

Policy Proposal: Liberating Education

A composite proposal taken from submissions by

- A student at University of York
- Queen's University Belfast Students' Union
- Durham Students' Union

Summary

This policy proposal aims to radically change our education system to put liberation issues at its core. It would seek to carry forward improvements to accessibility post Covid-19.

Inequality and inaccessibility are rife in our education systems. This can be seen to manifest in awarding gaps between Black and white students, and disabled and non-disabled students; it can be seen in the physical inaccessibility of university buildings and accommodation; in the justification of transphobia in academia as "freedom of speech" in the gender and ethnicity pay gap across the sector; to name only a few examples.

This policy addresses issues such as unfair hardship fund criteria, the expensive and time consuming admin work we have to do to access support, and to challenge the government and our institutions on ensuring work is produced with us, for us.

What are the issues?

We are beginning to hold our institutions to account – the Office for Students has now mandated UK universities to devise Access and Participation Plans (APPs) in order to address access of minority students to education, awarding gaps, and retention rates. However APPs are extremely limited, and do not use a holistic approach. Even universities with large populations of black, disabled, mature students and students with caring responsibilities still have awarding gaps, showing that simple representation does not erase the issues of structural inequality at the root of our education system.

Universities are looking for a one-size easy fix for awarding gaps, and some cite looking for "best practice" and standardized "evidence" as a reason why they haven't done any work. Only a varied approach that covers all forms of education inequality at their root will work.

In order to make real change we must understand that racism, sexism, queerphobia and ableism are woven into the way our education is structured. Inequality not only exists in the structural forms alluded to for students, but for staff also, who face gender and ethnicity pay gaps, hostile environment, increasingly casualised contracts and more. The way institutions are governed, for businesses and for profit turns education into a commodity only affordable to a privileged few, rather than a right that should be accessible to all. It is present in the investments of institutions in environmental and human devastation, in fossil fuels and arms companies.

It is in this context that we see awarding gaps on the basis of race, disability etc. It is in this context that sexual harassment on campuses is rife, both between students and between students and staff. Disabled students are refused adjustments to teaching and assessments on the basis of "rigour" and given insufficient support to deal with the impact of a disablist society on the capacity to learn. Some institutions have become hubs of transphobic ideology, where those who do not work with trans people or on trans issues cry "academic freedom" when their credibility, record or ideas are challenged.

The main barriers that we face are inbuilt into our institutions systemic structures, in particular how we access support, adjustments, and complaints procedures.

The bureaucratic and financial hardships we face are rooted in the services that are supposedly there to support us. We're faced with inaccessible and expensive services that rely on hours of administrative and exhausting work - when we're in crisis. When we eventually access these services, they're not fit for purpose and reinforce the oppressions we face.

The criteria for hardship funds, grants, and bursaries were designed by the very people who benefit from the system and unfairly penalise us when we seek support. Adding the rampant marketisation of education, the support systems we students have spent decades campaigning for still exclude the groups who did most of the campaigning. With the addition of a pandemic, it has become very clear that our education system is there to only benefit those that designed the system in the first place.

Therefore we are asking to overhaul the design of our education system to integrate liberation issues into its core design, and ensure any changes are done through co-production with those the changes are meant to support.

All students should receive an education which is fully and truly accessible and offers an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of identity. For many years, liberation activists have campaigned for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to make changes in order to achieve this and for many years, they have been told that such changes are not possible. However, the Covid-19 outbreak has clearly shown that not only are such changes possible, but HEIs are capable of implementing inclusive methods including online recorded teaching and take-home exams both quickly and widely.

