**HEPI SPRING CONFERENCE**

**Nick Hillman, Director of HEPI**

**21/5/14**

Thank you for coming to this press briefing / our spring conference.

It is the first spring conference and the first set of Academic Experience Survey results since I took over as HEPI Director in January, so I am particularly pleased to be here.

When I became HEPI’s Director, many people asked me if I would keep the survey going. They seemed to think it was so closely associated with my predecessor, Bahram Bekhradnia, who is famous for his take-no-prisoners approach, that it would go with him. Some institutions might have welcomed that. But cancelling the survey never crossed my mind because HEPI’s job is to shape higher education policymaking for the better using new evidence. In the long run, the sector will become stronger for knowing where it is weak as well as where it is strong.

The survey was first launched by HEPI in 2006, just before tuition fees were tripled for the first time. The original idea was to allow a before-and-after comparison on how expectations and the quality of the student experience changed over the short-term as a result of the increase in fees. Back then, I don’t think anyone predicted how big an impact the survey would have nor its longevity. But then no one was predicting a £9,000 fees cap then either.

The survey delves much more deeply than the official National Student Survey and includes questions on class size, attendance, the qualifications of lecturers, time spent working with friends, placements and time spent on academic study during vacations. I think of it as a microscope hovering over institutions and students to find out exactly what they are up to.

The survey is used by policymakers because it is an unrivalled source of information. Last year’s survey was a lynchpin for David Willetts’s October 2013 pamphlet marking the 50th anniversary of the Robbins report. I was working for him at the time and we had no choice but to use the HEPI survey because there is literally no other equally detailed source for what happens inside the classroom and without it we would not have been able to draw comparisons with Lord Robbins’s day.

Last year, HEPI partnered with Which?, who are continuing to do interesting work in higher education. But, this year, we have reverted to partnering with the Higher Education Academy, who you will hear from in a moment. They have rightly brought a renewed focus on student engagement to the survey. But all the old favourites, like the big variations in workload across the sector, are included this year too, as in the past. It’s like one of those greatest hits albums that have been re-recorded and updated and which has some new tracks on to boot.

In fact, the 2014 survey is the most useful one yet because:

* we make more detailed assessments between those undergraduates paying £9,000 – first and second years in England – and those who are not because they are in their third, fourth of fifth years or because they are not studying in England. This is in stark contrast to the official National Student Survey, which – incredibly – does not yet include a single £9,000 fees student.
* We have added new questions on the overall wellbeing of students, which have produced some interesting answers. These questions are lifted from the Office for National Statistics so we can draw a straight comparison with the general population. We may all need to reassess the caricature of students as carefree and happy-go-lucky as well as their needs.
* It is the last survey before the 2015 general election. I sometimes say HEPI’s job is to help politicians resist the temptation of saying stupid things on higher education – and anyone pitching for the student and academic vote in those marginal university seats will find out which issues they need to address here. That is why we will be circulating the summary report to every MP in the House of Commons in due course. We might even send Nigel Farage a copy.

For me, what really stands out this year is the disparity between satisfaction and value for money. As usual, almost 9 out of 10 students say they are satisfied with their course. But, the proportion of first and second year students in England – those paying £9,000 fees – who think they are getting poor value for money has more or less doubled to one-in-three. Students might be satisfied with their course but, increasingly, they also want clear evidence that their fees are being spent wisely and they don’t currently feel they have the evidence for that.

I will now hand over to Dr. Paul Bennett, Head of Surveys at the Higher Education Academy, to explain what the results show this year. When he is finished, I will take the floor again to consider the implications for policy and we will then open up to questions.

When I worked in Government, we used to ponder on why the changes to higher education of recent years, such as bigger fees and loans and the gradual liberalisation of student numbers have not produced a more responsive higher education system. We spent much less time than you might think agonising over why fees had all rushed to £9,000 and much more on pondering why students were not changing their behaviour in response to having to pay larger fees.

Of course, part of the answer to that is that the Government tries to have its cake and eat it. On the one hand, they tell students ‘don’t worry, student loans are not like real debts – you won’t feel a thing’. On the other hand, they say ‘institutions will have to respond to a new wave of consumerist pressure’. The reality lies somewhere in the middle, with students very alive to the fact that they are taking on debts but not wanting the prospect of debt to weaken their aspirations.

Today’s results show that some change is actually happening, but incrementally rather than overnight. Paul and I have both already referred to shifting perceptions of value for money as the £9,000 students work their way through the system. The gap between England and Scotland on this is stark and growing.

This poses a series of tricky questions for institutions. For example, when £9,000 students enter their third year this autumn, they will find their contact hours fall, while their debts go on rising and they are getting closer to the day when they have to start repaying their loans, so they will feel more real. Students in Humanities, Social Sciences and Languages may increasingly direct the powers of argument they have picked up in years 1 and 2 of their courses at their institutions. They could become like those pushy parents of children in independent schools who ask why they are paying full fees for the final term when there are just a few exams and even fewer lessons.

Institutions in England will, rightly, point out that it is difficult for them to meet changing perceptions when higher fees are largely a replacement for public funding rather than new money. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has estimated that universities used to receive £22,143 per student to educate each student under the old system, and now get £28,250. But such figures do not account for various other changes going on in the background, like less capital spending and new requirements from the Office for Fair Access. Yet, as the removal of number caps comes over the horizon, there is an onus on universities to explain the benefits they offer and on applicants to investigate what is really on offer as well as on employers to consider the value of different courses while recruiting.

For me, the results raise a number of public policy issues. Let me mention five:

1. People considering higher education need the Key Information Set to be supplemented by more comprehensive information on the teaching and learning environment – as a specific example, more granular information about contact hours.
2. The higher education sector needs to explain more clearly why degrees that are widely regarded as comparable make such different expectations of their students.
3. Given the disparities, graduate employers should be helped to understand the differences between courses and encouraged to accredit those courses they value the most.
4. Students could demand more transparency from their institutions in explaining how their fees are currently spent. Then they will be able to make a fine judgement rather than a trigger-happy one on whether their experience is value for money or not.
5. The current focus on teaching and learning needs to be augmented with a new focus on students’ overall quality of life, and the structures in place to support them.

Three final points:

Everything in this survey points to the fact that institutions which focus on improving the whole learning and teaching environment will prove attractive to students and, even if it does not put them at the top of our research-obsessed league tables, it will set them in good stead for the future.

Secondly, given that austerity is likely to continue whoever wins the next general election, which is now less than one year away, the issues raised by the survey are unlikely to go away. Indeed, by this time next year the question of where to spend any spare income may look out of place. The numbers cap will come off just as the next wave of austerity bites, so we may very well need to ask where any cuts in per-student funding should fall.

Thirdly, all the data are freely available – so you can inspect the figures, play around with them and produce your own results. We encourage you to do so.