



Leading learning and skills

Partnership, Provision, Participation and Progression: the Learning and Skills Council's Strategy for Higher Education

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This document is of interest to everyone in the
learning and skills sector

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Glossary

Foreword by Mark Haysom, Chief Executive, Learning and Skills Council

Higher education (HE), in particular the delivery of higher-level skills, is vital in achieving our aim of making the nation more competitive and making our workforce more responsive to the changing demands of technology and the economy. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has always recognised the importance of this area of work, and I welcome the recent White Paper *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances* (March 2006), which acknowledges the important and distinctive role that the learning and skills sector plays both in delivering higher-level skills and in preparing learners for progression to HE.

I have pleasure in introducing the LSC's HE strategy, which underlines our commitment to ensuring the post-16 learning and skills sector continues to play an important role in delivering the higher-level skills the country needs. The LSC's HE strategy recognises that in delivering the platform of skills and employability at Levels 2 and 3, we must also invest in building the ladder of progression and higher-level skills we will need for the future.

This is an ambitious strategy, and a necessary one. It focuses on the four key themes of partnership, provision, participation and progression, which will form the parameters for regional and national action plans. The LSC looks forward to working with our providers and key partners in its implementation.

Background and Introduction

- 1 The LSC has developed an HE strategy to support the delivery of the widening participation agenda for HE. It is intended that the strategy will establish the LSC as an active and influential strategic partner across the HE landscape, focusing on its strengths; its unique position with regard to HE, in terms of supporting both the preparation of individuals to progress to HE and the delivery of HE in further education (FE); and on those areas in which it can make most impact.
- 2 The strategy has been developed and will continue to be developed in the context of the Government's reform programme for learning and skills, specifically in the following White Papers:
 - *21st Century Skills: Realising Our Potential* (2003)
 - *Skills: Getting on in Business, Getting on in Work* (2005)
 - *The Future of Higher Education* (2003)
 - *14–19 Education and Skills* (2005)
 - *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances* (2006).
- 3 The strategy has been subject to internal consultation across the LSC and with key external stakeholders. It is intended that it will continue to evolve both in the context of the LSC's *agenda for change* reform programme and in the context of the next phase of FE reform, which will seek to increase the demand for and supply of HE in FE to ensure more locally delivered, vocational HE programmes and to encourage employers to deliver increased volumes of higher-level vocational skills and learning in the workplace.
- 4 The LSC has developed this strategy at a time of funding pressure across the learning and skills sector and in the context of the 2006 White Paper *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances*. It is of primary importance that the LSC meets its Public Service Agreement (PSA) adult targets for Skills for Life and Level 2, and in terms of decreasing the proportion of young people who are not in education, training or employment. But it is also important that, at the same time as addressing market failure in these three areas, the LSC ensures that appropriate progression opportunities to HE exist and that regional planning frameworks and regional skills partnerships (RSPs) address the importance of higher-level skills and learning, particularly with regard to employer involvement. This strategy is, therefore, also designed to support the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in achieving the PSA target to raise the HE participation rate of 18–30-year-olds towards 50 per cent by 2010.
- 5 In developing this strategy, the LSC faces two key challenges as it seeks to build a portfolio of planning and provision beyond its immediate PSA targets, namely how:
 - it should engage in the emerging debate on the nature, purpose and role of HE in FE
 - regional planning frameworks will support the learning and skills sector in delivering vocational purpose and widening participation in the context of HE.

Purpose

- 6 This introduction presents the HE strategy. It is not intended that the strategy should prescribe implementation plans. How this strategy is taken forward through the production of local and/or regional action plans depends on a range of factors. However, it is the intention that the strategy should clearly prioritise HE as an important consideration in planning dialogues and provide headline policy parameters within which action plans can be framed.
- 7 There will be a need for ongoing dialogue at national, regional and local level to support the development of action plans and so that the strategy can be reviewed on the basis of practice-led policy.

