

The government response to
the National Student Forum's
annual report 2008

Contents

Foreword	02
Executive Summary	03

01 Information, Advice and Guidance	07
02 Student Finance	14
03 Employability	20
04 Improving the Experience of Disabled Students	27
05 Improving the Experience of International Students	36
06 Improving the Experience of Postgraduate Students	44

Glossary	53
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Foreword

We believe that higher education is absolutely critical to our country's future and we very much welcome the crucial role that students play in making the system succeed. In a time of economic uncertainty it is all the more important that people are able to equip themselves with new and adaptable skills to prepare them for changes in the job market and that the country has the skilled workers it needs to benefit from the eventual upturn.

We cannot overestimate, however, the challenges of maintaining our world class position in the short and medium term, especially given the current uncertain world climate. That is why the Rt Hon John Denham MP has begun a wide-ranging debate on how higher education will need to develop over the next 10-15 years.

One theme already arising from that work is that the future student experience will depend on the quality of the partnership between students, HE institutions (HEIs) and their staff, representative organisations active in the higher education sector and the government.

The establishment of the National Student Forum (NSF) is a significant step in this direction. For the first time it gives higher education students direct access to government and national partners: it gives a representative group of students the opportunity to feed back "what it is really like" to be a higher education student today and highlight the issues which concern all students. We are very pleased to present this government response to the first NSF report. We would also like to pay tribute to Maeve Sherlock, NSF chair, and all the NSF members for their hard work over the last year.

In compiling the government response, we have considered each of the issues raised and consulted key national stakeholders. This response outlines where we can give an

immediate response, which areas need further thought and where specific organisations can help the sector take forward the recommendations and proposals of the Forum. The issues on which the NSF has chosen to focus are all key to improving the overall student experience – and in many cases work is already in hand to address the points which have been raised. This is all very positive: the NSF report will give added impetus to that work, and the NSF will be involved in offering further advice and ideas to continue improvement.

This response should not be seen as an end but as the beginning of a continuing dialogue, which should lead to real practical improvement in individual universities and HE colleges. To demonstrate that we are serious about promoting student engagement, we plan to hold a Spring seminar, involving the NSF, representatives from institutions and the representative sector bodies to debate the NSF recommendations and this response. We also intend to develop more opportunities for students to interact directly with government using social media techniques. Further details will be announced on the NSF website: <http://www.dius.gov.policy/nsf/>

David Lammy MP
Minister of State for Higher Education
and Intellectual Property
Lord (Tony) Young
Minister for Students

Executive Summary

Our higher education system is one of the country's most valuable assets. International comparisons show that we maintain high quality whilst providing increasing flexibility and responding to the challenges of supporting increased numbers of students from diverse backgrounds.

By working in partnership with students, partners and supporting bodies, we are committed to the continual development of our higher education so the country as a whole can continue to reap the benefits of one of the best systems in the world.

One initiative to help drive forward this collaboration and success is the NSF for higher education. The Forum, championed by Lord (Tony) Young, Minister for Students, and David Lammy MP, Higher Education Minister, is chaired by Maeve Sherlock. It brings together for the first time a representative group of students to make proposals and recommendations for improving the student experience and to ensure we continue to deliver first-class higher education.

This document outlines the government's response to the Forum's first annual report which was published on 17 October 2008. Having consulted a number of higher education partner organisations, we are announcing immediate responses to some of the recommendations, advising a longer-term review of others and in some areas identifying a specific sector organisation to work directly with the Forum to take forward the recommendations and proposals. We see this as the beginning of a process resulting in practical change and improvements in 2009 and beyond.

From having the right information, advice and guidance channels in place, to considering the student finance package and employability of graduates, the Forum is already proving its worth by providing on-the-ground feedback and insights from those currently experiencing higher education.

Many of the proposed solutions need the collaboration of a number of networks or organisations and we invite the leaders of higher education institutions to join us in supporting the activities outlined in this document as well as implementing the solutions. We also ask them to use the NSF report and this government response to help benchmark their own institutional practice and identify areas where practical improvements and amendments can be made to help improve the student experience. To maintain momentum, we plan to organise a seminar in the Spring to bring together representatives of higher education institutions, key delivery partners and the National Student Forum to debate the issues raised.

For individual students interested in being involved in the debate and contributing to higher education success in the future, we invite them to visit the NSF website (www.dius.gov.uk/policy/nsf).

01

The first chapter of this document looks at **'Information, Advice and Guidance'**, responding to a number of key recommendations and initiatives proposed by the National Student Forum (NSF):

- In this section, we agree to initiate a scoping study into the **online information** available to students and how it can be better enhanced and co-ordinated to help potential students make the most informed decision possible about entry to higher education
- We also provide detail on work in hand to improve the knowledge and skills of staff with careers responsibilities in schools and colleges
- We outline how institutions are using **student ambassadors**
- The chapter also covers the work already underway to improve the **higher education application process**, the information made available ahead of application and our response on recommendations around visits to universities.

02

Chapter two, **'Student Finance'**, covers recommendations addressed to the Student Loans Company (SLC) and individual universities and colleges. It includes:

- Confirmation that the Student Loans Company (SLC) will provide the Forum with a full update about progress on the Customer First programme of reforms in March 2009
- The suggestion that the Student Loans Company should consider the demand for introducing flexibility in the **loan instalment arrangements** in the longer-term

- Information on the 2007/2008 Student Income and Expenditure Survey and its role in the work of the **2009 independent review** which will review the impact of variable tuition fees
- Proposals for further discussion on recommendations for individual universities and colleges on the transparency of **tuition fee income and allocations**
- Detail on the **HE Money Doctors** programme and new toolkit
- A response on recommendations around **tuition fee payment schemes**.

03

In the third chapter, **'Employability'**, a range of subjects are covered from new approaches in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects, to increasing individual universities and colleges' focus on employability.

- Here we outline how the Government is already acting to engage and motivate students in **STEM subjects** at an early age and plans to make the teaching of **languages** compulsory in primary schools from September 2011
- We also comment on the student finance package available to **part-time students** at the current time and confirm we are continuing to monitor the impact of the current support system
- The chapter includes confirmation that we will be publishing a 'next steps' document shortly on improving the **employability of graduates** and the role we believe universities and colleges have to play in aiding the employability of their graduates.

Subgroup discussions

While the NSF plans to discuss the themes of the subgroup discussions in the course of the year, and develop them further, we felt we could respond to specific proposals now to help inform those discussions.

04

Chapter Four, **'Improving the Experience of Disabled Students'**, describes the warm welcome given by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) to the NSF Report's initial proposals. The ECU has indicated that it would like to work directly with the Forum from now on. It also explains how the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) will use the Forum's recommendations in revising its activities to support disabled students.

The majority of this chapter covers how the ECU is already working on relevant initiatives and covers the following proposals:

- The feasibility of setting up an **Association of Disabled International Students**
- Integrating **disability-awareness training** for all students and higher education staff
- Developing a bank of **student ambassadors** for disability
- Including disability issues in **feedback mechanisms**, establishing national guidelines around **Personal Development Plans** and investigating the feasibility of a **centralised electronic library** for disabled students
- Finally, the chapter looks at investigating the possibility of **commissioning research** into the progression rates for disabled students.

