

IPPR “The future of Higher Education in England” Call for Evidence

Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7

Question 1

How should our HE sector be organised to achieve the best outcomes for individuals, institutions and society?

Before moving to a definitive answer, we seek to expand and consider the *multiple points of commonality* that exist between Higher Education Institutions. Using these links, we will then provide our opinions as to how each should be taken into consideration.

We believe that the current system of mission groups serves a purpose, for the mission of an institution is indeed an important point of commonality between itself and the rest of the sector: shared interests and best practices are relevant to similarly focused institutions. A common mission statement is not the only point of commonality between institutions though. Points of commonality with other institutions outside of mission groups are already appearing – as are sects within mission groups based on further similarities. As mission groups tend to be quite large, the range universities in the same mission group span - when considering other points of potential commonality such as funding, academic standing and demographic - is vast.

For example, The Russell Group contains the twenty four most research intensive universities in the country, however they spread across the top forty in terms of academic standing: the 1994 Group take many of the other top forty places in terms of perceived academic standing.

Since no two Universities teach to the same curriculum, Imperial College Union believes that it is not possible to say that all courses are equal. Courses with the same name do not conform to a standard, or syllabus – Physics between institutions can range through different emphases, often determined by the strengths of the institution: from theoretical to practical, to astrophysics to nuclear physics. The quantity of material taught between institutions on courses of the same name varies wildly too: Imperial College London is repeatedly told that it teaches too much by external academics who examine and review our courses. The increased variety of material that is covered though means that students receive a broader, fuller, grounding in their subject.

Linked to this, the academic standing of a University – as deemed by its peers, industry, the research it produces and the quality of the graduates it creates – can be deemed as another point of commonality between institutions. In this respect, St Andrews is of a similar academic standing to Universities within the Russell Group, and is compared against by many of the top academically ranked Universities in the Russell Group, yet, in the current organisation of the sector, it is not 'linked' to these Universities as such.

Some Universities rely heavily on local students – Glasgow and Derby to name two – purely due to the demographic of their surrounding area. In certain areas, many businesses support and rely upon the Universities close to them for recruitment: Derby has strong links with Rolls Royce, Aston has introduced a mandatory year in industry. This is potentially another point of commonality between institutions: whether they exist for a specific industry, or to give a broader, purely academic education. Links with industry – for some Universities - promote employment upon graduating and are integral to the economic success of an area.

On the other hand, Imperial College's membership of the IDEA league (a group for 'STEM' Universities) does not have clear benefits for students. Whilst a comparison of Universities and

their structures across international borders is interesting, it does not serve its intended purpose of furthering 'best practice' due to the different European education systems and the different issues their students face. A domestic group of 'STEM' Universities would probably be of benefit to Imperial, though there are no others in the country. This could work for specialised institutions that do have domestic institutions with similar specialisations.

Imperial College Union strongly believes that there is no case to separating teaching from research, as one feeds the other. Despite being benefactors of large research grants, we appreciate the importance of teaching and believe funding from a government body could be based on teaching quality too. How else can a research institution survive without young talent being grounded in the basics? Essential not only for research, of course, but teaching allows Bachelors and Masters graduates who don't progress into research to apply themselves to industries outside of the sector.

Whilst being supportive of using teaching to gauge funding in principle, the indicators used to determine the quality of teaching across institutions must be considered carefully. Value Added Scores and NSS Student Satisfaction do not reflect the quality of teaching: they reflect how hard a course is and whether students enjoy it. No two courses are the same: some are more academically stretching than others, and a proper measurement of the academic quality of a course must first be found before teaching can be used to distribute funding.

Overall, Imperial College Union believes that the sector should contain smaller groups of Institutions with as many points of commonality between each other as possible. This is already happening informally, with, for instance, the G5 – Cambridge, Imperial, LSE, Oxford and UCL. One perceived failing of a sector divided by mission groups is that bonds are being created outside of said mission groups. We do not see this as a failing, and would support more fluid relationships between institutions that have any point of commonality – making them the norm, rather than the exception. An alternative suggestion is that each institution should be a member of multiple 'groups', each of which reflects a potential point of commonality (mission, size, academic standing, industry training or purely academic, etc).

Question 2

To what extent should the overall structure of higher education be determined by market forces and to what extent should government play a strategic role?

