

Written evidence submitted by the University of Salford (SPEB10)

Public Bill Committee: Skills and Post-16 Education Bill 2021

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The University of Salford welcomes the opportunity to provide a short, written response to the Public Committee Bill ahead of its consideration of the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill.
- 1.2. The University of Salford is a Higher Education institution in Greater Manchester. With over 25,000 students we are fastest growing university in the North West. Established 50 years ago, but with our roots in the Royal Technical Institute of Salford that was founded in the 19th century, we take an industry-led approach to teaching and research.
- 1.3. Our goal is to provide our students with real world experiences that set them up for life and to work with partners to tackle real world social and economic challenges.
- 1.4. This response will cover three areas: Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs); equivalent or lower qualification rule (ELQ); quality assessments of higher education; and the Lifelong Loan Entitlement.

2. Local Skills Improvement Plans

- 2.1. We welcome the inclusion of amendments in the House of Lords that recognise the role of Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) in the development of Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) in the Bill.
- 2.2. As a University, our ethos is all about collaboration. We work with industry to create demand-led, industry-informed curricula that ensures our students are prepared for the world of work when they graduate. Ensuring effective engagement with industry on a local and regional level is important, but this must be tied to – through collaboration and engagement – the strategies set out by the democratic bodies of a place; in our case, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA).
- 2.3. There is a significant culture of collaboration between the institutions of Greater Manchester that has historic foundations. To not take account of the GMCA's democratic authority and soft power as a convenor, particularly through the Mayor's office, is to not fully understand the ways of working of different stakeholders on the ground in Greater Manchester.
- 2.4. The GMCA and the Greater Manchester Local Enterprise Partnership (GM LEP) have a number of strategies and plans that any LSIP should have regard to, including:
 - 2.4.1. The Greater Manchester Strategy (although this is currently being refreshed).¹
 - 2.4.2. The Greater Manchester Local Industrial Strategy.²
 - 2.4.3. Economic Vision.³
- 2.5. The Greater Manchester Mayor and the GMCA has also submitted to government a 'Levelling Up Deal' to government ahead of the Comprehensive Spending Review.⁴ One of the five pillars of the

¹ https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/1084/greater_manchester_summary_full_version.pdf

² <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/2132/gm-local-industrial-strategy-web.pdf>.

³ <http://gmlep.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GM-LEP-Economic-Vision.pdf>.

⁴ <https://greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/levellingupgm>

deal is 'Create opportunities for people to retrain, get the skills they need and create jobs right across Greater Manchester'.

- 2.6. The five universities of the city region recently signed a Civic University Agreement with the Mayor and the GMCA (<https://www.greatermanchesteruniversities.org/>) and the universities have also signed a memorandum of understanding with 15 colleges in Greater Manchester.⁵
- 2.7. All of these strategies and plans outline aspirations and plans in relation to delivering the future skills needs of Greater Manchester. Further, the Combined Authority itself has its own work and skills policy function which exercises responsibility over its own policy and funding levers, and could add capacity and expertise to the LSIP. Since 2019, for instance, the GMCA has had responsibility for the city region's Adult Education Budget (AEB), which supported tens of thousands of people every year to develop the skills they need for life and work.
- 2.8. Therefore, any LSIP that does not have a formal relationship with the Combined Authority is likely to be missing a major piece of the puzzle in addressing the skills needs of our city region. We would like to see a formal role for combined authorities in the LSIP process and in the provision of registered providers.

