



The All-Party Parliamentary
University Group



All Party Parliamentary Group on Students

25 May 2016

Agenda

The subject of the meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary University Group is international comparisons of funding of the higher education sector.

- 6.00pm** **Roberta Blackman-Woods MP**, Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary University Group, and **Paul Blomfield MP**, Chair of the APPG on Students, welcome and introductions.
- 6.05pm** **Professor Simon Gaskell**, Vice-Chancellor, Queen Mary University London
- c6.15pm** **Nick Hillman**, Director, HEPI
- c6.25pm** **Sorana Vieru**, Vice-President (Higher Education), NUS
- c6.35pm** Questions, comments, and discussion with university leaders, MPs and Peers.
- 7.30pm** Speaker meeting concludes.

Speaker biographies



Professor Simon Gaskell

Simon Gaskell he took up the post of Principal of Queen Mary, University of London in October 2009. Externally, he is Chair of the Board of the Higher Education Statistics Agency, and has been elected to serve as Treasurer for Universities UK, the representative organisation for UK universities, from 1 August 2012.

His personal research interests and expertise are at the interface of the physical sciences with the life and clinical sciences. Specifically, he has been concerned with the development of mass spectrometry and related analytical techniques, and their application to problems of biological importance. He is particularly concerned with the understanding of the gas-phase ion chemistry of biomolecules (notably peptides and proteins) and the exploitation of that understanding in enhanced analytical approaches. Much of his recent research has been devoted to proteomics (the definition of the protein complement of cells and organisms), with particular reference to quantitative determinations.



Nick Hillman

Nick Hillman has been the Director of HEPI since January 2014. He worked for the Rt Hon David Willetts MP, the Minister for Universities and Science, from 2007 until the end of 2013, as Chief of Staff and then Special Adviser in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Previously, he was a History teacher and worked at the Association of British Insurers. At the 2010 general election, he was the runner-up in Cambridge.

He has written for a range of think tanks and journals. His recent writings include an article on the fifty-year history of student loans for *Contemporary British History*, a pamphlet on being a special adviser for the Institute of Government and a paper comparing access to selective secondary schools and selective universities for *Higher Education Review*.

His recent pamphlets for HEPI include an assessment of the impact of students in the general election of 2015, a comparison of the UK and German higher education systems and a guide to the removal of student numbers controls.



Sorana Vieru

Sorana Vieru has been the Vice President (Higher Education) of the National Union of Students since July 2015. She was the Postgraduate Education Officer at the University of Bristol Students' Union (from 2014-15), and is currently halfway through a PhD in Philosophy at the University of Bristol, following her

MA in Philosophy & History of Science and BA in Philosophy from the University of Birmingham.

As NUS' Vice President (Higher Education), her work focuses on campaigning for a more inclusive, liberated curriculum and higher education system, focusing on empowering students to work with their course leaders to make these changes. In addition, she has led NUS' work on responding to the significant changes to quality in the sector, including running the Quality Doesn't Grow on Fees and TEF Off campaigns.

Briefing - Students as consumers in their education: where student fees go, how universities explain their financial decisions to students, the public and government

Prepared for members of the All-Party Parliamentary University Group and APPG on Students

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All-Party Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues.

This briefing document has been produced by Universities UK which provides the Secretariat for the University APPG and the National Union of Students which provides the Secretariat for the APPG on Students.



Students as consumers in their education: where student fees go and how universities explain their financial decisions to students, the public and government

Briefing by the National Union of Students

Introduction

Over recent years, higher education policy has increasingly seen students as consumers. In part prompted by the introduction of – and subsequent rise in – tuition fees, there has been a natural progression in policy making to viewing higher education as a product being sold, where the student is a customer and the university and its teachers are service providers. Accordingly, there have also been growing pressures on institutions to account for where their funding goes – not least from students themselves, with only 7% of students in England feeling they get ‘value for money’.¹

Seeing students as consumers

The trend towards envisaging students as consumers can be traced through the most recent, key higher education policy documents:

- The Browne Review in 2010 sought to rationalise change by ensuring “Choice is in the hands of the student”.²
- The 2011 Higher Education white paper titled itself *Students at the heart of the system*, again seeking to empower students through choice and committing to “opening up the higher education market”.³
- The latest white paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (launched only on 16 May 2016), again makes students choice and value for money a centre piece of its vision, with key new plans to open the sector to new providers and make more information about courses, institutions and outcomes available.⁴

Consumers or partners?

