



Development Department

Your reference: Higher Education Strategy

Our reference: #115296

Being dealt with by: David Purchase

Date: 2 March 2010

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Higher Education Policy & Strategic
Development
Department for Employment and Learning
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Dear Sir or Madam,

RE: Consultation: Development of a Higher Education Strategy

Please find attached our provisional response to this consultation document. Please note that this is still subject to final ratification by full council.

Provisional Response

1.1. Overall comments

- 1.1.1. The Council is broadly supportive of the draft strategy and looks forward to seeing a more detailed proposal in due course. While not directly affected by the proposal the council sees this strategy as impacting on its work to help local businesses, grow the economy, increase employability and create jobs. The Council is already involved in several partnership programmes with the higher education sector. These include, support for students who may wish to become entrepreneurs, yearly work placements for students, and research/product development programmes.
- 1.1.2. The strategy also has implications for the Council's work with children and young people and its efforts to reduce poverty. From that perspective, the most substantive issue is that of the disincentive, particularly to those from disadvantaged areas or low income families, posed by higher student fees. Having successfully encouraged uptake of HE by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, over a period of several decades, the unintended consequence of any reduction in funding is likely to be a reversal of that success story.
- 1.1.3. Our European experience suggests that DEL's strategy should consider the EU2020 and the 7 flagships, particularly those focused on skills and innovation. All future regional and national strategies should reflect EU2020 as funding will flow from this, including the ESF that DEL manages. We also encourage reference to the opportunities for students to be internationally mobile through the EU lifelong learning programme and Framework Programme 7.

1.2. Responses to the specific questions

- 1.2.1. We have used the template you provided for specific responses. Please see the following pages.

Thank you for asking us to respond to the proposals.



Yours sincerely

David

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CONSULTATION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF A HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND QUESTIONNAIRE

A Vision for Higher Education: 2010-2020

PROPOSAL

- The Department's vision for higher education is one of a sector which is vibrant, of international calibre, which pursues excellence in teaching and research and which plays a pivotal role in the development of a modern, sustainable knowledge-based economy which supports a confident inclusive society which recognises and values diversity.

QUESTIONS

Question One

- What are your views on the vision outlined above for the development of the higher education sector up to 2020?

It seems appropriate.

A Learning Society

PROPOSALS

- Teaching and learning needs to be flexible, accessible and of the highest quality. More flexible pathways to qualifications need to be developed, with funding arrangements incentivising this change.



- The sector should seek to develop “Distinctive Northern Ireland Graduates”; graduates who possess additional skills that will place them at an advantage globally.
- A greater emphasis on part-time participation in higher education and on postgraduate research and training is required involving closer collaboration with industry and continuing Government commitment to research and development activities.
- The roles of the FECs in the provision and delivery of higher education should be further developed and fostered in partnership with the Universities and University Colleges.
- There is a need to incentivise choices for STEM areas beyond the traditional higher education courses
- There is a need for a greater emphasis on sub-degree qualifications which better meet the needs of local industry and brings Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK and Europe.
- It is imperative that we build on the success to date of widening participation to ensure access for all those who can benefit from higher education, addressing inequalities of gender and socio-economic grouping at a time of constrained resource availability.

What are your views on the above proposals?

The document makes reference to NI using its size to its advantage but does not appear to say how this can be done or what this might actually mean. It would be useful if the document elaborated on this idea to help understand how DEL intends to develop the uniqueness of our HEIs.

The document suggests that STEM courses need to be incentivised particularly as NI lags behind the UK in non-medical related STEM students. The percentage figures provided show this is not the case. They show that 27.36 NI students are studying non-medical STEM courses as opposed to 25.6% in the UK. We do not underestimate the importance of STEM subjects, we just hope your decisions have not been made on incorrect interpretation of the figures.

We also question the need to incentives STEM students on the grounds that your report already states that HE courses are provided



on the basis of demand. It seems more sensible to focus on making STEM related subjects more appealing at the school age (so that students want to continue to study them into HE) and to educate potential students as to the opportunities and higher earning potential of STEM graduates.