Key Points and Issues

- 8 The learning and skills sector has a unique role in relation to HE¹ in terms of preparing and qualifying individuals to progress to HE, and also in terms of providing HE programmes. The context for this dual role is set out in the 2006–07 grant letter to the LSC.
- 9 The grant letter sets targets for young people in relation to their readiness for skilled employment or HE and charges the LSC with 'supporting the higher education sector to achieve the HE PSA participation target by encouraging many more young people from all backgrounds to gain the qualifications and aspiration for higher education'.
- 10 The grant letter highlights a number of challenges for the LSC in developing and implementing an HE strategy: first, the need for the LSC to balance its own priorities, resources and demanding targets with those of another sector, and second, the need for clarity in assigning responsibility for the delivery of HE in an FE setting.
- 11 However, alongside supporting the above target (which is an 'already given' and demands that the LSC ensures robust and appropriate progression pathways from Level 3 to HE for young people), this strategy predominantly focuses on the:
 - need to continue to build a meaningful and coherent landscape of higher-level vocational learning and skills that can be delivered through FE and is responsive to the needs of employers
 - critical role of FE in promoting wider participation in HE, particularly through the ongoing development of lifelong learning networks (LLNs) and the active and strategic role of FE colleges in these networks.

¹ For the purposes of the strategy, HE is defined as all study, training and research carried out at a standard higher than that of Level 3 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), that is, National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 3 or equivalent. The scope of the strategy also incorporates non-prescribed HE. This includes a range of higher-level qualifications, chiefly technical and professional in nature, that the LSC has the power to fund and that are delivered both in HE institutions and FE colleges.

Higher Education Strategy

The Association of Colleges welcomes this reaffirmation of the LSC's commitment to widening participation in HE and the consequent prospect of closer alignment between the national and local LSC strategy on supporting progression to higher education and the delivery of higher-level skills. We look forward to working with the LSC to support colleges delivering higher education.

John Brennan

Chief Executive, Association of Colleges

Vision

12 In an attempt to address these challenges, and in the context of its commitment to fulfilling its leadership role and to bring the necessary drive and ambition to the reform of learning and skills (as part of *agenda for change*), the LSC has developed a vision for its HE strategy. It is intended that this vision will secure the LSC's position as an active and influential strategic partner, focusing on its strengths, its unique position in relation to HE and on those areas in which it can make most impact. This vision is set within a clear and manageable policy context and defines a distinct role for the LSC in relation to a focus on higher-level vocational provision, wider progression to and participation in HE (from a wide range of learners), and the development of strategic partnership working.

13 The vision statement for the HE strategy is that:

The LSC will embed the principles of the HE strategy by 2010 and we will transform participation in and progression to HE through ensuring that all learners with the aspiration to progress have appropriate and robust opportunities available, and through our support for and facilitation of the active involvement of the sector in lifelong learning networks (LLNs). We will achieve this through strategic working with key partners and through a practice-led policy context. In addition, we will be recognised for our championing of vocational and work-based pathways² into Level 4 and beyond and for ensuring that higher-level vocational skills and learning are responsive to employer needs.

Principles

14 It is intended that in the development of national, regional and local action plans to support the strategy, the LSC will:

- ensure that the values of ambition, urgency, trust and expertise underpin the strategy, its accompanying action plans and its dissemination
- enter into strategic partnerships with stakeholders to widen and increase participation across HE, based on a genuine understanding of learner preferences, employer need and market intelligence
- work with key partners to support equality of opportunity in terms of making support, advice and guidance available to all learners (especially those from vocational and work-based routes and from non-traditional backgrounds) seeking to access HE
- work with providers to support progression through the identification of appropriate opportunities and particularly

through active engagement with LLNs alongside support of Aimhigher at local and regional level and through supporting the expansion of Foundation degrees

