



**“Students at the heart of the system”-
The Higher Education White Paper
Summary and Initial Response**

July 2011



national union of students



Introduction

Today's publication of a higher education white paper – entitled “Students at the Heart of the System” – raises more questions than it answers. Indeed, it is amazing that a white paper that has been so delayed can be so confused about its intentions. On widening participation and fair access, a number of additional reviews and consultations are provoked and cited, but no decisions appear to have been made. Warm words on the role of students' unions, the future of quality assurance, strengthening complaints and careers advice are all welcome – but warm words alone will not hold the feet of poor providers to the flames. We need to see concrete proposals for what is to be done in all these areas, genuinely to improve access and reinforce student power.

Some features are bizarre. The paper gives a strong endorsement of the use of contextual data in admissions, but sets up an attainment based threshold for numbers expansion at the top-end of the market; apparently precluding the use of contextual data by many institutions. Post-qualification admissions is yet again floated by a government, but without any sense that the proposal is made more energetically now than on any previous occasion.

It comes as no surprise that the paper largely trusts quality improvement to the magic of the market; ministers have avoided taking a firm hand, in favour of leaving matters to Adam Smith's invisible hand. There is no evidence that such an approach can deliver quality improvement across the range and breadth of the whole higher education sector – a small number of ‘winners’ will land in the right institution at the right time, while a large number of ‘losers’ will be restricted to poorly-resourced courses, and most will pay double or triple today's rates for the privilege. The new role of HEFCE as a consumer champion could bring benefits, but again, there is such lack of clarity about what this really means and how it will make an impact.

We offer here our first critique of this white paper. It's not an easy task – in many respects it is hard to know what to pick out for attention, because so many of the proposals and ideas are so nebulous. We will provide further analysis as the summer progresses, and we will consult with students' unions as to the substance of our response to the consultation. Undoubtedly, the underlying logic behind the core of the document is worrying – it promises to usher in a dynamic, high-pressure market into the way higher education is organised, but without serious progress on the really substantial changes needed to make sure that market doesn't end up running out of control (as others have, in both the public and private sectors). There are areas of potential in the document to develop a more powerful student voice, but we will need to work hard to ensure this becomes a reality.

The government has hedged its bets – more market forces a certainty; greater quality, fairer access and more accountability, only prospects. Following the consultation period, it must get off the fence.

Aaron Porter
National President
June 2011



Chapter 1

Sustainable and Fair Funding

Reforms to student finance

Summary: Much of the early parts of the first chapter simply reiterate the announcements made previously about the new arrangements for student finance from 2012/13, following the publication of the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (the Browne Review) last year.

One new piece of information is however, details of the long-awaited consultation on early repayments, and whether penalties should be applied to these in order to protect the progressivity of the wider system – in other words, to stop wealthier graduates buying their way out of the system.

The document sets out a number of possibilities – penalties only when the amount of repayment exceeds a given threshold, penalties based on the earnings of the person making the repayments (ie higher earners would pay higher penalties), or a hybrid of both these approaches.

The consultation is available here:

<http://c561635.r35.cf2.rackcdn.com/11-1047-consultation-on-early-repayment.pdf>

NUS' view: NUS' views on the new system have been widely publicised. Our response to the proposals made in November 2010 can be downloaded here:

<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/asset/news/6001/Nick-Clegg-response-30-11-10.pdf>

We are keen to protect the progressive nature of the repayment system and if analysis shows it is necessary to establish early repayment penalties to do this we will strongly support them. However, we will examine and discuss the consultation document in more detail and will inform SUs as to how we intend to respond in due course.

Competition and efficiency

Summary: Competition and efficiency is covered in further depth elsewhere in the white paper, but one item discussed in this section is a review of the VAT rules around cost-sharing between institutions and which the government believes provides a financial barrier for this sort of activity. HMRC are conducting this review, and will take into account the possible impacts on other sectors.

It also notes the work of the Diamond Review into efficiency and modernisation in HE, which is due to report in July.

NUS' view: Many students' unions are looking at cost sharing and in principle we are not opposed to this, assuming any such process does not impact negatively on the student experience. We will look at the review more closely when it is published, and respond in depth at that time.

