

# NUS: STUDENTS NOT MARKETISATION AT THE HEART OF HE POLICY

## SORANA VIERU



With the publication of Green Paper for Higher Education and the announcement of the Autumn Spending Review, the timing of this interview with NUS Vice President (HE) Sorana Vieru in November 2015 was propitious. Sorana talks about the consequences of latest HE policy from a students' perspective and sets out the current NUS line with passion and foresight.

**It is a pleasure to meet you Sorana. Tell us about your journey. How did you end up as Vice President (HE) of the NUS?**

I have always been a very political person. I was brought up to think of myself as a citizen and that you have to take your political role in society seriously. I was seven years into higher education having done an undergraduate degree, a taught Masters and with a PhD in progress. I have always been involved in student politics from the feminist society to the LGBT society and also the Labour Club. The flexible pattern of my Philosophy studies allowed me to spend a lot of time campaigning and also to put my PhD on hold. I decided to suspend my studies and to run as a Sabbatical officer before running as NUS Vice President. Having experience of many levels of higher education helps me understand many of the issues of the different student experiences.

**What should be the right balance between vocational and academic learning? I'm particularly thinking about the shift in emphasis from HE to FE.**

Although my remit only covers HE, I definitely share the view of NUS' vice president for further education. We think that the only way to address funding is to come up with a realistic, holistic and sustainable model for funding all kinds of education. Historically, the government has focused on HE in a way that saw it as the only gateway to social mobility, ignoring FE and apprenticeships and any kind of vocational training beyond Level 3 that isn't in higher education. Actually, HE is not the best choice for everyone. It is elitist to uphold the narrative that you need a HE degree in order to succeed. For a lot of people FE or an apprenticeship will be the best choice that they can make in their career and in their life and they should have a wide range of choices. But I don't think the solution is to take money out of HE for this and burden students with further debt in order to readdress the balance.

**What are your views on the Green Paper?**

It's a mixed bag. You would have seen that the NHS bursaries have been cut. This is a move we are fighting against as it is unfair and negatively affects access into NHS professions and the student nurses. It is a direct consequence of this government's attitude to the NHS. In the same way higher education is not viewed as a public good, so the NHS is not viewed as a public service. The turning of the maintenance grants into loans has also been confirmed and this is something we have been campaigning against since the summer budget announcement, so we are obviously disappointed.

**How will the Teaching Excellence Framework change the landscape?**

Greatly. We talk of the Green Paper as the biggest change to HE since 1992. It is another roll of the dice in marketing HE and fulfilling something that the tripling of the tuition fees and raising the cap to £9,000 three years ago hasn't fulfilled, which is to create a functioning undergraduate tuition market. The next stage is the introduction of the TEF. The

aim of it is to raise tuition fees further and to get tuition fee differentiation between institutions, allowing private providers to enter the system. It is a move towards marketisation and we absolutely don't believe that marketisation and competition are the way to drive teaching quality. The TEF talks about teaching quality but not in the way that we talk about it which is as students and staff working together to create the academic communities that they want – to improve learning environments and teaching, as opposed to pitting institutions against each other. It is survival of the fittest and students will bear the brunt. We believe all students are entitled to excellent teaching regardless of where they study.

**Your thoughts on the proposed Office for Students?**

I call it OFSET – Office for Students, Employers and the Taxpayer. We have done a word count on the Green Paper: there are thirty-three mentions of what employers want and only sixteen mentions of what students want. Even then it is in relation to taxpayers and employers. So no, it is not in the interests of students. The Green Paper sees universities as churning out students fit for employment afterwards rather than seeing education as a public good.

**There will be £120million worth of teaching grant cuts by 2020. The Student Opportunity Fund for the poorest and disabled within the teaching grant will be cut. Considering that the Spending Review will be setting the funding structure until at least 2020, what are your views on how widening participation will move forward in universities? What is NUS's stand?**

We were against the cuts two years ago and we are against them now. I find that the Government's rhetoric around social mobility and investing in widening participation at odds with what it actually does. For politicians, it is a ticking-the-box exercise. It means getting underprivileged students and black and minority ethnic students into places like Oxbridge, it

means uncapping students numbers and allowing more students in. Instead of setting targets they should be listening to what students are saying and supporting them to succeed, and this also means financial support. Saddling the poorest students with unprecedented levels of debt and penalising them is unfair and it is not what widening participation is about. People are put off by debt and there are cultural differences in attitudes towards debt. We have done research on the first cohort of £9k fee-paying graduates that graduated this summer and we found out that 33% of BME respondents to our survey view student debt on par with commercial debt. The political mantra disregards that. It is driven by an ideological agenda. There is also a line about how student debt isn't really a problem because 'you won't have to pay it back', which is basically like saying, 'don't worry, you'll still be poor, so you won't have to pay it back'. How is that inspirational for someone from a family with no experience of going to university?

#### **What can we do in society and in the sector to support widening participation?**

We need to talk about access beyond getting students through the door. We must look at access across the board and at success of retention because students from widening participation backgrounds are far more likely to drop out and also are subject to attainment gaps. BME students are less likely to achieve 2:1s and Firsts. The data is skewed depending on subject and institution but the BME attainment gap is 16% across the sector and from all subjects. We must restrict talking about access in terms of entering HE as it does not mean that the barriers have been removed – it is the education system itself that is inaccessible!

There are pedagogical remedies that can be applied and a lot of student unions and the NUS are campaigning to liberate the curriculum. You might have heard of the term. It means making the curriculum

more representative of the experiences of women, black, LGBT and disabled students' lives; about changing assessment methods so they work for different kinds of students. It is about creating curricula that match student needs better, not about making students fit into the mould of what succeeding at university means. Because that mould and the notion of what academic success is has been created by the ones who are privileged by the system already. Students and staff must work together to make the curriculum more representative, to make changes on assessment methods, to look at how inclusive learning spaces are (for example how inclusive is a lab to women and how does that manifest itself in the under representation of women in STEM subjects and their careers afterwards?) and to change some of the practices in seminars so that they are more inclusive.

#### **Do you think the new proposed deal on maintenance grants for part-time study will improve the current situation of declining participation?**

We have welcomed the introduction of loans to part-time study and to making that available. If you are going to have a scheme, as broken and as unsustainable as that is, at least it should be open to everyone. At least this would recognise that part-time study is the best choice and solution some students. We still, however, think that there is not enough talk about solutions to part-time education and to the decline in the number of mature students going into university. Whenever politicians talk about access and widening participation it is always about full-time undergraduate study by 18-year olds. They should realise that widening participation is about lifelong learning and mature students are way more likely to study part time than on a full-time basis.

#### **You have had a great career journey so far. Did you visit your careers service when you were at university?**

I attended two universities: Birmingham

and Bristol. They both have exceptional careers services and although I did not use the services extensively myself I think they are hugely important and that there is a bigger role for them to take on. Part of the consequences of the increased marketisation of the HE sector is universities over-focusing on employability. For many subjects this is simply not appropriate and if anything it drives consumerist behaviour from students and forgets about the development of other skills which naturally turn into transferrable skills and employability skills. I believe that employability is mainly the job of the careers service and that it should be accessible and as wide ranging as possible to all kinds of subjects and students. The NUS are supporting careers services in their very important work.

*You can find more about the NUS research and policy mentioned in this article, and much more, at [www.nus.org.uk](http://www.nus.org.uk)*