Higher Education Policy Institute

Policy Briefing

Developments in higher education policy and practice • July 2021

This briefing for HEPI's University Partners explores the results of the latest *Student Academic Experience Survey*; looks at potential changes to student finance; a new report from the OfS on student outcomes; the Government's plan to tackle threats to higher education cyber-security; and a recent HEPI report on students' relationships.

Student Academic Experience Survey 2021

The *2021 Student Academic Experience Survey* by Jonathan Neves and Rachel Hewitt, which has been published by HEPI and Advance HE, is now in its sixteenth year. With fieldwork undertaken by YouthSight, this year's Survey, which is based on the views of more than 10,000 full-time UK undergraduates, reveals students' perceptions of: value; experience relative to expectations; teaching quality; and finance. There are new questions on the sense of belonging, opinions of institutions' commitment to race equality, the student voice, consideration of withdrawing and the cost of living.

The Survey was undertaken early in 2021 when the UK was in lockdown, following an extended period of serious disruption. In contrast to 2020, when the impact of the pandemic on the results was relatively limited, there is evidence of profound change. Across a range of important measures, such as value-for-money perceptions, experience matching expectations and time taken to return assessments, the picture has become considerably worse.

Since the introduction of £9,000 tuition fees in England in 2012, students' assessments of value have fallen before recovering in 2017 and then becoming somewhat more positive. However, in 2021 value perceptions have fallen significantly, to the lowest levels ever recorded in the Survey. Only 27 per cent say they have received good or very good value (a figure close to half of what it was in 2012) compared to 44 per cent perceiving poor or very poor value. A further 29 per cent felt that they had received neither good nor poor value.

In previous years, value has varied widely depending on where a student is from but this year value perceptions are at historically low levels and have fallen significantly for all four parts of the UK. Students from England (24 per cent) continue to hold the lowest positive value perceptions, but levels are also low among students from Northern Ireland (27 per cent), Wales (29 per cent) and the EU (30 per cent). Perceptions in Scotland have fallen to 50 per cent and are the lowest they have ever been, suggesting that even when many students do not pay fees there has been a fundamental change in the experience.

Respondents were asked what they were predominantly thinking of when they gave their answer on value, using predefined answers. The factors influencing perceptions of poor value were dominated by: tuition fees (59 per cent); volume of in-person contact hours (47 per cent); opportunity to access in-person teaching (42 per cent); and teaching quality (36 per cent). Other factors include: the volume of online contact hours (32 per cent); the cost

of living (32 per cent); and one-to-one tuition time (30 per cent). Free-text responses suggest that many students believe tuition fees are too high for courses delivered exclusively online, with practical elements such as lab work, field trips and placements missing.

Only 13 per cent (compared to 26 per cent in 2020) found their experience wholly better than expected, while for 27 per cent it was wholly worse than expected (compared to 13 per cent last year). There has been a small decline in those who felt their time was exactly as expected (8 per cent this year, down from 11 per cent). A large proportion (48 per cent) find some experiences better than anticipated and some aspects worse, a result that has remained broadly similar for many years.

Expectations were not met because of the absence of in-person teaching (54 per cent), fewer in-person contact hours than expected (52 per cent), too little in-person interaction with staff (51 per cent) and insufficient support relating to the pandemic (49 per cent). Free-text comments point to a lack of social contact, mental health issues, student support and living costs.

Although the proportion of students whose experience was better than expected has halved, this still represents a large number of students. When experiences were better than expected, course organisation (48 per cent), accessibility of teaching staff (47 per cent) and personal effort (46 per cent) were most often mentioned. Other factors driving positive experiences include high levels of organisation and challenging content.

Despite the concerns about value and the lack of in-person interaction, the majority (58 per cent) would still have chosen the same course and institution if they were applying again. This represents a decline from 2020 (64 per cent) but is not completely comparable because this year's Survey includes a new option to cover those wishing to defer their study to a later year (11 per cent).

A new question asked students whether they had considered leaving their course and 29 per cent had done so. Retention is more of a concern among disabled (43 per cent), LGB+ (39 per cent) and Trans (64 per cent) students, implying that they have faced particular challenges. Despite these findings, there is no evidence that the pandemic has had any adverse impact on overall continuation rates, potentially due to the absence of alternatives during the crisis. In terms of specific reasons for considering leaving, the one key issue that stands out is mental health.

When students were asked a question on which factors most contributed to their sense of being at their institution, being able to interact with academic staff was the aspect most frequently mentioned. Other important factors include proximity to other students as well as proximity to campus and institutions ensuring that they communicate what is expected of students. The Survey found 67 per cent of students feel their institution is committed to eliminating racial inequalities, although Black and students of Chinese heritage had a much less positive view.

As in previous years, the Survey finds that students from BAME backgrounds have enjoyed a less positive experience compared to white students. Results among both cohorts have fallen in 2021 but there remains a significant gap in the experience, with BAME students much less likely to feel they have learnt a lot, received good value or that the experience exceeded their expectations. Just over 2 per cent of the sample identified as being Trans or having a Trans history and there is mixed evidence as to the quality of their experience.

There has been a notable decline in scheduled contact hours (12.4 hours), which have fallen by 15 per cent in the past year. Reductions in contact hours (attended) and fieldwork have been partially offset by an increase in independent study, with total hours attended reducing from 31.6 hours in 2020 to 29.9 hours in 2021. Satisfaction with timetabled contact hours (which has declined to 50 per cent compared to 67 per cent in 2013) has fallen to the lowest level recorded. Workload, contact hours, independent study and class size continue to vary significantly by subject. Contact hours represent a particularly high proportion in most Science subjects, while independent study tends to dominate in the Humanities.

Last year's improvements in the perceptions of the quality of teaching staff have not been maintained, with student views being affected by the way they have been learning during the pandemic. There are relatively disappointing results for perceptions that staff were helpful and supportive, motivated students to do their best work or helped students explore their own areas of interest. These results imply how challenging it is for online learning to be an effective substitute for, rather than a complement to, in-person teaching, even though two-thirds say they are very satisfied or satisfied with the use of educational technology.

In 2021, all four student wellbeing measures – life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness and anxiety – have declined and are at their lowest levels yet. Even in normal times, the overall wellbeing of the student population is relatively low compared to the general population, but the gap has widened significantly this year. These results have implications for the provision of specialist support within institutions and outside.

Student views on the funding of teaching have shifted towards a view that government should contribute all or most of the cost (70 per cent compared to 65 per cent in 2020). Just 8 per cent say that students should contribute more than half or all of any fees. Students from Scotland are the most likely (82 per cent) to feel that government should pay more than half or all of the costs. When asked about their costs, students said that living costs rather than fees were their main concern (54 per cent compared to 23 per cent, with a further 23 per cent saying both).

Commentary

As HEPI Director Nick Hillman has commented, this year the *Student Academic Experience Survey* 'has come into its own' and it is 'the first one to reflect properly on student life while the whole world is in turmoil.' The findings suggest that, during the last year, students have faced bigger challenges than in living memory and that their experience in higher education bore little resemblance to what they might have expected at the beginning of their studies.

Among this year's key findings are very low proportions of students who feel they have received good or very good value for money, an increase in the proportion whose experience has been worse than expected and further falls in levels of wellbeing. There has been a reaction to the level of fees being charged in the absence of in-person teaching, a decline in timetabled hours, the absence of contact with staff and other students and delays in providing assessment feedback. Despite these challenges, drop-out rates have not increased and most students do not feel they have made the wrong choice.

