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DOING BETTER, GETTING BETTER: *GETTING A GRIP ON THE FULL-TIME STUDENT EXPERIENCE*

July 2025

THE POST18PROJECT

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About The Post-18 Project

The Post-18 Project is an initiative to shape the policy environment around universities and colleges and provide practical solutions for anyone with a stake in the success of post-18 education in the UK. We bring new thinking, ideas and analysis from experts around education to drive reform of post-18 education in the UK.

An initiative from the team behind Wonkhe – the home of the UK higher education debate – The Post-18 Project has been initially set up to offer a new Labour government in Westminster policy and ideas and solutions, and develop the most exciting original thinking around the sector.

We seek to help shape the policy environment with practical ideas, helpful research, big thoughts and new ways to think about how post-18 education can be funded, the system configured, and how institutions relate to the outside world as well as their own staff and students. Our recommendations always aim to be practical and achievable, not pie in the sky, and could depend on institutional staff and leaders, regulators, policymakers or politicians to make a reality.

The system needs reform. Our aim is to provide the foundations for change, and capacity within the sector itself to have the conversation about the how, what, when and why of it all.

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INTRODUCTION

The UK's higher education system enjoys global respect for its academic standards, research innovation, historic institutions, and consistent high rankings. This global standing, however, sits in contrast to the lived student experience — with the highest domestic tuition fees in Europe,¹ low levels of satisfaction with value for money,² growing levels of regret,³ and increasing concerns about mental health and financial sustainability.

The current system was designed for a world that no longer exists. Today's students juggle competing demands – 68 per cent work during term time to supplement living costs, with 24 per cent of home domiciled full-time students working to provide financial support to family members.⁴ Tightening finances mean many live increasingly far from campus, with 63 per cent of financially comfortable students reporting satisfaction with their academic experience compared to just 21 per cent facing major financial difficulties.⁵

Students today navigate a fundamentally different world than previous generations. The extended “middle stage” of life that higher education now occupies has stretched beyond traditional expectations.⁶ While past generations typically achieved key adulthood markers (marriage, homeownership, parenthood) shortly after graduation, today's graduates face these milestones much later, with average marriage ages exceeding 38,⁷ and both first-time buyers and new parents averaging around 35.⁸

This extended middle stage displays specific characteristics – identity exploration as students decide who they are and what they want from work, education, and relationships; instability marked by repeated residence changes and multiple careers; self-focus as they explore options before lifelong commitments; feeling in-between – taking self-responsibility without completely feeling adult; and belief in possibilities for upward mobility.

¹ Education at a glance 2024 (2024) Education at a glance. OECD indicators/Education at a glance. <https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en>

² Hepi (2025) Student Academic Experience Survey 2025 - HEPI. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/reports-publications-and-resources/student-academic-experience-survey-saes>

³ Dandridge, N. et al. (2025) The benefits of hindsight: Reconsidering higher education choices. <https://bpb-eu-w2.wp.mucdn.com/blogs.bristol.ac.uk/dist/f/1210/files/2025/03/The-Benefits-of-Hindsight-Reconsidering-Higher-Education-Choices-2025-1.pdf>

⁴ Hepi (2024) Student Academic Experience Survey 2025 - HEPI. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/reports-publications-and-resources/student-academic-experience-survey-saes>

⁵ Dickinson, Jim. 2024. “Some Students Have. Some Students Have Not.” Wonkhe. June 17, 2024. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/some-students-have-some-students-have-not/>.

⁶ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties. Oxford: Oxford University Press, U.S.A., 2006.

⁷ ‘Marriages in England and Wales - Office for National Statistics’. Accessed 5 May 2025. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/2021and2022>

⁸ “Timing of Motherhood.” Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, November 28, 2024. <https://www.campop.geog.cam.ac.uk/blog/2024/11/28/timing-of-motherhood>

Throughout the waves of higher education expansion, particularly since the 1992 conversion of polytechnics to universities, we've paid little attention to how massification affects the fundamentals of student experience. The traditional model, designed for a small elite transitioning quickly to careers and adult independence, is now expected to serve a mass system of diverse students navigating a much more complex and extended transition.

The pandemic, too, exposed fundamental contradictions in our approach to higher education. When institutions ran at 30 per cent campus capacity but 100 per cent residential occupancy, the focus on facilities rather than lives betrayed a misunderstanding of what students actually need.⁹ While universities remain resistant to change, clinging to entrenched assumptions around and models of academic delivery and assessment, successive governments have clung to an outdated coming-of-age experience. Yet simultaneously, voices argue for unbundling, convinced students would embrace pick-and-mix approaches if available.

Both miss the point. The persistent demand for full-time student status isn't just about qualifications or "growing up", it's about what being a student offers in this middle stage – a structured yet flexible environment and socially rich settings to explore identity and relationships, all within a framework that postpones rather than accelerates the seemingly bleak pressures of full adulthood.

Our traditional understanding of the full-time student has collapsed, and will continue to collapse further. Many students now work nearly full-time hours alongside their studies, with average working students spending 50 hours per week on work and study combined¹⁰ – well above the 36.6 hours the ONS reports for the working population in general.¹¹ When combined with long commutes, rising living costs, and insufficient maintenance support, the result is a student body unable to engage with their education in the ways our system idealises.

Student communities have become more diverse – in background, experience, and need – but our systems haven't kept pace. The student finance system lacks connection to real living costs. Representation structures persist from an era when surveys were on paper. Housing strategies fail to incorporate students as citizens rather than economic assets. And safeguarding approaches remain piecemeal rather than strategic.

⁹ Dickinson, Jim. 2020. "If Campuses Are at 30% Capacity, Why Are Halls at 100%?" Wonkhe. October 3, 2020. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/if-campuses-are-at-30-capacity-why-are-halls-at-100/>

¹⁰ Hepi (2024) Student Academic Experience Survey 2025 - HEPI. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/reports-publications-and-resources/student-academic-experience-survey-saes>

¹¹ Office for National Statistics. 2024. "Average Actual Weekly Hours of Work for Full-Time Workers (Seasonally Adjusted) - Office for National Statistics." Ons.gov.uk. March 12, 2024. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/timeseries/ybuy/lms>

This matters not just for students themselves, but for the UK's broader economic challenges. As productivity stagnates and skills gaps widen, a higher education system that fails to develop human capital to its full potential represents a profound economic vulnerability. Our competitors are investing in higher education structures that develop not just academic skills but social capital, civic engagement, and practical competence. If the UK fails to adapt, our international standing will rapidly erode – despite our historic advantages.

The benefits of transforming the student experience extend far beyond individual satisfaction. For government, it means more productive graduates with stronger civic commitment; for universities, it offers improved retention, better alumni support, and stronger community integration; for employers, it provides graduates with practical skills and adaptability; for society, it generates problem-solvers who bridge social divides rather than exacerbate them.

The solution isn't making the experience cheaper, faster, or more episodic – but making it richer, more meaningful, and better suited to the realities of this extended “middle stage” of life. It requires a fundamental and comprehensive reimagining of what full-time students are entitled to expect from a higher education experience and who bears responsibility for delivering it. It's not about indulging student demands – but ensuring that higher education fulfills its essential purpose in a society that has fundamentally changed since our current structures were established.

GETTING A GRIP – THE CASE FOR GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

A reimagining of the student experience recognises that institutions receiving significant public funding through the student finance system must meet reasonable expectations of students who ultimately bear the cost through decades of loan repayments. The current system creates a misalignment where universities receive up front funding while students shoulder long-term debt, all with insufficient mechanisms to ensure institutions deliver experiences reflecting contemporary needs.

Just as consumer protection laws safeguard citizens in other markets, students deserve legal protections for their significant investment. Government must create a regulatory framework ensuring universities deliver on core entitlements – not as state interference but legitimate expectation-setting for institutions benefiting from public financial mechanisms. Cross-departmental coordination is also essential to address challenges extending beyond education including health, housing, and financial sustainability, ensuring students' rights are protected across all domains of public policy.

For decades, ministerial engagement with higher education has been dominated by market management and reactive responses to newspaper headlines about "low value" courses or grade inflation. This approach has created a regulatory architecture built around principles of choice, rules, information, and complaint – assuming consumer power and competition will naturally produce diversity and excellence. Students expect and deserve more comprehensive stewardship – not just oversight that punishes deviation, but a positive vision for what the system should deliver and how it should nurture students' potential to contribute to society.

The great paradox of recent ministerial approaches is that supposed autonomy and market-based policies have produced striking conformity rather than diversity. Institutions compete on the same metrics, chase the same rankings, and increasingly offer similar educational experiences. True stewardship requires encouraging genuine diversity – not just in institutional types but within degree structures themselves, enabling students to craft educational journeys that reflect their unique aspirations and society's diverse needs.

Research consistently shows that students regret the extreme subject specialisation that characterises UK higher education¹². The narrow focus contributes to the perception that graduates lack practical skills and workplace readiness¹³. Ministers should actively work to reverse this trend, encouraging more flexible, interdisciplinary approaches that maintain intellectual rigour while reducing graduate regret and enhancing adaptability. In a rapidly changing world, the ability to integrate knowledge from multiple domains is increasingly valuable, yet our system pushes students into narrower and narrower channels.

If we truly seek a level playing field, we must consider the whole student experience. Currently, socioeconomically advantaged students supplement their thinning curriculum with extensive extracurricular activities, internships, and networking opportunities – building cultural capital and social connections alongside their academic credentials. Meanwhile, disadvantaged students often receive just the curriculum while juggling work commitments and financial stress. Ministers must intervene with professional and statutory regulatory bodies to rebalance the system, prioritising breadth of access over depth of specialisation. In a mass higher education system, it's arguably more important that more students develop some understanding of chemistry, for example, than producing fewer chemistry specialists with exhaustive knowledge.

Government should establish clear minimum entitlements for all students as a condition of access to the subsidised loan book, while actively encouraging innovation and differentiation between providers and within courses. For instance, European initiatives now enable students to earn degrees by studying at multiple universities – a model that could inspire similar flexibility in the UK. Rather than treating autonomy as an excuse for neglect, ministers should use their influence to shape a more diverse, responsive system that better serves students' varied needs and aspirations.

Unlike many European counterparts, the UK lacks a Higher Education Council of stakeholders to advise ministers and the Department for Education on system change, priorities, and effectiveness measures. Such a body – comprising students, academics, employers, community representatives, and experts – could provide vital input without yielding to producer capture. By formalising stakeholder consultation, ministers would gain broader perspective while maintaining democratic accountability for final decisions.

¹² Dandridge, N. et al. (2025) The benefits of hindsight: Reconsidering higher education choices. <https://bpb-eu-w2.wpmucdn.com/blogs.bristol.ac.uk/dist/f/1210/files/2025/03/The-Benefits-of-Hindsight-Reconsidering-Higher-Education-Choices-2025-1.pdf>

¹³ Tew, Imogen. 2025. "Why the Odds Are Stacked against Today's University Graduates." *The Times*. The Sunday Times. May 17, 2025. <https://www.thetimes.com/business-money/money/article/why-the-odds-are-stacked-against-todays-university-graduates-6h5q39m27>

The current regulatory landscape is wildly complex, with responsibilities fragmented across multiple bodies and departments. A new Higher Education Council should advise government on streamlining this system, with ministers articulating clear priorities and universal entitlements required for access to the subsidised loan book. This would bring coherence to what has become an increasingly opaque regulatory thicket. To create a more effective system architecture, the following structure should be established:

- **Genuine ministerial stewardship with clear articulation of expectations**
- **A Higher Education Council with substantial student representation providing independent advice**
- **A cross-departmental unit in government that recognises the unique status, role and situation of full-time students across public policy**
- **A separate funding and corporate governance regulatory body**
- **A dedicated student interests regulator coordinating campus ombuds services**
- **A peer-based education quality assurance body similar to the former QAA model**
- **Required democratic structures and participation mechanisms *within* public providers**
- **A consistent focus on empowering students with rights and entitlements**

The approach would separate funding and corporate governance aspects of regulation from both education quality assurance and student rights protection. The latter should be entrusted to a retooled Office of the Independent Adjudicator that coordinates campus ombuds services (shared between institutions where providers are small) and broadens its policy development and enforcement work on student rights.

