

Responses to consultation on the HEFCE policy statement: higher education and the regions

1. In March 2001 we published the HEFCE policy statement on higher education and the regions (HEFCE 01/18). We invited responses by 31 May 2001 from the higher education (HE) sector and relevant national and regional bodies.
2. A total of 119 responses were received:
 - a. Eight-six responses were received from institutions: 70 from higher education institutions (HEIs) and 16 from further education colleges (FECs). In addition, six responses were received from HE regional associations.
 - b. Twenty-two responses were received from regional bodies: five from individual Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and one collective response, seven from local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs), two from Regional Assemblies (RAs), two from Government Offices (GOs), and five from other regional bodies.
 - c. Five responses were received from national bodies.

General reactions

3. The respondents generally welcomed the policy statement. It was recognised as important in increasing the understanding of the role of HE in the regions and the contributions of HEIs/FECs towards the regional agenda. Some believed that the policy statement would help overcome the misconceptions about HE that still exist, and help strengthen regional relationships between institutions and their partners.
4. The majority of respondents [56 per cent] supported the role defined for the HEFCE in the statement – of enabling and supporting HEIs in their regional roles. They stressed though that the regional agenda was evolving rapidly, and could accelerate, the HEFCE should keep the agenda under regular review. Others, while not disagreeing with what was in the statement, felt that it had understated or omitted important aspects of the regional agenda. These included:
 - a. The cultural aspects of the regional agenda (social well being, health, sustainability, and the environment).
 - b. The rural sector in HE.
 - c. The importance of LSCs.
 - d. HEIs' engagement with the public sector and voluntary agencies in contributing to the regional agenda.

- e. The role of science parks in the regions and how they create wealth and knowledge transfer to support social and economic regeneration.
- f. The encouragement needed for regional collaboration, and the direction that regional HE associations might be expected to take in the future.

5. Most respondents also praised the statement for recognising and describing the diversity between institutions, and the range of roles that HEIs and FECs can play. The favourable views were strongest among HEIs. It was felt that the HEFCE had struck the right balance between regional and national perspectives.

6. The RDAs welcomed the HEFCE's continued commitment to working with them and LSCs through their initiatives. They nevertheless noted that progress in responding to the regional agenda was uneven between regions, and stressed that the situation was changing rapidly. They felt that Public Service Agreements would be helpful in speeding the process of successful collaboration in the region.

7. A summary of detailed points made to the consultation is set out below under the questions we originally posed in the policy statement.

The regional agenda: has it been correctly articulated?

8. Most respondents felt that HEFCE had correctly articulated and interpreted the regional agenda.

9. Both RDAs and HEIs/FECs commented on the complexity of initiatives and funding streams which might support regional activity. RDAs felt there was danger that these might promote competition rather than collaboration. They also noted that funding was often short-term. They, and HEIs, argued for better national and regional co-ordination of funding activity across the range of funders, and possibly medium-term strategic planning. Some argued specifically for the production of integrated HE plans in regions – addressing learning, skills, education and employment – which could assist in proactive co-ordinated working across the wide range of relevant parties.

10. Some argued that the HEFCE could play a bigger role in promoting partnerships traversing HEIs, FECs, RDAs, LSCs, schools and National Training Organisations (NTOs). They also suggested that the Council could synchronise its cycles for policy development and funding of initiatives such as the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF), Additional Student Numbers (ASNs) and widening participation, with the cycles used by RDAs and LSCs for, for example, Regional Employment Action Plans, Workforce Development Plans, Skills Strategies and Incubator Strategies.

11. Some noted the strengthening of regional engagement achieved by the existence of EU Structural Funds in a region, although a few HEIs said they had difficulties in involving themselves in this activity because of lack of matched funding.

12. Some concerns were voiced about the levels of mutual understanding between the different players in the regional scene. HEIs and FECs felt that RDAs had yet to engage fully with the complexity of their missions.

13. Most FECs that responded to the consultation felt that their role in HE had been significantly understated in the policy statement. They feared that they were seen as an adjunct to HEIs, simply providing them with progression to aid recruitment. However, FECs felt that they could offer a far more strategic contribution to HE in the region, especially with the introduction of Foundation Degrees, as they will be increasingly important in delivering the skills agenda. Some HEIs emphasised that they appreciated that FECs are often in a better position to understand and respond to the local employment situation. HEIs noted though the quality assurance responsibilities placed on them in working in partnership with FECs. Some regional respondents argued that the LSC would need to pay more attention to a potentially damaging 'mission drift' in the FE sector, which accompanies the recent emphasis on HE in FECs.