However, both students and institutions have questioned the suitability of a consumer culture in higher education.⁵ Not only has it been noted that there are few opportunities for repeat ‘sales’ of the ‘product’ and that there is no opportunity to ‘test’ the product before purchasing, the student is also an active participant in the product and their engagement with their education makes an integral contribution to its quality and success.

As pressure for students to act as consumers rises, it remains to be seen what place is left for recognition of students as learners and as partners in their education. The relationship between consumer and provider is one of transaction; the relationship between partners is one of trust, challenge and growth. Promoting

¹ http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/AS-PRINTED-HEA_HEPI_report_print4.pdf

² https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/422565/bis-10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf

³ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/31384/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf

⁴ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523445/bis-16-265-success-as-a-knowledge-economy-web.pdf

⁵ National Union of Students, *A Manifesto for partnership*; and, <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/higher-education-network-blog/2011/mar/14/students-as-consumers>

consumerism – which promotes choice *between* products – at the expense of giving students an integrated role in helping to shape their education may limit the intellectual challenge and learning experience that higher education is so valued by students for. This poses a particularly pertinent question given that recent research has suggested that students who see themselves as consumers rather than learners have lower academic attainment.⁶

Financial transparency

Despite the questions surrounding the conception of students as consumers or partners, there is great value in efforts to increase the transparency over where students' money is being spent. Improving the way in which explanations about financial decisions are made and the ways in which they are communicated too students can play crucial roles in creating a positive, balanced relationship between institutions and their learners. Secrecy in these decisions⁷ or decisions that suggest students' fees are not prioritising the student experience, but instead increasing marketing spending (which in the aftermath of the 2012 fees rise, rose 15%),⁸ can breed distrust between institutions and their students. A lack of transparency can create strong senses that the degree is not worth what is being paid, as has been found in surveys that suggest four-fifths of students believing their degree costs less than their fees.⁹

However, greater transparency may have implications for the relationship between students and institutions. As pressures to act as consumers and regard higher education as a transaction between an individual and institution grows, transparency may lead to questions from students over why their money should go to services or facilities that they do not use. Both students, students' unions and institutions would agree that any push for transparency should maintain the worth of the collective benefits over individual, so as not to jeopardise specialist services such as counselling services or disabled students' services.

Rights and protections

There are also questions over the rights and protections available to students, and how these could help strengthen the relationships between institutions and students as partners.

Firstly, it is worth considering the real power of student choice in practice. For example, students remain closely tied to universities and courses whilst completing their studies – seemingly contradicting their power to choose. Notably, the new white paper suggests a process for making it easier for students to switch university courses more easily, which could be a significant shift in empowering them to choose.

Secondly, institutions and Vice Chancellors often retain great power in their relationships with individual students, which again has potential to imbalance the relationships between students and institutions. There are, however, positive steps beginning to be made in improving the transparency and balance of this

⁶ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/students-consumer-mindset-get-lower-grades>

⁷ <http://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/top-universities-refuse-to-reveal-how-they-are-spending-tuition-fees-9958264.html>

⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/may/18/universities-turn-to-ad-man>

⁹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/tuition-fees-four-fifths-of-students-believe-their-degree-isnt-worth-the-money-9928635.html>

relationship, for example, with increasing numbers of universities actively including students in the design of their curriculum.¹⁰

Thirdly – and particularly pertinent following the white paper’s announcements about opening up the system to alternative providers – it is helpful to question what protections exist for students when things go wrong. Whether it is over how well current guidelines cover postgraduates or part-time students, as opposed to full-time undergraduates, or how well students are protected if their institution or course closes, there are valuable questions over what student protections should look like – whether they are consumers or partners.

As the narrative around students as consumers develops, it has become customary to imagine these rights in the same terms as consumer rights.¹¹ However, it is worth questioning how useful it is to frame the case for student rights in the context of tuition fees, rather than the need for learner voice. Whilst student rights can, and have, empowered students in their relationships with institutions, it is worth considering the implications for this relationship if those rights are increasingly seen as derived from being a ‘purchaser’ rather than being a learner.

For further information, please contact Alexander Lee, Public Affairs Officer, National Union of Students (alexander.lee@nus.org.uk).