Above all, ministers should not fear setting out clear conditions for access to the publicly subsidised loan book. This isn't overreach, but the responsible exercise of stewardship over significant public investment and the interests of students who ultimately bear the financial burden of that investment. Establishing clear expectations while encouraging innovation within that framework means that ministers can shape a higher education system that delivers for students, employers, and society alike – replacing homogeneity with purposeful diversity, and bureaucratic compliance with genuine accountability.

A reimagining of the full-time student experience recognises that institutions receiving significant public funding through the student finance system must

meet reasonable expectations of students who ultimately bear the cost through decades of loan repayments. The current system creates a misalignment where universities receive upfront funding while students shoulder long-term debt, yet with insufficient mechanisms to ensure institutions deliver experiences reflecting contemporary needs.

Government must create a regulatory framework ensuring universities deliver on core entitlements – not as state interference but legitimate expectation-setting for institutions benefiting from public financial mechanisms. And cross-departmental coordination is essential to address challenges extending beyond education including health, housing, and financial sustainability, ensuring students' rights are protected across all domains of public policy.

We propose **ten foundational entitlements** that should form the universal **baseline of the full-time student experience** in the UK. These entitlements recognise both the changed realities facing today's students and the continuing importance of higher education as a transformative period of development and growth. They also represent aspects that should be universal, rather than left to providers to compete over. By enshrining these rights and establishing clear lines of accountability for their delivery, we can ensure the UK's higher education system maintains its global standing while better serving the needs of contemporary students.

- The right to get in – and support to get on
- The right to meaningful learning, not meaningless metrics
- The right to a liveable minimum income
- The right to earn while you learn (and learn while you earn)
- The right to safety – not to shrink, but to stretch
- The right to connect – and to contribute
- The right to community – not just curriculum
- The right to be well – because good health makes learning possible
- The right to power, not just provision
- The right to shared investment – with shared responsibility

A note on devolution: For brevity and clarity, this paper primarily references Westminster government departments, regulators in England (particularly the Office for Students), and the student finance system as it operates in England. However, the fundamental principles and entitlements outlined here are intended to apply UK-wide. While Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have their own distinct approaches to higher education funding, regulation, and student support – students across all four nations face similar challenges around housing affordability, employment pressures, mental health support, and meaningful representation. The ten entitlements proposed should be seen as universal rights that transcend the specific regulatory and funding mechanisms of each nation. Where implementation would differ due to devolved responsibilities, the core principle remains – all full-time students in the UK deserve these fundamental protections and opportunities, regardless of where they study.

1. THE RIGHT TO GET IN & THEN TO GET ON

Full-time students should have the right to structured, explicit guidance on the academic, social, and practical competencies necessary for success in higher education. Students should then have a legal right to structured transitions into higher education, with guarantees of support for academic, social and practical competencies development.

In the last decade, evidence suggests that more students aren't prepared when they arrive at university. They are more socially diverse, and more varied in their educational backgrounds.¹⁴ They're often recruited on potential rather than achievement,¹⁵ suggesting we need to help them convert that potential into achievement within our frameworks.

The environments they enrol into are much more complex than before – bigger, more impersonal, more expensive and more demanding. They might get a campus tour, or a timetable, or a library induction – but navigation is about confidence as much as it's about maps¹⁶. And the move to massification has made learning from mistakes harder. The pressure to get a First or a distinction is intense. Having space to get something wrong in formative assessment feels like a luxury if you're working 30 hours a week.

The solutions have typically been pre-course initiatives. International students arrive early. Summer schools exist for first-in-family students. Online interventions – on everything from sexual consent to academic integrity – are hurled at students in August before they start shopping for duvets¹⁷.

Some initiatives happen at the start of term. Welcome weeks are now so packed with induction activities that they're often more overwhelming than the socialising. The message is simple – you have seven days to make friends, learn about diversity, navigate the campus and buy books – and then you'll be “ready”¹⁸.

¹⁴ Lewis, Joe, and Paul Bolton. 2024. “Equality of Access and Outcomes in Higher Education in England.” Equality of Access and Outcomes in Higher Education in England 9195 (9195). <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9195/>

¹⁵ Universities UK. “Unlocking Potential: Contextual Admissions.” Universities UK. Accessed May 5, 2025. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/creating-voice-our-members/campaigns/access-success/unlock-potential-contextual-admissions>

¹⁶ Dickinson, J. (2023). In at the deep end: why universities need to rethink student readiness. [online] Wonkhe. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/in-at-the-deep-end-why-universities-need-to-invest-in-student-readiness/>

¹⁷ Dickinson, J. (2023). PSHE in HE is here. It's time to implement it properly. [online] Wonkhe. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/pshe-in-he-is-here-its-time-to-implement-it-properly/>

¹⁸ Dickinson, J. (2024). Students need to know the secret codes to success at university. [online] Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/students-need-to-know-the-secret-codes-to-success-at-university/>

Yet thousands still won't be – especially if they are first in family, entered through Clearing, are from another country, or in any other way deviate from the mythical "normal" student that even diverse campuses default to. When we survey them at the end of their course through the National Student Survey (NSS), in part universities and students learn what they needed when it's too late to do anything about it.

Across the Atlantic, universities long ago recognised this challenge. In the US, universities require or recommend new student modules – often semester-long and covering everything from campus tours to group work, diversity classes and consent education. Real time and space is made for nurture – for students to discover and make connections, to navigate complexity and build the social capital they need to thrive.

There are many UK and European initiatives reframing the first year as formative. But they're often piecemeal, poorly funded, subject-specific, or hobbyist in nature, colliding with traditional academic structures developed in a different era.

We need a step change – dedicating significant portions of first year time, budget and credit to provide support for inexperienced students to realise their potential. Five aspects can make this work:

First, we need **student attribute frameworks** that integrate the knowledge, understanding and skills enabling success at university. These should reveal the secrets typically passed through families with higher education history. This goes beyond mere transition – students need to become something new. Second, incoming students should reflect on **where they stand relative to this framework**. A national pre-arrival questionnaire¹⁹ and local peer-interview would help course leaders understand their cohort and prompt students to plan their development.

Third, developing against this framework should be **credit-bearing**, with portfolio submission at the end of first year or first term for postgraduates. Fourth, supporting student success should be a **community effort** involving professional services, students' unions, community partners and alumni. Students should see aspects of their development as self-directed discovery, potentially supported by apps, badges or gamification.

Finally, some aspects should be **tested**. If we're serious about consent, diversity, or academic integrity, we need minimum standards. Just as one can

¹⁹ Morgan, Michelle. 2025. "The Power of Pre-Arrival Student Questionnaires." Wonkhe. October 4, 2025. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-power-of-pre-arrival-student-questionnaires/>

fail a driving test or employment probation, it should be possible to fail at being a student – but with the benefit that fewer would then fail to continue, complete or progress.

This approach would help all students develop social capital – links with similar people, links with different people, and links with institutions and communities that foster good citizenship.

A student attributes framework would create a fairer level playing field. It's true that some students know the secret codes to success and have resources to deploy them. But while it's important for international students to learn idioms and first-in-family students to know the value of societies, it's equally important that “traditional” students open their minds to others rather than expecting others to become like them.

All students should have the statutory right to a comprehensive student tutoring scheme, funded through combined government, public health and community resources. These structured programs – facilitated by students' unions with dedicated funding – pair continuing students with new students before term begins, providing academic mentoring, social integration, and wellbeing support throughout the crucial first semester.

These proven schemes improve belonging, retention, and outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged students. Beyond orientation, they offer an efficient vehicle for delivering developmental content through trusted peer relationships rather than fragmented institutional initiatives. Universities must be legally required to resource these schemes, while SUs should be empowered to coordinate training and ensure diverse tutor recruitment.

A reformed entry system should include a national entrance exam covering essential PSHE competencies alongside academic requirements. This would be paired with an end-of-first-semester assessment of fundamental “I'm a student” skills – from academic integrity to time management.

Students failing this assessment would have their first semester's tuition debt cancelled and receive guidance on alternatives, creating both consumer protection and accountability for universities to properly support transition. This approach ensures clearer expectations, better onboarding investment, and prevents unsuitable candidates from accumulating debt for educational experiences they aren't prepared to navigate.

For this entitlement to become reality, students need:

Structured, credit-bearing transitions into university life, with pre-arrival surveys, self-assessment tools, sufficient curriculum time, and portfolio submissions at the end of first year – backed by a legal right to guaranteed support for academic, social, and practical competencies.

National standards and assessments including a PSHE-based entrance exam, minimum standards testing (e.g. consent, diversity, academic integrity), and end-of-semester evaluations – with debt cancellation protections for students not yet ready.

Comprehensive student success frameworks that integrate knowledge, understanding, and essential skills, clearly aligned with institutional expectations and embedded into the first-year journey.

Community-supported success models involving students' unions, professional services, alumni, and local partners working collaboratively to support the student journey.

Statutory entitlement to and investment in peer-led support, including fully funded tutoring schemes facilitated by students' unions to ensure academic equity and mutual empowerment.

Government should establish a statutory framework for student transitions that guarantees every student access to structured onboarding programs with dedicated curriculum time. This should include national standards for transition support, legal protection for students who discover higher education isn't right for them, and specific funding for peer mentoring schemes. Universities must be required by law to properly resource these transition programs, with outcomes monitored through retention and progression metrics focused on students from diverse backgrounds.

2. The right to meaningful learning, not meaningless metrics

Full-time students should have the right to an education that prepares them for a rapidly evolving world, focusing on skills that AI cannot replace while ensuring assessment authenticity and meaningful skills development. The future of higher education depends on nurturing distinctly human capabilities – critical thinking, ethical judgment, and collaborative innovation – rather than competing with machines at tasks they increasingly do better than we do.

One of the things that became very clear as soon as OpenAI launched ChatGPT was that the way higher education tends to assess students is doomed. The asynchronous assessment of digital assets – produced without supervision – as a way of assessing students' learning will never again be reliable. There's no way to prove they made it, and even if they did, it's increasingly clear that it doesn't necessarily signal that they've learned anything when they did²⁰.

Even if universities could prove that students made it, the world – the public, employers, parents, professional accreditation bodies – won't believe it. And if the technology continues to develop at the pace that it is, the uncomfortable truth is that knowledge synthesis and writing may well come to be seen like plate spinning, glass blowing or weaving – interesting specialist skills that neither students nor the public are willing to underwrite 50 per cent of the population to learn.

To the extent to which a “position” on AI has been settling in higher education, universities are keen to stress that AI is the future and keen to embrace it for all sorts of good reasons, albeit tempered by some ethical concerns.²¹ They are also keen to rule out some usage of AI where it allows a student to pretend that they have learned something or mastered a skill when they haven't. There is a clear sense, for the time being at least, that assessment still matters and that it is important for universities to move towards more authentic forms of assessment.

