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

Consultation Document

November 2007

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACCAC	Qualifications, Curriculum & Assessment Authority for Wales
APEL	Accredited Prior Experiential Learning
CDP	College Development Plan
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DIUS	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate
FE	Further Education
FEC	Further Education College
FHEQ	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
FLU	Funding Learning Unit
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HEI	Higher Education Institution
MaSN	Maximum Student Number
NDAQ	National Database of Accredited Qualifications
NIHEC	Northern Ireland Higher Education Council
OFSTED	Office of Standards in Education, Children's Services & Skills
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
SPUR	Student Powered Unit of Resource

GLOSSARY

Academic Review – subject-level review process used for directly funded Higher Education in Further Education colleges in England from 2002

Access Course – course which prepares learners from non-traditional academic backgrounds for admission to undergraduate education

Accredited Prior Experiential Learning – relevant skills and experience gained, which are not recognised by a formal qualification, but which may be accepted as an entry route to, or exemption from units in a Foundation Degree

Awarding body – organisation that develops and awards qualifications

Edexcel – UK's largest awarding body

Education & Training Inspectorate – inspects educational standards in schools and Further Education colleges in Northern Ireland

Foundation Degree – professional/technical Higher Education qualification which integrates academic and work-based learning

Foundation Degree Forward – national body which supports the development of Foundation Degrees

Further Education Means Business – Department's programme for the future of Further Education in Northern Ireland

Higher Education Funding Council for England – distributes public money for teaching and research to universities and colleges

Higher Education in Further Education – courses at higher education level which are delivered through a Further Education college

Improving Quality; Raising Standards – ETI document which outlines the nature and purpose of the main inspection activities to be undertaken by the Inspectorate in all colleges/institutes of Further and Higher education

Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review – whole institution review method specially devised for Higher Education in Further Education colleges in England. It has replaced academic review of subjects.

Joint Information Systems Committee – supports education and research by promoting innovation in new technologies and by the central support of ICT services

Leitch Review – independent review of the UK's long term skills needs, undertaken by Lord Leitch. The final report was published in December 2006.

Maximum Student Numbers (MaSN) – cap which restricts the number of full-time undergraduate places in Northern Ireland

National Database of Accredited Qualifications – contains details of qualifications

that are accredited by the government's regulatory organisations in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

National Qualifications Framework – framework designed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, to set out the levels at which qualifications can be recognised

Office of Standards in Education, Children's Services & Skills – responsible for quality assuring educational provision in England at level 3 and below

Regulatory authority – external organisation that has been empowered by legislation to oversee and control the educational process and outputs germane to it.

Quality Assurance Agency – independent body which works with Higher Education Institutions to define academic standards and quality, carrying out and publishing reviews against these standards

Regional Development Manager – employed by Foundation Degree Forward and responsible for the development and promotion of Foundation Degrees

Sector Skills Councils – 25 independent, industry-led organisations, which provide a forum to express the skills and productivity needs of employers.

Success through Skills – the skills strategy for Northern Ireland, which sets out the Department's rationale and vision for an overarching framework for the development of skills

Student Powered Unit of Resource – the basic unit for calculating funding for Higher Education in Further Education

Success Through Excellence – Department's quality improvement strategy

Work-based Learning – time spent in the workplace (usually some months) as part of a course. A key element of a Foundation Degree

Workforce Development Fora – six bodies organised around the new Further Education colleges. They will identify skills needs at a sub regional level and will feed directly to the NI Skills Expert Group.

PURPOSE OF THIS CONSULTATION

This consultation seeks views on the Department for Employment and Learning's recommendations for the future of Higher Education in the Further Education sector, including recommendations for the development and delivery of Foundation Degrees.

Responses should be made to this consultation by 7 January 2008. A response booklet can be downloaded at the Consultation Zone on the Department's website.

Responses to this consultation will be subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000, which gives the right of access to information held by all public authorities. A report summarising the responses will be available on the Department's website.

EQUALITY

The Department for Employment and Learning is committed to promoting equality of opportunity and harmonious community relations, protecting human rights and meeting the objectives of the New Targeting Social Need policy.

In developing policy for Higher Education in the Further Education sector, the Department will continue to meet its obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and will also ensure that policy impact assessments are carried out in accordance with the Northern Ireland Civil Service's Policy Making Guide.

This consultation document is an integral part of the Department's Equality Impact Assessment, in terms of implementing a Further Education Strategy for Northern Ireland.

In line with the requirements of its Equality Scheme, the Department has conducted a Preliminary Equality Impact Assessment (PEQIA) on the recommendations set out in this consultation document. It indicated that the policy recommendations would have a neutral impact on the Section 75 groups.

FOREWORD

Higher Education in Further Education review

The Department for Employment and Learning is currently reviewing its policy in relation to the delivery of Higher Education in the Further Education sector. This review was recommended in the Department's strategy document, Further Education Means Business, which set out a programme of implementation to take forward the Department's policy on the future of Further Education. The Department, with the assistance of key stakeholders, has identified a range of issues for consideration and has developed a number of recommendations for the future delivery of Higher Education in Further Education. Through this wide-reaching public consultation, the Department seeks to establish policy proposals for the sector.

This formal consultation considers the role of Higher Education in Further Education and how it can be further developed through the College Development Plan (CDP) process. It also contains policy proposals on three key issues:

- A. Course approval and Quality Assurance
- B. Funding
- C. Maximum Student Numbers (MaSN)

Foundation Degree Review

A second project has been instigated, in conjunction with the Higher Education in Further Education review, to consider the principles underpinning the further development and delivery of Foundation Degrees. This project considers a number of key themes, which are:

- recruitment,
- promotion,
- delivery,
- Higher Education and Further Education collaboration,
- funding

Employer Engagement is also a key component of Foundation Degree development. However, as it cuts across all of the above themes, it is not discussed as a separate issue, but is considered, as appropriate, within each of the other themes.

The development of Foundation Degrees is integral to both the Further Education Means Business Strategy and Success through Skills. The Further Education Means Business strategy states that **“the Department will work with the other**

stakeholders to ensure that Foundation Degrees become the dominant sub-degree provision within the Further Education Sector....". Success through Skills states that: **“the number of Foundation Degrees in areas of priority skills will be increased significantly”** and that **“the Department will work closely with industry, especially the Sector Skills Councils to ensure... Foundation Degrees meet significantly the needs of employers and are industry led...”**

A discussion on the issues around Foundation Degree delivery begins on page 39 and consultation questions begin on page 52.

The consultation

The Department would like to thank the representatives of the following institutions and organisations who took part in the various working groups that were established to inform the development of this consultation:

- Association of Northern Ireland Colleges
- Belfast Metropolitan College
- Education and Training Inspectorate
- North West Regional College
- Open University
- Queen’s University Belfast
- Sector Skills Councils
- University of Ulster

Their valuable contributions are much appreciated.

The consultation exercise is a key part of both reviews. As the two projects are closely linked, it was practical to issue a joint consultation document to enable interested parties to consider the main issues in context. The consultation document outlines the background to both reviews, makes proposals and recommendations and asks questions relating to the issues discussed.

Your views are important to the overall review of Higher Education in Further Education. We would encourage you to respond as fully as possible in the response booklet.

The Project Board

PART ONE: HIGHER EDUCATION IN FURTHER EDUCATION

Introduction

1. What is Higher Education in Further Education?

- 1.1 Higher Education in Further Education is the delivery of Higher Education courses through the Further Education sector. Further Education colleges have been delivering Higher Education courses in Northern Ireland since the 1980s.

- 1.2 In 1997, the Dearing Committee recommended in relation to Further Education that:
 - (i) there should be growth in full-time Higher Education, particularly at sub-degree level (that is, intermediate level courses) and therefore in Further Education colleges; and
 - (ii) there should be no growth in degree level work at Further Education colleges.

- 1.3 Government accepted these recommendations and considered their implementation as key to responding to the needs of the economy.

- 1.4 In March 2006, the White Paper on Further Education noted that, in line with the wider mission, there should be a presumption that Higher Education delivered in Further Education should have a strong occupational and employment purpose and that the main area of expansion should be Foundation Degrees.¹

¹ 'Further Education: raising skills, improving life chances' (March 2006)

2. Definition of Higher Education in Further Education

Background

2.1 There has been some confusion as to the higher level status of a number of Higher Education in Further Education courses for funding purposes, particularly those awarded by professional bodies. It is important, both for clarity in the sector and, especially for future funding arrangements, for the Department to provide a clear definition of those courses which will be funded as Higher Education in Further Education.

Definition

2.2 Higher Education courses are defined in The Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 as the following:

- (i) a course for the further training of teachers, or youth and community workers;
- (ii) a course for the Higher National Diploma (HND) or Higher National Certificate (HNC) of the Business and Technology Education Council, or the Diploma in Management Studies;
- (iii) a course in preparation for a professional examination at higher level;
- (iv) a course providing education at a higher level (whether or not in preparation for an examination);
- (v) a postgraduate course (including a higher degree course);
- (vi) a first degree course;
- (vii) a course for the Diploma of Higher Education;
- (viii) a course for the Certificate in Education.

2.3 It is important from a funding perspective to ensure that qualifications are of a high quality and relevant to the needs of learners. There are two aspects to this firstly, regulation of qualifications and secondly, clarity at the different levels available.

