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UK HE sector response to the EU Green Paper – Promoting the learning mobility of young people

UK HE sector response

1. The UK Higher Education Europe Unit has produced this response to the Green Paper on the mobility of young people¹. The response reflects the views of the UK higher education (HE) sector, comprising individual higher education institutions (HEIs) and stakeholders. It does not contain examples of good practice as requested in the Green Paper; these will be submitted in the responses from individual UK HEIs. The UK HE Europe Unit response focuses on the areas of the Green Paper which come under its policy remit, namely:
 - Improving the information and guidance on mobility
 - What are the main barriers to mobility and how can they be addressed?
 - Promoting mobility to and from the European Union
 - Ensuring the high quality of mobility
2. The UK HE sector welcomes the European Commission's Green Paper on the mobility of young people as a reflection of the importance of this issue in achieving the goals of the Lisbon Agenda.

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. www.europeunit.ac.uk

Identification of mobile students

3. The UK HE sector would firstly like to highlight the importance of evidence-based policy making. European HE stakeholders within the Bologna Process have identified the lack of comparable data as an impediment to agreeing effective policies on mobility. In common with most countries, the UK has no mechanism for the direct identification of UK nationals who undertake a full programme of study overseas. Students who are mobile for the purposes of accumulating academic credit or for a work placement are easier to track since they will by definition be undertaking a programme of study at a UK HEI and thus be captured in the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data set. However, even at this level, it is almost impossible to document all mobile students due to the diversity of institutional links.
4. The European University Association, Education International (EI) and European Students' Union (ESU) are cooperating on a definition of mobility which complements that in the Green Paper. The draft definition mirrors current Bologna Process discussions and this Green Paper by emphasising that mobility should have a 'learning purpose'. The Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Wales and Scotland; British Council; Association of UK Higher Education European Officers (HEURO); British Universities Transatlantic Exchange Association (BUTEX); Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS); UK HE Europe Unit and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) are currently cooperating on developing a new data indicator for use in 2012 onwards that will capture a greater range of UK student mobility.

UK HE sector recommendation:

- **The European Commission should continue to work with the Bologna Process stakeholders in improving data collection procedures to capture the full range of student mobility.**

How can the availability of information and guidance related to mobility be improved?

5. The Green Paper identifies the benefits that mobility brings to the individual and to society as a whole. In terms of encouraging young people to undertake a period of study or training in another country, individual HEIs, staff, students' unions, and students who have returned from a mobility period have a crucial role to play.
6. UK HEIs suggest that their own websites are now the most important tool for promoting opportunities and providing lists of partners abroad, student case studies, on-line handbooks and guidance notes. It allows students to view the institution's activities and procedures for sending students on study abroad. Information on mobility opportunities can also be included on other parts of the institution's website, as well as on different types of electronic media, for example iTunesU, Twitter, Facebook, and emails. This can reinforce the role of mobility as an intrinsic part of the institution's life and not something on the periphery.

7. Websites detailing mobility opportunities should also address adverse perceptions (cost, complexity, linguistic issues) and highlight the positive experiences of students abroad as well as benefits and relevance beyond academic value. They can also provide links to key sites which provide help on accommodation abroad, for example, or work placement opportunities. UK HEIs have recommended not populating pages with a long list of on-line resources, but rather just a few which are reputable and well established.
8. The benefits of a mobility period need to be properly understood if students are to be encouraged to go abroad to study. This is particularly true when talking about future employability prospects. The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) in the UK conducted some research in this area. It concluded that:

“Unless the business message is more clearly transmitted to students, absorbed by them and ways are found by universities to facilitate overseas study and especially student exchanges (often short 6-8 week programmes), the UK students will be disadvantaged in the global jobs market.”²

A recent report by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) ‘Attainment in higher education: Erasmus and placement students’ concluded that students who undertook work placements were more likely to be employed six months after graduating and to have higher salaries than the average students. Students who went abroad to study as part of Erasmus were more likely to be engaged in further study but those in employment were substantially more likely to be employed abroad and had above-average salaries³.