Similarly, we will respond to the Diamond Review when it is published, critically examining any recommendations to ensure that students' interests are protected.

HEFCE funding



“Students at the heart of the system”

The HE White Paper Summary & Initial Response from NUS

Summary: The white paper notes that HEFCE will be consulting on how it allocates its remaining core funding this month, for the 2012/13 allocation, and later this year for longer term allocations. It outlines a number of priorities for HEFCE to consider, such as the higher costs of certain laboratory and engineering-based courses, support for strategic and vulnerable subjects, support for certain groups of students such as disabled students, and supporting certain services for the sector such as the QAA.

NUS' views: None of this is unexpected and in line with previous announcements made about HEFCE's future role. Supporting all these priorities will be challenging, even with a budget that runs into the billions and it will be critical that HEFCE funding does not simply flow into a minority of research-based institutions. We will participate in the HEFCE consultation and publicise further work on this in due course.

Postgraduate funding

Summary: The government notes the work of the Smith Review into postgraduate education last year, and the more recent work of the same review group following the publication of the Browne Review. The government will ask HEFCE to monitor postgraduate study and return to the issue once the new undergraduate system of funding is in operation.

NUS' view: This section is hugely disappointing, providing next to nothing in the way of proposals that would help bolster postgraduate study even whilst acknowledging the potential impact of higher fees for undergraduates on participation in postgraduate study.

Whilst greater HEFCE monitoring of the profile of postgraduates is welcome, the government must do much more to tackle the barriers to postgraduate study if the UK is to remain competitive.

Philanthropic giving

Summary: The government states that the match-funding programme launched in 2008 for philanthropic giving to universities has been a success, and that further to this, additional philanthropic donation will be encouraged by the department.

NUS' view: Despite the white paper's warm words on philanthropic donations there is relatively little content on exactly how this will be achieved, except a previously announced scheme the Cabinet Office is launching to encourage charitable giving via payroll, and the possibility that especially generous philanthropists may be considered for honours.

The match funding scheme is coming to an end (not that this is made explicit in the text) and this leaves little concrete activity to encourage further donation, especially as the huge increase in fees may serve to depress such giving in the future.

The Student Loan Book

Summary: The student loan 'book' – ie the total amount students and graduates are liable to repay – is expected to rise to £70bn by 2017/18. The previous government had hoped to 'monetise' some or all of the book – in other words, convert the debt owed by students to cash receipts for the government



quicker than would be the case purely through normal repayment, via sale to a private interest. The legal powers for this were made by the passage of the Sale of Student Loans Act 2008.

The present government shares this aim, and in the white paper outlines that it has asked the investment bank, Rothchild, to undertake a feasibility study into the different options. What seems to be different to previous proposals is the aim for the solution to cover all loans 'on an ongoing basis' as opposed to one-off sales of tranches of loans (as occurred under previous student loan arrangements in the late 1990s). The report will be published later this year.

NUS' view: Our principal concern is of course that any sale would not result in a change in terms and conditions for borrowers. The government itself reiterates that this is their intention in the white paper and we will continue to hold them to this pledge.

More broadly, there is the question of whether monetisation would result in value for money from the taxpayer, as a certain level of profit for the purchaser would have to be built into any sale. We will examine the report from Rothchild and comment when it is published.



Chapter 2

Well-informed students driving teaching excellence

Summary: This chapter focuses on how more information to prospective students will help to improve the quality of academic provision in English Institutions. It details how better information provided to applicants will help prospective students make more informed choices, which the government ultimately believes will increase the quality of Higher Education.

The chapter outlines the new Key Information Set (KIS) which will provide all prospective students applying to English Institutions with comparable data on student satisfaction as well as types of assessment and teaching methods used which the paper argues will give students more information on the potential value for money they will be getting in different institutions.

Information for prospective students is further enhanced by the launch of a new government initiative to link more publicly available information together so as to start tracking trends in student applications, enrolment, conferment and future employability to further inform student choice. It also sets out the vision for other types of information which should be available in a “wider information set” which includes contact hours, how student fees are spent and the ration of staff with higher level teaching qualifications.

Continuing with addressing the information available to prospective students, it also outlines a wish to explore more information for prospective taught postgraduate students and recommends that the Higher Education Public information Steering Group looks at how this can be achieved including the potential introduction for a taught postgraduate NSS and KIS.

