

Post-18 Education Review: Call for Evidence – LSESU Response

LSESU Position Paper on Class and Seminar Sizes

Introduction

At London School of Economics Students' Union (LSESU) we believe that Higher Education (HE) should be free at the point of entry and that students and graduates should not be required to contribute financially except through general taxation. Politically, we are opposed to the Government's continuous attempts to create a market in HE and believe that this is damaging the sector. We believe that the increase in tuition fees has brought a consumerist view point into HE and that students are increasingly seeing themselves as consumers. At LSESU we believe that education is a public good and that education and academia benefits society and that its importance to society should not be understated. Issues in the media about Vice-Chancellors' pay and refunds as a result of industrial action have distracted from the real conversations that we should be having about HE. The HE sector is more than a tool to stimulate the economy or a graduate creation factory, yet *prima facie* that appears to be the pretext to this review. We hope that this review considers in its response to attempt to rescue the sector from this marketised and consumerist approach.

However, it is disappointing that this review is not as extensive as was touted by the Prime Minister in September; the exclusion of issues around public funding and individual contributions is seriously limiting. This review could perhaps have provided an opportunity for the Government to halt its piecemeal approach to the HE sector. The threat of constant change for the sector has created a sense of instability and arguably the sector is now more vulnerable than we have seen before. Therefore, LSESU calls on the review panel to see themselves as the safe keepers of the sector and that its recommendations work in the best interests of students. Finally, it is important to note that LSE is a small and specialist, social sciences university, it does not provide Further Education (FE) courses, therefore this response will be written from this perspective.

Part 1: Choice and competition across a joined-up post-18 education and training sector

Variable undergraduate tuition fees

At LSESU we believe that this review and the Government should question the validity of any attempts to create a market in HE tuition fees. When fees were increased in 2010 LSE was one of the few institutions not to increase its fees to the full £9,000. This decision was taken on the basis that LSE should be accessible. However, it became apparent that this was not sustainable. Firstly almost no other institutions did the same thing, but secondly and more importantly the reduction in public funding meant a funding cut. While LSE tried to achieve this lofty vision, its future financial sustainability meant that it was not able to. And therein lies the problem with tuition fees. Even at LSE – a wealthy institution with diverse income streams – undergraduate tuition fees are built into financial planning and therefore any reduction will be felt. This demonstrates explicitly why previous attempts to create a market

in HE failed and why any future reduction of fees without an increase in public funding will create a crisis in the sector. We would argue that to create real choice in the sector, choice and cost need to be separated. If there were no fees then students would not be reliant on consumerist concerns but rather could focus on the quality or course content of their degrees.

There is also the question of if variable tuition fees are introduced, how would the Government assess a degrees worth? This could be based on quality, however measuring quality is a deeply subjective process and attempts to use metrics such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) are deeply flawed. Its simplistic measures are misleading even in its presentation of graduate outcomes. For example, at LSE TEF would say that it does not score highly for employment after 6 months, yet at LSESU we know that this is because many students choose to take time out after graduation and we know that many of our graduates go on to highly skilled employment in the future. Alternatively, the Government could choose to base this on their political priorities, of what skills they think graduates require. For LSE, this could create disparate funding between degrees at LSE with economics, statistics and finance courses being priced differently from anthropology, philosophy and sociology. This could have the potential to damage the offer of arts and social science courses not just at LSE but nationally as well. The value of these degrees needs to be treated in parity of esteem to STEM and quantitative courses. Further, if funding is measured on what the Government thinks the economy needs this leaves the sector open to too much political interference and short-term thinking. Which in a sector with so much uncertainty has the potential to be even more destabilising.

Ultimately, the sector should be properly funded to deliver high quality courses as determined by quality assurance processes and not based on blunt metrics. At LSESU we call on the review to reject the premise of variable fees without additional public funding and to resist any pressures to increase political interference in the sector.

Choice within the post-18 sector

Perhaps the greatest barrier to real choice for prospective students within the post-18 education sector is the perception that there is one direction of travel. When individuals go out into the workplace, unless they have chosen an academic route previously there is little opportunity to return to the academic sphere. This is in part the fault of policy makers; the very narrative of this review suggests transition from academic into vocational or technical. But it is largely the fault of universities and their entry requirements. Many Russell Group institutions, simply refuse or put up high barriers to admit students with “non-traditional” backgrounds.