These teaching and assessment methods, if carried forwards beyond the pandemic, would make a substantial difference to the education of many students whose needs have traditionally not been prioritised by the education system. Specifically, this includes students with disabilities and students from other liberation groups, who experience disproportionately high rates of disability and mental ill-health in particular¹

In addition to teaching and assessment methods, processes and policies regarding concessions and deferrals have also been adapted in response to the Covid-19 outbreak; another change which liberation activists have consistently campaigned for. Previously, to receive extensions, deferrals or special consideration, students have been expected to jump through hoops to demonstrate their needs, often by providing costly medical evidence and following invasive bureaucratic processes. At NUS National Conference 2020, student representatives from across the country passed policy on Parity in Healthcare, confirming the need for HEIs to review and alter their policies and procedures to become more streamlined, "focusing on genuine necessity for medical evidence"². Now, HEIs have proven that this is possible, and we must ensure that this progress is not lost when HEIs eventually begin to review the changes made during Covid-19.

¹ Williams, Buck and Babalola (2020). What are Health Inequalities?. The Kings Fund. Available at: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/what-are-health-inequalities#long>

² <https://conference.nusconnect.org.uk/results/policy-and-report-voting-results>

What Could the Solutions be?

We condemn the deficit model and encourage universities and colleges to move away from this and associated “quick fix” approaches to these deeply entrenched structural inequalities. In the months during the global Covid-19 outbreak, HEIs have shown that the changes so many activists have campaigned for in the past are possible, contrary to what they’ve so frequently been told. We cannot allow this progress to be lost. We believe that education must be fully and truly accessible to all, regardless of disability, mental illness or background, to ensure that everyone is given equal opportunity to succeed in our education system.

We want the Office for Students, Department for Education, and/or other external bodies to:

- Conduct annual research into liberation students’ lived experiences of education, and the barriers we face.
- Fund and support students going through complaints procedures, and to produce guidance to institutions on how to mitigate the barriers that we face as liberation students.
- Produce a public strategy how institutions and the OfS expect to meet the 2024 gap elimination targets. Particularly when the barriers that impact us haven’t realistically been taken into account - such as access to NHS services, social security, and housing other than PBSAs.

Universities and colleges should retrofit their curricula to contextualise and critique the coloniality and the structures of inequality inherent in the history and the practice of every discipline. Universities and Colleges should work on how they can improve inclusion without requiring our unpaid labour - for example, when institutions try to decolonise the curriculum, they place an excessive burden on students of colour to their courses.

Funding aimed at “widening participation” to not be spent on marketing. There should be a national review of criteria/rules for accessing hardship funds, bursaries, and scholarships.

Programmes of learning, teaching and assessment should pull down barriers to disabled students, including making physical spaces more accessible, making it easier for disabled students to get adjustments in learning, teaching and assessments as well as fundamentally rethinking the ways in which normative education excludes disabled students.

Improvements are needed to support given to survivors of campus-based sexual violence and harassment. This should include an end to non-disclosure agreements which protect institution reputations rather than survivors. Recognition and mitigation the role that unequal unequal power relationships play in abuse

We condemn links between education and fossil fuels, and links between education and war. Students should be encouraged to make divestment calls that make the link between sustainability and investment in the arms trade.

Students organising against transphobia on campus should be supported, especially against that organised under the banner of free speech. The right of trans students to be gendered correctly is not an issue of academic freedom, but one of the right to study free from harassment. We must resist the proposed changes to trans people’s rights, and call for the expansion of trans inclusive services and provisions on and off campuses.

We believe accessible equipment for sports/societies/opportunities should be funded, to enable the participation at no additional costs for liberation students, in particular disabled students.

There should be a professionalisation of support service staff and standardisation of titles.

The Covid pandemic highlighted that most people don't know what the issues we face actually are. We can't achieve inclusive education without challenging perceptions that we have it easy. We need to change the public perception of what a typical student is, given the current difficulties we have when trying to galvanise support for our rights from education to housing when the public believe we're all affluent, middle class, lazy, and white.

Higher Education Institutions must adopt accessible and inclusive teaching practices as standard beyond the immediate circumstances of Covid-19 and for these to be protected in policy. This means that all students will have access to recorded lectures and other online resources, allowing them to fully engage with their education.

HEIs must take responsibility for ensuring that all students have the necessary resources, space and time to effectively engage with their education. This means that all students who need it will have access to appropriate assistive technology, as well as suitable space to complete assessed work and additional time if required.