It cites the work of Professor Graham Gibbs who cites that a key dimension of quality is “levels of student effort and engagement” and support for greater mechanisms of student engagement are cited in Chapter 3 of the white paper.

It also aims to streamline the process for applying through UCAS and applying for student support.

NUS’ View: this chapter outlines some significant wins for NUS potential students and we welcome the introduction of some of our suggestions on the Key Information Set and better information for potential postgraduate applicants. However, we are critical of the government’s lack of consideration for how prospective students will be guided through this information.

Information cannot be seen as an end to itself, in Chapter 5, plans for a new careers website and telephone service are outlined, but we are concerned that this will not go far enough to replace Connexions, even with the requirement for schools to provide some for of independent advice.

We are particularly concerned with the government’s recommendation on the release of contact hour’s information. Although we agree that there are some major disparities between different institutions and subject disciplines, the amount of hours spent in the classroom is not the complete learning experience for student and we believe that unless more information is provided to contextualise this data, higher levels of contact hours may be seen as better value for money when this is not necessarily the case.



Chapter 3

A better student experience and better-qualified graduates

Summary: This chapter focuses on the government's vision for putting students at the heart of the process by increased student engagement, the expansion of the concept of learning communities as well as highlights how institutions should do more to work with employers and professional regulatory bodies to ensure well rounded graduates and encourages the widespread introduction of the Higher Education Achievement Record.

It also outlines its vision for quality assurance and encourages the greater use of students as part of the QAA institutional review process. The chapter specifically welcomes the work of the NUS/HEA Student Engagement Project as a positive move for institutions and students to be working more closely together and launches a new NUS/HEA initiative on encouraging more Student Led Teaching Awards. It also highlights that institutions should be doing more to support students through welfare services and recognises that students' unions also have an important role to play in this..

It also welcomes the work of NUS in developing union capacity, and asks to see more work undertaken by NUS and individual SU's to strengthen course representation. The government sees the introduction on a 23rd question in the NSS, as a way for SU's to monitor their impact and help them to keep developing in line with their members needs.

Within the new Regulatory Framework for quality assurance, it has commissioned HEFCE to consult with the sector into how the quality assurance review process can be tailored to the needs of the sector. For example it hopes that new providers will be audited with more frequency than longer standing HE providers, there will be better mechanisms for the audit of flexible provision including HE in FE whilst ensuring that all providers continue to be part of a single assurance framework.

The chapter also looks at how employers can be more involved in the development of the curriculum to ensure that graduates are well equipped with the skills that employers want. They have commissioned Professor Sir Tim Wilson, a former Vice Chancellor of the University of Hertfordshire and HEFCE board member to look at how the UK can be seen as world leading in employer engagement. They also encourage more employers to help fund the cost of higher education through the sponsoring of specific programmes at institutions and individual student sponsor schemes.

NUS Believes: NUS welcomes the governments support in our mission to strengthen the voice of students through our varying projects and is delighted that the government sees the student movement as a vital part of achieving a high quality education provision.

We especially welcome the support in strengthening the student voice in both developing course representation, as well as specific measures to close the feedback loop where students are currently informing enhancement activity. We also welcome the suggested changes to the OIA which NUS have been asking for such as setting time targets for the resolution of cases, introducing standards for how institution deals with complaints and increasing the membership on the OIA board.

Although we welcome the encouragement from the government for employers to out more money into the HE system, through sponsorship of individuals and courses, we are reluctant to support employers having a final say in what should be taught on courses in order to protect the sanctity of education for educations sake and the autonomy of institutions. While we agree that many students go to university in order to increase their job prospects, we as well as many others in the sector would argue that HE courses are not just to increase a student's potential earnings through increased job opportunities, but as a valuable experience in itself.



Chapter 4

A diverse and responsive sector

Summary: This chapter outlines how greater competition for student numbers will be stimulated, and new entrants can be supported to enter the market for higher education provision. The document accepts that demand for higher education is likely to increase into the future, and recognises the need to create additional places to respond that demand if it does rise. The government conforms it is rejecting Lord Browne's proposals for a 'levy' on fee income above £7,000 per annum as a mechanism for controlling public expenditure; instead, it proposes to retain a system of overall numbers control with an increasing level of 'contestability' within the overall allocation of student numbers.

