

Knowledge economy: fifteen big ideas for the next government

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ABOUT UCU

The University and College Union (UCU) represents more than 110,000 academic and professional staff in universities, colleges, prisons, adult education and training organisations across the UK.

We campaign for greater public investment in post-school education as well as for fair pay and decent working conditions for our members.

OUR VISION FOR THE UK'S KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

Post-school learning is fundamentally important for individual enhancement, as well as for a fairer society and successful economy.

Colleges and universities are key economic contributors, both as local employers and because they provide the skilled professional and technical workers upon which other businesses and public services depend. It is predicted that around eight million more highly skilled jobs will be created within the EU by 2025,¹ and our further and higher education sectors will need to expand in the coming years to accommodate this additional need.

OECD figures show that the net public benefit of someone gaining an education beyond school level is between six and eight times the cost to the UK taxpayer.² Furthermore, research from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) shows that university graduates earn on average 40% more across their lifetime.³ Those who attain post-school qualifications also tend to be healthier than those who do not.⁴

UCU believes that, in order to maximise the contribution of post-school education to the economy and society, it is necessary both to increase the UK's academic capacity and remove barriers to participation in further and higher education.

The union therefore supports an education system which helps people to reach their full potential, regardless of age or background, at minimum cost to the individual. UCU also supports measures which reduce fragmentation in the sector, promote a broad curriculum and make the UK a more attractive place for the best and brightest to work and study.

High quality, impartial careers guidance is essential if students are to fully understand the different study options available to them.

FIFTEEN BIG IDEAS FOR THE NEXT GOVERNMENT

1 Commit to increased public spending on the knowledge economy.

The UK currently spends just 0.7% of GDP on public funding for tertiary education, less than many global competitors;⁵ spending on research is also below average for the European Union.⁶ Additional public resource is required to close these funding gaps, remove financial barriers for those who wish to access post-school education and ensure that our research base is resilient and competitive. Post-school education has an intrinsic social value and represents an excellent return on public investment, so allocating appropriate resource to the knowledge economy should be a core commitment for any future government.

2 Redesign the way in which post-school education is funded.

Tuition fees for public universities are currently the third highest in the world after the USA and Japan, and the system of fee loans is not producing significant savings for the taxpayer when compared with the system it replaced. Furthermore, take-up of 24+ advanced learning loans in further education has been lower than estimated since their introduction in 2013/14.⁷ Government should look again at student finance and consider radical alternatives to the current system including full public funding for education, additional financial support to encourage retention of young people in education and personalised funding streams to support learners of all ages through post-compulsory education.

3 Reinforce the importance of early years education as a determinant of life chances.

A significant body of evidence demonstrates that good early childhood education and care has positive long-term educational, occupational and social outcomes for disadvantaged children. Around 55% of children who are in the lowest 20% of education achievers at age seven remain there at age 16; less than 20% of them move into the top 60%.⁸ The OECD report 'Doing Better for Families in the United Kingdom' suggests that progress to reduce child poverty in the UK has stalled, and that 'childcare costs can remain a barrier to work'.⁹ To achieve full equality of educational opportunity at post-school level, it is therefore necessary to ensure that early years provision is accessible to all, including working families, and of a consistently high quality, delivered by well trained staff.

4 Ensure a real choice and balance between academic and vocational options for 14-19 year olds.

The current system of qualifications for 14-19 year olds encourages students to choose either a vocational or academic route, which can lead to certain options being closed off too early because of choices made early on in a student's career. The government should work with education providers to introduce a system of qualifications for the 14-19 phase which allows students to choose a mixture of high-quality academic and vocational options, providing a broad and flexible basis for further and higher learning or employment.

5 Overhaul careers education to improve understanding of different educational pathways.

High-quality, impartial careers guidance is essential if students are to fully understand the different study options available to them and make an informed choice about their future education and employment plans. This should be free to all and available not only during initial education, but throughout further and higher study and beyond. Adequate resource should be invested to allow for face-to-face and telephone support as well as the provision of online resources.

A strong focus on traditional routes to university is unhelpful in terms of widening participation in higher education. Government should encourage much closer working relationships between learning providers at all levels.

6 Enhance the apprenticeship brand by improving quality and ensuring that apprentices receive a rounded education.

Too many apprenticeship frameworks are of poor quality and short duration, and this erosion of standards has been damaging to the apprenticeship brand. High-quality apprenticeships should last a minimum of three years and provide a broad educational basis for a future career, with a sensible balance between practical, on-the-job training and off-site learning. They should offer a route to professional status or license to practice. Apprentices should also receive at least the national minimum wage in recognition of their valuable contribution to an employer's activities.

7 Tackle youth unemployment using a kite-marked partnership model for local authorities, businesses and education providers.

Young people need fair access to employment and learning opportunities when they leave initial education so they have the chance to build sustainable, long-term careers. A 'Youth Resolution' would encourage greater partnership working between government, business and educational institutions at a local level, and the adoption of certain standards when working with young people including fair levels of pay and structured training opportunities.