Regulation

2.4 Higher level qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are regulated by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (ACCAC) and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). (These bodies regulate awarding bodies, qualifications, examinations and national curriculum assessments, to ensure that

the qualifications market is fit for purpose, that qualifications are fair, that standards are secure and that public confidence is sustained).

Clarity

- 2.5 QCA designed the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to set out the levels at which qualifications can be recognised. It helps learners make informed decisions on the qualifications they want to pursue, by comparing the levels of different qualifications and identifying clear progression routes to their chosen career. It also aims to promote public and professional confidence in the integrity and relevance of national awards. Clarity at level of qualifications is therefore achieved through the NQF. Only qualifications that have been accredited by the regulatory authorities are included on the NQF. (Qualifications at level four and above are considered Higher Education level.) External qualifications that meet – and continue to meet – the statutory criteria are accredited into the NQF. The awarding body must first be recognised by the regulatory authorities. This is an extensive and thorough process carried out by the regulatory authorities. Since 1999, the regulatory authorities have received 193 awarding body proposals. Of these, 113 have been recognised. At present, the majority of professional bodies offering awards in Northern Ireland Further Education colleges have their qualifications accredited to the NQF.
- 2.6 Recent research by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills (December 2006) has been extremely positive about the potential of what is designated non-prescribed Higher Education, such as professional courses accredited to the NQF. HEFCE's recent policy consultation on Higher Education in Further Education (November 2006) concluded that the provision leading to such awards could make a significant contribution to the development of new kinds of higher level and workplace learning to meet the need for a qualified workforce. They would expect professional and work-related higher level learning of all kinds to be reflected in colleges' Higher Education strategies. It concluded that an important challenge for the Higher Education sector as a whole is to think more positively about professional and work-related education at higher levels, and consider how to ensure that learners have access to the full range of opportunities in Higher Education.
- 2.7 The Department has therefore decided that courses on the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications and those accredited by QCA for equivalency in the NQF at level four or higher, should be recognised as Higher Education provision for funding and administrative purposes. Incentive will, be provided for professional awarding bodies to work closely with Sector Skills Councils and QCA to have their qualifications accredited to the NQF.

3. The role of Higher Education in the Further Education sector

3.1 Further Education colleges make a distinctive contribution to the overall provision of Higher Education. In supporting further development of Higher Education in Further Education, we want our policies and investment to enhance this distinctive role.

3.2 We believe:

- all Higher Education students, including those in Further Education should expect to benefit from a high quality learning experience, supported by scholarship, that meets their needs and the needs of the economy and society;
- the role of Further Education colleges in delivering Higher Education should not be over-prescribed. To do so would stifle dynamism and responsiveness, both of which will be required in the future in order to meet the skills needs of employers in Northern Ireland;
- if Higher Education in Further Education is to develop further, it should do so to meet clear strategic objectives that flow from the needs of learners, society and the economy; and
- the distinctiveness of Higher Education in Further Education lies in the extent to which its focus on short-cycle Higher Education enables it to adopt more higher level learning within the context of Lifelong Learning, its swiftness in responding to skills needs and its flexibility in delivery and effective working within a turbulent market. This flexible, responsive, employment focused, workplace-informed provision must be encouraged.

3.3 Our view of the future role and development of Higher Education in Further Education is that:

- (i) Further Education colleges should continue to provide a broad range of high quality Higher Education courses, particularly focusing on intermediate-level provision.
- (ii) Further Education colleges have a particular strength and role in meeting the needs of employers – they should continue to build on this strength.
- (iii) Further Education colleges should not be expected to conform to a single model of provision, but should focus on the development of higher level skills and engaging employers.
- (iv) Higher Education in Further Education will focus on the needs of local and regional communities. This means that, where Further Education colleges operate in relatively isolated communities, it is likely that the provision will be broader in scope than in more urban areas, in which there is likely to be a range of complementary Higher Education provision.

- (v) In niche curriculum areas, Further Education colleges may also need to serve a wider Northern Ireland market, e.g. Centres of Excellence.
- (vi) Further growth in Higher Education in Further Education should incentivise provision that is wholly or partly designed, funded or provided by employers. This could include more opportunities for part-time study, work-based learning and short-cycle courses and curricula, that are more responsive to learner and employer demand.
- (vii) Higher Education in Further Education has a crucial role to play in the development of a Higher Education system that meets the growing needs of the learning society and increases the opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate. It should attract learners who will be seeking progression opportunities from their Further Education programmes. It is likely, therefore, that these learners will be drawn from groups which are under-represented in Higher Education overall. Further Education colleges have a key role in ensuring Higher Education is no longer a once in a lifetime experience.

4. Higher Education in Further Education strategy statement

- 4.1 From academic year 2008/09, all colleges will produce a Higher Education in Further Education section of the CDP, a strategy setting out how they will develop and deliver their Higher Education provision. The Department will issue detailed guidance about this section of the CDP early in 2008. While recognising diversity and dynamism, we would expect all Further Education colleges, in planning their Higher Education provision, to:
- (i) have a clear strategy for the development of their Higher Education provision. This should be consistent with their overall institutional strategy and our view of the role of Higher Education in Further Education, as described above;
 - (ii) have a strategy which specifies how it adds value and relates to other Higher Education provision locally or regionally, and describes the relationships with other Higher Education providers;
 - (iii) build on their existing partnerships and strengths in Further Education provision;
 - (iv) offer courses that meet real, identifiable economic needs;
 - (v) ensure that staff involved in Higher Education provision are appropriately qualified, have opportunities for scholarly activity and are supported by adequate learning resources, in order to ensure a high quality learning experience for the learners; and
 - (vi) take into account other Higher Education networks and agencies, including the Higher Education Academy, the Quality Assurance Agency, the Joint Information Systems Committee and Foundation Degree Forward², and develop appropriate relationships with them.
- 4.2 The Department expects strategies for Higher Education to address all the above principles, but we do not expect them to conform to a single model. It will, first and foremost, be a statement of the college's strategic commitment and mission. We would, however, also expect the college to consult with its Higher Education partners and to see the results of the consultation in the strategy itself. Colleges' Higher Education strategies will be considered as a criterion in the allocation of Maximum Student Numbers (MaSN).
- 4.3 In June 2006, the Department published "*Further Education Means Business*" : A Programme for Implementation, which set out a vision and strategy for the future development of Higher Education in Further Education. This includes a view that a broad range of high quality Higher Education in Further Education provision should continue to be delivered and this should focus on intermediate level provision.
- 4.4 In response, the University of Ulster issued a policy statement and specific principles for its collaboration with the Further Education sector which stated that

² Foundation Degree Forward was set up in 2003 to support the development of high quality Foundation degrees, working in partnership with all relevant agencies, institutions, organisations and interest groups.

collaborative proposals should accord with the Department's strategy for Higher Education in Further Education and should not be beyond Higher Education intermediate level. In addition, the University agreed to "roll-out" the majority of its intermediate level provision to Further Education partners by 2008/09.

- 4.5 The Department supports the University of Ulster's commitment to withdraw from the delivery of intermediate level Higher Education courses. This commitment underpins the Department's view of the distinctive role that Further Education colleges can play in meeting the future higher technician and associate professional skills needs of Northern Ireland through the provision of intermediate level Higher Education programmes such as Foundation Degrees.

5. Why are we reviewing Higher Education in Further Education?

- 5.1 The review of Higher Education in Further Education is one of the projects within the Further Education Means Business programme. The aim of the Review is to develop a consistent, clear and coherent Departmental policy on the contribution of Further Education colleges to Higher Education provision and to improve the processes of managing and monitoring Higher Education in Further Education. The review also sits within the wider context of the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: Programme for Implementation.
- 5.2 There are a number of reasons why we are reviewing this now. The implementation of Further Education Means Business has introduced significant change throughout the Further Education sector, in particular the creation of six new regional colleges. There is also concern that advanced occupational and professional and technical provision at levels three and four, and the interface between Further Education and Higher Education, are insufficiently developed in the United Kingdom (UK), compared with other countries, notably Germany and the United States of America. This provision has grown up in a piecemeal way, straddling Further Education and Higher Education, and has rarely been the core focus of government, or the Further Education and Higher Education sectors. It has often been neglected in mainstream strategies for Higher Education and Further Education.
- 5.3 The development of our recommendations has been influenced by dialogue with the Higher Education and Further Education sectors, the Education and Training Inspectorate, the Quality Assurance Agency and examples of best practice throughout the United Kingdom. Working groups addressed the three principal strands of the review: Course Approval and Quality Assurance, the Allocation of the MaSN and Higher Education in Further Education funding. Specifically the review is considering:
- (i) the need for the current course approval process and a revised quality assurance process for Higher Education in Further Education provision;
 - (ii) the need for an alternative funding model for Higher Education in Further Education to support the Department's principles for Higher Education in Further Education provision; and
 - (iii) the current allocation of the Maximum Student Number (MaSN) and any re-allocation necessary due to the new Further Education structures.

