

POLICY RESPONSE

HEFCE consultation on funding to support teaching in higher education

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MillionPlus response to HEFCE consultation on arrangements to support widening access, student success and progression to postgraduate taught study

INTRODUCTION

In this consultation, HEFCE acknowledges that the proposals put forward are only part of its approach to reforming and addressing teaching funding, in light of government reductions in investment during the current spending review period. It is therefore difficult to understand fully the impact any proposals will have, as other changes are as yet unknown. In addition, the changes that may come in to effect when the new Office for Students is established, particularly around the new Access and Participation Agreements, may further impact the scope and nature of the financial support available for widening access, students' success and progression.

There are also other unknown factors that may arise from any changes that may come as a consequence of the vote to leave the European Union, the change in government, and the new departmental structure.

We believe, therefore, that HEFCE should consider either delaying any changes to funding to support teaching in higher education. A delayed approach would also enable HEFCE to take into account all factors that may have an impact when making decisions about funding support for students.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 1: TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE THAT WE SHOULD DISCONTINUE THE WIDENING ACCESS ELEMENT OF THE FUNDING WE PREVIOUSLY IDENTIFIED AS THE STUDENT OPPORTUNITY ALLOCATION FROM 2017-18? (NOTE THAT IF A WIDENING ACCESS ELEMENT IS CONTINUED, FUNDING FOR NCOP WILL BE PROVIDED IN FULL OR IN PART FROM THE TOTAL AVAILABLE FOR THE STUDENT PREMIUM AND THIS WILL BE FURTHERCONCENTRATED TO REFLECT THE REDUCED FUNDING AVAILABLE.)

We agree with investment that supports collaboration and outreach by the sector to potential students. The environment in which universities have had to work in recent years (since 2010/11) has become more market-based and competitive. Previous collaborative approaches such as AimHigher have been disbanded, and universities have to some extent been expected to work on policy areas such as outreach and retention on an individual basis. We therefore welcome the acknowledgement that collaboration is an important and vital element of the higher education sector, and one that requires combined efforts, coordinated among groups of universities, within a national framework.

In the context of limited (and reducing) investment from government in this area, it is sensible to target this into collaborative arrangements. We think it is unfortunate that the funding to support the national collaborative outreach programme (NCOP) is not new investment from government, and do not agree in

principle that other elements of support for students should be reduced. However, in that context, we understand the argument put forward by HEFCE that the most logical element of its current funding that could be diverted is the widening access element. However, we would urge HEFCE to investigate and publish the impact this will have on institutions, so that universities can understand fully what this change may mean.

We urge HEFCE to consider how, if funding to individual institutions for widening access is removed, no potential students will miss out on appropriate outreach activity. We understand HEFCE's rationale for proposing that the NCOP works on a targeted basis to identify the areas with the greatest need, but would want to be sure that this does not overlook any pockets of deprivation within areas of high participation. We also request further information from HEFCE about how this new approach may link with outreach and raising aspiration activity that is taking place at secondary level.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 2: TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE WITH THE PROPOSAL THAT THE FULL-TIME STUDENT PREMIUM SHOULD INCLUDE A SUPPLEMENT WITH A WEIGHTING BASED ON THE RECRUITMENT OF STUDENTS WHO ARE BOTH AT RISK AND FROM THE MOST DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS?

We agree that the targeted funding available via the full-time student premium should include a supplement with a weighting based on the recruitment of students who are at risk and/or from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. We note that HEFCE makes reference to POLAR quintile 1 analysis, and that this is the basis for the government's targets on increasing access. In this context, it is essential that HEFCE is fully confident that this data is comprehensive to meet the need of identifying where funding should be targeted. POLAR data is based on young participation, so does not fully capture all students studying; for example, older students may also be from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or be at risk. Additionally, as we note in our response to question 1, HEFCE needs to be sure that this approach does not overlook pockets of disadvantage in areas of high participation.

Any approach taken by HEFCE needs to ensure that those universities that do the most to widen participation and support success for students from areas of disadvantage and / or who are at risk, receive proper support and investment.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 3: WHAT SOURCE (OR SOURCES) OF DATA DO YOU CONSIDER SHOULD BE USED TO DETERMINE THE LEVEL OF DISABLED STUDENTS ALLOCATION TO EACH INSTITUTION?

We agree that given the recent changes to the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) it is no longer going to be appropriate for HEFCE funding to support disabled students to be based on those in receipt of this allowance. Many students who previously would have qualified for this support may no longer receive it. Therefore, determining the level of disabled students allowance on other information is going to be essential. Disabled students should continue to receive support and investment to ensure that they are encouraged to apply to university and can be successful in their studies.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 4: DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER COMMENTS OR ADVICE ON OUR PROPOSALS FOR SUPPORTING WIDENING ACCESS AND SUCCESSFUL STUDENT OUTCOMES?