UK HE sector recommendation:

- **The European Commission could conduct a survey of employers’ perspectives of mobile students across the EU. The resulting data could help inform the development of greater diversity in work placement and study mobility periods.**

What do you see as the main barriers to the motivation of young people to become mobile? How can the linguistic and cultural obstacles to mobility be best addressed?

9. The UK HE Europe Unit conducted an analysis of UK student mobility in February 2008⁴. The primary reasons given for the low levels of student mobility from the UK to mainland Europe are:
 - financial constraints;
 - language issues; and
 - lack of information about the mobility opportunities available.

² ‘Global Horizons and the Role of Employers’, October 2008, <http://www.cihe.co.uk/wp-content/themes/cihe/document.php?file=0810GlobalHorPress.pdf>

³ ‘Attainment in higher education: Erasmus and placement students’, http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_44/

⁴ ‘The future of UK student mobility – a Europe Unit analysis’, http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/sites/europe_unit2/resources/EuropeUnitMobilityDocument.pdf

10. Language courses in UK HEIs usually involve a period of study abroad in a country where the study language is spoken. Students see the ability (or lack of) to speak a foreign language as a powerful barrier to studying abroad. The fall in UK Erasmus student mobility over the past decade (the past two years have seen an increase)⁵ is closely paralleled by the decline in students studying European languages. However, the proliferation of courses being offered through English in many mainland European HEIs, especially those in Scandinavia, Netherlands and Germany, does mean that UK students have more options to study abroad.
11. The languages that local immigrant-origin students speak, such as Asian and Arabic languages, do not correspond to the Erasmus country languages. The expansion of the Erasmus programme to include non-EU destinations would help to address this. For example, UK-India and UK-China summer schools have proved very popular among students in UK HEIs⁶. However, students at UK HEIs may still be unwilling to visit a university outside Europe because their parents (important influences on students) may not support this as a study location. If the Erasmus programme is to expand into non-EU countries, the programme may need to concentrate initially on more well-known institutions in those countries in order to encourage equal flows of mobility.
12. A recent report commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) argues that HEIs themselves need to promote the learning of foreign languages, and that the languages community should place their discipline within the strategic plan of their institutions. However, the report highlights that HEIs cannot be expected to create the demand for language training. The demand for languages in HE and associated mobility opportunities must be created by introducing pupils to languages at primary and secondary school level and the benefits that multilingualism can bring⁷.

UK HE sector recommendation:

- **The expansion of the Erasmus programme to include countries beyond Europe would encourage greater diversity in students taking up study abroad opportunities to reflect the growing diversity of populations in the EU and the internationalisation of higher education.**

⁵ The fall in the UK has been arrested over the last two years by an increase in numbers of both student and staff mobility. <http://www.britishcouncil.org/erasmus-facts-and-figures.htm>

⁶ Summer school placements in China funded by Research Councils UK have proved very popular in the UK. <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/news/080122.htm>

⁷ 'Review of Modern Foreign Languages provision in higher education in England', October 2009, http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_41/

Legal issues

13. There are inconsistencies across Europe in the status given to students participating in work placements. While some organisations treat such students as employees with commensurate rights, others are defined as *stagiaires* or trainees, or part-time staff. This has led to ambiguities in insurance and employment liability and some UK HEIs have been requested to provide insurance for students on such placements. This makes work placements more costly for HEIs to administer than study-abroad schemes.
14. The Green Paper's proposal for a European Trainee Statute is interesting. The Statute could provide a broadly understood framework within which work placements could take place. Such a framework should remain voluntary, however, as there will be national circumstances which cannot be changed.
15. In the UK, the majority of doctoral candidates currently have student status, rather than being classed as employees of the institution. This has considerable benefits, notably exemption from income tax and national insurance contributions, and is supported by the UK's National Postgraduate Committee⁸. Changing the status of non-EU doctoral candidates to employees would very likely result in increased difficulties in securing a visa to the UK⁹. The UK HE sector believes that the status of doctoral candidates should be a matter for each country to decide, with reference to domestic employment legislation and regulatory frameworks. The UK HE sector welcomes the flexibility of the current Erasmus programme which allows UK doctoral students to retain their student status.
16. A Bologna Process seminar in Berlin in April 2008 found few clear cases in which specific concerns about pensions appear to inhibit or determine the mobility of early stage researchers. There are broader issues about supply and demand for early stage researchers that affect their mobility¹⁰.