STRAND A – COURSE APPROVAL AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

6. Terms of reference

6.1 The terms of reference for Strand A of this consultation were:

- to review the added value of the current new course approval process and consider whether, where a university has validated the programme, an approval process is needed;
- to consider whether the rationale behind the approval process should be one of demand and supply (in line with identified skills needs), rather than one of quality assurance;
- to consider the need for the periodic review or quality assurance of Higher Education in Further Education courses and the respective roles for the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in this regard.

Course approval

Background

6.2 At present, before a Further Education college can deliver a new Higher Education course, it must seek approval from the Department for Employment and Learning under the Institutions of Further Education Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1992. The Department has taken the power under the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 to regulate Higher Education in Further Education, prescribing which courses Institutions may deliver and the arrangements for the delivery of Higher Education.

6.3 Departmental approval is based on the advice of the ETI relating to colleges' capacity to deliver the course and the broad policy boundaries set by the Department. The Department has used this as a quality control measure. Once approval has been given to a new Higher Education in Further Education course, however, the approval remains in place indefinitely. There is currently no approval review process.

Aim and desired outcome

6.4 To make recommendations for change to the process of approving new Higher Education in Further Education courses.

Issues

- 6.5 No Departmental approval is required for courses provided at level three and below, nor for Higher Education courses delivered in HEIs (Higher Education Institutions). In England, approval for Higher Education in Further Education courses is not required from the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), nor HEFCE. The current requirement for Departmental approval for Higher Education in Further Education courses in Northern Ireland is, therefore, an anomaly.
- 6.6 The approval process is burdensome in terms of administrative resources for the ETI, the Department and the Further Education colleges. This administrative burden is likely to increase over the next number of years, with the further potential expansion of Foundation Degrees. There has already been an increase in the number of proposals for new Higher Education in Further Education courses. Since September 2006, Foundation Degrees could be expanded into any academic discipline, with the likelihood of a resulting increase in the number of new course proposals, especially conversions from Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) to Foundation Degrees.
- 6.7 Further Education colleges have also asked why course approval by the Department is necessary. They find it difficult to reconcile the need for the Department to seek further quality assurance, especially for qualifications already validated by the universities in Northern Ireland. The local universities have already rigorous course validation procedures for all university courses delivered in Further Education colleges. The other main awarding body for Higher Education in Further Education provision is EdExcel. In order to deliver EdExcel qualifications, a Further Education college must become an approved EdExcel centre. This is a robust process through which Edexcel considers aspects such as the college's understanding / experience of development and delivery of higher national qualifications and the published quality assurance documentation e.g. academic quality and standards policies.

Options

- 6.8 Options for the future of course approval considered were:
- (i) status quo;
 - (ii) retain a course approval process for quality assurance purposes, but streamline the process;
 - (iii) remove the course approval process for university validated courses, but retain the current approval process for courses validated by other awarding bodies;
 - (iv) retain the current course approval process purely to comply with statutory regulations;

- (v) remove the current course approval process altogether and introduce rigorous quality assurance for courses once established; and
- (vi) remove the approval process for individual Higher Education in Further Education courses, replace with a strategic planning approval process through the College Development Plans (CDP) and introduce rigorous quality assurance for courses, once established.

Recommendation 1:

6.9 The recommended option is Option (vi).

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.

6.10 Colleges will produce College Development Plans and will deliver against the objectives in these plans. Colleges will then be judged on how effectively and efficiently they perform, using agreed performance indicators. Higher Education in Further Education provision can be monitored and managed through a Higher Education in Further Education section within the CDP of each college.

Question

1a. Should the current course approval process be removed?

1b. What are your views on the proposal that a strategic planning approval process through the College Development Plans is introduced.

Issue

6.11 In the context of the course approval strand of the project, the delivery of the final year of degree programmes by Further Education colleges has emerged as an issue. A number of colleges have informed the Department that many of their HND and HNC students cannot obtain places on Honours programmes in Northern Ireland and, as they are unable to go to England because of limited finances or domestic reasons, they are effectively excluded from taking a degree. Colleges are increasingly keen to offer the final year of a degree course to allow these students to convert their HND qualification.

6.12 The Department's current policy was developed by the Advisory Group for the co-ordination of the Higher Education in Further Education sector in their strategic plan of November 1994. It states that in degree programmes, Further Education

colleges can offer only the first and second years of a degree programme. The final year should be provided by the university which validates the degree. This is intended to ensure that the university retains ultimate responsibility for the academic standards of the award.

Options

6.13 Options for the future of the delivery of degree programmes in Further Education colleges considered were:

i. Status Quo

That the policy whereby Further Education colleges can offer only the first and second years of a degree programme remains and is monitored via the College Development Plan process.

ii. Further Education colleges permitted to deliver modules up to, and including, the final year of a degree programme

That the current policy is removed and Further Education colleges are allowed to deliver modules from any stage of a degree programme.

iii. Further Education colleges prevented from delivering any modules from a degree programme

To help ensure that colleges concentrate on provision at intermediate level and on Foundation Degrees, the Department could introduce a policy whereby the colleges are prevented from delivering any modules from a degree programme.

Recommendation 2:

6.14 **The recommended option is Option (i)**

That the Department maintains the policy that colleges can offer only the first and second years of a degree programme.

6.15 One of the Department's key strategic objectives is to widen participation in Higher Education by disadvantaged students. Further Education colleges should, therefore, continue to be allowed to deliver the first two years of a degree programme in order to facilitate accessible, local delivery of selected degree programmes.

6.16 There are a number of critical reasons for retaining the current policy whereby Further Education colleges can offer only the first and second years of the degree programme.

- In 1997, the Dearing Committee recommended that there should be growth

in full-time Higher Education, particularly at intermediate level and therefore in Further Education colleges. There should be no growth in degree level work at Further Education colleges.

- There is good evidence to suggest that the skills gap is most acute at a level that is represented by Higher Education qualifications below degree level, particularly two-year work-focused provision³. Forecasts by the Institute for Employment Research show that, throughout the UK, between 1999 and 2010, the number of jobs in higher level occupations will grow by over one and a half million. That represents 80% of new jobs over the decade. Almost half of these jobs will be at the associate professional and higher technician level – best served through effective work-focused intermediate level Higher Education programmes⁴. Intermediate level Higher Education is therefore essential to the development of Northern Ireland's and the UK's economy.
- A degree place cannot be provided for progression purposes for every HND and HNC student in Northern Ireland. Due to MaSN restrictions, any increase in full-time final year degree level provision at Further Education colleges will produce a consequent reduction in the number of places available for intermediate Higher Education provision.
- It is far from clear that the problem is a substantial one. The numbers of first degree enrolments with HND or HNC qualifications is high at Northern Ireland HEIs. In the academic year 2005-06, 1,084 full-time students and 742 part-time students enrolled in Northern Ireland HEIs for a first degree, recorded an HND or HNC as their entry qualification. A further 208 students enrolled on other undergraduate programmes and recorded HNC or HND as their entry qualification⁵.

Question

- 2. 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?**

³ Higher Education White Paper (March 2003), para 1.25.

⁴ Higher Education White Paper (March, 2003), para 5.1

⁵ Source: HESR

Quality Assurance

Background

6.17 Quality assurance may be defined as the process of reviewing both the academic standards and academic quality of Higher Education.

6.18 Academic standards are a way of describing the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award. They should be at a similar level across the UK.

6.19 Academic quality is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them.

6.20 The broad purposes of quality assurance are:

- to secure value from public money, by ensuring that all education for which funding is provided is of an approved quality and by encouraging speedy rectification of shortcomings; and
- to encourage improvements in the quality of education through the publication of review reports and the sharing of best practice.

6.21 Currently, Higher Education in Northern Ireland's Further Education colleges sits at an administrative boundary with regard to quality assurance. The Department engages the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to quality assure university provision in Northern Ireland, including collaborative provision provided in Further Education colleges. Furthermore, universities are responsible for the standards and quality of their academic awards and programmes. Each has its own internal procedures for attaining appropriate standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of its provision. The Northern Ireland HEIs carry out both regular monitoring and periodic review of programmes. The academic standards of courses validated by universities, but provided within Further Education colleges, are therefore subject to QAA's and the universities' own quality assurance procedures.

6.22 The ETI is responsible for the inspection of Further Education colleges in Northern Ireland. The Inspectorate carries out focused inspections of colleges, makes specialist visits and also undertakes survey work commissioned direct by the Department, such as essential skills, Foundation Degrees, science provision, special learning difficulties and disabilities and the pilot programmes for small and medium enterprises in Further Education. The academic quality of all Higher Education in Further Education is, therefore, quality assured by ETI, through focused inspections of the colleges.

6.23 In England, since 2001, the QAA has reviewed directly funded Higher Education in Further Education through the Academic Review process. All Higher Education

provision in Further Education colleges directly funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is subject to review by QAA, whether validated by a Higher Education Institution or other awarding body. QAA has provided public and objective information through Quality Assessment reports, then Subject Review reports, and then Academic Review reports which address academic standards and academic quality. It is clearly recognised that QAA quality assure Higher Education in Further Education and the responsibility for quality assuring provision at level three and below rests with the Office of Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OFSTED).

