

UK higher education sector response

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UK Higher Education Sector Response to the European Commission public consultation on the future of the EU cohesion policy

Introduction

1. This UK higher education (HE) sector response has been coordinated by the UK HE Europe Unit¹ with particular input from the HE ESF Unit².
2. The response focuses on what it sees as the most relevant areas identified in the Fourth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion, namely:
 - The contribution of higher education to social cohesion;
 - The Lisbon strategy;
 - Management of future programmes;
 - Skills for the future;
 - Graduate retention and demographic change;
 - Climate change; and
 - Regional cooperation.

The contribution of higher education to social cohesion

3. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are crucial economic players in the UK. They are an important motor of wealth creation, social cohesion and regional partnerships. UK HEIs have diverse missions according to their foundation and disciplinary specialism, but all play a central role in the regeneration and cultural life of their communities and have an important contribution to make to cohesion policy.

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¹ The UK HE Europe Unit is a sector-wide body which raises awareness of the European issues affecting UK HE and coordinates the UK's involvement in European HE initiatives and debates. The Unit is jointly funded by UUK, the three HE funding councils of England (HEFCE), Wales (HEFCW), and Scotland (SFC), GuildHE and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). www.europeunit.ac.uk

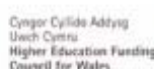
² Higher Education ESF Services Ltd (HE ESF Unit) was established in 1991 to manage the HE Sector responsibilities under the ESF Objective 3 Programme in the UK. It is a company of Universities UK and GuildHE. Since 2001, the Unit has managed national ESF projects for the HE Sector in England. www.heesf.ac.uk

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4. During the 2000-2007 programming period HEIs in the UK developed a wealth of experience in organising and delivering structural fund supported activity, particularly in the area of widening participation. HEIs mounted a range of activities designed to recruit and retain individuals who would not otherwise have considered higher education as an option. Many individuals have therefore acquired qualifications and skills that not only increase their employability but also enable them to participate more fully in all aspects of social life.

5. A Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commissioned report³ found that HE qualifications contribute to social mobility particularly for those who start off at the lower levels of the socio-economic status scale. It also found evidence of greater social tolerance among graduates, a higher probability of voting in general elections and greater community activity through participation in voluntary activities. The report concludes that the expansion of higher education to produce more graduates can only be seen as beneficial in terms of a political agenda that sees social cohesion as a primary goal.

The Lisbon strategy

6. Higher education has a central role to play in achieving the aims of the EU's Lisbon strategy. If Europe is to achieve the goals of growth and employment, social cohesion and better levels of research intensity, EU institutions need to make the Lisbon strategy a bigger priority than it is today. The EU Council of Ministers, the European Parliament and the European Commission should actively and publicly pursue the goals of the Lisbon agenda. Specifically, the spending under the EU Budget should properly reflect the importance of the Lisbon strategy.

7. The Fourth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion shows that many policies link into and affect cohesion policy. The UK HE sector would wish to see cohesion policy more clearly aligned with research and innovation, particularly in relation to the 7th Framework Programme, regional, environmental, energy and training policies. Without these synergies, the maximum potential benefits from Community action cannot be achieved.

Management of future programmes

8. The UK HE sector welcomes the simplification of structural fund regulation and processes for 2007-2013. It will be important that structural funding beyond 2013 is delivered in as simple a way as possible, minimising bureaucracy for applicants.

9. The sector also believes that cohesion policy should complement and seek to add value to regional and local strategies as well as policies operating at national and EU level. EU policies should not impose a 'top down' approach but rather build on existing initiatives in member states. Cohesion

³ "Revisiting the benefits of Higher Education", A report by the Bedford Group for Lifecourse and Statistical Studies, Institute of Education, HEFCE 2003. http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2003/rd05_03/rd05_03.pdf

policy should recognise and take into account the diversity of Europe's regions and enable regional and local partners to develop appropriate interventions without duplicating existing activities.

