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# Universities UK parliamentary briefing: higher education reform consultation

May 2022

## Background

In February 2022, the Department of Education published its plans to reform the higher education (HE) funding system. The plans were also accompanied by two consultations, the first on the lifelong loan entitlement and the other on a full package of higher education reforms which sought views on proposals that include student number controls (SNCs), minimum entry requirements (MERs), a reduction in fees for foundation years, a national student scholarship scheme and level 4 and 5 qualifications provision. The full Universities UK (UUK)

to succeed in higher education, but who may not have had sufficient opportunity through their pre-HE education.

Our views on plans to grow level 4 and 5 qualifications provision a2.9 ( 1 (u)T00 068.246 0 Td( )Tj-0.002 T22y85.6 (.

number cap on nursing students, which has contributed to chronic shortages in nursing which are still seen today. A long-term legacy of restricting access through SNCs may be a loss of expertise and knowledge across some disciplines – both in our graduates but also our research capacity – that cannot simply be re-established.

The imposition of SNCs, along with other proposed reforms, will also have financial implications for universities. Analysis by Frontier Economics has estimated that between £1.9bn and £2.6bn could be lost over a five-year period. This, added to the continued freeze in the fee cap, will restrict the ability of universities to maximise their contributions to meet the skills agenda and levelling up objectives of government.

## **2. Adverse impacts on students**

Students must have the freedom to make choices that best suit their individual circumstances, through their choice of course and provider of study. SNCs would take away this freedom of choice.

The consultation cites the reasoning for SNCs as ensuring a fair deal for students and to

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### **3. Whether additional bureaucracy is necessary to address poor outcomes**

Most higher education in England is high quality and supports students to achieve outcomes in line with their interests and aspirations, and this is a view that is shared by the regulator, the Office for Students (OfS). The OfS already regulates in this area and does so in a risk-based way, targeting those areas where there are significant concerns on quality and/or outcomes and then promoting improvement activity. There is a risk that SNCs simply create additional bureaucracy with universities not only having to meet their regulatory requirements, but also e



Students who enter HE with lower entry qualifications are still able to succeed and take advantage of the benefits of a university education. OfS widening participation data shows students who entered HE with the lowest reported A level results had continuation rates higher than the sector average.



## **A reduction in the fees for foundation years**

Foundation years are crucial to opportunities for people with non-traditional qualifications and backgrounds to enter higher education. They also support students who are changing subject area or desire additional support in their transition to higher education. Foundation years play an important role in increasing the number of students on strategically important subjects and preparing students to succeed in degree level study. In 2020–21, foundation year students accounted for 16% of entrants in engineering, 12% of entrants in physical sciences, 11% of entrants in computing, and 10% in biological sciences.

Foundation years are also key in supporting underrepresented groups to access competitive courses in these strategically important areas. In 2020–21, 43% of foundation year students were from a Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and previous data has also indicated that 32% of students on foundation years were from the most disadvantaged areas in England.

We are supportive of government aims to ensure the charging of routes to higher education are fair to students. However, we are concerned that a reduction in the fee across all foundation year courses would create issues for some universities to meet their costs in funding provision, as it would represent a shortfall of £182m and J28.923 (ov)-4. (8)-1.-5.5 (c)-3.2 (os).8 (r)0.-3.6



## **National student scholarship scheme**

We support the plan to introduce a national scholarship scheme, backed by new funding. However, the proposals set out in this consultation, on top of changes to parameters to the student loan system, have the potential to damage access to higher education. Therefore, a national scholarship scheme will be crucial to offset some of the more damaging impacts.

The scheme should be targeted at disadvantaged individuals who have the potential to succeed in higher education, but who may not have had sufficient opportunity through their pre-

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