Imperial College Union believes there can be a healthy mixture of collaboration and competition between Universities. Rivalry between London Universities is strong; yet, institutes such as the Francis Crick are centres for collaboration. One could argue that research should be collaborative, but teaching competitive: the battle for undergraduates between Imperial and UCL is still fierce despite partnering in research projects.

Whilst the National Union of Students is against the creation of a market, Imperial College Union supports it. The introduction of competition will cause the sector to innovate and improve faster. We believe that the poorer performing institutions will be forced to improve when overtaken in the rankings and by peer perception of other institutions (private or otherwise); injecting competition into teaching improves the quality of the teaching available to all students.¹ A market that caters to different demographics of students and offers more varying opportunities can only be a good thing.

For example, institutions that offer accelerated learning courses for those on a tight budget or keen for quicker progression could come one step closer to reality with private providers who are keen to create a market for themselves. An evaluation of 'pathfinder' accelerated courses by the Higher Education Academy found strong interest for such courses, as well as higher results than in the corresponding 'conventional' course - with accelerated students outperforming their peers by two-thirds of a degree classification.²

We strongly believe that the quality of education should be closely monitored: whether privately or publicly funded. This should mean that private Universities are regulated in some way. We also believe there needs to be regulation of non-educational aspects, such as admissions processes. For instance, the University of Phoenix has statistically some of the highest dropout rates and we believe that this is due to their aggressive recruitment tactics that lead students who are not completely committed to enrol. Given that these students have access to Government funding, this generates the company that runs the University a profit, but leaves the student in debt: and, if they've dropped out, without a degree.

Imperial College Union believes that government can and should play a strategic role without limiting the powers of a University. We propose that the Government adopt a set of principles to abide by, that set the support Universities can expect. The suggested principles are:

- Academic Independence
- Freedom for international migration
- Consultation on all matters affecting education
- Financial support to further knowledge

We support the government initiatives for widening participation and social mobility and welcome

¹ 1994 Group press release, <http://www.1994group.ac.uk/newsitem.php?item=433>

² http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/flexiblelearning/Pathfinder_2011_AW_2_281111_1614.pdf

their strategic involvement in developing more socially diverse communities in higher education. Those that have the natural academic ability to study at a leading university, but are limited by the quality of their education in early life should still be given a chance to study at a top institution. This links to our proposals in Question 6 with regards to the whole education system.

We disagree with the belief that the rise in tuition fees has led to a drop in applications:

- The demographic of 18 year olds in the country is lower than normal
- The number of gap years taken last year before the new fees system was introduced dropped substantially
- When considering both of these factors, the difference is 1% on applications: natural variation.

Question 3

How can we fund an expanded HE sector in a way that is fair to graduates, universities and the taxpayer?

Graduates

We agree with the political consensus in the UK is that some form of contribution to higher education funding from graduates is necessary, as long as access to education itself is not based in any way on financial means.

However we are not convinced that a 'full graduate tax' would differ dramatically from the current settlement. In practice, the current fee repayment scheme is effectively a graduate tax with a individual maximum liability, with considerable flexibility in repayment conditions.

Unfortunately, widespread misunderstanding of the way the system works is having a negative effect on debt-averse families when considering higher education.³ A sector-wide effort to educate parents and prospective students would improve the perception of the graduate contribution to the HE sector as 'fair'.

It is Imperial College Union policy to lobby for the extension of the new funding system to taught postgraduate students, as the requirement for up-front payment of fees excludes large numbers of qualified potential students from applying. This regressive 'exclusionary step on the education ladder' is a significant barrier to fairness in the wider HE sector beyond undergraduate study. We also believe that interest should not be charged on student loans for students who are still in higher education, regardless of whether it is part-time or full-time.

We agree that there is a strong social bias in university admissions, and that there is a role to be played by universities in tackling this, through school outreach programs and contextual admissions among other initiatives. We believe the root of the problem is not just in admissions, but in applications. It is unrealistic to expect university-led schemes alone to significantly change the social composition of university applications and admissions, particularly at elite universities, until major changes in early-years support and primary education have been made in order to reduce geographic and social educational inequality.