One of the major barriers to high quality research in UK institutions is the unpredictability of funding streams. This particularly affects full-time researchers who are often not treated equally to teaching staff in terms of pay, job security, contract conditions, etc. A practical negative impact of this is a high turnover of researchers and subsequent loss of knowledge. DEL has the opportunity to use its funding approach to address some of these problems e.g. through the use of longer-term research grants.

QUESTIONS

Question Two

- How should higher education in Northern Ireland be delivered to best support the needs of current and future learners, including those in the workforce?

The first proposal states that learning needs to be “flexible, accessible and of the highest quality.” While we agree that these are commendable aspirations, we have concerns that they may actually limit some opportunities. For example, there is potential to use associated or even third party providers of education who may be extremely flexible and accessible but ‘only’ of very good quality rather than ‘the highest quality.’

Question Three

- How can learning at higher education institutions in Northern Ireland be made distinctive from the rest of the UK, the Republic of Ireland and Europe, leading to graduates with greater employability potential?

Higher Education and the Economy



PROPOSALS

- **Research should continue to be funded at an appropriate level to enable our Universities to fulfil their central role to develop and sustain a world-class research base in Northern Ireland.**
- **Increased employer engagement with higher education and the continual development of knowledge exchange activity with businesses, the public sector and with the third sector is required.**
- **The promotion of entrepreneurship in the local economy through the higher education sector, including the development of graduates with the right set of skills necessary to compete in a global economy.**
- **Working more closely with local industry, particularly SMEs and potential investors to ensure that skills gaps are identified and addressed, putting in place flexible client-focused approaches to do so.**
- **Northern Ireland must play to its strengths, ensuring the development of a high quality skills base and a willingness to respond to investors.**
- **Cross-departmental co-operation to promote interest in, and the study of, priority subjects from an early age, achieving the right balance between these and other subject areas, whilst respecting academic freedom.**

What are your views on the above proposals?



The Council is already involved in programmes to encourage graduates to consider entrepreneurship. We also have partnerships with the HE sector to help SME's develop new products and prepare them for market. Hence we welcome the proposals and would be willing to share our experiences.

QUESTIONS

Question Four:

- How can the higher education sector maximise its contribution to Northern Ireland's economy, particularly in relation to research and development?

Our previous comments about research also apply here. The DEL is in a position, through its approach to funding research, to create a more stable environment for those interested in pursuing a career in research.

QUESTION FIVE:

- How can higher education, government and business work more effectively to identify research and development needs and improve the knowledge and skills of the current, and future, workforce?

There is a tendency for HE to think of knowledge skills, and workforce development in traditional terms of degrees, masters, etc. It should be noted that employers need staff to have new skills not necessarily new certificates and as such, short, focused programmes can be more relevant than a part-time qualification based course.

Equally students can acquire useful experience and a greater understanding of the relevance of their studies through work placement opportunities. The Council offers several placements each year and is convinced of the benefits to organisation and student. We suggest the department may be able to do more to raise awareness about placement arrangements among the private sector.



Internationally Connected

PROPOSALS

Expansion of Northern Ireland's market share within the UK in respect of

- **international activity and overseas student enrolments through the development of a unique Northern Ireland higher education selling point.**
- **Encouraging, incentivising and supporting Northern Ireland students to avail of the opportunities for international mobility.**
- **Institutions should seek to further develop their portfolio of well managed overseas institutional partnerships that benefit not only their students and institutions but Northern Ireland as a whole.**
- **Healthy and substantial international research links should continue to be fostered, for overseas trade and inward investment. In particular, HEIs should continue to work with SMEs to ensure they are well placed to reap the benefits of internationalisation.**

What are your views on the above proposals?