¹⁰ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/should-students-be-partners-in-curriculum-design>

¹¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/415732/Undergraduate_students_-_your_rights_under_consumer_law.pdf



The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

Students as consumers in their education: where student fees go and how universities explain their financial decisions to students, the public and government

Briefing by Universities UK

Students make a significant personal and financial investment when deciding to go to university. The UK higher education sector teaches approximately 2.3 million students (2013-14). It is essential that higher education providers ensure that students get a fair deal and actively support them to achieve their learning goals. Universities do this by:

- a. Giving students confidence that financial resources are being used in the best way possible
- b. Ensuring that students have a positive experience in an active learning community
- c. Maintaining a fair and balanced relationship that addresses the requirement of consumer law in partnership with students

UK universities continually review their practice ensure that they offer the best deal to students. It is essential that reforms to regulation and market entry proposed in the recent White Paper protect the interests and rights of students and prevent transient, low quality or negligent providers entering into the system.

Value for money

Universities have a responsibility to students and other stakeholders to demonstrate they are using resources in the best possible way to achieve their objectives. Students are interested in how their university spends money, but may find information on this difficult to understand or access.

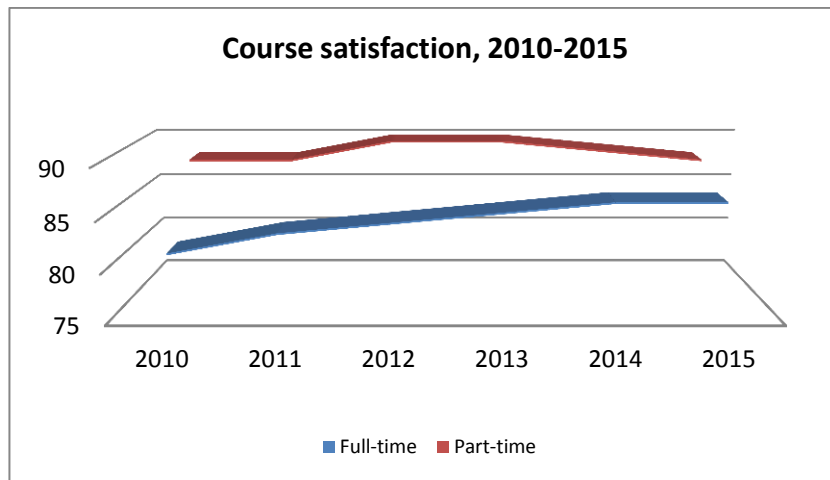
Universities are working with their students to make their financial information more accessible. This has included working closely with students and their students unions to ensure information presented in a clear, engaging and accessible ways. Examples are available here:

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/financetransparency/>

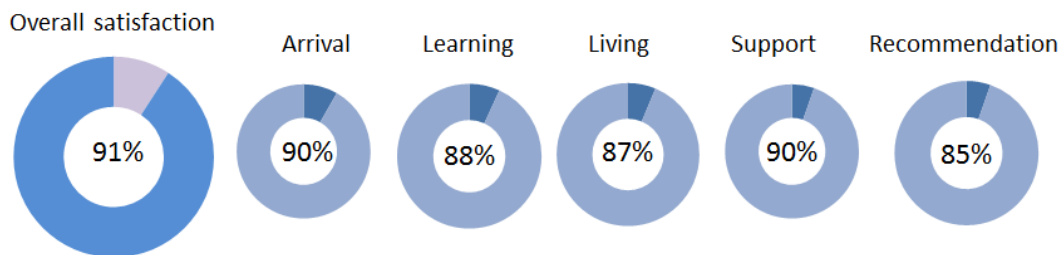
A positive learning experience

UK universities endeavour to ensure that students are happy with their study experience and outcomes. Universities actively engage with their student body to gather feedback on courses and the overall learning experience. This includes evaluation of programmes and modules, institutional and

sector surveys such as the national student survey, as well as dialogue and engagement with student unions.



Overall the National Student Survey (NSS) reported that 86% of students studying in the UK are satisfied with their course, which is at a near all-time high. International students are also more likely to recommend higher education in the UK than in any of the other major English speaking countries that are the UK's main competitors for recruitment.

