

Evidence to the Innovation, Universities, Science & Skills Select Committee inquiry into Students and Universities

1. Summary

- 1.1 Higher Education has been undergoing significant changes over the past decade, and no group has been more affected by these changes than students. With the growth since the 1980s of the UK HE marketplace, enhanced in recent years by changes to the full-time undergraduate fee system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, students are becoming more conscious of the quality of experience they receive.
- 1.2 The challenge for universities is to keep abreast of the shifting expectations of an increasingly diverse and informed student population and to adjust accordingly to provide the best possible experience to each of them. This is a challenge not only for universities but also for policy-makers and all student-facing groups across the sector if UK HE is to continue to be one of the leading higher education providers in the world.
- 1.3 It is important for universities and Government to emphasise the importance of higher education as a key stage of development for people of all backgrounds and that the relationship between student and university is one of partnership, a two-way contribution to develop and enhance a person's knowledge and skills and prepare them to become important contributors to society.
- 1.4 The good news is that students continue to be excited and engaged by higher education and continue to see it as an important stage in their own development. In light of variable fees applications to HE have continued to rise and many recent student surveys have indicated that students are satisfied and engaged with their university life. Institutions in receipt of variable tuition fees have launched ambitious investment plans designed to meet the increased expectations of students. This has included enhancing faculty numbers, teaching resources and student accommodation. The move to a regulated student marketplace has been a success.
- 1.5 However, students find themselves in a swiftly changing environment and the future of higher education contains some large challenges for them, for universities and for Government. Institutional investment in student support, scholarships and bursaries to widen participation and to attract the very best students from all backgrounds, places increased expectations on institutions to perform within this new market environment. Universities must also demonstrate continued and strengthened commitment to providing excellent teaching, support and facilities in order to ensure that the experience of university life continues to be as appealing to students as it has been in the past decade. They must achieve this within a relatively constrained funding environment. Furthermore, these funding constraints vary across the UK, with the devolved systems facing similar expectations from students as in England but receiving different levels of resource to meet them.

2. About the 1994 Group

- 2.1 The 1994 Group brings together eighteen internationally renowned, student-focused, research-intensive universities. The Group provides a central vehicle to help

members promote their common interests in higher education, respond efficiently to key policy issues, and share best methods and practice.

- 2.2 The National Student Survey results published on 11 September 2008 confirmed that, for the fourth successive year, the 1994 Group had emerged as the leading group of universities. Some 88% of students in the Group's 18 member universities said they were satisfied with the student experience compared to a national average of 83%. 1994 Group member universities were rated above average in each of the six categories surveyed. This includes Teaching, where they received 88% positive responses (sector average 83%) and Organisation and Management 81% (sector average 73%). The average for 1994 Group member universities for all six categories was 80% (sector average 76%).
- 2.3 Member universities are: University of Bath, Durham University, University of East Anglia, University of Essex, University of Exeter, Birkbeck University of London, Goldsmiths University of London, Royal Holloway University of London, Lancaster University, University of Leicester, Loughborough University, Queen Mary University of London, University of Reading, University of St Andrews, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of Surrey, University of Sussex and University of York.

3. Admissions

- 3.1 The 1994 Group welcomes the work undertaken by the National Council for Educational Excellence to identify mechanisms by which the links between schools and colleges can be enhanced and for better support to be given to schools to raise the aspirations of their pupils to apply to the most selective universities. Effective engagement with schools and colleges is key to the efforts of the most selective universities to increase and widen participation. If we are successfully to reach out to applicants from all backgrounds there is a need for a wider availability of information about university admissions requirements and about the nature of the student experience. This will better inform the life-changing decisions that pupils are making.
- 3.2 We also welcome the recommendation that data on the predictability of the award of the A* grade be collected and reviewed before it is used by universities in the applications process. The Group has expressed concern at the potential impact of the introduction of the A* grade on the admissions practices of research-intensive universities. It is right, given these concerns, that the impact of the A* grade be fully evaluated before universities start using it.
- 3.3 In recognition of the importance of the government's curriculum reforms and as part of our strong commitment to the student experience, in January 2007, the Group launched a joint project with the DCSF to assess the impact of the changes to 14-19 education on our member institutions. The resulting report, published in January 2008,¹ provided the empirical evidence needed to inform policy discussions and plan more detailed consideration of the reforms. Equally, the report provided to government a critical and informed assessment of how the reform package is likely to interact with, and influence, the dynamics of undergraduate admissions.