05

In the fifth chapter, we respond to recommendations on **'Improving the Experience of International Students'**. We were particularly interested in the work of the NSF in this area, as the Government recognises the importance of international students to the UK and is committed to making the UK an attractive place for them to study. This chapter includes:

- A response from Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and the National Recognition Centre for the UK (UK NARIC, the organisation responsible for providing advice on international qualifications) on recommendations around clearer guidance on the **international equivalence of qualifications**
- Detail on a series of materials that have been created to help international students **adjust to studying in the UK** and guidance that has been produced on mentoring schemes for these students
- Work already underway in association with the National Union of Students (NUS) on the **'internationalisation' of student unions**
- An outline of the UK Border Agency's (UKBA) Sponsors Register intended to reassure applicants about **course and institution authenticity**
- A response on the role of universities and colleges to support **international students who get into financial difficulty**.

06

The final chapter in this document, **'Improving the Experience of Postgraduate Students'**, links directly to the Government's ambitions for maintaining our competitiveness in research. In this chapter we've outlined our initial responses to each proposal and our view that the key issue that needs to be developed is how sector bodies are communicating the great work they are doing in this area to students.

- For example, the first proposal is around how the **Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Code of Practice** is being implemented for postgraduates. Much of the information that relates to this proposal is already available on various websites and it is clear from this that the Code is being taken seriously. The QAA would welcome a discussion with the NSF to review how better to communicate to students improvements to the postgraduate experience
- We also look at the recommendation that an **online calculator** be made available to help postgraduate students understand the costs of studying and confirm we intend to investigate the feasibility of this going forward
- We commit to initiating conversations on how we can promote best practice around the **quality of information available in postgraduate handbooks**
- We respond to a proposal on international postgraduate students securing **Research Council funding** and establishing a coherent framework for promoting research student databases
- And the chapter concludes looking at **postgraduate ambassadors**, improving **teaching opportunities** and creating an **accessible database** on funding.

Wherever possible, we have committed to timescales to respond or act on the Forum's recommendations and we hope we have made clear the immediate actions which the Government and key partners will be undertaking. We appreciate the positive support from HE sector organisations for the Forum's agenda and we hope that the report and this response will stimulate an open and continued dialogue with all parties involved with higher education – on how we can use the Forum's findings to help improve the experience for all students. Our goal is that by working in partnership together we will continually develop a system that both meets the country's needs for today and nurtures talent for the future.

Chapter One

Information, Advice and Guidance

1. Develop a 'first port of call' IAG portal.

The NSF recommends the development of a 'first port of call' online portal that would bring together the full range of factors of which prospective students need to be aware in order to make an informed decision about entry to higher education. As an online resource, it would employ the medium that most prospective students now use for research and information-gathering. It would also help to make sense of 'who is responsible for what' effectively and impartially.

Having access to the right information, advice and guidance is crucial for anyone considering higher education - as it is at all stages of education. This is an issue which David Lammy MP and Sarah McCarthy-Fry MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools and Learners, are actively considering, and the economic downturn has given this a greater urgency, because it is more important than ever that prospective students are clear about what skills and education they will be receiving from their chosen course and institution. DCSF and DIUS are already implementing a broad programme of work to take forward the recommendations of the National Council for Educational Excellence (NCEE).

IAG should be used simply to decide whether higher education is right for a particular person; it should also inform potential applicants about which subject, course and location is most suitable for them to help maximise their potential during their time in higher education and into employment.

Although there is a good deal of information available, we agree that potential applicants do need more help in finding their way through the existing system and ensuring that they consider all relevant issues before making a final decision. During these difficult economic times in particular we want to help students to make the best possible choice.

The government has therefore agreed to launch a further study straight away, as the NSF suggests, into:

- how well existing national, publicly funded websites help applicants make their decisions;
- how effectively national websites link to, and complement the information on the websites of higher education institutions;
- how they may be enhanced and better co-ordinated;

- specifically, whether a new national portal would be effective in helping students to navigate their way through information sources;
- if so, how it could be established in a way that is cost-effective and adds value;
- whether there are other possible ways of achieving the same ends.

The study will initially focus on information for people applying to full-time undergraduate courses, which is the group UCAS is best-placed to help. We acknowledge however the importance of part-time higher education and will therefore include recommendations for part-time applicants.

UCAS has agreed to lead the study, working closely with NUS as well as the DIUS Coalition of Partners on Student Finance, which includes the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF), the Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU), HEFCE, QAA, Action on Access, Aimhigher, Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA), local authorities services and the National Association of Student Money Advisers (NASMA).

UCAS will also liaise closely with the NCEE Ambassador Group, because of the close relevance to its work.

We will keep the National Student Forum well informed of developments and in some cases closely consult with them. This can only aid the study and so we welcome its thoughts.

UCAS will report back to us by June 09 (and we will provide an update to the NSF by the end of the academic year 2008/09).

2. Professionalise and raise the profile of school and college careers advisers.

We recommend a more systematic approach to developing and improving careers guidance by professionalising and raising the profile of careers guidance roles in schools and colleges.

Within government the DCSF has overall responsibility for IAG for students in schools, sixth form colleges and FE colleges.

A range of actions is being taken to improve the skills, knowledge and understanding of staff providing IAG on careers within schools and colleges.

Research into the role and training needs of careers co-ordinators within schools is currently being undertaken and a report will be published shortly. The findings will be used to inform the development of new HE - accredited continuing professional development (CPD) provision which will underpin improvements in the quality of careers education within schools.

A substantial, joint DCSF/DIUS review of the qualifications supporting the specialist IAG workforce in England (including careers advisers) is also underway. This will inform the Youth Workforce Reform Programme and is expected, in 2010, to lead to a number of new qualifications to support IAG professionals. In the meantime other steps are being taken to improve quickly the knowledge and skills of IAG practitioners. An online "practitioner guide" providing

detailed information on the full range of 14-19 pathways is about to be published, and work is in hand to provide additional support on learning and careers issues to Connexions Personal Advisers who do not have a strong background in careers work.

These actions will support the further development of a professional careers workforce. But we realise that all teachers in schools have careers related responsibilities and we have also asked the Training and Development Agency for schools (TDA) to consider how to:

- i) embed information about IAG into Initial Teacher Training programmes;
- ii) provide CPD for all teachers with PSHEe or form tutor duties so that they are better placed to give information and advice on the full range of 14-19 options;
- iii) provide CPD for teachers to give information and advice on progression opportunities (in the form of learning and careers) from their specialist subjects.

A range of other activities including planned communications activities with schools and support for INSET days will also build the understanding of the school workforce about the range of new learning options.

3. Increase the use of student ambassador schemes.

The Forum recommends a systematic approach to the best practice that already exists here to further raise awareness and widen participation. It also recommends targeted use of ambassadors in environments such as careers services and the workplace to reach out to non-traditional prospective students.

We know that undergraduates have an important role in helping young people when considering higher education options as they provide real life information and good role models. It is, therefore, an area we will continue to encourage.

HEIs already do a huge amount of work to raise aspirations and widen participation, in which current students also play a vital role. The range and scale of this work, including information from every university in England, is detailed in Universities UK's (UUK) recent submission to the NCEE. The report demonstrates the number of 'ambassador', 'mentoring' and 'classroom assistant' schemes which universities run, alongside work involving current students in open days and other outreach activities.

As the NSF has recommended, we are always looking at ways to further this activity for the benefit of students and in September '08, we launched the Aimhigher Associates scheme to do just that. This will involve 5,500 undergraduates providing encouragement and support to over 20,000 young people at school or college. Undergraduates will share their experiences, helping young people through educational transitions from Year 9 onwards and into HE. A national co-ordinator is currently being appointed who will help Aimhigher partnerships to share best practice, establish training arrangements and develop a national training standard.

Many universities use undergraduates in a variety of other ways as well, through mentoring schemes for example, often with the support of Aimhigher funding, and the Aimhigher campaign will raise awareness of these other good practices.

