

# HE in further education colleges: HE strategies

B107/08  
Agenda item 15  
17 December 2008

## Issue

1. Update on the pilot programme for requesting HE strategies from further education colleges (FECs) and proposals for implementing the policy.

## Recommendations

2. The Board is invited to:
  - a. Note the outcome of the pilot for FECs to submit HE strategies.
  - b. Agree that, in February 2009, we request strategies from all FECs with HE provision.
  - c. Authorise the Chief Executive to agree the text of the HEFCE guidance on strategies for HE in FECs which will be produced by February 2009.
  - d. Agree that good practice guidance is provided to support colleges in the development of HE strategies by April 2009.

## Timing for decisions

3. Agreement at this meeting will enable us to begin implementing this aspect of our policy in time for 2009-10.

## Further information

4. From John Selby on 0117 931 7416, [j.selby@hefce.ac.uk](mailto:j.selby@hefce.ac.uk) or Ruth Tucker on 0117 931 7367, [r.tucker@hefce.ac.uk](mailto:r.tucker@hefce.ac.uk).

## **Background**

5. A key feature of the policy review of HE in FECs conducted in 2006 was for colleges to become more strategic about their provision of HE. We received very strong support for this in our consultation in 2006-07. As part of this review, we proposed that we would seek HE strategies from FECs.
6. In July 2007, we received the agreement of the Board to develop a pilot programme to test the workability of the proposal for the implementation of the requirement for FE colleges to submit HE strategies.
7. We carried out the pilot programme during 2008, testing the process on 30 strategies. The pilot programme was evaluated by Professor Gareth Parry and Dr Anne Thompson of the Department of Educational Studies, University of Sheffield, who worked closely with us during the pilot programme.
8. This Board paper reports the outcome of the pilot programme, and seeks support for our proposals for taking the policy forward.

## **Discussion**

9. Our strategy for HE in FECs seeks a more strategic approach from FE colleges and their HEI partners with a view to enhancing and strengthening the provision. Our view is that HE taught in FECs, although not a large proportion of all HE, is critically important. This is because of its role in opening up vocational progression routes into and within HE, in making HE more accessible to those with no previous experience of HE whether young people or adults, and in contributing to the development of higher level skills and the employability of graduates. While much of the college provision of HE is very successful, there is undoubtedly some which has not been planned as strategically as it might have been and is not well connected to progression opportunities. Our policy is designed to address this.
10. The purpose of the pilot programme was to work out a robust and consistent process for the preparation and appraisal of colleges' HE strategies. Strategies were produced by 27 individual colleges and three partnerships, each of several colleges. The sample reflected the range of provision (volume, funding stream(s), location, and partnership models). The appraisal process was owned by HEFCE but a significant part of the desk-based appraisal was conducted for us by QAA. Institutional teams contributed by assessing how far a college's provision related to HE provision locally and regionally.
11. Without exception, colleges found participation in the pilot programme valuable for the reassessment of an existing strategy or, in the case of some, drawing up of a strategy for the first time. We are encouraged by this to want to continue with a process that will require colleges to provide us with a strategy for their HE.

12. However, in other respects, there were problems with the process adopted for the appraisal. The evaluation revealed that it was difficult to ensure a consistent approach to the process both within HEFCE and QAA and in the way in which the feedback to colleges was presented. A further issue concerned our assessment of the completeness, appropriateness and reliability of a strategy's evidence and claims.

13. We have therefore reviewed our approach and considered three options for taking the policy forward.

#### Option 1

14. To acknowledge the difficulties with appraisal of HE strategies that the pilot had revealed and to decide that we would no longer expect FE colleges to provide us with an HE strategy. The difficulty with this is that the whole logic of our policy that all colleges should become more strategic about their HE would be seriously undermined. Given that there is strong support both from colleges and from their HEI partners for the policy, this would seriously damage our relationships with the sector.

#### Option 2

15. To continue with the detailed appraisal that we had undertaken in the pilot but to refine the process. We would institute more rigorous process management to iron out the inconsistencies, revise the QAA involvement and make provision to resource the acquisition of the necessary local knowledge about HE provision.

16. This would make the process much more resource intensive for us and would mean that we could not manage the process across all nine regions and some 280 colleges offering HE.

#### Option 3

17. To request HE strategies from colleges starting in academic year 2009-10 and to use a less intensive process of review. This, when combined with other things, would enable us to achieve our policy objectives in a less burdensome way.

18. This modified approach would involve a number of elements:

- a. We would issue revised guidance to colleges about our requirements for an HE strategy and the related documentation, which would respond to the findings from the evaluation of the pilot programme. This recommended that the guidance should go into more detail on the indicative content. As well it should provide fuller information about acceptable formats, include a section summarising the volume and range of the college's HE provision, and have information on the extent to which the strategy needs to be underpinned by supporting documentation.

b. We would, in addition to asking colleges to prepare a strategy, ask them to complete a pro forma which indicated where in their strategy they were addressing our priorities. We would require the strategy to be signed off by the Principal and to have governing body support.

c. The college's strategy would form part of the Integrated Quality Enhancement and Review (IQER) process carried out by QAA in assessing the quality of HE in FECs. We have held preliminary discussions with QAA and this would fit well with the process and provide a valuable part of the evidence for the review. This would reduce burden on the colleges in that a single document would serve two purposes.

d. We have commissioned a good practice guide to support colleges in the management of their HE provision, which is a significant revision of our publication in 2003. Forming a part of this, but in addition to the work that is already underway, we propose expanding the information on thinking strategically about HE related to the policy context and, as well, incorporating practical information about such things as processes for securing support for the strategy, and examples of the kinds of documents colleges are producing.

