

The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP
Secretary of State for Education
House of Commons
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Sent by email only to: gillian.keegan.mp@parliament.uk

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Dear Secretary of State,

I'm writing to raise a number of concerns in relation to your government's higher education announcement this week. These concerns relate to the potentially damaging nature of the changes set out, as well as the way in which they were announced.

I am deeply concerned that rather than levelling up these measures are in fact punching down, by reinforcing the considerable structural barriers to learning that many students face.

While I understand there are very complex factors at play here these policies seem completely at odds with your government's commitment to "spread opportunity more equally across the UK" through the levelling up agenda.

How can fee changes which threaten to undermine the financial viability of foundation years be considered part of a package which, in your words, should offer students "the passport to a better future"? To extend the travel metaphor, I would suggest this move will prevent many from believing they can go on any kind of career journey.

The metrics used to focus on so-called "rip-off" courses also mean that there is a considerable prejudice against students from working-class and minority ethnic backgrounds. Simply focusing on continuation and graduate success does not take into account the social stresses that these students may be experiencing on a daily basis and which affect their achievements at university.

It is no coincidence that recent research from HEPI and London South Bank University shows that universities with a smaller number of Free School Meal (FSM) students are more likely to receive a Gold award under the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). No institution with more than a third of FSM students enrolled has achieved TEF Gold.

Rather than opening doors you risk slamming them shut by failing to take into account these much more nuanced factors. In particular, and of concern to places like Goldsmiths, is the impact these measures could have on creative arts subjects and the humanities.

With this decision I wonder how easy it will be for the next Steve McQueen or Kae Tempest to realise their ambitions and be able to share their talents with the world, with this pair having learned and grown at Goldsmiths.

Further to this, I do not for a minute believe anyone in our sector disputes that high-quality university teaching must be in place to give students the tools to achieve their ambitions. It's just that how you propose to measure this quality – and fundamentally weigh the value to society – is hugely limited.

For example, at Goldsmiths our graduates include teachers, lawyers and social workers alongside artists, musicians and designers who all benefit society using the skills learned with us. Quality – or more importantly, value – can be counted in so many different ways.

Your measures could be devastating to universities which, like Goldsmiths, continue to believe in the value of higher education and its transformative power.

This in turn risks damaging the local communities around universities, which act as civic beacons on a number of levels. From a purely economic position, we contribute a huge amount to our home borough of Lewisham, which is among England's poorest areas. This includes generating £91m for the area, supporting 2,500 jobs in the borough and a total of 3,600 jobs in London.

In addition to the substance of the changes I would also like to address the style in which it was delivered. Monday's newspaper front pages were full of "crackdowns" and "rip-offs" – language to catch the eye, certainly, but perhaps not to engage the more thoughtful parts of the brain.

I have no doubt that universities have a duty to show to the public that we remain relevant and make a hugely positive contribution to society, and that this can be challenging. But using our sector as a political football with which to rack up goals in the early stages of an election campaign is at least unhelpful and at most careless given the higher education sector is a £95 billion a year British success story.

There needs to be a far more nuanced and detailed discussion about universities. As set out in a very thoughtful long read in the Financial Times this week there is wide consensus that the broader structural problems facing our sector have been ignored by government to leave us with a broken funding system. We are now seeing the real-world impact of these challenges at universities across the UK – all of which play a vital role in their local communities and economies.

I would call on you to rethink your priorities and address these bigger issues, rather than initiatives that grab headlines but will do little to solve the great challenges facing universities. This should be done through talking and listening to the sector rather than via newspaper front pages as parliament gets ready to enter the political doldrums of recess. In this spirit, please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to discuss any of the above.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Frances Corner', written in a cursive style.

Professor Frances Corner OBE
Warden