There are some institutions in the sector that understand and promote the transition between HE and FE, but this is still not the case for Russell Group institutions. These institutions hide behind high entry requirements as a means of limiting choice and access for prospective students. Accessibility and choice are closely linked, one cannot exist without the other. For many in education the path they will take through the post-18 sector is set at 16 and this can

limit their access to HE later in life. For example, many institutions will not accept BTEC qualifications for some courses or for students of non-traditional backgrounds at LSE they are required to sit an additional formal examination, in London. This does not promote a joined-up sector and actively is a barrier for students without A-levels.

Interestingly, while undergraduate study at LSE is academic, postgraduate study can have more technical and vocational aspects to it. Yet, the terms of reference for this review appear to be focussed on FE and undergraduate education. We believe that to truly think of a joined up post-18 education sector, postgraduate education – whether academic, vocational or technical – needs to have serious consideration by the review panel. Issues surrounding access to postgraduate education are dealt with in the next section.

LSESU calls on the review to recognise that transitions by students from FE to HE (both undergraduate and postgraduate) and between academic, vocational and technical at different points of their lives is not linear. And to hold universities to account (particularly the Russell Group) for placing needless burdens on those with non-academic qualifications in their entry requirements.

Part-time study

The reality of the collapse in part time study has been due to Government policies around part time study and the lack of support for these students. Therefore, the only feasible option to promote part time study is for this review to advocate the implementation of a truly equitable system for part time study at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. However, there is also an issue of willingness to deliver, at LSE part-time provision at undergraduate level has all but been quietly phased out. Anecdotally, this is simply because individuals within the institution do not wish to deliver it. They see these students as being more likely to withdraw and requiring additional support as they tend to come from non-traditional backgrounds. This is unacceptable, institutions need to be held to account where they simply just do not want to deliver part-time study. At postgraduate level at LSE the situation is slightly different, there are more part-time options, and for the more technical or vocational courses there is an expectation this will be completed alongside work. However, what LSE (and other Russell Group institutions) should do better at is offering teaching outside of 'traditional' teaching hours. While we are not calling on LSE to take on entirely the 'Birbeck model' of teaching; evening options would open HE to those that choose to work full time and study.

LSESU calls on the review to ensure that part-time students are treated equitably to full-time in terms of funding and student support. Further LSESU would ask the review to consider advocating for the provision of evening study at Russell Group institutions such as LSE.

Part 2: A system that is accessible to all

Access to HE

There is a real problem with access to HE and Russell Group institutions, for example LSE actively states within its access agreements that it does not recruit mature students. Further, LSE has not in the past conducted outreach work at FE colleges, a key site to encouraging mature students. Nor does it have plans on how to engage care leavers, leavers of the criminal justice system or children of armed forces personnel. Applications from prospective students of black, Afro-Caribbean heritage are low – although acceptance rates are good. Despite endless platitudes from the Government about access, institutions such as LSE (at undergraduate level) are still mainly white and middle class. Despite continuous platitudes from Government about increasing access these problems persist. More needs to be done on holding institutions to account for failing to meet targets or in some cases failing to even have targets. The content of many access agreements gives the façade of acting but in practice much of the work is little but lip service. Successive years of ‘action’ by Russell Group institutions has done little to change their demographics. Instead, recent focus by Government has been on forcing universities to prop up schools, this needs to end. Therefore, LSESU calls on the review to demand greater accountability from institutions including higher penalties for failure. We also call on this review to push for a move away from the issue of schools and to push for a focus on more practical interventions.

Student maintenance costs

The removal of student maintenance grants exponentially increased the burden of debt placed on students. This has resulted in students leaving undergraduate education with circa £60,000 of student loan debt. While it is much touted that students do not repay this until they start earning, it is still a lot for students to take on. We know that disproportionately it is students from low socio-economic backgrounds that leave university with the most student debt and we know that they are the least likely to ever pay it back. This creates not only a potential psychological barrier for students who may be more debt averse but also a future crisis for the public purse. Public opinion has shown that not only has the increase of student debt been an unpopular policy with students and young people but it is also unpopular with their families as well. Simply put, this was the wrong choice and maintenance grants need to return.

