



## The need for a clear strategy for Higher Education

Response to HEFCE's pre-consultation on its outline strategic plan 2006-2011

1. The Campaign for Science & Engineering is pleased to submit this response to HEFCE's outline strategic plan for the period 2006-2011. CaSE is a voluntary organisation campaigning for the health of science and technology throughout UK society, and is supported by over 1,500 individual members, and some 70 institutional members, including universities, learned societies, venture capitalists, financiers, industrial companies and publishers.

2. In general, the outline strategic plan seems to be a hurried, ill thought through mixture of unclear language and imprecise ideas. We note that it is 'work in progress' and that HEFCE will be 'refining the text,' so we do not expect the document to be polished. However, at present, the plan confuses means with ends, strategy with tactics, and core aims with peripheral staging posts. It is not in any meaningful sense an 'outline strategic plan' but looks more like unprocessed and disorganised loose gathering of pages from a flip chart used for an initial brainstorming.

3. Our specific comments are designed to illustrate this point rather than to be a comprehensive analysis of the degree to which the document fails to encapsulate a headline series of strategic aims or the outline tactics required to achieve them. Our comments are organised by the paragraph numbering of the pre-consultation document.

### **PARAGRAPH 10**

4. The list of eight 'key policy areas' is a hotch-potch of subjects, some of which are dependent on others, some of which relate to outcomes and others to inputs, and at least one of which is effectively meaningless. By what rationale does HEFCE consider 'funding for teaching' and 'research excellence' as key policy areas, but not apparently either 'funding for research' or 'teaching excellence'? Does this mean that HEFCE considers it to be more important that universities have the money to teach than whether they do it well, whereas in research, it is more important to do high-quality research regardless of funding?

The list includes 'factors' that are not comparable with one another. For example, 'widening participation' is extremely important, but it is a wholly

different quality of objective from 'research excellence'. There would be no point in widening participation in a second-rate system.

HEFCE is a funding agency, and exists to fund two principal kinds of activity: teaching and research. This is its overriding end, and it should not lose sight of it.

Universities exist to discover new knowledge and to disseminate it. If they are not doing these things well, they are wasting public money. Other factors should be integrated appropriately. For example, it is obvious that we will not have the best possible university system if we allow strategically important subjects to vanish or if we effectively disbar sections of the community from participating. Thus, supporting vulnerable disciplines and widening participation are essential tactics in the overall strategy of funding the best teaching and research.

Unless the final strategic plan has more clarity and consistency than this list of 'key policy areas' suggests, it will be a waste of effort.

#### **PARAGRAPH 27**

This table of 'key performance targets' attached to this paragraph demonstrates clearly how vacuous the targets are.

For example, 'foundation degree growth' is given as a measure of 'evidence of investment in demonstrable excellence or innovation'. It is not clear whether 'foundation degree growth' is intended to refer to an increase in (a) the number of foundation degree courses on offer, (b) the range of disciplines in which they are available or (c) the number of students engaged on them, or some combination of all three. But whichever it is, there is no intellectual justification for using it as a measure of evidence of investment in excellence; for this to be a useful target, there would need to be some attempt to measure the quality of the foundation degrees on offer.

Another of the supposed targets - 'the implementation of major initiatives' - cannot in any real sense be described as a 'key performance target'. What initiatives? Why are they necessary? How are they justified by any of the loose language above about increased globalisation?

#### **PARAGRAPH 31**

One of the targets here is to deliver the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise 'and *then* to develop the assessment process for the next exercise [our italics]'. Surely, the lesson of the past is that the development should be occurring now, in plenty of time, not left until after 2008.

#### **PARAGRAPH 40**

This paragraph refers to the necessity of “intervening where necessary to promote the public interest – for example, in respect of strategic subjects”. But in its own report on strategic subjects<sup>1</sup> HEFCE repeatedly stressed the belief that intervention is largely inappropriate apparently, because it might damage “the dynamism of the English HE sector”. This inconsistency will only serve to confuse universities and students.

#### **Conclusions**

Overall, the draft strategic plan presented in the pre-consultation is too woolly to be treated as the basis of a strategy for the coming five years.

Higher education in England has some serious challenges to address. Teaching and research are underfunded, global competition is increasingly fierce, and British universities need to adapt to changing conditions. In doing so, they need the strong support and collaboration of the Funding Council, and the Funding Council needs a clear sense of purpose. The current outline plan lacks that clear sense of purpose and requires complete revision before it could seriously be considered the basis for future action and investment in the English university system.

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<sup>1</sup> Strategically important and vulnerable subjects, HEFCE 2005/24