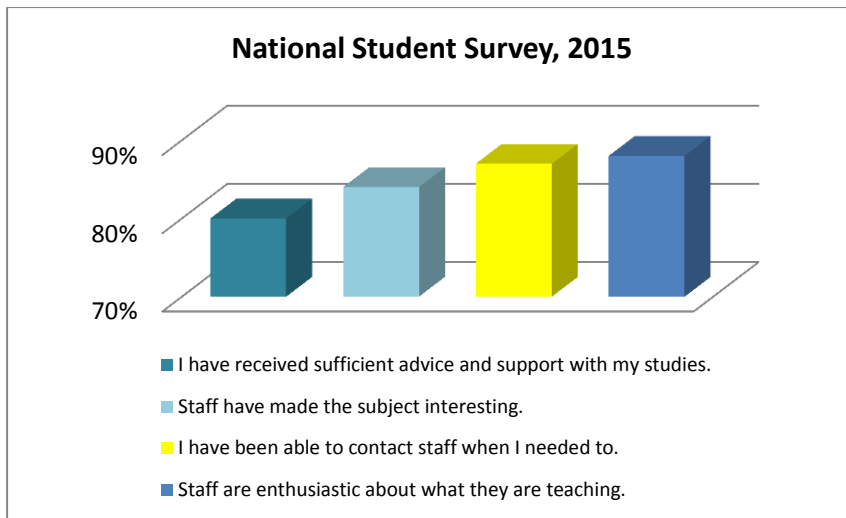


Levels of satisfaction compared

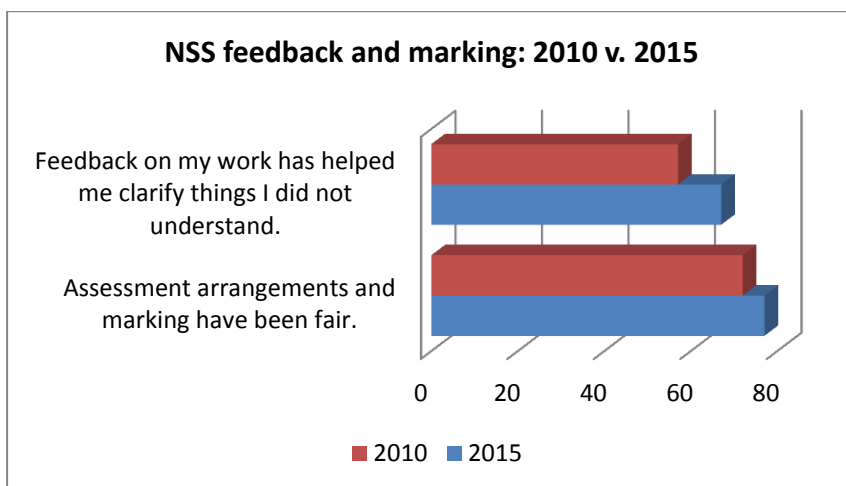
Ranking	Overall satisfaction	Arrival	Learning	Living	Support	Recommendation
1	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK
2	USA	Australia	USA	Australia	USA	USA
3	Canada	USA	Canada	New Zealand	New Zealand	Canada
4	Australia	Canada	Australia	USA	Australia	Australia
5	New Zealand	New Zealand	New Zealand	Canada	Canada	New Zealand

Source: 2014 ISB survey data (from IU, [Igraduate](#) (2015) The UK's Competitive Advantage

Teacher and lecturer characteristics matter most to students, particularly the skill, accessibility and enthusiasm of teaching staff. Teaching and learning methods, including the design of programmes is a close second. Students place a high priority on interaction in classes which is viewed as being beneficial for academic development, social capital and transferable skills.