The findings point to the need to improve the student experience, including more input from staff and more in-person teaching, which will be costly for institutions and suggests that it would not be the moment to cut university funding. Most students have missed out on face-to-face teaching but the loss of field trips, placements and labs has also affected their perceptions of value. As the report suggests, 'we should think more broadly when we consider what constitutes students' learning experience.'

The Survey shows that the need to improve student wellbeing remains a major priority at a time when the gap with the rest of the population continues to widen as a result of the impact of the pandemic. However, as the report notes, institutions also need to be mindful of staff wellbeing in delivering for students following a particularly challenging year. While there is a need to do more to meet students' expectations, this should not be done at the expense of staff mental health and wellbeing.

www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/SAES_2021_FINAL.pdf

Regional policy and R&D

In *Regional policy and R&D: Evidence, experiments and expectations* (HEPI Report 137, May 2021) Sarah Chaytor, Grace Gottleib and Graeme Reid of University College London discuss the purpose of regional R&D investment and question prevailing assumptions about the spread of research funding across the UK. With many previous attempts to deploy R&D for regional economic development failing to meet initial expectations, the authors identify several principles for the development of future initiatives at local and regional level.

A growing political focus on regional inequality – the UK has some of the greatest regional inequalities in the world – has reopened long-standing questions

about the geographic distribution of R&D investment and whether it is too heavily concentrated in particular regions. However, when the UK is compared with other countries, R&D concentration is less than elsewhere. In the United States, for example, six states account for almost half of its R&D expenditure and in Germany a single region attracts 28 per cent of the total. In the EU, 27 of the 266 regions account for half of R&D spending.

International benchmarks of R&D spending helped to persuade the Government that that the UK should increase its total investment to 2.4 per cent from its current level (1.7 per cent). But international comparisons of regional concentration provide less fertile ground for developing regional R&D policy: the UK's persistently low levels of total investment mean that even its large clusters appear modest by international standards. For example, the combined R&D expenditure in London's universities falls behind the equivalent investment for each of the top ten American cities.

Comparisons at regional level mask often significant differences in R&D funding levels within those regions. In the North West of England, for example, the sub-region with the largest expenditure receives about three times that with the smallest expenditure. Regions with higher levels of R&D investment tend to have higher levels of intra-regional variation. For example, two of London's sub-regions receive lower R&D investment than any of the sub-regions in the North East, North West and Yorkshire.

Regional clusters of investment allow researchers to form professional networks, move jobs without moving home and share expensive research infrastructure. R&D clusters of sufficient scale to complete globally require concentrations of research funding but this poses a policy dilemma: clusters are often admired by politicians while research concentration is often perceived as a problem.

Research clusters combine specific research strengths, highly qualified researchers, access to public and private funding, a skilled workforce, business capabilities and appropriate infrastructure. In the UK, research clusters are magnets for business investment in R&D, not least from companies based overseas which provide around half such investment in this country. It will be difficult to achieve the aim of raising R&D investment to 2.4 per cent of GDP without additional investment from international companies. If the UK does not maintain research clusters that compete with the best in the world, it will struggle to hold its place against global competitors.

Policymakers face the challenge of balancing the allocation of resources to existing, high-performing clusters against resources for smaller clusters with high potential for the future. The challenge is less stark if an entirely new research facility is created, with entirely new funding; the new Advanced Research and Inventions Agency (ARIA) is one example. In that case, there is a winning location but no losing locations from which resources are transferred.

Cash expenditure is the most straightforward measure of R&D volumes, with the South East, East of England and London between them accounting for much of the research investment in the UK. But this measure does not reflect different regional characteristics (for example, whether it has a research-intensive university) and may not be the best metric for comparing R&D investment levels. Using four measures – overall R&D spend, R&D spend per capita, R&D as a percentage of regional GDP and R&D spend per university – produces a more varied picture, which changes according to the denominator.

The East of England secures a high proportion of funding on all measures, while the North East, Wales and Yorkshire and the Humber consistently score low levels. The pattern of distribution in other regions of the UK varies from one measure to another. For example, the East of England, the South East and London attract the highest levels of business investment, while Northern Ireland, the North East and Wales attract the least. On overall R&D spend, London ranks third but on R&D spend per higher education institution it ranks eleventh.

These findings have important implications for the promise in the March 2020 Budget to 'examine how R&D funding can best be distributed across the country to help level up every region.' Defining the best distribution of R&D funding to support levelling up will be a matter of political judgement rather than objective calculation, but making a geographic redistribution in order to promote economic growth would take resources from areas of proven success.

Poor connections between regional and national

R&D policy create obstacles and risks to the levelling up agenda. For example, consideration of the full economic costing of research is usually missing from regional development initiatives even though the systematic underfunding of research had resulted in a UK deficit of £4.3 billion by 2018/19. Increasing research funding in a region also increases the funding gap in that region and puts greater financial pressure on those parts of the country the Government is trying to help.

Successful regional R&D investment depends on four requirements: academic strength: business strength; local government support; and good leadership. Redistributing R&D funding may address the first of these, but it is unlikely to do much to enhance the others. To break the cycle of new regional initiatives that are not followed through with long-term investment, the authors identify a number of issues that need to be addressed. These include: defining the aims of levelling up; establishing the optimal variation in R&D investment; determining the metrics to be used; and accountability for the effectiveness of public spending on R&D.

The primary purpose of regional R&D investment is to enable regions to capture the impact of research, leaving national funding to support the research itself. If regions that have not traditionally been research-intensive are to benefit from the UK's research performance, R&D funding decisions need to be undertaken alongside investments in education and skills, human capital, infrastructure and connectivity. Sustaining research excellence across the UK is also likely to require the involvement of local leaders in research investment decisions in order to ensure that it addresses local need.

The need for R&D initiatives that are led regionally is one of six principles for the development of successful future initiatives that the authors identify. The others are:

- set out measurable objectives;
- focus on the impact of research rather than the level of investment;
- foster inter-regional collaborations to strengthen research impact;
- integrate regional, national and global interests; and
- ensure financial sustainability for university research.

The authors recognise that these principles are challenging but comment that 'it is only by rising to these challenges that regional interventions can become longer lasting, more effective and better integrated into regional and national policy.'

Commentary

The new HEPI report is a timely contribution to the question of the role of geography in the distribution of research funding and precedes the Government's publication of a new Innovation Strategy and R&D place strategy later in 2021. It acknowledges that the UK is significantly unbalanced economically (in terms of income, productivity and economic growth) and recognises the role that R&D can play in reviving the regions. The Government commitment to increase R&D investment provides the opportunity to 'expand research capacity across the UK while enhancing our most research-intensive institutions.'

In a HEPI blog (available at www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/05/19/what-does-levelling-up-rd-look-like), Professor Andy Westwood of the University of Manchester endorses the report's conclusion that there have been multiple failures in science and regional policymaking but says there has been 'no failure in the central idea itself: that more R&D can lead to more innovation, jobs and economic growth.' There is a strong case for using the planned increase in the R&D budget on different places and different types of research rather than on the same things in the same places.

Dr Annette Bramley, Director, N8 Partnership, and Dr Peter O'Brien, Executive Director, Yorkshire Universities, have also commented on the report in a HEPI blog, which is available at www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/06/03/regional-policy-levelling-up-and-rd-a-north-of-england-perspective. They support the view that there are potential opportunities to do things differently while recognising that this will require a wider range of metrics in order to measure the impact on levelling up. They also argue that regional university networks have a key role to play in ensuring the benefits of increased investment in R&D are felt by citizens across their regions. Dr Peter O'Brien and Dr Diana Beech, CEO of London Higher, discuss the role of university networks in boosting regional R&D in a separate HEPI blog, which is available at www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/05/14/boosting-regional-research-and-development-the-role-of-regional-university-networks.

www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Regional-policy-and-RD_HEPI-Report-137-FINAL.pdf

Student finance

It has been widely reported that the Government is looking to make savings in public expenditure on higher education in England at the autumn spending review. HEPI commissioned London Economics to model the impact of various changes to the terms of student loans that have been proposed as an alternative to other less palatable options for cuts.