Students should be given the option to complete alternative assessments, including take-home and online exams, whilst recognising that all students will have unique, individual needs. This means that HEIs must listen to the experiences of students with disabilities or other individual needs and ensure that they are fully supported during assessment periods, in order for them to demonstrate their academic abilities as best as possible.

Concessions such as extensions and deferrals must be made more accessible to students without the need for costly medical evidence and bureaucratic processes. This means that students will be trusted by HEIs to request concessions when they need them, without having to share extensive personal details or "proving" their need. Institutions should cover associated costs in the interim - for example, SPLD assessments, doctors notes, or deadline extensions

We now know that all of the above are possible across the sector. Though it's disappointing that HEIs have only made these changes now that they have had to, rather than to support students from liberation groups, we must now ensure that they are carried forwards, post Covid-19, in a step to make our higher education system more accessible to all.

Amendment: Hate Crime Reporting

A composite proposal taken from submissions by:

- University of Exeter Students' Guild
- A student at UCL

If passed this amendment would ADD to "Liberating education"

Summary

Hate crime and harassment are challenges faced disproportionately by black, LGBT+, Trans and Women students. Nationally, data suggests that the number of hate crime incidents have increased drastically over the last few years, especially in offenses linked to sexual orientation and transgender identity. In the Higher Education sector, the number of racial harassments reported to universities are also rising. A number of high-profile cases of racial harassment and gender-based violence have been reported at a number of universities such as Exeter, Warwick, and Cambridge. We also know that inadequate support is in place to ensure victims of hate crimes and harassment get justice and ensure these vulnerable students are safeguarded. This needs to change.

What are the issues?

Online hate speech has been made easier thanks to social media. We have seen in recent years that anonymous confession platforms on Facebook at several universities have enabled hate speech that targeting marginalised student groups as well as individual student activists from marginalised backgrounds. Little has been done across the sector to tackle this type of hate speech. Worryingly, a recent study by Cardiff University found that the increase in online hate speech that targets race and religion would give rise to the number of racially and religiously motivated hate crime. This highlights the importance of the Higher Education sector in responding to the rise of online anonymous platforms to protect its most vulnerable students.

Report from the UUK task force showed that there has been improvement in reporting system at a number of universities, yet there is still room for more improvement. At some universities, students would be bounced back and forth between their university and their local police force, with either party being helpful, claiming that the case is not within their remits. Particularly, student sex workers often don't report hate crime, violence, and harassment they experience in fear they might lose their place at university even when this might not be in their university's jurisdiction. Students have also been telling us that support for those who reported hate crime and harassment during the investigation process is also inadequate.

What could be the solutions?

Potential solutions to this include:

The creation of national standard of reporting hate crime and harassment at universities. Universities should review support for victims of discrimination and harassment and reform internal complaints policy to ensure the right outcome is always reached quickly and effectively with minimal distress to the victim.

We must be critical of the police force in its complicity in hate crime and harassment and work with the police force to ensure they reform policies in investigating hate crimes and harassment at universities.

An approach with impartial mediation and conflict resolution allow all parties to acknowledge what happened, who it make them feel and add a possibility of reconciling by engaging with each other to come to an agreement on how to move forward.

Greater advertisement of how to report discrimination, hate crime, abuse and sexual assault both anonymously and otherwise.

Clear and measurable rules for how universities should support liberation students based on EHRC guidance, e.g. having an accessible complaint procedure, providing reasonable adjustments within 2 weeks of starting, yearly surveys of liberation students.

Ideas for Implementation

The NUS must work with the UUK, the Office for Students, and social media platforms in an enquiry into online anonymous platforms at universities and how to tackle hate speech enabled by these platforms.

NUS to call for OfS to do a yearly "lived experience" survey into liberation students' equal access to education.

Ask OfS how they're going to reach their 2024 goals and hold them to account to keep these promises.

Audits on equality gaps, external audits.

NUS to call for OfS to Investigate barriers to accessing complaints procedures across all liberation groups; Fund, publicise and supply policy & procedure explainers and reasonable adjustments like typing for students going through their university's complaints procedure.