

Yorkshire Universities briefing on the Further Education White Paper and recent Higher Education policy developments

Introduction

1. This report provides a summary of recent government publications and statements in relation to the new FE White Paper and higher education.

Background

2. The government has published several documents with resonance for HE. These include: *'Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth' (White Paper)*; *'Interim conclusion of the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding'*; *'Government response to Dame Shirley Pearce's independent review of the teaching excellence and student outcomes framework'*; *Guidance to the Office for Students (OfS): Allocation of higher education teaching grant in the 2021-22 financial year*. Some of these are long-awaited; all have important implications for the future of the higher education (HE) sector in England. The first, 'Skills for jobs,' known as 'the skills White Paper' or 'FE White Paper',¹ has important implications for HE too.
3. The White Paper has been welcomed for its aim to create multiple routes to 'success and a good job': with no hierarchy envisaged in learning (content or method), all routes equally valued. Skills provision in further education (FE) is clearly important: more than half the population, at present, does not go to university. However, whilst the intention to broaden skills and training opportunities is welcome, the demand for HE, and enrolling at university remains strong, and is forecast to increase.²
4. The link between skills and productivity is well-established³ and, given the current fragile state of the economy, the emphasis by the government on developing and improving skills linked to economic growth and development is understandable. So too, is the focus on employer involvement in identifying skills and the means of assessing demand and supply, through local skills plans – although employers have played a direct role for some time in many professional and vocational programmes, in both FE and HE. We do, however, also need to recognise that too many employers have failed to invest in skills and training, and that more work and support is needed to drive increased demand for skills amongst business and employers, especially in regions such as Yorkshire.
5. There is a welcome recognition in the FE White Paper of the geographical dimension – the distinctive needs of localities and regions – but this could better articulated, and the proposals should reflect more directly spatial differences and should be situated

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pioneering-reforms-to-boost-skills-and-jobs>

² <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/10/22/demand-for-higher-education-to-2035/>

³ <https://productivityinsightsnetwork.co.uk/>

more firmly within a wider economic and social framework, looking to build and maintain a sustainable recovery.

Which skills are being developed?

6. The Education Secretary claims that the 'lifetime skills guarantee' will 'ensure that everyone has the confidence and the opportunity to gain the skills they need to progress at any stage of their lives'. This relatively broad statement is encouraging, but success will reflect the internal capacity of the individual ('confidence') and the importance of appropriate provision ('opportunity'). The focus on 'Lifetime' is also welcome: opportunities available at all stages in a person's life ('lifetime' goes beyond a 'period in employment' or 'career').
7. Elsewhere, though, the focus of the government's plans is more narrowly upon employment. The full title is revealing: 'Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth' as it reflects some of the tension in government thinking between a narrower, economic emphasis (the first part) and a broader emphasis on individual opportunity (the second). In practice, it is the first part – the directly vocational – that prevails: 'The Lifetime Skills Guarantee will offer tens of thousands of adults the opportunity to retrain in later life, helping them to gain in-demand skills and open up further job opportunities. This includes the chance for adults without a full level 3 qualification (A-level equivalent) to gain one from April 2021, for free, in a range of sectors including engineering, health and accountancy.' This is 'training' rather than 'education' or 'learning', and 'job opportunities' rather than life opportunities more generally. Again, there is the assumption that 'success and a good job' are one and same ('success' equals getting 'a good job'). The definition here is extrinsic rather than intrinsic: a good economic outcome for the individual is a good salary rather than personal satisfaction in acquiring knowledge or understanding (though the two are not mutually exclusive). Similarly, the emphasis is on what is good for the economy (productivity) rather than on the broader social and communal benefits that education and skills can bring. One salient lesson of COVID is that the value of the work of nurses, social workers, food and logistics operatives and others cannot wholly be measured by economic or financial contribution.
8. A similar point is picked up by Rama Thirunamachandran, who writes that: "Even more galling, graduates in the very specialties we have come to rely upon like never before since the start of this pandemic are also consigned (to) the "low value" category: nurses; paramedics and other allied health professionals; physiotherapists, teachers and many more. What's more, the salaries that see them lumped into this unflattering category are set by government."⁴