The results of the modelling have been published as *No easy answers: English student finance and the spending review* (HEPI Policy Note 31, June 2021) by HEPI Director Nick Hillman. Further information, including some additional options for the future, have been outlined in slides produced by London Economics, which are available at: **www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/London-Economics-HEPI-Change-in-thresholds-June-2021.pptx**.

Despite current pressures on public expenditure, there are strong arguments for spending more on higher education at a time of crisis when the labour market is changing so fast, when the number of 18-year olds is growing and when the amount that institutions receive to educate each student has been eroded by inflation. If, however, policymakers have higher education in their sights in the spending review, then some ways to save money will be more damaging than others.

There are three main options:

i. Imposing new student number controls either by a general cap or by limits on specific courses, or by the introduction of minimum entry standards;

ii. Cutting teaching grants to institutions or lowering tuition fees and associated loans; and / or

iii. Adjusting the terms of student loans.

Before 2012, there was a further option: switching funding to institutions from teaching grants to additional student fees supported by loans with income-contingent repayments. At the time student loans did not count as public expenditure even though some of the loans were expected never to be repaid. As a result, when teaching grants were cut in England in 2012 and the resulting gap was filled by increased fees and loans, in-year public expenditure on higher education fell dramatically.

More recently, student loans have been reclassified in the public accounts so that every pound lent that is not expected to be repaid (now more than half the total) counts as current public spending. As Nick Hillman points out, this 'accounting change not only reversed much of the previous savings but also gave policymakers a new incentive to look for savings.' Expected repayments have been lowered as a result of the increase in the student loan repayment threshold from £21,000 to £25,000 in 2018, intensifying pressures on public finances.

London Economics has modelled the impact of possible changes to the loan scheme using the cohort of English-domiciled (home and EU) undergraduate students commencing their studies in 2020/21. The cost of this cohort over their entire expected period of study approaches £11 billion, which consists of £5.4 billion on tuition fee loan write-offs; £4.0 billion on maintenance loan write-offs; and £1.2 billion on the residual teaching grant. The average debt on graduation is expected to be £47,000 and the proportion of loans written-off (the so-called RAB charge) is likely to be 54 per cent. Around 88 per cent of former students are expected not to repay their loan in full by end of the 30-year loan period, while 33 per cent are expected to make no repayments. Average lifetime repayments vary significantly by gender as a result of the gender pay gap, with male former students repaying just under £35,000 and female former students around £13,000 in net present value terms. This indicates that an increase in repayments will often affect women proportionately more.

The first possible change to student loans – abolishing the real rate of interest, which is charged

at a maximum rate of 3 per cent above the Retail Price Index (RPI) and then tapered according to income – would significantly increase taxpayer costs. London Economics estimates that the change would have an annual cost of £1.2 billion and increase the RAB charge by seven percentage points to 61 per cent. The impact would be regressive, helping only the best-paid graduates because others do not extinguish their loan, irrespective of interest, before the 30-year cut off. Debt on graduation declines by an average of £1,400 per full-time first-degree student, while average repayments of men would fall on average by £6,400 but the repayments of women would only fall by £1,300, reflecting the graduate gender pay gap.

Extending the repayment period from 30 years to 35 years would save the taxpayer just under £1 billion and reduce the RAB charge by four percentage points to 50 per cent. It would have no impact on graduates with the lowest incomes, who would continue to repay nothing, nor on graduates with the highest incomes, who would continue to pay off their full loan before the original 30 years were over. However, it would affect others. The Augar report recommended an even longer 10-year increase in the repayment term, as they thought 'borrowers should continue to repay their loan for as long as they benefit; we judge this to be 40 years after study has ended.'

Reducing the current repayment threshold to match the threshold for pre-2012 student loans (from £26,575 to £19,390) would reduce the cost of one cohort of students by almost £3.8 billion (£2.2 billion less on tuition fee loan write-offs and £1.6 billion less on maintenance loan write-offs). If this lower repayment threshold were extended to those who face the current threshold – and assuming real interest rates continued to apply – then loan write-offs would fall from 54 per cent to 33 per cent (roughly the expected rate when the current system was introduced in 2012). It would also reduce the proportion of former students who do not repay their entire loan from 88 per cent to 76 per cent and halve the proportion who never repay a penny (from 33 per cent to 16 per cent). On average, both male and female graduates would repay around £10,000 more.

London Economics has also modelled the impact of reducing the repayment threshold to the current level of the tax-free allowance (£12,570). This would reduce the RAB charge to 28 per cent, while reducing the proportion who never repay the full loan to 41 per cent and the proportion who never repay a penny to just 2 per cent. Under this scenario male graduates would repay £5,500 more, but female graduates would repay an extra £16,200.

Commentary

Although there is a strong case for increased investment in higher education, cuts at the autumn spending review seem likely when there are severe pressures on public expenditure and more pressing electoral priorities. Recent ministerial statements suggest that there is little reason for optimism; for example, the Augar review's recommendation to lower tuition fees remains on the table.

Although all the options for reducing expenditure on higher education have negative outcomes, as Nick Hillman argues, adjusting student loan terms may be less damaging than controlling numbers or cutting funding for teaching. Students are more concerned about their living costs than fee levels or repayment terms, even though public debate may suggest otherwise, and some of the savings from a lower repayment threshold could conceivably be used to reintroduce maintenance grants in England. However, student loan tweaks do not affect everyone equally, with those on middle to high incomes and female graduates paying more compared to the lowest paid who do not have the means to repay.

But some people have rejected an evolutionary approach and argue that the present system of upfront fees and loans should be replaced by graduate contributions. In a HEPI paper (HEPI Debate Paper 25, January 2021), available at www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/01/21/student-finance-in-england-from-2012-to-2020-from-fiscal-illusion-to-graduate-contribution, Alan Roff outlines a scheme where graduates would be required to make an affordable long-term contribution to reduce the cost to the taxpayer. Although contributions would no longer be directly related to the cost of higher education, he argues that the scheme would 'provide a fairer and more transparent way of handling student finance.'

www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/No-easy-answers-English-student-finance-in-the-spending-review.pdf

Net Zero

HEPI Director Nick Hillman has contributed a piece on 'Universities and Net Zero' to *Racing to Net Zero: The role of post-16 education and skills* (June 2021), edited by Julia Wright and Mark Corney, which has been published by the Campaign for Learning. The pamphlet provides an overview of climate change and Net Zero for post-16 education and skills stakeholders. It includes a summary of key policy statements as well as a review of the latest Net Zero policy by climate change experts in the lead up to the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November 2021. The aim of the conference is to agree joint action to reduce carbon emissions with the aim of achieving net zero as soon as possible and by 2050 at the latest.

In Nick Hillman's contribution, he refers to the fact that there are not many statues of women in the UK – one assessment suggests that only one in-five UK statues are of women, and almost none of them is of a young or contemporary woman. Yet, when Greta Thunberg's statue was recently unveiled at the University of Winchester, there was one of those 'synthetic rows.' It turns out that, where statues are involved, construction is almost as controversial as destruction. Whether or not it was appropriate for the University to spend its own money on commissioning the piece, the controversy shows three important things.

