

LTC09D039

Title: Implications for the Learning and Teaching Committee of the report 'Higher Ambitions – The future of universities in a knowledge economy' published by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

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Date: 1 December, 2009

Circulation: Learning and Teaching Committee – 9 December, 2009

Agenda: LTCA003

Status: Open

Version: Draft

1. Background

- 1.1. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has recently published its report on the future framework for higher education. (The Committee has received the executive summary of the report (Divider A). The full text may be consulted at:

<http://www.bis.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/publications/Higher-Ambitions.pdf>

A time-line in respect of the main proposals is attached as **Annex A**.

- 1.2. This key document sets out the broad aims and objectives for higher education over the next few years and identifies some specific expectations and proposed key changes. It is clear that recent public debates about quality and standards in the sector have influenced aspects of the report, for example the increased focus to be placed on external examiners in maintaining academic standards. These debates which were at their height last year (2008) led to the establishment of a Select Committee on Students and Universities under the auspices of the former Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and to the formation of a sub-committee on Teaching, Quality and the Student Experience by the Higher Education Funding Council (its report may be consulted at:

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/oubs/hefce/2009/09_40/

2. Proposed changes relevant to LTC

- 2.1 Senate discussed the BIS report at its meeting on 11 November, 2009 and the attention of Heads of Schools has been drawn to the document. The key proposals of interest and concern to the Committee are:

- (1) **Access:** Continued and enhanced focus on access to higher education by all those who have the ability to benefit. The report envisages an expansion in the number of adults at university and a broader range of course models alongside the three-year degree: for example, part-time, work-based, foundation degrees and more study at home. Greater emphasis on use of academic credit systems to support flexibility in access and in portability is a likelihood.
- (2) **Employability:** New priority is to be given to programmes that meet the need for high level skills especially for key sectors. **Enhanced support is envisaged for 'STEM' subjects and a greater element of competition**

between universities for funding is envisaged. Associated with this targeted support will be a requirement for all universities to publish a statement on how they promote students employability, from 2011-12. (Note: The Committee will be discussing reports from Faculties on the University's employability strategy at the 9 December, 2009 and 3 February, 2010 meetings). Greater importance will be placed on the role that business people play in Universities and in influencing course provision through employer-led Sector Skills Councils. There will also be a review of postgraduate provision (taught and research).

- (3) **Excellent teaching:** new requirements will be laid on universities to publish a **standard set of information** setting out what students can expect in terms of the nature and quality of their programmes. This development has been expected, particularly as there is a parallel review of the tuition fees paid by first degree students. Information to be published will include: how and what students will learn; what that knowledge will qualify them to do; whether there is access to external expertise/experience; how much direct contact there will be with academic staff; what facilities will there be; opportunities for international experience; and what long-term employment prospects there are. **The role of external examiners in maintaining standards will be strengthened.** (A possibility could be some national training around standards).
- (4) **Global education market. and global perspectives:** the report envisages that UK universities will be world leaders in transnational learning based on 'e'-learning. The report sees a vital role for universities in helping to internationalise the experience of British students (eg by language provision, more students undertaking a period of training or study abroad. The Bologna process has a target of 20% of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a period abroad.
- (5) **Quality assurance and enhancement:** BIS will discuss with HEFCE and the Higher Education Academy how its profile in quality enhancement may be raised. The role of the Quality Assurance Agency will be changed so that it has a greater focus on the student experience and the service delivered to the student. There will be more student (union) involvement in the audit process. QAA will also have a greater responsibility for the public assurance of quality and standards and a more proactive role in dealing with complaints about standards. We are expecting consultation on the principles of these new arrangements during the winter of 2009-10.

3. Implications and issues

What are the potential implications for and impact on the Committee?

Here are some speculations:

- i) we know that a change in the nature of the **audit process** is a certainty. We shall have an opportunity to comment on the principles and we must ensure that there is a shared understanding across the University of its import. We could have more regular contact with the QAA. It will be interesting to see what its more proactive role in complaints may be and how this dovetails with the role of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (which deals with individual student complaints). The work that has been undertaken in the LTC's review of assessment should see us reasonably well placed for reviewing academic standards. The review of the current Common Course Structure regulations should do likewise;

- ii) the increased focus by the QAA on the **student experience and the service delivered**. It is not clear precisely what aspects of service delivery the Agency will look at. It is possible that it could include, for example, feedback (times), a known sectoral relative weakness in the National Student Survey Outcomes. Feedback to students is one of the areas under scrutiny by the Taught Programme Policy Group this session;

What else should LTC be doing in this area?

- iii) provision of a greater range of **course/programme-level information** will be a challenge in terms of how this might be done in efficient and effective ways. As indicated above, Heads of Schools are aware of this impending requirement.

How does the LTC view its responsibilities here? We have envisaged the development of a Code of Practice on the provision of information which could also address handbooks and the 'e' portal etc. Is this appropriate? Who will take responsibility for publication of the required information? Should this be at University level or at Faculty level? It may be that we could use programme specifications for this additional material or a national 'template' may be devised (which could lend itself to the development of league tables!). It is probably too early for answers and we should await the detailed proposals. Nevertheless, LTC may wish to consider what its role in this development should be.

- iv) given current economic conditions and the impending review of tuition fees paid by students, it is not a surprise that there is to be a focus on **employability and employment prospects**. The UEA strategy on employability is pertinent here and the imminent annual reports timely.

Should we make publicly available the Faculty reports on employability? How easy will it be to collect data on, for example, graduates' career destinations/salaries at the level of the course/programme?

- v) we are promised a strengthening of the **external examiner role** in ways that are not yet specified. Clearly, we shall have to keep this under review lest there are implications for our regulatory frameworks and our Code of Practice. It is possible that there will be a 'training' requirement at national level with regard to academic standards (a role for the HEA perhaps?). A speculation would be whether external examiners will be required to report concerns about standards not just to the institution but to the QAA as well (see i) above). In this regard, we have a robust system for considering reports which, if it were to be diluted, could create a significant risk for the institution in the light of the above. The LTC-sponsored review of assessment (see **Divider X** on the agenda for the 9 December, 2009 meeting) is both timely and pertinent Consideration is currently being given to how we might continue such analyses, by weaving them into standard procedures (for example, in periodic review of programmes and in annual overview reports to the Committee, for example. A review of the section of our Code of Practice that addresses module and course/programme monitoring and review and regular review of programmes is to be undertaken from next session).

Does LTC support the development of a dedicated part of the LTQ website to ensure that external examiners have access to a range of relevant information about academic standards? (Examiners currently have access to a range of information on the LTQ website: it would be helpful to make this more prominent.

- vi) the **pattern and possibly the amount of HEFCE funding** for a range of course provision may change significantly as may applicants' behaviour in terms of course selection. Whilst these matters will no doubt be considered by the Executive Team, Faculties and Schools, the LTC might wish to reflect on its response to questions such as:

Would the Committee support an expansion of Foundation Degrees, including at UEA itself? Should certain courses/programmes have 'top-up' routes from (relevant) Foundation Degrees? Would the Committee support the development of part-time provision that is not co-terminous with a full-time version, ie stand-alone part-time provision that is offered in the evening or at week-end. (Some Schools already have such models of provision, for example in the Norwich Business School at Master's level.).