This will work in two ways:

Firstly, students with high levels of attainment (AAB at A-level or the equivalent) will be removed from the overall numbers allocation, with institutions free to recruit as many of these applicants as they wish. This represents an estimated 65,000 places in 2012/13. The threshold for this release may be reduced over time to lower levels of attainment (e.g. ABB, then BBB, and so on).

Secondly, once this has been the allocation of core places to all institutions will be reduced equally to allow 20,000 places to be allocated (by HEFCE) on the basis of 'value for money' – a kind of 'reverse auction' where the lowest prices win the places. The only institutions allowed to bid in this auction will be those whose average fee level is lower than £7,500, once fee waivers have been taken into account. The size of this auction would be increased over time to stimulate more and more competition for places.

The government intends to allow 'off quota' places, not included in any numbers allocation, provided that they are only funded by employers or charities, and provided the places do not produce any cost to the public loans system or other sources of public funding. There will also be rules to prevent 'off quota' places at lower entry tariffs.

The government indicates that it will make it easier for an organisation to gain university title and taught degree awarding powers, by simplifying the process for applying and winning these statuses. In addition, they will make it possible for bodies that do not themselves teach courses to gain degree awarding powers; this could create a similar structure for separated teaching and examining, like the role of exam boards at the GCSE and post-16 levels. The government intends to allow any recognised private institution to draw funding via the student loans system, provided they charge less than £6,000 per annum for their courses, from September 2012.

The white paper hints at the possibility of making it easier for an institution hitherto legally constituted in one way (e.g. as a charity) to change its legal status (to, for example, a company limited by shares); in effect, to privatise itself. Steps would be taken to secure assets that may have been acquired over many years with public money.

NUS' View: NUS is opposed to the continuing development of a market-driven system in higher education, but recognises that with the changed financial arrangements it is necessary to look again at the issue of numbers control and the limit on places. The government has planned very badly and got into a position where there is widespread concern about whether the HE budget can be balanced, as a result of institutions charging much higher fees than expected. It is in nobody's interests for the total number of places available to be artificially constrained, but the government must take great care not to put a system in place that promotes a 'race to the bottom' where achieving a low price is everything, and quality is sacrificed.



The numbers control measures proposed are relatively moderate compared to some other models. It is to be welcomed that a substantial core allocation to all currently funded institutions will remain in place and that HEFCE will be responsible for managing the allocation of the margin over time. We understand that HEFCE will now consult on the detail of this mechanism and how it will work, and we will respond to that consultation.

We have serious concerns over the use of an attainment threshold for creating new opportunities. By allowing unrestricted expansion of recruitment at AAB level, there is a risk that institutions will dedicate large amounts of time and resource to chasing highly-qualified applicants rather than concentrating on teaching and quality improvement. We will be looking for cast-iron assurances on the suitability of alternative qualifications to A-levels at the same tariff-point level for entry into this unrestricted band, and also for institutions to declare an applicant as an AAB applicant if they have lower grades but are admitted under a contextual data policy.

Our initial view is that we would expect the size of the margins on both the attainment threshold and the price 'auction' together to never exceed 30% of the total number of places in the system, ensuring for the long term that 70% of places continue to be secured within the core allocation, protecting provision from strong market fluctuations. We will examine the implications of this complex proposal in depth before coming to a final view on how it should be moderated.

We welcome further exploration of new routes to qualification, including the possibility of creating national degree awarding bodies to give alternative options to HE in FE providers and individual students as to where they gain their qualifications, but we are concerned about the possibility of these structures being driven for profit at the expense of creating new qualification options of equal esteem. We would be very concerned at the prospect of institutions established as charities and supported with public money for many years might be allowed to become profit-earning companies.



Chapter 5

Improved social mobility through fairer access

Widening Participation, Fair Access & OFFA

Summary: The Government is proposing to create a new widening participation framework. This will be aimed at getting students into the most selective universities. The government have reaffirmed the requirement for universities to produce a widening participation strategic assessment along with access agreements and will be working with OFFA to increase its capacity up to around four times its current level.