Skills for the future

10. Higher education is centrally placed to deliver the workforce needed for a highly skilled knowledge-based economy. Research published by the UK Council for Industry and Higher Education⁴ shows that high-level skills are crucial in securing a competitive advantage in the global economy. Leaders and senior managers from a wide range of multinational business agree that the UK HE sector has:

- problem-based learning at its core, which fosters attitudes that challenge received wisdom and stimulate innovation, and;
- universities that have a culturally diverse student body, seeing diversity as a strength which, again, encourages attitudes conducive to innovation.

11. The Leitch review⁵ commissioned by the UK Treasury on the UK's long term skills needs identified improved skills, including higher level skills, as critical to UK competitiveness in the future. The review concluded that skills must be demand led rather than centrally planned. It is therefore important to recognise future skills needs as these will vary between regions and should be identified at regional and local level and take into consideration the needs of employers and learners. In the UK, regional partnerships are tasked, and should continue to be tasked, with identifying skills needs in their own regions. Partnerships consist of the relevant public sector agencies and employers organisations. The UK HE sector believes that this ambitious agenda is essential given the accelerating forces of globalization and the likely shifts in employment patterns by 2020. UK experience in this area can inform EU policy developments.

12. The Fourth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion refers to critical competencies for globally competitive regions. Whereas skills might be defined as being the capabilities and expertise required for a particular occupation or activity, competencies are general descriptions of the behaviour and underlying characteristics needed to successfully perform a particular role at the required level. Competencies will vary from occupation to occupation.

Graduate retention and demographic change

13. During the 2000-2007 programming period, a number of HEIs developed programmes designed to retain graduates in the Objective 1 and 2 areas of the UK. These programmes helped graduates secure employment and also enabled local economies to hold onto young highly qualified individuals.

⁴ "International Competitiveness. Businesses Working with UK Universities", Council for Industry and Higher Education, May 2006. <http://www.cihe-uk.com/docs/PUBS/0605ICSummary.pdf>

⁵ "Leitch Review of Skills, Prosperity for all in the global economy - world class skills", December 2006. http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/6/4/leitch_finalreport051206.pdf

14. Demographic changes, for example the ageing population and changes linked to globalisation and enlargement, present a significant challenge to the economic development of regions. In addition to graduate retention activities, there is a need to support regions in attracting graduates and others with relevant skills, helping to create business clusters, and improving networks across Europe. Tackling the impact of demographic change on regions will also require ongoing research, which should be used to underpin future policy developments.

15. UK experience can inform discussions in this area. In some parts of the UK, for example Wales, HEIs perform particularly well in the recruitment of 21-year-olds and above. This high level of re-engagement is due to a strong part-time base and well-established initiatives to widen access to higher education in all communities. UK experience can inform discussions in this area.

Climate change

16. UK evidence suggests that the environmental related employment sector continues to expand in response to the sustainability agenda. However competitive pressures coupled with student debt burden from undergraduate studies, make it difficult for both employers and individuals to meet the high cost of such training programmes. Cohesion policy can, through structural fund support, assist companies and individuals to meet the cost of high-level training in environment related subject area.

17. Over the last fifteen years, structural funds have enabled many HEIs to develop programmes of education and training that have increased the number of suitably qualified environmental scientists and technicians. The funds have enabled HEIs to develop links with small and medium sized enterprises that have aided the transfer of new, environmentally friendly, technologies from academia to the business community.

18. In addition to environmental research and skills development, the response to climate change will require research to inform regional public policy, including town planning, building design and public health research. All of these offer significant potential for links with the EU research programmes and for collaboration between European regions and beyond.

Co-operation between regions

19. The UK HE sector welcomes the opportunity to work with other regions to share its experience on issues such as widening participation, entrepreneurship and knowledge transfer. It is important that cohesion policy supports the development of transnational activity. Existing EU funding for joint HE programmes and research collaboration provide opportunities for students, academics and staff from different member states to study /work together. These links encourage the better understanding and appreciation of different social and cultural realities that in turns create, support and strengthen European cohesion.

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