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Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance call for proposals- Response from The University of Sheffield

The University of Sheffield argues strongly that ensuring the long-term future of a high quality and accessible higher education system in the United Kingdom that can compete on the world stage requires a significant and permanent uplift in the resource that is available for teaching. The University participated in the research which resulted in the December 2008 report of the Financial Sustainability Strategy Group for HEFCE, and endorses the findings of that report.¹

The University recognises that, in creating such a sustainable uplift in resource availability, the major high level policy issue concerns the balance between public and private funding for higher education. Public funding is currently represented by the HEFCE Teaching block grant to institutions and by Treasury provision of grants and its subsidy on loans. Private funding is represented by the contribution of student fee payments. The University welcomes the fact that a review of the HEFCE element is currently under way, and earnestly asks that the deliberations of the Browne Group and of the HEFCE Review inform each other very closely.

The University argues that it is essential that the UK retains the world-class reputation of its higher education sector and the competitive advantage that this brings to the UK economy. Therefore any proposals for major change in the balance between public and private funding need to ensure the retention of excellence of UK universities. Discussion of any proposals for changing the balance should be wide-ranging and engage multiple stakeholders, including the Universities. The University of Sheffield would argue that excellence and sustainability could not be retained with a lower overall resource base – and that the resource base is currently too small (as indicated above). If public finance were to be reduced for higher education, the University of Sheffield would argue that excellence will be reduced and sustainability further eroded without a significant compensating shift in the balance of funding to students, to graduates or to other elements of private support (for example through alumni giving). However, if such a rebalancing were to be required, we would argue that any shift could not plausibly be achieved quickly. We note that even in 2010 there is still massive media and public misunderstanding of the current fees system introduced in 2006, and we would urge the Review Group to give particular attention to publicity over transition arrangements to aid public acceptance and understanding of a revised structure.

The University's response to the four questions in the second phase of the Browne Review is concerned not with identifying the merits or demerits of particular proposals (which have not yet been made by the Review Group), but in arguing that certain basic principles should be paramount in the Review Group's proposals for any changes.

Question 1 - In light of short term pressures and longer term trends, how do your proposals for reform ensure the sustainability of the higher education system as a whole?

The University of Sheffield has identified four key goals for any proposals for change in the funding / resourcing system. To be successful, any proposal must meet these requirements.

Widening participation

¹ *The Sustainability of Learning and Teaching in English Higher Education*, report prepared for the Financial Sustainability Strategy Group by JM Consulting, December 2008.

The University of Sheffield strongly supports a higher education system where possible applicants who have the potential to succeed in higher education are not deterred from entry. This is consistent with the continuation of an admissions system based wholly on the qualifications and potential demonstrated by applicants (i.e. a "needs-blind" system).

The University of Sheffield will continue to place a high priority on the provision of bursaries and outreach activity, drawing on its experience of delivering an enhanced range of outreach activities and provision of a series of bursaries schemes (including a scheme which targets students that have engaged with the University through its Compact scheme). The University argues that bursary and outreach schemes need to be responsive to local needs which differ from region to region and from university to university. As a result it would not be favourably disposed to the imposition of national or centrally-determined structures to deliver uniformity across the country or across institutions.

The University of Sheffield also recognises the importance of part-time study, particularly at postgraduate level, for students whose circumstances do not make full-time study feasible or attractive: we consider that funding and student support models should reflect this. We note that:

- (i) The Milburn Report (Unleashing Aspiration) recommended fairer financial support for those undertaking postgraduate and part-time courses and more targeted packages of financial support for students from average and less well-off families. (This followed some studies which asked undergraduates whether they would go on to postgraduate education and indicated that those from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to be worried about debt and more likely to study part-time while working.)
- (ii) Professor Adrian Smith's recent review and report "One Step Beyond: Making the Most of Postgraduate Education", which the University of Sheffield participated in, emphasised the value of postgraduate education, and showed that a high proportion of postgraduates do not receive any support towards tuition fees or living costs.

We argue that any fees and support package should extend its remit to cover part-time and postgraduate students, in a manner that is not currently the case.

Sustainability

We would support a higher education system which ensures the future sustainability of high quality research-led teaching as delivered at the University of Sheffield. The University produces a range of high value outputs (graduates at undergraduate and postgraduate level and across a breadth of subjects; research; and knowledge exchange), which are interlinked and bring economic and wider benefits to society: however this would be at risk in the longer term without overall financial sustainability. The mission of a research-led university such as ours is to bring students to an understanding of how knowledge is created, challenged and developed through the embedding of such students in an integrated research and teaching environment of high quality facilities including laboratories, libraries, and IT infrastructure. We would also argue that sustaining research-led teaching may necessitate support for academic scholarship, the impact of which is then manifest in the excellence of the student experience.

In addition to the enhanced resources needed to deliver research-led teaching, there are further issues of sustainability for the University of Sheffield, as outlined in the previous submission to the first call for evidence. These include: (i) the maintenance of staff-student ratios, (ii) time and resource for portfolio development / renewal, and (iii) resource for targeted and generic student support.

