

Higher Education and Research Bill

Overview

We share the Government's desire to strengthen the UK's world-class higher education system.

We support the Government's commitment to maintain and build on the world-class research and innovation taking place at our leading universities. However, the Government should be careful about making any substantial changes to a successful system that allows us to punch above our weight internationally.

We welcome legislative protection for the dual support system in the Bill. How the principle of 'reasonable balance' in funding for the Research Councils and Research England is determined will be critical. The combination of stable core funding and competitively awarded grants ensures the diversity and breadth of research in the UK.

We need tuition fees to rise with inflation to help our universities remain internationally competitive and our students continue to receive a world-class learning experience. This year, £9,000 tuition fees will be worth only £8,546 in 2012 terms and our universities already have to do more with less.

Russell Group universities deliver outstanding research hand in hand with excellent teaching – this is central to the student experience they provide. It is important the Government enhances the UK's reputation for excellent teaching by ensuring regulation is risk-based and proportionate.

Regulation

The Bill replaces the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Office for Fair Access with a single regulatory body, the Office for Students. The research funding and assessment functions of HEFCE will be taken on by a new body, UK Research and Innovation.

- Splitting the responsibilities of the HEFCE between two new bodies may add to the burden of regulation on universities in terms of reporting and data collection. The Government should ensure that the creation of two bodies does not increase the burden and cost of regulation for universities.
- It is also important that this division should not create a split between research and teaching: the best teaching is research-led and the best research is informed by close links with teaching.

Teaching excellence

The Bill provides for the new Office for Students to assess the quality of teaching in universities.

- There are already many ways in the current system whereby quality of teaching is incentivised and assessed.
- Indeed, a huge amount of time, effort and resources have been devoted to improving the education and student experience at our universities. And this is reflected in feedback from employers and our students who year on year express above average levels of overall satisfaction with the quality of their course. The latest National Student Survey showed 89% of students at Russell Group universities are satisfied with the teaching on their course and 90% found their course intellectually stimulating.
- There is always room for improvement but this is best delivered through a risk-based approach to regulation that protects the institutional autonomy, diversity and competitiveness that our system thrives on.

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- The new Teaching Excellence Framework must add value and assess teaching fairly and accurately without adding to the regulatory burden.
 - It is encouraging to see the Government has appreciated the difficulties of introducing a complicated teaching quality assessment system so quickly and will develop this new system over a longer period.

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)

The Bill provides for the establishment of UKRI, which brings together the seven existing Research Councils, the research function of HEFCE (as Research England) and Innovate UK.

- Allowing the Research Councils and Innovate UK to retain their identities and budgets is a step in the right direction but the Government should proceed with caution. Taking time to establish UKRI in shadow form before full implementation should help ensure a smooth transition, but the scale of change being proposed to the UK's research funding architecture should not be underestimated.
- Added legislative protection for the dual support system is very welcome. How the principle of 'reasonable balance' in funding for the Research Councils and Research England is determined will be critical. The combination of stable core funding and competitively awarded grants ensures the diversity and breadth of research in the UK.

Transparency and access

The Bill provides for universities to publish information on the backgrounds of applicants and those who receive places and on the degree outcomes of students by background.

- Russell Group universities share the Government's commitment to ensuring universities are open to talented and able students from all backgrounds. We want these students to know that with the right grades in the right subjects a place at one of our universities is well within their reach.
- Real progress has already been made with increasing numbers of disadvantaged and black and ethnic minority students admitted to Russell Group universities, but we are far from complacent. Next year Russell Group universities will spend over £243 million on outreach activities and financial support aimed at the most disadvantaged students in England alone.
- Universities publish a range of data through UCAS, the Higher Education Statistics Agency and on their own websites to ensure the admissions process is as clear and easy-to-understand as possible. It is important that such data is always presented in context to ensure it is not open to misinterpretation. For example, the data that is currently available does not take into account the A-level subjects that are studied by applicants, course entry requirements and the results of interviews and admissions tests.

Competition and new providers

The Bill will make it easier to gain degree-awarding powers and the title of 'university'. The OFS will establish a register of higher education providers and the Bill allows for these powers to be taken away from a provider.

- Russell Group universities are not opposed to new providers so long as the growth does not increase pressure on the limited funding available from Government. For example, additional government funding for vital STEM subjects that cost more to teach is already under strain – and future funding levels per student need to be protected.
- The probationary period for new entrants to the market must be robust and we urge the Government to consider a longer period of enhanced scrutiny and peer review to help maintain the UK's reputation and high standards.
- We are encouraged by the Government's commitment to making quality assurance risk-based and proportionate, focusing resources on new providers and areas of weakness while relieving the highest performing institutions of unnecessary regulatory burden.