What more can be done to promote mobility to and from the European Union? How should this be done?

17. While the UK has comparatively low levels of Erasmus student mobility, the mobility rate of UK students outside Europe is consistently higher than other Anglophone countries (Australia, New Zealand, Canada), and very close to the OECD average. UK students are increasingly travelling to distant English speaking destinations. In 2008-09, over 8,700 UK students studied in the US¹¹. UK student mobility destinations are less Eurocentric and orient students increasingly to study and work opportunities in North America and other parts of the world. UK HEIs have altered their priorities and marketing considerations as a result.

⁸ See: <http://www.npc.org.uk/policies/s/studentstatus>

⁹ Under the new UK Border Agency rules, doctoral students classed as employees would become immigrants under Tier 2 rather than Tier 4. <http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/studyingintheuk/student-visitors/eligibility/>

¹⁰ Summary report prepared for the official Bologna seminar hosted by the German Rectors' conference: 'Penalized for Being Mobile? National Pension Schemes as an Obstacle to Mobility for Researchers in the European Higher Education Area' http://www.hrk.de/bologna/de/download/dateien/Summary_Report_for_Berlin_June_2008_FINAL.pdf

¹¹ Open Doors, 2009, <http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/?p=150811>

18. The EU's exchange programmes should change to reflect the desire of Europe's young people to travel outside the EU. Many UK HEIs are developing US-style summer schools with partner HEIs which allow students the opportunity to do more 'gap-year' type study and/or work placements abroad. There is also some scope to use this model to provide scoping visits or 'taster sessions' for young people interested in becoming mobile but who are not yet willing to commit fully.
19. Some UK HEIs have noted that the Erasmus Mundus scheme is not best suited to cooperation with North American HEIs as they are more reluctant to award dual degrees. Similarly, there also needs to be much greater flexibility on the interaction of non-ECTS credit systems with ECTS. The UK HE sector has some experience to share in this respect.
20. As well as the drive to support mobility from the institutions themselves, the use of 'mobility champions' from outside the institution, such as high profile celebrities like footballers, can promote the benefits of living and working abroad in schools particularly.

What measures can be taken to ensure that the mobility period is of high quality?

21. The UK HE sector strongly supports the Bologna Process as a means of ensuring that mobility periods, both within and outside Europe, are of high quality. Greater use of qualifications frameworks aligned with the FQ-EHEA, study programmes based on learning outcomes, better information about programmes and the use of shared European standards and guidelines for quality assurance can help greatly towards ensuring that the framework for HEIs allows them to provide quality mobility experiences.
22. Sustainable partnerships between HEIs, VET institutions, businesses and other Erasmus partners require leadership from the highest levels of the participating partners. A culture of supporting mobility must be created in institutions to make sure mobility partnerships outlast individual staff members' terms of office.
23. Some UK HEIs have suggested that they wish to reduce and consolidate the numbers of partnerships they have with overseas HEIs. Where HEIs have long-standing links with a large number of host institutions, it is good practice to work with academic departments to revise the ongoing usefulness of the links for their subject area. It may be advisable to reduce the list of links to a manageable number for each subject area. The home institution can then be better informed of the course choices on offer and all academic and administrative particularities of each particular link, including practical issues around housing, semester dates, cost of living and safety. The quality of each individual student placement is also likely to be enhanced as thorough and accurate preparation will be possible. A smaller number of links also means each link is more likely to be used on an annual basis, creating a rolling effect where information grows instead of being lost from one year to the next.