As he points out, it is a reminder that not all higher education institutions are the same. Winchester has a 'history of environmental awareness, hosts a number of interesting works of modern art and, spurred on by its religious heritage, is always conscious of its ethical role. So, it would be unfair to accuse the institution of insincerity, whether or not other universities might have been guilty of "greenwashing".'

Secondly, it is a reminder that universities have a direct role to play in tackling climate change. The challenge may be greater for larger research-intensive institutions, with – for example – large numbers of international students making multiple flights each year and considerable endowments, which have sometimes been invested without much of an eye on environmental awareness. Moreover, many universities are the biggest – or one of the biggest – employers in their region, and most have a big physical footprint.

Thirdly, it is a reminder that universities are not insulated from the wider concerns of society. The author argues that 'society should value universities because, at their best, they can serve as the thread that binds the very fabric of our society and communities together.' Apart from providing skills to local employers, transforming the lives of millions of students and pushing forward the boundaries of human knowledge, they are intertwined with the rest of society in other ways. This includes the substantial investments made by the Universities Superannuation Scheme, which has recently committed to net zero for greenhouse gasses by 2050.

In responding to the climate challenge, Nick Hillman mentions three areas where universities can act. One is embedding sustainability in their own planning. He gives the example of the University of Manchester whose commitment to sustainability is at the core of what it does, as reflected in its Strategic Plan, which promises to 'align our work with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).' Putting such commitments formally into institutions' plans for the future not only reflects the desire for action that exists among most students and staff but also encourages wholly new initiatives.

At a practical level, a second thing that universities can do is lead by example. The University of Cambridge's north-west development, for example, neutralised potential opposition by embedding sustainability in its building standards, its energy use and even in its recycling of rainwater. The desire of institutions to continue expanding and improving need not always fly in the face of environmental concerns.

Thirdly, university research is crucial in the race to net zero. As Nick Hillman points out, 'as a country, we have strength in breadth, with expertise across

the board, in social science, behavioural economics and anthropology as well as STEM areas, and interdisciplinary approaches are crucial to tackling the world's grand challenges.'

These ideas might be viewed as less radical than those proposed in *Beyond business as usual: Higher Education in the era of climate change* (HEPI Debate Paper 24, December 2020), which is available at **www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/12/10/new-report-urges-universities-to-have-zero-carbon-emissions-by-2035-and-to-rethink-knowledge-and-teaching-practices-for-the-era-of-climate-change**. The report's recommendations include: the development of a massive open programme of public learning; a 'moonshot' capital and revenue research fund to stimulate the research and innovation needed to ensure that all UK universities have zero carbon emissions by 2035; and the creation of a £3 billion National Green Livelihoods Transition Fund.

However, even if a more radical approach were more effective, Nick Hillman argues that there is a need 'to recognise the destructive forces that inevitably come with revolution. In the higher education sector as with the nation as a whole, we need to bring people with us if we are to ensure deep and lasting change. The Green Agenda should not be used by anyone as a backdoor route to foisting their own personal hobbyhorse on everyone else.'

Other contributors to the Campaign for Learning focus on the likely demand for green jobs and the scale of the skills response by the post-16 education system. Estimates of the number of new jobs as the economy transitions to net zero range from hundreds of thousands to many millions. As well as creating new jobs, the transition will also produce a need for the development of green skills within existing jobs, particularly in industries using significant amounts of energy and raw materials. Although the transition will mean the creation of high-skilled and high-quality graduate-level jobs, the demand for green skills takes place at many skill levels.

Contributors make the point that although higher education will have a major role to play, upskilling and reskilling at Level 3 and below will also be required to meet the needs of green jobs and green skills for existing jobs. Providers in different parts of the post-16 education and skills system are developing strategies to embed education for sustainable development in Levels 2 to 6 qualifications and academic and vocational courses, including T-Levels and Higher Technical Qualifications.

Commentary

Like Nick Hillman, other contributors stress the importance of implementing whole institution net-zero strategies, which cover decarbonising estates, adapting teaching and learning and providing a voice for learners to initiate change to reduce global warming. They also recognise the importance of the research contribution to climate change and transitioning to net zero by 2050 as well as universities' role in supporting employers to innovate in green technology and providing graduates with the necessary skills.

A contribution from the Open University argues that universities should give priority to aligning their teaching and learning strategies to focus on sustainable development as the curriculum is 'one of the most powerful tools that the education sector holds for global collective good.' Yet despite the fact that universities are busy greening their campuses, the core business of teaching and learning remains largely unchanged even though there are increasing student demands for climate change to be embedded across the whole curriculum as it affects the whole of society.

The Open University recommends that institutions should align their existing curricula to focus on 'climate emergency skills for a climate-safe future'. They should also adopt a new approach to teaching climate change, which focuses on the physical requirements for rapid decarbonisation. This will means ensuring that all teaching staff receive climate literacy training so that they can 'actively engage in whole systems solutions and transformation.'

www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=0162dddb-b83f-4c79-b0a9-3a695e96dcda

Student relationships

In *Sex and Relationships Among Students: Summary Report* (HEPI Policy Note 30, April 2021) HEPI Director Nick Hillman discusses the results on a new poll of students' personal lives. The research provides more robust evidence of the sex lives and relationships of students in the UK than has been published for many years. It is also intended to help inform students about how their fellow students behave. This is important in part because misunderstandings about other people's sex lives are common and can leave people with an incorrect impression about how their own lives compare.

The poll was conducted among 1,004 undergraduate students by YouthSight in August 2020. The results have been weighted by gender, year of study and institution type to ensure they are representative. Students were asked to respond to questions about their knowledge and attitudes, experience and behaviours, and other issues, including contraception, technology and COVID-19.

The survey found that undergraduates enter higher education with a range of prior experiences: 43 per cent 'had never had sex with anyone': a quarter (25 per cent) had not 'intimately kissed anyone'; and 18 per cent were 'in a long-distance relationship'. Sex is not a high priority for most new students – 58 per cent say making friends was more important to them than finding sexual partners, with only 16 per cent saying 'when first going to university, I was excited about having sex'. Only 10 per cent expected to have sex during their welcome week and a similar proportion (9 per cent) did so.

Students express confidence in their knowledge about contraception, on reducing the risk of sexually transmitted infections and on 'the facts and choices about pregnancy'. Fewer students have confidence in their knowledge on the laws on female genital mutilation, sexual grooming and forced marriage and there is less confidence still on taking action to avoid the spread of HIV.

Just 6 per cent of respondents 'strongly agree' and a further 21 per cent 'slightly agree' that the education they received at school prepared them for sex and relationships in higher education and around half disagree (24 per cent 'slightly disagree' and a further 24 per cent 'strongly disagree'). One-in-six (17 per cent) 'strongly agree' and further one-third (32 per cent) 'slightly agree' that the education they received at school provided them with 'a comprehensive understanding of sexual consent', while another third disagree (20 per cent 'slightly disagree' and 12 per cent 'strongly disagree').

Two-thirds of students want 'opportunities to learn about sex and relationships' across the academic year (26 per cent 'strongly agree' and 41 per cent 'slightly agree'). A slim overall majority think relationships and sex education 'should be made compulsory at my university during the welcome period' and a similar proportion say 'all students should have to pass an assessment to

show that they fully understand sexual consent' before entering higher education. A majority disagree with the statement that 'I learned more about sex and relationships from school than I did searching online', with 34 per cent in strong disagreement and a further 24 per cent 'slightly' disagreeing. A third say they have 'learned more about sex from pornography than from formal education', with 11 per cent 'strongly' agreeing and 24 per cent 'slightly' agreeing.