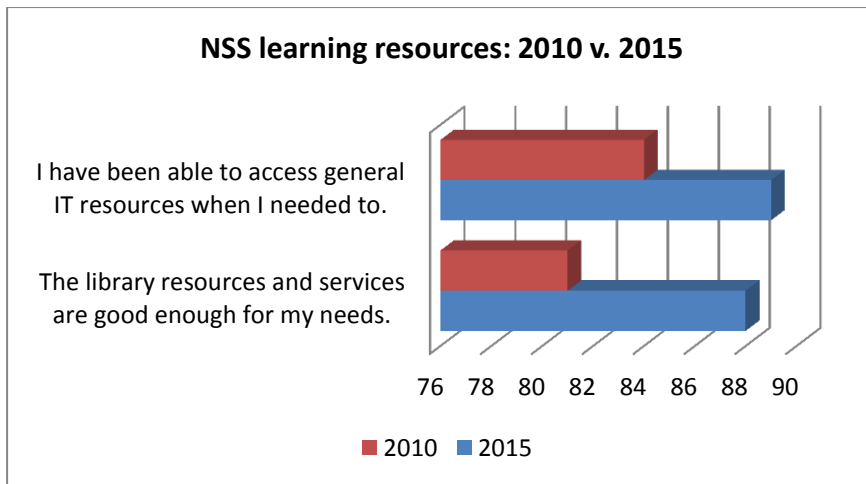


The sector frequently assesses student satisfaction with feedback and assessment. In 2015 77% of NSS respondents¹² reported that assessment and marking criteria are fair and 67% reported that feedback has helped them clarify things they didn't understand. International students gave UK institutions a score of 3.03 for performance feedback, slightly below Canada and the US, and in learning support it scored second from the top, just behind the US.

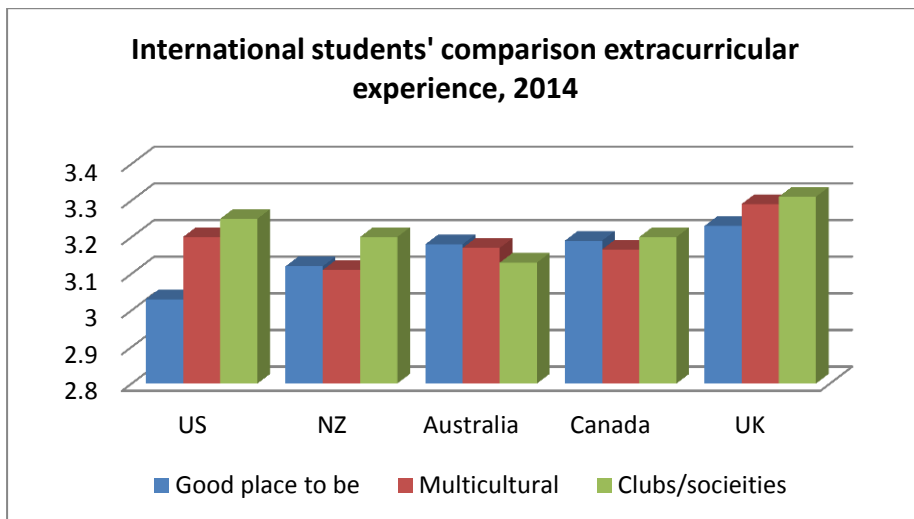


Students are positive about learning facilities such as library support, which is also heavily weighted. The 2015 NSS found that 88% of students found the library resources and service “good enough for [their] needs” and that 89% felt they “have been able to access general IT resources” when needed; in 2010, these figures were 81% and 84%, respectively. UK universities also ranked top for physical and online libraries, laboratories, and learning spaces against international competitors.