24. The Erasmus learning agreement is an integral building block for institutional mobility links. However, some UK HEIs have questioned its worth. In an attempt to assure quality, some National Agencies responsible for administering the EU's Lifelong Learning Programmes insist Learning Agreements are exchanged before the period abroad. However, as not all course information is available from host institutions at the time the student is applying, the first learning agreement can often be worthless and lead the student into a false sense of security regarding the need to sort out their courses when they get to the host institution.

In your experience, is the validation and recognition of both formal and informal learning still a significant obstacle to mobility?

25. There is considerable evidence that students in HE across Europe are still experiencing difficulty in having their mobility periods (for both formal and informal learning) properly recognised. The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) survey in 2007 showed that slightly more than half of all Erasmus students receive recognition for their courses. The European University Association (EUA) Trends V survey indicated similar problems with recognition¹².

26. It should be noted, however, that recognition can be given in different ways. It does not always have to involve the validation and/or recognition of academic credit. Some UK HEIs distinguish mobile students through the titles of qualifications and through the Diploma Supplement.

27. Engineering Council UK, the Royal Society of Chemistry and the National Health Service are some of the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) that play an important role in validating HE as a prerequisite for entry into professional practice in the UK. HEIs need to consider the demands of PSRBs when setting up study and work experience placements overseas. This can prove to be a disincentive for HEIs in developing mobility opportunities. It is another example of the need for greater clarity and dialogue between employers and HE about the value of the mobility experience of young people.

28. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK (QAA) has well-developed principles for the accreditation of prior learning¹³. In 2007 the QAA also revised its Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education to clarify its advice to HEIs about work-based and placement learning¹⁴.

How can we best make use of ICTs to provide valuable virtual mobility opportunities to enrich physical mobility?

29. UK HEIs expect that as the technology improves and prices come down, they will make increasing use of ICT in preparing students for mobility assignments, and to follow up on contacts made and projects initiated following a period of mobility. Greater use of ICT also means HEIs can address environmental concerns by cutting down on unnecessary travel.

¹² EUA Trends reports, <http://www.eua.be/publications/#c399>

¹³ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/guidance.asp>

¹⁴ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section9/default.asp>

30. Increased use of technology, for example breaking down course content into 'chunks' which are available electronically, and embracing 'pod casts' or 'learning apps' could help broaden the access to information. Some UK HEIs have also used iTunesU to increase their online presence.

What do you see as the main obstacles to a stronger engagement of teachers and trainers in promoting mobility?

31. The institutional culture in HEIs should highlight that a study period or work placement abroad can be a valuable part of a teacher's self development and improve future career prospects, as well as providing an example of the institution's commitment to promoting mobility at all levels. Once a teaching exchange has taken place, it is more likely that it will happen again, and if not by the same member of staff, then by another member of staff within the same department or school.
32. In the past, institutional partnerships tended to be instigated and administered at the individual academic or department level, together with a lot of support from administrative staff. The UK HE sector supports the move towards a more institution-wide approach to mobility. However, to compensate for the loss of ownership of mobility programmes, it is recommended that staff involved in promoting mobility should be recognised in the formal structure of their institution, that is, in their access to the senior management of the institution and in career and salary terms. Where staff are unable to undertake a long period of mobility (eg 2-3 months), the funding allocated for their mobility could instead be used to send them abroad to partner HEIs to resolve any student difficulties.
33. UK HEIs already participate in a wide range of internationalisation (and mobility) activities, the scope of which often reaches beyond the EU and EU mobility programmes. In many UK HEIs academic staff are already regularly working outside the UK as 'flying faculty' and/or moderators and external examiners for the institution's own transnational education (TNE) programmes. These work periods overseas form an integral part of HE of their work, they are not a 'work placement'. TNE arrangements also often involve staff from partner institutions coming to the UK.

Targets for mobility

34. The UK HE sector endorsed the 20 per cent target for mobility in the Leuven Communiqué. It is an important incentive for the UK HE sector to make its contribution towards achieving the target. However, the UK HE sector recognises that the target is not a national one, and will focus its efforts on increasing mobility that will achieve quality outcomes for the individual and the countries of the EU.

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