The next set of questions asked respondents about their experiences and behaviours. Around a half express positive responses on 'being able to ask for advice and / or help' about sex and relationship issues, where to find that advice and how to access sexual health and contraception services. A large majority understand that such services 'are confidential and free'. Peer-to-peer support is particularly important, with most respondents feeling able to seek support from other students: 32 per cent 'strongly agree' and a further 37 per cent 'slightly agree' that they are 'able to speak to one or more friends at university about sex, sexual health and relationships'.

Over a third (36 per cent) are 'fairly confident' on 'who and how to contact someone if I am concerned about an aspect of sex including bullying, coercion or regret', and a further 15 per cent say they are 'very confident' on this. Two-thirds are confident they know what to do if someone they know is in a harmful or abusive relationship. On the other hand, one-in-four (25 per cent) students say they are 'not very confident'.

Around two-thirds express some level of confidence in knowing 'how to challenge inappropriate sexual behaviour' and very few say they are 'not at all confident' (5 per cent), although 26 per cent say they are 'not very confident'. There are strongly positive results on the understanding of a range of consent issues, from 'how not to put pressure on others' to knowledge of legislation 'around sex and consent'. Nonetheless, around 10 per cent are 'not very confident' and a smaller minority 'not at all confident' on 'how to communicate consent clearly', 'what constitutes sexual assault and violence' and 'what constitutes sexual harassment'.

A large majority know that alcohol and drugs can lead to risky sexual behaviour (with 45 per cent 'strongly' agreeing and 42 per cent 'slightly' agreeing). The proportion who are 'very confident' about their understanding of sexual consent after the consumption of alcohol is just 30 per cent, which is half the proportion (59 per cent) who otherwise said they were 'very confident' about 'what constitutes sexual consent'.

Students' experiences confirm they are heterogenous: for example, 41 per cent say they have had sex during their time as a student, 32 per cent say they are 'currently in a relationship' and 11 per cent say they are 'voluntarily abstaining from sex'. Just over half (52 per cent) say they have watched pornography, with one-third (31 per cent) saying they currently do so. The proportion who say they currently watch pornography is twice as high for men (43 per cent) as for women (22 per cent).

Among those who have had sex during their time in higher education, the majority (52 per cent) have had just one sexual partner and a further quarter (26 per cent) have had between two and three. A higher proportion of women (47 per cent) than men (34 per cent) say they have had sex during their time as a student. These men are less likely to claim they have only had one sexual partner.

Respondents were also asked about several other issues. Two-fifths of female students (40 per cent) report that symptoms of their periods may have stopped them from giving their best effort in academic assignments and over one-third (35 per cent) report missing an academic appointment due to the impact of their period. One-in-eight (13 per cent) female students say side effects from contraception have adversely affected their academic work and one-in-nine (11 per cent) say such effects have caused them to miss a class.

Four-in-ten students (40 per cent) have undertaken sexting. Much of this seems likely to have included sending naked or semi-naked images to another person, as 37 per cent say they have done this. Smaller proportions have had sex over video software (16 per cent) or the phone (12 per cent).

When asked whether 'it is easy for me to maintain friendships during lockdown', nearly half (48 per cent) express some agreement and around one-in-three (30 per cent) disagree. Although universities have moved much of their teaching and many of their support services online, only

a small proportion agree their university has told them 'how to have safe intimate and sexual relations online' (9 per cent 'slightly agree' and 5 per cent 'strongly agree') while 45 per cent 'strongly disagree' and a further 17 per cent 'slightly disagree'.

Commentary

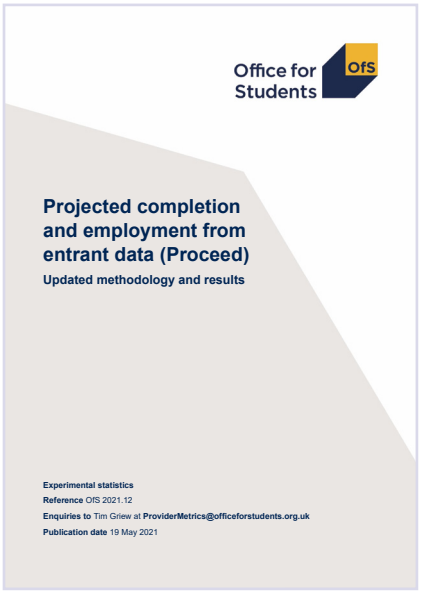
Nick Hillman concludes that the survey results replicate other findings on different topics in that they suggest that students are less hedonistic than is sometimes supposed. The caricature of full-time undergraduates has been somewhat redrawn in recent years and this poll provides further evidence that many students are living more regular lives than is sometimes perceived.

In a HEPI blog (April 2021), available at www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/04/30/brook-relationships-and-sex-education-must-go-further, Lisa Hallgarten, Head of Policy and Public Affairs at the charity Brook, responds to the HEPI report. She says the value of the research is that it shows the great heterogeneity of experiences and views among students; it has generated 'vital insights that should help ensure that policy and practice is focused on what they really want and need.'

A key finding is that, despite high knowledge levels about sexual health information, the majority did not feel that what they had learned at school had prepared them fully for relationships in higher education. Although, as Nick Hillman points out, 'there is no quick and easy fix for providing students with more support on sex and relationship issues', there is scope for parents, schools and universities to do more. Greater support on the issue of consent, which in schools is often limited to education on the legal aspects, is needed to address wide disparities in knowledge and confidence.

Although the study does not cover the critically important issue of sexual violence in detail, a HEPI blog by Sophia Hartley, Welfare Officer at Leeds University Union, explains how her institution is tackling the problem. The appointment of an expert staff team with a remit to encourage a change of behaviours and cultures has underpinned the Leeds approach, which is focused on preventative measures; these include organising consent classes and healthy relationship workshops. The blog is available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/05/10/case-study-tackling-sexual-violence-in-university.

www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/04/29/sex-and-relationships-among-students-summary-report



Student outcomes

The Office for Students (OfS) has published (May 2021) a measure which projects new students' likelihood of finding professional level employment or embarking on further study in the year after they graduate. The measure reveals significant differences between individual universities (and other higher education providers) in different subjects, and in different subjects at individual universities.

The measure – *Projected completion and employment from entrant data (Proceed)* – is derived by multiplying the percentage of full-time first-degree starters in England in 2017/18 who are projected to complete their degree by the percentage of graduates who are in professional employment or study. The calculation is based on data from students who graduated in 2017/18, drop-out rates from the previous year and their occupational status 15 months after graduation. (The employment measure includes those who are retired, travelling or have caring responsibilities.) The methodology on which the measure is based was subject to a consultation with universities in December 2020 and has been modified as a result.

The data show significant differences in performance between individual universities and colleges. The composite Proceed measure projects that over 75 per cent of entrants at 22 universities and other providers will go on to find professional employment or further study shortly after graduation. At 25 institutions less than half of students who

begin a degree can expect to finish that degree and find professional employment within 15 months of graduation. Many of the 25 institutions with the lowest Proceed measure are private providers but there are also several universities.

There are 38 providers with projected completion rates of more than 90 per cent and 16 with projected completion rates of less than 70 per cent. Most providers (46) have completion rates of between 80 and 90 per cent, while 32 providers have rates of between 70 and 80 per cent.

There are significant differences in likely study and job outcomes at subject level (based on sector level data in 34 subject groups). There are just over 30 percentage points difference between the subject group with the highest proportion projected to obtain a degree (Medicine and Dentistry, 97.2 per cent) and the subject group with the lowest (Computing, 71.8 per cent). Other subject groups with high proportions include Veterinary Sciences (93.6 per cent) and Geography, Earth and Environmental Studies (93 per cent), while others that have lower proportions include Sport and Exercise Sciences (74 per cent) and Materials and Technology (74.1 per cent).

