

million+ response to the BIS consultation on adult vocational education – June 2015

Introduction

1. million+ works with a number of modern universities across England and Scotland. These universities have many long-standing partnerships with further education colleges, supporting students from diverse backgrounds to access and progress through higher education to study high quality vocational and technical degrees that enable them to be successful in the workplace. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

Vocational education in universities

2. High quality vocational qualifications are of great importance to the higher education sector. Nearly a quarter of students accepted to university places included a BTEC qualification as part of their application. Universities not only offer a wide variety of vocational and technical qualifications themselves, they also value vocational qualifications as part of the university application process. Many full-time university and honours degree programmes are vocationally focused and lead directly to particular careers and occupation of a professional and technical nature.
3. Modern universities have long-standing experience in delivering vocational qualifications such as HNC and HND qualifications, often with partner further education colleges, within vocational fields that provide skilled graduates to local employers. In many fields these qualifications are the preferred professional recognition.
4. HNC and HND qualifications developed and delivered within the higher education system are subject to rigorous and robust quality assurance, funding and governance arrangements; indeed there are strong arguments to extend the quality and regulatory framework to those HNC/D courses currently not being delivered by higher education providers.
5. HNCs and HNDs are highly valuable qualifications for both employer recognition and for progression to other higher education courses. As such, they are integral to promoting access to higher education, with the consequent benefits on individual earnings and social mobility.
6. Universities operate as independent organisations, competing for students, and as such are seen by further education colleges as external funding agencies. Further education colleges are able to consider a variety of providers within the higher education sector when it comes to offering qualifications to students. This level of competition can be of benefit to potential students who can exercise choice and so drive improvement in degree quality.

University entrants with vocational qualifications

7. Universities offer a wide range of undergraduate programmes: 10 per cent of UK domiciled full-time students are enrolled on programmes such as foundation degrees and HNDs that are usually vocational and technical nature. In the part-time population, 28 per cent of students are enrolled on those types of programmes.
8. 23 per cent of students who applied prior to the June 2014 deadline (for entry to university from autumn 2014) included a BTEC qualification in their UCAS application¹. There is a difference between traditional school leavers and mature students, with older applicants being more likely to apply with at least one vocational qualification.
9. Students are increasingly likely to apply to university with a vocational qualification. The number of applicants with BTEC qualifications has nearly doubled since 2008.

Impact of previous government reform on vocational education

10. From 2010 to 2012-13 the number of part-time students in universities in England declined by 40 per cent, linked with the introduction of the 2012 Higher Education reforms. Although loans for part-time students were introduced for the first time, the cost of part-time study also increased significantly. The majority of the reduction in part-time students was in these highly vocational courses. This has an impact on employer development of staff, on individuals retraining to adopt new skills for new jobs, and on people who did not progress to further study immediately after leaving school.
11. The rapid decline in part time registrations as a result of the higher fees has reduced not only the pipeline of skills to employers but also the volume of degree level work-based outcomes in the workplace. Work-based learning assessments generate insight and innovation for organisations that fuel continuous improvement and growth. Fewer part time work-based students means that the UK macro economy is deprived of the transformational benefits of vocational HE outcomes
12. The vast majority of the drop in part-time numbers was in courses known as “other first degrees,” namely HNC/Ds, Foundation Degrees, DipHE and other qualifications that tend to be technical and vocational.

Employer-funded higher education

13. There are **46,000** full-time-equivalent (FTE) students in England whose employer pays the majority of their course fees, largely because the courses are highly vocational, having been designed with employers. A further 95,000 students have their fees paid by a public sector body, mostly in education, health and social care.
14. Employers are also involved in the creation and shaping of courses they do not directly financially contribute to, including through professional accreditation bodies as well as more informal consultation.

Conclusion

¹ <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/data-and-analysis/end-cycle-data-resources/applicants-and-acceptances-groups-applicants> Table DR2 033 05

15. Universities have a strong record in providing high quality vocational education built up over many years. This includes courses co-developed with businesses, HNCs and HNDs, foundation degrees, and technical undergraduate and postgraduate degrees that produce highly-skilled graduates with the attributes needed by employers.
16. Modern universities in particular have a long history of providing vocational and technical education opportunities to older learners, those without traditional academic qualifications and those wishing to study part-time.
17. The government should ensure that any policies introduced to reform vocational education build on the existing strengths, knowledge, teaching expertise and research in universities. This is likely to be far more effective than attempting to introduce brand new courses or programmes that may not be as effective, credible or attractive as the vocational and technical degrees that are offered by universities that are successful in this area. A return to the type of environment that existed when the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) was in operation would not be desirable, and may in fact stifle innovation in what providers can offer to and for employers.
18. Rather than generate new qualifications, energy would be better invested in developing robust metrics to identify employer expectations for a vocational HE programme. Delivering compelling, meaningful evidence for employers against those expectations will demonstrate how value is released at individual, team and organisational levels and quantify their return on business education.

About million+

million+ works with a number of modern universities across England and Scotland. We use rigorous research and evidence-based policy to address and provide solutions to complex problems in higher education.

For further information about this response or about million+ please visit www.millionplus.ac.uk or contact:

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