A broad definition of skills

9. The employment landscape is in constant flux, with new jobs created and existing jobs requiring new combinations of skills. Increasingly, employees need to show judgement, intelligence and thoughtfulness – not just the 'how' but also the 'when'

⁴ <https://www.conservativehome.com/sponsored/2021/02/rama-thirunamachandran-modern-universities-and-their-graduates-are-a-necessity-not-a-luxury-in-a-post-covid-britain.html>

and 'why', going beyond simple acquisition of skills to include the capacity to adapt and transfer skills to meet new opportunities and challenges. There is some evidence that adults in employment need more effective information and advice on how their skills could transfer to another career; they may be unaware of possibilities in other employment sectors and lack confidence in making job changes.⁵

10. For some, Level 4 Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs), for example, "would be more attractive if they were to provide not only the skills requirements of the employer, but also meet the educational and content requirement that will enable onward progression, so the qualification isn't seen as a 'dead end'".⁶

The 'Lifelong Loan Entitlement'

11. The 'lifetime skills guarantee' is to be underpinned by a 'lifelong loan entitlement' from 2025, enabling people to access funding across higher and further education throughout their lifetime. This is to provide 'maximum flexibility for those who need it' and 'should lead to many more people undertaking training that will result in positive, tangible outcomes' (again note the default preference for 'training' and 'tangible outcomes'). The 'guarantee' is to be equivalent to four years of post-18 education, usable for modules at higher technical and degree level (levels 4 to 6) at both colleges and universities (as well as for full years of study). Funding is to be identical regardless of the route individuals choose. The White Paper acknowledges that major changes will be needed to the student loans system, inevitable given the complexity of current systems of support.
12. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has published a briefing note commenting on the lack of detail on spending commitments in the White Paper; and saying that it is "short on specifics and actual commitments", especially given the context of falling spending and falling numbers over recent years.⁷ In mid-April, the government also in effect cut spending on the Adult Education Budget (AEB) by requiring providers to deliver a minimum of 90% of this year's training (compared to 68% for the previous year, to take account of the pandemic). Failure to meet this target will require providers to return money; FE leaders claim this might mean cuts to courses and reductions in other expenditure.⁸

Flexible provision

13. The loan entitlement will require more flexible learning ('training') provision than currently exists. Increased flexibility is designed to allow individuals to study individual modules of eligible courses and transfer credits between institutions. HE is well-positioned for such flexibility, at least in terms of 'delivery', given experience during the pandemic. But flexibility will need to include re-structuring the curriculum

⁵ <https://www.cityandguildsgroup.com/research/building-bridges-towards-future-jobs>

⁶ <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/01/20/will-higher-technical-qualifications-foster-greater-collaborations-between-universities-and-colleges/>

⁷ <https://www.tes.com/news/skills-white-paper-missed-opportunity-says-ifs;>
<https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/15405>

⁸ [https://twitter.com/AoC_info/status/1382701406595993608;](https://twitter.com/AoC_info/status/1382701406595993608) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-56751302>

into smaller 'chunks' and the operation of credit transfer/accreditation of prior learning (not unknown in HE but hitherto not operated easily or 'at scale').

14. There are questions as to whether there will be sufficient incentives for HE to deliver the White Paper agenda, especially the work involved in designing shorter modules within a more flexible framework. Previous experience is somewhat sobering. For example, two-year degrees didn't fully take off; nor did credit transfer. The traditional undergraduate market remains strong, as recent end of cycle admissions figures from UCAS have revealed.⁹ As long as the demand from 'conventional' students to enter HE grows, universities will continue to offer the traditional three-year degree. Shifting emphasis, at scale, towards more part-time/modular courses, will require further investment in curriculum design and delivery.
15. There will be continuing pressure on providers not only from students but also from employers to make learning more 'open' and flexible. The NHS – to name one very large employer – has recently spoken of the need to widen traditional means of access to employment in nursing and other health-related roles.¹⁰

