

## PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING

# Skills and Post-16 Education Bill

## Second Reading, House of Lords, 15 June 2021

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MillionPlus is the Association for Modern Universities in the UK, and the voice of 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education. We champion, promote and raise awareness of the essential role played by modern universities in the UK's world-leading university system. Modern universities make up 52% of all UK undergraduates and 37% of all postgraduates, with over one million students studying at modern institutions across the UK.

The government's commitment to boosting skills and investing in lifelong learning is very welcome. No matter how a person chooses to engage with education post-16, be that at a further education (FE) college or a university (or indeed both), it is vital that they are supported and given every opportunity to succeed. There is much in the current Bill that should bring about positive change and that speaks to what many in the sector have called for. However, there remain some questions about the legislation as presented and we believe both clarifications and modifications can ensure this Bill is able to make a difference and truly meet the skills needs of the country as well as help many more people access education over the course of their lives.

MillionPlus is therefore calling for:

- Greater detail on the lifelong learning entitlements and proposals on modular funding at Second Reading
- Abandoning plans to remove benchmarking in quality assessments
- Protecting the integrity of the UK higher education sector
- Ensuring collaboration between Higher and Further Education, and not needless competition

## LIFELONG LEARNING

MillionPlus has long called for more to be done to enable people to access education at every stage of their lives. In our manifesto ahead of the 2019 General Election we called for greater flexibility to be introduced into the funding system so that we could both arrest the alarming decline in part-time and mature study, as well as open up new and exciting opportunities for those who may not be able to access traditional models of education.<sup>1</sup> The Government's ambition to do just that, therefore, is to be warmly welcomed. However, the Bill as it stands has an extreme lack of detail for a policy that is both so significant and also potentially complex. The Skills for Jobs White Paper set out an ambition to enable a Lifelong Loan Entitlement for the equivalent of four years of post-18 education from 2025, and whilst we welcome this ambition, the detail and complexity of such a scheme requires lengthy scrutiny from both the sector and Parliament. We believe this detail should be outlined as soon as possible, ideally in the form of an amendment at Second Reading, to

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Election2019\\_Manifesto\\_Portrait\\_3pp\\_final.pdf](https://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Election2019_Manifesto_Portrait_3pp_final.pdf)

flesh out the proposals and give them the critical analysis necessary to enable the successful implementation that we all want to see.

## **MODULAR FUNDING**

Allied to the changes on flexibility is the change to allow for modular funding. MillionPlus has supported calls for a change to enable funding to be accessed in ways that are not solely linked to academic years, so the theory behind such a move is one that we support. However, the level of complexity behind this, and the necessary changes that would need to be made at all levels of the system, mean that such a change must be taken very carefully and deliberately. As with the lifelong learning provisions in the Bill there remain many areas of detail that are not in the legislation as drafted and that require extensive scrutiny and testing. Rushing such a system could have serious consequences, and as was proven following previous funding reforms, unintended consequences for certain cohorts of potential students can be seriously harmful to educational opportunities around the country. We therefore urge the Government to bring forward a detailed plan for how this new funding system will be designed and to work constructively with the sector and Parliament to ensure it delivers on its undoubted promise.

## **MEASURING QUALITY WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Ensuring higher education throughout the country is of high quality is something that everyone in the sector supports, and indeed we have robust quality assurance processes in place currently that do just that. Section 17 of this legislation sets out powers that the Office for Students (OfS) will have on measuring data, much if not all of which is already collected, and setting minimum thresholds on student outcomes that, critically, will no longer need to take into account any benchmarking.

Whilst we believe that robust quality measures are important, we believe that it is not always the case that a certain set of measures chosen are always accurate representations of quality. People access higher education in many ways, and for many reasons, and pre-supposing one absolute criteria as to what defines success limits our understanding of education – it also sits incongruously in a Bill designed to diversify access to higher education and boost mature and part-time study. Various factors play critical roles in the outcomes graduates get, not least social background, which remains a significant determinant in this regard.<sup>2</sup> This is why moves to remove benchmarking entirely within legislation, and have a one-size-fits-all approach to assessing quality, has the potential to misunderstand ideas of quality, and focus on measuring what we are easily able to measure as opposed to the true objective of measurement.