- continue to work with Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) through sector skills agreements, FE and HE institutions, provider organisations and other key agencies to ensure a relevant and robust vocational and work-based offer at Level 3 as a basis for progression to higher-level vocational skills and learning
- work with key partners to support a new approach to HE in the workplace, developed through and integrated within the Train to Gain programme and responsive to employers' needs
- work closely with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and HEFCE to ensure that Access to HE provision continues to be recognised as a critical pathway to progression. In addition, we will identify opportunities for the continuing development of Access to HE provision in the context of the reform of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and in the context of LLNs
- work with key national agencies, with HE institutions and employers locally and through regional skills partnerships to clarify the offer at Levels 4 and 5 in order to meet changing skills needs, secure appropriate up-skilling and ensure responsiveness to the needs of employers
- work with key agencies to ensure that the recording of achievement across HE is aligned with methods being developed across the learning and skills sector and that data requirements do not increase bureaucracy (specifically for mixed-economy institutions (MEIs))
- continue to work with key partners through the Joint Forum for Higher Levels on the development and application of overarching principles for a common approach to credit, along with a consideration of actions to achieve implementation
- work with HE partners and government towards a consistent and coherent approach to the development, delivery, accountability and quality assurance of HE delivered in an FE setting, working towards principles of self-assessment and self-regulation (where appropriate), with the LSC's role clearly articulated.³

² The potential for growth in numbers progressing to HE among middle-class, academic learners is marginal since approximately 90–95 per cent of A-level learners currently access HE. In comparison, less than 40–50 per cent of vocational and work-based learners achieving Level 3 qualifications progress to HE, and it is estimated that less than 5 per cent of Advanced Apprentices progress to HE. There is, therefore, more potential to increase learner numbers progressing to HE from vocational and work-based routes.

³ Approximately 44 per cent of learners progressing to HE come from the FE sector, which delivers 11 per cent of HE provision.

Themes

The University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) exists to champion higher-level vocational learning. Accordingly, we welcome the LSC's higher education strategy and, in particular, its focus on vocational provision and emphasis on supporting vocational learners' progress to higher education. We look forward to working with the LSC to support its implementation.

Professor David Melville CBE

Chair, University Vocational Awards Council

15 Building on the above vision and principles, the HE strategy focuses its objectives into four themes which can form the parameters for regional and national action plans. The four themes are:

- partnership
- provision
- participation
- progression.

Partnership

16 This theme encompasses the facilitation of effective and coherent partnership working across the range of initiatives that have emerged since the White Papers. This theme has an 'external' and 'internal' dimension. The external dimension focuses on building relationships with national stakeholders. The internal dimension focuses on implementing this strategy in a local and regional context, and ensuring that local and regional work can feed back into practice-led policy.

17 Key national objectives for this theme are:

- examining how the impact of initiatives in widening participation and enhancing progression into HE that have emerged since the White Papers can be maximised, particularly within the context of supporting the growth and coverage of LLNs (including identified priority areas) and the expansion of Foundation degrees
- embedding the emerging LSC partnership protocols across relationships with HEFCE, QAA, UVAC, Foundation Degree Forward and other key national bodies in order to deliver the vision of the strategy
- identifying the opportunities to deliver the HE strategy across a range of national policy imperatives and with a range of national policy partners
- adopting a more strategic role in the development, planning and delivery of higher-level vocational skills and learning so that they can be more responsive to employer needs
- working with HEFCE to explore mechanisms for further capital support to enable FE providers to contribute to HE, and reviewing the financial arrangements that underpin HE courses in FE
- working with key national partners, specifically the Association of Colleges, the Mixed Economy Group of Colleges and HEFCE to support the sector in increasing its role in the delivery of HE that is of high quality, identified as a critical part of a college's mission and in line with regional and sectoral priorities

- working with key national partners to reduce the administrative burden on MEIs.⁴