4. Define and introduce best practice guidelines for pre-entry information provided by universities and colleges.

Prospective students do not simply require course information, they also require information about the nature and level of social and emotional support that the university or college provides.

A number of HEI representatives (Vice Chancellors, Heads of Admissions), have come together with national bodies (including NUS, UCAS, UUK, GuildHE, DIUS), schools as well as FE representatives to form the HE 'Delivery Partnership'.

The Delivery Partnership is currently looking at how to make the HE application process more accessible and effective for applicants, their advisors and institutions. This work follows the publication of the government's response to a national consultation, 'Improving the higher education applications process' where one of the key recommended reforms is to improve the provision of clear, comparable entry requirement information.

This reform involves increasing the coverage and quality of 'Entry Profiles'. These are written by HEIs and are located on the UCAS course search website. They give prospective applicants more information about the courses they want to study by providing details about entry qualifications, entry criteria and relevant skills and qualities (which may include the relative importance of the criteria plus the process detailing how admissions decisions are made), all on one website.

Entry Profiles were originally developed to explain entry requirements and course selection criteria, but they now include details and signpost further reading about the institution such as location, size and student accommodation.

Information about a course may include a description of its content, including options and special features.

The Delivery Partnership has a specifically assigned 'Entry Profiles Working Group', which has members from UCAS, the SPA programme and a number of HEIs. The aim of the Working Group is to encourage universities to provide entry profiles for 100 per cent of undergraduate courses by September 2009 – the current coverage is 83% of courses. SPA has circulated a paper to heads of institutions and practitioners in the sector entitled 'Entry Profiles – key messages and benefits for HEIs.'

Alongside that, UCAS has developed a standard template for Entry Profiles to help improve the consistency, quality and coverage. UCAS also regularly hosts free training workshops to help UCAS member institutions understand and enhance Entry Profiles, and will publish 'Developing Entry Profiles: A Guide for HEIs'.

In addition, we are now asking the QAA to look at how HEIs can help potential students understand what their course will cover, what options are available, and what informal learning opportunities are available. In particular, we want them to explore whether HEIs could adapt or enhance the Programme Specifications produced for each course, so that they are written in a format which is digestible for potential students. HEFCE and QAA will also explore how HEIs can improve access for students to course and module descriptors, which specify the contact time and learning delivery method for each module.

The Association of Managers of Student Support Services in Higher Education (AMOSSHE) has agreed to work with us and the National Student Forum and UCAS to look at how financial, pastoral and social information can be further developed alongside Entry Profiles to provide a comparable resource for prospective students.

As with “academic” information, much of this information is already available – often within university prospectuses – but this can be enhanced by better signposting for applicants and students. AMOSSHE will work with the Forum to improve transparency, raise the profile of student support in pre-entry information and further encourage innovative approaches such as:

- video casts to promote lifestyle issues and services available;
- “transitions” DVDs to be sent to incoming students;
- using mentoring to support transition into student life;
- providing information on financial literacy issues (Including the Financial Services Authority (FSA) Money Doctors initiative);
- pre-arrival days for those with a widening participation background and mature students; and
- the use of web based portals.

5. Introduce an entitlement for all Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) students to visit at least two universities or colleges.

In the interests of genuinely widening participation, the Forum recommends the introduction of an entitlement for all students receiving the EMA to receive a grant to cover the costs of visiting at least two universities or colleges when considering applying to higher education.

We agree that visits to university can help to play an important part in helping young people 'see themselves' as being at university in the future. Class visits to HEIs are a typical activity funded by Aimhigher partnerships.

Aimhigher partnerships provide a number of other valuable interventions which encourage everything from basic awareness of HE through to commitment to entering HE.

Last year, HEFCE issued guidance to Aimhigher partnerships and universities to help them target more young people from lower socio-economic groups and

disadvantaged areas, so the majority of EMA recipients are likely to be within the main Aimhigher target group. Ultimately, it is a matter for Aimhigher partnerships and universities to decide how to make best use of the resources available to them.

We are exploring whether this recommendation could be piloted with a subset of students through an existing programme, such as the gifted and talented strand of the City Challenges, which supports academically gifted young people from disadvantaged backgrounds aged 14-19 to progress to the right university.

Chapter Two

Student Finance

6. Monitor progress on the Student Loans Company (SLC) reforms.

We support the improvement plans outlined by the SLC. We recommend that DIUS and the SLC should provide the Forum with a formal update on progress for phase 1 of the SLC reform programme in March 2009 and for phase 2 in March 2010.

We will work with the SLC to ensure that the Forum is given full written updates on phases one and two of the Customer First Programme as requested. We will also make sure representatives of the SLC are available to come to the Forum to discuss progress in more detail.

On 29 October the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, the Rt Hon John Denham MP, announced amendments to the student support package for new students entering higher education in academic year 2009/10. This has inevitably meant that there will be a delay in the launch of the new Student Finance Service and it won't be available as part of the UCAS timeline as originally planned. However, the SLC fully expects to deliver all the other Phase one improvements when it is launched in Spring 2009, as planned. This will include the new Student Finance Calculator due to be delivered in the course of academic year 2009/10.

Service improvements will be phased in over three years. Key changes over the life of the programme will include:

- a better level of service for customers through a primarily online service with other channels also available;
- high quality, consistent information, advice and guidance throughout the HE journey – with more personalised support for those who need it;
- an online calculator providing information on financial entitlement and comparing bursaries from different HE institutions;
- a simpler online application process which will work out from the student's individual profile the steps they need to take, rather than them having to work through lengthy forms and guidance;
- a reduced need to provide paper documentation as a result of better data sharing arrangements with the Identity and Passport Service (IPS) and HMRC;
- earlier indications of financial entitlement by enabling applications for loans and grants to be made at the same time as UCAS applications;
- faster decisions and payments by putting the service primarily online.

7. Introduce a choice of loan instalment options.

We feel there is a need for more flexibility in loan instalment arrangements. Some students are content with current termly arrangements, whilst others would prefer a monthly instalment that better suits their outgoings. With increasing numbers of universities and colleges moving towards semester systems, the Forum recommends that DIUS introduce a choice of loan instalment options: monthly, termly or each semester.

This needs further consideration with the SLC. There would of course be administration costs involved and, given the fact that the SLC is about to launch a significant transformation programme, there would be issues of timing to consider. We therefore invite the SLC to bear this idea in mind for future development of their service. An important first step would be to gauge the level of support for change amongst students before any decision is made to go ahead and, of course, to consult other interested parties in the HE sector.

8. Increase student loans to reflect increasing cost of living.

We hope that the government takes into account the results of the 2007/08 Student Income and Expenditure Survey (SIES) when it is published. Subject to its findings supporting our view of the current situation (that the total amount of borrowing by students on university or college courses has increased dramatically), we hope that the government recommends an increase in the size of student loans, to ensure that they accurately reflect increased costs of living as well as any rises in tuition fees – and consequently reduce the amount of commercial debt students need to take out.

The 2007/08 SIES was commissioned with the specific purpose of informing the 2009 independent review.

The survey has collected information on student income (including from student support, family, paid work etc) and expenditure (on living, housing and the costs associated with studying including tuition fees) as well as their general financial well-being. The way in which the current survey influences future policies will largely depend on how the findings are interpreted by the independent commission and what recommendations they make.

In the past, the SIES has been used to help decide what level of maintenance loan should be available to students – which is a significant portion of a student's total income. The last survey was conducted in 2004/05, and this will act as a benchmark as we consider the impact of variable tuition fees and the associated new package of student support introduced in 2006/07.