These decisions are being considered at a time of reducing funding, but are in response to government ambitions to increase participation by students from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or who are at risk. The impact of the pupil premium in secondary education over the last 5 years will, if it meets its own success criteria, likely to increase the number of students at the age of 18 who are qualified to apply to university. Therefore, as the population of students from disadvantaged backgrounds increases, and universities are

required to investment more resource in supporting them, it is essential that the funding available from government via HEFCE (and the Office for Students from 2018/19) keeps up with this increased need.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 5: TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE THAT WE SHOULD DISCONTINUE THE ELEMENT OF THE TAUGHT POSTGRADUATE SUPPLEMENT FOR PROVISION THAT IS ELIGIBLE FOR THE MASTERS LOAN? (WE WOULD RETAIN THE SUPPLEMENT FOR FLEXIBLE SHORT-CYCLE PROVISION).

Although postgraduate students will be able to apply for masters loans from 2016/17 and for doctoral loans from 2018/19, there is no certainty over whether these will be taken out by students, or if they will address all of the issues in postgraduate progression. It may therefore be unwise to withdraw the taught postgraduate supplement immediately. Instead, HEFCE should evaluate how successful the loan provision is and make funding decisions in light of that information. Withdrawing support too early could exacerbate the current situation regarding progression to postgraduate taught study.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 6: IF THE TAUGHT POSTGRADUATE SUPPLEMENT FOR PROVISION THAT IS ELIGIBLE FOR THE MASTERS LOAN IS DISCONTINUED, TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE THE SUPPLEMENT SHOULD BE ATTRIBUTABLE TO ACTIVITY ACROSS ALL SUBJECTS, NOT JUST CLINICAL, HIGH AND INTERMEDIATE COST SUBJECTS?

Any funding to support taught postgraduate provision should be attributable to as wide a range of activity as possible. Focusing investment only on clinical, high and intermediate cost subjects may mean that other areas of support – such as support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds or who are at risk – may be overlooked. It may be that students that fall into these categories do not need as much additional support as those studying undergraduate level, but their needs should be considered when making investment decisions.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 7: TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE THAT FUNDING SHOULD BE PROVIDED ACCORDING TO THE PROPORTION OF TAUGHT POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN EACH INSTITUTION FROM THE LOWEST PARTICIPATION AREAS OR IN RECEIPT OF DISABLED STUDENTS' ALLOWANCE?

Postgraduate students may have a shared advantage of having studied at undergraduate level, but many of the inequalities and areas of disadvantage carry through and so it is important for HEFCE to recognise this in allocating funding to support postgraduate students. HEFCE should consider how to ensure progress made in widening participation at undergraduate level is not lost at postgraduate level. We believe that the starting point for considering how to target support needs to be the same as at undergraduate level – students from low participation areas, from disadvantaged backgrounds, and disabled students. As noted in our responses to questions 2 and 3 it is important that this approach is comprehensive and takes into account other changes to government policy – so basing funding on receipt of Disabled Students Allowance may not be appropriate since that is no longer available to many students who may well need support to be successful.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 8: ARE THERE OTHER WAYS IN WHICH YOU WOULD SUGGEST WE SHOULD PROVIDE TEACHING FUNDING TO ADDRESS BARRIERS TO TAUGHT POSTGRADUATE PARTICIPATION?

It is important any lessons learned from experiences and evaluations into success at undergraduate level are examined to see what can be implemented to support postgraduate students. The introduction of the new national collaborative outreach programme at undergraduate level emphasises the importance of joint, coordinated activity to address areas of under and low participation. The same approach needs to be considered to challenge and address barriers to progression into postgraduate study, whether students are moving immediately after undergraduate provision or returning to study many years after graduation.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 9: DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER COMMENTS OR ADVICE ON OUR PROPOSALS FOR SUPPORTING PROGRESSION TO TAUGHT POSTGRADUATE STUDY?

We repeat the comments we have made elsewhere in this response that there are inequalities in postgraduate progression and study that relate to the same characteristics as are present in undergraduate progression and study. These include where students are from areas of low participation, or from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as disabled students. Access to funding for postgraduate study has been a significant barrier to progression and participation, and so the introduction of the new loans for masters and doctoral programmes may address some of the inequalities. However, access to funding is not the only barrier to progression and participation, and so loans are not the only solution. HEFCE (and in time the OfS) needs to continue to identify these barriers, evaluate where they still present problems for students, and argue for government support to address these issues.