Of the 34 subject groups, more than 27 of them are projected to achieve completion rates in excess of 80 per cent. A further seven have completion rates falling between 70 and 80 per cent. Student transfers – where they leave one provider and start at another at first degree or postgraduate level – are excluded from the figures as the OfS does not classify a transfer as a negative outcome.

The proportions in professional employment or further study also vary significantly by subject group. The highest proportion is for those who studied Medicine and Dentistry (98.3 per cent) followed closely by Nursing and Midwifery (95 per cent) and Veterinary Sciences (92.4 per cent). There are seven subject groups where the proportion in professional employment or study is below 70 per cent. The lowest is for Sociology, Social Policy and Anthropology (60.8 per cent) and the next lowest is Agriculture, Food and Related Studies (62.4 per cent). Among Sociology, Social Policy and Anthropology graduates, 33.7 per cent were in other employment (not professional), 6.8 per cent were unemployed and a further 6.8 per cent were in other destinations.

The data have also been used to calculate the projected rates of progression from entry to professional employment by subject group, with a relative majority of groups (12) having rates in the 50 per cent to 60 per cent range. There is a difference of just over 66 percentage points between the subject group with the highest projected rates of progression from entry to professional employment (Medicine and Dentistry, 95.5 per cent) and the lowest (Sociology, Social Policy and Anthropology, 48.1 per cent). In fact, Medicine and Dentistry has the highest projected rate by a substantial margin and there is only one other subject group with a projected rate above 80 per cent (Veterinary Sciences, 86.4 per cent).

The destinations of graduates are likely to be influenced by the geographical locations of those graduates. This may contribute to lower projected rates of progression from entry to professional employment for providers in certain areas of the country, particularly those with large proportions of local students. The *Graduate Outcomes* survey (2017/18) shows that the proportions of respondents in professional employment or further study range from 65 per cent (in North Somerset and Cornwall) to 82 per cent (in West Berkshire).

A recent Office for Students report, *A geography of employment and earnings* (June 2021) presents a method of grouping areas based on measures of local graduate opportunity. It shows that in England, the areas with the highest concentration of well-paid graduates (those earning over £23,000) are London, Reading, Slough and Heathrow – where 70 per cent of graduates earn over £23,000 or are in further study three years after graduation. The areas with the lowest earnings – where 52 per cent of graduates earn over £23,000 or are in high-level study – are mainly in the Midlands, the North and the South-West. The report is available at: **https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/f200fd3a-c1b7-4806-8605-6d46bd0e2de0/geography_employment_earnings_experimental_statistics_finalforweb.pdf**.

In the earlier consultation paper on Proceed

(December 2020), the OfS divided universities' projected rates of progression from entry to professional employment into tariff groups based on the number of UCAS points achieved by their entrants. The data (which are available at: **www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/551c58cc-718b-4d8f-b63e-1ba8edba1a6e/projected-epe-methodology-and-findings.pdf**) show a clear relationship between the tariff group of a provider and their projected rates of progression from entry to professional employment: high-tariff providers generally have higher rates and low-tariff providers generally have lower rates. Existing evidence shows that continuation after the year of entry and progression of graduates into professional employment or further study are both highly correlated with the strength of prior qualifications.

There are significant variations in performance in completion rates between subjects at individual universities, with some subjects having much more consistent projected completion rates across providers than others. Significant variation is also evident in professional employment or further study rates within each study group. Medicine and Dentistry, Nursing and Midwifery and Veterinary Sciences have the highest median proportions of respondents in professional employment or further study (98.3 per cent, 95 per cent and 92.4 per cent, respectively) and the results are quite consistent for these subject groups across most providers. Some subject groups, including Agriculture, Food and Related Studies, Health and Social Care and Engineering, have much greater variation in their professional employment or further study rates across providers.

Medicine and Dentistry and Veterinary Sciences have consistently high rates of progression from entry to professional employment. Most of the other subject groups have significant variation in their projected rates of progression from entry to professional employment across providers.

Commentary

According to the OfS, the new measure is intended to provide prospective students with 'good independent information about the courses they may be interested in.' For many students finding professional employment after graduation is 'one of the most important reasons for going to university' and these data will 'provide further assistance to students in their decision-making.' Although the OfS says it has no plans to use the indicator for regulatory purposes, it is determined to 'tackle poor quality provision which offers a raw deal for students.'

In responding to the publication of the measure, Gavin Williamson, the Education Secretary, referred to the Government's 'manifesto commitment to tackle low-quality higher education and drive up standards, and this data proves that there is much more work to be done.' The Skills and Post-16 Education Bill (2021) gives the OfS powers to enforce minimum standards on course completion rates and graduate outcomes. This could mean that a course which failed to meet a threshold based on the Proceed measure is denied access to student finance.

The new measure has been criticised on the grounds that contextual data – including subject studied, entry grades and backgrounds – have not been used to calculate the indicator. This could penalise institutions that recruit students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are less likely to complete their courses. A focus on professional jobs 15 months after graduation may exclude many vocational careers (where early career employment is more likely to be freelance or temporary) and is also out of kilter with student expectations.

The HEPI / Advance HE 2021 *Student Academic Experience Survey* (see p.1) shows that only 44 per cent of final year students expect to enter graduate-level employment on leaving university while 17 per cent expect to go on to further study. With the remainder having other plans – only some of which are captured in the Proceed measure – the results suggest that the OfS' judgement of success could be more closely aligned to students' expectations.

www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/b4bd5b29-0ddb-4e68-9ebf-811c111f150f/proceed-updated-methodology-and-results.pdf

Security threats

The Government has announced (May 2021) that it is establishing a new Research Collaborative Advice Team (RCAT) within the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to provide advice to universities on security-related topics. A team of 15 is being recruited to advise academic staff on how to protect their work from hostile activity and ensure that international research is carried out in a way that is 'safe and secure.' It will promote government advice on security-related topics, including cyber-security, export controls and the protection of intellectual property. The team will act as a sounding board for university staff uncertain about the risks of sharing information, but it will not have enforcement powers.

The new Government initiative follows the publication of Universities UK's (UUK) guidance on *Managing Risks in Internationalisation: Security Related Issues* (October 2020), which recommended that universities should review and adapt their risk management processes in order to address the increasing security threats they face. These include the theft of intellectual property and data, the security of university campuses and 'threats to the values that have underpinned the success of the higher education sector: academic freedom, freedom of speech and institutional autonomy.'

The guidance (which is available at: **www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2020/managing-risks-in-internationalisation.pdf**) identifies four areas that institutions should focus on:

- protecting your reputation and values, including building resilience to security-related issues, conducting due diligence, promoting the values of UK higher education;
- protecting your people through communications and knowledge-sharing as well as those staff and students travelling and working overseas;
- protecting your campuses from cyber-security attacks, and developing estate and visitor policies; and
- protecting your partnerships, including research, intellectual property and transnational education partnerships.

It recommends that governing bodies should consider an annual report on how an institution is managing the risks associated with internationalisation.

The UUK guidance followed the launch of the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure's Trusted Research campaign in 2019. The campaign included the publication of guidance which aimed to help academics 'get the most out of international scientific collaboration whilst protecting intellectual property, sensitive research and personal information.' The guidance stresses the importance of protecting sensitive information from hostile states whose activities 'may undermine the system of international research collaboration in the UK, which has been integral to the success of our research and, ultimately, global scientific progress.'

In late 2019, the security services issued a warning that hostile state actors were targeting universities to steal research and intellectual property 'which could be used to help their own military, commercial and authoritarian interests.' They also suggested that international academic collaboration allowed hostile states to benefit from UK research without the need to undertake traditional espionage or cyber warfare.

