

Sustainable development in higher education: Consultation on a framework for HEFCE

Response from the EAUC and its Membership
7 February 2014

While the EAUC Membership welcomes the Framework, our concern is that HEFCE's approach isn't aspirational enough especially in regard to leadership, ESD, research and carbon reduction targets.

Supporting Green Academy and funding a 0.5 FTE academic lead is good but HEFCE could do more to expect HEA to have greater synergy with its values. HEFCE needs to overcome its historical reluctance to talk about learning. The commitment of HEA to sustainable development is unclear and this is a major obstacle for the sector to make substantive progress. Equally unclear is HEFCE's own commitment to sector Scope 3 carbon reduction targets. This is now sending mixed signals to the sector which isn't helpful.

EAUC values HEFCE's commitment to this agenda, but we recognise that HEFCE does not have the same opportunities it previously did and hence fear that the Framework as is will easily be ignored. However where HEFCE does have power now is in empowering students to drive change. We welcome the Green Fund but more can be done to champion the student voice and the new relationship between students and sector professionals as reflected in the new staff/student approach to EAUC Membership. HEFCE must do more to ensure that sustainability is included in the NSS and we encourage it to do that. As called for in the recently launched Manifesto-Enabling The Future We Want, an organisation such as HEFCE is uniquely well placed to play a connecting and collaboration building role across government departments, students, NGOs and the business sector to ensure young people are sufficiently prepared for the opportunities and challenges of a green and fair economy. Similarly HEFCE could lead on better coordination between government departments on how they can better collaborate to support learning for sustainable development. HEFCE has a potentially powerful role to play and we encourage it to be more ambitious.

The sector suffers a lack in leadership for sustainability. Our concern is that a reading of the Framework reflects the agenda still as only a 'nice to have' at best and at worst 'an irrelevance'. The Framework is weak on UUK and HEA influence and the EAUC welcomes the more advanced and constructive approach with LFHE.

UUK consistently fails to give leadership in this regard with the Framework's only references to UUK being based on resource efficiency which while being a significant agenda, it is only one aspect of social, economic and environmental sustainability. As the sectors lead body for sustainability the EAUC aspires to help sector leaders come to see the business value of embedding the principles and values underpinning sustainability into day to day governance, risk management, long term strategic and financial planning and to the heart of the mission of the institution. The EAUC has committed to building such a business case in partnership with sector agencies and we encourage HEFCE to be part of this. Similarly our emerging work with senior leaders to co-design new models of organisational leadership would benefit from HEFCE advice and support when at an appropriate stage.

EAUC Members ask how achievement of the draft HEFCE Vision will be measured particularly as there has been no evaluation of the impact of the previous Strategy? And, how will universities be recognised as leaders in society's efforts? And by whom? The EAUC

believes that more could be done by HEFCE to require public benefit/CSR accounting and reporting to be recognised as good practice by all institutions. The EAUC can help with this given the whole-institution accountability and improvement offered by the LiFE Index which will soon be released in a radical new format, and be free to most of the sector. Our intention is to put students into the heart of LiFE accreditation and we are currently in dialogue with NUS regarding this. Putting 'students into the heart of the system' is still work in progress for us all but the EAUC welcomes the emerging new generation of partnerships and collaborations across the sector. While it's tempting to simply pass the baton to students and tell them to get on with it, the more impactful (and arguably more sustainable) approach is to find a fundamentally new relationship and dynamic between university staff and students. We have not found this yet but the EAUC is committed to being the space where this interface happens and new models created and trialed.

Regarding improving the Revolving Green Fund, comments from EAUC Members included the benefit of allowing longer paybacks and whether large scale projects could have less restricted timescales on when the RGF money has to be spent. The EAUC would like to work with HEFCE on creating additional models of revolving funds to increase the sectors access to finance as we need more investment capital.

To quote Jeffrey Sachs, Director of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network:

"Success in sustainable development, will require new science-based solutions. Success will require an unprecedented integration of insights across various disciplines, including earth systems sciences, public health, civil engineering, information technologies, economics, politics, law, business and much more.

Only universities bring together this range of knowledge (hence their "universality"). Universities are therefore critical stakeholders for success.

To an unprecedented extent, universities must partner with government, business and civil society to take on the great challenges of sustainable development that lie ahead."

The question is whether the draft HEFCE Framework will really be the call to action we need? The EAUC fears not, but we are committed to partnering with HEFCE, student bodies and other key stakeholders to find a new approach to turn this stalemate around.

Could it be that we are barking up the wrong tree? Is our mistake that we think that a separate stand-alone framework will deliver the change we seek? Is it time for a completely new approach in which HEFCE could show profound and inspirational leadership? A new approach in which we abandon 'stand-alone sustainability' and move to one in which we embed the principles and values of sustainability into the sectors existing policy infrastructure. Perhaps it's not so surprising that the sector struggles to embrace what it sees as an additional, separate agenda. Sustainability isn't about doing different things but doing what we do now differently.



Iain Patton, CEO, EAUC