

#whenstudentslead



WHEN STUDENTS LEAD

An Education System for the Public Good

2019 General Election Manifesto policy briefing

An Education System for the Public Good

General Election Manifesto briefing

NUS has released its manifesto of key general election asks for the December 2019 election. This briefing provides you with more information about our central asks on education policy.

The manifesto

NUS has developed a manifesto of general election asks which span our work. The manifesto is for us and you to use to lobby candidates in your constituencies and nationally. We are also developing a set of hustings questions to go alongside it which you can ask your local candidates at events that you are running – let us know how you get on!

The three core manifesto areas are:

- An end to Brexit, for the public good
- An Education System for the public good
- A healthy society for the public good

Briefings on all three of these areas are being released.

Our asks for Education

In education, we know it is time for a National Education Service, and we want all parties to commit to:

1. Working to develop a new post-16 education system in England which is accessible, funded and lifelong
2. Moving from a marketised approach to education to one where cooperation, partnership and collaboration are central
3. Restoring maintenance grants across further and higher education
4. Improving apprentice and student rights and protections

5. Abolishing the Prevent Duty in further and higher education

This briefing covers all of these asks except number four, for which the National Society of Apprentices will provide a separate briefing to follow.

1. Developing a new post-16 education system

What do we want?

To meet the needs of students and society now and in the future, when students vote they will do so to transform our post-16 education system. As we enter a period of rapid societal change, from automation and AI and other advances in technology to longer lifespans and a changing environment, our education system must adapt. Education must be seen as primarily a public good and structured accordingly.

This means it must be:

- **Accessible:** Education should be available to all and we will break down the institutional and financial barriers which mean that is not the case now.
- **Funded:** There should be a parity of funding between Further and Higher Education and more directed funding to meet social and economic needs.
- **Life-long:** Students should be able to continue to learn throughout their lives,

change career, retrain, and develop new skills. To do that we need flexible funding and learning opportunities attached to institutions with deep civic responsibilities.

Candidates should commit to working with students, staff in FE and HE and other stakeholders to develop this new education system in the next Parliamentary term.

Winning the arguments

How would you pay for the system you propose?

Investing in education brings with it a return. Improving skills and knowledge leads to greater productivity, tax revenues and inward investment. But it is vital not to see education through a narrowly economic lens. We need to ensure that we develop the science and the social responses to the climate emergency for the benefit of all; we need to ensure that as we have longer working lives we remain able to access education later in life; we need to train the public servants of the future; and tertiary education improves health and civic engagement – saving money but improving society for all of us. This cannot be done without significant investment, but this should be achieved through proper progressive taxation of individuals and business, not a wasteful market-based system where millions are squandered on marketing and market mechanisms rather than teaching and learning or student support.

Shouldn't those who benefit from education pay for it? Why should someone in a low-paid job pay for students to go to university?

Just as we see the NHS, schools and social security as public services which should be funded through general taxation, so should we see tertiary education. This means opening up colleges and universities to more people and reinforcing their civic role and being clear that a well-educated society benefits everyone, not only in terms of economics but the many social benefits too. We need to address the 'cold spots' where FE and HE provision is scarce, and where Government has neglected the needs of

those communities for access to such education. This could include new forms of distance learning as well as physical institutions.

And where there are inequalities in society we should use proper progressive taxation – on wealth as well as income where necessary – to address these, not a broken system of student loans which distorts educational pathways and creates inequalities of its own.

2. Moving away from marketisation

What do we want?

Currently, higher education is regulated like a market by the Office for Students. They believe that providers having to compete with each other over students, because they're competing for their tuition fee income, automatically makes them provide a better quality education in order to seem more attractive to potential 'customers.'

However, that's not the case – it doesn't ensure a quality education. Marketisation impacts how providers behave: they race for fee income, cutting corners and saving money. Instead of investing in high quality education, they invest in advertising and huge new buildings which can be used at great expense as conference venues, to bring in more money. They are also more likely to care about superficial feedback, such as NSS results, and things that can affect league table positions and their reputation – and prize this over creating long term change to the academic environment.

This competition between providers also makes collaboration between institutions, which could be beneficial for staff and students, much more difficult.

To run a successful market, it has to be easy for new entrants to pop up and challenge those more established. The Office for Students takes it as a sign of a healthy higher education market if new providers are coming in, and other providers are closing down. Of course, this has a huge effect on students, staff and

whole communities where the higher education provider is the primary employer – but even then, the Office for Students has said it won't financially bail out providers that are at risk of collapse.

We want a regulation system which is based on the principles of cooperation and education as a public good, and which supports all types of provider to deliver the best education for its students. We believe that the way to this is through democratising our institutions and spreading the power out through them, so that students and staff have an equal say and ownership over their education.

A crucial first step is properly funding the education sector from central government funding.

Candidates should commit to supporting a review of the regulatory system, and promote democracy, collaboration and partnership with students within providers in their constituency.

Winning the arguments

Doesn't having consumer rights in the market give students more power?

