



The Augar Review in Focus

Tuesday 16th July 2019, 11am – 12pm

House of Lords Committee Room 1, Westminster, SW1A 0AA

The APPG met to discuss the Post-18 Education and Funding Review with invited guests, Philip Augar and Bev Robinson, respectively chair and member of the independent panel for the review. The focus of the event was for a dialogue between student representatives, parliamentarians and the panel members to discuss the content and recommendations of the review, which was released in May.

Philip Augar, chair of the panel, explained that the review aimed to produce an independent, impartial and evidence based analysis of tertiary education. It also asked whether tertiary education provides the appropriate skills, enables fair access, allows choice and gives value for money for students, whilst managing to balance the books financially. Key starting points of the review were the sharp decline of the total number of students, despite increasing numbers of younger students attending university; the misalignment of resources between higher and further education, which is key to addressing social inequality and closing the skills gap; and the broader skills gap and low productivity in the UK. Some of the key recommendations from the review include a reform of funding and increased capital for FE, closer alignment throughout the suite of available qualifications, a reduction in tuition fees to better align with the cost of providing courses combined with increased teaching grants for high-cost courses.

Bev Robinson, a member of the panel, described how the review engaged with students and students' unions. This included a student reference group where various bodies relating to students and young people were represented. The panel also heard directly from students by holding focus groups around the country which represented a broad mix of students.

She explained that the key messages the panel heard from students during their deliberations included:

- Despite facing a number of barriers, students were still keen to engage with education and training.
- Generally students didn't see HE fees as a barrier to education or saw fees as debt, but saw significant barriers around maintenance costs.
- Students wanted more flexibility to fit education around their lives.
- Information, advice and guidance needs to be improved, students perceived it as being too 'PG' and schools too directed at driving students to undertake A Levels and continue into higher education.
- Students wanted more support to access level 4 and 5 qualifications, rather than always being directed to having a full degree.
- Students wanted greater transparency around fees in higher education.

Observations from panel's student reference group were:

- Information, advice and guidance in schools needs to be improved.
- The removal of maintenance grants have impacted access to higher education.
- Lifelong learning should be a priority.
- The cost of accommodation can be a problem, with private companies profiting from the student loans system.



Zamzam Ibrahim, president of the National Union of Students, saw the review as an opportunity to address a number of challenges for students across HE and FE. The review shows that student views have been considered, such as through the recommendations for controlling the costs of accommodation, the restoration of maintenance grants, increased protections for apprentices, and increased funding for disadvantaged students. These recommendations are also a testament to the power of students' unions. However, NUS are disappointed that the review failed to recommend the introduction of maintenance support for students studying at levels 1-3, that changes to the loan repayments system mean some poorer students pay more, and that the review focusses on an unhelpful distinction between high and low value courses.

The group then heard **questions and comments from the floor**, with responses from Bev Robinson and Philip Augar. There were a wide range of topics, and these included as some illustrative examples:

- How will it be possible to deliver the recommendations around protecting apprentices losing jobs when a company goes bust, eg Carillion?
 - The focus of the recommendation is only on protecting the teaching, and bringing into line that independent training providers are not currently covered.
- Will cuts to foundation courses this limit recent progress in widening participation?
 - The panel feels that some such courses are being provided unnecessarily – for example, on business and finance courses, when lower-cost alternatives such as access to HE courses are available in FE
- What is the framing of high value and low value in the context of this review? With concerns about how this will affect arts and humanities, and that it will get confused with the quality of a course.
 - The response was that earning is not the only thing that matter, social value is important, and the Government should take account of social value, cost of provision and economic outcomes. Subsequent earnings were a useful metric for looking at taxpayer subsidies and whether some HEIs were providing worthwhile courses.
- Will the FE sector be able to deliver the recommendations in the context of ongoing cuts?
 - The panel felt that the sector had proven resilient to change and would be able to do so
- Does the panel have a sense of which recommendations are going to be taken forward by the government?
 - The response was that the panel does not know what the Government is doing, and their role was just to produce a report to inform the Government's review.
- How can we change the discourse around vocational education?
 - The panel hope that their recommendations would help take the discourse in the right direction.

For further information, please contact the Secretariat, David Malcolm, Head of Policy and Campaigns, National Union of Students (david.malcolm@nus.org.uk).