



# **Future of HE Review: informal responses from members of the National Student Forum**

**17/02/2009**

## Background

DIUS is currently working towards creating a framework that will set out how the English Higher Education sector will develop over the next ten to fifteen years. This framework is scheduled for publication in 2009, to coincide with the independent fees review scheduled for the same year. The first step in creating this framework saw DIUS commission nine contributions from expert individuals and bodies within the Higher Education Sector setting out how they propose the HE sector needs to progress. The second step is to understand how users of Higher Education, including students and industry, would like to see the HE sector develop within this timeframe. Part of this involves DIUS seeking users' views on the contributions commissioned during step 1. DIUS asked members of the National Student Forum to give a student perspective on the contributions, and on the issues more broadly.

The discussion took place at the induction session of the Forum's second year, with nine out of 17 members present. The opinions expressed below should therefore be viewed purely as those of some individual Forum members, rather than as a formal NSF response or statement of position.

## Approach

Prior to the induction event members familiarised themselves with the main recommendations outlined in each of the nine reports (as provided in a summary by DIUS). Members were then given an overview of the framework and their place within it by Claire Wilkinson, a member of Andrew Battarbee's (DIUS policy lead for the Future of HE) team.

Members chose the contributions that most interested them: UUK's *The Demographic Challenges Facing HE*; Paul Ramsden's *Teaching and the Student Experience*; Nigel Thrift's *Research Careers in the UK* and Christine King's *Part Time Study in Higher Education*. They then divided into small breakout groups ranging from two to five in size to discuss these in more detail.

## Overall response

In general, NSF members felt that the topics chosen for contributions were the right topics. When they were asked what areas were missing one student suggested lifelong learning, while another thought that universities should be looking at how they can build loyalty and bring in endowments. One student expressed surprise that Online Innovation was a separate report to Teaching and the Student Experience, as he felt the two issues should be intricately linked.

### 1. 'The Demographic Challenges Facing HE'

Two members chose to look at UUK's report into 'Demographic Challenges Facing HE.' They felt that, from a student perspective, there seemed to be a surprising emphasis on business models and funding as opposed to the demographic aspects that they might have expected it to focus on.

*"The report shouldn't just be talking about age – and it should be focusing more on the different demographic groups than on payment and funding."*

The two members looked at the five recommendations as articulated in the summary:

*Recommendation 1: Universities should be supported to excel in their core missions, and make their own decisions about how far those missions extend (e.g. by running facilities which benefit the communities in which they are based), creating the right conditions for them to compete successfully with other international systems and private providers.*

The members thought this recommendation potentially risked giving the public the message that universities wished to be left alone to compete internationally without taking into consideration the changing demographic needs of the country. They believed that this did not give a positive message to students and that, as universities receive public funding, it is only right that their missions should take account of wider public interest.

*Recommendation 2: The current levels of concentration of research funding to institutions should be maintained, so as not to bring about regional disparities or to undermine the dynamism of the research base.*

While the two members broadly agreed with this statement, they recommended that universities should also be rewarded financially if they are able to bring in more non-traditional students. Perhaps there needs to be a new look at how universities are funded so that public interest values can be embedded in otherwise autonomous institutions?

*Recommendation 3: Collaboration between universities and further education colleges should increase, but without the difference in their missions and purpose becoming blurred.*

As a response to this recommendation the members challenged DIUS to give more direction as to who is responsible for students undertaking degrees in Further Education institutions. They felt that, currently, these students are 'falling through the cracks.' They wanted further clarity about who is responsible for supporting this student group.

*Recommendation 4: Universities should continue to prepare students for a career and for life – not a single job.*

Members felt this was a laudable approach. NSF discussions over the past year and a half have often focused on the need for universities to take a more holistic approach to students and to give them a variety of skills that are transferable between many careers. Members recognise their university experience will not just benefit them professionally, but also personally. They value the opportunity to develop 'soft skills' as well as academically related skills.

*Recommendation 5: Funding for interaction between universities and business should be consistent and more predictable, so that the boundary between universities and industry becomes more permeable.*

Again, the members felt that this was a good point, but emphatically stated that 'businesses should not dictate what universities get money for.'

### **Demographic challenges: a student's perspective**

The members presented their own view of the demographic challenges they felt the UK was currently facing and made some recommendations to help the UK HE sector deal with these challenges. They outlined the following groups of students that they thought would need specific provision in the future: students of faith, widening participation students (students from less advantaged backgrounds and disabled students), students of ethnic minority, mature and part time students, international students and traditional students.

They made the following tentative recommendations for each of the above student groups, stressing that these were purely some of the issues resulting from a brief conversation.

- **Students of faith:** More 'safe spaces' should be introduced within universities, for example, alcohol free areas.
- **Students from ethnic minorities:** Universities should market themselves correctly and use student ambassadors that genuinely reflect the student demographics at their institution.
- **Mature and part time students:** Universities should provide time for all students with an individual tutor. They should have extra support, for example, study skills sessions should be available to students that have not been in formal education for considerable periods of time – this is not about spoon feeding these students, but about providing them with much needed extra support. The members also recommended that these students need to have increased funding that takes account of their specific needs (e.g. childcare for mature students, access to student loans for part-time students and, occasionally, access to housing benefits).
- **Mature students:** Mature students need to be provided with childcare and housing, and the curriculum needs to be made more flexible to allow it be taught in modules. They noted that currently the cost of flexible learning is much more expensive than more traditional modes of study.
- **Students from less advantaged backgrounds:** Some universities are more difficult for poorer students to attend e.g. Cambridge University does not allow their students to work during term time. Policies such as these need to be reconsidered if students from less advantaged backgrounds are truly to be encouraged to attend.