8 Introduce greater incentives for collaboration between schools, colleges, universities and community learning programmes to widen participation.

A strong focus on traditional routes to university is unhelpful in terms of widening participation in higher education. Government should encourage much closer working relationships between learning providers at all levels so that the merits of different qualifications and educational pathways can be better understood, and different groups including part-time and mature students targeted more effectively.

9 Launch a bespoke educational offer for those aged 25 and over wishing to up-skill and retrain.

Good provision for workplace learning and training for the over-25s is imperative. The number of apprentices has increased rapidly over the last few years, but concerns are growing about the 'one-size-fits-all' nature of the all-age apprenticeship system. Adults who have been in work will have already gained employability skills, so do not need to relearn these as part of an apprenticeship qualification. Government should introduce a bespoke lifelong learning model for those aged 25 and over, which takes account of previous experience and supports appropriate provision for upskilling and retraining, as well as encouraging a culture of learning throughout life.

10 Undertake an in-depth review of the prison education system.

The important role of prison education in reducing reoffending is widely recognised, with studies showing that 'offenders who take part in learning while in prison are three times less likely to be reconvicted than those who do not.'¹⁰ Prison educators, however, report a number of barriers to effective teaching in custody including the instability caused by regular retendering for contracts. A review is required to analyse the relationship between prison education and investment and learner outcomes, and to identify appropriate alternatives to the competitive retendering process so that quality and consistency can be improved.

11 Increase transparency and accountability at education institutions.

It is currently unclear how the salaries of many leadership positions in further and higher education are decided; as a result, there is a democratic deficit in our education institutions. Introducing a requirement for remuneration committee minutes to be published and vice-chancellor and executive salary packages to be fully disclosed would allow leaders to be held fully accountable for their actions.

Casual contracts in education institutions diminish both the student experience and the value of academic teaching. Often, they do not support staff development activity or account for preparation time required for high quality teaching.

12 Extend the statutory protection of academic freedom to all staff working in teaching and research.

Freedom for academic staff to conduct research and publish their findings without interference from institutions or commercial bodies is vital in extending the UK's knowledge and understanding of emerging issues. Staff must also be free to express their opinions about the institution where they work if leadership is to be held accountable. Academic freedom should therefore be a statutory right for staff involved in teaching and research at all UK further and higher education institutions.

13 Protect our global reputation and remove overseas students from the immigration cap.

Recent negative public discourse about immigration has failed to make adequate distinction for overseas students, who have a valuable role to play in our education system. If we are to avoid losing a significant share of the international student market, government must remove students from the immigration cap and work to promote the UK internationally as a welcoming place to study, encouraging a more positive public dialogue about international students.

14 Stop all public funding for profit-making education institutions.

Government has, encouragingly, rejected the idea that schools should be run for profit. However, profit-making providers are increasingly prevalent in the further and higher education sector, many of whom have been shown to be providing low-quality provision and adopting unscrupulous recruitment practices. Government should extend the ban on for-profit providers to cover all kinds of education, and cease all public funding for profit-making education institutions.

15 Preserve the status and quality of academic teaching by ending exploitative working practices.

Casual contracts in education institutions diminish both the student experience and the value of academic teaching. Often, they do not support staff development activity or account for preparation time required for high quality teaching. Student access to academic support is also limited when teachers are only available during timetabled hours. The problem is widespread; a UCU freedom of information request has shown that at least 12.4% of all academic staff working in higher education are employed on this type of contract, and at least 35 FE colleges employ over 40% of their academic staff casually. Strong action should be taken to end exploitative contracts and ensure that all staff are fairly paid and have access to professional development opportunities.

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¹CEDEFOP 'EU Skills Panorama 2014', p1 <http://bit.ly/1tpHEWH>

²OECD 'Education at a Glance', 2013, p131 <http://bit.ly/1kD6aCj>

³BIS, 'The Impact of university degrees on the lifecycle of earnings', 2013, p6 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/229498/bis-13-899-the-impact-of-university-degrees-on-the-lifecycle-of-earnings-further-analysis.pdf

⁴OECD 'Education at a Glance', 2013, p148 <http://bit.ly/1kD6aCj>

⁵OECD 'Education at a Glance', 2013, p182 [http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2013%20\(eng\)-FINAL%20%20June%202013.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2013%20(eng)-FINAL%20%20June%202013.pdf)

⁶European Commission 'Research and Innovation performance', 2013, p275 <http://bit.ly/1p7aael>

⁷BIS '24+ Advanced Learning Loans: application information', May 2014, p4 (forecast uptake was 85,000 for 2013/14, actual uptake was just over 66,000) <http://bit.ly/1puE2jr>

⁸Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances 'The Foundation Years, preventing poor children becoming poor adults', 2010, p38 <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/14156/1/poverty-report.pdf>

⁹OECD 'Doing Better for Families in the United Kingdom' <http://bit.ly/WpNexk>

¹⁰Social Exclusion Unit, 'Reducing reoffending by ex-prisoners', 2002, p44 http://www.thelearningjourney.co.uk/reducing_report.pdf/file_view