19. The HEFCE guidance would be completed by February 2009 and the good practice guidance by April 2009, which would fit with requesting HE strategies from institutions in February 2009, which we would expect to have received by autumn 2009.

20. The advantage of option 3 over the other two options is that it constitutes a comprehensive approach, which both minimises burden and supports the development of good practice in strategic thinking about HE in FECs. The strategies would become a valuable resource for institutional teams in understanding the provision of HE in FECs and would act as a useful backdrop to any dialogue with either FECs or with their partner HEIs about the development of HE. This may be in the context of a proposal for ASNs or development funding.

21. As a further support to the policy, we have recently agreed to fund a project through the Leadership, Governance and Management (LGM) fund that supports staff development through provision of an expert programme for senior managers of FECs offering higher education. Dr Anne Thompson, the project manager for this project, is the key person involved in the evaluation of the pilot, and HEFCE has a place on the steering group for this project. Thus, there will be a strong link between the development of HE strategies and the staff development of senior managers in colleges delivering HE.

Recommendations. The Board is invited to:

- a. Note the outcome of the pilot for FECs to submit HE strategies.
- b. Agree that, in February 2009, we request strategies from all FECs with HE provision.
- c. Authorise the Chief Executive to agree the text of the HEFCE guidance on strategies for HE in FECs which will be produced by February 2009.
- d. Agree that good practice guidance is provided to support colleges in the development HE strategies by April 2009.

### **Financial implications**

22. There are no direct financial costs beyond those already committed through the LGM fund. We address the question of administrative burden in the sector impact assessment.

### **Risk implications**

23. There is a risk that, while our approach has secured considerable support both in the consultation responses and as evidenced by the large number of colleges volunteering to be in the pilot, resistance may develop once we formally request HE strategies from all colleges. We will continue to mitigate this risk by informal consultation and widespread discussion about the value to institutions of being strategic about their HE provision.

24. The procedure we have identified for influencing FECs to become more strategic about their HE provision is much lower risk than that attempted through the pilot, because it does not require a detailed assessment process which would be complex to administer.

25. It was evident from the HE strategies provided in the pilot that many colleges had an element of growth in their strategy. In view of the recent and possible future restrictions on ASNs, some colleges may become less enthusiastic about developing HE strategies. We would argue that in a time of restricted growth, the more strategic a college can be about its provision, the stronger its case will be for receiving whatever growth opportunities are available. The good practice guide will also support colleges in thinking strategically about the links between their FE, their HE and local employer demand and need for provision. This will provide them with greater security for their provision in the future.

## **Sector impact assessment**

26. We have developed a sector impact assessment for this policy. We consider that the increased administrative burden for institutions in drawing up a strategy document will be far outweighed by the benefits that will accrue internally from the recognition of the place of HE within the college overall. Just as important, we consider that the potential benefit to the shape of HE in FECs will justify the increased administrative burden.

27. We shall mitigate the burden on FECs by not prescribing the precise form for the colleges' strategies and asking them to draw on existing college documents where possible. In addition the documentation provided to HEFCE could be used for the development review as part of IQER carried out by QAA. Thus, the provision of a single document for two separate purposes would reduce the burden on colleges.

28. An outcome for colleges of working on HE strategies may result in some withdrawal or transfer of provision and in consequence may involve partner HEIs. While involving work in the short to medium term, we would argue that the benefit to the shape of provision of HE taught in FECs would be far outweighed by the effort and resource involved.

29. HE in FECs attracts a greater proportion of students that are drawn from lower socio-economic groups who are not well represented in higher education than the sector as a whole and the policy will enhance the quality of this provision.

## **Public presentation**

30. We will publish the evaluation of the pilot and make clear our future intentions regarding our revised approach to FECs' HE strategies in a circular letter.

31. We shall continue to attend meetings with representative groups including the Association for Collaborative Provision, the Mixed Economy Group, the QAA HE in FE Policy Advisory Forum, and the HE Academy HE in FE Reference Group. We will keep other stakeholders such as the Association of Colleges, Universities UK and GuildHE informed of our policy. In addition, the three Institutional Teams each have an HE Policy Adviser who has the lead for the team on HE in FECs, which should enable more focused communication with institutions.

32. We shall accept invitations to speak at national conferences, such as that organised last month by Action on Access and the Mixed Economy group on the theme of widening participation and HE in FECs where one of our directors gave the keynote address.

33. The launch of a good practice guide supporting colleges in the planning and development of their HE strategies early in 2009 will provide a further platform for us to promote our approach to the implementation of policy.