On the “embrace” question, there are important issues surrounding staff development, subject practice and differential levels of access to subscription-based tools. But capacity to keep up is not evenly distributed

²⁰ Dickinson, J. (2024). There's no point comforting ourselves over AI and cheating when we don't know what cheating is. [online] Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/wonk-corner/theres-no-point-comforting-ourselves-over-ai-and-cheating-when-we-dont-know-what-cheating-is/>

²¹ Williams, Shannon. 2023. “UK Academia Divided over Role & Ethics of AI Technologies.” IT Brief UK. November 14, 2023. <https://itbrief.co.uk/story/uk-academia-divided-over-role-ethics-of-ai-technologies>

between students, academic staff or universities. On the “detection” question, those that intend to cheat when producing a digital asset can do so with complete impunity. Detection tools for flagging AI-produced content or verifying identity during remote assessment are either unreliable or produce “false flags” in ways that are unacceptably discriminatory in a system funded by international students.²²

On authentic assessment, it is clear that this is easier in some subject areas than others. The prevailing economic model of higher education – involving cross-subsidies from mass participation in “cheap to teach” subjects – prevents authentic assessment where the staff-student ratio is high. The uncomfortable truth is that if universities must persist with assessing and grading students, they’ll need to shift to supervising students’ production of things and/or engaging with them synchronously. And as a result, given the time and resources available to students and staff, they’ll almost certainly need to do less of it.

But the bigger issue isn’t that assessment won’t work or that our meaning of cheating will change. It’s that if synthesising, processing and summarising existing information is now easily automated, it rips the heart out of almost every undergraduate degree – because it develops skills that society may no longer need.

Surveys suggest students do not understand what AI tools they are allowed to use – not least because guidelines change regularly and may differ between courses.²³ A particular issue concerns tools that assist with cognitive processes before writing begins. If a student automates all research, analysis and critique – but then writes a paper by “electronic” hand – they may only have “learned” how to write, which is one academic skill that vanishingly few people will need to personally master in the future.

The “meritocracy of difficulty” describes a system where academic value is tied to how hard a course is to survive – with dense content, heavy workloads, and high-stakes assessment used to filter rather than support students. Moving away from this model doesn’t mean making things easier, but making success more achievable and meaningful.

That includes reducing reliance on final exams, allowing more than one attempt at summative assessments, and expanding the use of pass/fail credit to encourage risk-taking and focus on learning rather than gaming grades. The aim should be to support deeper engagement, not lower expectations – and

²² Dickinson, Jim. 2023. “It Looks like You’re Writing a Disciplinary Letter. Would You like Help?” Wonkhe. July 12, 2023.

<https://wonkhe.com/wonk-corner/it-looks-like-youre-writing-a-disciplinary-letter-would-you-like-help/>

²³ Freeman, Josh. 2025. “Student Generative AI Survey 2025.” <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/HEPI-Kortext-Student-Generative-AI-Survey-2025.pdf>

to shift from a system that rewards endurance to one that enables progress, with release valves for the build up of academic pressure.

There is a clear and urgent need for all higher education providers to be mandated to systematically assess the actual workload of modules and programmes against the credit system's expectations. The current system assumes 20 hours of study per ECTS credit (200 hours per 10-credit module), yet students report studying only 24.2 hours per week total - a dramatic shortfall from the expected 35-40 hours²⁴.

The disconnect between theoretical credit allocations and lived reality is contributing to academic pressure, mental health crises, and potentially fraudulent credentialing²⁵. Providers should be required to conduct regular workload audits that capture not just contact hours and assignments, but the actual time students spend on all academic activities including commuting, assessment preparation, and independent study – and should particularly examine assessment clustering, the cumulative impact of "continuous assessment," and how workload varies by student characteristics and circumstances.

The UK's narrow specialisation model contrasts sharply with European approaches that balance disciplinary foundations with significant credit for interdisciplinary exploration and transferable skills. These systems explicitly recognise that becoming a student itself requires dedicated learning time, allocating credit for study planning, digital capabilities, and communication development.

The current degree classification system was designed for an elite era where classification signaled that the graduate was better than other people. In a mass system, we should clearly describe the contribution graduates can make to the world rather than signaling how they're "better". This shift would also reduce the mental health impacts of students' panic about "standing out".

Rather than hundreds of marketed programmes with shrinking actual choice, a system with fewer degree titles but greater internal flexibility would produce graduates with both depth and breadth. Students deserve credit-bearing interdisciplinary learning that creates truly rounded graduates without depending on extracurricular activities inaccessible to many, better preparing them for complex careers while reducing educational regret.

²⁴ Hepi (2024) Student Academic Experience Survey 2025 - HEPI. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/reports-publications-and-resources/student-academic-experience-survey-saes>

²⁵ Dickinson, J. (2025). Our drop-out and pace miracle is harming students' health and learning. [online] Wonkhe. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/our-drop-out-and-pace-miracle-is-harming-students-health-and-learning/>

For this entitlement to become reality, students need:

Future-facing curricula and assessment, with inquiry-driven learning, pass/fail options to support risk-taking, multiple assessment attempts, and time-efficient methods that reflect real-world skills, support working students, and reduce compliance-led approaches.

Academic integrity and AI use, with institution-wide policies co-created with students, ethical AI literacy embedded in teaching, clear guidance on acceptable AI use, and rejection of flawed AI detection tools.

Flexible, interdisciplinary degree structures, enabling students to explore across disciplines, shift specialisations later, and earn credit for project-based, cross-cutting learning that builds truly rounded graduates.

Modernised recognition of achievement, moving beyond outdated grading systems towards competency-based transcripts that better reflect diverse strengths and deeper learning.

Student-centred programme design, with formal student roles in shaping education, programmes that account for time pressures, and continuous curriculum updates that respond to developments in AI and pedagogy.

Additionally, students must be guaranteed **participation in curriculum design** and review bodies. This includes the right to **flexible and interdisciplinary study**, as well as the ability to **switch supervisors** and **specialise later** in their degree. Universities should be required to implement **compulsory student module evaluations** with **visible actions** based on feedback. **Flexibility in assessment methods** and rights to **multiple attempts** should be standard, with protection against **academic discrimination**.

Governments should **approve a shorter and broader list of degree subjects** that students can study, with **providers mandated to offer flexibility in credit acquisition** within those areas, across subject areas and between providers. It should mandate **graduate attributes-based systems**, with **enhanced transcripts** that reflect students' **skills and competencies** rather than traditional classifications, and a target date for the **abolition of the UK degree classification system**.

3. The right to a liveable minimum income

Full-time students should have the right to financial support that enables full participation in higher education without excessive debt or in-study poverty. The current student finance system fails to reflect contemporary realities. Its complexity hinders opportunity, its inadequacy is choking human capital development, and its immediate impacts have normalised food banks on campus – real poverty that universities neither can nor should alleviate with other students' fees and debt.

In early 2025 on Wonkhe.com, our contributors highlighted an obvious injustice. Universal Credit (UC) reduces by 55p for every £1 earned as income – unless you're one of the few students entitled to UC, where instead it is reduced by £1 for every £1 you are loaned for maintenance.²⁶ When UC was introduced, income disregards for books, equipment and travel were rolled into a single figure of £110 a month. Taper rates were introduced to prevent “benefit traps” – and have gone from 65p initially to 55p now. But for students, there's never been a taper rate – and that £110 for the costs of books, equipment and travel hasn't been uprated in over 13 years.

And when, in July 2025, the Westminster government debated changes to the Welfare system, neither the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) nor the Department for Education (DfE) could identify how many students would be affected by the proposals to tighten access to Personal Independence Payments (PIP)²⁷.

The student finance system in England is full of these problems – probably the most vexing being the parental earnings threshold over which the system expects parents to top up to the maximum. It's been set at £25,000 since 2008 – despite significant growth in nominal earnings across the economy. The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that if the threshold had been uprated since 2008, it would now be around £36,500 (46 per cent higher) in 2023–24.²⁸

²⁶ Moss, Antony. 2025. “Why Do We Punish Low-Income Students for Entering Education?” Wonkhe. October 3, 2025. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/why-do-we-punish-low-income-students-for-entering-education/>

²⁷ Dickinson, J. (2025). Guess how many students will be hit by Welfare reforms. You'll have to - the government doesn't know. [online] Wonkhe. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/wonk-corner/guess-how-many-students-will-be-hit-by-welfare-reforms-youll-have-to-the-government-doesnt-know/>

²⁸ Ogden, Kate, and Ben Waltmann. 2023. “Student Loans in England Explained and Options for Reform.” Institute for Fiscal Studies. July 20, 2023. <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/student-loans-england-explained-and-options-reform>

In 2007, it was estimated that a third of English students would get the maximum maintenance package.²⁹ We're now down to about one in five.³⁰ The maximums available have failed to increase by inflation – especially during the post-pandemic cost of living spikes. It's a particular issue for the “squeezed middle” – families earning £25,000 in 2007 now have £4,000 more a year to find in today's money.³¹

The means test doesn't actually work. The system assumes all 18-24-year-olds are dependent unless they meet rigid criteria – like proving total estrangement for a year.³² It ignores complex family dynamics, counting absent parents' income while factoring in step-parents regardless of actual support. The result is students trapped between unaffordable loans and unwilling parents.

How much should students get? Over twenty years ago, Charles Clarke established two policy principles on maintenance.³³ The first was aspiring to make maintenance loans no longer means tested, available in full to all full-time undergraduates – treating students as financially independent from 18. That was never achieved*.³⁴

Having received results from the Student Income and Expenditure Survey (SIES), Clarke's second big announcement was that from September 2006, maintenance loans would be raised to the median level of students' basic living costs:

“The principle of the decision will ensure that students have enough money to meet their basic living costs while studying.

If we look at the last DfE-commissioned SIES – run in 2021 for the first time in eight years – median living and participation costs for full-time students were £15,561,³⁵ so would be £18,888 today if we used the Consumer Prices Index (CPI). The maximum maintenance loan today is £10,227.

²⁹ Lipsett, Anthea. 2007. “More Students to Receive Financial Help.” The Guardian. The Guardian. July 5, 2007. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2007/jul/05/highereducation.studentfinance>

³⁰ “Statistics at SLC.” n.d. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/student-loans-company/about/statistics>

³¹ Dickinson, Jim. 2024. “The Poverty Gap between Students and the Universities They Attend Is Getting Wider.” Wonkhe. September 29, 2024. <https://wonkhe.com/wonk-corner/the-poverty-gap-between-students-and-the-universities-they-attend-is-getting-wider/>

³² Bland, Becca. 2018. “Family Means-Testing for Student Loans Is Not Working.” Wonkhe. September 19, 2018. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/family-means-testing-for-student-loans-is-not-working/>

³³ “House of Commons Hansard Debates for 8 Jan 2004 (Pt 11).” 2025. Parliament.uk. 2025.

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmhansrd/vo040108/debtext/40108-11.htm>

³⁴ “– unless you count its implementation in the Diamond review in Wales twelve years later: Welsh Government Response to the Recommendations from the Review of Student Support and Higher Education Funding in Wales (‘the Diamond Review’) Background to the Review.” n.d. Accessed May 5, 2025. <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-02/response-to-the-recommendations-from-the-review-of-student-support-and-higher-education-funding-in-wales.pdf>

³⁵ “Student Income and Expenditure Survey: 2021 to 2022.” n.d. GOV.UK.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/student-income-and-expenditure-survey-2021-to-2022>

The third policy principle that tends to emerge from student finance reviews – in Scotland, Wales and Phillip Augar’s Post-18 review of education and funding in England – is that the value of student financial support should be linked to the minimum wage.³⁶ Augar argued that students ought to expect to combine earning with learning – suggesting full-time students should be unable to work for 37.5 hours a week during term time, and should therefore be loaned the difference (with a parental contribution and assuming PT work is possible for all students, which it plainly isn’t).

