

**Consultation on the review of Higher
Education In Further Education, including
Foundation Degrees**

Response Booklet

November 2007

Consultation on the review of Higher Education In Further Education, including Foundation Degrees

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Organisation on whose behalf you are replying

.....University and College Union.....

Does your response represent the collective view of your organisation (if appropriate)?

Yes

Your position within that organisation (if appropriate)

...Regional Official.....

SECTION ONE

REVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN FURTHER EDUCATION

STRAND A – COURSE APPROVAL AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Recommendation 1

“The approval process for individual Higher Education in Further Education courses is removed and replaced with a strategic planning approval process through the College Development Plans and a robust quality assurance system for established courses.” (See page 19)

Q1a. Should the current course approval process be removed?

Yes.

STRAND A – COURSE APPROVAL AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Q1b. What are your views on the proposal that a strategic planning approval process, through the College Development Plans, is introduced? (See page 19)

This sounds sensible. However it is left open as to how this would work in practice. Approval will still be required. Who will make such decisions and on what basis? Will such decisions be transparent and will there be an opportunity to challenge where it is felt that a decision will impact adversely upon a college or community it serves? UCU would expect that such decisions would be taken by a body representative of colleges, SSC's and the Department.

STRAND A – COURSE APPROVAL AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Recommendation 2

“That the Department maintains the policy that colleges can offer only the first and second years of a degree programme.” (see page 20)

Q2 What are your views on the proposal that the Department should maintain the policy that colleges can offer only the first and second years of a degree programme?

UCU views this as unnecessarily restrictive and places NI Colleges in a position where it would be difficult to develop foundation degree relationships with cross-channel universities. Where a college has demonstrated record of delivery, the system should be sufficiently flexible to permit that college to come to an arrangement with an associated higher education institution whereby the college could deliver a full degree programme.

STRAND A – COURSE APPROVAL AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Recommendation 3

“Given the role of QAA in reviewing Higher Education in HEIs and Further Education colleges in England and the Northern Ireland HEIs, it is the Department’s recommendation that the QAA be charged with undertaking quality assurance of Higher Education in the Further Education colleges in Northern Ireland. Their significant expertise in this area will help ensure the quality of provision in the Further Education sector.” (See page 27)

Q3 Which agency do you believe is best placed to review Higher Education provision in Northern Ireland’s Further Education colleges? Please give reasons for your answer.

UCU would support recommendation 3 primarily because this approach will ensure consistency of standards between Northern Ireland’s colleges and those elsewhere in the UK. This will safeguard the currently of qualification obtained by students at Northern Ireland’s institutions.

Care must be taken however to ensure that colleges here are not overburdened by unreasonable demands in reflect of quality assurance requirements.

STRAND A – COURSE APPROVAL AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Recommendation 4

“It is recommended that the newly designed Developmental Review be implemented in Northern Ireland in academic year 2008-09.” (See page 28)

Q4 What type of approach do you consider appropriate for ensuring robust quality assurance of Higher Education in Further Education?

We support the Developmental Review approach with the qualification that reports regarding the delivery of programmes be available for public scrutiny.

STRAND B - FUNDING METHODOLOGY

Recommendation 5

“It is proposed that the new funding model that has been developed for the Further Education sector should be used to fund Higher Education in Further Education provision from 2008-09 academic year onwards.”

The advantages of this approach are: the flexibility inherent in the new funding model; the model will be used to fund all other Further Education provision, so the sector will understand the model and will be able to administer it with a minimal additional burden; there will be capability and capacity within the Department to administer the model; and the model provides an opportunity to fund all Further Education activity, including Higher Education in Further Education, in a planned, consistent and stable funding environment.”
(See page 33)

Q5 What are your views on the introduction of the new Further Education Funding model to fund Higher Education in Further Education?

UCU does not support recommendation 5 on the grounds that it preserves the current inequality which results in HE courses in FE being funded at a significantly lower level than comparable courses delivered in HEI's.

Despite the difficulties referred to at (iv) p33, UCU believes that an in-house HE funding model comparable to the HEFCE model would result in fairness and equality of treatment which we view also as an important objective in this policy initiative.

Recommendation 6

“It is recommended that from academic year 2008/09, MaSN allocations will be made for each new regional college, to distribute among their campuses and curriculum areas as they deem appropriate. Non-Transferable MaSN places and available Foundation Degree places will be integrated into a single Transferable MaSN allocation.” (See page 38)

Q6a. What are your views on the creation of a single transferable MaSN, which colleges can distribute among their campuses, as they deem appropriate?

UCU supports measures to remove the complexity of the current system. We support the concept of the single transferable MaSN option.

STRAND C – MAXIMUM STUDENT NUMBERS

Q6b Can you suggest other criteria which should be considered as a means of re-allocating MaSN in 2011/12 and beyond?

We feel that targeting social need and meeting priority skills needs should be amongst the criteria to be considered.

SECTION TWO

REVIEW OF FOUNDATION DEGREES

THEME 1 - RECRUITMENT

Recommendation 7

“The Department recommends that academic qualifications should not be a pre-requisite for entry to Foundation Degree courses and that APEL is retained as a key principle of the Foundation Degree philosophy.” (See page 44)

Q7a Do you agree that APEL should be retained as a key principle in Foundation Degree recruitment?

Yes – this is particularly important in respect of adult learners. Current Foundation Access courses could complement APEL for learners without traditional academic qualifications. Existing Access courses are fit for the purpose of university entry including foundation degrees – they are available on a full-time, part-time and day or evening basis and attract a socially diverse intake of students across a wide variety of vocational areas.