Universities

We also argue that the Browne Report and the Government's White Paper was a missed opportunity to further explore a diversification of income sources for the sector, including contributions from employers and industry. Further investigation should be made into the fairness of, and possible Government support for, employer-support schemes that would see employers enlist students before they commence study, and 'pay off' their student debt in return for a minimum period of employment. Such schemes have the potential to encourage greater uptake of STEM subjects by debt-averse students, and give confidence to employers that a supply of qualified, competent future employees can be guaranteed.

The link between a graduate and their university would also be broken with a straight graduate tax,

³ Independent Taskforce on Student Finance Information – 'less than one third of school pupils and prospective students fully understand' the new system.

which is arguably unfair and not reflective of each institution's individuality in teaching abilities and provision of academic resources.

Attempting to prescribe or predict a 'balance' of private and public funding for the HE sector is not economically valid or possible, as this will continue to differ widely between individual institutions and mission groups.

Taxpayers

We believe that the idea of a graduate contribution to higher education is fair on taxpayers as it aligns the costs of the HE sector more accurately with the personal and social benefits. However, an ongoing contribution from the taxpayer to the HE sector, particularly in supporting research, is absolutely crucial to maintaining the UK's research and innovation base.

Question 4

What role can higher education play in promoting a rebalanced economy across England and safeguarding our position in the global economy?

Imperial College Union believes that higher education should play a different role across different part of the country, dependent on the needs and state of the local economy. The only way to solve the problem with the economy on a national scale, is to solve each local issue separately on a smaller scale.

We suggest devolving more power to local government, so they are empowered to do what is right for their local economy. In London, an area of relative affluence, this could include specifically protecting the international market of Higher Education. This should include measures to take international students out of the net migration figures and lifting the far too strict visa application procedures. In areas with weaker economies, it might mean giving more power to strong Higher Education Institutions in weak Local Education Authorities to develop links with industry and to increase the quality of the workforce by improving the quality of the education received; from child to graduate.

In response to the second part of the question regarding the country's position in the global economy, the argument for removing international students from net migration figures is also valid.

Students' Unions across the country are normalising and advocating entrepreneurship. Imperial College Union would like the government to aid and support this activity. In our organisation, we do this by inviting students to find fault, improve, and develop the Union as a profitable charity. We give financial responsibility and training to two thousand volunteers a year, teaching them how to manage money and run finances efficiently and effectively.

Question 6

What contribution should higher education make to improving social mobility and building a more socially just nation?

Imperial College Union believes in the fundamental principle of social mobility – that an individual's potential and quality of life should not be determined by accident of birth or class, and a nation is not socially just until that is true. We believe that further and higher education are fundamental tools in that goal which is why we support the principle of access to university based on ability rather than means.

However, as mentioned earlier, we believe that the potential of higher and further education to bring about social justice can only be fully realised when early-years support and primary and secondary education are capable of compensating for social circumstances in educational outcomes.⁴

We also support the diversification of study types – part-time, mature, flexible, distance – as this can only increase the number of potential students who would otherwise have not been able to consider study as an option. Universities should be increasingly free to offer courses of varying speeds and intensities in response to applicant demand, and innovation in this respect should be welcomed and supported by higher education agencies.

Imperial College Union also feels that particularly in subjects not offered widely, for instance Latin or Greek, or indeed Physics where some schools and colleges are struggling to attract teachers for certain disciplines, foundation courses may provide a solution. Pre-University courses would not restrict students' choices of course or institution by opening previously closed opportunities to otherwise disadvantaged students.

⁴ Frank Field Review on Poverty and Life Chances: <http://www.frankfield.com/campaigns/poverty-and-life-changes.aspx>

Question 7

Does higher education have a role to play in shaping our national culture and strengthening ties of common citizenship?

Imperial College Union believes that there is little difference between the question of taking advantage of the entire HE sector's international standing, and the question of how HE can rebalance local and regional economies.

The globally competitive nature of the UK's HE sector offers an additional benefit to all universities: the opportunity to develop an internationalised workforce for and from their region. If regional universities are to boost job markets and growth in their local areas, then investment in international students, overseas graduate retention and overseas industry links are as important as similar schemes on a local level.

We fully support the idea of universities strengthening ties of common citizenship, but we do not see this as detracting from the idea of 'internationalising' UK students – but instead, as offering a new, global dimension to local civic identities.