As of September, the National Living Wage at 37.5 hours a week x 30 weeks will be £13,376 – some £2,832 more than most students will be able to borrow, and more even than students in London will be able to borrow.

Augar thought someone ought to look at London weighting – calling it a “subject worthy of further enquiry.” Given that the last government failed to even respond to his chapter on maintenance, no such work has been carried out – leaving the uprating of the basic for London (+25 per cent) and the downrating for those living at home (-20 per cent) at the same level as in the 1997 regulations.³⁷

Things are worse for postgraduates. Not only does a loan originally designed to cover both now go nowhere near the cost of tuition and maintenance, the DWP still pretends that thirty per cent of the loan should be treated as maintenance “income” for benefits calculations. To put that into context – thirty per cent of the current master’s loan of £12,471 is £3,741. 90 credits represents 1800 notional hours spent studying rather than participating in the labour market. The maintenance component is worth £2.08 an hour – the loan is £16,851 short on maintenance alone for a year with less vacation time.³⁸

Carer’s Allowance is available if you provide at least 35 hours of care a week – as long as you’re not a full-time student. Free childcare for children under fives? Only if you’re not a full-time student. Most Covid support? Full-time students excluded.

When ministers outside of DfE give answers on this, they tell MPs that “the principle” is that the benefits system does not normally support full-time students, and that instead, “they are supported by the educational

³⁶ Dickinson, Jim. 2025. “A Proper Review of Student Maintenance Is Now Long Overdue.” Wonkhe. October 3, 2025. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/a-proper-review-of-student-maintenance-is-now-long-overdue/>

³⁷ “The Education (Student Loans) Regulations 1997.” 2025. Legislation.gov.uk. 2025. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1997/1675/contents/made>

³⁸ Dickinson, Jim. 2024. “Student Financial Support for PGT Is a Forgotten, Inadequate Mess.” Wonkhe. 2024. <https://wonkhe.com/wonk-corner/student-financial-support-for-pgt-is-a-forgotten-inadequate-mess/>

maintenance system.”³⁹ What DWP ministers really mean is thank God our department doesn't have to find money for them too. Even our understanding of student poverty is patchy – official government figures count tuition fee loans as income, distorting our understanding of their position at every fiscal event⁴⁰.

Back in 2004, as part of concessions to get top-up fees through, Clarke announced fee remission at around £1,200, a “Higher Education grant” of £1,500 for those from poorer backgrounds, and required universities to offer bursaries to students from the poorest backgrounds⁴¹. By the end of the decade, universities were spending almost £200 million on financial support for students from lower income backgrounds – with more than 70 per cent for those with a household income below £17,910. By 2020–21, that had doubled to £406m.⁴²

This shouldn't be beyond the sector. HEPI's Minimum Income Standard for Students work (developed by the Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough) moved the debate from calling for an increase to maintenance to establishing what students actually need to have their basic needs met.⁴³ The methodology is similar to that used for the Living Wage – which Labour has committed to shifting the statutory minimum wage toward. It's no good calling for an inflationary increase to maintenance loans if we're not sure whether the amount we're increasing from is enough. And the hauntingly modest basket of goods, services and costs that students call for in HEPI's report shows it manifestly isn't.

Part of the answer lies in a reimagining of the purpose of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) to serve existing full-time students rather than focusing solely on adult learners seeking additional skills through “single module” provision. The current system rigidly defines “full-time” study as 120 credits per year, creating unnecessary barriers for students facing real-life challenges – whether caring responsibilities, financial pressures, disability accommodations, or mental health support needs. A shift is crucial because the current inflexibility forces students to either “drop out” or “struggle on” when life circumstances change, whereas a more flexible system would better support student success and potentially improve labour market outcomes⁴⁴.

³⁹ “Written Questions and Answers - Written Questions, Answers and Statements - UK Parliament.” 2024. Parliament.uk. 2024. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-10-11/8727>.

⁴⁰ Dickinson, J. (2022). For many students isn't it all about the money? [online] Wonkhe. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/for-many-students-isnt-it-all-about-the-money>

⁴¹ Curtis, Polly. 2004. “Clarke Tops Fees with Concessions.” The Guardian. The Guardian. January 8, 2004. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2004/jan/08/highereducation.uk>

⁴² Dickinson, Jim. 2025. “A Proper Review of Student Maintenance Is Now Long Overdue.” Wonkhe. October 3, 2025. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/a-proper-review-of-student-maintenance-is-now-long-overdue/>

⁴³ Hill, Katherine, Matt Padley, and Josh Freeman. 2024. “A Minimum Income Standard for Students.” <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/A-Minimum-Income-Standard-for-Students-2.pdf>

⁴⁴ Dickinson, J. (2024). Students want more flexibility. Here's some tweaks to deliver it. [online] Wonkhe. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/wonk-corner/students-want-more-flexibility-heres-some-tweaks-to-deliver-it>

Affordability requires a whole-government approach beyond education alone. The government must establish formal cross-departmental duties to reduce essential costs for students – including subsidised public transport, reduced utilities, healthcare access, and digital connectivity. European models demonstrate this through comprehensive national student discount systems that recognise both economic vulnerability and societal contribution. Each department must incorporate student affordability metrics into its planning with clear accountability measures, acknowledging that student poverty cannot be solved through loans alone but requires coordinated intervention across all public services.

Governments should pass legislation establishing a **Minimum Income Standard for Students**, based on methodologies similar to those used for the **Living Wage**. This should include legal requirements for universities to publish all study costs transparently and **emergency hardship funding based on demonstrated need**. Additionally, all students deserve **legal protections** against **financial vulnerability**, particularly during times of **institutional change or restructuring**.

For this entitlement to become reality, students need:

Maintenance support that meets real needs, including an entitlement to “full time” student maintenance support at 30 credits or more per year, aligning loans with actual living costs via the minimum wage, raising the parental income threshold to at least £36,500, and reforming means-testing to reflect real family circumstances.

A detailed review of the relationship between devolved education funding systems, the reserved Welfare system and institutional support, such as applying the Universal Credit 55p taper rate to maintenance loans, supporting student parents and carers, accounting for London and commuter costs, and extending crisis and hardship funding to international students.

Improved and protected funding, with increased postgraduate maintenance support, reform of PG loan treatment in the benefits system, and ringfenced hardship funds, bursaries, and emergency grants as core widening participation tools.

Better data and joined-up policy, through annual Student Income and Expenditure Surveys (SIES), cross-departmental coordination, and strong protections for students during cost-of-living crises.

Transparent and empowering approaches, including mandatory programme-level disclosure of participation costs, universal access to financial literacy and debt advice, and a duty on all providers and government departments to demonstrate the steps they are taking to reduce the costs of participation in study.

4. *The right to earn while you learn (and learn while you earn)*

Full-time students should have the right to educational structures that acknowledge and accommodate the reality of part-time work alongside full-time study.

Right across Europe, economic growth has been slowing – down to zero in real terms.⁴⁵ And that means that just as in the UK, massified higher education systems have been enjoying strong demand for participation, but little support from taxpayers to pay for that participation. As birth rates decline, and populations age, the need to increase spending on health and the need to generate economic output from the young is increasing.

Controversies over significant cuts to higher education in France⁴⁶ and the Netherlands⁴⁷ are the latest in a line of countries tightening their spend on tertiary education, as governments demand more efficiency from the systems they have. But those efficiency demands are not restricted to universities. Increasingly, efficiency is being demanded of students themselves. Eurostudent shows the volume of “full-time” students working during term-time is on the increase almost everywhere.

This year's HEPI/Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) told us that two thirds of full-time (undergraduate) students are now working,⁴⁸ spending on average nearly two days a week doing so, and when combined with time spent on study, students with jobs are averaging 50 hours working and studying – far more than the 36.6 hours that the ONS says adults are working for in the population in general.⁴⁹

That two thirds of students report they work to pay for essential bills reminds us that we are some distance from the cliché of students working to earn extra for leisure – the vast majority are working to live.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Bank, European Central. 2024. “Eurosysteem Staff Macroeconomic Projections for the Euro Area, December 2024.” European Central Bank, December. <https://doi.org/10.2866/04939>

⁴⁶ “French Universities Join ‘Day of Mobilisation’ against Budget.” 2024. Times Higher Education (THE). December 3, 2024. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/french-universities-join-day-mobilisation-against-budget>

⁴⁷ Sokolova, Tetiana. 2024. “Netherlands Faces Backlash over Higher Education Budget Cuts.” <https://www.educations.com>. December 3, 2024. <https://www.educations.com/higher-education-news/netherlands-faces-backlash-over-higher-education-budget-cuts>

⁴⁸ Hefi (2025) Student Academic Experience Survey 2025 - HEPI. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/reports-publications-and-resources/student-academic-experience-survey-saes>

⁴⁹ Office for National Statistics. 2024. “Average Actual Weekly Hours of Work for Full-Time Workers (Seasonally Adjusted) - Office for National Statistics.” [ons.gov.uk](https://www.ons.gov.uk), March 12, 2024

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/timeseries/ybuy/lms>

⁵⁰ Dickinson, Jim. 2024. “Latest from Belong – Students Are Earning, but What Are We Learning?” Wonkhe. December 9, 2024. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/latest-from-belong-students-are-earning-but-what-are-we-learning/>

The widely recommended volume of hours over which every major study suggests that health and outcomes suffer is 15 hours – in previous waves of survey work we have found that for home domiciled students, 27 per cent of those from the more advantaged social class groups ABC1 with a job were working over that limit, while 71 per cent of those from less advantaged/working class C2DE backgrounds were doing so.⁵¹

But hours spent at work and on independent study don't account for the time spent travelling to work. In our sample, almost one in five home students have a 60+ minutes travel to work time from campus, rising to 27 per cent of international students.⁵² Home to work travel time is shorter – but it is no wonder universities and SUs are reporting that they are struggling to get students to come to campus. Their homes and their workplaces are increasingly distant.

Increasingly, it is clear that students – both home and international – are supplying large volumes of labour in industries which do not only serve other students, but rather care for and feed the population as a whole. And more broadly, while we used to think of full-time students joining the labour market upon graduation, it is increasingly clear that students are already in it, and make up a significant proportion of it in some industries.

A minority of students have found the job they are doing via a university or SU service, with the majority relying on web searches or friends and family, a resource which is not evenly distributed between the diversity of students on campus. In our sample, almost half of students are on a zero-hours contract, a figure which should worry both universities and ministers, given the centrality of the role that student work plays in helping to fund students' participation.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, while some students do seek to reduce their expenditure when they hit a financial problem, the most popular response on the income side was to seek to work longer hours, with a large proportion of students seeking to find a second job. Both will have impacts on health and study.

