

BBC Age-related TV license policy

National Union of Students response

February 2019

Introduction

The National Union of Students (NUS) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the BBC's age-related TV licence consultation.

NUS consists of almost 600 students' unions in both the higher and further education sectors, including apprenticeship providers, and through them we represent around 7 million students, learners and apprentices across the United Kingdom. Although our members are very often young people, significant numbers of learners are from older age cohorts.

Policy background

A key focus of our work in the last few years is student poverty. We convened a commission of experts from different sectors to gather evidence and make recommendations on the nature of student poverty and the potential mechanisms to alleviate poverty and the problem it creates, and we published our report in April 2018¹.

While TV licences were not a specific focus of the report, we found that students do face significant housing costs, primarily rent but also in utilities. These costs have been rising above inflation for many years while student support has failed to keep pace.

A common complaint among students is that the law relating to licences is poorly drafted, and certain types of student accommodation, including purpose-built halls of residence and some shared flats/houses, cannot be covered by a single general licence. Instead, students must purchase individual licences, at significant cost to them given their restricted budgets.

Although this consultation does not cover students per se, we would want to highlight that TV licenses affect different groups in different ways and there is a case for wider reform of licence charges.

More generally, we tend not to talk about the issues facing students in terms of

intergenerational divides, as although some policy decisions – perhaps most notably the increase fees in England to £9,000 – have become symbolic of the way the current government has placed a greater burden on young people during austerity, the effect has been to decrease mature student participation in HE most significantly. We prefer to look at these issues via the lens of class and certain other protected characteristics as the challenges facing society are as much or more about poverty, racism, sexism and similar matters than they are generational.

Options for reform

Our view is that the BBC should reform the current TV licence concession to means-test it, given that although many pensioners have significant incomes, there are equally many who do not. It does not seem fair to subsidise licences for the wealthy of any age, when students and others on much more limited income may struggle to pay and in many cases make less use of the BBC's services.

If there remain concerns about the impact on vulnerable groups, we would support some combination of other measures. For instance, the change could be accompanied by a lowering of the age threshold 70 so as to extend the concession to those with small incomes at an earlier age, or perhaps retention of a blanket concession at a much higher age, say 90, if it was felt that managing payments becomes harder at that time.

We believe this is a fairer approach than a blanket concession for all over-75s given limited resources at the BBC and the general principle that support should be greatest for those with least ability to pay. If the Government wishes to continue to fund free licences it should do so by providing additional funds to the BBC. We would also argue DCMS should review the operation of the licence fee as it affects students to address the issues and unfairness that the current law creates.

¹ [Class Dismissed: Getting in and getting on in further and higher education](#), NUS, 2018

Contacts

NUS would be very happy to discuss our response further with the BBC. In the first instance please contact:

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