¹ 'New Foundations, Enduring Values: Undergraduate Education, Research-intensive Universities and the Government's Reforms of 14-19 Education in England.' Findings from a research project funded by the DCSF and the 1994 Group. Available at: <http://www.1994group.ac.uk/documents/public/NewFoundationsEnduringValues.pdf>

- 3.4 During 2007 senior staff and admissions tutors at member universities were surveyed for their thoughts on the reforms and their impact on admissions patterns. The main conclusions were that:
- the award of the A* grade at A-level would allow research-intensive universities across the board to select with more discrimination among applicants. However, as detailed in paragraph 3.2 above, there were some concerns that the new A* award might have an impact on the social composition of the undergraduate population in these universities;
 - 1994 Group universities were likely to take a close interest in applicants who have taken an Extended Project, either as a mandatory part of their Diploma studies or alongside awards such as AS and A2 at A-level;
 - it seemed very likely that almost all 1994 Group universities would be in a position to accept applicants completing Diplomas onto undergraduate courses from 2010 and that, as such, the government's aim of establishing Diploma study as a route from school or college to higher education for a number of 'the most capable students preparing for the most demanding university courses' will be achieved. Subsequently, all member institutions confirmed that they would be willing to accept applications from Diploma students for 2010 entry.
- 3.5 The 1994 Group supports the implementation of Progression Accords as an effective means to develop and maintain productive engagement between FECs/Diploma Consortia and Universities. Progression Accords provide a means to initiate and embed good practice in the management of progression to HE helping to ensure that Diploma and other FE learners are well prepared for the HE learning experience.

4. The balance between teaching and research

- 4.1 1994 Group institutions are amongst the most research-intensive in the UK and research-led teaching is key to their mission. They operate in the strong belief that there is a clear connection between excellent and innovative research and the highest quality teaching and they offer their students the opportunity to learn in a research-enriched community.
- 4.2 Research Assessment is, and must continue to be, about supporting research excellence, wherever this is found. Excellence is primarily measured by research output, and there must be peer oversight of the assessment process. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has enabled the UK to prove its demonstrable excellence in research in all fields of study. We have strongly supported the Government's desire to reform the RAE in order to lighten the burden on Higher Education Institutions but have emphasised that such reform must strengthen, not weaken, our ability to demonstrate the excellence of UK research. The RAE allows reliable comparisons to be made between subject units, institutions, and countries. It is essential that this aspect is preserved in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) if the UK is to retain its position as a world leader in higher education research. There should be a continuing role for higher education institutions and HEFCE in the development and operation of the revised assessment and funding system and the revised assessment system should be based on a commitment from Government that the dual funding system for research will be maintained.
- 4.3 With undergraduate students now behaving more like consumers in a market place, it is essential that there is a mechanism by which they can assess the relative qualities of Higher Education institutions and the courses they offer. The National Student Survey offers students the information they require to make such a value judgement. The 1994 Group values highly the feedback and opinions of its students, and so takes the National Student Survey extremely seriously. At the Group's institutions the

survey is used as a tool for identifying problem areas and much effort is going into evaluating and improving these in the hope that the student experience can be enhanced in the future. The 1994 Group supports the continuation and further development of the National Student Survey and strongly recommends that a postgraduate taught student survey is developed.