Aims and desired outcomes

6.24 The Department’s Quality Improvement Strategy, “Success through Excellence” states that *“The Strategy will ensure a coherent approach to quality improvement, and the raising of standards across the system, working collaboratively with the key partners. This involves the use of inspection, support, advice and guidance, and the dissemination of good practice to support improvement initiatives, both within individual providers and across the system as a whole.”* A key element of the Strategy is to develop a robust quality assurance process for Higher Education in Further Education that will:

- (i) develop self-evaluation as a key component of an institution’s quality assurance scheme and ensure this becomes embedded within the management system;
- (ii) provide a robust and comprehensive overview of academic standards in individual Higher Education in Further Education programmes;
- (iii) provide a robust and comprehensive overview of the learning opportunities available to help students achieve their award;
- (iv) provide a robust and comprehensive overview of the academic quality of provision, by curriculum area, in Northern Ireland as a whole;
- (v) provide a robust and comprehensive overview of the standard of internal quality assurance of Higher Education in Further Education;
- (vi) allow effective benchmarking of Higher Education in Further Education provision; and
- (vii) provide effective and accessible public information on the quality of Higher Education provision in Northern Ireland’s Further Education colleges.

Issues

6.25 There has not been, in recent years, a comprehensive overview of academic standards or learning opportunities in Higher Education in Further Education, nor

is information on the quality of provision by curriculum area in Northern Ireland as a whole, readily available.

6.26 It is currently not possible to benchmark Higher Education in Further Education provision against established standards, nor to provide effective and accessible public information on the quality of Higher Education provision in Northern Ireland's Further Education colleges.

6.27 There has also been limited specific assessment of each college's internal quality assurance of its Higher Education portfolio.

6.28 The two questions in regard to quality assurance are:

- (i) Which body or bodies should carry out the quality assurance reviews?
- (ii) What type of review should be carried out in future?

6.29 Which body or bodies should carry out quality assurance reviews in the future?

Option (i)

ETI to review Higher Education provision in Further Education colleges

6.30 The ETI has many years' experience of promoting the highest possible standards of learning, teaching and achievement in the education and training sectors. Inspectors make an objective, professional evaluation of the quality of learning and teaching and evaluate the management and leadership of the organisation. The ETI's key priority is the interests and well-being of the learners, in terms of the education or training they receive and the outcomes they achieve. In 2003, the Inspectorate collaborated with the QAA to carry out a review of the original Foundation Degrees in Northern Ireland. This exercise involved observation of lessons, discussions with college staff and management, students and employers and a review of documentation across seven colleges.

6.31 There are a number of benefits to having ETI quality assure Higher Education in Further Education provision. These are:

- ETI knows the colleges and the context, for example, the standard of provision at, and progression from, level three;
- ETI's approach to inspection places a major emphasis on the quality of teaching and learning and not just the outputs or the rigour of the administration; ETI has also significant experience in inspecting work-based learning and has knowledge of the provision of local employers;
- ETI is currently reviewing its procedures for focused inspections to reflect the new Further Education structures. The new procedures are likely to include a whole college dimension, including a scrutiny of the statistical profile of the college's provision and standards of achievement over a three year period,

coupled with a detailed inspection of the quality of the provision within a number of curriculum areas or of courses across the curriculum at a particular level;

- Colleges are familiar with the performance indicators used by ETI and have been consulted on anticipated changes;
- The Department has a Service Level Agreement with ETI. ETI has indicated that it has the capability and capacity to undertake regular surveys of colleges' Higher Education in Further Education provision; they can be commissioned, as and when the Department requires.

6.32 ETI does not, however, have the same depth and breadth of experience as the QAA in reviewing Higher Education provision. The Department is seeking, through this policy review, to develop a new approach to Higher Education in Further Education delivery and it is vital to its success that the quality assurance process underpins this fully. This may best be delivered by taking a completely fresh view of the system of quality assurance.

Option (ii)

QAA to review Higher Education provision in Further Education colleges

6.33 The mission of the QAA is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of Higher Education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of Higher Education. To achieve its mission, QAA works in partnership with the providers and funders of Higher Education, staff and students in higher education, employers and other stakeholders, amongst much else, to promote wider understanding of the nature of standards and quality in higher education, including the maintenance of common reference points, drawing on UK, other European and international practice. QAA has responsibility for developing, maintaining and updating the Academic Infrastructure, the set of inter-related reference points which help institutions in their management of quality and standards and inform the public about the structure of Higher Education. The reference points, also used by QAA review teams, include the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, subject benchmark statements, the Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark, programme specifications and the Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in Higher Education.

6.34 Another key focus of QAA is to review the standards and quality of UK Higher Education. It does this by auditing the way in which awarding HEIs manage the overall quality and standards of their provision and QAA is currently completing the first full cycle of review of academic standards and the quality of teaching and learning in each subject area in directly funded Higher Education in Further Education.

6.35 The benefits of using QAA are:

- QAA's experience in reviewing Higher Education in Further Education provision in England through the Academic Review process and its knowledge across the Higher Education sector;
- Higher Education provision in Further Education would be quality assured by the same organisation as Higher Education delivered in HEIs, creating greater uniformity in the sector and parity of outcomes between Higher Education and Higher Education in Further Education;
- QAA will use a Teaching Quality Information (TQI) dataset for Higher Education in Further Education in England in its future reviews; TQI and published review reports will provide complementary public information about Higher Education in Further Education; currently, Northern Ireland's Further Education colleges have no presence on the TQI website and this puts them at an unfair disadvantage;
- the Department has a Service Level Agreement with the QAA to review Higher Education provision in HEIs in Northern Ireland; it would be straightforward contractually to engage QAA to review Higher Education in Further Education.
- QAA has established a Higher Education in Further Education Liaison Group, in England, the aim of which is to provide a forum for the discussion of matters of interest to colleges, their representative bodies and the QAA. In addition, the QAA has set up a Policy Advisory Forum consisting of the Further Education college Liaison Group together with representatives from other organisations with an interest in Further Education and Higher Education matters. Among its activities the Policy Advisory Forum receives report and comment from the Liaison Group; it provides an area for debate between representatives of Further Education colleges and national bodies; it provides an opportunity for the exchange of information on matters of common interest in the work of QAA, the Further Education colleges and related organisations. The Department believes the suggestion of establishing a Northern Ireland Higher Education in Further Education Liaison Group and Policy Advisory Forum has merit.

6.36 The QAA has also indicated that they have the capability and capacity to deliver a rigorous quality assurance of Higher Education in Further Education in Northern Ireland. They have advised that the quality assurance process can be flexible to meet Northern Ireland needs.

6.37 A number of issues need to be considered in relation to QAA involvement in quality assuring Higher Education in Further Education. These are firstly QAA's unfamiliarity with the Further Education sector in Northern Ireland and secondly, the potential impact on Further Education colleges, for example staff development requirements and dual inspection regimes. Also, ETI will continue to have a role in

quality assuring the remainder of Further Education provision, using the performance indicators set out in Improving Quality: Raising Standards (IQ:RS) and as colleges would be required to work with QAA and ETI and their respective quality indicators, care would need to be taken to ensure that colleges were not over-burdened by external inspection.

Recommendation 3:

6.38 The recommended option is Option (ii)

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.

Question

- 3. 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.**

6.39 What type of review should be carried out?

There are four options for the type of reviews. Options considered were:

- (i) The status quo. Review of Higher Education in Further Education as part of a focused inspection of the college's total provision at all levels in a particular subject.
- (ii) Systematic survey of individual Higher Education programmes delivered by Further Education colleges on a subject rotation. A schedule of subjects would be compiled for review each year. This method of review provides robust assurance at subject level, but is intensive, because colleges provide a range of subjects and each college is, therefore, likely to be included in the review each year.
- (iii) A more holistic approach, in which each Further Education college's full portfolio of Higher Education provision will be reported on at a whole-institution level on a systematic basis. Judgements will be made on how the college manages standards and quality of learning opportunities and the

accuracy and completeness of public information for the Higher Education programmes it delivers.

- (iv) A Developmental Review approach⁶ - developmental reviews identify features of good practice and include a series of desirable, advisable or essential recommendations, but there are no outcome judgements, or published reports.

Recommendation 4

6.40 The recommended option is Option (iv).

It is recommended that the newly designed Developmental Review be implemented in Northern Ireland in academic year 2008/09.

6.41 Developmental review is an evidenced-based process carried out through peer review. The college under review will be invited to nominate a member of its staff to participate as a full member of the team (the college reviewer). The report will comment on three core areas of the college's management and delivery of the quality and standards of Higher Education provision, namely:-

- academic standards
- quality of learning opportunities
- partnership agreements.

6.42 Developmental review has a number of features that particularly recommend its use to Northern Ireland. The engagements undertaken by the review team are intended to be developmental and an opportunity for the colleges to engage directly with QAA. The outcomes of the review will identify features of good practice and include a series of desirable, advisable or essential recommendations, but there will be no outcome judgement. The conclusions and recommendations of the team will be supported by a written report. The report will not be published. Where concerns have been identified, QAA invites the college to report on progress within an agreed period. The college reviewer will gain development from training and working with QAA reviewers and will be able to advise the college on the implementation of the review team's recommendations.

6.43 Developmental review was specifically designed for Welsh Further Education Colleges which, like Northern Ireland Further Education colleges, have had no previous direct review by QAA. It draws on QAA's substantial experience of carrying out similar engagements in HEIs in Wales and in England and more recently in a pilot of 15 Further Education colleges in England. The approach is sector friendly. It will give Further Education colleges an opportunity to engage directly with QAA, without outcome judgments or the final report being published.

