

Sustainable development in higher education

Report on the consultation seminars

Executive Summary

Purpose

1. The report summarises feedback from the three HEFCE sustainable development consultation seminars held in July 2008. The information gathered will be used with the written responses to the consultation to help inform our thinking on sustainable development.

Key Points

2. The report is structured around the main areas of discussion that emerged from the consultation seminars. There were 14 broad themes discussed and these are covered in paragraphs 9 to 42 of the report below.

Action required

3. No action required. This report is for information only.

Report of the consultation seminars

Introduction

4. In June 2008 HEFCE published 'Sustainable development in higher education: consultation on 2008 update to strategic statement and action plan'¹. The document was circulated to all higher education institutions (HEIs) in England, and to other agencies and bodies. Written responses have been submitted by the sector, individuals and other interested stakeholders and HEFCE will publish an analysis in January 2009.

5. As part of the consultation process, HEFCE arranged three consultation seminars in London and Manchester in July 2008. The objectives of these seminars were to share experiences of sustainable development, discuss the roles and opportunities open to the sector, and provide a forum for participants to discuss and feed into the action plan.

Seminar programme

6. The three consultation seminars followed similar themes and formats. Each seminar consisted of a presentation from HEFCE and an institutional speaker, followed by a smaller group session that helped initiate questions and observations for a final panel discussion.

7. HEFCE commissioned the production of a short film, 'Higher education: Thinking sustainably', and showed a poster display of HEFCE-funded sustainable development projects at each seminar. The film and poster display showcased a variety of institutional approaches to sustainable development.

8. Full details of each consultation seminar, and links to the presentations and the film can be found on the HEFCE web-site under 'Events/Recent Events'².

¹ HEFCE 2008/18 - http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08_18/

² <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/events/2008/sustain/>

The role of HEFCE

9. Participants had differing opinions on whether HEFCE should continue to adopt a largely non-prescriptive approach or take a more directive and prescriptive approach towards sustainable development. The majority of participants tended to agree with the current non-prescriptive, enabling approach, seeing it as the best and most productive way to achieve change within a diverse sector. HEFCE speakers stated the Council's belief that prescription may risk creating conformity, stifle innovation, and establish a culture of compliance. Participants agreed that a prescriptive approach would be resisted by the sector, and that HEFCE should continue to adopt an approach of facilitation and encouragement that continues to recognise the autonomy and diversity of institutional approaches.

10. A number of participants support a greater degree of prescription in some areas. Some suggested a 'hybrid' approach in which HEFCE would prescribe a minimum standard for baseline monitoring, targets and best practice but play an enabling role in other areas. For example, one participant believed HEFCE should provide specific guidance on the policies institutions should adopt towards air travel. It was observed that some individuals see an increased level of prescription as a solution to difficult and often endemic cultural difficulties within institutions.

11. Delegates appeared to think that HEFCE should move forward from the 2005 action plan, but continue to spread good practice and reward sustainable behaviour in a similar manner. Discussions and comments highlighted a genuine tension between the need for prescribed systems to gather standard data and information, and the need for each institution to manage their own development through internal governance and management processes.

Sustainable development as the fourth HEFCE objective

12. It was suggested that sustainable development should be made the fourth key policy objective for HEFCE, alongside teaching, research and third stream. The HEFCE speakers stated that HEFCE's next strategic plan will continue to contain a strong commitment to sustainable development.

13. Debate over this issue examined whether sustainable development should constitute a separate funding stream or whether HEFCE should embed it within existing funding streams. It should, delegates argued, be integral to all other HEFCE strategies and form part of a more joined-up approach to policy. The HEFCE speakers noted that Sector Impact Assessments, which the Council undertakes for all policies, consider the impact of sustainable development and will be published online from October 2008.

14. There was also a view among delegates that the current level of resource available to institutions is insufficient to meet the vision of the consultation document. Some suggested that a way around this would be to integrate the sustainable development agenda with existing funding streams. Initiatives, such as the Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning, could, for example, expand to develop this type of model and create a number of 'Beacons for Sustainability'.

Pace of change

15. The seminars highlighted the perception that the publication lacks urgency and that, to build momentum, the speed of progress should increase. Similarities with the 2005 document were made, and some participants thought the document lacks precision and time-bound commitments with specific outcomes. Other delegates reflected, however, that the use of more open language – or the lack of specifics – is consistent with HEFCE's non-prescriptive approach. Speakers acknowledged that HEFCE does not have answers to many

of the complex issues, and that the sector as a whole is still looking for the solutions and, in some cases, the questions.

