

Draft HEFCE Business Plan 2015-2020: Questions for gathering feedback from the sector

Introduction

1. HEFCE's current Business Plan runs from 2011 to 2015. During 2014 HEFCE has been developing a new Business Plan for 2015 to 2020. Engaging with our stakeholders is fundamental to the development of our Business Plan. We have held several discussion events on particular policy areas in order to inform and shape our priorities for the next five years, as well as significant internal developmental work. We welcome comments from all our stakeholders on the overall structure and content of the plan, including our proposed objectives and performance indicators.
2. We aim to publish our new Business Plan in February 2015, reflecting as far as possible the feedback received from this exercise. A separate document will describe the main activities which will deliver our objectives for the academic year 2014-15, and how we are allocating our resources across the organisation to enable this. This document will be published alongside the five-year business plan and will be updated each year. We have also developed a risk register for each of our activities, which will be reported against regularly to our Audit Committee and Board. An initial impact assessment for the draft plan has been undertaken and is published alongside the draft plan.
3. We will commit to read, record and analyse the views of every response in a consistent manner. For reasons of practicality, usually a fair and balanced summary of responses rather than the individual responses themselves will inform any decision we make. In most cases the merit of the arguments is likely to be given more weight than the number of times the same point is made. We will publish an analysis of the responses and an explanation of how they were considered in developing our final Business Plan.
4. Please send your comments via e-mail to businessplan@hefce.ac.uk by 1700 on **Wednesday 3 December 2014**.

Questions

Your details:

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Responding as on behalf of: The English Learning and Sustainability Alliance [ELSA]

The English Learning and Sustainability Alliance was 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 launched this month at UNESCO's World Conference in Nagoya, Japan.

Section One

In Section One of this draft plan we have set out an overview of our Business Plan and our planned commitments and priorities over the next five years (2015-2020).

Question 1

This draft plan sets out the vision and broad strategic direction for HEFCE over the next five years. Do you agree with the focus of the plan? If not, what do you feel should be the focus?

We think that there is insufficient focus on sustainability in the document. A number of the points that we shall make will relate to this, but here are two specific examples from the teaching & learning section of the draft business plan.

Section #5 of the draft plan says: "We will also pilot new approaches to measure students' learning, and we will explore how we might measure any increases in their social capital and social agency." We strongly urge you to relate these measures more explicitly to aspects of sustainability, since students and graduates are clearly increasingly interested in making a difference in the world. We would like you to spell this out clearly in your Plan, in order to help institutions make the linkage, and encourage their students to take appropriate action in their personal, professional and civic lives after graduation.

Section #6 of the draft says that the Council will make appropriate changes to the National Student Survey after consultation and careful piloting. We are very supportive of the Council's doing that. In particular, we think you should be responding to the findings of the research that NUS, HEA and Change Agents UK has been doing for a number of years now on students' attitudes towards sustainability, as reflected in their experience of tuition and the wider activities of their institution. We would like you to commit to introducing an element to the NSS that focuses on the growing evidence that students want their university courses to include sustainability because this would further stimulate institutional interest.

NB, see also #55g where the NSS is also mentioned.

Question 2

Are any areas not covered that you would have expected to see identified as priorities or commitments?

We are disappointed to find so little mention of sustainability in the document. In particular, that there is no mention of sustainability in the *Education: Teaching & learning* section of the draft. We actually find it doubly surprising given, [i] the considerable amount of money and other resource that HEFCE has provided over the last few years to support a focus on sustainability within teaching and learning provision; and [ii] the way that this commitment is supported in the Council's sustainable development framework and action plan that is soon to be published. It is almost as if the business plan had been written without reference to the action

plan.

We express similar disappointment not to see sustainability featured in the Knowledge Exchange section, given how much of universities' activities (carbon reduction; energy efficiency measures; curriculum initiatives etc) now focus, one way or another, on sustainability. Sustainability is also a key element of the knowledge exchange activities of BIS, as represented in the work of Innovate UK and the Knowledge Transfer Network, which underpins the UK's action to increase the level of innovation in industry and business through open innovation between universities and industry. It remains critically important that students in all disciplines are given a clear steer on this.

We cannot help but note that we are making this response in the week when the Alliance has received a letter from the Rt. Hon. Greg Clark MP, Minister of State for Universities and Science. In this, he invites us to share his delight "in the recent favourable verdict on HEFCE's work in the area of sustainability" by UNESCO in its report *Shaping the Future we Want*. This concluded that "... HEFCE has provided leadership, resources and targets for whole-institutional change towards sustainability ...". We acknowledge that this has been the case, and we are appreciative of it. Our point, however, is that the Minister could not write so positively about what HEFCE is now doing, and proposes to do, through this plan as currently set out.

Question 3

Do you think the priorities set out in this draft plan will enable HEFCE to respond sensibly and effectively to changes during the next five years?

Up to a point, yes. There is much here that is both sensible and expected. Our 'point', of course, is that the draft plan brings little focus to bear on sustainability. We are aware of how much the Council is going to focus on sustainability over the coming period, and that it will encourage institutions to do so, because we have seen what we believe to be near final drafts of your sustainable development framework and action plan. It is, therefore, difficult to understand why so little of the latter finds its way into this document. How is it, we wonder, that what is in an action plan can feature so little in a business plan?

We are aware, of course, that you do focus on this in section #42, but what you say there is poorly focused. There is a commitment "to maintain strong relationships" with a host of other bodies, and "to support further investment, sharing of good practice, and innovative activity". We think it unfortunate that you do not spell out in here your links with universities themselves, and how you are going to support them, and encourage them to collaborate for sectoral and societal benefit. Again, this is where some detail from the sustainable development framework and action plan could be introduced to add substance to the text.