As well as the established impacts on outcomes, this volume of work takes its toll on students personally. In our sample three in ten students said their work was “very” physically tiring, while more than three in ten say the same in terms of emotional/mental impact. Those impacts differ by industry. Across health and social care, retail, hospitality, manufacturing and food processing, work is “very” physically tiring for over a third of students – falling to below 10 per

⁵¹ Dickinson, Jim. 2024 “Students Can’t Get No Sleep.” n.d. Wonkhe. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/students-cant-get-no-sleep/>

⁵² Dickinson, Jim. 2024. “Latest from Belong – Students Are Earning, but What Are We Learning?” Wonkhe. December 9, 2024. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/latest-from-belong-students-are-earning-but-what-are-we-learning/>

cent for other roles. And the more mentally tiring students said their work was, the worse their mental health scores.⁵³

But it is the interrelationship with their studies that is most stark. We asked students about the extent to which it all “hangs together” by asking them to reflect on the extent to which their timetable, the academic demands of the course and their wider expectations with student life are compatible with being at work. The levels of disagreement should worry policymakers at all levels.

Universities should acknowledge what the evidence clearly shows – the full-time student model is collapsing as financial necessity forces students to work substantial hours alongside study. Rather than clinging to outdated assumptions about unlimited student availability, higher education must adapt to this reality through better timetabling, more flexible assessment, and integration of paid work into the curriculum.

Then when looking for graduate work, plenty of universities have attempted to “embed” employability, attributes and skills into the curriculum – with varied results and enthusiasm from students and staff. The mistake is to assume that a student will be able to demonstrate the full range of skills and competencies via the academic curriculum – few employers are impressed by a student who has “led a team” when writing a project report, or by undertaking an employability module. It is making space in the credit system to recognise what we used to think of as “extra curricular” that allows students to shine.

⁵³ Dickinson, Jim. 2024. “Latest from Belong – Students Are Earning, but What Are We Learning?” Wonkhe. December 9, 2024. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/latest-from-belong-students-are-earning-but-what-are-we-learning/>

For this entitlement to become reality, students need:

Work integrated into education, with credit for work-based learning, volunteering, and internships; every undergraduate and postgraduate taught programme required to offer a guaranteed, credit-bearing placement within the ECTS framework.

Fair, meaningful, and student-centred jobs, with all universities required to offer substantial structured, on-campus employment that includes proper induction, career progression, guaranteed hours, and prioritises student wellbeing – reducing reliance on exploitative external agencies.

Statutory frameworks and protections, including legal rights tailored for student workers, fair tax treatment, flexible attendance and assessment adjustments, and required institutional strategies co-developed with SUs to expand access to fair, affordable work.

Supportive conditions for working students, through transport subsidies, extended study space hours, digital access to course content, and course timetabling that recognises the reality of students' work patterns.

Accessible career development, including a shift away from employability in the *curriculum* towards employability in the *credit system*, paid, non-exploitative placements (especially in public services), guaranteed access to job fairs, employer networks, and career-focused workshops that build skills and open doors.

Governments should legislate for a **student employment framework** that protects, promotes, and properly values student work – mandating **fair hours**, guaranteed **shift notice**, and equal access to **employment rights** for those on **zero-hours and flexible contracts**. It should require all universities to deliver **student employment strategies**, co-designed with SUs, that include access to credit-bearing work-based learning, paid placements, and on-campus jobs that support wellbeing.

Governments should also introduce a UK-wide **Student Worker Status** with accompanying rights to **modified assessments**, flexible **attendance**, and **fair tax treatment**. Fund universities to embed employment into curricula, and mandate that all undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes offer structured, credit-bearing internships. And it should establish a **statutory duty** on **universities** and **SUs** to ensure every student can access **safe, meaningful, and fairly paid work** while they study – recognising work not as a distraction from learning, but as a crucial complement to it.

5. The right to safety – not to shrink, but to stretch

Full-time students should have the right to comprehensive safeguarding that protects their physical, mental, financial, and academic wellbeing throughout their university experience. The current approach to student safeguarding lacks integration, coordination, and clear accountabilities. Generation Z sees no contradiction in expecting structures of support without infantilisation. Universities' failure to define their safeguarding role leads to unmet expectations and erodes trust.

We have seen a pattern emerged around safeguarding, from academics working with schoolchildren, to students reporting campus safety concerns (spiking, racism, poor accommodation), to pedagogical responses affecting student anxiety, to sexual harassment and exploitative relationships.

All these diverse issues represent facets of student safeguarding, raising fundamental questions about universities' roles, duties and powers. The pattern reveals how these seemingly separate concerns actually form part of an interconnected responsibility framework that requires systematic, rather than piecemeal, approaches to prioritising, preventing, managing and mitigating risks to student wellbeing across university life.

There is an unhelpful narrative surrounding “safety” on campus. Generational differences around “emotional safety” create conflict. Too often, university is characterised as an “adult” environment that should somehow be dangerous, while students clamor for safety – as if it's that simple. Until something bad happens, when those calling for university to be “dangerous” suddenly revert to panicked parent mode and demand infantilisation of students.

Beyond these characterisations, we need to evolve a more sophisticated understanding of “safety” as a reasonable expectation of an environment, based on proper risk assessment, that's probably a precursor for learning.

In 2023, the Charity Commission updated its guidance on safeguarding people who come into contact with charities.⁵⁴ It requires charities to take reasonable steps to protect from harm people who come into contact with them, holds trustees accountable when things go wrong, and expects them to assess and manage risks to people – not just to buildings, finances, reputation or recruitment.

⁵⁴ The Charity Commission. 2017. “Safeguarding and Protecting People for Charities and Trustees.” GOV.UK. December 6, 2017. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safeguarding-duties-for-charity-trustees>

At least in England, the Office for Students acts as the “principal regulator” of universities as charities – the assumption in England being that OfS’ powers overlap sufficiently to safely downgrade the Charity Commission’s direct role. But that assumption is problematic. OfS rarely talks about safety or safeguarding in this strategic way, and within universities there’s nothing like the level of coordination and sophistication seen in big national charities.

Put simply, students don’t know what they can expect their university to do to keep them safe. And not only does that mean they can’t hold them accountable if they don’t, remember – the enemy of satisfaction is unmet expectations.

Universities should be required to demonstrate that in developing and implementing policies, procedures and practice, they have given due regard to relevant guidance about protecting people from harm. It would involve developing a strategic assessment based on the students and staff at that provider, gathering feedback and statistics, making the issue everyone’s problem, focusing on those most vulnerable, and debating carefully where safety stops and reasonable risk starts.

In Universities UK’s guidance on information sharing when there are serious concerns about student safety or mental health, the sector has finally cracked an appropriate approach to deciding whether to contact families or trusted contacts.⁵⁵ If anything, the gap in the guidance is defining what constitutes a “serious concern” or how to notice one.

While a university might engage in policy definitions and training, a department with a 1:35 student staff ratio (SSR) needs more focus on this than one with 1:5. There will be different levels of competence and willingness to engage, and different student characteristics on different programs to consider. Certain settings or activities will need more effort to notice and respond appropriately. We should think about risk.

Similarly with harassment or sexual misconduct, cases like that of the UCL Bartlett School of Architecture case show that not all parts of a student body will feel equally able to raise concerns.⁵⁶ Where abuse is harder to challenge and easier to cover up, there should be more focus on building victims’ confidence to take action than in areas where a simple poster campaign

⁵⁵ “Universities to Involve Trusted Contacts When There Are Serious Concerns about a Student’s Safety or Mental Health.” n.d. Universities UK. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/creating-voice-our-members/media-releases/universities-involve-trusted-contacts>

⁵⁶ UCL. 2022. “UCL Apologises and Takes Action Following Investigation into the Bartlett School of Architecture.” UCL News. June 9, 2022. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2022/jun/ucl-apologises-and-takes-action-following-investigation-bartlett-school-architecture>

might suffice. And if research shows particular communities are less likely to report, there should be bespoke approaches with specific theories of change.

For many, a "duty of care" conjures up a problematic image of a university "looking after" adults. There are often cries from the sector that in complex cases in which a student comes to harm there is insufficient focus on NHS failings. But blame and accountability aren't a simple binary.⁵⁷

Under common law, employers' duty of care means they must take all reasonably practical steps to ensure the health, safety, and wellbeing of employees so as not to expose them to unnecessary risk. This duty extends to physical and mental health. The law isn't prescriptive – the specific steps required will be defined by what is reasonable in those circumstances.⁵⁸

While we regulate the corporate conduct of providers of teaching and student support, and have various mechanisms that regulate what they provide, we don't actually regulate teachers from a professional standards perspective. Increasingly, that represents a major problem.

The debates on regulation of the university teaching profession have naturally tended towards the teaching itself rather than the relationship between teachers (and other student support professionals) and students. The 2001 "Students at the Heart of the System" White Paper called for national professional standards through what became Advance HE and for those standards to describe competences required for all teaching staff.⁵⁹

One critique is that while Advance HE hosts the UK Professional Standards Framework (PSF) and Fellowship scheme, its update in 2023 fails to even mention mental health or disability, let alone the importance of deepening an understanding of who is being taught in a particular cohort⁶⁰. Teaching is a partnership – and it takes two to tango.

We've reached a stage where OfS' condition of registration E6 on harassment and sexual misconduct exists, but where we are not sure it would make much difference because the regulatory focus remains on the provider rather than the profession(al). The good news is that a move in this direction can improve the professional standing of university teaching, prevent perpetrators from

⁵⁷ "The University of Bristol Loses Its Appeal over the Abrahart Case." n.d. Wonkhe. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-university-of-bristol-loses-its-appeal-over-the-abrahart-case/>

⁵⁸ "The Employer's Duty of Care | Legal Guidance | LexisNexis." n.d. Wwww.lexisnexis.co.uk. <https://www.lexisnexis.co.uk/legal/guidance/the-employers-duty-of-care>

⁵⁹ Dickinson, Jim. 2024. "Whatever Happened to Students at the Heart of the System?" Wonkhe. April 15, 2024. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/whatever-happened-to-students-at-the-heart-of-the-system/>

⁶⁰ Advance-he.ac.uk. (2023). Professional Standards Framework (PSF) 2023 | Advance HE. [online] Available at: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/teaching-learning/professional-standards-framework>

moving around the sector with impunity, save universities time and money, and build trust in victims of harassment and abuse to raise issues.

Finally, the UK should consolidate oversight of the student learning environment. While Australia's TEQSA comprehensively regulates “the nature, access to and fitness for purpose of the learning environment” without prescribing delivery models, the UK fragments these responsibilities across multiple agencies⁶¹.

Our current approach scatters environmental standards across different bodies – physical spaces (estates), digital platforms (IT), academic resources (libraries), and wellbeing provisions (student services) – with no coherent framework for how these elements should integrate to support learning. This fragmentation means excellent guidance rarely reaches implementation. A single regulatory framework should establish clear standards for integrated learning environments that combine physical, digital, and support elements, while creating straightforward accountability for ensuring these standards translate into practice across all institutions.

⁶¹ Teqsa.gov.au. (2022). HESF Domain 2: Learning environment | Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency. [online] Available at: <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/how-we-regulate/higher-education-standards-framework-2021/hesf-domain-2-learning-environment>

For this entitlement to become reality, students need:

A statutory duty of care and safeguarding framework, requiring universities to take reasonable steps to support student wellbeing, follow sector-wide safeguarding standards with clear responsibilities, and demonstrate “due regard” to protection guidance for all students.

Robust, transparent handling of misconduct and harm, including a professional standards body to stop perpetrators moving between institutions, independent reviews of safeguarding failures, and guaranteed rights to anonymous reporting and transparent complaint resolution data.

Legal duties that strengthen institutional accountability, with a duty of candour in internal and external processes, regular publication of prevalence and misconduct reports, and mandatory safeguarding training for all student-facing staff.

