

## NIACE response to HEFCE Consultation: Withdrawal of funding for equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs)

This paper gives the questions asked by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in its on-line consultation together with the responses of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

Question 1:

*Have we responded appropriately to the Government's instruction that certain categories of student should be exempt in light of Student Fees (Qualifying Courses and Persons) (England) Regulations and Education (Student Support) Regulation?*

**NIACE strongly disagrees**

*Comments*

It is hard to judge whether HEFCE's response to the Government's 'instruction' has been appropriate or not without knowledge of conversations between Council members and officers and officials of the DfES and DIUS as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007.

There is a widespread opinion in the field that the Council was advised that it needed to 'flex-up' £100m for the CSR and that changes to ELQ funding were identified as one of a number of options. In the interests of transparency the Council should either declare what alternative options for re-prioritisation were considered or to deny that such discussions occurred. At the select committee for Innovation, Universities and Skills meeting of 28/11/07, Mr Rammell remarked "I think people recognise and understand the underlying importance and are prepared to work with us on this". It would be helpful for the Council to clarify whether it is among such people.

In the absence of clear information about the Council's role in the run-up to the Secretary of State's letter, and because of the increasingly wide range of subjects that will be damaged by the proposals (including psychology, post-compulsory certificates of education for FE teachers, pharmacy and languages), NIACE strongly disagrees with the statement that the Council's approach has been appropriate.

Question 2:

*Do you agree with our proposal to continue providing public funding for students studying for a foundation degree as an equivalent or lower qualification (ELQ)?*

**NIACE agrees**

*Comments*

The protection of Foundation Degrees is welcome and should be extended to HND and HNC qualifications as well. Encouragement should also be given to the development of Foundation Degrees in subjects such as history and literature given the importance of the cultural, creative and heritage sectors to the UK economy.

In addition, it should be recognised that Foundation Degrees are not always the most appropriate form of provision for each and every adult (not least those who are self-employed or not in paid employment). Many adults discover or test out their aptitude and suitability for a subject through a short course or a part-time course offered through a department of continuing education and involving a modest time commitment. These need protection too.

Question 3

*Do you agree with our proposal to allow students studying for an ELQ to count towards the delivery of separately monitored co-funded additional student numbers (ASNs)?*

**NIACE strongly agrees**

*Comments*

It is important that mechanisms can be created which do not exclude adults who are unable to secure employer commitment to co-funding their career development and labour mobility. This proposal will help but it is not enough.

#### Question 4

*Do you agree with the proposal to introduce an allocation for strategically important and vulnerable subjects (SIVS), calculated on the basis of ELQ numbers studying SIVS?*

#### NIACE disagrees

##### *Comments*

The protection of SIVS is welcome - but since the Government itself will ensure the preservation of these subjects, HEFCE should instead be turning its attention to protect additional CULTURALLY important or vulnerable subjects (CIVS) and to ensure a degree of support remains available to subjects such as languages, social sciences and liberal arts.

Within the Learning and Skills Council-funded sector, there is provision within a largely skills-driven strategy for the funding of Personal and Community Development Learning (PCDL)(currently £210m pa for three years). NIACE urges HEFCE to consider the establishment of a similar safeguard for 'Higher-level PCDL' to protect some of the infrastructure of continuing education and give a degree stability to continuing education departments re-orientating provision.

SIVS are nationally-identified priorities. NIACE urges the Council to also consult with Regional Development Agencies to consider whether safeguarding REGIONALLY important and vulnerable subjects (RIVS) is necessary.

#### Question 5:

*Do you agree that we should provide a supplement to the part-time targeted allocation?*

#### NIACE strongly agrees

##### *Comments*

Supplementing the part-time targeted allocation would be a necessary but insufficient response to the reform of funding for ELQs. The overwhelming majority of students affected by changes will be part-time and many part-time courses (especially those running in Further Education colleges), will cease to be viable, risking a dramatic narrowing to curriculum range and choice. Where full and part-time students study alongside each other, the viability of some full-time courses may also be at risk.

The proposals thus risk changing the ecology of institutions and the overall profile of higher education in England in unanticipated ways as well as weakening the ability of universities to fulfil their traditional wider civic duty of promoting informed citizenship. The detrimental impact on departments of Continuing Education which offer adults the opportunity to test their aptitude and interest in a subject through shorter and smaller episodes of study is particularly significant.