3. Equivalent or Lower Qualification Rule

- 3.1. The ELQ rule is seen as a major hindrance to the creation of a true lifelong education system. This rule prevents those studying for a second higher education course at an equivalent or lower level to their first from receiving either fee loans or maintenance support on the grounds that funding should be reserved for first time students.
- 3.2. Retraining is clearly going to be a critical element of lifelong learning, but the ELQ rule means we have a system where tertiary education is seen as a one-off event. This is ill suited to a situation where people can now expect to have multiple careers over their working lives and where it is realistic to expect graduates to have to retrain.
- 3.3. Provided below are some statistics to demonstrate the scale of the challenge in terms of retraining:
 - 3.3.1. We're getting older – in Greater Manchester, the over 50 population is set to grow by almost a quarter of a million people by 2041, accounting for 83% of all forecasted total population growth in that period. Our city region has below national average economic activity rates for the over 50s – a situation the pandemic will only have worsened.
 - 3.3.2. Technology is changing the nature of jobs – the OECD estimates that 14% of existing jobs could disappear as a result of automation in the next 15 – 20 years and another 32% are likely to change radically. It estimates that 38-42% of the UK population will need to completely retrain within the next 10 years owing to the fourth industrial revolution and artificial intelligence.
- 3.4. The removal of the ELQ rule is a recommendation of a new report from the Lifelong Learning Commission (of which the University of Salford is a member institution).⁶
- 3.5. Removal of the ELQ, along with other measures, such as the reintroduction of maintenance grants and employer support for part time learning could go some way in addressing the steep fall in part time and mature learning.

⁵ <https://www.salford.ac.uk/news/greater-manchesters-universities-and-colleges-announce-plans-work-more-closely-together>

⁶ https://0b3b9a1e-b06e-45b9-920b-ee850e3b1d47.filesusr.com/ugd/5e41e6_68cd7840181c46a38effa7e731e5f016.pdf

- 3.6. For reference here are some figures from the University of Salford in relation to mature or lifelong learning:
- 3.6.1. Overall, at Salford, 30% of our undergraduate students are mature (defined as 21 or over on entry).
 - 3.6.2. We have programmes with high numbers of mature learners, particularly in our School of Health and Society, where the average age on entry for undergrad is 24 and for post grad is 35, but across other schools the age profile is younger.
 - 3.6.3. It is clear that part time provision can support lifelong learning. 29% of our full time undergraduate students are mature, whereas across part time it's 72%.
 - 3.6.4. But part time is in decline. Between 2015/16 and 2020/21, part time undergraduates dropped from 7% of all students to just 3%.
 - 3.6.5. Degree apprenticeships have opened up new opportunities for those already in employment and older learners who might be seeking to get back into education. Only 20% of our apprentices are under 21.
- 3.7. We welcome the inclusion of Clause 18 of the bill and the requirement to review the impact on the overall levels of skills in England and Wales of the rules regarding eligibility for funding for those undertaking further or higher education courses after a year. However, we would argue that this should go further and that the ELQ rule should be removed immediately.

4. Quality assessments of higher education

- 4.1. Clause 20 of the bill gives the Office for Students (OfS) a statutory right to monitor the quality of higher education provided by registered higher education providers in England by reference to student outcomes. It clarifies the OfS's ability to determine minimum requirements for quality by reference to expected levels of students' outcome. The OfS is not required to benchmark these standards to take into account different student body characteristics or regional variability.
- 4.2. The fact that the OfS does not have to benchmark against regional and socio-economic factors when it comes to the assessment of quality is a concern. The economic and social inequalities between regions of the UK, for instance, are well known. This is reflected in the different outcomes of graduates in the north and south of England, both for career earnings and graduate employability.
- 4.3. Without benchmarking, the structural factors, such as the socio-economic background of students and the economic prosperity of the regional labour market they will enter on graduation, are not accounted for in university rankings or in the regulation of quality and value. The lack of benchmarking could also contribute to universities feeling less inclined to recruit students from low socio-economic backgrounds because the assessment of student outcomes would not be benchmarked for this.
- 4.4. According to research in the House of Commons Library there is significant variability in average earnings by region in the UK. This can be seen in the graph below.⁷

