

Convention for H.E. calls for targeted government investment to save the sector

Sean Wallis introduces the Convention for H.E. statement.

The Covid-19 crisis has exposed the fragility of the current funding model of Higher Education in the UK. It has done so in dramatic fashion, with an expected loss to universities of £2.5bn per annum, and an existential threat to perhaps 30 institutions. It has exposed the inefficiency, instability and inequality between institutions and the HE sector as a whole. It has highlighted the loss of academic governance of universities as the ethos of corporate managerialism has eroded, over the last two years, both academic freedom and the idea of scholarly endeavour and higher learning as public goods.

Yet the social benefits of HE are obvious every time one turns on the TV. University research is headline news; an independently-minded, educated populace drove the UK lockdown, and resisted an early return to workplaces; mathematical models and R scores are discussed on a daily basis, thanks to a high level of education.

We need publicly-accessible, critical, independent, higher education more than ever before. But thanks to the disastrous and absurd market experiment of the last decade, HE institutions are close to financial collapse. Many staff may lose their jobs.

The *Convention for Higher Education*, <https://heconvention2.wordpress.com>, is a network of campaigns in defence of HE. It was conceived to challenge the £9k fee/loans reforms of 2010-2016 that now threaten to collapse.

In two recent Zoom-organised meetings of the Convention, with over 500 registered academic participants, the Convention outlined in a formal Statement the key principles that should underpin a reconstruction of the sector and to rescue those institutions which face insolvency. The Statement, *A New Future for Higher Education*, is published at <https://heconvention2.wordpress.com/2020/05/25/new-future-for-he>.

The current situation is unsustainable. The Conservative government is currently sitting back and allowing the market to rip, and HE managers to make cuts. The elite universities, expecting to lose overseas

student enrolments, are lobbying for bailouts that funnel greater support to themselves.

The market funding model is broken. Across Europe, non-market HE systems are not in crisis. UK schools and FE colleges do not face a collapse in income.

The Convention is not arguing for a 'bailout', but a targeted investment in education. The Statement calls on the Government to pick up 30 per cent of student fees, and to fund maintenance grants for disadvantaged social groups. It also calls for basic improvements in accountability and salary equity within the academy.

It is a credible proposal for government intervention that can garner widespread public support.

HE can play its part in offering new opportunities in a post-Covid recession. A programme of fee support and grants could allow a lost generation of working-class and BAME students to return to education. Prince Charles excoriates the Government about the plight of 18-24 year-olds. A new deal for HE can offer them a lifeline.

This is a modest and affordable proposal. A 30 per cent cut in undergraduate fees would cost around £1.2bn. By comparison, around £7.5bn in student loans are written off annually, and the Conservatives have earmarked £100bn in furlough and self-employment support. Depending on need, targeted maintenance grants might add £0.8bn to that figure. But this would be a wholly transformative offer to many people, young and old, who aspire to self-improvement while attempting to survive Covid-19 in the recession-blighted Autumn of 2020.

The Convention calls on everyone who cares about the future of education to sign the Statement, and calls on friends, family members and colleagues to sign it.

But that is not enough. We need the widest possible debate. Colleagues should approach union branches and professional associations to debate it. We should take it to our academic boards, school and faculty boards and debate it there.

Crucially we should use it to lobby MPs, and ask them to back it. As the NUS used to say, if you think education is expensive, try ignorance.