9. Employ transparency over tuition fee income and allocations.

We recommend that universities and colleges should commit to providing all students with a simple breakdown (in a pie chart or other similarly accessible format) of how domestic and international student fees are allocated across different faculties and facilities.

Most of the information suggested is already available but not in a form which is particularly accessible or easily understood by students. However, we are aware of this and it is something for individual institutions to consider. We will invite the British Universities Finance Directors Group (BUFDG) to consider this further and advise the Forum.

10. Raise awareness of student financial advisory services.

We recommend that universities and colleges should work in partnership with student unions to encourage pro-activity in dealing with student finance issues and systematically raise awareness of the financial support available (e.g. bursaries, access to learning fund, trusts).

The role of student financial advisory services has developed enormously over the last 15 years. Some examples of ways in which institutions are pro-actively seeking to raise awareness are listed below:

- using films to make finance more relevant;
- regular updating of websites;
- following up with students after the first term;
- providing a single port of call (one stop-shop); and
- using social networking sites, texting, podcasts and animated web forms.

Another important initiative is the FSA's Money Doctors programme. This has been developed in consultation with institutions and is designed to help students in higher education become financially competent. It encourages students to take control of their own finances before getting into any potential difficulties. The programme is delivered in HEIs across the UK through student money advisers, who receive training and support to help them pro-actively improve students' financial capability.

As part of the initiative, the final Money Doctors toolkit - refined during work with 19 "Early Developer" institutions - has now been sent to all UK HEIs following a series of road shows in summer 2008. A network of 50 institutions has been established, providing advisers with mentoring, training and a practical guide to setting up their own Money Doctors Programme. With further phased roll-out the aim is that all HEIs should provide proactive student financial capability education by 2011.

Increasing awareness amongst students of the services on offer is a challenge for every student service manager because a student's specific needs aren't realised at the beginning of term or start of their higher education journey. Further collaborative work within the sector to look at the most effective ways to reach students would be helpful. We will invite UUK and GuildHE, as well as other organisations such as NASMA, AMOSSHE and BUFDG, to consider what further joint activity might be useful.

11. Introduce more flexibility in tuition fee payment schedules.

We recommend that universities and colleges consider introducing more flexible payment schedules for tuition fees. Whilst we acknowledge that this would require an initial review of a university's income flow, we believe this approach would give universities and colleges who offer such flexibility a competitive edge and a reputation for innovation and student responsiveness.

12. Provide a guaranteed 'cap' on fee levels for the duration of the course (for international students).

We recommend that universities and colleges guarantee that fees will rise by no more than a certain percentage during the course for all students. We believe that this could be a decisive factor in influencing student choices about which university or college to study at – particularly for international students, whose fees are subject to a secondary uncertainty because of fluctuations in exchange rates. We recommend that, as minimum standard practice, all international students and their parents (if responsible for their fees) are explicitly warned about the potential impact of currency fluctuation on their fees.

Both recommendation 11 and 12 touch on areas which are essentially matters for individual institutions and some of them already offer some flexibility.

Whether or not to introduce the flexibility recommended by the NSF is a matter of judgement for each institution: taking into account issues such as cash-flow, non-payment of debts, staff resource and systems capability as well as sensitivity to the different circumstances in which students find themselves.

Chapter Three

Employability

1. Identify approaches to Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) and language teaching that seek to unlock motivation over the long term.

Direct funding into supporting exchange trips at school level; encourage more schools to pursue special status in modern languages and to run language clubs; promote positive role models for children and young people.

The Government has a long-term strategy and commitment to secure and sustain a supply of scientists, engineers, technologists and mathematicians to improve the science base (The Science and Innovation Framework 2004-2014).

The decline in strategically important subjects – including STEM subjects – is now being reversed. For example, more university students are now taking science courses and enrolment in higher level language courses such as Mandarin Chinese is also increasing.

The recovery is due to the imaginative work of universities, colleges and schools, underpinned by HEFCE's £350 million support programme (from 2005-2011) for strategic subjects. This money is focused on:

- Increasing student demand for STEM subjects
- Sustaining high-cost science subjects
- Building research capacity in STEM subjects

- Area studies of particular countries or global regions
- Modern foreign languages
- Quantitative social science.

We have already done a lot to engage and motivate students in STEM subjects from an early age, which we are looking to build on. In September 2008, a new secondary curriculum was introduced that retains the breadth, depth and challenge of each subject, but is more relevant to today's needs. We have also launched a number of career and communications campaigns aimed at 11–14 year olds to make them aware of the wide range of exciting and interesting career opportunities which are open to them if they choose to continue to study STEM subjects after the age of 16.

Bringing these subjects alive has been a very important aspect of our campaigns and initiatives we do. So far, we have set up 500 after-school science and engineering clubs to offer a rewarding, additional programme of

activities for Key Stage 3 pupils and we have recently published a set of STEM directories for schools, which provides easy access to a large range of recommended activities. These can be used inside and/or outside the classroom to enhance and enrich teaching and learning.

The network of science learning centres looks to improve the quality of teaching through its programme of continuing professional development activities, and the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics (NCETM) looks to achieve a similar aim by making access to good quality mathematics professional development easier.

As for language teaching, we are undertaking a range of actions as part of the National Languages Strategy (2002) and following the Dearing Languages Review (2007). The British Council already promotes and funds a number of opportunities for schools to take part in exchanges and visits which have a key role to play in increasing pupils' exposure to other cultures as well as other languages. Currently, there are over 220

specialist language colleges and many schools offer language-related activities and clubs outside the required curriculum. A major communications campaign is underway to promote languages to young people in secondary schools, as well as their parents, as a good option for them to pursue at GCSE and beyond because of the career-related and cultural opportunities it can open up.

Part of this includes using positive role models to inspire young people. The Higher Education Academy's 'Languages Linguistics and Areas Studies (LLAS) Subject Centre' also promotes the study of languages in higher education.

As for primary schools, languages will become compulsory in primary schools from September 2011, and from September 2008 the range of languages taught in secondary schools was widened following the removal of the EU rule which stated that a working language of the EU had to be taught. Secondary schools can now teach any major world or European language.

2. Consider the introduction of student loans for part-time students.

Student loans for part-time students could encourage participation from non-traditional groups, and support individuals who are already in the workplace but need to study to upgrade their skills.

Funding part-time higher education is complicated because part-time students are a diverse group with different funding requirements from full-time students.

But with increasing numbers of students choosing to study part-time it is important to understand their motivations and needs. That is why we included part-time education as a specific strand of the HE Debate, on which Professor Christine King has produced a paper (<http://hedebate.jiscinvolve.org/parttime-studies-in-he/>).

A new part-time support package was introduced in 2006 which was the most generous package for part-time students ever. UUK research had demonstrated that the take-up of loans by part-timers was low, so we made a conscious move towards offering a grant-based system as part of our objective to widen student participation in HE through ensuring that money is not a barrier.

Improvements made to the student support package for part-time students for the 2006/2007 academic year included a 27% increase in fee grant compared to 2005/06 and the introduction of a discretionary Additional Fee Support Scheme (AFSS) through the Access to Learning Fund (ALF).

The financial support package for 2008/09 includes a course grant of up to £255 to help pay for books, travel and other course costs, and a fee grant of up to £1,180. Both the fee and course grant are income assessed. As mentioned above, the part-time sector is notable for its diversity and we have to ensure that, with limited funds, the money we provide is closely focussed to gain maximum benefit. While it is difficult to generalise, a large proportion of part-time students are in employment, and many are supported by their employers.