They will also work with the new Director of Fair Access, once appointed, to extend the powers of OFFA and is considering options such as giving OFFA the power to instruct institutions in their spending; giving them more sanctions or the ability to make public any institution that is not performing well enough against its Access Agreement.

In addition to this, they intend to introduce further education loans for learners over the age of 24 from 2013/14 and they will be inviting HEFCE to monitor and review how the changes to the undergraduate system effect postgraduate participation, as recommended in the recent “Response to the Postgraduate Review”.

NUS’ View: We welcome the potential strengthening of the powers of OFFA, and have called on many occasions for OFFA to have greater capacity to increase fair access. We are also very interested to see more details regarding the proposed widening participation framework.

We welcome the introduction of the further education loans, although we do note that this is no replacement for the cutting of EMA, especially as it targets a different cohort of students. We would urge the Government to ensure that sufficient support for young learners is also provided.

The monitoring of postgraduate participation is also welcomed, although we are concerned that by the time there is enough data to see a trend, it will be too little too late.

Careers Guidance

Summary: The Government will be establishing an online & telephone careers service for young people and adults, and face-to-face careers guidance for adults. This face to face service will be delivered through the Next Steps careers service – which runs through a network of public, private and voluntary organisations.

The current Education Bill also includes a new legal duty for schools to provide independent careers advice for all pupils in Years 9-11, though this does not necessarily have to be face-to-face advice. Finally, the government will introduce a quality assurance framework and a national quality standard for careers advice and guidance.

NUS’ View: Whilst a national online portal is a start, it is no replacement for the cutting of Connexions, which provided a quality national service to learners, and we are concerned that as schools are now expected to replace it themselves at their own cost, they will not be able to provide the level of information, advice and guidance that is required to negotiate the new system.



Aspiration Raising & Admissions

Summary: The Government supports the use of contextual data in admissions, and programmes that work to replace the work of AimHigher. Also, they are interested in the potential to move to a Post Qualification Application (PQA) process. UCAS is currently undertaking a review of their processes which will report in early 2012. Once the report has been published the Government will work with the sector to determine if a PQA model can be introduced.

NUS' View: We welcome Government support for contextual data and aspiration raising schemes. The loss of AimHigher will be a significant blow to widening participation agenda, and we urge the Government to rethink its decision to cut all AimHigher funding instead of implementing transitional arrangements and supporting knowledge transfer from the AimHigher Partnerships. Without any form of transitional support, all the work of AimHigher risks being lost.

We also welcome, and have been involved in UCAS' review of its admissions processes. We support the idea of implementing Post Qualification Application, and look forward to being involved in the development of this once the review is published.

National Scholarship Programme

Summary: All institutions charging over £6,000 will be required to participate in the programme. They will be expected to contribute their own funds, and attract charitable donations to increase the funding in the scheme. Institutions are able to decide what type of scholarship award, and who they will be allocated to, however, each student who receives an award should receive a benefit of not less than £3,000.

NUS' View: Whilst any extra money going to students is certainly a positive, by requiring that institutions pay into the fund (in addition to other commitments in their Access Agreements) and expecting them also to look for charitable donations, the Government is masking the fact that the £150 million National Scholarship Programme is not nearly enough to cover the access needs of the student population- and given awards can only be made once a confirmed student has applied, will do nothing to influence the application behaviours of the students it is designed to target.



Chapter 6

A new, fit for purpose regulatory framework

Regulatory Bodies- A Revised Role for HEFCE

Summary: Earlier in the White paper enhanced roles for the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) are dealt with in detail. In the final section of the White Paper a revised role for the “lead” regulator, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), is outlined.

At present the funding council operates at arm’s length from Government, working to distribute block grant funding to universities. The wider student finance reforms (pushing student funding through an individualised loan based voucher scheme) mean that this central role in distributing funds needs to change.