⁶ Developmental Review for Wales should not be confused with the developmental review aspect of IQER Review. The developmental review aspect of IQER targets a single key area in the college's management of its responsibilities for quality in its Higher Education provision. Developmental Review designed for Wales examines **three** core areas of the college's management and **delivery** of the quality and standards of Higher Education provision.

6.44 The review will be completed and evaluated and in its outcomes will inform implementation in 2009-10 of one of the following:

- further “themed” developmental reviews;
- a cycle of review at an individual programme level (Academic Review methodology), through a scheduled rotation of subject areas;
- the review of the management and quality assurance of all Higher Education level programmes in a college (Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review methodology).

Question

- 4. What type of approach do you consider appropriate for ensuring robust quality assurance of Higher Education in Further Education?**

STRAND B – FUNDING METHODOLOGY

Background

- 7.1 Currently, funding for Higher Education in Further Education colleges, excluding Foundation Degrees, is allocated from the Further Education budget using the Further Education Funding Formula.
- 7.2 The basic unit of funding is called a SPUR (Student Powered Unit of Resource). Only students on a course of over 10 hours duration per annum will generate SPURs. All types of provision eligible for funding are considered. These basic SPURs are then enhanced wherever a student meets the criteria with regard to Targeting Social Need, vocational provision, age, subject of study, basic IT provision, learning difficulties or disabilities etc.
- 7.3 Student and course data from two years previously is used to calculate SPURS. For example, data for 2003-04 academic year was used to determine SPURS for 2005-06 academic year. The Further Education budget is then distributed on the basis of the percentage of SPURs generated by each college.
- 7.4 Foundation Degrees are currently funded on an “in-year” basis from a dedicated budget. They do not generate SPURs funding. The level of funding allocated was based on the Further Education funding formula principles used to determine the current year formula funding allocations.
- 7.5 The current funding arrangement was developed as an interim approach for the Foundation Degree pilot programmes. Foundation Degrees are no longer in pilot mode and in 2005 the Department invited new proposals, in any vocational discipline, for commencement in 2006-07.

Terms of reference

- 7.6 The Higher Education in Further Education Funding Working Group’s terms of reference were:
 - to review and develop an appropriate funding model for Higher Education in Further Education courses, to support the principles of provision as defined in Strand A; and
 - to consider the impact on resources, if the Department moved to an alternative funding model.

Aims and desired outcomes

- 7.7 To make recommendations for a revised model for the funding of Higher Education in Further Education courses and consult stakeholders on the new model.

Issues

- 7.8 The Department wishes to move to an arrangement whereby the Higher Education in Further Education funding methodology supports the overarching rationale and principles underpinning Higher Education in Further Education. The new approach must be capable of being implemented and managed effectively and efficiently by the Department and by colleges.

Options

7.9 A number of funding options were considered:

(i) Continue to fund using the SPUR Further Education funding formula;

This is, effectively, the “status quo” option, which would see the existing SPURs Further Education funding model continuing to be used to fund Higher Education in Further Education provision. However, through the development of the Further Education Means Business strategy, the Department concluded that a new funding methodology was required to support the delivery of the strategic aim and objectives of Further Education and as a result the SPURs funding model will disappear. A new Further Education funding formula based on funding learning hours will be operational from 1 August 2007 in the new regional colleges. Consequently, it would not be possible to continue funding Higher Education in Further Education through the SPUR model. The SPURs model, however, will be retained to fund Higher Education in Further Education in the 2007-08 academic year only.

(ii) HEFCE funding model

The Department has a Service Level Agreement with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for the provision of assistance and advice on core services. This includes the calculation of core teaching funding to the Northern Ireland HEIs, using a funding model which is based on a principle of similar resource for similar activities. In this context, the Department concluded that providing a similar consistent and equitable funding model for Higher Education, delivered in the Further Education sector in Northern Ireland, would be of benefit to key stakeholders.

The Department scoped the work required (in respect of data collection, verification and audit), to enable it to approach HEFCE and ask it to extend the existing funding methodology service it provides to include the Further Education sector in Northern Ireland. The exploratory work identified that significant business process change and resource would be required to enable the Further Education colleges in Northern Ireland to meet the mandatory data and audit requirements to work within the remit of the HEFCE funding model, as currently defined⁷.

The Department also discussed with HEFCE a range of funding issues including the potential volume of work and change management required to incorporate the

⁷ HEFCE have recently completed a public consultation on to a wide range of policy issues impacting upon Higher Education in Further Education Colleges (including funding).

Further Education colleges within the existing Higher Education learning and teaching funding model it currently operates on behalf of the Department, in respect of the two Northern Ireland universities. In January 2007, HEFCE confirmed that it was not in a position to undertake any additional funding methodology services for the Department. This official confirmation resulted in the HEFCE option being withdrawn from final considerations.

(iii) Move to new Further Education funding model;

Under this option, Higher Education in Further Education provision would be funded through the new Further Education funding model. This model establishes a unit of resource (a so-called Funding Learning Unit – FLU). The FLU is based on hours of actual teaching, on top of which the following agreed funding weightings are applied:

- level of study weighting;
- weighting for professional and technical provision;
- weighting for the subject area studied, which reflects Northern Ireland's priority skill areas combined with the relative cost of delivery; and
- weighting for disadvantage, based on the geographical area which the college serves.

These weighted components of the funding model are sufficiently flexible to enable them to be applied at different levels to support specific requirements of Higher Education in Further Education provision. In addition, the model has been future proofed to accommodate migration to any future unitisation of qualifications. The funding model has been aligned to the National Database of Accredited Qualifications (NDAQ) and to approved professional courses. This reinforces the relevance of the model to the twin objectives of delivery, consistent with Sector Skills Bodies' workforce development plans and with the delivery of the Leitch recommendations, where relevant, to Northern Ireland's requirements.

The new Further Education funding model has been developed with the involvement of the Further Education sector. The data underpinning the model originates in and is validated by the colleges and is consistent with colleges' existing and planned data collection processes. The planned Further Education processes include a commitment, commencing at the start of the 2008/9 academic year, to move to funding based on in-year data, which is consistent with Higher Education requirements in this area. Using the new Further Education funding model to fund Higher Education in Further Education provision would, therefore, minimise the additional administrative burden within the sector, while ensuring up-to-date data is used to inform funding decisions.

Finally, an analysis of the characteristics of full-time Higher Education in Further Education provision indicates that the new Further Education funding model, with its inherent flexibility, would be able to manage the funding of Higher Education in Further Education provision in an effective manner.

(iv) In-house Higher Education funding model (comparable with the HEFCE funding model)

This option, as with the HEFCE option, would provide the Department with the opportunity to fund Higher Education across the Higher and Further Education sectors using a comparable methodology. The primary difficulty lies in the Department's ability to develop and implement a funding methodology which would replicate the HEFCE model. In assessing this there were three primary concerns:

- Expertise – the Department does not currently have the considerable level of knowledge and expertise necessary to develop and implement a complex funding methodology, such as that developed by HEFCE⁸
- Sector Experience – the HEFCE funding methodology incorporates data on sector norms and trends and contains sector-wide assumptions, based on experience and past performance. It allows for student numbers, courses, student-related factors and institutional factors to influence resources. The funding method aims to ensure that the funding body allocates an appropriate level of teaching funding for an institution as a whole. This would constitute a major challenge for the Further Education sector; and
- Resources – this relates to Departmental and sector resources. From the Departmental perspective, a dedicated team of staff, including expert input from analytical staff, would need to be sourced and trained. From the Further Education sector's perspective, there would be additionality in terms of data collection, ICT costs and staffing resource.

Having considered this option fully, the Department concluded that the development and implementation of a HEFCE style in-house funding methodology would be unachievable, in terms of the timeframe for implementation, resource implications and the accountability burden which would be placed on the Department and on the Further Education sector at a time of significant change.

Recommendation 5

7.10 The recommended option is option (iii)

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.

7.11 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

⁸ Details of the HEFCE Funding methodology can be accessed on the HEFCE website at www.hefce.ac.uk.

Education activity, including Higher Education in Further Education, in a planned, consistent and stable funding environment.