18 The proposed key regional objectives for this theme are working with:

- providers to build appropriate progression opportunities for all types of learner from Level 3 to HE into planning reviews and development plans
- HEFCE regional consultants to ensure FE colleges and the LSC are proactively engaged with and support the establishment and ongoing development of LLNs, particularly in priority areas where provision is most sparse, alongside continuing support for Aimhigher. For the LSC, this should involve engagement with the appropriate consultative forum and possible participation on steering or management groups and/or other appropriate working groups
- regional skills partnerships to ensure they take account of HE and higher-level skills and learning
- employers and HEFCE to support higher-level skills training through Train to Gain, particularly new trials of HE skills within Train to Gain and the notion of a single broker with an integrated programme from basic to higher-level skills
- FE colleges and HE institutions to consider the role of HE in its widest sense in the context of local and/or regional priorities.

Provision

19 This theme encompasses working with key national stakeholders to ensure appropriate progression pathways from Level 3 (within the context of a reformed NQF) and becoming a key strategic partner in ensuring that higher-level skills and learning are fit for purpose and responsive to employer needs.

20 Key objectives for this theme are:

- seeking a better alignment of the structure and delivery of provision from Level 3 and above through a recognised credit accumulation and transfer system
- ensuring appropriate vocational provision at Level 3 in order to support progression pathways
- working with key national partners to support the engagement of employers in higher-level skills and learning
- working with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), HEFCE, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) and the Skills for Business Network, and UVAC to review higher-level qualifications and ensure clarity of purpose and coherence of funding (particularly with regard to the higher-level offer in FE)
- working with DfES, HEFCE, the Skills for Business Network and Foundation Degree Forward to support the expansion of Foundation degrees
- working with HEFCE to ensure continuing consolidation and development of LLNs, and to support expansion in priority areas
- developing a clear position for the LSC with regard to HE in FE.

⁴ MEIs are defined as those with HE provision in FE institutions and FE provision in HE institutions.

21 The proposed key regional objectives for this theme are:

- through the balance and mix of provision, ensure the availability of appropriate vocational provision at Level 3 in order to support progression pathways
- working with key regional partners to support the engagement of employers in higher-level skills and learning and linking this to the creation of a quality-marked nationwide network
- working with HEFCE regional consultants, Foundation Degree Forward regional development managers and the Skills for Business Network to support the expansion of Foundation degrees
- working with HEFCE regional consultants to identify expansion in priority areas
- ensuring that the development of skills academies, second-phase Centres of Vocational Excellence and facilities for specialist provision take account of the need for progression pathways from Levels 2, 3 and above.

Participation

22 This theme focuses on a better understanding of how participation can be measured, monitored and evaluated through the identification of more robust methods for capturing data through focused and fit-for-purpose information, advice and guidance for key cohorts, as well as examining how we can continue to promote wider participation in HE.

23 Key national objectives for this theme are:

- improving the quality of data available to monitor participation rates of vocational and work-based learners in HE
- working with QAA and DfES to support the continuing development of Access to HE provision
- supporting attainment and achievement at Level 3 and thereby increasing the pool of learners able to enter HE.

24 Proposed key regional objectives for this theme are:

- establishing regional benchmarks for progression rates of vocational and work-based learners into HE in order to inform future planning of appropriate Level 3 provision (and provision at Levels 4 and 5)
- acknowledge the importance of QAA-recognised Access to HE as a priority in the balance and mix of provision
- supporting attainment and achievement at Level 3 and thereby increasing the pool of learners able to enter HE.

Progression

25 This theme addresses the current barriers to implementing the range of initiatives designed to support and enhance progression for both work-based learners and learners seeking to re-engage or engage with HE in order to ensure the availability of appropriate progression pathways.

26 Key national objectives for this theme are:

- ensuring that all LSC-funded vocational and work-based learners at Level 3 have the choice of an appropriate pathway to Level 4 or 5
- raising the profile of vocational and work-based progression opportunities into and through HE among admissions tutors, providers of information, advice and guidance, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and employers
- reviewing the planning, funding and fees policy for progression pathways available for adult (non-traditional) entrants to HE, in the context of a possible entitlement for 19–25-year-olds in relation to Level 3 achievement (and the possibility of accounts for learners over 25 to achieve a first, full level 3).