- **International Students:** Universities are likely to look internationally for 18-21 year old students because of the growing diversification of the student body at home, the ageing population, and the subsequent decline in 'traditional UK students.' There is an ethical issue here - universities should not be allowed to use international students as 'cash cows.' Universities also need to be more aware of the different learning styles that international students bring and ensure provision is made for them to catch up the skills they may have missed.
- **'Traditional' students:** Some traditional students from middle class backgrounds can no longer afford to go to university because their parents earn too much for them to qualify for all funding – but won't support them. Government needs to recognise that these parents do not have a legal responsibility to pay for their children's education, nor may they be able to afford to send them to university. Currently, means testing does not take into consideration how many children a middle-class family has in university, if students actually receive financial support from their parents or if, indeed, students are estranged from their families. The workings of means testing needs to be revisited to find a fairer solution for all students.

## 2. Teaching and the Student Experience

This was a popular choice for members to work on, demonstrating that – despite the diversity of issues under consideration - teaching and the student experience is still paramount for students. In general, the members agreed with the report's recognition that students' satisfaction levels are high, but they did report that this was a simplified view and that while some students view their teaching as excellent, others do not.

### Students as co-developers of curriculum

The members working on this topic agreed that there should be more collaboration between students and universities, particularly in the development of curriculum. While they recognised that students do not necessarily know what they need to learn, they do feel students have a valuable contribution to make in terms of teaching methods and flexibility, for example, and they can provide useful guidance to lecturers in what material will keep them engaged. They felt that, at present, students do not feel like co-producers of curriculum. The members recognised that student union representatives can help gather student opinion and, in turn, feed this to curriculum developers. However, they also understood that this way of working was not yet being widely implemented and was not being used by more than a handful of students. It was suggested that universities develop systems to allow students to inform curriculum decisions in a more regular and meaningful way.

### Teaching

In agreement with the report, there was a feeling amongst members that teaching needs to be better recognised by institutions, and, more importantly, by funding bodies. A small number of members felt that some lecturers appeared to view teaching as 'a necessary evil' rather than as a fundamental and important component of their positions. This bias, they believed, was reinforced by funding priorities that saw 19 universities share 76% of the research income last year. Members would like to see an increased emphasis on teaching standards, perhaps incentivised by extra funding. Members also wanted universities to improve their sharing of good practice across the sector.

Members believed that teaching is still too focussed on traditional students who don't have any particular special needs, and felt that universities still had some way to go in learning to teach different kinds of students, and students with special needs.

## Funding

Funding as a lever to motivate universities to change also featured in the members' recommendation that funding allocations be shared out equally between the disciplines. They felt that, currently, sciences and vocational disciplines are favoured over arts and humanities subjects. They recognised that there needs to be some correlation between the needs of the economy and university emphasis, but not at the expense of 'the softer subjects.'

## Information, Advice and Guidance

Members agreed with the report that there is a large gap between students' perceptions of what to expect at university before entering, and their actual experiences upon entry. The members pointed to the recommendations on IAG made in their annual report, specifically the need for a central portal for IAG.

## 3. Research Careers in the UK

The two members who chose to focus on Research Careers in the UK noted that research careers are not considered well paid and so there is a reliance on the presumption that people will follow this career path 'for the love of it.' They felt that in order to avoid a 'brain drain' from the UK, salaries in this field needed to be raised to parallel salaries in the US.

## Information, Advice and Guidance

Careers Guidance, it was believed, about Research Careers is virtually nonexistent, both prior to entering study, and during study. Members gave the example that those studying for a PhD are not given any formal structured guidance on how to better market themselves. Some supervisors do provide this on an ad hoc basis, but it is not common.

In addition, these members suggested that progression routes within research careers are not clear and people don't know what progression routes are available. They felt that both of the below recommendations made by Nigel Thrift would help alleviate this, and make these careers seem more viable and attractive.

- Subject associations should work in partnership to promote careers in research at an early stage by working more intensively with school teachers to inform them of the possibilities for their pupils.
- Research Councils should work with universities, research institutes, charities and industry to develop a national Research Experiences Programme for undergraduate students.

## Funding

Members noted the disparity in opportunities between researchers with funding from a research council, and those on university scholarships. They understood that students on research council grants had many more opportunities than those not. This disparity, they recommend, should be addressed and opportunities should be equally available.

## Widening Participation

- "Universities should consider whether the widening participation agenda applies to postgraduate study and, if so, what might realistically be done to improve matters."

It was agreed that widening participation for postgraduate students should be an important focus over the coming years. Members suggested that this would not only benefit students from less advantaged backgrounds, but it would also provide role-models amongst academics and, thus, encourage other non-traditional students to consider a career in research.

#### **4. Part Time Study in Higher Education**

The same two members who discussed research careers also briefly looked at the recommendations made by Christine King about Part Time Study in Higher Education. They agreed with King's findings that the vocabulary surrounding flexible study, part time students and non-traditional students can be confusing, isolating and disadvantageous. They felt that this 'jargon' should be simplified and students should be called, simply, students.

One member (with experience at a leading university for part-time students) felt that Britain was a world leader in flexible learning and recommended that leading universities should share best practice with other institutions – but highlighted that this would need an injection of capital investment.

The members also recommended enabling trial periods of part time study so that people can experience for themselves how flexible university study can be.

#### **5. Ongoing Review**

During Event 1, of the second year of the National Student Forum, members agreed that ongoing review of the future of HE debate was important. The members believed their input into this debate could help inform future policy in Higher Education. Consequently, they have agreed to re-visit the debate later in the year, and the Vice-Chair and a Forum member will be joining the Future of HE debate event in late February 2009.