When the Government introduced the loans, they congratulated themselves on increasing the level of maintenance available. The increase of student maintenance was welcome, although this should not have come at the expense of grants, nevertheless for students living in London the maximum loan is still not enough. The maintenance loan available to undergraduates is based on how much the government thinks it costs rather than what it does cost. This needs to change, there needs to be a link between student support and the actual expenditures of being a student, particularly in London. A suggestion would be utilising the student expenditure survey for this purpose rather than delaying its publication.

Further, the link between parental and partner based support needs to be reviewed, at present the assumption that parents can contribute is overstated and long overdue a review.

For postgraduate students there is little to no support for maintenance costs, the Government offers a £10,000 loan, but this is not specifically for living costs. As will be discussed later the high cost of postgraduate tuition fees means that studying full-time is impossible for many from low socio-economic backgrounds. The increase in part-time postgraduate study since the introduction of the loans is a symptom of this lack of maintenance support. Many students are choosing to use the loan to cover their tuition fees and instead work and study at the same time. We believe that postgraduate taught maintenance support should be introduced so that individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds can access this full-time.

Finally, where possible the Government should seek to reduce the burden on student incomes, such as through the high cost of student accommodation. Too much of student maintenance support is spent on halls of residences, especially in London. While an increase in maintenance support will offset this, the Government also needs to hold universities to account for their poor business decision making. Universities should not be seeking to make money off students – and the Government – through their halls of residences. Instead they should be required to provide affordable accommodation, and they (and local authorities) should be given the levers to deliver on this mandate.

Therefore, LSESU calls on the review to advocate for the return of maintenance grants, to review expected parental contributions and to link maintenance levels to actual student expenditure. We also call on the review to introduce postgraduate maintenance support and to call on universities to provide, real affordable accommodation for all its students.

Regulation of postgraduate tuition fees

Perhaps the most inaccessible aspect of post-18 education is postgraduate tuition fees, at LSE we have the highest postgraduate tuition fees in England. In 2018/19 for Home/EU students an MSc in Gender Studies or Political Sociology will cost £13,536. This degree is in the lowest price bracket for MScs at LSE, the cost increases significantly from here. If you wanted to study an MSc in Economics then this will set students back £26,976, or even more expensive is an MSc in Finance which costs £34,200. These are extraordinary figures and present a real barrier for individuals accessing postgraduate education. At postgraduate taught level there is little to no funding; LSE offers some institutional funding and the postgraduate loan from the UK Government is only £10,000. Not a single course at LSE is below this amount and for some courses this doesn't even cover a third of the fees let alone even being able to consider living costs. Being able to study as a postgraduate at LSE is impossible except for those who have the families who can pay.

The simple fact is that postgraduate taught fees require regulation, LSE MScs are only accessible to those with the money to pay for them. This is unacceptable, and we believe

that institutions like LSE that charge astronomical prices should be held to account for this. Further, the postgraduate loan has gone some way to increasing postgraduate study but in many institutions, it barely goes any way to making a postgraduate qualification a realistic ambition. Also, as postgraduate loans are paid through the student maintenance system the funds come after the deadline for paying tuition fees. We believe the introduction of separate postgraduate taught loans (although ideally grants) for fees and for maintenance would go some way to solving this problem.

Therefore, LSESU calls on the review to recognise the crisis in access to postgraduate education and to hold institutions to account for this. We also call on the review to recommend the regulation of postgraduate tuition fees and to seek for the introduction of separate loans for postgraduate tuition fees and maintenance.

Part 3: Delivering the skills the UK needs

This narrative around HE delivering skills for the economy is directly as a result of failed Government policies. It is recent Government's that have created the zero-hours, low skilled, low wage, gig-economy that the job market in the UK is fast becoming. These are the very jobs that are most at risk of automation in the future. Therefore, the Government has turned to universities (and colleges) to undo this damage. Government are placing an unfair burden on the post-18 education sector to fill the gaps in its own failed economic policies and setting it up to fail. It is Government and not the HE sector that have the levers to stimulate the economy. This focus on 'hard' skills is also concerning, LSE as an institution has a strong reputation of producing highly skilled, employable graduates with many of those graduates entering London's financial and public sectors. This reputation is 'despite' being primarily a social sciences institution, this is because employers recognise the value of transferable skills. A fact that appears lost on the current Government. If this review decides to direct the sector down the route of 'hard' skills and favouring STEM over the social sciences, this presents a real risk of the narrowing of the sector and the loss of knowledge in the future.