27 Proposed key regional objectives for this theme are:

- ensuring that all LSC-funded vocational and work-based learners at Level 3 have the choice of an appropriate pathway to Level 4 or 5
- reviewing the planning, funding and fees policy for progression pathways available for adult (non-traditional) entrants to HE, in the context of a possible entitlement for 19–25-year-olds in relation to Level 3 achievement (and the possibility of accounts for learners over 25 to achieve a first, full level 3)
- continuing to support existing regional widening participation and progression initiatives, such as Aimhigher.

28 These themes and the emerging objectives are interdependent. Promoting widening participation and transforming progression can be achieved only through fit-for-purpose provision and a partnership of planning and funding bodies, providers, learners, support agencies and employers working together to make HE opportunities accessible and available to all who can benefit from them.

The Mixed Economy Group of Colleges plays a fundamental role in the delivery of locally focused vocational higher education programmes. We welcome the LSC's higher education strategy. We look forward to working with the LSC in its implementation and supporting colleges to deliver the vocational higher education programmes demanded by local employers and learners.

John Widdowson

Chair, Mixed Economy Group of Colleges

Glossary

| Acronym | Definition |
|--------------|---|
| AoC | Association of Colleges. The independent organisation that promotes the interests of FE colleges in England and Wales |
| DfES | Department for Education and Skills |
| FDF | Foundation Degree Forward, the organisation supporting the development of high-quality Foundation degrees |
| FE | further education |
| HE | higher education |
| HEFCE | Higher Education Funding Council for England, which promotes and funds high-quality, cost-effective teaching and research in HE |
| HESA | Higher Education Statistics Agency, which is the central source for the collection and dissemination of statistics about publicly funded higher education in the UK |
| IAG | information, advice and guidance |
| JFHL | Joint Forum for Higher Levels. The purpose of this group is to provide a forum to assist QAA, QCA and regulatory partners in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales in the development of a coherent and progressive framework of qualifications and credit |
| JPS | Joint Progression Strategy, the aim of which is to advance vocational and workplace progression into, and through, HE. DfES, the LSC and HEFCE are the partners in taking forward this work |
| LLNs | lifelong learning networks, which are being set up to offer new progression opportunities for vocational learners across a city, area or region |
| MEG | Mixed Economy Group of Colleges, which is a group of 18 FE colleges across England offering HE courses |
| MEIs | mixed economy institutions, which are those with HE provision in FE institutions and FE provision in HE institutions |
| NQF | National Qualifications Framework, which sets out the levels at which qualifications can be recognised. The NQF is regulated by QCA (see below) |
| NVC | National Validation Consortium, an organisation linked to UVAC (see below) |
| NVQ | National Vocational Qualifications are work-related, competence-based qualifications |
| PSA | Public Service Agreement, an agreement negotiated between the LSC and the Government |

| Acronym | Definition |
|-------------|--|
| QAA | Quality Assurance Agency, which exists to safeguard and help improve the academic standards and quality of HE in the UK |
| QCA | Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the organisation that regulates, develops and modernises the curriculum, assessments, examinations and qualifications. QCA is also responsible for regulating the NQF (see above) |
| SfBN | Skills for Business Network is the business name of the Sector Skills Councils and also encompasses the SSDA (see below) |
| SSCs | Sector Skills Councils, which are employer-led, independent organisations that cover a specific industry sector in the UK. See also SSDA |
| SSDA | Sector Skills Development Agency, the organisation that, through its 25 member SSCs, aims to boost productivity in the UK by identifying and tackling skills gaps and shortages on a sector-by-sector basis |
| UCAS | University College Admissions Service, the organisation that processes applications for full-time undergraduate courses at UK universities and colleges |
| UVAC | University Vocational Awards Council, the organisation that provides an independent voice for HE institutions and FE colleges on matters relating to higher-level vocational learning |

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