The white paper claims that this will include a new, explicit remit to promote the interests of students, including as consumers, with a duty to take competition implications into account when making decisions on funding. This will “complement the work of the OIA in relation to individual complaints” and the Government will “legislate for reserve powers for HEFCE to intervene if evidence is found of widespread poor treatment of students”

The white paper then envisages four adapted key roles for HEFCE in the future:

- **Maintenance of control of the Government’s financial exposure-** there is a real need to ensure that the Government’s risk is managed and limited, so as more money “flows through graduate contributions”, this requires amendment so that “conditions can be set on institutions that access the student support system”- in other words, it’s still HEFCE’s job to manage the allocation of university places and to set new “market rules”.
- **Overseeing the financial health and sustainability of higher education providers-** This duty, applying across all HEIs in receipt of public support, whether through direct public funding or publicly-supported loans, means HEFCE will need to both monitor financial health and find a way to manage the decline of a financially failing HEI in a way that minimises harm for students.
- **Allocating funding to achieve particular objectives-** The Government still needs to allocate some core funding for subjects and areas agreed are in the public interest, such as the protection of strategically important and vulnerable subjects.
- **Scrutiny of applications from organisations for designation for student support and grants.** This duty will mean that it’s HEFCE’s job to scrutinise the various “new providers” that Willetts wants brought into the system.

NUS’ View: NUS welcomes a new regulatory focus for HEFCE having repeatedly called for better student rights and protections. Sadly, whilst the Government has made much in the press of HEFCE’s new role of “consumer champion”, there is little detail on how this will give more protection or power to individual students in the white paper. In fact there appears to be a lazy assumption that merely having a regulator, giving it mysterious “reserve powers” (which would only apply in the case of widespread poor treatment) somehow will improve quality or student power.

There is welcome text on HEFCE’s role in ensuring financial sustainability, but giving HEFCE the role of “orderly wind down” of institutions who have been plunged into market chaos by the Government will do little to comfort students facing closing or merged institutions in coming years.



Regulatory Bodies- A more transparent framework

Summary: The Government is proposing a “single, transparent regulatory framework” for all providers in the HE system, including FE colleges and new private providers. The white papers claims that this will provide a “level playing field” for all providers that wish to benefit from public funding (ie student loan vouchers)

The new framework will comprise three elements:

1. **Degree Awarding Powers:** All institutions offering a ‘recognised’ degree will need to satisfy a **quality threshold**, administered by the QAA. They will also need to give students access to some form of dispute resolution.
2. **Access to the student funding system:** Institutions that want their students to access **loans and grants** will need to meet further conditions;
 - publishing much more detailed information about their courses and outcomes;
 - giving students access to dispute resolution via the OIA;
 - complying with the quality framework;
 - and, if they intend to charge above £6,000, having an Access Agreement approved by the Director of Fair Access.
3. **Teaching Grants:** There’s not a lot of teaching grants left, but only non-profit institutions will be able to access grants from HEFCE to fund priority areas (ie those additional costs and public policy priorities that cannot be met by graduate contributions alone)

Should an institution fail to meet any of these requirements, despite having been given time to take remedial action, their access to student support finance could be suspended or stopped. At the same time, a far more light-touch approach to monitoring will be applied to high performing institutions.

There are then a number of minor changes proposed to data collection, bureaucracy and costs monitoring.

NUS’ View: NUS repeatedly called for private providers to be brought into the regulatory system and welcomes the announcement here. We believe that any institution offering a degree should have to participate in the OIA- not just those using the student loans and grants scheme. We called for only non profit providers being able to access limited teaching grants and welcome this news. However we remain opposed to the idea of private providers being able to “cherry pick” the cheapest courses to run- see previous section.



Views from around the sector

UUK have welcomed the 'freedom' for universities and the lack bureaucracy whilst remaining sceptical of involvement by 'new' private providers.

1994 Group say it is a missed opportunity. It expresses good intentions but ignores the across the board contributions of 'the best universities'.

Million+ says the rhetoric of putting students at the heart of education is welcome but that there is nothing new for students and that the 'AAB mini-market' will harm social mobility.

University Alliance also welcome the move to put students centre stage but say that they ignore the wider economic benefit of a well educated work-force.

OFFA welcome a strong commitment widening participation and the review of their powers but sound a note of caution about protecting independence.

Russell Group welcome much of it but are concerned about the bureaucracy of requiring widened access and are sceptical about the 'AAB model'.