MillionPlus would seriously question the validity of any metric of quality that ignores contextual factors as a first principle. It is vital when considering the quality of higher education that we have some perspective on the bigger picture, and this is ever more important in the context of the Government's objective to "level up" the country

In our view this codification of an already troubling move in this direction is being enacted with little or no evidence or justification as to how it will improve student performance or outcomes. Indeed, by removing all context the sector risks turning the tide on many years of dedicated support on widening access and working with students of all backgrounds to achieve their own successes. This is not baking in lower aspirations, rather it is appreciating the individual circumstances of a student and working with them to succeed to their full potential. To remove the ability to contextualise you also remove the ability to assess value-add, which in any case is a better determinant of quality than an absolute baseline. Many modern universities take on

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<sup>2</sup> <https://ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/wps/WP201430.pdf>

students and work with them to add that value, and benchmarked performance indicators highlight how successful they have been in that effort. Two thirds of all entrants to higher education in England from low participation backgrounds attend modern institutions, as well as 71% of full-time mature students, and the proven success of this widening participation, and the impact that it has had across the country, should not be jeopardised.<sup>3</sup> Part of the core mission of modern universities is to add value in this way, which also boosts the skills base and economy locally. Formally removing the ability to contextualise risks all this, and standardises a sector that has great strength in its diversity.

There is also an issue with such a move fundamentally moving the English sector out of line with the UK Quality Code. Having different definitions of quality in this way damages the coherence and consistency of UK quality assessment, which has risks internationally. We believe the UK sector is stronger united than divided, and we believe steps should be taken to ensure such a divergence is only undertaken when presented with overwhelming evidence as to its necessity, which we do not believe is the case here.

## **HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION**

Much of the legislation focuses on FE, and on meeting local needs through technical and vocational skills. MillionPlus universities work closely with the FE sector across the country, and we believe it is vital that more support is given to FE colleges to reverse the funding decline that has taken place over recent years. We therefore welcome the new funds set up by the Government, and their wider commitments to investing in that sector. However, we believe it is vital that in this legislation, and more widely, we ensure that we can have FE and HE collaborating rather than competing for resources. Ensuring parity of esteem between different post-16 routes is enormously important, but this is best achieved by investing in FE and not by taking funds away from HE and levelling down. Many MillionPlus institutions serve places and communities that have lacked investment, and who welcome the levelling-up agenda the Government is pursuing with open arms. Having an ability to access both further and higher education, with investment that matches their ambition, is the only way that the country can meet its skills needs and provide pathways into good careers today as well as the jobs of the future.

## **OVERALL**

There is so much in this Bill that, in theory, has the ability to bring about positive change. Whether it is supporting the FE sector whilst not doing down our world-class higher education institutions, or tackling mature and part-time study, this Bill can address concerns the education sector has had for many years. However, for this to happen the legislation needs to be considered, well thought-through, and not simply rhetoric or nice ideas that will not translate into practicable policy.

Much greater detail is needed on many parts of this Bill before the sector can have the confidence needed to fully support it, however we look forward to working with the Government when this detail does arrive, ideally at Second Reading.

We strongly believe that removing benchmarking undermines much of what the rest of the Bill is pushing for, and this should therefore be re-assessed, and we want to see a Bill that is consistent in its messaging, collaborative in its approach, and with the students of today and tomorrow as its focus.

**For more information please contact Adam Haxell, Head of Advocacy and Stakeholder Engagement, at [adamhaxell@millionplus.ac.uk](mailto:adamhaxell@millionplus.ac.uk)**

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Think\\_Modern\\_-\\_Facts\\_and\\_Stats\\_2020.pdf](https://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Think_Modern_-_Facts_and_Stats_2020.pdf)