To improve the information available about part-time students needs, we will continue to involve part-time students, including those at the Open University, in the SIES. The report which follows this survey provides information on the financial position of higher education students and will help us develop packages to support students wishing to study more flexibly.

Meanwhile we will continue to monitor the impact of the part-time support system, and funding for part-time students will be included in the 2009 independent review.

3. Improve the partnership between universities, colleges and employers at a national level.

Employers should be encouraged to supply information which will help inform subject selection, so that prospective students get an overview of the long term prospects when considering courses; employers should provide universities and colleges with a 'wishlist' of broad-based skills so universities and colleges can develop courses which integrate and deliver on these; universities and colleges should work with employers to shape meaningful work placements that will develop the skills that employers need in the long term.

Employers appreciate the broad range of skills that studying for a higher education qualification brings.

Most employers (84%) say that their recent graduate recruits are well prepared for work (NESS, 2007). We know from other employers' surveys such as surveys such as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) survey, however, that some skills such as business awareness are in short supply.

All universities involve employers in designing and reviewing many of their programmes, and they examine issues relating to the employability of their graduates as part of their approach to ensuring all programmes are fit-for-purpose. UUK's report, 'Quality and Standards in UK Universities: A Guide to How the System Works', explains in detail how they do this. In addition, out of the responses to HEFCE's 'Higher Education Business and Community Interaction Survey', 78% of HEIs report that employers are actively engaged in the development of content and regular reviewing of curricula at levels 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale (i.e. the highest level). Information about post-graduation employment is available to prospective students through the Unistats website (www.unistats.com).

We have sought advice on our own high level skills strategy through 'Higher Education at Work – High Skills: High Value', which had a strong focus on improving the employability of graduates; we are grateful to the NSF for their input. We will shortly be publishing a 'next steps' document which sets out what we intend to do as a result of that consultation and this will include a section on employability, laying out a programme for developing stronger HE-business links to enhance opportunities for student-staff exchanges and internships.

Of course, these are testing times and the government is therefore working closely with the HE sector to encourage it to support businesses and individuals in the economic downturn. Research shows that having a degree makes an individual less likely to lose their job and that, if you are made redundant, you will be out of work for a much shorter time. Investing in the high level skills of their workforce can make the difference between whether businesses succeed or fail in the current economic climate – and prepare them better for the upturn when it arrives.

HE can offer training at a time and place to suit employers and individuals. There are many examples of what HE can do in the recently published 'Standing together - Universities helping business through the downturn' (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/econsoc/standingtogether.pdf>) and we expect the HE sector to step up their support for businesses and individuals alike.

We recognise that new graduates will not be immune to the effects of the economic downturn and may find it more difficult to gain employment. Universities already have a lot of experience in preparing their students for employment through work experience, internships, development of entrepreneurial skills and curriculum enhancement and the high level skills strategy will promote more activities to increase employability.

In addition the government is consulting with the main stakeholders – both HE careers agencies and business – on collaborative ways in which we can help graduates who are unable to secure suitable employment. This includes developing new opportunities for internships for unemployed graduates.

It is vital that employers advise HEIs on what preparation their courses should provide for future employment. Indeed they do currently

do this through their involvement in the design of a wide range of courses. The reports 'Higher Level Learning: Universities and Employers Working Together', published by Universities UK, and 'Stepping Higher', jointly published by UUK and the CBI, provide some detailed examples. The piloting of Employer Co-Funded places should provide further valuable lessons on how provision can be developed and delivered to meet employers' demands. This is particularly relevant to students already in the workforce who wish to study at higher levels.

With others we have supported development work by UCAS to make information on employability skills available to potential students as they decide which HE course is right for them. This project to produce employability profiles has been successfully launched and is now available at www.ucas.com/seps.

In addition the UUK-CBI Partnership is developing good practice on employability skills within undergraduate programmes. We will also be considering the relevance to higher education of the findings of the the UKCES to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) employability project.

4. Increase the focus on employability at individual university or college level.

Set up a database detailing content and skills base of various work placements previously undertaken (plus contextual detail, such as accessibility for disabled students etc); introduce modules with a specific focus on prospective careers and transferability of skills to all courses; provide more information about how to affiliate with professional societies; implement high profile inter- and intra-university or college competitions that require students to collaborate with others to develop team-working (particularly for those students in predominantly solitary subjects e.g. science, maths); work collaboratively with other universities and colleges to set clearer guidelines for Personal Development Plans to improve consistency across the system.

We will continue to work closely with HEIs to make a collective effort to boost the employment prospects of graduates, and we are keen to explore further how we might support HEIs to take greater responsibility for their students' employability.

The proposals in 'Higher Education at Work – High Skills: High Value' provide an opportunity to consider how wider activities which develop employability might be recorded and recognised. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) has developed an extensive resource in developing and embedding employability skills across the curriculum. Its subject centres provide support for the discipline aspects of employability. Universities support students in thinking about future employment options through personal development plans (PDPs), the guidelines for which have recently been reviewed by a sector working group.

The QAA Code of Practice contains advice for institutions on providing a range of support to students preparing for employment. QAA is currently revising the section of the Code of Practice relating to Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance. This contains a greater emphasis on engaging with employers to improve the integration of career skills and employability into the curriculum, recognising the value of work placements improving students' awareness of the global employment market. The section of the Code of Practice for Postgraduate research programme states that institutions should also provide students with opportunities to maintain a record of personal progress, which includes reference to the development of research and other skills. The Vitae Programme funded by the research councils (www.vitae.ac.uk) also provides information and resources regarding personal development planning and recording progress.

In addition, the Burgess Implementation Steering Group (established by UUK and GuildHE) is currently supporting trials of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), alongside the existing degree classification system. It is intended to provide broader information to graduates and prospective employers about what they have achieved during their period of study, offering more in the way of relevance than the single summary judgement which the current degree classification system produces.

Chapter Four

Improving the Experience of Disabled Students

Looking at the proposals around improving the experience of disabled students, we have consulted with the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU).

It supports the higher education sector in promoting equality for all staff and students, whatever their race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion and belief or age, to the benefit of those individuals, higher education institutions and society. ECU is funded by UUK, GuildHE and the four UK funding councils.

The ECU has given a warm welcome to these initial proposals and is already working on projects that relate to many of the issues raised in this chapter. It would like to work directly with the Forum to develop them further, and, where resources allow, will seek to incorporate recommendations and proposals into its work through 2009 and 2010.

During 2008, HEFCE has undertaken a major review of their policy as it relates to disabled students.

The review included:

- A review of their funding method for the mainstream disability allocation to ensure that it remains fit for purpose
- Research to establish what the sector is doing to meet the needs of disabled students and establish the progress made since 1999 (when HEFCE published its 'Guidance on base line provision for disabled students in higher education institutions' HEFCE 99/04, http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/1999/99_04.htm)
- An evaluation of the Disability Equality Partnership (DEP) - a collaborative arrangement between Action on Access, the Higher Education Academy and the Equality Challenge Unit

HEFCE have agreed to discuss the emerging themes and findings of the review with the NSF and explore how they align with the Forum's proposals.

HEFCE are committed to disseminating the good practice identified during the review.

1. Explore the feasibility of an Association of Disabled International Students.

We propose that the feasibility of an Association of Disabled International Students be considered, to combat the isolation that can be felt by these students – and to provide peer support about any potential sources of funding and broader advice.

The ECU has commissioned research looking at the relationship between internationalisation and equality, focusing particularly on international disabled students. It is now proposing approaching potential partners to discuss joint work in this area.