NUS COMMENTS ON PUBLICATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION WHITE PAPER

For immediate release – Tuesday 28 June 2011 (4pm)

The National Union of Students (NUS) today commented on publication of Students at the Heart of the System, the Government's Higher Education White Paper.

Aaron Porter, NUS President said:

"It is amazing that a white paper that has been so delayed can be so confused on the key issues."

"Fees have been tripled and students have been exposed to the potential chaos of the market and yet there are still no concrete proposals for how quality, accountability and access will be improved."

"We welcome the focus on students' unions and the drive for better information for students in the white paper, but the Government must not confuse information with power. Market competition alone will not drive up quality."

ENDS

NUS Press Office 07866695010 / pressoffice@nus.org.uk

10am Press Notice:

Aaron Porter, NUS President, said:

"To use proposals for more information as a justification for lifting the cap on fees to £9,000 is outrageous and will not fool students and their families. It's the price rather than educational standards, that will have tripled.

Ministers are at risk of creating stability for the perceived best but complete chaos for the rest. The vast majority of university entrants, who don't get the very best grades, will be treated to complete market chaos and real uncertainty about their universities and courses."



"Students at the heart of the system"

The HE White Paper Summary & Initial Response from NUS

A virtual consumer revolution for students? Students at the heart of the system?

Aaron Porter Comment Piece:

The announcement by the Minister of State for Universities of a student consumer revolution in the week in which I complete my term as President of the National Union of Students should be music to my ears. It certainly came as somewhat of a surprise to hear David Willetts taking to the airwaves to talk about putting power into the hands of students. And while many questions remain unanswered and worrying gaps need filling in, there is much potential in what the Government has announced which must be backed by concrete action

It is hardly a secret that NUS have had our differences with this Government's approach to universities and to students, and in particular the combination of fee increases and funding cuts that Ministers unleashed on us before Christmas. Before they had even addressed improvements to courses, institutions or the student experience the Government forced through a threefold increase in tuition fees through Parliament, prompting backbench rebellions and Government resignations in the face of protests on the streets and overwhelming public hostility from students and their families.

This back-to-front approach means that universities have been allowed to graze on carrots but students have no sticks with which to hold them to account. It is students themselves, through their own representative structures who should be given those powers and to that end, I welcome greater recognition of course representatives, students' unions and NUS and hope we will see more student empowerment and university accountability. Information for students is welcome, but also long overdue. The lack of available information to prospective students has long been of great concern to students, and measures to tackle it were originally announced by Lord Mandelson in 2009, before Lord Browne's review of fees had even commenced.

In the current dire employment circumstances in which nearly a million young people are unemployed and in a squeezed graduate recruitment market, key information statistics and student charters have never been more necessary and we have long called for them to be made available. And yet we must be clear that this in itself provides no justification for allowing universities to hike their fees or to take an axe to the higher education teaching budget.

Willetts' declaration that he has put power in the hands of students brings to mind a cricketing metaphor. It is rather like sending your opening batsmen to the crease, only to find, as the first balls are being bowled that their bats have been broken before the game; in this case by the Universities Minister's decision to cut funding and triple fees without first ensuring accompanying powers or rights for students.

How can students be expected to take advantage of this consumer revolution when they have been put in such a compromising position by the Government's approach to higher education policy, and when little has so far been said about fair access?

In the lead up to the Commons vote on fees Vince Cable had previously championed access and fairness on behalf of the yellow side of the coalition in order to promote the Government's higher education as 'progressive' but there is little in these proposals that give reassurance the issue is firmly on the Government's agenda.

Measures to ensure fair access to university and widening participation have been curiously absent from the debate in recent days, as has Dr Cable himself. At just the time students need the Secretary of State with responsibility for higher education to be signalling an amber light of caution to these proposals, batting their corner, securing concessions and making good on the Liberal Democrats' long-standing commitments to fair access and widening participation, there is silence. At the present time, it is only fees that have increased, not standards or rights for students or measures to ensure fair access and social mobility.

It is now incumbent on Dr Cable to ensure that while an elite group of students continue to have a safe and secure passage to university, the majority of students are not exposed to unacceptable chaos and uncertainty. If it came to pass that warm words were not backed up by action, this would be a waste of talent and what once appeared to be music to the ears could become a cacophony of protest.