In *A cautious embrace: defending democracy in an age of autocracies* (2019), the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee referred to evidence of external financial, political or diplomatic pressures shaping the research agenda and curricula of UK universities. This might include, for example, providing direct or indirect financial support for research or educational activities with explicit or implicit limits on the scope of the subjects that can be discussed. It might also mean pressuring event organisers not to invite certain speakers.

These risks are most obvious in the research partnerships some UK institutions have with Chinese

universities and companies, which have increased during the last decade. It has been estimated that collaboration with Chinese academics accounted for 11 per cent of the sector's research output in 2019. The companies sponsoring UK-based research centres include major Chinese weapons manufacturers and military suppliers. As the boundaries between military and civilian research have eroded in recent years, there may be uncertainty as to whether research in some subjects could prove to be a security risk. This risk is greatest in collaborations that involve dual-use technologies – such as facial recognition, drone or aerospace technology – which can have both civilian and military applications.

There are also pressures on UK-based researchers who focus on subjects related to certain countries, which may include visa refusals, pressure on university leadership and pressure on relatives still living in that country. Students and academics in the UK may be subject to laws passed by other countries that are not enforceable in the UK but may pose challenges to future international travel or to international students and staff returning to their home countries. For example, the Hong Kong Security Law (2020) gives the Chinese Government powers to arrest individuals who are not Hong Kong residents for actions or comments outside of the territory.

There may be pressure on UK-based international students to inform on the speech or activities of other students, or to engage in political protest in the UK in support of the country's objectives. There is evidence, for example, that Chinese students in London have engaged in activities that undermined Hong Kong protestors and have tried to stop discussion of topics sensitive to China. Politically active students who are critical of Chinese policy may be monitored and there are worries there about the targeting of their families in China.

There is more direct evidence available of the increasing cyber security risks facing UK higher education, which have increased during the pandemic as personal data are increasingly being held on devices outside of institutional premises. The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) has said that cybercrime presents 'the most evident and disruptive difficulties for universities' but that state-sponsored espionage 'is likely to cause greater long-term damage' to the value of UK research.

Cyberattack objectives include scamming individuals for money, accessing systems to defraud payroll, demanding ransom payments, identity theft and attacks designed to extract high-value research. State-sponsored attackers seeking access to university research may align themselves with sophisticated cyber-criminal organisations as they pursue their objectives. There is evidence of attacks that have affected multiple organisations at the same time: they have occurred either through the infrastructure of a single institution or through multiple attack points.

Jisc's most recent survey of the cyber security landscape (2020) found that institutions ranked phishing attacks as their top-ranked threat, with 72 per cent of respondents selecting it. Ransomware and malware and unpatched security vulnerabilities are ranked as second and third. Other threats include human error and accidental data breaches by staff. The average cost of a data breach in the education sector has been estimated at £3.1 million, with staff time in resolving cyber-security breaches being the biggest impact. The cost of a successful attack during key times, such as Clearing, enrolment or assessment, could be even higher. (HEPI's previous work with Jisc on this topic is available at: **https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Policy-Note-12-Paper-April-2019-How-safe-is-your-data.pdf**.)

There is a growing threat of ransomware attacks on UK universities and the NCSC has issued an alert following an increase in these attacks in May / June 2021. They may have been fuelled by the decision of some institutions, particularly in the United States, to pay ransom demands. Ransomware is a type of malware that prevents an institution from accessing its systems or the data held on them. Following the initial attack, those responsible will usually send a ransom note demanding payment to recover the data, often with a threat to release sensitive data if it is not paid.

Commentary

Although universities have a strong incentive to establish international partnerships, the evidence of external influences on UK campuses suggests that this should be balanced with the potential risks to academic freedom. Further action to mitigate these risks might include the publication of partnership agreements with overseas institutions in the interests of greater transparency (an objective which the UUK guidance supports). There is also a need for a greater understanding of the links between UK universities and Chinese universities and companies, which have been the subject of much speculation but no systematic review.

The sector has welcomed the appointment of the RCAT team which will provide a single point of contact within government. It meets a need for more informal guidance about the process of developing international research collaborations to supplement the Government's formal guidelines as it is not always clear what is allowed. Existing controls are complex and subject to change: the Academic Technology Approval Scheme, for example, will be extending its checks for courses with military applications to researchers as well as students.

Recent guidance has helped to increase sector awareness of the need to manage the risks associated with internationalisation. Universities have taken action to combat the threat to individual students with the introduction of Chatham House rules of non-attribution in relation to seminar discussions. There are examples of universities allowing students specialising in China to submit papers anonymously and group tutorials being replaced by individual sessions. However, despite these new safeguards, there remains a risk that affected students could self-censor.

The Government's R&D target

In a HEPI blog, Adão Carvahlo of the Universidade de Évora in Portugal has discussed the likelihood of the UK reaching its target of spending 2.4 per cent of GDP on research and development (R&D) by 2027. He considers the poor record of such targets around the world and the conditions for success. The blog is available at **www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/03/15/goals-based-rd-policy-high-popularity-low-effectiveness-what-is-the-likelihood-of-the-uk-reaching-its-target-of-spending-2-4-of-gdp-on-rd-by-2027**.

Most OECD countries have set R&D intensity goals – in the form of gross expenditure (public and private) on R&D as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – as an essential element of their science, technology and innovation plans. These goals are an expression of governments' belief in R&D as a main driver of progress and change in a knowledge-based economy. By setting these targets, governments take a leading role in encouraging R&D expenditure and commit themselves to reaching a defined target in a specific time frame. However, it may put 'them in an uncomfortable situation because it is easy to assess the effectiveness of the policy, particularly when policymakers do not directly control variables (like business R&D and GDP) which are critical to reaching the set goals.'

Only a minority of the countries studied have achieved their R&D intensity goals: 67 per cent missed this target by 40 to 100 per cent, while another 17 per cent missed it by more than 100 per cent (meaning their research intensity decreased over the period). The main reasons for these failings have been: GDP grew quickly but R&D spending could not keep up; there was insufficient public spending; business R&D spending did not keep up; and the original target was found to be unrealistic.

The author concludes that the low effectiveness of the goals-based R&D policy suggests that policymakers should review the way they use this indicator to promote innovation and economic growth. Unrealistic goals call into question 'the credibility of the policy and the policymakers behind it, but the problem lies in the commitment of governments not in the importance and usefulness of the indicator.'

HEPI Director Nick Hillman discusses whether the UK Government's R&D target will be achieved in a HEPI blog entitled 'The road to 2.4% is long, bumpy

and full of obstacles – and we may never arrive'. It is available at **www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/05/18/the-road-to-2-4-is-long-bumpy-and-full-of-obstacles**. The UK will face similar difficulties to other countries and hitting the target by 2027 will be arduous (the current figure is 1.7 per cent), but even if it were achieved it would only take the UK to about the OECD average, which could itself go up in the intervening period. And 2.4 per cent is much lower than in some of our key competitors, such as Israel, Korea and Sweden.

In 2020, HEPI published updated estimates of the financial shortfall in research projects in UK universities amounting to £4.3 billion. Most of the gap is covered by surplus income from international student fees, but possible cuts to the income from teaching home students would mean that less of the surplus was available to spend on research. This will make it much more difficult to reach the 2.4 per cent target by 2027.

The author also points to the reduction in spending on overseas aid and the row over whether the UK's future contribution to Horizon Europe should come out of the existing research budget or a new budget line as further evidence of the pressure research budgets are under. However, more recently, in June 2021, the Government has announced plans to restore Britain's place as a global science superpower and reaffirmed its aim to increase public spending on research to £22 billion a year by 2024/25, but it is not yet clear what will be included in this figure.

