

Rt. Hon. David Willetts MP
Minister of State for Universities and Science
Department for Business, Innovation & Skills
1 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0ET



22nd May 2014

Dear David,

We write to you on behalf of the English Learning and Sustainability Alliance, established in 2012. The Alliance brings together England's key stakeholder groups with interests in learning and sustainability, in order to inform national debates and influence policy and practice. As a 'Group of Groups', the purpose of the Alliance is to promote and influence the strategic policy discourse on learning and sustainability in all contexts across sectors and interests in England, working with key practitioners, strategic bodies and policy makers.

In setting ELSA up, we were mindful that there was no independent group to facilitate this important societal and economic challenge, and one of ELSA's key operating principles is to monitor and review national progress on learning and sustainability and make recommendations for the way ahead. This is particularly significant now because of the Global Action Plan on education and sustainability due to be launched in November at UNESCO's World Conference in Nagoya, Japan.

We wish to make two points. Firstly, we were encouraged that the 2013 government grant letter from BIS to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), as it has since 2008, highlighted the important role higher education plays in developing sustainable development within this sector of education. The letter stated:

*We thank the Council for its activity which has contributed to the HE sector's good progress in sustainable development. ... **We look forward to the development of a new sustainable development framework that should seek to build on the achievements of universities and colleges and the enthusiasm of students and continue to support institutions in their efforts to improve their sustainability.*** (para 28)

The phrase "the enthusiasm of students" is, we believe, a reference to the cumulative evidence from consecutive student surveys commissioned by the Higher Education Academy and conducted by the NUS and Change Agents-UK, in 2010, 2011 and 2012. These rigorous and extensive surveys of nearly 15,000 students have shown that students believe that employers value sustainability skills. Almost 80% of second year students surveyed view universities as key facilitators of these by bringing environmental, social and economic issues together. This gave the HEFCE a more widely accepted mandate to support and influence the development of innovative ways of leading curriculum and teaching reform within our universities. Indeed, in a similar vein, a letter sent by many the university Vice Chancellors and leading academics – which we attach – emphasized how important the grant letter from BIS was in making this a durable long-term commitment to change. We hope that the disappointing absence of any mention of sustainability in the 2014 grant letter will not lead to any dilution of HEFCE's commitment to leading this change through its soon to be published Sustainable Development Framework. Indeed, the Framework was widely supported by the sector, as evidenced by a draft consultation exercise earlier this year, and we further hope that there will be an overt reference to sustainability in the 2015 letter.

.....
ELSA brings together England's key stakeholder groups with interests in learning and sustainability. As a 'group of groups' it promotes and influences strategic policy on learning and sustainability in all contexts, across all sectors.

Our second point relates to the parliamentary reception last week (14 May) at the House of Lords to celebrate the positive impacts of the Students' Green Fund. Many of our member organisations were represented there, and we were pleased to hear your PPS speak of your commitment to this major student led initiative – indeed your speech emphasized that:

Embedding sustainability is a core purpose of higher education. The Students' Green Fund has empowered graduates to leave their time in education as part of the solution to society's environmental challenges. The Students' Green Fund brings a host of wider benefits to students and wider society, ranging from providing valuable employability skills, to strengthening community cohesion, to enhancing academic performance. All of these are core priorities not only for NUS, but for government as well.

We welcome this strategic commitment that you have made on behalf of the Coalition government. However, we are concerned that any further scaling up of this initiative could be threatened by the reduction in funding to HEFCE. Indeed, we understand that a bid for further funds for a second round of the Students' Green Fund by the NUS was recently turned down by the Council. Clearly the many university student unions that unsuccessfully bid for first round funding would have welcomed a further opportunity, as you and others acknowledge, to enhance pro-environmental behaviour across higher education.

In conclusion, and to bring our two points together, we are concerned that the student green fund 'good news story', along with the leadership shown by HEFCE, might be further compromised by the absence of any prioritization of sustainability in this year's grant letter. As noted above, we hope that this absence will be rectified next year.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Stephen Martin

on behalf of the following members of ELSA:

*Change Agents-UK
Consortium of Development Education Centres
Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges
Environmental Sustainability Knowledge Transfer Network
Forest School Association
SEEd - Sustainability and Environmental Education / SSA Sustainable Schools Alliance
South West Learning for Sustainability Coalition
TEESNet-Teacher Education for Equity and Sustainability
Transition Network
University and College Union*

cc CEOs of HEFCE, the Higher Education Academy, Universities UK

.....

Please reply to: esmartin@talktalk.net

A full list of ELSA members can be found at: www.eauc.org.uk/elsa

.....