

HEFCE Review of the teaching funding method: Consultation on key principles and features

A response from the Society of Biology to the Higher Education Funding Council for England

12 July 2010

The Society of Biology is a single unified voice for biology: advising Government and influencing policy; advancing education and professional development; supporting our members, and engaging and encouraging public interest in the life sciences. The Society of Biology is a charity, created by the unification of the Biosciences Federation and the Institute of Biology, and is building on the heritage and reputation of these two organisations to champion the study and development of biology, and provide expert guidance and opinion. The Society represents a diverse membership of over 80,000 - including practising scientists, students and interested non-professionals - as individuals, or through the learned societies and other organisations listed below.

Summary

The Society of Biology welcomes this review and the opportunity to comment on it.

- The higher education sector will be significantly affected by overall cuts in funding. In this context it is vital that there is **adequate support for teaching within the sciences, including biology, where costs are justifiably high.**
- Clear understanding and recognition of the costs of delivering high quality programmes is needed. It is vital that quality is not compromised. We believe that an explicit **link between quality of provision and funding incentives** is important. In the current proposals there is very little reference to quality, whereas in the past, HEFCE has supported improvements in teaching quality and it would be a significantly retrograde step should these no longer be encouraged. This is particularly relevant given the need for the sector to retain its strong international position and economic importance.
- **Institutional autonomy** has contributed a great deal to the education sector over many years, fostering and facilitating innovation. We would not wish to see any significant erosion of this capacity for independence.

Consultation question 1

Do you broadly agree with our statement of the purpose of HEFCE's funding for teaching?

We do broadly agree with the statement of the purpose of HEFCE's funding for teaching, however, these are outline statements and avoid potentially contentious detail making any significant disagreement unlikely.

We observe that employer input to this area is unlikely to increase; indeed there are indications that large employers are looking at other strategies to form their workforce, including moving overseas. Company funding of graduate schemes cannot generally guarantee a recruit or dictate delivery of the skills sought. Sandwich courses, however, continue to be popular and often equip students with skills directly required by employers. An increase in the number of companies willing to offer placements would be welcome. In general it will be important to maintain clarity on what teaching can and will deliver in terms of graduates with broad transferable skills rather than tailor-made employees.

In reality, a system whereby the majority of funding for teaching does not derive from government is unlikely and the protection of institutional autonomy remains important. There is an underlying issue regarding the accuracy of calculations of the cost of teaching and the disparity in costs between laboratory- and field-based practical teaching programmes, and others. It is essential that these are supported at a level to ensure sustained, appropriate, and high quality teaching.

Consultation question 2

Do you broadly agree that our funding method should give institutions the freedom to manage provision in a way that best responds to the needs of students, employers and society?

We recognise that higher education institutions face an inherent conflict in running courses of differing costs. There is inevitable competition between courses which are more or less expensive to run. Given the necessity for institutions to balance their books, whilst addressing their individual missions, we acknowledge the strains which this can place on intentions to act in the public interest. Various strategies may be adopted within institutions and because of the differential funding now available the balance of subjects is important to overall viability.

We question the extent to which HEFCE can know true teaching costs and endorse the anecdotal evidence that the Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) method is not reliable. In particular we wish to highlight that bioscience subjects are costly to teach, in part due to the vital elements of laboratory and fieldwork, and therefore require balanced funding within the STEM category. Relative underfunding of bioscience programmes, which remain strong in terms of recruitment, will place an increasing burden on institutions and make the delivery of high quality practical teaching (laboratory and field) more difficult. This teaching does not just require access to facilities, sites and consumables but also to sufficient dedicated staff time. We are already aware that courses with laboratory- and field-based elements are experiencing a funding squeeze and are concerned at reports that some practical classes are virtually non-existent in certain universities.

We recommend that the word "usually" be removed from the statement in Paragraph 36 to protect from an impression that core funding might be used as a policy lever and which could lead to a

more fundamental conflict with the concepts set out in Question 3 and Question 4. HEFCE should clarify its position in relation to this.

Consultation question 3

Do you broadly agree that our funding method should enable us to incentivise change which is in the public interest?

We are concerned about the lack of strategic debate around what constitutes the 'public interest' in this context. In particular we are concerned that short term incentives and changing policy priorities will not interact well with this sector. Because of planning time; acquisition of staff skills; student through-put, and to allow time for outcomes, a full course could not be created and evaluated in less than five to seven years. Alterations of funding and incentive structures which did not adequately take this into account could be counter-productive. Moreover, despite the view expressed in Paragraph 40, we anticipate that few institutions in this financially constrained environment could forego an opportunity for extra funding.

We are aware that student evaluation is important and recognise that students highlight the importance of gaining transferable skills as well as knowledge in the course of studies. Employer evaluation can also be a valuable element of such assessments.

Consultation question 4

Do you broadly agree that we should achieve this through a 'strategic margin'?

We reiterate our concern that 'fluid' and 'short-term' arrangements might be of questionable value. We do not note any indication of the percentage at which this strategic margin would be set relative to the overall budget; whether it would be ring-fenced, and whether institutions might use this allocation for core provision. We look forward to thorough consideration of all of these points in the second consultation.

Particular attention will need to be paid to potential interference with institutional autonomy and the likely effect on the core missions of many institutions which are long-term in nature and require stability.

We are aware of the inherent contradictions within Questions 2 to 4 in terms of the balance between provision of incentive funding by HEFCE and the maintenance of institutional autonomy over the use of funds. We comment specifically on the options outlined in Question 10 below.