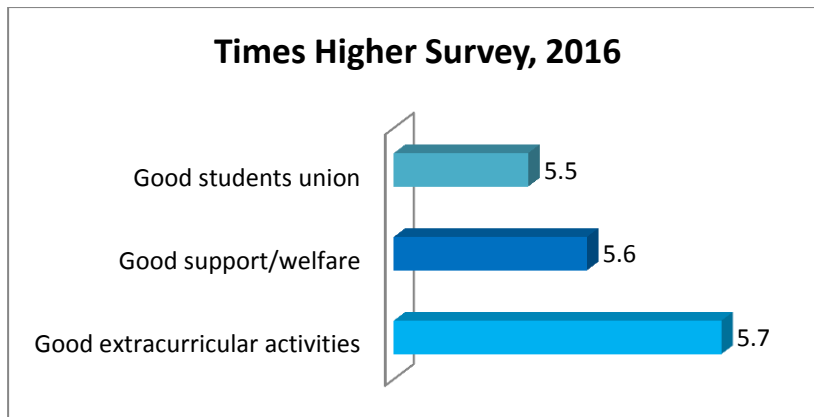
¹² Taught HEIs, England



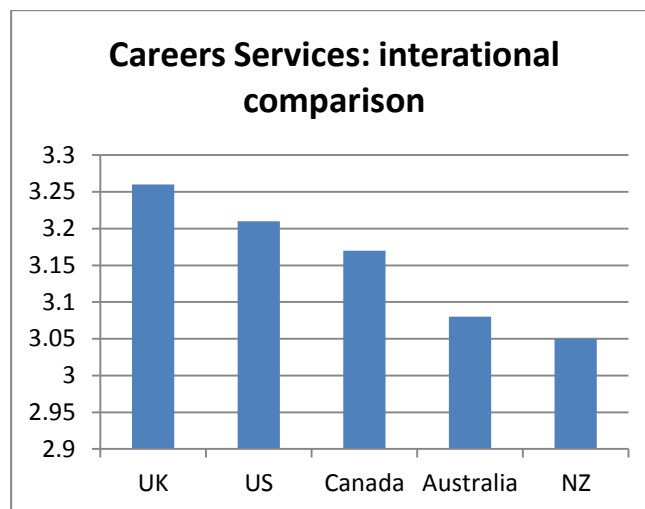
Universities challenge students socially and culturally, by pushing them to collaborate, socialise and often live with new people who may come from different backgrounds. These extracurricular elements of the student experience are valuable from a purely social and personal perspective. In addition university can also help to build a networks that can be valuable throughout a career whilst also fostering skills related to leadership, teamwork, creativity, and problem solving.



The 2016 Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey indicates that, on average, students are very satisfied with the extracurricular activities on offer at their universities: on a scale of 1-7 they rated these 5.7. They are also very satisfied with student support and welfare services, another highly weighted direct opportunity, ascribing these 5.6 out of 7.



A 2015 UUK survey found that 83% of students are very/quite satisfied with their careers services; similarly, international undergraduates in the UK rated their career services 3.26 out of five, higher than New Zealand, Australia, Canada or the US. In addition Industry connections, ascribed high level importance by respondents to both the *Times Higher* and NSS/QAA research, score, in the Times Higher an average 5.7 out of 7.



A course being poorly organised is the number one reason (33%) for university not meeting a student’s overall expectations. This is followed by the volume of contact hours next at 31%; support for independent study (29%) and teaching quality (29%). However, overall satisfaction with the course tends to outperform the extent students report that a course is well organised and running smoothly, 77%. This suggests overall satisfaction is based on a combination of factors.

A fair relationship

The sector has long had in place the [Quality Code](#) which forms the baseline for entry into the higher education sector. The code sets out expectations for the fair treatment of students during their studies, including areas such as provision of information and appeals arrangements.

Following the introduction of the maximum £9000 fees in 2012 the Competition and Markets Authority [issued advice](#) about higher education institutions’ responsibilities to students under

consumer rights regulations. Following this advice the sector is actively working to ensure that it also meets these requirements. This includes the following actions.

Institutions are reviewing the **information they provide to prospective students** to enable them to choose the most appropriate course and institution (this refers to all information but specific attention is being placed by the CMA on the provision of information from the application stage to the enrolment stage). Universities present a range of information to students, including the Key Information Set that ensures that students have access to comparable data between institutions. This includes:

- Average tuition fees
- Results from the national student survey
- Proportion of time spent in various learning and teaching activities
- Proportion of assessment by method
- Details of professional, statutory and regulatory recognition
- Non course costs, including accommodation
- Financial support available
- Destination of prior graduates, including occupation and salary

Institutions are reviewing the **terms and conditions** used to govern the relationship with students, including their accessibility, fairness and proportionality (this refers to university regulations and all regulatory documents that relate to students). Institutions are reviewing arrangements for making changes to courses to ensure that enrolled students are not disadvantaged. A recent [statement of good practice](#) agreed by the sector set out the following requirements:

- **Transparent, fair and accessible** policies and practices governing course closure and changes
- Policies and practice recognise that students invest time and effort in studies and need **timely dialogue** and **clarity of options** when changes occur
- Clear arrangements for **informing and consulting** with students about material changes to continuing courses
- Clear arrangements for **continuity of provision** if a course is closed
- How to **support the HE sector and students** in the event of course or provider failure elsewhere

Universities are also working to ensure **speed and effectiveness of complaints handling**. This includes ensuring that current and prospective students are informed about the process. All universities should have internal dispute processes and all publicly funded institutions have been required to subscribe to the Office for the Independent Adjudicator for instances.

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The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

Future meetings

28 June 2016

University APPG Summer Reception
6-8pm, Churchill Room

For more information about the group please email appug@universitiesuk.ac.uk or visit www.universityappg.co.uk



All Party Parliamentary Group on Students

More details about the APPG on Students' programme for 2016-17 will be released shortly. For further information about future meetings of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Students, please email the Group at info@appg-students.org.uk.

You can follow the Group's activities and find further details at appg-students.org.uk and on Twitter at [@APPGStudents](https://twitter.com/APPGStudents)