

Green Paper – OU views on Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice

The Open University warmly welcomes the Green Paper's emphasis on maximising student choice and the sense of inclusivity it conveys, in particular that *"**anyone** with the talent and potential should be able to benefit from higher education"* and assurance of *"a level playing field for **all** providers"*.

Greater student choice whatever their background or age

We applaud the Prime Minister's target, reconfirmed in the Green Paper, to double the number of disadvantaged people going to university by 2020 and increase the number of BME students by 20% in the same period. This specific focus must not however inadvertently disadvantage ongoing and successful work with other groups, for example disabled students, mature students and part-time students.

One in five undergraduate entrants in England from low participation neighbourhoods chooses or has no option but to study part-time (22 per cent)¹ and 38 per cent of all undergraduate students from disadvantaged groups are mature². In 2013/14 nearly 13 per cent of England's total undergraduate entrants from low participation areas³ studied with The Open University.

If the Prime Minister's social mobility target is to be achieved, the Government must ensure that the providers who give disadvantaged students the flexible learning options many of them need are not themselves disadvantaged. As we have seen from changes to HE policy in the past, when part-time students are not fully considered from the outset, the consequences for student choice can be stark. Repeated references to 'young people', terms like 'work readiness' and the fact that the underpinning data the Green Paper cites is for young full-time students reinforce our concern that the overwhelming focus of this Paper is young full-time students, in contrast to the November 2015 Spending Review which contained some welcome measures reflecting the specific needs of part-time study. We recognise that this document is very much a 'Green Paper' and therefore encourage the Government to ensure that there are no inherent biases towards the full-time sector in the next stage in its policy development process.

To ensure the desired step-change in the pace of the sector's progress on social mobility, it is also important that the Director of Fair Access has the power to set targets where institutions are insufficiently aspirational or fail to achieve what can be reasonably expected of them. This should include targets for continued sustainable and effective joint outreach activity by providers, driving faster progress on tackling social mobility (perhaps funded along the lines proposed by the Social

¹ HESA Performance Indicators, Tables 1 and 2, 2013/14 (students who started an undergraduate programme of study at any level at an English HEI excluding entrants who are recorded as leaving before 1 December).

² HESA 2013/14

³ No other institution has more than 3 per cent. OU calculations based on HESA tables T1b, T2a, T2b.

Mobility & Child Poverty Commission⁴). Collaborative activity of this nature already exists and the HEFCE funded National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO)⁵ are consolidating this activity, primarily for young full-time entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds. Rather than setting institutional widening participation targets for admissions, OFFA could establish a national plan to reach aggregate widening participation targets for the sector and require HEIs to sustain and enhance the NNCO work as part of their Access Agreements, possibly top-slicing if additional funding is needed. The OU is actively engaged in cost-effective collaborative working across the UK through the use of open educational resources, with social partners, charities and community groups and has direct experience of these successful approaches, especially in Scotland and Wales.

We welcome the establishment of a Social Mobility Advisory Group by Universities UK, and hope to see the group push hard for more broadly focused and hence more effective collaborative activity, including broader joint work with schools.

The greatest progress on social mobility will be made if OFFA's function remains as autonomous as possible. If OFFA ends up being under the umbrella of the Office for Students rather than remaining a separate entity then it is important that it retains separate governance mechanisms.

Greater student choice through a more diverse sector

The Open University is supportive of encouraging new entrants in both the public and private sectors, so maximising student choice and widening access to higher education. **Validation of courses** that are delivered by providers who do not hold Degree Awarding Powers is a critical element here and is best carried out by a central validation body – one with extensive existing expertise in validation, able to make an objective, impartial appraisal of an institution's capacity to deliver and maintain appropriate standards of quality and student experience, and able to operate at scale. **Given our long experience of UK-wide validation, the OU is exceptionally well placed to take on this role.**

More informed student and employer choice through a Teaching Excellence Framework

We welcome the development of a TEF and are fully committed to the principle of valuing high quality teaching as much as high quality research, in the process enabling students and employers to make more informed choices. In our view, **the drivers for the TEF are best kept simple** – better informed students, institutional reputation and faster progress on social mobility are enough of an incentive for the TEF to be meaningful for the sector and its students.

Building a truly effective and credible TEF however is a long-term project – in particular, it will take time to get the vitally important learning gain element right. Priorities should be that:

- The measures fully capture teaching excellence.
- The process for every institution is consistent whilst **making allowances for the different missions of institutions** and the **varied aspirations and concerns of their students**.
- There is sufficient flexibility within the framework to **take account of the different modes of study** students may choose
- Any **information drawn from the TEF is sufficiently nuanced** to ensure that institutional context is fully taken into account by expert panels and is understood by students and employers.

⁴ [*State of the Nation 2015: Social Mobility and Child Poverty in Great Britain*](#)

⁵ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/sas/ncco/>

- Once fully developed, the learning gain element of the TEF will be an increasingly important element (this will take time to develop fully).
- In the interim, while there is a heavy reliance on metrics, expert panels must take context into account.

On the link to fees, whilst we accept that linking an RPI increase to baseline quality requirements is justified, it is not possible at this stage to assess the criteria for higher level TEF categories and therefore whether a fees link would be warranted.