No. Treating students as consumers has given them more rights, to some degree, for example using the Consumer Markets Authority to complain about their courses – but this doesn't mean they've got more power as a group, and as ever it can only benefit students who can navigate the system.

Education isn't the same as any other product you might buy on a market – you invest significantly more time (and money) in your choice, and you can't easily return it or change and then have the same opportunity. Furthermore, the things that govern a student's choices are complex – you're quite often limited by other factors in your life, be they caring responsibilities or a particular destination you want to move to, and so you are not comparing across the full range of provision.

3. Restoring maintenance grants

What do we want?

Until 2015, students could get non-repayable, means-tested grant funding to support their living costs while they were studying. This was scrapped in favour of a maintenance loan, which is also means-tested. This means that the poorest students, who are eligible for the highest levels of maintenance funding, therefore accrue the most debt over their period of study. This is known as a poverty premium.

NUS believes that no student should face barriers to accessing education. Working-class students are likely to be the most debt-averse – and they're also currently the most under-represented in higher education. Student poverty is a growing problem, with expenditure on everyday expenses such as rent and bills often exceeding students' income, and working class students are more likely to have to take on jobs alongside their studies, leaving them less time to devote to their academic work.

In contrast, non-repayable grant funding has a positive effect on participation in higher education and enables students to excel in higher education. For NUS, it is also a question of social justice, and therefore of not creating barriers to education for any group of students.

Candidates should commit to supporting the reintroduction and improvement of non-repayable maintenance grants.

Winning the arguments

Why should students be paid to study?

Don't they need to invest in their education?

Students invest in their education by dedicating three or more years of their lives to studying their subject – the choice is not something that's taken lightly.

Furthermore, society should invest in their education and fund it as a social good. The money for maintenance grants can come from general, progressive taxation, just as the

money for a free education can. This is because investing in education is an investment in society – from doctors to architects to historians and translators, education benefits us all.

Don't students get more money with loans than they did with grants?

Students do get marginally more money with this system than they did with a grant-based one – however, it's still not enough to live on – and the pay off is that those students who receive the most funding, also accrue the most debt, which is an unfair system. As those students are also likely to be more put off by debt, it places a double barrier in front of them – of debt aversion to get in, and of still not having enough to live on once they have.

4. Improving apprentice and student rights and protections

NUS is proud to house the National Society of Apprentices, who work with apprentices across the UK to represent their interests. They are developing a specific manifesto for apprentices and NUS will support their asks.

5. Abolish the Prevent Duty in further and higher education

What do we want?

Prevent is a strand of the Government's counter-extremism strategy, and subject to intense criticism for its negative impact on several of our communities, most notably Black and Muslim people. Prevent has generated suspicion and prejudice against those communities and, in FE and HE, the requirements of the Prevent 'duty' has changed the relationship between lecturers and students from one of partners in learning to that of suspects and informants, as well as eroding students' right to freedom of political expression. Prevent is currently under review, but it has so lost the trust of our communities it now cannot be reformed.

Candidates should commit to abolishing the Prevent duty in FE and HE and indeed beyond.

Winning the arguments

What would you replace Prevent with? Do you not see the need for a strategy to stop people committing violent acts?

Prevent does not concern itself with people committing violent acts; instead it concerns itself with "extremism", which is unclearly defined. It operates in a "pre-criminal" space. The subsequent link between "extremism" and individuals committing violent political crime is unclear and poorly evidenced: it is based on studies that were not peer reviewed, and there has been no effective or transparent evaluation of the scheme as a whole.

NUS does see the need for a strategy to stop people committing violent political crime. It would advocate for the government to focus on the root causes of violent crime, which include its foreign policy, disenfranchisement, poverty, racism and deprivation.

Prevent is about safeguarding students – we can't abolish it?

Safeguarding practice and policies existed in the UK before the Prevent duty and would continue to exist if the Prevent duty was repealed. However, the Prevent duty itself may endanger students who should come under safeguarding duties. Practitioners with a thorough understanding of safeguarding have their professional judgment overruled by Prevent. They would then have to refer when they would judge there to be a better course of action for the student at risk. Additionally, many marginalised students at risk may choose to not engage with a support service that must act as a surveillance unit and cannot under the duty allow them agency within a safeguarding situation thanks to the law.

NUS has evidence that Muslim students who encounter Prevent personally are less likely to engage with their students' union and other university communities and structures. This effect could result in many students not being supported when they need a safeguarding intervention.

Prevent has caught some right-wing extremists – surely that proves we have to keep it?

The effectiveness of Prevent at preventing violent political crime is unproven and unevaluated, and while there may be some referrals due to concerns around white supremacy or right-wing views, this still does not address the root cause of any violent political crime.

Additionally, even if there were positive outcomes from Prevent, it has racist outcomes, it damages freedom of expression and the freedom to publicly discuss the government's actions, and it 'pre-criminalises' students who may be seeking support on mental health. The function and design of Prevent is corrosive to our civil liberties and our education system; it must be abolished.

More information

If you need any further information or support on any of these areas, please get in touch at policy@nus.org.uk