Question

- 5. What are your views on the introduction of the new Further Education Funding model to fund Higher Education in Further Education?**

STRAND C – MAXIMUM STUDENT NUMBERS

Background

- 8.1 In 1994, in order to constrain escalating public expenditure on demand-led student support costs, Government introduced a UK-wide policy of consolidating the number of award holders in Higher Education. This policy was enforced through the setting of an annual cap on the numbers of full-time home and EU undergraduates that individual HEIs could enrol. This annual cap is known as the Maximum Student Number (MaSN). A MaSN allocation also applies to full-time, but not part-time Higher Education places in Further Education colleges. These places are known as “transferable” MaSN places and can be allocated to courses as each college sees fit.
- 8.2 While the existence of the MaSN has effectively constrained the number of full-time undergraduate Higher Education places in Northern Ireland, its level has been lifted in recent years to allow for some expansion. Since 1999, the Department has allocated some 4,130 additional full-time equivalent (FTEs) student places, of which 1,170⁹ went to Further Education colleges. These included 600 “non-transferable” MaSN places that were allocated to the Further Education sector in 1999. The places were distributed across six vocational areas identified as being important for supporting Northern Ireland’s economic development, namely construction, computing, electronics, manufacturing engineering, software engineering, and hospitality and tourism and can only be used for the courses for which they were allocated.
- 8.3 Foundation Degrees were introduced in Northern Ireland as pilot programmes in the priority skills shortage area of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in academic year 2001-02. Subsequently, the Department agreed to a limited extension of the pilots in 2002-03. Foundation Degrees are no longer restricted and in 2005 the Department invited new Foundation Degree proposals in any vocational discipline for commencement in 2006-07.
- 8.4 By 2003, there were 300 earmarked full-time equivalent (FTE) pilot places for Foundation Degrees in the areas of ICT, Construction and Hospitality. In 2003, a further 240 FTE equivalent Foundation Degree places were allocated to colleges through a bidding process.
- 8.5 There has been increasing public debate in relation to whether there are too many or too few full-time undergraduate places in Northern Ireland, particularly since the MaSN cap was abolished in England in 2002-03. The Department recently produced a detailed position paper, *Consideration of the optimum number of full-time undergraduate places in Northern Ireland Higher Education* to initiate an open debate on the optimum number of full-time undergraduate places in Northern Ireland. The paper analysed the current evidence and concluded that the

⁹ The 1,170 additional places allocated to the Further Education Colleges includes 300 pilot Foundation Degree full-time equivalent places which were allocated to the university led consortia who were delivering Foundation Degree pilots. The universities then decided how many places each of their Further Education partners should receive.

case for securing funding for further full-time undergraduate places in Northern Ireland was not convincing, when balanced against other, competing demands. Seventeen responses to the position paper were received, mainly from organisations within the Higher and Further Education sectors and also from the CBI and the Ulster Unionist Party. The responses have not provided compelling evidence that the policy on MaSN should be changed. The Minister is committed, however, to keeping the MaSN policy under review. The Department is actively engaging with the universities to explore options such as targeted expansion in areas of strategic importance to the future growth of the local economy. It should, therefore, be noted that the scope of the Higher Education in Further Education project is not to consider the merits of MaSN, but rather to ensure an equitable and rational distribution of the MaSN allocation.

Terms of reference

8.6 The Higher Education in Further Education MaSN Review Group's terms of reference were:

- to consider the impact of the move to six regional colleges on the MaSN allocations and to review allocations to ensure an appropriate spread of places across Northern Ireland; and
- to review the MaSN allocations, looking in particular at the continuing relevance of non-transferable MaSN places and their reallocation, and the allocation of Foundation Degree pilot places as additional MaSN places.

Aim and desired outcome

8.7 To make recommendations for a methodology to reallocate the MaSN places among the six regional colleges, including recommendations on the treatment of non-transferable MaSN places.

Issues

The new college structure

8.9 In 1993, in response to the Stewart Report, it was decided that provision of full-time Higher Education would be limited to those Further Education colleges that had, or had the potential to have, in five years, a total enrolment of 120 full-time equivalents, Higher Education provision in at least four vocational areas, viable enrolments in each course and a successful track record in delivering part-time Higher Education. 10 of the former 16 Further Education colleges had a MaSN allocation.

8.10 The criteria originally used to decide which institutions should have a full-time MaSN allocation are no longer relevant. This is because of the recent restructuring of the Further Education sector into six regional colleges as part of the Further Education Means Business programme. Each of the new regional colleges will certainly fulfil the original criteria for delivering full-time Higher Education in Further Education provision. The Department, therefore, seeks to ensure that the MaSN allocations are equitable and reflect the quality of provision and the potential and strategic vision of each integrated unit of management, in order to allow each of the regional colleges to deliver a wide range of full-time Higher Education provision.

Enrolment trends

8.11 In recent years, there has been a downward trend in Higher Education in Further Education enrolments. In 2004-05, none of the 10 colleges recruited up to their MaSN limit; indeed, between 2000-01 and 2004-05, eight colleges dropped enrolments against MaSN by more than 20%, with two of these colleges dropping by 50% or more.

8.12 Enrolment data also indicates that the allocation of “Non-Transferable” MaSN places has not been successful in increasing recruitment in these skills shortages subject areas. Since non-transferable MaSN places were introduced in 1999, less than half of the 27 allocations have increased their recruitment levels and only one allocation had an increase of more than 20 enrolments. In the same year, 14 allocations had zero recruitment; by 2004-05, six of these allocations still had no enrolments and a further six had recruitment below ten enrolments. These results are particularly poor, when enrolments are compared with the target recruitment levels; only two matched their target allocations in both 2003-04 and 2004-05. Analysis of the population in Northern Ireland aged 18-26 indicates that demographic trends cannot explain this decline in enrolments in the period 2000-2005. The decline in the population in this age group in the period to 2020 and the potential impact this might have in Higher Education in Further Education enrolments is noted. It is, however, recognised that a contributory factor to the reduced number of enrolments on these “non-transferable” MaSN places was the introduction of Foundation Degrees in the same subject areas / disciplines.

Removing complexity

8.13 A college can have three individual types of allocation: a “transferable” MaSN allocation, a “non-transferable” MaSN allocation and an allocation of Foundation Degree places. It is clear from the data that the current system is unnecessarily complicated and difficult to monitor effectively.

8.14 Following consultation with the college directors, the Department has reallocated MaSN among the regional colleges from 2007-8 on the basis of the regional colleges' average full-time funded Higher Education enrolments between 2000 and 2006. This identified an average number of unfilled places, which were redistributed equally across those campuses which formerly had no MaSN allocation.

Recommendation 6

8.15 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.

8.16 Where a regional college has introduced Foundation Degrees in disciplines in which they have an unused allocation of "non-transferable" MaSN places the Department will be prepared to consider, on a case made basis, a relaxation of the current restriction on the use of these places in other disciplines in academic year 2007/2008.

8.17 From academic year 2010/11, the Department will review MaSN allocations on a three year cycle to coincide with the College Development Planning schedule. Recruitment will be a primary criterion for allocating places, but data on the quality of provision and the information provided in the college's Higher Education strategy will also inform allocations.

Questions

- 6a. What are your views on the creation of a single transferable MaSN, which colleges can distribute among their campuses, as they deem appropriate?**
- 6b. Can you suggest other criteria which should be considered as a means of re-allocating MaSN in 2010-11 and beyond?**

PART TWO – FOUNDATION DEGREES

Introduction

What is a Foundation Degree?

- 9.1 Foundation Degrees are professional and technical Higher Education qualifications, which integrate academic and work-related learning. They aim to equip students with the combination of technical skills, academic knowledge and transferable skills that employers are increasingly demanding.
- 9.2 A Foundation Degree takes two years to complete full-time, but it can also be studied part-time, usually over four years (though this may be flexible). Entry requirements for a Foundation Degree may be stated in terms of formal qualifications, such as “A levels” or Advanced Vocational Certificates in Education. Applicants without formal qualifications, who can demonstrate they have the relevant skills and aptitudes, may also be considered.
- 9.3 The Foundation Degree is a qualification in its own right and should open specific employment opportunities in the sector for the Foundation Degree graduate, as identified by the Sector Skills Councils and the Department’s own Skills’ Expert Group. There must, however, also be clearly stated arrangements for articulation to at least one Honours degree.
- 9.4 The recent Leitch Report echoed the Higher Education White Paper in endorsing Foundation Degrees as one of the newer types of provision which will provide the right basis for future Higher Education expansion.

Foundation Degrees in Northern Ireland – current position

- 9.5 In Northern Ireland, Foundation Degrees are developed and delivered by consortia involving one of the Northern Ireland universities or the Open University, a Further Education college and employers. The university is the body with degree-awarding powers and has responsibility for ensuring standards, the employers ensure the curriculum will give students the skills employers need, while Further Education Colleges are well equipped to bring close-to-home delivery to a diverse student group.
- 9.6 Foundation Degrees were piloted in Northern Ireland in academic year 2001-02, in the priority skills shortage area of Information Communication Technology. In 2002-03, the pilot was extended to cover Construction & the Built Environment and Hospitality & Tourism.
- 9.7 For academic year 2006-07, the Department invited proposals for Foundation Degrees in any vocational discipline, but in order to improve employer engagement in Foundation Degree development, it was clarified that each new proposal still had to meet all the relevant criteria for a Foundation Degree with clear evidence of:

- the involvement of the relevant Sector Skills Council, employer bodies and, in the case of an education based course, the Department of Education in the design and development of the Foundation Degree curriculum and the nature of their involvement; this is to ensure that the content and delivery of the course meets the needs of the industry;
- evidence of a wide consultation to ascertain the needs of a range of employers;
- the specific employment opportunities that will be open to someone who holds the proposed Foundation Degree; and
- the specific Honours degree(s) to which a successful Foundation Degree graduate will be able to progress.