THEME 1 - RECRUITMENT

Q7b What can be done to make Foundation Degrees more open or appealing to students with non-academic qualifications?

For all students Foundation Degrees will be more appealing when they are accorded recognition and support by employers. There is a major gap to be filled in that regard.

For students with non-academic qualifications there is a need to emphasise the importance of the Foundation Degree as a qualification in its own right as well as its importance in respect of career advancement and entry to further HE study programmes.

THEME 1 – RECRUITMENT

Q7c How can APEL be developed as an entry route to Foundation Degrees?

This should not be left to individual institutional discretion. There is a need for sector wide guidance incorporating advice from colleges, Sector Skills Councils, HEI's and QAA.

THEME 1 - RECRUITMENT

Q7d What are your views on the proposal that a pre-Foundation Degree Access Course could be a viable alternative to APEL?

UCU is not convinced of the value of such a course. It is our view that if APEL is consistently applied, advice and support can be offered to ensure necessary preparatory issues are addressed prior to eventual entry to a Foundation Degree.

THEME 1 - RECRUITMENT

Q7e In your view, is there sufficient demand for such a course?

The evidence of the decline in applicants may point to an issue where further research is necessary. That may reveal if such a course is necessary and indeed what the level of demand might be.

THEME 2 - PROMOTION

Recommendation 8

“The Department recommends that Higher Education Policy Branch works with Foundation Degree Forward and the Regional Development Manager to develop a strategy for the promotion of Foundation Degrees, particularly to those in industry.” (See page 47)

Q8 What are your suggestions for the best way to promote Foundation Degrees? Please give details

Greater supporting publicity from employers and universities - particularly in respect of success stories.

Increase marketing at post-primary schools and FE colleges.

THEME 3 - DELIVERY

Recommendation 9

“The Department recommends that the articulation route continues to be the 2 + 2 model which is currently in place. This will maintain the integrity of the Foundation Degree as a stand-alone qualification, whilst giving the universities an assurance that students who progress to Honours will complete the necessary modules at that level.” (See page 51)

Q9 What is the most appropriate model for articulation from Foundation Degree to Honours, and why ?

It is possible that more than one model may be appropriate. The Departments' recommendations is based upon current practice involving local universities – in the future it may be that FE colleges may collaborate with other HEI's which may operate a different practice in respect of articulation. That development should not be restricted and to so do would be difficult to justify. Provided QAA standards are maintained, it is feasible for a 2+1 model to be appropriate. UCU is concerned that current practice adds a financial burden over 4 years to foundation degree students which does not apply to students undertaking a 3 year degree programme. UCU sees this as a present barrier to access.

THEME 3 - DELIVERY

Recommendation 10

“The Department recommends that the process of work-based learning should continue to be a key element in the structure of a Foundation Degree.”
(See page 52)

Q10a What are your views on the importance of retaining the work placement element of the Foundation Degree?

UCU supports this recommendation. We do recognise however the difficulty in obtaining suitable work placements – a problem particularly acute for colleges with an isolated, rural hinterland.

THEME 3 - DELIVERY

Q10b What are your views on the “projects” approach as a possible solution to the problem of obtaining suitable work placements?

This is one possible solution – another might be to seek work-placement arrangements with employers overseas such as elsewhere in the UK or the Irish Republic or further afield.

THEME 3 – DELIVERY

Q10c How else might the lack of placements be addressed?

See earlier answer.

THEME 4 – HIGHER EDUCATION & FURTHER EDUCATION COLLABORATION

Recommendation 11

“The Department recommends that the current policy remains in place, except where the local universities are unwilling or unable to validate a Foundation Degree, in which case a Further Education college could seek a partnership with a university outside Northern Ireland.” (See page 54)

Q11 What do you think is the most appropriate model for future validation of Foundation Degrees, and why?

UCU believes that Northern Ireland’s FE colleges should be treated no less favourably than colleges elsewhere in the UK. UCU sees no justifiable reason why a local college should not be permitted to develop partnership arrangements with universities outside Northern Ireland provided QAA Standards are maintained and such developments meet the needs of students. UCU also believes that Northern Ireland’s colleges should be treated no less favourably than colleges elsewhere in the UK with regard to awarding foundation degree status.

THEME 5 - FUNDING FOR FOUNDATION DEGREE DEVELOPMENT

Q12 What criteria should be used to allocate funding for the development of Foundation Degrees? (See page 55)

We ask that two further criteria be added – that of targeting social need and the promotion of cross border collaboration to address high levels of unemployment in the border areas.

THEME 5 – FUNDING FOR FOUNDATION DEGREE DEVELOPMENT

14.1 The Department has a small amount of funding available for the development of Foundation Degrees and is seeking to set criteria for its provision. Various measures are currently being considered, which may be taken into account when funding is allocated to these activities and these could include:

- where there is comprehensive engagement with the relevant Sector Skills Council;
- where the employment sector has identified a major skills gap; and
- where the need is in priority skills area.

14.2 We would welcome your ideas on what these criteria should be and how the funding would be best directed.

Question

12 What criteria should be used to allocate funding for the development of Foundation Degrees?

The criteria stated at 14.1 seems appropriate.

THE WAY FORWARD

15.1 This consultation closes on the 7 January 2008. The Department will then carry out an analysis of the responses and a summary report will be placed on the website. A full report containing recommendations for future policies on Higher Education will be submitted to the Minister.

15.2 Thank you for taking the time to read this consultation document. We look forward to your response.

Further Information:

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