



Sutton Trust response to the government green paper

Higher education: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice

(November 2015)

The Sutton Trust welcomes the Prime Minister's ambition to double the number of disadvantaged young people going to university by the end of this parliament and the broad intentions behind the Higher Education Green Paper to widen participation. We are particularly encouraged by the development of the Teaching Excellence Framework and creation of the Social Mobility Advisory Group. However, we are concerned that the proposals to merge the Office for Fair Access into a new Office for Students may reduce the independence of the access regulator and compromise the Prime Minister's goal.

Office for Students

We cautiously welcome the opportunities that the proposed new Office for Students may bring, and the proposed new powers for the Director of Fair Access. If we are going to meet the Prime Minister's ambitions, it will be absolutely vital that fair access issues are not diluted or crowded out by other priorities.

However, we fear that the merger of Ofa into the OfS could lead to a regulator who lacks the independence to challenge universities robustly, particularly if those universities who dislike an access ruling can appeal to the head of the OfS. Therefore, the independence of the access regulator must be retained. The Director of Fair Access's role should not be subordinated to the head of the OfS and should report directly to ministers. Clearly s/he will need to work with the head of the OfS on access issues, but it is important that the Director has the right powers to support retention and progression as well as fair admissions.

We believe that for this to happen the access regulator must:

- Still be appointed directly by the Secretary of State and should report directly to him/her and to Parliament.
- Have a single focus on access – so keeping fair access issues high on the public agenda.
- Have sufficient personal powers and staff leadership enshrined in legislation to be able to challenge institutions and hold them to account.
- Be someone seen as credible by the sector, which probably means a former vice chancellor or university leader with an understanding both of institutional diversity and autonomy and of the challenges faced in improving fair access.

Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)

We strongly support the creation of the TEF. It is vital that access and good teaching are intricately linked. There is a danger that universities will cherry pick students if they fear that those needing extra support might hurt their TEF judgement. The TEF has the potential to support the work of the access regulator and needs to be seen as a key part of retention and progression for disadvantaged students, as well as ensuring excellent teaching for all.

In regards to the TEF, we believe that:

- Universities should provide clear information on the teaching offer available to students including contact hours, tutor support (including that for disadvantaged students), study and research expectations and employment outcomes.
- To support teachers and encourage disadvantaged students, the TEF should require HE institutions to show how they add value for students and their specific record in terms of admissions, retention, degree results and employment outcomes for disadvantaged students.
- There should be specific progression measures of progression and employment outcomes for access students benchmarked with similarly profiled universities. UCAS and other data should be used to track students' progress from different social and ethnic backgrounds to identify specific issues that might point to a need for improved teaching and support.
- It is important that good teaching is recognised and rewarded at all universities, and that it is not seen as a second order issue for those that are research intensive. Equally, if Further Education and other new providers enter the system, they should be equally expected to provide strong teaching.

Widening participation

We strongly support the Green Paper's targets to further improve access and success for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds. However, we would also like to see measures that encourage progress in the best universities (the top third or Russell Group) for both disadvantaged and BME students. In measuring such progress at these universities, it may be appropriate to look at both POLAR data.

It also makes sense for HE institutions to have independent assessment panels, as proposed. It will be important that they contain relevant subject specialists and an expertise in access/progression for disadvantaged students to retain a social mobility focus.

Tuition Fees

We do not agree with the proposed approach to incentives for the different types of provider. Fees are too high already. Universities with good teaching have the incentive of being able to recruit more students and increase their budgets in that way.

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