

Education Committee: Call for Evidence – Value for Money in Higher Education

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

A Introduction

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents nearly 19,000 heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of maintained and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL has members in more than 90 per cent of secondary schools and colleges of all types, responsible for the education of more than four million young people. This places the association in a unique position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of secondary schools and of colleges and report on the feedback they have received from their former students.
- 2 ASCL welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence on value for money in Higher Education (H.E.). School and college leaders frequently engage with discussion with young people on this topic as they are considering their educational and employment future beyond the age of 18. Our members also receive feedback on this topic from alumni, parents and from recent graduates who join their institution as new members of the teaching profession.
- 3 Our submission is organised in line with the five issues identified in the call for evidence to the inquiry, beginning with some general points, as follows:
 - A Introduction**
 - B General points**
 - C Graduate outcomes and the use of destinations data**
 - D Social Justice in higher education and support for disadvantaged students**
 - E Senior management pay in universities**
 - F Quality and effectiveness of teaching**
 - G The role of the Office for Students**

B General points

- 4 The association receives noteworthy feedback from members that many students are wary of taking on the significant loan commitment that is required to complete an undergraduate degree. There are also indications that this also is a contributory factor to drop-out from H.E. at an early stage as the financial reality of the loan system becomes clear to individual students.
- 5 The fact that there is some uncertainty over the long term repayment system has been highlighted by recent changes and this is a further contributory factor in terms of student decision making related to choosing whether to go to university or not. The recent increase in the interest rate from 4.6% to 6.1% is one example of the lack of certainty that may impact on a young person's decision to attend H.E.

- 6 Although the major thrust of this inquiry is to focus on the value for money element for HE this matter must also be seen from the true real cost to the young person over the duration of the loan repayment period.
- 7 To be fair to young people a system that indicates more clearly the real cost over time to them would allow better informed decisions by young people. This would imply some form of fixed interest system and a payment floor that is routinely raised to keep ahead of entry level graduate salaries.
- 8 Members receive a significant amount of feedback from present and former students and from their parents about the costs of accommodation as well as the cost of the fees. It is not just the costs of the accommodation but the fact that in many cases the students are required to pay for a 40 week tenure even through the student only needs the accommodation for around 30 weeks.
- 9 The accommodation issues go beyond the university accommodation itself as many students have little choice over the tenancy agreements that they are required to sign, usually through their guarantor, to secure the accommodation. Often these agreement again are for a significantly longer period than the student actually needs them.
- 10 The costs of the accommodation are frequently higher than the maximum loan that a student can take out meaning that the student has little or no money left from their loan for living expenses. This means that students will often have to find part-time work to meet their living costs which can, particularly for courses with a high contact time have an impact on their available study time.
- 11 ASCL also gets feedback from members about the amount of contact time that H.E. students' experience. This varies significantly between subjects but it is not unusual in many courses for undergraduate students to have around 8 or 9 hours contact a week often with some of the contact periods being in large groups of 50 or even 100 upwards. Many universities have 24 weeks of student contact with the other 6 weeks being for examination periods or individual study. There are however other courses e.g. medicine, engineering, sciences, where the contact time is significantly higher.
- 12 Whilst understanding that there are significant differences in structure and organisation schools and colleges find it difficult to understand the significant difference in fees given a school or college gets an average £4,531 per student and a H.E. institution an average £8,781, particularly given that schools and colleges provide between 15 and 18 hours contact time per student over 38 weeks. Whilst making this point we would note that 16-19 funding in schools and colleges is woefully inadequate.
- 13 Whilst not obviously directly related to this inquiry we would draw the committee's attention the increasing number of unconditional offers now being made to students. Evidence would indicate that several H.E. institutions are indicating to students that they will make the offer to them unconditional should the student make that institution their first choice. This practice raises a number of issues including whether this may encourage students to make decisions based on ease of entry rather than appropriateness of course and institution.
- 14 School and college leaders also have concerns that the use of unconditional offers can lead to students easing back on their 'A' level or BTEC studies which can have an impact on their final grades. Whilst not affecting the university entry because of the unconditional nature of their offer this can have a detrimental impact on their future career opportunities should earlier grades be a factor in the selection criteria.

C Graduate outcomes and the use of destinations data

- 15 The association would welcome further improvements in the use of destinations data to inform young people better when they are making decisions related to both their Higher Education institution and course choice before completing their initial applications.
- 16 It would be helpful to young people not only to know potential immediate employment prospects on graduation but also information regarding the longer term career progression of former students. This would require a longitudinal study which should not be limited to pay progression but to broader career progression.
- 17 Such information would undoubtedly help young people in their initial choice of institution and course and may well assist in reducing drop-out rates from H.E.

D Social Justice in higher education and support for disadvantaged students

- 18 We recognise the government's commitment to improving the opportunities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds however the points given in paragraphs 5 to 10 above are particularly relevant to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is some anecdotal evidence that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may well look for a higher apprenticeship, or some other funded route, rather than direct entry into university in order to avoid what they see as taking on a significant debt.
- 19 The issue given in paragraph 10 above is a major difficulty for disadvantaged students where the sum total of a student's grant and loan is insufficient for them to live off. It is not uncommon for the whole of this money being needed to cover accommodation costs. This is a particular problem for a disadvantaged student who is studying a high contract subject such as medicine, veterinary science, dentistry, sciences and engineering, where part-time work is not a viable option.

E Senior management pay in universities

- 20 We have no specific comment to make in this section.

F Quality and effectiveness of teaching

- 21 It is very early in the process of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) to see how this will work in practice. There are however concerns as to how this is linked to allowing HE institutions to raise their fees.
- 22 For students it is the quality of the teaching and learning experience in their particular course that is of the greatest interest to them rather than any overall rating for the HE institution.
- 23 It would be most helpful for students if there was clear validated information about the teaching quality of individual courses available to them before they make their initial choice.

G The role of the Office for Students

- 24 ASCL recognises the need for a simpler, less bureaucratic and less expensive system of regulation. A system that explicitly champions the student whilst recognising employer needs and taxpayer interest in ensuring value for their investment in higher education.
- 25 The association supports bringing together in one organisation the regulation of all higher education providers in the sector to operate a single regulatory gateway creating a level playing field for all providers.
- 26 ASCL sees the rationale in bringing together existing functions on teaching standards, market entry and widening participation in a single organisation.
- 27 It is however too early to comment on the effectiveness of the Office for Students.

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