⁷ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8456/>



- 4.5. We can see from this chart that the average salary in London is £716 a week, while the average salary in the North West is £560 a week. This significant variation would have an impact on the assessment of quality of higher education providers, putting those in the north at a significant disadvantage, unless benchmarked.
- 4.6. The ONS publishes monthly data on the labour market in the regions of the UK. Its July 2021 data shows some regional variation in employment figures. The employment rate in the north west is 73.0%, while for the south east the same figure is 77.7%. This puts the north west below the UK average of 74.7%, while the south east is above the average.
- 4.7. Like for average earnings, without benchmarking this regional variability is likely to disadvantage higher education providers in the north west against those in the south east.
- 4.8. There is also a wealth of evidence that shows how socio-economic factors impact on students' progression, competition and employment outcomes. The Institute for Fiscal Studies in 2014 found that less than 10% of the least deprived state school students drop out of university within two years, over 80% complete their degree within five years and nearly 70% graduate with a first or a 2:1. This compares to figures of more than 20% drop-out, less than 60% degree completion and less than 40% graduating with a first or a 2:1 amongst the most deprived state school students.⁸
- 4.9. According to the research, even students from the most deprived backgrounds attending relatively high status universities that attract only the highest achieving students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are still 3.4% less likely to drop-out of university, 5.3% more likely to graduate and 3.7% more likely to graduate with a first or 2:1 than those from lower socio-economic background. The IfS noted that: "A substantial proportion of these raw differences [*in likelihood of dropping out or completing between individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds*] – between 55% and 80% - can be explained by the fact that individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds enter university with different levels of human capital. This suggests that a key part of any strategy to reduce socio-economic inequalities in degree acquisition and performance should be to increase the attainment of those from the poorest families earlier in the school system."
- 4.10. Likewise, research from the UPP Foundation and the Social Market Foundation found that the groups targeted by widening access initiatives – notably black students, lower income students and students from low participation neighbourhoods – are the groups who are most likely to drop out.⁹

⁸ <https://ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/wps/WP201431.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/UPP-final-report.pdf>

- 4.11. In 2019 the University of Salford published its social and economic impact report, Salford Untold. The report showed the composition of the university's student body. We are a widening participation university, and the report showed that 25% of our students are from low income families.¹⁰
- 4.12. There are concerns that without the requirement for the OfS to benchmark for regional inequalities and the socio-economic background of the student body, that this would give universities an incentive to avoid widening participation activities, and put the University of Salford at a disadvantage because it has a large portion of students from low income backgrounds.
- 4.13. None of this is to say that universities have a 'get out of jail free card' on supporting disadvantaged students to succeed. Universities are constantly innovating and developing ways to boost retention and outcomes - it is absolutely what they do day in day out. But it is to say that universities shouldn't be judged on their ability to overcome structural inequalities that exist in wider society outside the control of universities, and they should not be penalised for taking on more students from disadvantaged backgrounds and underrepresented groups.
- 4.14. The benefits of higher education on the individual are clear in terms of social mobility, improving career outcomes and life chances, and opening doors to new experiences and abilities. Quality and value in higher education should be about the wider benefit to society, but the impact on individuals and the distance travelled for individual students should be the focus rather than narrow cross-cohort measures of success.

5. Lifelong Loan Entitlement

- 5.1. It has been confirmed as this bill passed through the House of Lords that new primary legislation would be required in order to deliver a Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) and this new bill will follow the consultation that has been promised.
- 5.2. We welcome the principle of this, which is all we can comment on at this stage until the government provides more information. Access to funding for training and retraining throughout an individual's career has never been so important; not least of all because of the changes that the Covid crisis has had on the economy, but so too because of the ongoing rapid transformations in the jobs market as a result of technological change and other opportunities such as the path to net zero.
- 5.3. We would encourage the government to focus on two broad principles when they design this scheme. And these are around supporting collaboration between further and higher education, not competition, through this new loan entitlement and supporting students from all walks of life to access education and training through the provision of appropriate maintenance support.
- 5.4. And we look forward to further engaging on the detail of this and providing additional evidence through the consultation process and subsequent legislative process on the LLE.

For more information, please contact:

Charlotte Morris, Public Affairs Manager, University of Salford

November 2021

¹⁰ https://www.salford.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/1205_Social-Impact-Report_Digital.pdf