



House of Commons
Science and Technology
Committee

**Government Response
to the Committee's
Seventh Report,
Session 2003–04:
Director General for
Higher Education:
Introductory Hearing**

Eighth Special Report of Session 2003–04

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The Science and Technology Committee

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The current staff of the Committee are: Chris Shaw (Clerk); Emily Commander (Second Clerk); Alun Roberts (Committee Specialist); Hayaatun Sillem (Committee Specialist); Ana Ferreira (Committee Assistant); Robert Long (Senior Office Clerk); and Christine McGrane (Committee Secretary)

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Eighth Special Report

1. On 21 June the Science and Technology Committee published its Seventh Report of Session 2003–04, *Director General for Higher Education: Introductory Hearing*. On 24 August 2004 the Committee received a memorandum from the Government which contained a response to the Report. The memorandum is published as Appendix 1 to this Report.

2. We welcome the Government's full and constructive response to our Report on our introductory hearing with the new Director General of Higher Education, Sir Alan Wilson, held on 22 March 2004. In our Report we expressed concern about the closure of departments of science, mathematics and engineering and discussed the merits of Government intervention to maintain provision. We note that the Government has accepted the principle of intervention in the 10-Year Investment Framework for Science and Innovation, with the announcement that the Higher Education Funding Council for England will take a more active role in examining the regional implications of closures in certain science disciplines, possibly with the provision of financial support.

3. We do not underestimate the complexity of intervention but seek to highlight its importance in ensuring that appropriate numbers of students study certain subjects in a market-driven educational economy. We recognise that other factors need to be taken account. For example, consideration needs to be given as to whether the teaching funding formula currently used by HEFCE makes it "uneconomic" to mount courses in many science and technological subjects. It may be that the formula should be based not only on what universities are spending on science and engineering teaching but also on what they should be spending in order to sustain viable provision throughout the country. We hope that such issues will be addressed.

Appendix 1

Government Response

Introduction

The Report is of an introductory hearing with Sir Alan Wilson, the new Director-General for Higher Education in the Department for Education and Skills. The hearing covered a wide variety of topics and only a few have been identified in the recommendations. At the time of the hearing Sir Alan had been in his post – on a part time basis – for 7 weeks. He took up the post full-time on 1 June 2004. Sir Alan looks forward to further discussions with the Committee.

List of recommendations and Government responses

1. The creation of the position of the Director General for Higher Education is welcomed and Sir Alan Wilson has the right credentials for the job. Our only disappointment is he joins the Department after the publication of the Higher Education White Paper. An earlier appointment would have been preferable, to enable the incumbent to help shape the Higher Education Bill which the Department is required to implement. (Paragraph 4)

It is important to be clear at the outset that the Department has long had a Directorate responsible for higher education and a Board Member with responsibility for higher education. However, those responsibilities were part of a wider set of responsibilities for lifelong learning. The creation of a new Director-General for Higher Education raises the status of, and focus on, policy on higher education in the Department for Education and Skills and gives the higher education directorate leadership at Board level. The recruitment of Sir Alan Wilson is also part of a wider drive by the Department to bring in people to its senior team with recent experience of key education sectors.

The Government is pleased to see that the Committee welcomes the creation of the position of Director General for Higher Education, and the appointment of Sir Alan Wilson. The Government agrees that, in an ideal world, it would have been preferable to make the appointment earlier. But the first attempt by the Department to recruit a Director General did not attract applicants of Sir Alan's calibre, so the recruitment process had to be re-run. However, the Director General has been fully engaged in the discussions as the Higher Education Act completed its passage through Parliament, and will be central in carrying through the implementation of the proposals set out in the Higher Education White Paper

2. We are concerned that the Director General for Higher Education knew so little about the Bologna Process. The science community is looking for leadership from the Government on this issue, and on the evidence of Sir Alan's comments, it is unlikely to be forthcoming in the near future. We recommend that he takes steps to initiate a national debate among universities, ensure that the issues are well understood in the higher education sector and press for action where necessary. (Paragraph 7)

The Government fully supports the principles behind the Bologna Declaration and welcomes the increased potential it provides for mobility of both students and academics. Since 1999, when the Bologna Declaration was originally signed, we have been working closely with the higher education sector to inform national debate and raise awareness throughout the UK. We have promoted and defended UK higher education policy with European partners in the Bologna process at all levels, through Ministers attending biennial Ministerial conferences, through meetings and negotiations at official level as well as through academics engaging in academic conferences such as the one in Graz, Austria in May 2003.

Education Ministers are also fully engaged in Bologna issues. Most recently Alan Johnson spoke to a European audience at the UK government event on the Bologna process entitled 'Using Learning Outcomes', which took place at Heriot-Watt University on 1 July. Charles Clarke gave a key-note speech on Bologna in July last year in London. DfES officials have spoken on several occasions to higher education audiences to explain the Bologna process and its implications for the UK, and to dispel some of the myths. The higher education sector itself has also established the UK's sector-wide Europe Unit, based at Universities UK, to raise awareness of Bologna and other European issues and to help the sector respond to those issues.

There are some common misperceptions which persist. For example, it is not right to imply that Bologna requires Masters degrees to be two years long, or that the UK's one year Masters and four year integrated Masters courses will be rendered unacceptable by the Bologna process. We have consistently argued, successfully, that qualifications should be described in terms of learning outcomes rather than on the length of a particular course of study.

