

Annex A

Detailed Response on Other Matters Raised in Secretary of State's Letter

Research Collaboration

The HEFCE Board, advised by its strategic advisory committee on research, has considered what might be done to encourage further research collaboration. We take as our starting point the advice of the HE Research Forum: collaboration should be encouraged, in a way that reinforces the benefits it can bring when done well, but cannot be imposed from the top down. Our thinking has also been guided by the principle that any special funding for research collaboration should focus on work planned over a period and managed at a strategic level, and preferably where other partners such as research councils or RDAs are also giving support. Therefore:

- a. The Board has agreed a clear statement of the criteria to be used in considering future requests for funding for research collaboration from our Strategic Development Fund.
- b. In agreeing to undertake research capacity building initiatives jointly with other funders, we have emphasised that proposals to develop capacity collaboratively between two or more institutions are welcomed.
- c. We have worked with the other funding bodies to ensure that the 2008 RAE will give all due credit to collaborative research, and that HEIs understand that collaborative submissions are welcomed.

HE and skills

Your predecessor wondered how the Council and the sector might work more closely with Sector Skills Councils and regional skills strategies.

The commitment in the recent Skills White Paper (Getting on in business, getting on at work, March 2005) to strengthen the role of HE in Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) is timely and welcomed. This will support the work we have in hand in this area, such as a Board level Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between ourselves and the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA); and it will complement our ongoing engagement with Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs). Moreover, our funding for growth in the sector during 2005-06 and 2007-8, will be managed to meet the priorities and major strategic developments of each region.

The sector has already begun to develop links with the Skills for Business network at a national, regional and institutional level. Activity to date has focused predominantly on two

areas: curriculum development to enhance the work-relevance of courses, primarily through Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs); and the development of Foundation Degree Frameworks.

In view of the complexity of matching the supply of provision to student and employer demand for courses, the Council has been working with the DfES and SEDA to support the four SSCs which are piloting SSAs. Emerging SSAs have surfaced a range of cross-sector and sector-specific employer needs. We are addressing these through joint projects with SSCs to address demand and supply side problems through both our funding and policy levers.

Following the publication of the recent Skills White Paper, we are identifying how HE can be involved in Skills Academies and the National Employer Training Programme. We are also exploring how the 24 new Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) can work with Sector Skills Councils to promote vocational excellence. In addition, the HE Academy has supported work on employability and enterprise. High level strategic consultancy to develop employability strategies has taken place with several HEIs; the Academy has led the DfES Entrepreneurship Skills for Graduates programme; and it has supported the completion of student employability profiles in 22 disciplines. Productive relationships have been established with the SEDA and LLUK and plans for closer subject centre involvement with the SSCs are under discussion.

Variations on the three year honours degree model

There are a number of developments in this area, including support for foundation degrees, and developments in e-learning. CETLs will develop additional capacity and innovative approaches to, for example, foundation degrees, e-learning and work-based learning.

In terms of flexible learning, we are working on a strategy to promote more flexible and accessible provision that will enable learners to study and progress at their own pace. This includes part-time and 'mixed mode' provision, the use of APEL, credit accumulation, and accelerated learning (such as two year degrees). Pathfinder projects will be funded in a small number of institutions to explore opportunities and barriers to these developments. The strategy will be informed by primary research which we have commissioned, and will be supported by the development of national credit arrangements. Additionally, our teaching funding review will consider the arguments for and against funding teaching by credit.

National Credit Framework

The QAA, with our support, is developing proposals under the steer of the Burgess Group, for national credit arrangements. The Burgess Group is planning to consult initially in autumn 2005 on proposals to move towards a national credit framework. This will be followed by the development of more specific proposals on the nature of a national framework and the timescales for implementation.

As these proposals develop, QAA is tasked with ensuring alignment with developments in FE and cross Europe. This involves some challenges, as FE and European developments are currently evolving in different ways. In particular, the QCA and LSC have developed a number of details of the 'Framework for Achievement' which may not align well with HE systems. QCA have noted concerns from the HE sector through their consultation process but it is not yet clear how they will be addressed. QAA have suggested a high-level forum to take forward a more combined approach to developing FE and HE credit and qualification frameworks. We recommend that this is supported, so that the current window of opportunity for a more combined approach is not lost.