Question 4

Have we appropriately covered the key partnership dimensions in the 'working in partnership' section of this draft plan?

No response.

Section Two

In Section Two of this draft plan we outline our draft objectives and proposed performance indicators for each of our directorates over the next five years.

Question 5

Do you have any comments on the draft objectives for:

- finance and funding
- research, education and knowledge exchange
- institutions
- analytical services
- regulation and assurance?

In section #55e, you say: “Within all of the objectives above [ie, 55a to 55d], to secure the value of higher education for the economy and society, supporting economic growth and cultural and social prosperity.” In 2014, to highlight these aspects without mentioning sustainability seems, at best short-sighted. Indeed, the Department of Business Innovation and Skills policy on the green economy specifically mentions the important role that universities can play in supporting research, innovation and skills development for this potentially important contribution to the UK’s economy.

Section #57 says: “The Institutions Directorate aims to develop trusted, professional relationships with higher education providers and their stakeholders. It gathers ‘rich’ intelligence, knowledge and insight into higher education providers, shares good practice appropriately across the sector, and offers specialist expertise in estates management, equality and diversity, *sustainable development*, and governance.”

This ‘aim’ is obviously laudable, but in relation to sustainable development, does the Council’s Institutions Directorate really have the “specialist expertise” to offer to institutions? Isn’t it the case, that it is the institutions which may well have this expertise? And should not the Council be setting out to enable institutions to share this rather than asserting it can do this on its own?

Question 6

Do you have any comments on the proposed performance indicators for:

- finance and funding
- research, education and knowledge exchange
- institutions
- analytical services
- regulation and assurance?

We note that section #57f says: “Support the continuing development and sharing of leading practice in relation to sustainable development in the sector, equality and diversity, and an efficient and effective higher education workforce.” Whilst we applaud this, we also note that the metrics set out in the “*We will know we are succeeding when ...*” section are limited. They currently are: “#57g The fourth Revolving Green Fund [RGF] is allocated in full and subsequently evaluated positively. The progress the HE sector has made towards its carbon reduction goals is maintained, with a target of 43 per cent further reduction by 2020 compared with a 2005 baseline.”

We would make a number of points about all this:

[i] the 2020 target figure falls at the end of this reporting period, and so little sensible will be said about it until that time. Therefore that only leaves the revolving green fund [RGF].

[ii] We are surprised that the RGF is the only carbon focused initiative mentioned. Is there nothing else to be said here?

[iii] In relation to the RGF, we applaud the focus on evaluation, and would wish that this condition had been applied in the past to all sustainability-related funding supplied by HEFCE.

[iv] a wider point here is that, looking ahead, and more widely than the RGF, we think that the Council should make evaluation a key part of all its sustainability-focused funding. Indeed the HEFCE's Catalyst Fund which prioritises innovation in sustainable development including aspects of new curriculum provision – should be evaluated as a matter of urgency – since this has a particular significance in disseminating the way universities respond to the sustainability agenda. V Metrics, which capture the way universities are contributing towards the green economy, would support national policy and provide empirical evidence for successive governments to assess its effectiveness.

Question 7

Do you have any other comments on the draft plan?

No.

Question 8

Alongside this draft plan we have also published a draft impact assessment. Please provide any comment on whether we have sufficiently considered the impact of this draft plan.

We have two points here:

1.

In terms of sustainable development, you say no more here than you do elsewhere; you just repeat what is in the main document. That may well be your purpose, but it does not help the reader understand the issues. For example, you write: "We are committed in this plan to continue to support best practice in estates management, sustainable development and carbon reduction." We think, however, that the phrase "best practice in ... sustainable development" is far too vague to be useful. It would be better for everyone if you were to exemplify what you mean.

2.

We are astonished to find these two paragraphs next to each other in the Impact statement:

[i] We have judged that this draft Business Plan will impact **positively** on sustainability. We are committed in this plan to continue to support best practice in estates management, sustainable development and carbon reduction. We will continue to maintain strong relationships with the relevant sector bodies and with third-party funders, to support further investment, sharing of good practice, and innovative activity.

[ii] A primary aim of this Business Plan, and therefore of the work of the organisation over the next five years, is to support an economically sustainable world-leading

sector. Public finances are likely to remain stretched in the period of this Business Plan, and correspondingly there will be a sharpening focus on evidencing the efficiencies delivered by the sector. We are committing in this Business Plan to working with sector organisations to support the delivery of further sustainable efficiency savings. This work will seek to enhance the financial viability of institutions and the sector as a whole..

The first is about sustainability in the sustainable development sense. The second is not; it's about sustainability in the enduring / continuing sense. Our point is that it is crass to use "sustainability" in this way in a document that focuses on *sustainable development*; they are different concepts. We think you might mean "economically viable" in the second paragraph, although we do not understand the phrase "sustainable efficiency savings".

The third paragraph, on research, also uses "sustainability" in this enduring / continuing sense. We think you need to draft this document much more carefully.

Contributed on behalf of the following members of ELSA:

Change Agents UK

Consortium of Development Education Centres

EAUC – Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges

Forest School Association

NUS – National Union of Students

SEEd / SSA – Sustainability and Environmental Education / Sustainable Schools Alliance

Society for the Environment

South West Learning for Sustainability Coalition

TEESNet

Transition Network

UCU – University and College Union

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Please reply to: w.a.h.scott@bath.ac.uk

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

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