

Press release: PM: post-18 education must work better for everyone



Prime Minister Theresa May has welcomed the findings of an independent review.

Further and higher education must work better for students, universities and taxpayers, the Prime Minister will say as she welcomes the publication of an independent review into post-18 education.

The Prime Minister ordered the review specifically to ensure young people have more choice, can access the highest quality courses, and receive the best possible value for money.

An expert panel – led by Philip Augar – has today (30 May 2019) published 53 recommendations for Government.

While their report says there are overwhelming strengths to the UK's education system, the Prime Minister strongly agrees with a number of the issues identified.

In particular, she calls for a reintroduction of student maintenance grants to support those from low income families. The report is clear that a minimum grant of £3,000 per year for the lowest income families would see debt for these students reduce by over £9,000.

Whilst those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely than ever to go to university, the Prime Minister will also say progress is too slow. Last year, some universities failed to improve their intake of students from disadvantaged backgrounds for the first time in more than a decade.

The report says the removal of maintenance grants is deterring some less well-off young people, and recognises strong concerns about the highest levels of debt being incurred by disadvantaged students following grants being abolished.

She is expected to say:

I was not surprised to see the panel argue for the reintroduction of means-tested maintenance grants both for university students and those studying for higher technical qualifications. Such a move would ensure students are supported whichever route they choose, and save those from the poorest backgrounds over £9,000.

It will be up to the Government to decide, at the upcoming Spending Review, whether to follow this recommendation.

But my view is very clear: removing maintenance grants from the least well-off students has not worked, and I believe it is time to bring them back.

The Prime Minister will also say that we must significantly increase support for further education.

Despite the Government boosting education or training places for every 16 to 19-year old, rolling out T Levels, and creating high-quality apprenticeships, she will say more must be done for the 50 per cent of young people who do not go to university.

In Germany, 20 per cent of 25-year-olds hold a higher technical qualification – yet the figure in the UK is just four per cent.

She will argue that:

By failing to equip more of our young people with the technical skills they will need to compete in the jobs of the future, we have hampered our national ability to compete on the world stage.

So reinvigorating FE is vital if we are to help all our young people develop the skills they need to get on – and if we are to truly make a success of our modern industrial strategy.

The PM is also expected to say that:

Making a success of FE is not just about increased funding – it's about giving these young people a genuine choice about their education.

So more also needs to be done to ensure that further and technical options are every bit as attractive a path for students as more academic options – including by reforming the sector so that colleges can thrive.

The Prime Minister will also call for reform to tuition fees to ensure value for money for students and the taxpayer. She will say that while the majority of courses provide good outcomes for students, this is no longer true across the board, and many courses do not cost £9,000 per student per year to teach.

She will say:

There is much to be said for the panel's proposal to cut fees and top up the money from Government, protecting the sector's income overall but focussing more of that investment on high-quality and high-value courses.

I know there are some, including the Labour Opposition, who will reject this finding because they want to abolish fees altogether.

Such a move would be regressive and destructive – hurting our institutions and limiting the opportunities for our young people.

But the Prime Minister also agrees that universities must continue to be properly funded, so that teaching grants for high value courses are protected.

In conclusion, the Prime Minister is expected to say:

I have always believed and I still truly believe that, if this is to be a country that works for everyone, then we have to make education work for everyone.

But only by taking action now will we be able to deliver the lasting change and improvements we need in further and higher education.

And give every child and young person in this country the education they need to reach their true, incredible potential.

The Government will now consider the panel's proposals carefully, and engage further with stakeholders and students, before finalising its approach at the Spending Review.