5. Degree Classifications

We welcome the recommendation of the Burgess Report that degree classifications be examined and potentially restructured, following a complete review of assessment systems, and possibly replaced by a degree transcript and summative judgement. We take very seriously the conclusion that appropriate change is needed to the degree classification system to maximise its usefulness to students and employers, and are committed to playing our part in effecting that change. Our member institutions are studying the report in depth to assess the detailed implications of its recommendations.

6. Student Support and Engagement

6.1 The effectiveness of initiatives to support student engagement in the formulation of HE policy, and how the success or otherwise of these initiatives is being assessed

6.1.1 The changing environment of fees and expectations has brought the nature of the relationship between student and university into focus. As the marketplace develops, there is certainly a growing need to encourage and consider the 'student voice'. There is a growing importance for universities and Government to listen to the opinions of students through forums and surveys, and acknowledge their role as 'change agents' when updating policy approaches to teaching and learning, student support and any other aspects which affect their experience of university. This has begun to be recognised by Government by the very welcome creation of a Minister for Students in October 2007 and the formation of an independent National Student Forum which advises ministers on student issues.

6.1.2 There is an increased responsibility on institutions to work in close partnership with the NUS in recognition of its role as the national voice of students, as well as with local students' unions in their role as the voice of students on campus and providers of many aspects of the non-academic student experience. Student unions are, of course, independent organisations but there needs to be a carefully managed partnership between universities and students' unions if we are going to deliver and meet the highest standards which are increasingly expected of us.

6.2 Examples of reasons for, and potential strategies to reduce, the non-completion of higher education programmes by students

6.2.1 Specific stages of early university life such as the admissions process, the open day, the welcome week and the first lecture are vital stages in the development of a strong relationship between student and university, which works to greatly enhance the chances of retention. From an HE Academy survey examining the experience of first year students in HE, it appears 41% of students who knew little or nothing about their course before enrolment had thought of withdrawing, compared with 25% of those who knew a moderate amount or a lot.² The Government must work closely with universities to ensure that proper information, advice and guidance is available to prospective students. The Group strongly endorses the recommendations of the NCEE to improve provision in this area and enhance aspiration at school level.

² 'The First Year Experience Survey', HEA 2006. See: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/FYEsurvey.htm>

6.2.2 The 1994 Group's November 2007 'Enhancing the Student Experience Report'³ suggested that a strong link exists between engagement in co-curricular activity and high levels of student satisfaction and retention. It also highlighted the need to conduct further research to evaluate in more detail these programmes in order to understand this link more fully. Some examples of current practice are detailed below.

- (i) Accreditation of co-curricular activity through co-curricular transcripts is at varying stages of development at each 1994 Group institution. The Leicester Award for Employability Skills is a 20 week programme for up to 150 students involved in work-related extra-curricular activities including paid or voluntary employment, enterprise or Students' Union activities. The Award provides an opportunity for them to reflect on, develop and gain recognition for their broader life or work experiences by participating in learning activities, pursuing an active programme of personal development, and gaining an accredited qualification. Similarly, the York Award, the University of York's certificate of personal development, provides a framework within which students can reflect on their experiences in work, volunteering, study and personal interests. It enables students to identify the personal development resulting from these activities and builds their abilities to articulate this to future employers. For 2008-09, the University of Exeter has introduced the framework of the Exeter Award to recognize its students extra-curricular activities. Designed to build scale, 2400 students have currently enrolled on the Award. A second Award, the Exeter Leader Award, will be introduced in January 2009 and is designed to recognize stretch and challenge.
- (ii) It is also important to examine case studies which do not necessarily have accreditation attached, but nonetheless play a large part in the experience and retention of students, as well as enhancing their employability. An example of this would be the large-scale volunteering services at institutions, such as 'Community Action' at Exeter. This service involves around 600 students and has been adopted as a model of best practice by the Higher Education Active Community Fund (HEACF). Student volunteers at Exeter gave 100,000 hours of service last year to disadvantaged people in the city – the equivalent of 70 full-time voluntary sector workers.