9.8 The Department has engaged Foundation Degree Forward to assist with the development of a strategy for the expansion of Foundation Degrees in Northern Ireland. A Regional Development Manager (RDM) has been appointed, who will work with the Department to develop partnerships between Higher Education institutions, the regional colleges, Sector Skills Councils, employers and employer bodies. The role of the RDM will include the dissemination of good practice in the design, development and delivery of Foundation Degrees. The RDM is now in post and is beginning discussions with stakeholders on the best way forward. If you would like to discuss any aspect of Foundation Degrees with the RDM, she can be contacted at:

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Foundation Degree review

9.9 The Department is committed to the expansion of Foundation Degrees. Their development is integral to effective implementation of both the “Further Education Means Business” Strategy and Success through Skills. In order to identify the issues which will shape the plans for expansion, a discussion paper was prepared and a Foundation Degree Review Working Group was set up, with the following Terms of Reference:

- to consider the objectives outlined in the discussion paper and agree and prioritise the main issues to be addressed within each objective;
- to provide advice to the Department on these issues; and

- to contribute to the development of a consultation paper outlining policy proposals.

9.10 The Working Group originally identified five broad themes which are fundamental to Foundation Degree development; these are listed below, with the main outcomes we hope to achieve for each:

THEME	OUTCOME
1. Recruitment	An overall increase in the number of students enrolling on Foundation Degree courses.
2. Promotion	A greater awareness and recognition of Foundation Degrees by employers, employees and potential students.
3. Delivery	A flexible model of delivery that meets skills needs, maintains consistency of standards and includes meaningful Work Based Learning.
4. Higher Education & Further Education Collaboration	Development of high quality Foundation Degrees, through genuine collaborative partnerships.
5. Funding	A funding model which supports the development and delivery of fit for purpose Foundation Degrees.

9.11 Employer engagement is also a key component of Foundation Degree development. However, as it crosscuts all of these themes, it is not discussed as a separate issue, but is considered, as appropriate, within each section.

9.12 The following pages set out the issues, condensed under each one of the five main themes.

THEME 1 – RECRUITMENT

Aim

10.1 The Department's aim is to have in place Foundation Degrees which are open to all who have the ability to achieve. We particularly want to see increasing enrolments on part-time Foundation Degrees by existing employees. The desired outcomes from this theme would be an overall increase in the number of enrolments on Foundation Degree programmes:

- by students who have followed professional and technical qualification pathways;
- by students who have no formal qualifications, but who can demonstrate the ability to achieve at this level;
- by existing employees, on a part-time basis, in order to support the up-skilling of the current workforce; and
- by students who wish to re-skill in order to change employment.

10.2 It is the Department's view that if Foundation Degree development is to be successful and meet the Department's aim, entry requirements must be flexible to accommodate the varying levels of qualifications presented by prospective students.

Issues

10.3 There are two main issues within this theme: entry qualifications for Foundation Degrees and Accredited Prior Experiential Learning.

A. Entry qualifications for Foundation Degrees

10.4 One of the underpinning principles of Foundation Degrees is that traditional academic qualifications are not necessary to gain entry to a Foundation Degree course. In practice, however, entry requirements for Foundation Degrees are set by the university which is validating the course and frequently they are set at GCSE / A Level standard.

10.5 In Northern Ireland, in academic year 2004-05, of those students who enrolled on a Foundation Degree and who provided information on their qualifications on entry (78% of all Foundation Degree students), 42% were educated to "A/AS" level or above and 17% to GCSE. Only 6% said they had no formal qualifications.

10.6 There is a similar trend amongst those who have vocational, rather than academic, qualifications – of the same enrolment group as above, only 9% had a

vocational qualification. Given their vocational emphasis, Foundation Degrees provide the best progression opportunities for students who come from such a background; for example, they should offer a practical progression route for Modern Apprenticeship trainees.

- 10.7 The principle that Foundation Degree students should not need to have formal academic qualifications to gain entry to the course underpins the vocational aspect of the qualification. The Department believes it is important that this is upheld if they are to appeal to employees, as many of these prospective students may not have such qualifications.
- 10.8 It may be, however, that universities consider the rigour of a course to be such that some level of academic achievement must be demonstrated before a student can gain entry to it. This limits the opportunities for those from a non-academic background.
- 10.9 Although a Foundation Degree can be a stepping stone to an Honours degree course, which clearly requires a high level of academic competence, it has been argued that a student's ability to progress should not be about qualifications on entry to the Foundation Degree, but rather the student's Foundation Degree outcome.

B. Accredited Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)

- 10.10 APEL is an important part of the Foundation Degree ethos. Its underpinning principle is that prospective students and, in particular, existing employees may already have valuable skills and experience on which to build, but which may not have been recognised by a formal qualification. Employees should be encouraged to see a Foundation Degree as a means of gaining a work-focused Higher Education qualification which builds on, or indeed formally recognises, experience gained in the workplace. Employees may, therefore, be encouraged to apply, if APEL was a formal route to entry.
- 10.11 APEL, however, is not yet embedded in the Foundation Degree process. This arises in part from the difficulty in assessing APEL – students are generally required to prepare a portfolio to demonstrate the competences they have gained, but this can be a cumbersome and time-consuming process.
- 10.12 It has been argued that if a student can demonstrate sufficient levels of relevant prior experiential learning, they may be exempt from units, or parts of units, of the Foundation Degree course. This would shorten the time taken to complete the qualification, which may be particularly attractive to both employees and employers, as less working time would be lost. It may also reduce the financial cost to the student of achieving the degree.
- 10.13 The Foundation Degree Working Group suggested that one way to address both the issues of recruitment raised above would be to introduce a pre-Foundation

Degree Access Course, for potential students who do not have the required entry qualifications, but who have, for example, relevant skills or experience, or perhaps a vocational qualification. This would be shorter than the normal one year Access Course and would consist of appropriate modules taken from existing courses. Such a course would satisfy the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) that students must demonstrate their fitness to do the Foundation Degree.

- 10.14 There are two factors, however, which would need to be taken into consideration before introducing such a course. Firstly, Access Courses do not have any currency within the National Qualifications Framework. This is not an issue if the student advances to Higher Education, as effectively, the course would have successfully achieved its purpose. If the student does not progress further, however, and decides to end their study at that point, the Access Course itself has no value or recognition. Secondly, any decision on the introduction of a Foundation Degree Access Course will have to be considered in the context of the wider issue of guaranteed continued funding for Access Courses.

Recommendation 7

- 10.15 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.**

Questions

- 7a Do you agree that APEL should be retained as a key principle in Foundation Degree recruitment?**
- 7b What can be done to make Foundation Degrees more open or appealing to students with non-academic qualifications?**
- 7c How can APEL be developed as an entry route to Foundation Degrees?**
- 7d What are your views on the proposal that a pre-Foundation Degree Access Course could be a viable alternative to APEL?**
- 7e In your view, is there sufficient demand for such a course?**

THEME 2 – PROMOTION

Background

11.1 Since 2001-02, the number of students enrolling on Foundation Degree courses has risen from 116 (67 full-time and 49 part-time) to 721 (403 full-time and 318 part-time) in 2005-06. Whilst this is an encouraging trend, the qualification has not realised its full potential for growth and this may be due, at least in part, to the lack of a coherent strategy for promoting the Foundation Degree as a viable alternative to other courses at this level. If this qualification is to achieve the wide recognition envisaged in Success through Skills, the Department's Skills Strategy and Further Education Means Business Strategy, it is essential that a plan is put in place which will deliver this objective. There are three main target audiences, namely, employers, employees and other prospective students.

Employers and employees

11.2 The Leitch Review of Skills states that "Without employer participation, it will not be possible for the UK to achieve the scale of increase in skills levels that being world class will require, as 70% of the 2020 workforce have already left school." Foundation Degrees could make a significant contribution towards achieving higher skills levels, particularly among those already in employment. The qualification is designed to meet the higher technician/associate professional skills needs of a particular sector and, through part-time delivery models, can play a real part in raising the skills level of the existing workforce. Employers, therefore, need to understand and value Foundation Degrees, both when recruiting staff and when considering training and development needs for existing employees. In 2003, however, a QAA/ETI review of Foundation Degrees identified a lack of awareness about the qualification on the part of employers and the need to strengthen and sustain links with them. There is a particular need, therefore, to raise the profile of Foundation Degrees within industry, emphasising how they can upskill employees and thus improve business. Employers can also play a part here, by becoming more involved in the development of new courses, so that they meet the needs of their sectors.

11.3 In order to help facilitate this, the Department proposes to hold a series of events to raise awareness. These will include meeting and working with stakeholders such as the Sector Skills Councils, Chambers of Commerce and the Workforce Development Fora and also with senior managers from major employers.

11.4 Educational institutions also have a role to play here. In order to encourage more employers to consider using the Foundation Degree as a training tool, institutions must deliver courses which can be adapted to the needs of the individual. Employers may be unlikely to release staff to pursue a course of study, so full-time, or even day release courses may not be a viable option for many. More

flexible teaching arrangements are necessary, such as part-time or evening attendance at college, distance or web-based learning.

Other potential students

11.5 Foundation Degrees are not aimed solely at those already in employment in a particular sector, who want to improve their career prospects. They are also open to people who have completed their compulsory education, those in work who want to change their career path whilst still earning a wage, as well as those wishing to improve their employment/life prospects generally. (This raises issues about the work-based learning element of the qualification; these placements are hard to obtain if the student is not already in a relevant job, but these concerns are considered under the Theme, “Delivery”.)