The ECU agrees that it would be useful to explore the feasibility of an Association of Disabled International Students, and also recommends opening conversations with Skill, the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities. In particular it highlighted the need to consider how such an association would be funded.

The NUS has a Disabled Students' Campaign, which looks to address key issues affecting disabled students in further and higher education. Within that, it is keen to support the development of an international strand and advises this should allow significant progress in this area.

In addition, there is scope for the needs of international disabled students to be embedded in the other proposals that are being made. For example, staff and student disability awareness/equality training could highlight the additional challenges faced by such students and suggest strategies for overcoming them.

2. Integrate disability-awareness training for all students into the orientation period.

We propose a more systematic approach to raising awareness of disability amongst the general student population, especially during the orientation period e.g. offering workshops on disability, self-diagnosis posters and leaflets.

The ECU is currently working with the NUS and the Association of Managers of Student Unions (AMSU) to produce guidance to ensure that equality issues are mainstreamed into student union activities.

The guidance will include a recommendation that generic equality training be provided to students, with guidance and advice in relation to disabled students.

Embedding a more systematic approach to raising awareness of disability among the student population during orientation might also help to encourage students to disclose their disability at an early stage. HEFCE expects that research undertaken as part of its Review, outlined earlier, will identify where good practice already exists within institutions with regard to disclosure.

3. Improve disability-awareness training for all higher education staff.

We would like to see the introduction of compulsory disability-awareness training for academic staff, and the improvement of disability-awareness training for all other higher education staff, to address issues surrounding perception and stigma, and to provide practical strategies for improving practice both within and beyond the lecture room.

The HEFCE policy review seeks to highlight the benefits of staff training and provide examples of good practice.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) requires HEIs to positively promote disability equality and the former Disability Rights Commission (DRC) 'Code of Practice for Providers of Post-16 Education and Related Services' emphasises the benefit of comprehensive staff training approaches.

The ECU has already produced a guide, 'Disability Legislation: Practical Guidance for Academics', in association with the HEA, providing guidance for academic staff on teaching disabled students. This is available at www.ecu.ac.uk

The HEA's inclusion change programme, 'Developing and Embedding Inclusive Policy and Practice in Higher Education', also provides a very useful point of reference. As part of this programme the University of Worcester, for example, led the project 'Developing Inclusive Curricula in Higher Education through an Appreciative Enquiry Approach', focusing on positivity – this proved successful in engaging staff. It also involved disabled students and provided the students with developmental opportunities
<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/disability/inclusion>.

4. Develop a bank of student ambassadors for disability.

We are interested in exploring the potential of a bank of student ambassadors for disability to raise awareness of disability issues, support their peers and encourage applications from prospective disabled students.

Many Aimhigher Partnerships provide specific support to help students with disabilities access higher education. In addition, many HEIs use Aimhigher and their own funding to encourage the participation of disabled students as ambassadors and mentors.

We will discuss with the Forum how we might increase awareness of these excellent local initiatives.

5. Increase the emphasis on disability issues in feedback mechanisms.

We propose that national and local feedback mechanisms, such as the NSS and individual university or college surveys, should place a much stronger emphasis on disability issues and provision. The NSS could then offer pre-entry comparative information for prospective disabled students to access.

ECU believes that this proposal could feed into the work of the HEA, Action on Access and the ECU itself, all of which are funded by HEFCE to support institutions in meeting the needs of disabled students.

These three organisations already analyse NSS data for disabled students and would be happy to share this with the Forum. They will also investigate the scope for additional questions with the sector NSS Group.

6. Establish national guidelines to strengthen use of Personal Development Plans (PDPs) for disabled students.

We would like to see the establishment of national guidelines to strengthen the use of PDPs, for the benefit of all students.

However, we suggest that the guidelines should make specific reference to the potential for PDPs to focus on the development of transferable skills and support goal-setting for disabled students.

The Centre for Recording Achievement, an Associate Centre of the HEA, has produced a number of resources to support the sector on PDP implementation. Details can be found at the following link: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/pdp>.

We will ask the ECU to liaise with the Centre to explore whether there are particular issues for disabled students (and, if so, how these might be addressed in conjunction with the HEA and Action on Access). In addition, QAA is reviewing the PDP Guidance and will take the Forum's views into account.

7. Investigate the feasibility of a centralised electronic library for disabled students.

We propose a centralised system enforcing a copyright requirement to produce an electronic copy of every book published. Our understanding is that current copyright law enshrines the right for visually-impaired people to request an electronic copy of a publication, but that this right does not extend to people with dyslexia. Only universities and colleges are currently able to approach publishers to ask for electronic copies, rather than individual students. We would like to see a centralised library to which all disabled students have access. We believe that universities and colleges should extend their loan periods for disabled students as a matter of course.

The technology for an electronic library already exists, although it is informal and regional in nature.

Some institutions already house electronic libraries, such as Liverpool John Moores University and the University of Cambridge's Disability Resource Centre.

The UK has a reciprocal copyright agreement with the US whereby we have access to one another's copyright material.

ECU shares the views of the NSF about the benefits of a central technological support resource for disabled students. The ECU has carried out preliminary work on developing such a central resource for the benefit of both disabled staff and students.

8. Commission research into comparative progression rates for disabled students.

We suggest commissioning research into identifying the comparative progression rates for disabled and non-disabled students for: achievement and take-up of places; progression and attainment (including non-completion of courses).

There is a good deal of data and analysis on the progression and attainment of disabled students available. We will arrange for HEFCE and the ECU to make a presentation to the Forum to show them the range of information available.

This includes material in the 2007 National Audit Office report: 'Staying the course: the retention of students in higher education' http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0607/retention_of_students_in_he.aspx which shows high continuation rates for students receiving the government's Disabled Students' Allowances.

Chapter Five

Improving the Experience of International Students

The Government welcomes the work that the NSF has done to highlight issues of interest specific to international students. Such students are very important to the UK, and HEIs are committed to ensuring that they have a good experience whilst they are studying here.

The Prime Minister's Initiative on international education includes measures designed to improve the experience of international students as well as helping higher education institutions to strengthen their links with their counterparts overseas. The NSF proposals will stimulate further discussion and progress in this area.

1. Provide clearer guidance on international equivalence of qualifications.

Despite the work already undertaken by UK NARIC (the organisation responsible for providing advice on international qualifications equivalence) and UCAS in this area, we believe there is still a need for further awareness-raising.

We approached UCAS and UK NARIC

about this. UCAS produces a guide to international qualifications for use primarily by HE selectors. It is available as a PDF on the HE section of the UCAS website:

(http://www.ucas.ac.uk/he_staff/curriculumandquals/) and

contains information relating to a wide range of international qualifications suitable for undergraduate admission in the UK. Its purpose is to provide objective up-to-date information which is easy to access and use. Each entry is submitted annually to the appropriate authority of each country concerned to allow opportunities for comment and update. There is a plan to move the information into a searchable database in the future.

The International Team in UCAS talks to advisers and British Council staff to gauge views from overseas, and acts on this feedback. Comments from experienced staff in UK universities and colleges are also welcomed, in order to improve the information. The UCAS Continuing Professional Development Programme, which is available to all HE staff, includes sessions on qualifications and on international issues for non-international staff.

The UCAS Tariff is another resource that is valued by some awarding bodies internationally and UCAS receives suggestions for non-UK qualifications to be included. Qualifications are given a points score through this Tariff scheme. To date the Advanced

Placement (US), International Baccalaureate and the Irish Leaving Certificate are all in the UCAS Tariff and approaches have been made for other qualifications to be included, most recently the Hong Kong Diploma.