Quality

16. The various government papers variously touch on 'quality', most significantly in the response to the review of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). TEF is based on a multi-focused definition of quality (including an enhancement or developmental dimension) but the government seems more interested in "driving up the quality of higher education provision" (whatever this may mean) and funding "courses with good outcomes", which seems to mean employment outcomes. A 'Limiting Factor' (sic) is to be student outcomes to make the ratings "credible to students, parents, employers and providers". Thus, according to the government, "a provider should not achieve a high TEF rating if it has poor student outcomes". The matter of what is a poor outcome is taken as unproblematic, limited presumably to completion results in courses with so-called good employment outcomes.
17. The government expects TEF to be appropriate for flexible and lifelong learning: the way curriculum is shaped and delivered (including modularity and credit transfer) is thus an aspect of 'quality' provision and needs to be measurable: "We would ... like the OfS to be mindful of how metrics could measure the quality of learning delivered in a more flexible way over the course of a student's lifetime (e.g., part-time study), as well as those which measure outcomes from a full-time degree." Affording flexibility in provision due weight is commendable but measuring it separately from other delivery modes would seem a challenge.
18. The new method of allocating teaching capital (from formula to bidding) is to include, as one criterion amongst several, support for 'part-time, modular and other forms of flexible provision'. At a regional level, the move by the government to allocate FE capital by national competition for individual institutions, rather than 'passport'

⁹ <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/ucas-january-deadline-2021-in-depth/>

¹⁰ <https://www.nhsconfed.org/resources/2020/09/creating-the-workforce-of-the-future-collaborative-nhs-colleges>

through LEPs and Combined Authorities, across functional economic geographies, has been criticised by regional institutions.

19. Quality remains contested ground. The TEF review has recommended a focus on enhancement (rather than more narrowly on metrics); the government appears to be paying lip service to that, but in practice is more concerned with setting minimum entry requirements (to HE) and courses with 'good (job) outcomes' – 'graduate level employment'.
20. The government is largely silent on the regional implications of quality, although the courses on offer in a particular region and their closeness to skills needs in that region are relevant factors. The proposed reduction in funding for certain courses (such as arts and the media) is concerning in this context, especially given the size and impact of the creative industries nationally and the sector's importance in Yorkshire.

The student

21. In the government documents, the student is defined in different ways and sometimes the definitions are in conflict. At times, students are customers or consumers, with the right of choice; the system of fees is based on that very premise. But what if they choose the 'wrong' courses, those that seem irrelevant to the country's economic growth? The tension is also apparent in the government's statement on the National Student Survey (NSS)¹¹: "the Government does not consider 'Student Satisfaction' to be an appropriate measure of excellence, as satisfaction can, potentially, be too easily obtained via a reduction in quality or academic rigour" – suggesting that you can't trust the decisions of the customer as they may judge by inappropriate criteria. Rather than satisfaction, the government proposes 'Student Academic Experience'. If this suggests yet another definition – the student as participant in a learning experience – that would be applauded by many, but it is unlikely that the government will want to define the quality of the 'academic experience' in this way.
22. The suggestion that minimum entry requirements should be set, coupled with the removal of funding for foundation year courses, potentially limits student access to higher education at the very time when maximum flexibility is needed, and when the economic climate and labour market are fragile, and are expected to remain so for the foreseeable future. Students have recently suffered interruptions to their study and confusion over examinations, and the government elsewhere says it wishes to increase opportunity.

The regional dimension

23. 'Levelling up' across regions is mentioned several times in the government publications, but little detail is given on how this might be achieved in practice.

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/953306/Government_response_to_the_independent_review_of_TEF_.pdf

Elsewhere, there has been a growing clamour for a more sophisticated definition of the levelling up agenda, and a clear plan to accompany the message.¹² The removal of London weighting from the teaching grant, which has sparked a response from London's universities,¹³ is a recognition of regional difference, but it is not part of a wider funding analysis across geographies.