16. The delegation raised a number of perceived quality-related issues in the document: the lack of any clear balance of priorities, any specific targets for research to address, or a scientific underpinning. Some suggested HEFCE could provide guidance on the energy sources institutions should be using. Other participants commended the quality of the document and recognised its use as a framework on which to build.

17. Opinions vacillated between support for an evolutionary approach that adapts to future changes and accepts certain 'open-ended' actions, and a view that the document is not ambitious enough, particularly where opportunities exist to exceed government targets.

Building good practice

18. Delegates requested some form of central pool of knowledge to build on the existing pockets of good practice within the sector and allow universities to share developing practices. HEFCE's envisaged role would be to emphasise sustainable development as one of the core principles within institutions. It was suggested that HEFCE could develop a central bureau, similar to the Joint Information Systems Committee. This would provide a single source of information and an advisory service. Individuals commented that the information could prove particularly useful for smaller and less-established institutions.

19. Comparisons between sustainable development and the approach to equality and diversity led to the view that the two areas might coalesce. Participants suggested the creation of a 'sustainable development challenge unit', similar to the Equality Challenge Unit³.

20. The seminars indicated that funding streams for sustainable development are welcome, and many delegates appreciated the chance to observe the range of HEFCE-funded activity on the poster displays. Delegates suggested a number of ways, however, in which HEFCE might streamline its funds to foster good practice. These included creating an 'ethical investment fund' and the possibility of an application to the Leadership, Governance and Management fund to explore the complexities and differences.

Students

21. A large cohort of opinion maintained that, critically, the sector must deliver students aware of the issues surrounding sustainable development. It was argued that universities have a duty to create 'global citizens', and that the knowledge and skills relating to sustainable development are an essential aspect of this ambition. A means to this end, delegates suggested, would be to improve engagement with the student population, which HEFCE might facilitate through a formal partnership with the National Union of Students (NUS). HEFCE speakers noted that there is already a representative from the NUS on HEFCE's sustainable development steering group.

22. A more collaborative approach would, it was thought, bring issues of sustainable development to the student community, and help them acquire the skills and knowledge needed. Participants emphasised the need for improved links between student-led projects and university initiatives to improve the links within institutions.

23. This aspect of the debate also recognised that the wider relevance of sustainable development might support other agendas. Since sustainable development applies to

³ <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/>

students of all ages, including school children, delegates argued that it could support the widening participation agenda. Similarly, its relevance to the broader community was seen as an opportunity to develop cohesive and collaborative activities with local regions.

24. A number of institutions have proposed to introduce free public transport for students. Delegates supported this proposal, while acknowledging the associated costs and difficulties.

Curriculum

25. A minority of participants recommended that HEFCE should introduce a level of prescription to the curriculum to improve knowledge of sustainable development. Conversely, the majority of participants argued this would not respect the principle of academic freedom. It was suggested that HEFCE might exercise its influence with greater lightness of touch by working with key sector bodies and stakeholders; HEFCE could, for example, encourage the Higher Education Academy (HEA) to adopt a specific sustainable development performance indicator if suitable metrics were available. In response, HEFCE speakers confirmed that the HEA grant letter will contain explicit requests surrounding sustainable development.

26. Feedback made it clear that HEFCE needs to strengthen this area of the document. It needs, in particular, to provide specific actions addressing the statement that enabling students to acquire skills and knowledge is the 'greatest contribution HE can make to sustainable development'⁴. The discussion noted that training in sustainable development applies equally to teaching staff, and that the HEA could expand the work it does currently on different learning provisions to address wider training needs.

Leadership

27. Discussions recognised that 'visionary leadership' from the heads of institutions is critical to sustainable development, and reflected the perception that there is more support among heads of institutions for the agenda than in 2005. For this reason, delegates and HEFCE speakers agreed that senior individuals should be empowered to develop an institutional approach. Both said that this would support the continued need to broaden the scope of sustainable development from estates to an institution-wide approach, and serve as a strong advocate for the respective institution.

28. Participants suggested the Leadership Foundation should make sustainable development an underlying theme to help ensure future heads of institutions are sufficiently aware of this area. Likewise, participants believed bodies such as Universities UK should place greater emphasis on it.

University staff

29. The seminars identified the need to make sustainable development an integral part of the sector's culture through greater staff involvement. It was suggested that it may be necessary to break down sustainable development into clear targets and objectives to allow staff to understand what is expected operationally. It was recognised, however, that the sector can only achieve widespread behavioural changes through the goodwill and mobilisation of staff.