6.3 The adequacy of UK higher education (HE) funding and student support packages, and implications for current and future levels of student debt

6.3.1 International and postgraduate students across the UK have been paying tuition fees since the 1980s, and this was the real beginning of the HE student marketplace. Across the UK, international student fees are not capped, and universities have the power to set fees as they like. Despite this, demand for UK HE from international students continues to rise,⁴ and these students make an extremely important contribution to the sustainability of many parts of the sector. Similarly, postgraduate fees are uncapped but demand for these programmes is increasing at a rate faster than for undergraduate courses across the UK, and this is particularly the case for postgraduate taught programmes.⁵

³ 'Enhancing the Student Experience', 1994 Group Policy Report, November 2007. Available at: <http://www.1994group.ac.uk/documents/public/SEPolicyReport.pdf>

⁴ Full time international students in UK rose from 95,900 in 1992 to 240,390 in 2004-05. 'The Economic Costs and Benefits of International Students', Vickers & Bekhradnia, HEPI, July 2007, p2

⁵ UK postgraduate student numbers (FTE) rose from 254,671 in 2000/01 to 309,478 in 2005/06, a growth of 9.7%, compared to a 6.6% growth in undergraduate student numbers (FTE). This trend was particularly marked in PGT student numbers, which grew 11.3%. HESA, Planning Plus 2007.

- 6.3.2 Since September 2006, universities and colleges in England have been able to charge new full time home undergraduate students a variable fee. We have yet to see the full implications of the new variable fee system in England, but so far the signs have been encouraging. Following fears that the new system would reduce participation and drive students to apply to other HE systems the evidence is that applications have risen significantly once again, resuming the trend over the past decade of unprecedented increase in HE participation.
- 6.3.3 As the implications of the new system unfolds, there is no doubt that its long-term success depends greatly on the successful implementation of grants and bursary schemes. As a group we are rightly proud of the substantial new investment in bursary and scholarship schemes and outreach activities made possible in our institutions this year through the introduction of the new variable fee arrangements. In 2006-07, 1994 Group institutions invested £15.5 million in new bursary and scholarship schemes and outreach activities. This investment is estimated to rise to £45 million in 2008-09. These sums are in addition to the significant amounts already invested by members in bursaries and scholarships from charitable and other sources.

6.4 Any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world class educational experience

The challenge for universities and policy-makers is to keep abreast of the shifting expectations of an increasingly diverse and informed student population and to adjust accordingly to provide the best possible experience to each of them if UK HE is to continue to be one of the leading higher education providers in the world. The 1994 Group 'Enhancing the Student Experience Report' concluded that there were **seven priority areas** for the sector and Government to take forward if we are to meet the challenges of a changing environment of student experiences and expectations.

These priority areas are:

1. A requirement to provide transparent and accurate information around the student experience, building on the National Student Survey, and extending to include graduate students, and making better use of existing data.
2. Promoting the 'well-rounded' graduate. Striving to achieve recognition amongst the top employers and the sector skills councils for 'well-rounded' graduates who benefit from excellent academic and non-academic experiences, and to ensure that the value of these graduates is understood outside universities.
3. Promoting the student voice. Universities, Government, the NUS and local students' unions working together to fully promote and listen to the student voice and implement a partnership approach to the student experience.
4. More effective engagement with schools and colleges to increase and widen participation in higher education and central involvement in the introduction of the 14-19 curriculum reforms.
5. Developing a better understanding of student needs when universities implement their student-focussed resources, including new strategies to provide more joined-up and accessible student services, support and facilities.
6. Taking a new approach to the creation of an international strategy for UK higher education, linking universities, government, devolved governments, the British Council, funding agencies and other sector stakeholders to maintain and build the UK's strength in challenging international markets.

7. Giving students the role of 'change agents'. Universities must be prepared to adapt approaches to teaching and learning in light of student demand and technological advancement, including placing teaching and learning in a research-enriched environment and truly international context.

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