QUESTIONS

Question Six:

- **As higher education becomes increasingly globalised, how can Northern Ireland's institutions further expand their international portfolios, to assist not only the higher education sector, but Northern Ireland as a whole?**



The Council is involved in a number of events to promote the area internationally (EU events, MIPIM, Nashville, etc) and would welcome input from the HE sector.

Question Seven:

- How can Northern Ireland's students be encouraged, incentivised and supported to become more internationally mobile?

As in the introduction, we refer to the opportunities for students to be internationally mobile through the EU lifelong learning programme and Framework Programme 7. We try to promote these through programmes such as 'Opportunity Europe' and "Leonardo students".

Higher Education and Civil Society

PROPOSALS

- Increasing opportunities for learners to enter higher education and assist in the development of initiatives and programmes at the HEIs to ensure the establishment of an open and diverse society.
- Promoting the creation of sustainable outreach links between the HEIs and the local voluntary, community and local Government sectors, supported by external engagement committees in which all stakeholders are represented.
- HEIs working in partnership with FECs to encourage and promote the provision of higher education in enabling those from geographical 'coldspots' to benefit from a higher education experience.

What are your views on the above proposals?

QUESTIONS

Question Eight:

- How should the already established relationships and interfaces with local communities and civic society be developed further to maximise their effectiveness?



The Council already enjoys a good relationship with HEIs as referenced in the consultation document (Holylands, etc) and as previously mentioned in this consultation response. We welcome any efforts to further develop these relationships.

- Question Nine:
- If new relationships and interfaces need to be established, what should they look like?

Higher Education Finance and Governance

PROPOSALS

- Changing the funding model for higher education to a simplified system that better reflects the need for part-time, modular study to ensure flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness in higher education.
- Assessing the extent to which MaSN, as a means of controlling expenditure, is still fit for purpose.
- Considering whether the Financial Memorandum between the Department and the Universities and University Colleges takes account of the UK-wide
- HEI Financial Memoranda and also reflects the appropriate degree of assurance.
- Striking a clear balance between HEI autonomy and the role of the Department through a renewed funding and governance framework to ensure clarity in roles and responsibilities.

What are your views on the above proposals?



QUESTIONS

Question Ten:

- **How can we ensure that government funding is being used effectively to support learners and respond to economic priorities?**

While we agree that the tax payer needs to be assured that funding is being used appropriately, we would be concerned about introducing another layer of reporting. The consultation document says that Universities and Colleges are now generating “significant income from private and voluntary (trust) sources and are accountable for the use of such monies to the funder.” (p56) It seems sensible for the same accountability mechanisms to be used to satisfy the needs of DEL. Developing and implementing a system that creates duplications of reporting work will only divert resources away from teaching and research.

Question Eleven:

- **What are your views on the higher education funding model in Northern Ireland?**

We agree with the proposal that efforts should be made to create a new simplified system that better reflects the aims of this strategy and the changing climate for the education sector. However, we expect that reaching agreement on a new approach will be very difficult. Consequently we suggest that a range of basic options is considered, with reference to approaches taken elsewhere, and a review of the pros and cons of each is produced for consultation.

Question Twelve:

- **How could government funding, including student support, be revised to support modular and flexible study?**

As mentioned in the introduction, our main concern is the potential for disincentive, particularly to those from disadvantaged areas or low income families, posed by higher student fees. Having successfully encouraged uptake of HE by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, over a period of several decades, the unintended consequence of any reduction in funding is likely to be a reversal of that success story.

Question Thirteen:

- **What are your views on the cap on student numbers (MaSN)?**



The Consultation paper seems to suggest that the MaSN approach is no longer appropriate. We would prefer to see details about alternative approaches (the removed completely option on page 51) before making comment.

Implementing the Strategy

QUESTION

Question Fourteen:

- **What are your views on the establishment of a strategic implementation body to oversee implementation of the strategy when it is finalised?**

We support the proposal but would add that the implementation body also has to have the appropriate “blend of experience and expertise” *and authority*, if it is to be successful.

We welcome any additional thoughts or comments on the consultation?

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