Risk-based protections for vulnerable groups, underpinned by statutory risk assessments, clear information-sharing policies with trusted contacts, and targeted measures for students at increased risk of harm, exploitation, or abuse.

Guaranteed access to essential services and safety partnerships, including mental health support, subsidised prescriptions, basic needs centres, and collaboration with police and local authorities through community safety partnerships.

Government must establish a national framework for **student safeguarding**, including independent oversight of **university teaching**, **risk assessments** in high-risk academic contexts, and **legal protection** for **vulnerable** students. All students should have the right to be taught by staff **qualified to teach** and with a basic understanding of **mental health issues**.

6. *The right to connect – and to contribute*

Full-time students should have the right to secure, affordable accommodation that is near to their campus of study and meets consistent quality standards and contributes positively to their educational experience.

What is striking in many student accommodations is the absence of spaces for students to meet, socialise, or study together. Unless you're near campus – which itself may lack social learning spaces – the surrounding city centers offer few alternatives beyond chain coffee shops. A glance at the Plymouth Plan underlines this problem.⁶² The city's universities are mentioned in economic contexts, but there's virtually nothing about supporting the student community. This pattern repeats across numerous university towns and cities, where acres of empty retail space lie unused while student facilities remain inadequate.

This shouldn't surprise us – students are often “othered” by local authorities. The explosion of student city-center living pre-dates many urban development schemes, with little evidence that even the International Education Strategy considered where students would live, socialise, or study.

In 2019, the Towns Fund for England provided £3.6 billion for struggling towns to support local economic growth and reimagine community centres and social infrastructure.⁶³ Yet across towns with university campuses, students are typically mentioned as economic assets rather than citizens with spatial needs for third spaces.

For students living away from home, the situation is increasingly dire. Unipol/HEPI's student accommodation costs report reveals that in ten key markets, student rents have increased by an average of 14.6 percent over two academic years, now consuming almost the entire average maintenance loan available to English students.⁶⁴

When universities recruit students who'll live away from home, they must consider where these students will live. If we deem it essential that students can rent affordable, reasonably located, quality accommodation, then overall housing supply analysis matters critically. Looking at just international

⁶² “The Plymouth Plan | PLYMOUTH.GOV.UK.” n.d. Www.plymouth.gov.uk. <https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/plymouth-plan>

⁶³ “Towns Fund Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy.” n.d. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/towns-fund-monitoring-and-evaluation-strategy/towns-fund-monitoring-and-evaluation-strategy>

⁶⁴ HEPI. 2023. “Rent Now Swallows up Virtually All of the Average Maintenance Loan as the Student Accommodation Market Reaches ‘Crisis Point.’” HEPI. October 25, 2023. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/10/26/student-rents-now-swallow-up-virtually-all-of-the-of-the-average-maintenance-loan-as-market-reaches-crisis-point-in-affordability/>

postgraduates in the two largest providers across eight cities, numbers doubled from 21,035 to 42,215 between 2020 and 2022⁶⁵. Either there were 20,000 spare beds in 2019, or universities recruited more students than local housing markets could accommodate. Since every student needs somewhere to live, more modest increases in international recruitment would likely have resulted in more modest rent increases.

Universities UK suggests institutions conduct such analysis, yet we rarely see this happening systematically across the UK.⁶⁶ Universities previously didn't need to consider housing beyond first-year guarantees, but it's increasingly important given higher education's scale and the wider housing crisis.

Universities don't control local housing markets, but for any market to function properly, moderate oversupply is necessary. This creates downward pressure on prices and enables choice. The tighter the market, the more morally dubious it becomes to recruit "away from home" students, given the impact on their experience and outcomes.

All this requires urgent attention. Universities and students' unions should collaborate on city-wide initiatives to create student-friendly urban environments. When political figures campaign in university cities, they should address the needs of students living in inadequate, overpriced accommodation. The census might not show it, and nor will council tax receipts – but there are plenty of them.

⁶⁵ Dickinson, J. (2023). Who broke the student housing market? [online] Wonkhe. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/who-broke-the-student-housing-market/>

⁶⁶ "Supporting Good Practice in Student Accommodation: Considerations for Senior University Leaders." n.d. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2023-06/Supporting-good-practice-in-student-accommodation.pdf>

For this entitlement to become reality, students need:

A national housing strategy centred on student need, requiring universities to conduct recruitment impact assessments, mandating inter-institutional collaboration in shared cities, and obliging local authorities to include student housing in planning frameworks.

Affordable, transparent, and high-quality accommodation, with rent controls linked to maintenance support, mandatory quality standards under a single code, regular inspections, and full transparency on costs, profits, and ownership structures.

Rights-based tenancy models, including flexible tenancy agreements tailored to students, protected rights to organise tenants' unions, and emergency housing funds to prevent homelessness.

Student voice in local decision-making, with guaranteed student representation on planning committees and provider boards, recognition of students as stakeholders in town regeneration efforts, and legal protections ensuring access to local services and anti-discrimination for international students.

Community connection and civic inclusion, supported through integration programmes with permanent residents, funding for student-led community initiatives, and protected rights to access local amenities, participate in community life, and travel affordably to and from campus.

Government must establish legal protections specific to student housing, including **rent controls** linked to maintenance loans, **flexible contract** terms, and **mandatory quality** standards. Local authorities should be required to include **student housing needs** in **planning** strategies, while universities must conduct **housing impact assessments** before increasing **recruitment**. Student representation should be **mandatory** in housing **governance**, with guaranteed rights for **students in purpose-built accommodation**.

7. *The right to community – not just curriculum*

Students should have the right to structured opportunities for building meaningful social connections, developing networks, and engaging with wider communities beyond their academic programs.

The idea that students should make a contribution to the place where their university is located predates students' unions and civic university agreements. But the contemporary framing of students' contribution to their community tends to be more negative – noise and litter complaints morphing in 2020 into an unfounded assumption that they “caused” the winter Covid-19 lockdown, when data showed their real civic contribution was sticking to rules to protect the vulnerable at the expense of their own education, experience and mental health.⁶⁷

The relationship between students and places has changed, with major impacts on housing and local economies. Far more students are “of” the local community to begin with⁶⁸. Campuses and student bodies are less homogeneous. And participation in traditional activities is in freefall, as the student time crisis in a mass system bites.

Throughout the waves of higher education expansion, we've paid little attention to the student community, students' communities and their relationship to the wider community. A model focused on a professional elite of undergraduates has been complemented or supplanted by one of individual skills acquisition – positioning students and their activities outside the curriculum as agents for wealth creation.

Despite political narratives, students' unions weren't originally about politics and campaigning. They emerged, particularly in England, as ways to bring together student clubs and societies to share administration and organisation costs.

Involvement in SUs always had educational and social capital benefits. But as the Conservative government developed its vision for an expanded higher education system in the late eighties, university involvement began to take on

⁶⁷ BBC News. 2020. “Coronavirus: Students ‘Scared and Confused’ as Halls Lock Down,” September 26, 2020, sec. UK. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-54308329>

⁶⁸ Kernohan, D. (2025). Which universities recruit commuter students? [online] Wonkhe. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/which-universities-recruit-commuter-students/>

a new purpose, with initiatives like Enterprise in Higher Education stressing the need for the university experience to generate skills useful to employers.⁶⁹

Today, graduates routinely highlight skills learned through such activities on CVs and in job applications. Graduate attribute frameworks stress the acquisition of skills through leading a team or organising an event. The Sutton Trust has researched the impact on social mobility as students missed these activities during the pandemic⁷⁰.

But perhaps there's more to all of this than a choice between creating an exclusive “professional elite” with some benevolent community work, and producing atomised individualists with CVs full of skills to sell in a mass system.

In October 2007, then shadow minister for higher education David Willetts delivered a lecture with a different view of students and their unions focused on community:

“The student is not just a free-floating consumer. He is a member of a community. To this end, we should strive to foster the idea of the university community. Each and every university is its own community – its own society... But the hub of these university communities is not the university itself. It is not the Vice Chancellor, the central administration or the quadrangle. It is the students' union.”⁷¹

Social capital and social division should matter for policy reasons too. In [Fractured](#), Jon Yates notes that half of us think the country has never been more divided, with friendship circles segregated by age, class, politics, and race – half of degree-holders have no friends without degrees.⁷² Connecting with people outside our bubbles through rituals, clubs, and shared experiences has historically bridged these divides.

When we speak with student representatives and volunteers, the most common motivations are service and connection. They talk about helping, giving, wanting to get to know others, and helping others connect. They express a desire to foster community, make others feel welcome, and improve

⁶⁹ “Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative.” 2024. Wellcome Collection. 2024. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/f542bbzd>

⁷⁰ The Sutton Trust (2021). Low-income students more likely to be missing out on extra-curricular activities. [online] Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/low-income-students-more-likely-to-be-missing-out-on-extra-curricular-activities/>

⁷¹ “David Willetts – 2007 Speech on Higher Education – UKPOL.CO.UK.” 2021. Ukpolic.co.uk. October 11, 2021. <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/david-willetts-2007-speech-on-higher-education/>

⁷² “Fractured: Why Our Societies Are Coming Apart and How We Put Them Back Together Again: Amazon.co.uk: Yates, Jon: 9780008463960: Books.” 2025. Amazon.co.uk. 2025. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Fractured-societies-coming-apart-together/dp/0008463964>

experiences through others. With strikingly few exceptions, their motivation is to serve and connect.

In recent years, universities and SUs have tended toward giving up on diversity in roles requiring time or responsibility – assuming busy commuters or student parents won't have time for roles with badges, events to organise, and reports to write.

One concerning trend involves abolishing positions of responsibility altogether. Because these roles might only be filled by “usual suspects”, there's a tendency toward alternatives like student engagement posts, residential life teams, focus groups, and surveys – all keeping power with convenors while robbing the student body of agency.

Another problematic approach is paying students to do what they used to do for each other voluntarily. Yet beneath the surface, there's a whole army of students eager to serve others – running coffee mornings, facilitating project groups, gathering feedback, or giving campus tours. What if, instead of asking “who wants to be the rep?” we asked who would like to get involved in running the course – and said yes to everyone?

With time pressures on students in a mass system, the traditional approach has been adding “...in the curriculum” to keywords. But what is a stressed module leader supposed to do when asked to incorporate multiple agendas into a ten-credit module? And will employers be impressed when a student's only example of leading a team comes from an academic course?

Student association leaders deserve statutory protections recognising their essential democratic contribution. Following European models, these should include legal rights to justified academic absences for official activities, rescheduled assessments when duties conflict, flexibility in deadlines, exemptions from strict attendance requirements, and explicit protection against academic discrimination.

These rights should be formally recognised in university regulations with clear appeals processes, ensuring students aren't penalised for civic engagement. This statutory framework should extend beyond association leadership to recognise other legitimate statuses – including student-workers, student-parents, and student-athletes – each with tailored protections that acknowledge their specific circumstances while enabling full educational participation.

The available evidence ought to bury the cliches of lazy students sponging from the state. When a realisation dawns that maybe it's the norms of higher

education that need to change rather than wishing that students were as carefree, and frankly rich (both in money and time) as they were in a forgotten past, we can reimagine how social capital development becomes central to the student experience rather than peripheral to it.

For this entitlement to become reality, students need:

A universal entitlement to credit-bearing, community-rooted participation, where students earn academic credit for civic service, peer leadership, and roles that serve other students, communities, or employers – enabled through inter-institution collaboration and protected by academic flexibility policies.