14. The complexity of geographical boundaries between regions and the complexity of local interactions were stressed in some responses. Some institutions have two regional agendas to address because they are on a regional boundary, and not all HEIs that operate in a region are physically located there. Regions do not necessarily reflect the natural clusters of activity by HEIs/FECs. These complexities place considerable burdens on institutions. Respondents from London noted the scale and complexity of that region, which has a large range of HE providers with many diverse missions.

The regional agenda: should we take a uniform approach?

15. There was widespread agreement from all respondents that the HEFCE should not take a uniform approach to the regional agenda but should leave it to the discretion of each HEI or FEC and region to determine their own priorities and roles. The general approach taken by the HEFCE of providing information and support, as outlined in the paper, was approved.

16. RDAs put in a cautionary note that, while HEIs and FECs should identify their own priorities, they should not therefore work alone. They should seek to strengthen their partnerships with other institutions, as well as business and other organisations contributing to the economy. Some stressed the need for more cross-regional collaboration. A range of respondents noted the important role played by HE associations, and some HE associations felt that they could make a still greater contribution if they had a more central role in seeking funding (including being directly funded by the Council). The importance of sharing experience and good practice in engaging with the regional agenda between HEIs/FECs was stressed, as well as the usefulness of performance indicators to assist in this. The HEFCE could also help in disseminating effective practice.

17. Specific proposals for further HEFCE action were:

- a. Encouragement to HEIs to take an active regional role in Economic Partnerships and Lifelong Learning Partnerships.
- b. In relation to widening participation, the HEFCE could refine or replace the postcode analysis so that numbers of students from poor backgrounds can be better identified. Weightings and premiums might be increased to reflect more accurately the additional resources required.

Regional dimension: is this being suitably and sufficiently reflected in HEFCE programmes and policies?

18. Most respondents felt that the regional dimension was being suitably reflected in HEFCE programmes and policies, and that the Council has been very responsive to the ways in which HEIs are involved in their regions. Some felt that the regional dimension might be reflected further in certain areas of HEFCE funding, such as research and the funding of new HE programmes. The proposal for a research capability development fund as a means of enabling HEIs to develop a strategic approach to regional research capacity was therefore approved by many. HEIs were, in general, reluctant for core funding for teaching and research to be diverted to support new initiatives/projects in the region. RDAs, however, felt that the HEFCE did not appreciate the importance to the region of research and activity supported by the Higher Education Reach-out to Business and the Community (HEROBC) fund.

19. The Council's HEROBC funding (and now the Higher Education Innovation Fund – HEIF) were strongly supported as important components in addressing the regional (as well as national) competitiveness agenda. Some RDAs commented that they would wish to see a greater degree of regional allocation and decision making in HEROBC. One HEI made proposals for some specific regional activities to be funded from HEIF – regional fellows, regional innovation networks and regional foresight laboratories. However, some HEIs were concerned that RDAs should not seek to restrict HEIF to regionally focused activities. A few commented on the importance of the community aspect of HEROBC, which might appropriately cover the quality of life of the local communities.

20. FECs said that they would welcome more support for their role in providing HE, and wanted more HEFCE funding opportunities opened up to them. A particular concern of FECs was that HEIs have the main role in leading Foundation Degree proposals, whereas FECs have a wealth of experience through their diversity of HNDs/HNCs.

Regional consultants: is their role clear and appropriate?

21. The general view from respondents is that the role of HEFCE regional consultants (RCs) is clear and appropriate. Some found the annex setting out the role of the RC a useful checklist against which HEIs' expectations of the role may be compared. Most HEIs and FECs have found their contact with their RCs valuable, particularly in helping the institution to plan on an informed basis. A number of responses stressed the importance of RCs

supporting institutions in determining their own regional priorities by sharing their detailed knowledge of the regional and national agenda.

22. RDAs recognised the role that RCs play in working with regional bodies (although some HEIs said that regional HE associations were better placed to fulfil this role). HEIs noted that RCs, with their national and regional knowledge, could assist them in defining the HEI's appropriate roles. RDAs felt that in future the RCs would need to become more involved with other regional bodies such as regional assemblies and chambers, Chambers of Commerce, and particularly LSCs. Some RDAs offered to assist RCs in spending a greater proportion of their time within the region by offering an office base and diary management.

23. There were concerns whether HEFCE would be able to maintain the quality of its RCs, who often move on after limited periods of time. Some said that RCs would need to be given greater support to fulfil the expectations of them in the region, particularly as some felt that RCs needed more than one visit annually to an HEI if they were adequately to address the regional dimension.