UCAS will also be working with a careers adviser organisation to provide a web-based IAG service for international students. This service will initially be introduced as a UK-based pilot scheme, and subsequently rolled out to international students. The service will use the latest webcam technology and will offer the following features:

- A UCAS-branded service that offers one-to-one access to a trained higher education and careers adviser;
- The chance to talk to an adviser with specific specialist knowledge, who can guide the student on the wider picture of HE in the UK as well as provide top line information on the UCAS process;
- Students will be able to view adviser profile pages, enabling them to pick and choose which adviser they would like to talk to, based on the adviser's relevant knowledge base and experience

05 Improving the Experience of International Students

- The opportunity to build a relationship with a specific adviser, who can advise and guide at all stages of the student's HE journey.

Another source of information is UK NARIC, which provides information and expert opinion on vocational, academic and professional skills and qualifications from over 180 countries worldwide. Finally the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) in England, Wales and Ireland applies to all higher education qualifications and awards in those countries, and has an explicit remit to inform international comparability of academic standards, especially in the European context. See: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08/default.asp#p1>

2. Introduce ‘cultural transition’ workshops for international students as part of a phased orientation programme.

Student orientation sessions are essential for international students and we believe that all universities and colleges should offer these. However, there can be information overload. We therefore propose a phased process as best practice, in which international students undertake an orientation programme consisting of a ‘cultural transition’ workshop, followed by a more general induction course about study skills, financial IAG, use of resource centres etc.

There are already a number of initiatives underway to help the ‘cultural transition’, being taken forward by individual universities and colleges as well as by government.

The UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) which provides information and advice to international students, has produced a range of materials including videos, online tutorials and a quiz (see www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk). It has also developed an online calculator to help international students understand the real cost of living in the UK, available at www.studentcalculator.org.uk/international.

Under phase 2 of the Prime Minister’s Initiative (PMI2) there are a number of small pilot projects running to encourage innovation in international student support. These include a guide to planning and running orientation programmes; a short course, “an introduction to British life and culture”; C-shock - virtual games and quizzes aimed at combating culture shock; m-learning - delivering support via mobile phone technologies; and a practical guide to mentoring schemes and international students.

3. Implement peer support networks.

We suggest the introduction of peer support networks. Ongoing emotional support from peers is invaluable, and we would like to see a buddying/mentoring system run by international students for international students.

Adjusting to life and study in another country can be very challenging and any support that international students can give to each other, through providing buddying and mentoring arrangements, for example, is certainly worthwhile.

UKCISA has produced guidance on mentoring schemes to help encourage both peer support and raise awareness among student unions. This is also an opportunity to support integration by involving both UK and international students in peer mentoring schemes.

4. Encourage student unions to be more ‘international student-friendly’.

Local and national student unions and student bodies can be a great source of support for all students, yet many international students can feel disenfranchised from these. We suggest that the NUS take steps to encourage student unions to make a more explicit effort to be ‘international student-friendly’, in order to promote a sense of belonging and integration.

There is already work underway to develop an ‘internationalisation of unions strategy’: the NUS, under PMI2, is conducting a five-month pilot involving three university student unions.

The NUS will publish a document by March 2009 outlining guidance on internationalising student unions. This will determine whether the programme will be extended by two years, during which time more student unions would be invited to join, good practice shared and guidance toolkits dispersed. A training and resource pack is being developed along with case studies to showcase best practice.

In addition, UKCISA held a major training and consultation event in London on 24 October for around 60 sabbatical officers and heads of national societies.

5. Identify mechanisms to reassure applicants about course and institution authenticity.

We propose the introduction of a mechanism – e.g. a licensing system – that can authenticate courses and offer international students security when they are applying to study in the UK. We will develop our thoughts on this proposal in our second year.

There is already a 'Register of Education and Training Providers' used by the UKBA. It holds a list of colleges, universities and private education providers in the UK and student visas are only granted by the UKBA to people intending to study at an institution on the Register.

The Register has been very successful in combating bogus colleges, particularly those which were entirely fictitious. In 2004, some 1,200 were visited ahead of the register being implemented: 25% were found not to be genuine and were prevented from registering. Since it was established, almost 300 colleges have been removed from the Register which means they are no longer able to recruit international students.

From March 2009 all education providers that want to recruit international students will need to appear on the UKBA's Sponsors Register – this will replace the current Register of Education and Training

Providers. To be registered, providers will need to prove that they are genuine institutions which are audited, inspected or accredited for education provision. This will cut down on the number of less scrupulous operators and criminal networks operating as education or training providers. And education providers will need to ensure that their courses lead to a recognised or approved qualification.

The new Points Based System (PBS) will also simplify the immigration arrangements for genuine students and education providers. By developing this clearer and more transparent system, students will be able to work out whether they have sufficient points before they make a visa application. UKBA works closely with the education sector to strike a balance between securing our borders and ensuring the UK remains an attractive destination for international students.

6. Allocate a percentage of international student fee income to support individual students in need.

We believe that the allocation of a percentage of international student fee income specifically to support international students in need is best practice for universities and colleges and would like to see this being implemented more widely.

Individual colleges and universities set their own policies when it comes to supporting international students who are in financial difficulty. Many operate hardship funds for all students who encounter financial need and within that wider fund there is often specific provision for international students. In addition, a wide range of bursaries and scholarships is available, details of which can be found through the Office of Fair Access (OFFA) website (www.offa.org.uk).

We do encourage institutions, however, to consider setting aside a portion of the income they receive from international students' tuition fees to support those who find themselves in financial difficulty.

Chapter Six

Improving the Experience of Postgraduate Students

We believe that improving the experience of postgraduate students is key in ensuring that this country has a strong research base, both now and in the future. Getting this right will also help us deliver against our objective of raising the overall skill levels of the workforce.

One of the themes of the HE Debate is the question of research careers, and Professor Nigel Thrift has made some interesting and helpful recommendations which we refer to in this chapter. This makes it even timelier that the NSF has chosen to focus attention on this subject and that it intends to develop its initial proposals further in its second year.

Our initial responses to the individual proposals are set out below. It is clear that the relevant sector bodies are already heavily engaged in addressing the issues, but we need to work harder together to ensure that this work is being communicated to students in the right way. We think this is one area of focus for future work.

1. Evaluate how effectively the QAA Code of Practice is being implemented for postgraduates.

We recommend an evaluation of how effectively the QAA Code of Practice is being implemented. There needs to be a review of the degree to which its recommendations do – or don't – translate into the reality of the daily postgraduate experience.

The QAA Code of Practice, and the section which deals with postgraduate issues, is subject to regular review. In 2005/2006 one such review found widespread evidence that the Code was being implemented positively and constructively, through an evaluation of research degrees at 114 higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland.

In addition, institutional audit in England and Northern Ireland has a specific focus on institutional arrangements for postgraduate students and each report has a section on postgraduate research students, measured against the relevant part of the Code of Practice. All of these reviews and reports are available from the QAA website.

www.qaa.ac.uk

A further initiative in this area is the Post-Graduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), run for the past two years by the HEA. This specifically invites research students to comment on their experience. The aggregate results are available on the HEA website and demonstrate a consistently high level of satisfaction amongst respondents.

Overall, there is no doubt that the Code of Practice is being taken seriously and extensive information is available on various websites but we would question how this information is packaged to make it readily accessible and digestible for potential and current students. This is something which the QAA is already thinking about and would be happy to discuss further with the NSF.