The current HEFCE mainstream teaching grant allocation is based on four price bands, which relate to average costs across the sector (specifically direct costs by HESA cost centre), and do not take account of the higher cost of teaching at research-led institutions (as evidenced by TRAC information on the Full Average Cost of Teaching a Student where benchmark costs for our peer group are higher than the sector average). Any future structure for student fees and support funding should take account of the varying costs of delivering excellent teaching with very different pedagogic goals and philosophies.

Excellence

It is important that the UK can maintain its world-class status in the provision of higher education, and therefore quality and competitiveness need to be sustained.

The University of Sheffield continues to invest in the quality of its student experience, and future funding to underpin this is essential in order to maintain and improve the excellence of our provision. Examples include:

- Research-led teaching, delivered by academic staff who are at the cutting-edge in their disciplines.
- The development of a distinctive set of graduate attributes (as exemplified by the concept of the 'Sheffield Graduate'), including those leading to improved employability, delivered through innovative approaches and supported by a range of learning technologies.
- High quality support enabling our very diverse student population to achieve their potential.
- Rising student expectations in terms of teaching quality and the student experience.
- Maintenance and improvement of teaching infrastructure/ the estate.
- The competitive nature of hiring in a global environment so that students have access to the best staff.

Growth

A future comprehensive funding regime (including funding to universities and support for students) should be flexible enough to permit growth where it can occur without reductions in quality. Such a funding regime should therefore be associated with the removal of the cap on student numbers, but also with the continuation of a national quality assurance regime which ensures that student number growth in institutions with the demand and capacity to permit this does not happen at the expense of the quality of provision. Growth within the sector should be allowed to flow to where excellence exists and where demand is high, eliminating current restrictions which inhibit the establishment of greater efficiencies in the delivery of high quality student experiences.

Due to its worldwide reputation for excellence and high scores in the National Student Survey (3rd in the Russell Group for overall satisfaction with the course) the University of Sheffield experiences a high level of demand for entry onto its undergraduate courses. The University has attempted to (partially) satisfy this unmet demand, and respond to UK skills needs, via: (a) a bid for additional New Entrants submitted April 2010, (b) acceptance of 135 Additional Student Places at short notice in July 2009, (c) previous ASN bids submitted in 2009, 2008 etc. A new funding structure should enable the overall system to be more responsive to such demands.

Question 2 - What type of mechanism should be used to drive up quality, efficiency and innovation in the UK HE system, and what metrics should be used to assess quality improvements.

We would challenge the apparent assumption behind this question – that there is a general 'problem' over quality, efficiency and innovation in the UK HE system. Evidence from our own institution (for example from QAA Institutional Audit, from PSRB accreditations, from student satisfaction, and from employer feedback) suggests that our degree programmes display high quality and innovation. We accept that all universities need to strive constantly for improvements in efficiency.

The question asks about the use of metrics. The University of Sheffield raises the following three significant concerns:

- (i) Currently available metrics are not wholly suitable for assessing quality improvement, and would require further development (perhaps in parallel with the quality monitoring carried out by the QAA and quality requirements of PSRBs). Crude measures such as contact hours (or staff student ratios) should not be used as they do not take account of the breadth of experience offered and range of innovative teaching methods employed by a university such as ours. (These value added activities do more to develop our graduates' skills and prepare them for future employment and further study or lifelong-continuing professional development.) Measures which would invite 'grade inflation' should also be avoided.
- (ii) Linked to the breadth of experience mentioned above, research led-teaching at the University of Sheffield includes contact with research-active academics, and in particular world-leading scholars, both during formal contact hours and outside this via project work and other types of academic support. (This is a key element of our strategy at the University of Sheffield - the opportunity to engage in

research activities inspires and challenges our students, and also encourages the development of a number of key transferable skills.)

- (iii) There are a number of areas where important aspects of teaching quality can be evidenced as playing a key role in producing the best graduates, but where the availability of metrics is likely to be limited. For example the University of Sheffield provides extensive extra-curricular opportunities in enterprise and in community volunteering activities, both of which have received national recognition, but for which simple measures of impact on the student experience would be difficult to provide. We recognise that other institutions may emphasise other aspects of enhancement and innovation: a metricated approach to evaluation could reduce diversity across the sector and act against institutional autonomy. .

Question 3 – What type/s of participation will be important to incentivize in future, and how should this be achieved without compromising quality and sustainability

The University of Sheffield supports the principle that socioeconomic background / financial circumstances should not be a barrier to entry to higher education. And, as highlighted in the answer to Question 1, it is also important to address barriers in terms of progression to postgraduate education.

Question 4 – How would fair access be promoted and enforced in the higher education system you propose?

Although the University of Sheffield supports in principle the use of OFFA agreements, monitoring widening participation activities and performance, it also believes that monitoring access should not become too burdensome. The University of Sheffield also:

- (i) endorses the continuing use of HESA Performance Indicators for measuring and monitoring widening participation.
- (ii) supports the principles outlined by the Schwartz Report on Fair Admissions including transparency, assessment on achievements and potential, validity and reliability of assessment methods etc.
- (iii) supports recommendations for a national publicity campaign to address persistent misinformation over 'the burden of debt'.

Professor Paul White (Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching)
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