A further risk of this skills focussed approach is to student satisfaction. LSE uses its ethical history as a marketing tool, it claims to produce graduates for the betterment of society, that students will have a 'truly academic' experience. The reality of this is that LSE places a high value on graduate employability. From the moment students arrive they are under an immense pressure to know what their career plans are, to get internships and then to get good graduate jobs. Students are placed in direct competition with each other for placements and this creates a toxic atmosphere. Students feel that the School is just a conveyor belt for graduate employment rather than a place for learning. This has an impact on students' mental health and is a significant contributor to its low levels of student satisfaction. A direct quote from a student to LSESU research on the LSE educational experience was that "[at LSE you] get in, get a 2:1 and get a job". If graduate employment is valued more highly than the student experience this will lead to low satisfaction. The LSE tale should be a cautionary one, which is why at LSESU we work to offset this competitive, employment focussed culture. We are slowly trying to end this, it would be a shame for the Government to force the rest of

the sector to take on this bad practice.

LSESU calls on the review to reject the focus on STEM and 'hard' skills in this review and to recognise the transferable skills gained through the study of social sciences. We also call on the review to reject an all-encompassing focus on graduate employment in favour of protecting the student experience.

Part 4: Value for money for graduates and taxpayers

The issue of what is value for money is currently poorly defined and subjective and yet the Government are determined to push this principle into the everyday use of the language of the sector. The question of what is value for money for taxpayer and for graduates of HE is deeply complex and is a clear example of the problem of how HE is currently funded. With a mixture of public and private elements there will always be a tension between taxpayers and the Government and students and graduates as their motivations are very different. This places a demand on universities that does not need to exist were they wholly publicly funded, and yet, the Government continues to push this duality.

Students' Unions have been at the forefront of trying to define what value for money in the HE sector means and what students think it means. In the recently published research by a consortium of Student's Unions it found a complex picture, filled with contradictory priorities. But very simply students do not feel they receive value for money from their institution, the cause for this dissatisfaction is unclear but the research suggests this is being driven by the consumerist nature of tuition fees. Students cannot tangibly see how their money is being spent, therefore they are not happy with their expenditure. What is clear is that if the Government persists with a consumerist approach to HE, then further research into value for money is needed. This research makes an important contribution but this is not, nor should it be, the end of the conversation.

From an institutional perspective, LSE is reasonably unique in that it primarily delivers classroom based, traditionally academic courses. It does not deliver (except for Behavioural Psychology) courses in laboratories neither do many of its courses require extremely expensive specialist equipment. This means that relatively speaking the 'cost' of delivering these courses should be relatively low also meaning that there should be little cross subsidising of more expensive courses within the institution. Likewise, the cost to the student is relatively low, there are fewer course costs as compared to arts based courses. This would suggest, using the research on value for money, that students at LSE should feel that their courses are value for money. We do not have specific research on this, but we would suggest that this is unlikely to be the case. This hypothesis stems from the fact value for money and student satisfaction are intrinsically linked; and at LSE this is low.

The reason for this low satisfaction at LSE is twofold; one that LSE does not do enough to invest in the 'student experience'. LSESU research shows that students are unhappy with the non-academic side of the institution, including investment in student support, in sports and

societies and building a sense of community. Secondly, they are unhappy with the quality of education that LSE provides in teaching both at undergraduate and postgraduate taught levels; LSE does not get the basic elements of teaching quality correct. Issues such as course organisation, Departmental autonomy, a lack of support for GTAs all compound students feeling like LSE does not consider teaching to be important. LSE advertises itself as having world renowned academics and yet students are either not taught by them or they see them once a term in a lecture theatre of lots of other students. It is in this that students at LSE do not feel they are getting value for money. Therefore, this question of value for money is merely a distraction from the real issues of the quality of higher education.

At LSESU in the next academic year we will be prioritising testing our hypothesis and speaking to our students and asking them what they think value for money at LSE. But we also call on the review to ask the Government to do further thinking on this issue and to scale back the emphasis on value for money. The term is meaningless and is not a helpful measure of HE. Instead the Government should focus on means of promoting the quality of the HE sector and teaching quality. They should remove the meaningless TEF and find ways through quality assurance processes including through ensuring that students are at the heart of the review process to really assess the quality of education. Focus not on value for money but quality.

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