The Government is committed to continuing and deepening the national debate on the implications of Bologna, particularly as preparations for the next Ministerial meeting in Bergen, Norway in May 2005 gather momentum. From January 2005 the UK will be directly involved in the small group of Bologna signatories charged with taking forward preparations for Bergen, ensuring that we are well-placed to influence the outcome.

3. We are concerned that the relationship of the DfES, and in particular the Director General for Higher Education, with HEFCE is not clear and that there could be confusion over HEFCE's ability to make decisions on the allocation of its grants. Subtle shifts in funding by HEFCE can have a big effect on universities. The Director General for Higher Education needs to be clear about what his role is in intervening. (Paragraph 8)

The recruitment of a new Director General for Higher Education is designed to provide more effective support and advice to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, who is responsible for determining the overall policy environment for higher education. That responsibility is much wider than the responsibilities of HEFCE. It encompasses amongst other things, leadership across Government, student support, links with business and further education, and university title. This is clear from the Higher Education (HE) White Paper which was published in 2003. Where the agenda is shared the DfES and HEFCE have agreed to implement the reforms through a joint programme of change, the "HE Strategy Programme". Sir Alan Wilson and Sir Howard Newby, Chief Executive of

HEFCE, are joint “Senior Responsible Owners” of that programme, and share accountability for its delivery. As a result of the joint working arrangements, DfES and HEFCE enjoy an open and transparent relationship that respects the specific roles and responsibilities of the two organisations.

HEFCE is responsible under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 for administering the public funds made available for higher education institutions, and for advising the Secretary of State on the funding needs of HE. These arrangements support the principles of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. HEFCE’s statutory position and the statutory limits placed on the Secretary of State’s powers provide safeguards for institutional autonomy. It avoids political involvement in decisions on allocations to individual autonomous institutions that might involve issues of academic autonomy.

4. We are concerned that the Director General for Higher Education knew little about the Voluntary Vetting Scheme. A successful scheme that helps to prevent the UK becoming a training ground for terrorists needs a coordinated approach from UK universities and Sir Alan must play an active part. We recommend that he takes this up with the Foreign Office. (Paragraph 9)

Sir Alan had been in post only 7 weeks at the time of the hearing so he could not be fully briefed on every area of his new responsibilities. However, the Voluntary Vetting Scheme is well known to the Department. Operated by the FCO, it is designed to counter the acquisition of technology by proliferators that would help their weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programmes. It does not, and cannot, work to counter terrorism. It is a voluntary scheme by which higher education institutions refer postgraduate students and researchers on courses of concern from countries of concern to the FCO. The FCO then provides a risk assessment to the HE institution concerned. The DfES regularly reminds HE institutions of the importance of compliance in the scheme. This, and awareness raising work undertaken by other Government departments including the FCO, has brought about an increase in the number of referrals made. But we believe more can be done to reform the scheme.

The Cabinet Office is leading a Government-wide review of the VVS, working closely with officials in the FCO, the Security Service and the DfES and involving discussions with bodies representative of higher education interests including Universities UK and the Association of Heads of University Administration. The Cabinet Office hopes to publish the outcome of the review in the next few months.

5. We are pleased that Sir Alan is an advocate of evidence-based policy. If he is to bring this to bear on Government higher education policy he should be in a position to ensure that appropriate and reliable data are gathered, which cannot be airily dismissed as a result of the many and serious imperfections of social science. (Paragraph 11)

The Department’s Higher Education Directorate (HED) is committed to evidence-based policy. Higher Education Analysis Division (HEAD) in the Directorate is responsible for developing and delivering a programme of analytical work on higher education policy issues which meets the short-term and long-term needs of policy-makers and Ministers. HEAD is also responsible for ensuring that the evidence produced is effectively communicated, disseminated and used. HEAD recently moved into the HE Directorate as

part of the reorganisation of the analytical resources in the DfES. This should ensure that the programme of analytical work the HE Directorate undertakes effectively informs, influences and improves HE policy.

6. We are disappointed that Sir Alan does not see a greater role for Government intervention to maintain university research and teaching capacity in key disciplines. (Paragraph 13)

The Committee rightly identifies that in the long-term the solution to this problem is to stimulate demand by encouraging more young people into key subject areas. We already have a raft of measures in place to enthuse and encourage school pupils to take science courses in higher education, for example the Science Ambassadors Scheme and the Student Associate scheme. And there are proposals to build on this in the 10-Year Investment Framework for Science and Innovation, published alongside the Spending Review White Paper on 12 July. We also recognise the significant role which institutional collaboration can play in safeguarding key disciplines, through the development of critical mass as well as assisting with the recruitment and retention of staff.

However, the Committee's conclusion that "there is nothing difficult about intervening in the market to support subject areas crucial to future economic performance" risks oversimplifying the issues. Intervention is not risk-free and manpower planning an inexact science. Planning the optimal supply of graduates in certain disciplines is not straightforward, particularly in a situation where the employment options for such graduates are so varied. Nevertheless we recognise the need to do something in response to concerns within the sector and elsewhere and we have set out in the 10-Year Investment Framework for Science and Innovation some options for HEFCE to pursue in consultation with the sector. These include the possibility of making it a condition of grant that a notice period of 12 months should be given before the closure of any department; and whether there is scope for HEFCE to provide additional funding to particular departments if there is a powerful case that weakening provision in a particular region would hinder student access to disciplines that are important to national and regional economic development.

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