

Time for a New Future for Higher Education

1. The Crisis in Higher Education

Covid-19 has brought universities to the brink of collapse. An estimated 30-60,000 jobs are at risk, and many universities are confronting bankruptcy. The Government's fee/loan market reforms of Higher Education were originally justified as a way to provide a sustainable future for HE and facilitate student choice. Instead, they have created a financial bubble, the over-expansion of some institutions while others shrank, and debt-fuelled building projects leveraged on ever-growing home and overseas student numbers.

2. The Public Value of Higher Education

The expected economic depression in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis will disproportionately affect young people, and those in the poorest areas of the UK. We need a strong, sustainable HE system if the UK is to recover. Universities are uniquely equipped to enable the development of new knowledge and skills, and thus a social and economic renewal.

The ideology of the tuition fee market has prioritised the private benefit of Higher Education over the public good. But universities do not merely train students for the workplace: they are the centres of research and scholarship essential to the understanding of society and its ills; they develop our culture; and they facilitate much-needed public debate.

- Support for universities must be based on a model of public funding, in conjunction with planned support for a reinvigorated Further Education sector.

3. Addressing Social Inequalities

Addressing social inequalities should be the main focus of delivering support to universities in the crisis. Support for Higher Education must be addressed in conjunction with support for Further Education, which has been de-funded and denigrated.

- To enable full advantage to be taken of the opportunities in reformed Higher and Further Education sectors, the restoration of properly-funded maintenance grants must be a priority, with additional resources to tackle the inequalities of access by social class, ethnicity and disability.
- Priority should be given to those social groups in disadvantaged circumstances, whether on the basis of locality, socio-economic class, ethnicity or disability; and to unemployed adult returners.

- In the short-term, and with the temporary move to on-line teaching, tuition fees should be reduced by 30%, with the balance made up by direct government grant to institutions. Delivery of higher cost subjects should be directly subsidised by grant income.

4. Creating Sustainable Employment in Higher Education

Marketisation has encouraged run-away salaries at the top of UK universities alongside the vast expansion in fractional, temporary, hourly-paid or even zero-hours contracts at the bottom. This is wrong, and it must be reversed.

- Salaries within higher education should be contained through a maximum ratio of 6:1 between the lowest and the highest paid in an institution.
- Universities must provide secure contracts for staff who carry out teaching and research, and the out-sourcing of teaching must end.
- Voluntary severance schemes should not be used to worsen staff-student ratios but rather to provide employment opportunities for early-career researchers.

5. Research and Education without Borders

Universities should be welcoming places for all staff and students, irrespective of their nationality. Research and education is enriched by the international diversity of university campuses. The government's so-called 'Hostile Environment' policy is making international and EU staff and students feel like second-class citizens, and has turned university staff into border guards forced to monitor their international students.

- International students and staff should not be subject to discriminatory surveillance for the purposes of UK Visa & Immigration (UKVI) monitoring, and should not be subject to the migrant NHS surcharge.

6. Cooperation not Competition between Universities

The removal of caps on student recruitment, alongside the pursuit of overseas student fees, has profoundly destabilised the university system. Allowing universities to compete for students, even within the 5 per cent over-target cap proposed by the Office for Students, will likely cause many institutions to collapse. The diversity of provision, structure, courses, modules and subjects in UK post-compulsory education is a strength of the sector, and must be protected from the simple logic of market forces.

- A restoration of institutional recruitment limits is required, backed up by direct public funding to support any struggling institutions through a temporary dip in recruitment.

7. Addressing Financial Inequity and Cross-subsidy

Universities have used surpluses in teaching income to fund both capital expansion and under-funded research.

- Research should be funded directly at full cost, instead of relying on a subsidy from student fees. This requires increased and more equitable Quality-Related funding and increased funding within grant-awarding bodies.
- To minimise waste, the “Full Economic Costing” component for salary per employee should be capped at the minimum level for a professor.
- The teaching of costly subjects should be topped up by direct public teaching grants to institutions.

8. Governance and Oversight

Universities have become increasingly authoritarian in their internal governance structures, with a control culture of managerialism replacing scholarly leadership. Widespread but secretive contracting of debt and public-private partnerships pursued by university managers now imperil their institutions’ very survival. These arrangements have been leveraged against current and future fee income, subsidised with public money.

- Internal university governance must be democratised to restore internal accountability. This would require the election of Vice-Chancellors by the academic community, and a return (or the institution) of the sovereign role of elected representative bodies of staff (e.g. congregations, academic boards, and senates).
- The Office for Students should insist that all institutions publicly declare their outstanding debts and associated covenants, and introduce adequate transparency and oversight regulations.

9. The Way Ahead

The steps identified above are, we believe, a modest set of achievable goals for a sustainable future for Higher Education in the UK. Implementing these steps would preserve the strengths of the existing sector in the short term and allow the UK Higher Education sector to play its part in the economic and social recovery we all want to see following a Covid-19 lockdown. Some steps are urgent. As outlined above, offering students maintenance grants and fee support in the next academic

year would have two benefits: it would create major opportunities to learn and develop to the population while financially stabilising institutions and averting a wave of redundancies.

1. The Convention for HE

First formed in 2015 to draw together the variety of organisations seeking to defend the quality of British Higher Education against a series of threats posed by the marketisation of the sector and proposed reforms, the Convention is now seeking to open a debate on the repositioning of universities for the altered circumstances after the COVID-19 crisis. The Convention is supported by members of a variety of HE organisations and campaigns which are represented on its Steering Committee: the Council for the Defence of British Universities (CDBU), the Campaign for the Public University (CPU), the University and Colleges Union (UCU), and the National Union of Students (NUS).

Details of the Convention's past and present activities, and its occasional papers and publications can be found on its website:

<https://heconvention2.wordpress.com/2020/05/25/new-future-for-he/#more-9316>