Social capital and integration as intentional outcomes, with institutions actively measuring and building bonding, bridging, and linking ties – supported by commuter inclusion initiatives, digital platforms for hybrid and on-campus connection, and strategic goals for peer connection backed by evidence-based interventions.

Institutional investment in student-led activity, including guaranteed funding for cultural, artistic, and recreational initiatives, support for underrepresented societies and student groups, and a minimum of £100 of the fees paid by students allocated to SUs from institutional budgets.

Sustained community engagement infrastructure, delivered through professional community organisers (not just admin staff), dedicated collaboration spaces, and reinvestment of AI-driven efficiencies into more meaningful student involvement.

Civic belonging embedded in planning and narrative, through structured community partnerships, student roles in local development, public storytelling that challenges negative student stereotypes, and collaboration frameworks connecting student communities across neighbouring universities.

Government should require universities to develop **social capital strategies** that establish clear expectations for **community-building** and **measure outcomes**. This includes mandated funding for **students' unions to support cultural, artistic, and recreational activities**, alongside requirements that universities create dedicated spaces and resources for **community development**. **Service learning** and **community engagement** should be recognised through elective **credit-bearing opportunities** within **degree programs**.

8. *The right to be well – health makes learning possible*

Students should have the right to accessible, integrated healthcare that addresses their physical, mental, and social wellbeing needs throughout their educational journey.

The debate about student health across the UK is stuck in an accountability void. Poor access to preventative healthcare and health services is justified either by NHS pressure from an aging population or by expectations that universities should do more with less. Both arguments have merit, but they leave the crucial link between health and academic success unaddressed.

Our polling reveals a stark contrast between student health and the general population. Only 20 per cent of students report “very good” health compared to 48 per cent of the general public. Even more concerning, 32 per cent of students rated their health as merely “fair” – nearly two and a half times the general population rate. And 27 per cent of students report their health has worsened since starting university.⁷³

Access to healthcare services remains a significant barrier. While 65 per cent of students are registered with a GP in their university town, dental care is severely lacking with only 17 per cent registered locally. A third of students aren't registered with a dentist at all. Student dissatisfaction with the NHS is telling – 49 per cent report being “quite” or “very” dissatisfied, compared to just 31 per cent reporting satisfaction.

Mental health, sleep, and nutrition form an interconnected web of challenges. The results reveal troubling sleep patterns – 21 per cent of students getting less than six hours and 24 per cent experiencing poor sleep quality. Meanwhile, 25 per cent demonstrate possible food or body image issues and 24 per cent showed possible eating disorder patterns.

Recent news that many areas of the UK have eight-year backlogs for adult ADHD assessments should give higher education serious pause. This is particularly problematic for universities that require formal, external diagnosis before students can access support or teaching adjustments, despite the Equality and Human Rights Commission noting that universities can be found to have discriminated against students when evidence of disability is apparent from the students themselves.

⁷³ Dickinson, Jim. “Latest from Belong – Students’ Health Is Not OK, and That’s Not OK.” Wonkhe, 2025, [wonkhe.com/blogs/students-are-not-ok-and-thats-not-ok/](https://www.wonkhe.com/blogs/students-are-not-ok-and-thats-not-ok/)

As the Westminster government develops its 10-year health plan with three major shifts – moving care from hospitals to communities, better using technology, and focusing on prevention – students must be part of the equation. Any plan for the NHS that involves pushing services from hospitals into communities will fail without proper consideration of students. The time for a dedicated student health strategy is now.

For this entitlement to become reality, students need:

Universal, affordable healthcare access, including dual GP registration at home and university, free prescriptions, universal health screening, subsidised medications, and guaranteed access to telehealth and online support services.

Proactive and inclusive health support, with faster disability assessment pathways, clear communication that formal diagnosis isn't required for adjustments, and academic flexibility and timetabling designed to support disabled students.

Integrated regional partnerships and basic needs provision, through NHS – university collaboration on mental health, crisis, and preventative care strategies, alongside food security measures such as low-cost meal programmes and hardship funds that cover food insecurity.

Health embedded in education and regulation, making wellbeing a core part of educational quality assurance, backed by a national student health and wellbeing survey and strong legal protections for students' personal health data.

Evidence-based, student-focused health policy, supported by dedicated student health funding, digital access to services, and public efforts to challenge misinformation and promote informed, data-driven health interventions.

Government must establish a **national student health strategy** that includes **legal rights** to continuous **healthcare access**, **subsidised prescriptions**, and **mental health support**. This should include mandatory requirements for universities to provide **credit-bearing health education**, adequate **sleeping facilities** on campus, and **financial support** for students facing health-related **costs**. Health **outcomes** should be integrated into **quality assurance frameworks**, with universities held accountable for student **wellbeing metrics**.

9. *THE RIGHT TO POWER, NOT JUST PROVISION*

Full-time students should have the right to genuine influence in university decision-making, with representation structures that ensure their voices shape both strategic directions and day-to-day operations and a clear understanding of their rights.

In the UK, the core “voice” for students is an unspoken assumption is that there’s one or two course or class reps on every course, for every year group. It’s been this way for decades, once mandated by the Quality Assurance Agency. But in my encounters with these reps, they consistently report that whichever room they’re in, it’s almost never the one where decisions are made.

The rep attending a staff-student liaison committee typically reports things outside the control of those in the room – allowing a temporary wallowing session over timetabling or facilities, where issues are rarely escalated. Those who persevere face a painful paradox – they’re told to gather feedback, but when they present it they’re told it differs from survey data or that they need more responses. Most got involved for community building rather than quality assurance.

Course representation in the UK comes from a different age – when surveys were on paper, data was scarce, programs were smaller, and more decision-making was devolved. The internet, mass HE efficiencies, and student life realities now mean the scaffolding makes no sense. There are too many course reps but not enough representation where it matters⁷⁴.

Meanwhile, few UK universities have proper boards with student input that oversee counselling, campuses, projects or IT initiatives. Student input is typically forced through quarterly “student experience committees” or occasional focus groups. It’s notable that on the continent, both in democratic and managerialist systems, a broader range of students are recruited to contribute – and their input is more impactful. Given that quality culture now focuses less on auditing systems, and more on targeting interventions based on data, student reps aren’t expected to gather feedback – their role is to spot trends in existing data and feed into interpretation and decision-making.

⁷⁴ Dickinson, J. (2024). There are too many student reps in this country. And also not enough. [online] Wonkhe. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/there-are-too-many-student-reps-in-this-country-and-also-not-enough/>

This matters in relation to OfS' quality conditions. The B conditions of registration form the basis of OfS' inspections and investigations. These conditions cover everything from staffing levels to hidden costs and from academic support to adequate study space. Yet many universities act as if these conditions don't exist. Few SUs have been alerted to them, and student leaders tell us that universities consistently conduct programme reviews without mentioning them.

When it comes to student complaints, we also have a major problem. The OIA closed 2,654 complaints in 2021 but failed to meet its KPI of closing 75 per cent within six months, managing just 69 per cent. And that's after students wait for their completion of procedures letter.⁷⁵

Resolution typically applies only to those brave enough to complete the process – incentivising providers to apply “deal or no deal” plus non-disclosure agreement principles rather than admitting fault and resolving issues collectively. This prevents institutional learning and discriminates against disabled students⁷⁶.

When a student fails or receives a disappointing grade, appeals based on university failings are doomed. “Academic judgment is sacrosanct” is the response, with “you should have made a complaint” the standard advice. But why don't universities routinely treat failed appeals as complaints? Students often don't raise issues when they occur because they raised concerns informally without resolution, don't know complaints processes, or fear retribution. And the barriers are greater for international students.

Research identifies five barriers to complaint-making: opportunity costs, fear of conflict, fear of retribution, lack of confidence, and lack of information about rights.⁷⁷ University annual complaints reviews rarely analyse what's in failed appeals – just categories like “65 per cent failed because they concerned issues a student should have raised as a complaint.”

European higher education models demonstrate the power of ringfenced funding for student services with real student governance. In several systems, a dedicated portion of fees or government funding is allocated specifically for food, housing, healthcare, and activities – with elected student-majority councils controlling these substantial budgets.

⁷⁵ “OIA Publishes Operating Report 2021 and Operating Plan 2022.” 2022. Oiahe.org.uk. OIAHE. January 26, 2022. <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/resources-and-publications/latest-news-and-updates/oia-publishes-operating-report-2021-and-operating-plan-2022/>

⁷⁶ Dickinson, J. (2024). How to actually learn from student appeals. [online] Wonkhe. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/how-to-actually-learn-from-student-appeals/>

⁷⁷ Banwell-Moore, Rebecca, and Philippa Tomczak. 2022. “Complaints: Mechanisms for Prisoner Participation?” *European Journal of Criminology* 20 (6): 147737082210942. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14773708221094271>

This approach recognises that many services are place-based rather than provider-specific, enabling coordination across institutions in the same region. The UK should implement statutory structures guaranteeing a defined percentage of fees is allocated to student services with mandatory student-led governance, ensuring services truly reflect student needs rather than institutional assumptions.

More generally, democracy must be the foundation of this reimagined student experience – not as an abstract concept but as daily practice. When students have real voting power in governance, from curriculum design to resource allocation, they develop as both learners and citizens.

European universities that integrate students into “the power system” demonstrate how democratic participation creates better institutions and graduates. These practices aren't symbolic concessions but essential educational components that build civic capacity. The erosion of democratic culture in UK universities threatens not just student experience but our broader civic future. Any meaningful framework of entitlements must position democracy as both a right itself and the foundation that makes other rights sustainable.

For this entitlement to become reality, students need:

Legally protected student representation at all levels, ensuring students have rights to participate in all decisions that affect them – across senates/academic boards and sub committees, governing bodies, curriculum committees, programme boards, and PBSA housing governance – with mandatory consultation before decisions are made.

Democratic, meaningful participation in governance, backed by a legal duty to elect student representatives fairly, ensure involvement in national policymaking, and embed subject-level communities in curriculum design – extending student voice beyond teaching into support services, estates, IT, and campus planning.

Recognition and support for representation work, including financial compensation or academic credit for reps, mandatory training in quality standards and data use, and transparent processes with clear accountability when student input is ignored.

Fair, independent complaints and appeals systems, with a ban on all non-disclosure agreements, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's Good Practice Framework made mandatory, and reforms allowing failed appeals to be converted into complaints – supported by on-campus independent ombuds

in all providers with 500 students or more (shared where providers are smaller) instead of adversarial and defensive internal processes.

Protections for student activism and decision transparency, including legal safeguards for protest and mediation rights, transparency requirements for institutional decision-making, and robust accountability mechanisms when student feedback isn't acted upon.

Students' unions should also have the **right to operate within guaranteed campus space**, supported by a **percentage of institutional budgets** (at least £100 per student) for operations and activities. Legal rights should include **access to university information** and funding for cultural, artistic, and recreational activities.

The idea that students are **citizens**, the university is a **community of communities**, and they have **responsibilities** to each other, is vital **educationally** and will make resource reductions more bearable.

Governments should establish a **statutory framework** for **student rights and representation** that gives student representatives **real decision-making authority** rather than just **consultative** roles. This should include **requirements** for students' unions to operate within **guaranteed campus space**, supported by a **percentage of institutional budgets** (at least £100 per student) for operations and activities. Legal rights should include a duty on students' unions to give **information to new students about their rights**, **access to university information**, funding for cultural, artistic, and recreational activities, and protection from **academic discrimination** for **representative activities**.