Consultation question 5

Do you broadly agree that our funding method should be compatible with various modes of study, including flexible provision?

We broadly agree with this position but note that full-time courses will remain the core activity for most institutions, apart from, for example, the Open University and Birkbeck which specialise in part-time and flexible courses and provide a valuable facility for those students already in employment or with other time commitments. In terms of biological studies we would wish to ensure that good practical teaching (including laboratory and field work) could be adequately

incorporated into any flexible arrangement. We are not convinced of the merits of any move towards fast-track two-year degrees as a new norm and we are aware that these are particularly difficult to achieve within the research-intensive universities. It is important to note that our international commitments under Bologna push us in a different direction, proposing a *minimum* of three years for undergraduate degrees. The Society of Biology is currently developing an accreditation programme for four-year integrated Masters bioscience Degrees with a pilot due to be launched this Autumn (2010).

Consultation question 6

Do you broadly agree that our funding method should be as simple and easy to understand as possible?

We recognise the attractions of a simplified funding system but caution that over-simplification is a real danger. Inevitably one size will not fit all and there are many specific situations which should be reflected in funding.

Consultation question 7

Do you broadly agree that our funding method should be responsive and dynamic?

While responsive and dynamic elements may be desirable elements of a funding strategy, we wish to highlight the genuine need for a degree of stability and that student needs would not be well served by a volatile system. We recognise that too much stability could contribute to stagnation but argue that a stable supply of core skills and knowledge is a vital contribution of the HE sector. Certain strategically important and vulnerable subjects (which should include subjects within the biological sciences) require protection both in terms of student access and the retention of trained staff. A system which over-compensated for student demand might not align well with long-term societal needs. Student choices will be informed by course content, institutional reputation, cost, competition for places, immediate and long-term employment prospects, and a host of other factors. Interventions to smooth the peaks and troughs of demand may be valuable but regular staffing and de-staffing would be an unwelcome and de-stabilising prospect for institutions.

We consider the retention of a tolerance band to be essential. We would welcome clarity on the implication of any proposed alteration to the current arrangements for the charging of tuition fees on the block grant. We do not think that a straightforward relationship can be inferred between these two allocations.

Consultation question 8

Do you broadly agree that, to achieve value for money, our funding method should continue to reflect the impact of income from tuition fees and contributions from employers?

We are concerned that the market for bioscience courses could be adversely affected in such circumstances. The burden placed on students by the necessity to repay higher tuition fees may be a very significant disincentive if the fee rate was set to reflect the relative costs of the programmes. Furthermore, there should not be a disincentive on institutions to seek funds from elsewhere: those that do so should not effectively be penalised by reductions in their block grant.

We wish to emphasise that high quality laboratory- and field-based biology teaching is high-cost. HEFCE's funding arrangements should ensure that this cost differential, compared to non-experimental subjects, is borne by the Funding Council and not by the student. We believe that this is the correct approach because whilst it is clear that biological science degrees provide good value to the UK economy, they do not lead necessarily to more highly-paid jobs for graduates.

Consultation question 9

Do you consider that any other principles or features should be fundamental to our teaching funding method?

We reiterate the key message that practically-based science teaching costs more and the production of skilled scientists is critical to the economy: this should be reflected in funding from HEFCE in order to ensure that there is sufficient incentive and provision to guarantee good teaching.

Students applying to higher education are making increasingly informed choices and are aware of the contribution of good teaching to their ultimate career prospects. We therefore suggest that statements on added value could be helpful.

Consultation question 10

What are the advantages/disadvantages associated with each of the options in paragraph 60? Are there other effective alternatives?

With regard to the difference in character between providing funding and allocating student numbers (as in (a)) we note that in the biosciences it is not necessarily the case that increasing student numbers in a good institution will guarantee more good graduates in the absence of significant expansion of staff and facilities which is not easily achievable within a 'dynamic' model. Higher numbers of students in practical (laboratory and field) classes can put a significant strain on standards. In this case an increased allocation would be effectively a penalty.

Provision of rewards under (b) may help to reinforce good practice in theory but there is little discussion of how quality will be evaluated and a real danger that the withdrawal of funding could destabilise an established programme.

The application of incentives under (c) is a more direct approach but also carries the danger of encouraging moves towards a more uniform way of working with a risk of banality. While we see value in generating the capacity to fast-track pilot schemes in this way we would be concerned about stability following the withdrawal of funds.

We are unhappy with the option as described under (d). We would view with dismay the extension of a facility to discourage activity not in support of policy objectives to the penalising of current core activity in the form of three-year degrees.

We gratefully acknowledge the specific contributions of a Task Force (Chair: Dr Jon Scott, University of Leicester, with contributions from Dr Annie Geraghty, British Pharmacological Society; Dr Graham Godfrey; Prof Martin Griffin, Aston University; Prof David Male, Open University and British Society of Immunology, and Dr Jeremy Pritchard, Society for Experimental Biology) as well as submissions from the Association of Applied Biologists, the Anatomical Society, the Biochemical Society, the British Ecological Society, the British Lichen Society, the Genetics Society, Heads of University Biological Sciences, Science and Plants for Schools, and the Physiological Society among others.

The Society of Biology is pleased for this response to be publicly available and will shortly place a version on www.societyofbiology.org. For any queries, please contact Dr Laura Bellingan, Society of Biology, 9 Red Lion Court, London, EC4A 3EF. Email: policy@societyofbiology.org

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