24. The 'interim conclusion' paper expresses the intent to move teaching capital from "a broad formula allocation to a targeted bidding system". The government believes that this will make it easier to ensure that funding is adding value and investment is focussed on key government priorities. Amongst the priorities is to support "the levelling up of regional economies in less prosperous regions of England". But the proportion of the funding allocated to bidding is small and this criterion has less significance than others referenced.
25. Discussions with some YU members have suggested that the new OfS metric to assess HEI performance ('Start to Success') will prejudice the work of universities in supporting regional economies in the north of England. The metric is based on a combination of graduate salary data and completion statistics. The higher wages of London and the Greater South East mean that institutions that predominantly supply other labour markets are disadvantaged; the vast majority of HEIs in the north of England are in this category. There is a risk that any initiative to support graduate retention in Yorkshire will be impacted by the new metric, which would promote the movement of graduates elsewhere. YU intends to comment on the OfS consultation on projected rates of students progressing from entry to first degree programmes through to professional employment or further study progression,¹⁴ suggesting the regional benchmarking of employment data. The issue is recognised in both the Pearce Review of the TEF and the DfE's response.

Issues for YU members

26. Nick Hillman considers the immediate issue for universities to be a lack of "friends beyond their borders".¹⁵ He suggests that universities should search out and emphasise areas where their interests and those of the government align. Hence the importance of responding positively to the intentions behind the proposals, suggesting further developments and outlining how implementation can be achieved.
27. YU members will welcome the lifetime guarantee/loan fund, the greater provision of Level 4 and Level 5 and a more modular approach to the curriculum. YU and regional partners are encouraging the government to develop a more coherent approach to 'levelling up' and to connect this to civic engagement (not mentioned in the skills documents but clearly potentially a beneficial outcome of closer collaboration with FE

¹² <https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/politics/lord-bob-kerlake-warns-failing-levelling-agenda-would-damage-public-trust-he-urges-government-produce-plan-3060536>

¹³ <https://www.londonhigher.ac.uk/news/response-to-allocation-of-teaching-grants-for-the-2021-22-financial-year/>

¹⁴ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/developing-an-understanding-of-projected-rates-of-progression-from-entry-to-professional-employment/>

¹⁵ <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/02/02/is-the-biggest-problem-facing-uk-universities-the-lack-friends-beyond-their-borders/>

colleges). The documents, at times, show governmental thinking in silos: teaching, research, meeting employment needs – and YU should respond by showing how these interrelate and address additional social and communal concerns (such as, for example, the rejuvenation of town centres, especially in places said to have been ‘left behind’).

28. Andy Westwood has suggested that “the cart is being put before the horse”, and that it would be better to see where FE should fit “into the big agendas coming up”, which is expected to be set out in the Spending Review.¹⁶ Until then, he believes all FE and HE can do is to continue to demonstrate that they can and do work together.
29. YU welcomes the need to grow the provision of skills, whilst arguing for a broad definition, combining academic, technical and professional skills. This is territory in which FE and HE can and do work together. Universities are already making a major contribution, delivering about a third of Level 4 and 5 technical provision alongside higher-level and degree apprenticeships (quite apart from the 40% of undergraduate students on courses with a strong professional focus, such as nursing, health and engineering).
30. YU and its members work collaboratively with LEPs, (Mayoral) Combined Authorities and other stakeholders on the identification of skills’ gaps and how these can be addressed at a sub-regional level. Closer working with FE to ensure a seamless skills’ provision linked to regional needs will be a continuing priority in all parts of the region. The new Wave 2 Institutes of Technology (IoT) offer another potential opportunity.
31. YU members are working to develop further the flexibility of their provision, including curriculum size and structure, delivery and learning mode. Such flexibility – along with credit transfer – also requires effective marketing, as it can appear complex from the outside. Advice and guidance systems will help students take advantage of the greater opportunities.
32. YU members are responding to the areas on which government wishes to consult (flagged as ‘spring 2021’), both as individual institutions, and nationally through Universities UK and other mission groups. YU will reflect upon distinct perspectives from Yorkshire, as part of its response.

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April 2021

¹⁶ <https://wonkhe.com/events/credit-worthy/>