30. To raise awareness and develop a systemic way of harnessing staff involvement, delegates suggested that HEFCE could help provide tools to universities for improving staff development and training.

⁴ HEFCE 2008/18, paragraph 45

31. As employers, it was thought, that institutions could shape employment practice to increase staff involvement. Some suggested that 'well-being indicators' could be developed for measuring community action while recognising that any such action would be at the discretion of individual institutions.

Carbon reductions

32. There was a range of views expressed on the benefit of a sector strategy for carbon management. Some participants believed that high-level sector targets are necessary and will provide a clear focus for institutions. In contrast, other participants considered the lack of commonly agreed benchmarks and calculating methods make reductions difficult to monitor, and impose undue pressure on institutions. Some participants argued that the sector does not need a specific strategy, and would favour a framework that provides overarching principles and guidance. Alternatively, participants suggested a continuum between a prescriptive and enabling approach that will help to provide clearer direction and create a direct link between carbon performance and funding.

33. Despite the differing views expressed on this area, a general consensus thought that institutions should set their own carbon reduction targets. There was also agreement that clearer, universal definitions and metrics would be required before any sector strategy could be agreed. Participants did not, for instance, deem metrics based on carbon per student an appropriate individual measure. It was suggested that HEFCE could help formulate an agreed methodology and develop a carbon-footprint tool for the sector.

34. The HEFCE speakers reiterated its commitment to work with the sector on the reduction of carbon emissions. HEFCE speakers considered the interim target of 26 per cent reduction in carbon emissions by 2020 achievable and that the sector could yet outperform this target. HEFCE speakers recommended that any new targets would need to be challenging, realistic and scientifically based.

Revolving Green Fund (RGF)

35. The RGF found widespread support but many believed a larger fund is required, particularly for funding transformational change. Participants observed that HEFCE needs to offer significant levels of funding to demonstrate its continuing commitment in this area. To assure delegates of the Council's commitment, HEFCE speakers encouraged institutions to submit RGF proposals, pointing out that requests in future spending reviews for further funding will be influenced by the level of demand.

Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM)

36. There was discussion regarding the most widely used environmental assessment method for buildings, BREEAM. Participants note that the Learning and Skills Council require BREEAM 'excellent' for new buildings and question whether HEFCE would adopt a similar approach. It was suggested that HEFCE should undertake a study to find out the proportion of the existing HE estate built since 2005 with a view to providing benchmarks for spending on new buildings and refurbishment.

37. Representatives of the Council stated that HEFCE will consider requiring institutions to achieve a BREEAM standard for the next round of capital funding. It was noted that HEFCE are working with the Association of University Directors of Estates and the Higher Education Environment Performance Improvement to develop a new higher education sector measure based on BREEAM. The work on this measure is due for completion in May 2009 and a policy decision will be made following this process. Future capital funding from HEFCE will be dependent on performance against carbon management plans, as required in the 2008 grant letter from the Secretary of State.

Stakeholder and wider engagement

38. As a central body, some delegates thought that HEFCE could address a perceived lack of collaboration over sustainable development by working closely with the Research Councils and other stakeholders to develop the action plan. The Council might create the incentive for this relationship by making sustainable development a condition of funding for certain bodies. This, it was argued, would mitigate the risk of work duplicated unnecessarily.

39. The discussion emphasised that the sector should not be seen in isolation and needs to pursue greater community engagement; it might, in this context, strengthen links with relevant employers to establish improved sustainable development skills for graduates; and it could learn from existing good practice in European countries.

Focus on non-environmental issues

40. Feedback indicated that the document does not place sufficient emphasis on the issues of financial and social sustainability. Speakers emphasised the strong links between the three types of sustainable development outlined in the action plan, stressing that they should be given equal weight but not compartmentalised. Delegates questioned, however, whether the definition could be broken down further to reflect its relevance to a range of wider issues, such as social and cultural areas, and avoid always using the overarching term 'sustainable development'.

Procurement

41. The seminars singled out procurement as one area that HEFCE should provide a greater level of prescription. It was observed that institutions sometimes struggle to strike a balance between value for money and considering sustainable development in procurement, due, in part, to the difficulties in assessing the real 'carbon cost' of certain products. For this reason, participants suggested that a database containing this type of information would be a valuable tool to develop best practice for procurement.

42. Participants noted that there is already substantial advice and guidance available about appropriate purchasing, but there remains a need to improve education and training. Institutions, for example, tend to place greater weight on initial costs rather than the life-cycle costs of a particular item or building; whereas appropriate training could ensure that the powerful combined purchasing power of institutions exercises a significant and beneficial influence.