11.6 It is important that these audiences are targeted in any promotion strategy. The Careers Service will play a role in this and the Department has already ensured that information on Foundation Degrees which appears on the Careers website is up-to-date. Careers Advisors have been issued with an information sheet which answers the most common questions asked by prospective Foundation Degree students. Improved publicity material on the Degree will be developed, if it is considered appropriate.

Foundation Degree Forward Regional Development Manager for Northern Ireland

11.7 A key part of a promotional strategy is the engagement of Foundation Degree Forward. One of the tasks of the Regional Development Manager for Northern Ireland is to disseminate good practice in the design, development and delivery of Foundation Degrees. She will have a central role in advising the Department on promotional issues.

Desired outcomes

11.8 The desired outcomes from this theme would be:

- greater awareness and recognition of Foundation Degrees by employers, employees and potential students;
- higher enrolment numbers on Foundation Degrees, in particular by existing employees; and
- greater involvement by employers in the development and delivery of Foundation Degrees.

Recommendation 8

11.9 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.

Question

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

THEME 3 – DELIVERY

Background

12.1 A Foundation Degree is primarily a qualification in its own right, a key feature of which is for the student to gain employment in the relevant sector at an appropriate level. Having gained the Foundation Degree, graduates have the option to progress straight to an Honours degree course. These are not mutually exclusive - a student may go into employment following the Foundation Degree, then decide to top-up to Honours at some future date. In the latter case, it is important for part-time top-up courses to be available, as such a student might wish to continue working whilst studying.

12.2 The Department's aim is to have in place a delivery system which attracts the widest possible range of students across this spectrum. A fit for purpose Foundation Degree should strike a balance between the skills needs of the student and employers, and the requirement that the student is prepared for the academic rigour of the Honours degree programme.

Desired outcomes

12.3 The desired outcomes from this theme would be the Higher Education and Further Education sectors and employers working together to:

- identify skills needs;
- develop a flexible, responsive model of delivery which allows for maximum participation in Foundation Degrees;
- ensure consistency of standards;
- deliver meaningful work-based learning;
- encourage the growth of fit for purpose Foundation Degrees; and
- produce people who are fit for purpose in employment.

12.4 The consultation is focussing on two main elements within the theme of Delivery, that is, articulation to Honours degree and work-based learning – work placements.

A. Articulation to Honours Degree

12.5 In Northern Ireland, a student who completes a Foundation Degree has the option to progress to an Honours degree course, either here or in Great Britain. For full-time students, the Foundation Degree takes two years, with a further two years of

study at a local university to achieve the Honours degree (the 2 + 2 model); at some universities in England, this may often be done in one year (the 2 + 1 model). This differential can have an impact, both positively and negatively, on the student who chooses to study in Northern Ireland, as the course takes an extra year to complete, with consequent additional fees and maintenance to pay. The options for delivery models are set out below.

Options for delivery

The 2+2 model

12.6 It has been argued that the 2+2 model is needed to better prepare those students who do not have an academic background for the academic rigour of the course. As the majority of students entering Foundation Degrees would not be eligible to enter an Honours degree programme directly, because of their lack of formal qualifications at a sufficiently high level, they would require additional support in order to achieve the same level of achievement as a student who entered the Honours course with higher level academic qualifications.

The 2+1 model

12.7 The 2+1 model would bring Northern Ireland students into line with those in Great Britain and would therefore reduce the fees and loan by one year. Foundation Degrees, however, are not designed to be the equivalent of the first two years of an Honours Degree – indeed, the qualifications have different purposes and should not be regarded as “equivalent” in any way. A move to 2+1 could be regarded as detracting from the Foundation Degree as a qualification in its own right, with employment opportunities at that level. There are also some professional bodies which do not recognise qualifications completed under the 2+1 model.

The 2+1.3 model

12.8 The original concept for Foundation Degree articulation was the 2+1.3 model, but this was based on the English concept, where students typically complete an Honours degree in three years. After consultation, however, this was not considered appropriate in Northern Ireland for the selected subject areas and the 2+2 structure was introduced. Such a model would also require a change in the student support legislation, as there is currently no mechanism for funding part-year courses. In addition, Foundation Degree Forward has confirmed that this model has more or less ceased to exist in England.

Flexibility in the model of delivery for the individual student

- 12.9 It can be argued that the articulation model should focus on the individual student and his or her capabilities, as well as the nature of the course. For example, a student who performed very well in the Foundation Degree (say with 80%) should be able to complete the Honours course in one year, whilst those who perform at a lower level would complete in two. However, this is not consistent with students already on the Honours course, who proceed between years having achieved 40% in each module – higher marks make no difference to progression. It is also important to note that equality legislation requires that all students are treated in an equitable and consistent manner and a flexible approach as described could contravene this. It has been suggested that an enhanced second year could be introduced to Foundation Degree courses, which would act as a bridge to enable those students who performed at a high level in the first year to progress to the final year of the Honours course.
- 12.10 The local universities have, however, questioned the practicality of implementing a flexible model. Their contention is that Honours degree courses are based on sequential learning and as such, it would not be possible for a Foundation Degree graduate to omit the second year of the Honours course, regardless of the level of ability the student has demonstrated during the Foundation Degree. The proposal to introduce an enhanced second year for the more able student might address this issue, but there are concerns about how this might affect the overall perception of the Foundation Degree. It is important that the Degree is recognised as a qualification in its own right – progression to Honours is only an option. Introducing an enhanced second year for some students would, in effect, create a two-tier system of Foundation Degrees and would, in turn, detract from the stand-alone nature of the qualification. There is also a danger that the option without the enhanced second year could be devalued and come to be perceived as a lesser qualification. This is not in line with the government's policy that the Foundation Degree should become the primary qualification at this level.

Options

- 12.11 In summary, the options considered were:
- (i) the 2+2 model should be retained, or
 - (ii) agreement should be sought from the Northern Ireland universities that a 2+1 model be introduced, or
 - (iii) a 2+1.3 model (that is, one year plus one semester – possibly a summer bridging course) be introduced, or
 - (iv) the articulation route should be flexible for each student.

Recommendation 9

12.13 The recommended option is Option (i)

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.

Question

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

B. Work-Based learning – work placements

12.14 A fundamental part of the Foundation Degree is the work-based learning element, whereby the student spends some months working in the relevant industry, consolidating the practical aspect of the course, and this is considered to be a valuable use of time.

12.15 In the current context, there is a major difficulty in obtaining sufficient suitable, work-based placements for current Foundation Degree students. If the programme is expanded this problem will increase. The current system also hinders those outside a particular sector who want to reskill, as it is virtually impossible to find a placement for them. On the other hand, there is a strongly held view that the work-based learning element of the Foundation Degree is important and if it was diluted, this could affect the value of the qualification.

Work-Based projects

12.16 One alternative to a work-based learning placement might be a work-based project. Colleges and employers could collaborate to build up a bank of projects in different subjects areas. These would be real projects, which are required by employers, but which are not time-bound. Students who could not obtain a placement in industry could spend a semester working on one of these projects, which would gain them the work-based learning credit and the relevant business would benefit. If the learning outcomes were the same as those on a normal work placement, this would prove sufficient for the requirements of the Foundation Degree.

Recommendation 10

12.17 The Department recommends that the process of work-based learning should continue to be a key element in the structure of a Foundation Degree.

Questions

- 10a What are your views on the importance of retaining the work placement element of the Foundation Degree?**
- 10b What are your views on the “projects” approach as a possible solution to the problem of obtaining suitable work placements?**
- 10c How else might the lack of placements be addressed?**

THEME 4 – HIGHER EDUCATION & FURTHER EDUCATION COLLABORATION

Validation of Foundation Degrees

13.1 It is the Department's policy that Foundation Degrees in Northern Ireland can only be validated by the University of Ulster, Queen's University and the Open University. This policy was adopted in order to encourage the development of partnerships between the local universities and Further Education colleges and to ensure the quality of the developed learning programmes.

13.2 It has been argued that this policy is too restrictive and may hinder the further expansion of the qualification, because there are likely to be subjects where none of the local universities are able or willing to validate the proposed Foundation Degree. There are also issues about the length of time the validation process takes and the cost to the partners. There are a number of ways through which these issues could be addressed. If the current policy was relaxed, however, key stakeholders believe quality could be affected – they have concerns about the variable quality of Foundation Degree provision outside Northern Ireland. This would be of particular concern while the Department is trying to promote Foundation Degrees, their currency with employers etc. They also question whether provision outside Northern Ireland would meet the needs of local employers (although the relevant course would need to be endorsed by the appropriate Sector Skills Council). The quality assurance issue could be addressed in part by involving Foundation Degree Forward in the process, as they have a wealth of experience in brokering the qualification in England. The Department could seek their views on the capacity of the relevant HEI to deliver the course effectively.

Options

- (i) that the current policy remains in place and Further Education colleges will only be able to form partnerships with one of the local universities, or the Open University; or
- (ii) that the current policy remains in place, except where the local universities are unwilling or unable to validate a Foundation Degree; a Further Education college could then seek a partnership with a university outside Northern Ireland; or
- (iii) that the current policy is removed and a Further Education college can seek a partnership with a university outside Northern Ireland at any time.

Recommendation 11

13.3 The recommended option is Option (ii)

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.

Question

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

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 a priority skills area.

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

Question

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

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 in Further 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.

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