2. Develop a postgraduate student calculator to provide a clearer indication of overall costs.

We suggest that the SLC explores whether its proposed 'My Fact Find' service could be adapted to incorporate postgraduate fees and other related costs, so that students have a clearer picture of the overall costs of undertaking postgraduate study.

We think that 'My Fact Find' could be adapted to incorporate postgraduate costs but it would require all higher education institutions to submit details on courses, fees and bursaries, as they do for undergraduates. Developing the system would, of course, have operational and financial costs, and these would need to be assessed.

We will ask the SLC to undertake exploratory work into the feasibility of this proposal and produce some considerations for the Forum for a future meeting on this subject.

3. Make postgraduate handbooks more relevant and accessible.

We feel that universities and colleges need to review the handbooks that are currently provided for postgraduates, as they are often too dense and have insufficient focus on what matters from a student perspective. On commencing postgraduate study, a short, accessible 'survivors guide' that outlines the key defining points of the postgraduate experience is much more helpful in orientating yourself than a technical, lengthy tome. We suggest that universities and colleges liaise with existing postgraduates to establish what they wish they had known when they first started, and rework their handbooks from this perspective.

It is up to individual universities and colleges to decide how to present information to postgraduates, although the QAA Code of Practice has clear guidelines on this.

We will initiate joint discussions with sector bodies including UUK, GuildHE and QAA, to investigate opportunities for publicising examples of good practice and encouraging institutions to review the material they provide.

4. Explore the potential for international postgraduate students to secure Research Council funding.

We suggest that the Research Councils review their position on funding international students, so that those who have previously undertaken all of their undergraduate study in the UK could secure Research Council funding if they wish to continue their study here.

At the moment, the rules on Research Council funding for international postgraduate students generally make a distinction between students from other member states of the European Union and those from elsewhere in the world. EU students' eligibility depends on length of previous residence. There is some limited funding for international postgraduate students but this is only available in certain specified institutions and in specific fields. We will discuss this further with RCUK, the umbrella body for the research councils, to ensure this eligibility information is clear and accessible.

The Thrift report includes the suggestion that government should work in partnership with universities and industry to extend existing scholarships for high-quality international students studying in the UK. This will be considered further in the context of the HE debate.

5. Establish a coherent framework for updating and promoting research student databases.

Current research student databases are frequently out of date or hold patchy information. In addition, we believe that more could be done to leverage their potential to provide networking opportunities and combat potential isolation.

Promoting research student databases is largely a matter for individual institutions. As part of their further consideration of postgraduate issues, we would suggest the NSF invite one or two research-intensive institutions to further discuss this proposal and are happy to facilitate such a discussion.

6. Implement a bank of postgraduate ambassadors.

We propose the creation of a bank of postgraduate ambassadors, who can provide advice for prospective students on the topics and universities and colleges they are considering. We will further develop our thinking on the practicalities of this in our work on IAG for postgraduates next year.

We agree that this could be beneficial and look forward to hearing the Forum's further thinking on this proposal.

The recommendation by Professor Thrift, that research councils should work in partnership with universities, research institutes, charities and industry to develop a national research experiences programme for undergraduate students, could also be worth considering here.

7. Improve teaching opportunities for postgraduates on research programmes.

We feel that more can be done to improve the postgraduate experience of teaching through better teacher training, and support while teaching. Whilst we appreciate that it is difficult to tailor teaching opportunities to every individual researcher in every discipline, we believe that universities and colleges could do more to offer doctoral students teaching opportunities in a systematic, accredited, and well-regulated way.

There are a number of bodies already involved in supporting and developing teaching opportunities for postgraduates. In particular the research councils encourage institutions to provide such opportunities as part of training and development for research students; there is reference to teaching opportunities in the QAA Code of Practice and there is also support available for institutions from the HEA.

In addition, the UK Professional Standards Framework for supporting teaching and learning in higher education (UK PSF) provides a reference point for postgraduates who teach, to benchmark themselves to professionalism in teaching; and the HEA subject centres deliver discipline specific training for postgraduates who teach and they align their work to the UK PSF. Through its accreditation work the HEA also supports HEIs in developing provision for postgraduates. We recommend further discussion with all these parties.

8. Create an accessible database for alternative sources of funding.

We propose the creation of an easily accessible database of charities or bursaries which provide funding in specific circumstances.

There is a Centre of Excellence in Preparing for Academic Practice funded by HEFCE and based at the University of Oxford. The Centre is working with a network of research intensive institutions to support development in this area and this work could be a good starting point for further discussion.

Glossary of abbreviations and useful links

Action on Access		www.actiononaccess.org
AFSS	Additional Fee Support Scheme	
AGCAS	Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services	www.agcas.org.uk
Aimhigher	Aimhigher programme	www.aimhigher.ac.uk
AMOSHE	Association of Managers of Student Support Services in Higher Education	www.amoshe.org.uk
AMSU	Association of Managers of Student Unions	www.amsu.net
BUFDG	British Universities Finance Directors Group	www.bufdg.ac.uk
CBI	Confederation of British Industry	www.cbi.org.uk
CPD	Continuing Professional Development	www.cpdfoundation.com
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families	www.dcsf.gov.uk
DDA	Disability Discrimination Act	
DEP	Disability Equality Partnership	www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/disability/dep
DIUS	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills	www.dius.gov.uk
DRC	Disability Rights Commission	
ECU	Equality Challenge Unit	www.ecu.ac.uk
EMA	Education Maintenance Allowance	www.ema.direct.gov.uk
FHEQ	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications	www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/fheq/EWNI/default.asp
FSA	Financial Services Authority	www.fsa.gov.uk
HEA	Higher Education Academy	www.heacademy.ac.uk
HECSU	Higher Education Careers Service Unit	www.hecsu.ac.uk
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council of England	www.hefce.ac.uk
HMRC	HM Revenue & Customs	www.hmrc.gov.uk
IAG	Information, Advice and Guidance	
INSET	In Service Training	
IPS	Identity and Passport Service	www.ips.gov.uk
NASMA	National Association of Student Money Advisors	www.nasma.org.uk
NCEE	National Council for Educational Excellence	www.dcsf.gov.uk/ncee
NESS	National Employers Skills Survey	
NSF	National Student Forum	www.dius.gov.uk/policy/nsf
NSS	National Student Survey	www.thestudentsurvey.com
NUS	National Union of Students	www.nus.org.uk
OFFA	Office of Fair Access	www.offa.org.uk
PBS	Points Based System	www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/employers/points
PDP	Personal Development Plan	
PRES	Post-Graduate Research Experience Survey	www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/surveys/pres
PSHEe	Personal, Social, Health and Economic education	
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency	www.qaa.ac.uk
RCUK	UK Research Councils	www.rcuk.ac.uk
SIES	Student Income and Expenditure Survey	
Skill	National Bureau for Students with Disabilities	www.skill.org.uk
SLC	Student Loans Company	www.slc.co.uk
SPA	Supporting Professionalism in Admissions	www.spa.ac.uk
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths	
TDA	Training and Development Agency	www.tda.gov.uk
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service	www.ucas.ac.uk
UKBA	UK Border Agency	www.bia.homeoffice.gov.uk
UKCES	UK Commission for Employment and Skills	www.ukces.org.uk
UKCISA	UK Council for International Student Affairs	www.ukcosa.org.uk
UK NARIC	National Recognition Information Centre for the UK	www.naric.org.uk
UK PSF	UK Professional Standards Framework	www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/policy/framework
UUK	Universities UK	www.universitiesuk.ac.uk

Electronic copies can be downloaded from www.dius.gov.uk/policy/nsf

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