

Draft HEFCE Business Plan 2015-2020: Questions for gathering feedback from the sector

Response of the Association for Learning Technology (ALT)

Questions

Your details:

Name: Maren Deepwell

Position: Chief Executive

Institution/organisation: Association for Learning Technology (ALT)

E-mail: marren.deepwell@alt.ac.uk -

Responding as (individual or on behalf of organisation): Organisation (ALT)

Address: Gipsy Lane

Town: Oxford

Postcode: OX3 0BP

Section One

In Section One of this draft plan we have set out an overview of our Business Plan and our planned commitments and priorities over the next five years (2015-2020).

Question 1

This draft plan sets out the vision and broad strategic direction for HEFCE over the next five years. Do you agree with the focus of the plan? If not, what do you feel should be the focus?

We broadly agree with the plan. It is thought through, reflects changing priorities and suggests a clearly defined role for HEFCE.

We do not agree with the current title. There is a segway between the idea of the title of the need to create a world-leading "system" of HE in England to the definition of para 1 which expands on that by asking it to transform lives, strengthen the economy and enrich society. The document is largely about the three properties which are not included in the title which is in any case long. There is a conflict between using "creating" implying that we do not currently have the conditions for a world leading HE system (and therefore we cannot currently have one?) and implying that we need to sustain these conditions (even if we then do not have a world leading HE system). Some more thought on the title and para 1 is needed – perhaps replacing the indefinite article by "our" thus asserting that we have one already and the job is one of updating the necessary conditions in response to changing needs and definitions.

In the case of education the use of "innovation" needs some qualification. For most students consistency and excellence are seen as far more important. For example in the case of learning technology, there is no problem persuading significant numbers of staff to innovate. The problems are often rather those of capturing, sustaining and transferring good practice and being prepared to import it from other parts of the institution and from

outside. Thus in para 5 we suggest that “simulating greater innovation” is neither difficult nor particularly meritorious in its own right – it is stimulating successful, adopted, sustainable innovation that we should be planning as is highlighted immediately afterwards.

It is good to describe English HE as a “system”. A short unpack of what is meant by that would help.

Question 2

Are any areas not covered that you would have expected to see identified as priorities or commitments?

We feel that not enough is currently said about brokering and partnership and the relation with sustainability. See below.

Question 3

Do you think the priorities set out in this draft plan will enable HEFCE to respond sensibly and effectively to changes during the next five years?

Largely yes but our answer to Qn 4 suggests an area of planning priority.

The diversity of possible “new governments” and their subsequent actions must be a source of concern and it may be worth mentioning scenario width as a risk in the document.

Question 4

Have we appropriately covered the key partnership dimensions in the ‘working in partnership’ section of this draft plan?

There is a risk facing English HE of isolation - both of individual institutions and of the system – from one another, the rest of the UK, other educational sectors, North America, Europe etc. This may well be an increasing risk in the period in question and the role of HEFCE in this area could turn out to be crucial. Links are clearly strengthening across the system with the world of work and local communities in England but the other areas may need more support.

The obvious technical example is the continued ability of the jisc to provide efficient infrastructure under new funding models but there are other areas where we are currently part of external systems (e.g. ERASMUS) which we might leave within the time period of the plan. It would be nice to be told in the plan that contingencies were in place (it comes

back to sustainability of conditions).

In the ALT area there is much in common between the problems that institutions face between countries, sectors, and continents. HEFCE partnering or using agencies such as LFHE and others to help spread understanding and knowledge of good practice at management levels, especially in conjunction with others (as with Changing the Learning Landscape) has been successful and needs more emphasis. Thus there is an ongoing role for hefce in bringing together groups of agencies and others to help English practice stay at the leading edge.

Section Two

In Section Two of this draft plan we outline our draft objectives and proposed performance indicators for each of our directorates over the next five years.

Question 5

Do you have any comments on the draft objectives for:

- finance and funding
- research, education and knowledge exchange
- institutions
- analytical services
- regulation and assurance?

These are largely easy to follow and sensible.

Para 54 has some infelicities

- in b Move “effectively” two words later!

f is ambiguous, Careful read needed here and elsewhere.

The analytical services section is much more realistic and sensible than the claim of Section 1 (see below). Paragraph 58 is important as one of the strengths of this group comes from its the close interworking with HESA.

Question 6

Do you have any comments on the proposed performance indicators for:

- finance and funding
- research, education and knowledge exchange
- institutions
- analytical services
- regulation and assurance?

These follow sensibly from the objectives and are suitably precise. There is even a commitment to learn from other countries in 60h.

- The issue of student protection comes up in obj 60b. This in part relates to para 25. Performance Indicator 60a says that there should be no disorderly failures. In so far as this relates to Para 25 it is unconvincing with the present form of para 25 (what have you done to mitigate? – consulted the sector). It is hard to see who will take ultimate responsibility if HEFCE does not.

Question 7

Do you have any other comments on the draft plan?

There are a lot of typos and grammos. It needs a careful proofread.

A few drafting points:

- para 2 bullet 4. The word unique is ambiguous and likely to be misunderstood, especially with the indefinite article. Sufficient to claim authoritative.
- It is surprising that the open agenda is not mentioned once (open access, open resources etc.) This is a major challenge and relates to partnership.
- Para 21. We do not think that you intend to claim that HEFCE Analytical services are world leading in “data analysis, modelling, synthesis and interpretation of evidence” – if they were that in general then you would be wasting public funds. There needs to be some qualification of the “sphere of worldleadingness” – such as “ of Higher Education related data”.
- Para 25 is weak: See above. Perhaps also cover providers leaving the state funded system.
- Para 30 implies that there is a one off change that will be followed by stability. Perhaps for “the new” read “changing”.
- Para 49 needs splitting – the sentences are all pretty major and lie uneasily together especially after the mention of the detailed benchmarking in a specific subarea in the first sentence. The first sentence at least could be expanded into a separate “green” para.

Question 8

Alongside this draft plan we have also published a draft impact assessment. Please provide any comment on whether we have sufficiently considered the impact of this draft plan.

This seems a very sensible document.

Freedom of information

Information provided in response to a request, invitation or consultation from HEFCE may be made public, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act or of an appropriate licence, or through another arrangement. Such information includes text, data and datasets. The Freedom of Information Act gives a public right of access to any information held by a public authority defined within the Act, in this case HEFCE. It applies to information provided by individuals and organisations, for example universities and colleges. HEFCE can refuse to make such information available only in exceptional circumstances. This means that data and information are unlikely to be treated as confidential except in very particular circumstances. Further information about the Act is available at www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk.