

Review of post-18 education and funding – briefing note

Background

In February 2018 the Prime Minister [announced a review](#) of post-18 education and funding. An independent panel, led by Philip Augar, were asked to provide input into the review. The terms of reference of the review stated that it would focus on:

- Choice and competition across a joined-up post-18 education and training sector
- A system that is accessible to all
- Delivering the skills our country needs
- Value for money for graduates and taxpayers

In March 2018, the independent panel invited interested individuals and organisations to submit evidence to inform its work. The Royal Society of Biology (RSB) submitted a [response](#) to this consultation. The society was able to draw on previous responses submitted 2015 – 2018 as we have been actively engaging with policy makers on skills, education, training and funding over the last few years. We sought input from our SIGs, committees and member organisations and drew on evidence in reports published by our member organisations and others.

In May 2019 the [independent panel's report](#) was published. The report sets out their findings and policy recommendations for government consideration. The RSB produced a [summary](#) of the post-18 review report, including a full list of the panel's recommendations.

Following publication of the panel's report, the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee launched a short [inquiry into science research funding in universities](#). The inquiry focused on the current system of research funding for universities in England, its relationship with student funding and challenges. The Committee held oral evidence sessions and published a [report](#) in August 2019 which examined these challenges and explored the implications for universities if the recommendations of the Augar Review were fully or partially implemented.

Summary of the panel's recommendations

- **Strengthen technical education**
Improved funding, a better maintenance offer, and a more coherent suite of higher technical and professional qualifications would level the playing field with degrees and drive up both the supply and demand for such courses.
- **Increase opportunities for everyone**
Almost 40% of 25 year olds do not progress beyond GCSEs as their highest qualification. Reverse cuts in adult skills provisions and encourage part time and later life learning.
- **Reform and refund the FE college network**
Increase the base rate of funding for high return courses. An additional £1bn capital investment over the coming spending review and investment in the workforce will help improve recruitment and retention. Rationalisation of the network to even out provision across over-supplied and under-supplied areas and funding for some specialised colleges.
- **Bear down on low value HE**
Encourage universities to bear down on low value degrees and incentivise them to increase the provision of courses better aligned with the economy's needs.
- **Address higher education funding**
Restore more control over taxpayers support and reduce what universities may charge each degree student. Universities should find further efficiency savings over the coming years, maximum fees for students should

be reduced to £7,500 a year, and more of the taxpayer funding should come through grants directed to disadvantaged students and to high value and high cost subjects.

- **Increase flexibility and lifelong learning**

Introduce a lifelong learning loan allowance to be used at higher technical and degree level at any stage of an adult's career for full and part-time students. This should be available in modules where required, to encouraged retraining and flexible learning. These proposals should facilitate transfer between different institutions.

- **Support disadvantaged students**

Provide additional support by reintroducing maintenance grants for students from low income households, by increasing and better targeting the government's funding for disadvantaged students.

- **Ensure those who benefit from higher education contribute fairly**

Support the income-contingent repayment approach, with those benefitting the most making the greatest contribution. The current student loans system should be renamed the Student Contribution System to avoid public misunderstanding.

- **Improve the apprenticeship offer**

Make further improvements in the quality of the apprenticeship offer by providing learners with better wage return information, strengthening Ofsted's role, and better understanding and addressing the barriers SMEs face within the apprenticeship system. Apprenticeships at degree level and above should normally be funded only for those who do not already have a publicly-funded degree.

Royal Society of Biology view – September 2019

One of the key recommendations to emerge from the post-18 review was the proposal that fees chargeable to higher education students should be reduced to £7,500 a year. The review considered a variety of options for different fee levels, including differential fees. Differential fees would introduce a variable fee caps for different subjects on the basis of cost, expected value or a combination of the two. The panel concluded that a system of differential fees would be undesirable at subject level, and was that while overall funding should be differentiated between subject, fees for the student should not.

The RSB welcomed support for our recommendation, and that of the wider sector, to avoid differential student fees between subjects, which we believe is a critical component in ensuring equality of access and the continued supply of bioscientists in to the future. We have been clear in addressing our concerns on this issue in our response to the call for evidence on post-18 education and funding, where we stated that STEM subjects incur higher costs compared to other subjects as they are resource intensive, requiring practical work and high requirements for staff time. 'Cross subsidising' of science subjects is therefore necessary to fund these areas of practical work in colleges and university.

The panel recommended that the government should adjust the teaching grant attached to each subject to reflect more accurately the subject's costs and its social and economic value to students and taxpayers. This could be seen as a positive for higher education institutions offering a substantial component of high-cost medicine, dentistry and STEM subjects. The RSB strongly recommends that any change in post-18 education funding must be fully assessed in terms of the potential impact of recommended reductions in students' fees on the funding of research and the disproportionate affect this would have on the sciences.

Since plans to launch a review into post-18 education and funding were announced in 2018, there have been significant changes within government, including the appointment of a new Prime Minister and Minister for Science and Universities. Alongside our approaching EU exit, this leaves some uncertainty as to whether recommendations from the Augar review will be implemented.

The RSB will continue to follow future developments in the post-18 education and funding landscape. The RSB education policy team are following this policy area closely, and will engage with the government if and when they take any recommendations forward. We feel our voice can best be used at the subject-level in these discussions and will continue to engage informally with the Department for Education and respond to relevant consultations where appropriate.