

12 February 2009



To Heads of higher education institutions in England, Wales,
Scotland and Northern Ireland

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Dear Vice-Chancellor or Principal

FSSG Report: The sustainability of learning and teaching in English higher education (embargoed until 19 February)

1. You will recall from my letters of 7 May and 1 December 2008 that an important part of the work of the Financial Sustainability Strategy Group (FSSG), led by a sub-group chaired by Professor Geoffrey Crossick, has been devoted to a study of the sustainability of teaching.
2. We are enclosing five copies of the report, which will also be available on the web from 19 February (www.hefce.ac.uk/finance/fundinghe/trac/fssg/). Please note that the report will be in the public domain from 19 February 2009. As far as the media is concerned it is embargoed until 0001 hours on 19 February when we are launching the report.
3. Both Geoff and I believe this report is an important one for the sector. I want to commend him, and his group, for the excellent job they have done in bringing together a very complex set of issues in a way that I believe is very readable; thorough in its analysis; and credible in its evidence base. And this is not just a theoretical piece. Geoff and I are both convinced of the need for action to protect the quality of the student learning experience, and the sustainability of institutions. I also would like to record my thanks to the case study universities and the members of the various sector and professional groups that contributed to this report.
4. The report draws on a range of evidence, including case studies at six English universities, to review the 'state of health' of learning and teaching, and the cost pressures which impact on the sustainability and fitness for purpose of teaching and the distinctive UK student learning experience. This is a much more complex and challenging exercise than it was to cost research in the early part of the decade when we used TRAC data, successfully, to make the case for enhanced public funding. For teaching, the diversity of missions and pedagogic approaches across the sector, and the absence of any single national indicator of fitness for purpose

equivalent to the RAE, means that it is not possible to produce a single 'cost' of delivering sustainable and high quality teaching.

5. The report acknowledges that the Government has been generous in its funding of teaching over the past decade. But this followed a period of unfunded expansion, of which a legacy remains, and it is now accompanied by a much increased set of demands and pressures on institutions: and of course with a financial base where institutions are nearly all in deficit (when their finances are evaluated on a TRAC full economic cost basis). The report reviews a broad spectrum of issues, but focuses on three areas where the student learning experience is under particular pressure (access to, and feedback from, academic staff who are established in their field; infrastructure for teaching and learning; and student support services).

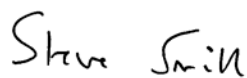
6. The report highlights actions that we as heads of institutions need to take, both individually and collectively, to assure the sustainability of our teaching enterprises and to improve the evidence base for any future case for funding of teaching. There are also some messages for Government about the funding that is needed if the English sector is to maintain its reputation and international market position against increasing competition from institutions overseas.

7. While the study focuses on the higher education sector in England, the analysis is equally valid for the higher education sector in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

8. There will be a chance to hear more about these issues at the Universities UK Spring Conference (26-27 February 2009) and we hope there will be opportunities to discuss the report and its recommendations with other sector and professional groups in the coming months.

9. As chair of the FSSG, I hope that each institution will take time to consider these issues in its senior management group. They are directly relevant to the future sustainability and success of our core business.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style. To the right of the signature is a vertical red line.

Professor Steve Smith
Vice Chancellor, University of Exeter

Enclosure - FSSG Report: The sustainability of learning and teaching in English higher education