10. The right to shared investment – with shared responsibility

Students should have the right to a well-funded, transparently operated higher education system that balances academic excellence, financial sustainability, and student wellbeing.

Just as unplanned expansion is so dangerous, so is unplanned contraction. And as usual it's students – paying for 40 years not 30 these days – that will suffer. It is possible to have a less expensive HE system – albeit with difficult choices. But getting there in the way that this government is allowing to happen just means absolute misery. And all because it can't stand being seen to plan a thing.

Throughout this document, we have set out a whole range of things that I think both universities and government should do to help students to help themselves to a better education and a better world. In its totality it almost certainly feels like a lot. So it's also important to set out how a mass system might be able to afford to deliver change on the scale we are suggesting.

One of the major problems for universities in lobbying for funding is a lack of clarity on where the money goes, and a set of global figures that make the UK system very expensive. The UK's Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) data⁷⁸ apparently doesn't achieve the T in its name for the public funders of higher education – and so the default way to understand it becomes the OECD's data on expenditure per head on tertiary institutions per student.

And on the face of it you can see why officials might be briefing ministers that universities should be able to take a dose of spending restraint without destroying the UK's competitiveness in higher education.

If we ask the question “why is UK HE so comparatively expensive?” there are two kneejerk responses – one that retreads the “shiny buildings” trope, and the other positing that we spend more on “administrators” and/or non-academic staff. The panoply of professional services in the UK, especially those that seek to support students, do seem to be more extensive than we've seen on our SU study tours across Europe.⁷⁹

But there is one other argument that bears better interrogation – and it's about choice. Almost without fail across systems we've visited, there's

⁷⁸ “About.” n.d. TRAC. <https://www.trac.ac.uk/about>.

⁷⁹ Dickinson, J. (2024). We spend a lot on HE. Or do we? [online] Wonkhe. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/wonk-corner/we-spend-a-lot-on-he-or-do-we/>

evidence of less rigid subject-specialisation – more manifestations of liberal arts curricula, degrees achieved by diverse module gatherers, and chunks of core credit obtainable via work experience, volunteering, and interdisciplinary project work.

You don't need many ECTS credits per year to be obtainable via these categories to reduce costs considerably – and the more that a university does this, the more it is able to apply “demand smoothing” techniques to achieve a decent student experience on what look like higher staff-student ratios than the UK seems to achieve.

Back when we all thought Covid was going to cause temporary fee income collapse, DfE rapidly developed a Higher Education Restructuring Regime that was largely rebuffed and never actually deployed because students paid up and enrolled anyway.

It had four main policy objectives:

- Protect the welfare of current students because of the potential impact on the quality of teaching provision, and the impact on disadvantaged and local students
- Support the role HE providers play in regional and local economies through the provision of high-quality courses aligned with economic and societal need
- Protect teaching provision because of the risk of the loss of strategically important or unique provision, the loss of provision supporting key workforce pipelines, the loss of teaching capacity in cold spots and potential impact on regional businesses, jobs and local growth
- Preserve the sector's internationally outstanding science base.⁸⁰

All four of these risks are still present, and all four will matter to a Labour government. Hoping that tuition fees will go up to fill in for the lost years of high inflation feels like a big risk – especially now that £9,250 is worth £5,616 in real terms⁸¹. The sector should instead call for a version of that restructuring regime to be dusted off and relaunched with urgency.

If universities reimagine their role as civic engines – embedding students in local, regional, and national initiatives in exchange for support, funding, and academic credit – there is a clear value proposition for different government departments. A massively expanded pool of student volunteers and civic

⁸⁰ Department for Education. 2020. “Higher Education Restructuring Regime (HERR).” GOV.UK. July 16, 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-restructuring-regime>

⁸¹ Corver, M. (2025). How big has the funding shock been for UK universities? [online] LinkedIn.com. Available at: https://www.linkedin.com/posts/markcorver_how-big-has-the-funding-shock-been-for-uk-activity-7333176385877815297-6EuB

participants could be leveraged to advance key policy priorities, reduce reliance on stretched public services, and create stronger, more engaged communities.

Different departments could benefit in various ways:

Housing, Communities and Local Government: Students could be mobilised into community-led projects, local democracy initiatives, and high-street revitalisation efforts

Education: Students could mentor school pupils, support literacy and numeracy in underperforming areas, and work in local FE colleges

Culture, Media and Sport: Students could provide digital skills training for older residents, volunteer in creative industries, and work in sports and wellbeing projects

Health and Social Care: Students could volunteer in mental health peer support, community health programmes, and local social care initiatives

Work and Pensions: Students could take on structured civic apprenticeships, skills-based volunteering, and employment support schemes

Sustainable higher education funding requires a clear 50/50 shared contribution principle between students and state, acknowledging both personal benefits and societal value. This balance must be transparent, ending current opacity and establishing a framework to measure when government support falls below reasonable levels. This model reinforces higher education as both personal advancement and public good, deserving substantial state support for its role in national prosperity.

Certain aspects function as pure public goods requiring complete state funding – widening participation initiatives, disability support, regional provision in educational cold spots, and strategically important subjects. These generate societal benefits that cannot fairly burden individual graduates and require dedicated, ringfenced government investment with transparent accountability.

Reestablishing a dual-sector system – but one that is operated at faculty level – would preserve technical and vocational education's value while creating clearer pathways⁸². Unlike post-1992 homogenisation, this approach allows

⁸² Dickinson, J. (2025). Students should be co-authors of their education. [online] Wonkhe. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs-sus/students-should-be-co-authors-of-their-education/>

targeted funding, better public understanding, and stronger regional development. Modern dual-sector systems should maintain permeable boundaries, allowing students to combine elements from both sectors to create personalized educational journeys better suited for complex careers.

For this entitlement to become reality, students need:

A fair and transparent funding model, with a clear separation of funding streams for teaching, research, student support, and capital investment; a reduction in reliance on high-cost private borrowing; and a commitment to 50/50 state/student contribution as an explicit principle.

Planned, sustainable higher education infrastructure, delivered through a national planning framework to prevent sudden institutional collapse, protection for strategically vital disciplines regardless of market trends, and a national subject strategy that stops short-term cuts to essential fields.

Flexible, inclusive, and applied learning, including modular and extended degree structures that reduce cost pressures and mental health strain, interdisciplinary and project-based learning, and reimagined full-time education adaptable in length and pace.

A dual-sector system with strong civic and vocational connections, restoring universities of applied sciences and strengthening pathways between further and higher education, backed by coordinated government funding for student civic participation and a cross-government civic engagement strategy with academic credit for national contributions.

Efficient, student-driven support systems, including streamlined and capped costs for branding, estates, and support services; structured student communities embedded in every programme; a shift toward peer mentoring and programme-level networks; fair pay for PGRs; and shared welfare responsibilities between universities and government departments.

Government should **relaunch** the Higher Education **Restructuring Regime** to fund **transformation**, not just stave off **collapse** – linking **public investment** to **transparency, civic value, and sustainability**. It should require disaggregated funding streams for teaching, research, support, and estates, ending opaque cross-subsidies and risky borrowing.

It should protect **strategically vital subjects** through a **national subject strategy** and a **move towards a more dual-system approach**. Embed students in public service and civic initiatives for credit, with departments across government benefiting from their skills. Guarantee fair pay for PGRs, cap spending on branding and vanity estates, and prioritise student-led, programme-level support over excessive professionalisation. And develop a national HE planning framework to prevent unplanned contraction – ending chaotic drift through coordinated, civic-minded reform.

CONCLUSION: DOING BETTER AND GETTING BETTER

The ten entitlements outlined in this document represent more than aspirational ideals – they form the foundation of a necessary new settlement between students, universities, and the state. This settlement recognises that higher education's purpose has fundamentally evolved, reflecting both the extended “middle stage” of modern adulthood and the complex social, economic, and technological challenges facing the UK.

For too long, policy approaches to higher education have oscillated between treating students as passive consumers in a market or dismissing their concerns as evidence of entitlement. Both approaches fail to capture the essential nature of higher education as a transformative period that develops not just knowledge but character, connections, and civic capacity.

The rights proposed here offer a more balanced framework. Students would gain **structured support**, meaningful **representation**, financial sustainability, and comprehensive **wellbeing provisions**. In return, society would benefit from graduates who are not only academically accomplished but **socially connected**, **civically engaged**, and **practically prepared** for an uncertain future.

Government action required

For this settlement to succeed, government must take decisive action through:

Legislative framework: The government should introduce a Student Rights Bill that establishes these ten entitlements in law, ensuring they have binding force rather than remaining aspirational.

Regulatory reform: The Office for Students must be reoriented to monitor and enforce these entitlements, moving beyond narrow metrics of academic quality and financial sustainability to encompass the whole student experience.

Cross-departmental coordination: A ministerial taskforce should coordinate policies across education, health, housing, work and pensions, and communities departments to ensure coherent approaches to student support.

Financial reform: A comprehensive review of student finance must establish a **Minimum Income Standard for Students** and reform maintenance support to reflect actual living costs.

Planning powers: Regional bodies should gain powers to coordinate student recruitment, housing development, and community integration to prevent market failures in accommodation and public services.

Professional standards: A national register of higher education professionals should be established, similar to the General Medical Council, to maintain standards and address misconduct.

Data collection: Regular nationwide surveys of student income, expenditure, health, and time use should inform policy development and measure progress.

Digital access: Ensuring all students have access to digital tools and resources necessary for modern education, including affordable technology and high-speed internet.

Global mobility protection: Guaranteeing students the right to study abroad or transfer credits internationally, ensuring academic continuity and recognition of qualifications.

Data protection framework: Providing strong legal protections for students' personal data and ensuring transparency in how it is used for assessment and analytics.

University accountability mechanisms

These entitlements would be enforced through:

Participation plans incorporating specific targets for student wellbeing, financial support, and community integration

Conditions of registration that explicitly require evidence of meeting these entitlements

Metrics that evaluate university performance across these entitlements rather than narrow measures of "student satisfaction", including a new National Student Survey covering all of these aspects

Annual reporting requirements that track progress on implementing the entitlements

Consumer protection enforcement with universities held accountable under laws like the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act

Expected outcomes

This new settlement would deliver:

Improved retention and outcomes: Students with adequate financial support, proper housing, and comprehensive health services are more likely to complete their studies and achieve their potential

Enhanced social cohesion: Graduates with experience bridging social divides and engaging with diverse communities will strengthen social fabric

Economic growth: Developing students' full capabilities—not just academic but social, practical, and civic – will increase productivity and innovation

International competitiveness: A distinctive approach that develops the whole student will enhance the UK's global standing in higher education

More responsive institutions: Universities better attuned to students' actual needs and experiences will adapt more effectively to changing circumstances

The cost of implementing these entitlements is not insignificant. But the cost of maintaining the status quo – where thousands of students struggle financially, disengage from learning, and fail to develop their full potential – is far greater. Every year we delay comprehensive reform represents another cohort whose talents are not fully realised and whose contribution to society is diminished.

As other nations develop higher education systems that explicitly nurture social capital alongside academic achievement, the UK faces a choice: continue with a model increasingly misaligned with student needs and societal challenges, or embrace a new settlement that recognises higher education's true purpose in contemporary society.

These ten entitlements offer a path forward – one that honours higher education's transformative potential while acknowledging the realities of today's extended “middle stage” of adulthood. If ministers can get a grip on the student experience and enshrine these rights in law and practice, we can ensure that the UK's higher education system not only maintains its global reputation but truly serves the students and society it exists to benefit – because students will both **do better**, and **get better**.

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