In addition to increased allocations, (which rather presume a ready and waiting cohort of applicants) the Council should consider an enhanced part-time premium to assist institutions in transition.

Question 6:

*Do you agree with our proposal to aim to provide 'safety net' funding to maintain each institution's grant at a comparable 2007-08 level in cash terms?*

**NIACE strongly agrees**

*Comments*

This is wholly welcome but the Council should do more to make strong and public representations to Government to delay any changes by at least one year since the unintended consequences of the re-prioritisation are still emerging and have not been factored into different economic models (not least in the Open University, Birkbeck College and many new universities and colleges). The Minister may be convinced of the need for urgency but it is not evident to others that there is substantial pent-up unmet demand from first-time students who are being denied entry by people continuing their education.

The modelling that has been undertaken suggests that the greatest challenges will be faced by the institutions that have done most to widen participation and deliver the reskilling and upskilling identified as necessary by Lord Leitch's Review of Skills. If any negative impact is not mitigated, the whole Leitch agenda is jeopardised.

Question 7:

*Do you consider that the ELQ policy outlined in this document is likely to have a differential impact on students, depending on their gender, race, whether they have a disability, or any other extraneous factors? If so, how might this be mitigated?*

NIACE strongly agrees

*Comments*

In addition to any legal responsibilities that the Council may have to assess its policies and functions, and to set out how it will monitor any possible negative impact on race, disability and gender equality it needs, as a matter of good practice to consider age-related inequalities that may result from its policies and also consider 'rural-proofing' the effects of policy change.

NIACE considers that the proposals may risk harming several groups including:

- 'first generation' HE students who may have had less good advice on the appropriateness and utility of their first degree than students from backgrounds more familiar with HE;
- ex-offenders who may be legally prevented from returning to a former occupation;
- (mainly women) returners to the labour market after a break for child or eldercare during which the currency of their initial qualification has decayed;
- older people displaced in the labour market in mid to late career whose qualifications have minimal currency in a 21st century labour market.

As well as groups of prospective students at disproportionate risk, NIACE urges HEFCE to consider the 'multiplier impact' of the proposals in the health and social care sectors where many entrants to that part of the labour market are adults switching careers for whom foundation degrees may be inappropriate. Any disruption to labour supply carries the risk of a wider social cost which will impact on the clientele of health and social care professionals.

Question 8:

*Do you have any further comments?*

NIACE is concerned about:

- the absence of consultation before these proposals were announced;
- the absence of market-testing and modelling to ameliorate risk;
- the apparent absence of an equalities impact assessment prior to announcement.

We urge HEFCE to make a case to government for alternative ways of delivering £100m of HE funding for re-prioritisation including "top slicing" from all institutions rather than placing the burdens of re-prioritisation on those universities that do most to widen participation.

A further alternative to the government's "all or nothing" proposals, NIACE urges HEFCE to argue of differing levels of public support ranging from:

- enhanced levels of resource to institutions (no less than pro-rata with the funding a full-time undergraduate would attract) for people without prior experience of HE;
- current levels of support for people seeking career change in the labour market independently of their employers after a certain period of time since their most recent HE experience (since there is growing recognition that many academic qualifications have a time-limited currency);
- lower levels of subsidy of "serial repeater" learners funded from a ring-fenced budget for "Higher level Personal and Community Development Learning".

The balance between the public and private benefits of higher education is not as stark and clear-cut as the Government's proposals imply so we urge HEFCE to make a robust case to government for:

- DELAY (of at least a year ) so that institutions can better analyse the impact of the proposals on the viability of each and every every course and plan strategies that minimise damage to learners.
- EXTENSION OF EXEMPTED SUBJECTS (to include Culturally important and Regionally important subjects as well as obvious anomalies around FE teaching certificates and courses related to health and social care).

In any response that HEFCE makes to Government, NIACE believes a proper estimate should be made of the cost of "policing" the new regime in terms of data-gathering and fraud prevention since the additional bureaucracy required may mean that Government's proposals come at a high price.

The House of Lords debate (3 December 2007) showed that the breadth of the ramifications of the proposed changes are considerably greater than ministers may have anticipated when the proposals were announced. They are indicative of the difficulties in securing informed attention to the place of part-time learning within the higher education system.

We urge the Council and the Government, in advance of the 2009 fees review, to undertake a thoroughgoing review of part-time higher education in England.

7 December 2007

NIACE  
Renaissance House  
20 Princess Road West  
Leicester  
LE1 6TP