

## **Social Exclusion Unit consultation Response from the Further Education Development Agency**

FEDA is the leading development body for post-16 education and training, focussing on post-16 policy, research and quality improvement. Our engagement with the work of the Social Exclusion Unit has therefore been in relation to its reports *Bringing Britain Together* and *Bridging the Gap*. We have met with unit staff in relation to the latter report and submitted evidence.

We welcome this opportunity to comment on the early work of the Unit. We have been impressed both by the reports and by our meetings with Unit staff. SEU has been successful in bringing to the centre of government thinking one of the issues at the heart of UK competitiveness. We hope that this response supports their continued role, and in particular their capacity to take the longer-term view that is needed to make significant and structural change.

### **What impact do you think the Unit's various reports have made?**

The SEU has raised the profile and understanding of social exclusion through its reports. This is an achievement. The impact of the Policy Action Teams set up as a result of the *Bringing Britain Together* report is as yet unclear, although reports from these are beginning to appear on the SEU website. These have very clear targets and action plans for bringing about change which should bring results.

FEDA is optimistic that the most recent report, *Bridging the Gap*, could have the capacity to transform 14-19 education and training. The report interrogates the system from the point of view of young people who are not in education, training or work, and indicates that the system is failing rather than the young people. This analysis could offer the potential for re-designing the system in the interests of those who the system is currently failing. Traditionally minority groups have been expected to fit into the system that meets the needs of the majority of learners. Appropriate practice for those who are vulnerable is likely to inform good practice for all young people.

The SEU's reports have been considered in arriving at FEDA's current research and development plans. Key issues raised by SEU are being addressed in the FE context.

### **What are the strengths of the Unit's approach?**

The Unit's reports are well written and structured and generally jargon-free, making them accessible to a wider audience. The Unit is able to interrogate systems and policies from the perspective of the client, and because it is independent from the specific government departments, their recommendations take a fresh approach to policy issues. This has the potential to bring together a wide range of data and research to overcome policy blockages. We find that the Unit's reports are frequently a breath of fresh air in the policy arena, and believe that independence and the client-focussed perspective are strengths of the SEU's approach.

### **What could the Unit do better?**

More regular updates of the work of the action teams would assist in enabling those not directly involved to keep informed of progress. The SEU's website could be more systematically used to this purpose, but it should be recognised that the internet is still a relatively exclusive mode of communication. While continuing to develop the web site's role paper-based newsletters and advertising of reports might be appropriate.

Without such arrangements, the level of engagement in developing solutions and ways forward is restricted to a small group. Often greater impact is achieved by sharing interim findings or 'work in progress' than through the presentation of final reports. Seminars and symposia with stakeholder organisations could be helpful. Consideration could also be given to ensuring that findings are fed into the journals and newsletters of the different audiences and interest groups that the SEU is so effective in bringing together for consultations.

Despite the Government's commitment to education and training, the neighbourhood renewal report placed limited emphasis on the key role of education both as prevention and remedy for social exclusion. Where education is recognised as important, the focus tends to be on younger learners and therefore on the provision made through schools. For example, the report of Policy Action Team 10 on Arts and Sport refers to schools and the role of University for Industry, but does not refer to the potential role of colleges which in many cases have a strong second chance, local and inclusive ethos. There may be a case for the Social Exclusion Unit to ensure that the policy action teams are aware of the potential of colleges in their local communities in order that this is reflected in the strategies proposed.

SEU's reports generally provide a very sharp policy analysis of the issues, but do not include discussion or analysis of policy options. Reports generally present a single preferred policy option without alternatives. Greater discussion of policy options might enhance their impact.

### **What should the role of the Social Exclusion Unit be in the future, and what issues should it address?**

The Unit has focused much attention on young people in order to break patterns of deprivation. We propose that it would be timely now to focus attention on patterns of social exclusion and under-achievement among groups of adults who are marginalised in our society, such as some ethnic minority groups, refugees as well as at-risk families living in poverty. Work could examine the implications for the socially excluded of the 3<sup>rd</sup> age agenda (45+ age group) for continuing economic activity beyond current retirement age.

SEU could have a responsibility to track over time the impact of policies designed to alleviate social exclusion. Particular attention might be given to the pressures of discrimination and attitude on the success of policies. These need to be recognised as a reality in policy implementation.

It would be interesting if SEU were able to carry out more international comparison of policy initiatives and their effectiveness.

We also suggest that the SEU gives thought to a wider dissemination of its thinking through, for example, pamphlets and other short, lively publications which could be made available in supermarkets and other public outlets and on the SEU web site. This could encourage wider understanding of the issues and support for the Unit's work.

**What is the Unit's contribution to ensuring that policies to reduce social exclusion are co-ordinated across all Departments?**

The SEU has made the case for co-ordinated action across a range of government departments in order to tackle social exclusion effectively. The SEU reports specify clear timescales, tasks and outcomes that provide an effective basis for monitoring progress. SEU should continue to monitor progress, perhaps in collaboration with cross-departmental groups.

In addition, the SEU could:

- report on the cumulative effect of the introduction of proposals in different reports;
- identify and evaluate the relative success of particular initiatives and interventions;
- undertake comparative benchmarking to assess the relative effectiveness of the actions taken by various government departments as part of the effort to review strategy and influence future policy.