

**Immediate Release:
Government's White Paper on higher education could
damage social mobility for generations**

28 June 2011

Responding to the release of the White Paper on Higher Education, **Dr Tessa Stone, Chair of the Bridge Group**, the independent policy association promoting social mobility through higher education, said:

“The Bridge Group welcomes the Government’s focus on improving information for prospective university students, providing flexible learning opportunities and ensuring quality in higher education provision. However, we are concerned that some recommendations contained in the **White Paper could have a negative impact on widening access to higher education in the short-term and therefore social mobility in the long-term.**

“The Government seeks to create competition within the higher education sector and, in doing so, create a differentiated system. A complex higher education system requires a multifaceted and nuanced set of policy recommendations. It is therefore essential that any recommendations taken forward are pursued in consultation with the sector and those who understand the system best. **We look forward to working with relevant agencies to achieve this in relation to access to higher education.**

Information, Advice & Guidance

“The lack of access to effective information, advice and guidance (IAG) is one of the most significant brakes on access to higher education. Inadequate or inaccurate IAG can deter prospective students and engender bad decision-making. Under the new finance regime, information about financial support will be complex, differentiated by institution in terms of value but also in terms of style. The National Scholarships Programme will add to the complexity. While the Bridge Group has previously welcomed the Government’s awareness-raising campaign on student finance, **we feel that greater emphasis to address the IAG deficit is required and not sufficiently addressed in the White Paper.**

Student numbers

“**The recommendations on student numbers will reverse much of the good work that has been done to ensure admission to higher education takes account of applicants’ full potential.** In the bidding for additional places, we are concerned that low-cost courses are supported at the expense of those in high demand. This proposal is also likely to disadvantage those universities with a good track record of supporting non-traditional students into university and on into professional careers, but whose entry requirements may not reach the AAB threshold. We do not see how this is in the interest of ‘students as consumers’ as the White Paper purports.

“The Bridge Group has previously recommended that all higher education institutions should continue to be strongly encouraged to employ contextual data in the application and recruitment process. The focus on students gaining AAB at A level risks undermining universities’ willingness to try and take into account an applicant’s full potential that is not reflected by grades alone. Research has shown that comprehensive school students with grades of BBB are likely to perform just as well at university as their independent school

counterparts with grades of AAB.¹ **This proposal could significantly disadvantage students from non-traditional backgrounds as universities clamor for AAB students, without considering the context in which those grades were achieved.**

Employability

“The Bridge Group welcomes the focus on providing better information on employability. Information relating to graduate earnings and employment certainly must be improved to help students identify the potential return on investment from their course, and current indicators of employability, such as the Destination Leavers from higher education (DLHE), do not provide an accurate picture of graduate prospects.

“However, the Bridge Group has previously (1) expressed its concern that a narrow focus on graduate prospects masks the broader value of higher education and current graduate recruitment practices. This will increase the risk that students from non-traditional backgrounds in particular will narrow their choices to more apparently vocationally-focused courses rather than those that might have greater longer-term benefits or lead to high-status professional careers. This is perpetuated by the Government’s proposal to rank courses by basic indicators of employability.

Data

“The unsatisfactory and unreliable availability of data has long hindered work to promote social mobility. There are many instances where the impact of policy interventions in widening participation has been significantly diminished, not through lack of quality or appropriate timing, but by ineffective targeting and an inability to reach the right group. How data is employed and the extent to which it is used, is inconsistent. Despite the focus on more robust information for prospective students, this data is rarely presented in a form that can be employed to help inform decisions at the organisational and individual level and while we welcome the proposals in the White Paper to improve the transparency and quality of the data this must go hand in hand with effective advice and guidance for students if they are to make best use of it.”

Footnotes

(1) The Bridge Group’s initial report, *Bridging the Gaps: Current Issues and Focus for 2011/12* is available for download at: <http://www.thebridgegroup.org.uk/evidence.html>

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The Bridge Group

The Bridge Group is an independent non-partisan policy association promoting social mobility through higher education. The association offers Westminster and other influencers specialist guidance on policy, drawing on the expertise of our professional network of associates and the collation of research and evaluation.

The Bridge Group’s approach to policy is evidence-based, bridging the gaps between research, policy, and programme implementation. The Bridge Group attracts a broad range of experienced colleagues to its network of associates.

The Bridge Group’s inaugural seminar took place at Google, London in November 2010, with Alan Milburn as the keynote speaker. Its strategy report entitled ‘Bridging the Gaps: Current Issues and Focus for 2011/12’ was launched in May 2011 by Deputy Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP:

¹ Kirkup, Catherine et al (2010) “Use of an aptitude test in university entrance: a validity study”. National Foundation for Educational Research.