Decisions on future research spending will be confirmed in the autumn spending review and Nick Hillman argues that the sector needs to rethink its approach to lobbying if it is to make an impact. Past success in boosting research budgets may owe more to the commitment of previous governments than the effectiveness of universities' lobbying. There is a need to change how the sector talks about research, which (according to work conducted by Universities UK) the majority of people see as the biggest benefit of universities. If the sector is to have a positive impact on the outcome of the spending review, it needs to avoid talking about the money and focus on uses to which any money is put, as it is the uses of the money that transforms lives.

No-platforming

In *Culture wars in the UK: political correctness and free speech* (June 2021), the Policy Institute at King's College London has published the results of an online survey on no-platforming and controversial issues conducted at the end of 2020. Ipsos MORI interviewed a representative sample of 2,834 adults aged 16+ across the United Kingdom. Data were weighted by age, gender, region, Index of Multiple Deprivation quintile, education, ethnicity, and number of adults in the household.

The survey found that half the respondents (50 per cent) were against 'no-platforming' controversial speakers at universities, while one-in-six (17 per cent) were in favour of such a response and one-in-four (24 per cent) did not take a position. Labour supporters (27 per cent) are nearly three times as likely as their Conservative counterparts (10 per cent) to agree that no-platforming can be appropriate. Among 16-to-24-year olds, 25 per cent also support the practice – slightly higher than the proportions of those aged 25-to-34 (20 per cent) and those aged 35-to-54 (17 per cent) who feel the same.

There are bigger variations in the extent to which people actively disagree with no-platforming. For example, 32 per cent of 16-to-24-year olds oppose the idea, compared with 60 per cent of those aged 55 and above. Overall, 53 per cent of the public say universities should expose students to all types of viewpoints, even if they are offensive or biased against certain groups – around twice the 28 per cent who feel that universities should ban offensive speech that is biased against certain groups.

There is little sign that most of the public believe that there is a left-wing bias among university professors. Among those who did not go to university, 42 per cent think professors most often have a range of different political views – compared with 18 per cent who think they tend to be left-wing, 11 per cent who think they are moderate and 6 per cent who think they are right-wing.

It is a similar story among those who did attend university, with the most common view being that professors at their institution had a mix of political opinions (36 per cent) – although graduates are more likely than non-graduates to think that professors are mostly left-wing (27 per cent compared to 18 per cent). However, there is a stronger perception that university students tend to be left-wing: for example, people who went to university themselves are more likely to say their fellow students (41 per cent), rather than their professors (27 per cent), had left-wing views.

In general, Britons lean towards thinking people are too easily offended (55 per cent) rather than believing there is a need to talk more sensitively to those from different backgrounds (42 per cent). They are clearer still that political correctness has gone too far: 62 per cent agree with this view (including 29 per cent who strongly agree) – three times the 19 per cent who disagree. There are, however, a very wide range of views: 76 per cent of those aged 55+ agree, compared with 38 per cent of those aged 16-to-24, and Conservative supporters (85 per cent) are nearly twice as likely as Labour supporters (46 per cent) to agree.

Despite the feeling that some are too sensitive, most people say they would not feel reluctant to share their views on key culture war issues with colleagues or classmates – even ones that are potentially controversial. For example, of all the issues asked about, the public are least prepared to talk about trans rights in such a situation – but two-thirds (65 per cent) are still willing to share their views on the issue, compared with one-in-five (21 per cent) who say they are reluctant to do so. More people say they would be willing to discuss immigration (80 per cent) or the Black Lives Matter movement (76 per cent).

The survey results confirm that many respondents have a clear view that 'no-platforming' in universities is not the best response to controversial views and that students should be exposed to a wide variety of viewpoints. As a result, they may be supportive of the Government's plans to impose requirements on universities and students' unions to protect freedom of speech through legislation. The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, which was published in May 2021, would allow speakers to seek compensation for no-platforming through a new statutory tort, empower the Office for Students (OfS) to levy fines on infringing institutions and establish a 'free speech champion' charged with monitoring cases of no-platforming and academic dismissals.

www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/culture-wars-in-the-uk-political-correctness-and-free-speech.pdf

Staff mental health

In a HEPI blog (June 2021), available at **www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/06/16/staff-mental-health-2019-2021-what-has-changed**, Dr Liz Morrish, author of two HEPI reports on the mental health and wellbeing of university staff, assesses changes in their mental health from 2019 to 2021. Her most recent report, *Pressure Vessels II: An update on mental health among higher education staff in the UK* (HEPI Policy Note 23, April 2020), which was co-authored with Professor Nicky Priaulx of Cardiff University, provided evidence of the declining mental health of university staff.

In her latest update, Dr Morrish notes that, during the pandemic, universities have become even more pressured places to work. As well as the stress of the sudden switch to online teaching and further impositions on over-extended workloads, there have been almost daily reports of course and departmental closures and hundreds of redundancies. These decisions are typically justified with statistics on undergraduate application trends or changes in research income.

But sometimes these decisions seem to be made without any obvious precipitating cause. Scholars

may be selected for redundancy because their grant income falls beneath some arbitrary quartile, but 'others are being subject to a form of ideological cleansing because their work is so thoroughly interdisciplinary that it resonates outside of their own discipline – a success perversely read as failure to demonstrate mainstream orthodoxy.'

Redundancies have upset the delicate balance of trust between employer and employee. As well as a pandemic crisis, there is a crisis of managerial overreach. Academics who have invested in specialised training and research will feel aggrieved to be told that their work is no longer valued. When well-regarded scholars are cast aside, it leads more junior colleagues to wonder whether that institution deserves their own loyalty. However, the author also recognises the challenges facing universities, which are facing a future of potential fee reductions, defunding of the Arts and Humanities, interest repayments on estate renewal, fewer international students, competition from further education and a body of employees protesting about a range of issues from pension contributions to job insecurity.

Under marketisation, a changed relationship has developed in universities between the anxious student navigating an uncertain future and the all-too-responsible lecturer as customer service provider. In turn, managing student anxiety has multiplied the emotional toll on the lecturer and this will have intensified over the past year and in circumstances in which students, quite understandably, have felt disoriented and alone.

Other pressures this year have resulted from differences in the perceived hazards associated with the 'COVID-safe campus.' Despite the growing recognition that COVID is not spread by buildings but by people, universities went ahead with in-person teaching in the autumn of 2020. Predictably, COVID infections can spread rapidly in halls of residence and in off-campus social spaces. Staff were faced with pressure from management to work in an environment where the risks from indoor aerosol transmission were known but the recommended mitigation was via social distancing. This 'offered indemnity against litigation, but not against a sense of betrayal by staff'. They continue to function with what has been labelled high-functioning anxiety, but it is not acceptable to require medication in order to do a job.

Online teaching has been another source of overload. It has been estimated that a new online module may require 400 per cent more effort to develop and teach compared to a traditional, face-to-face course. While online teaching offers some advantages, it levies yet another claim on academics' overstretched time budget.

At a time when universities are becoming more challenging places to work, there is little evidence that they have implemented many of the recommendations in the author's *Pressure Vessels* reports of 2019 and 2020. These included: more realistic workload allocations; more responsible use of metrics; better performance management policies; and a commitment by universities to sustainable careers. Liz Morrish does, however, note that greater working from home may signal a move to a higher-trust environment, one of the recommendations of the 2019 report.

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Higher Education Policy Institute
99 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6JX
Tel: +44 (0) 1865 284450
admin@hepi.ac.uk **www.hepi.ac.uk**