

## RESEARCH TEMPLATE FOR THE SITUATION IN THE PARTNER COUNTRIES **UK**

---

### OVERALL NATIONAL COMMENTARY

---

Please outline the national and institutional state of play concerning the implementation of the LLL-Charter (1-2 A4 pages).

Identify key policies, trends, success factors, challenges, etc.

Summarize what has happened – is happening – and will further on happen

#### **The impact of the European Universities Association (EUA) Lifelong Learning Charter : a view from the UK**

The **Department for Business Industry and Skills (DBIS)** is the government department responsible for universities. It was created in 2009 to replace the Department for Innovation Universities and Skills (DIUS). The response from DBIS confirmed that the EUA Lifelong Learning Charter is not seen as being central to UK government policies, but that it is broadly in line with what is happening in the UK HE sector. It was also acknowledged that in recent years the strength of the economic case for skills has been seen as the only case for investment in learning and has tended to overlook the social and cultural benefits of learning to individuals, families and communities and the government does seem to recognise that concentration on the utilitarian aspects of learning excludes valuable activity and many people. Higher Education institutions in the UK are autonomous, even where they are publicly funded, and so it may be the case that they enjoy greater freedom than their European counterparts when delivering their academic programmes.

One way in which universities can be incentivised is through the HEFCE grant letter which points to priorities for English universities and institutions are also subject to quality assurance inspections by the **Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)**, which has had a significant influence on the development of European standards and guidelines. QAA follows the national strategy with regard to the Bologna Process (i.e. that followed by the High Level Policy Forum). They also try to assist in helping facilitate discussion in areas such as integrated masters programmes which have problems with recognition in terms of the perceived Bologna 3+2+3 framework. They also work closely with UUK. There is not a high level of awareness at QAA of the EUA charter.

In December 2006 Lord Leitch produced the final report from his review of skills, having been tasked with considering the UK's long-term skills needs. The report presented an ambitious and challenging vision for the UK to become a world leader in skills, seeing 'skills' as the 'most important lever within our control to create wealth and to reduce social deprivation' (Leitch 2006). One of the important messages for universities in the report was that it was claimed that over 70% of the 2020 workforce had already completed their compulsory education, and that future skills demand was likely to be for learners in employment, studying part-time and via flexible, work based routes. This pointed towards a need for significant change in the way in which universities might deliver courses in the future and was just the beginning of a rapid and substantial shift in focus for the higher education sector and its increasingly perceived role as a vehicle for economic development and the delivery of skills and 'economically viable' subjects. This has been followed by the **Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)** investing in a series of **Employer Engagement** pilots in universities, with funding over a 3 year period to develop new curriculum with employers, with employers also contributing to the costs of development and delivery. This is part of a wider move to increase HE income from employers.

Supported and funded by HEFCE, **Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs)** have brought together higher and further education institutions across a city, area or region to offer new progression routes into HE for vocational learners. LLNs are a key driver for improving progression opportunities for learners on vocational programmes, including those currently in employment, putting them on the same footing as those following more traditional academic pathways. They do this for example through formal agreements that they put in place to ensure progression; support for learners within the participating institutions; and appropriate curriculum adjustments. The work of LLNs is also important in the context of progression routes for those who have studied for the new 14-19 Diploma. HEFCE has provided around £106 million to support 30 LLNs, spanning 120 higher education institutions and over 300 further education colleges in England, achieving almost national coverage.

*Continued:*

From 2008, it withdrew £100m of funding for students studying for a higher education qualification equivalent to, or lower than, a qualification (ELQ) that they had already been awarded. These plans appeared to contradict the government's focus on widening participation and social mobility, as well as the re-training and skills agenda, threatening to impact particularly on universities offering courses to adults and part-time students. The government justified their stance on the basis that funding should primarily be available to those who had yet to achieve undergraduate level education, and on the grounds that public financial support for such duplicate provision is unreasonable. It has not been adopted in Wales and Scotland to date. Whilst there were some exemptions agreed, such as foundation degrees, the impact of ELQ has been severe, with universities looking at ways of mitigating these funding losses. Some institutions have taken decisions to cut courses, where there are high proportions of ELQ students, or increase fee levels and the longer term impact of this policy is not yet fully known.

2009 saw the publication of ***Higher Ambitions: The future of universities in a knowledge economy***, Business Secretary Lord Mandelson's new framework for higher education, in which he set out a vision for a world class higher education system. The report did nothing to reverse the increasing importance placed on university collaboration with business and at the same time it also placed a growing emphasis on research excellence, impact and plans for concentration of research in a small number of institutions. Surprisingly perhaps the report did also place significant emphasis on 'wider and fairer access to higher education' and also highlighted the likely growth in part time higher education and the importance of adult learners. Although commissioned by an outgoing labour government, the report claimed to have cross party support, so the messages have been taken fairly seriously by the sector, as representing a probable direction of travel for universities. It has the appearance of a UK wide document, although interestingly parallel documents have been produced by Welsh and Scottish governments.

***Universities UK (UUK)*** is the representative organisation for the UK's universities. Together with Higher Education Wales and Universities Scotland, its mission is to be the definitive voice for all universities in the UK, providing high quality leadership and support to its members to promote a successful and diverse higher education sector. The UK sector-wide Europe Unit was launched in January 2004 in response to the growing body of European legislation and policy initiatives currently affecting UK higher education and is now 'The Europe and International Unit'. It is funded by Universities UK, the three higher education funding councils for England (HEFCE), Scotland (SFC) and Wales (HEFCW), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and GuildHE. The Unit works closely with the Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills (DBIS), the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly Government. The response from UUK indicated that the Europe Unit was consulted in the drafting of the EUA charter and UUK are very aware of the charter's existence. It is considered that the UK is ahead of the game in relation to the lifelong learning and widening participation agenda, as well as in relation to developments around the Bologna process. EU member state governments have agreed benchmarks for lifelong learning, although these are not specific to the HE sector. The prime indicator is the participation rate. The target set for 2010 – 12.5% of the adult population – rises to 15% for 2020. The current figure quoted for the UK is 19.9%, which places the UK the fourth best performer overall ( European Commission, SEC[2009]1616, Progress towards Lisbon objectives in education and training, p.14)

UUK would say that the engagement of the UK HE sector in Bologna has been significant, but the current challenge for the sector is maintaining momentum, as other countries change and do more, and particularly with HE provision through the medium of the English language being developed by other countries. In the last few of years the UK has been seeking to influence the importance of learning outcomes, rather than learning 'hours', as has been the case in some EU member states.

***Lord Browne's review of higher education funding and student finance***, an independent review of higher education funding and student finance, launched in November 2009 was published in October 2010. The sector is still awaiting a full government response to the recommendations in the review, the most significant being the lifting of the cap on university fees to allow institutions to set their own fees (currently capped at £3290). In relation to part-time study the report recommends that part-time students are treated equitably to full time students, and there is also a general view that the part-time HE market will expand, but it is not clear what the government response will be on these matters. Following the government comprehensive spending review from the new coalition government, towards the end of 2010, universities are facing cuts of around 80% in teaching funding. Whilst full details are still awaited, it looks likely that in future there will be no public funding for Arts, Humanities and Social Science subjects and reduced, but largely protected funding for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths). The outcomes of both Browne and the spending review will have a significant impact on how universities move forward and is likely to shape what the sector will look like in the future. All English universities are currently deciding fee levels for 2012, which will be between a lower cap of £6,000 per year and an upper cap of £9,000. Those seeking to charge above the lower level will have to demonstrate that they are meeting widening participation benchmarks, although it is as yet unclear what these will be. As universities are forced to prioritise activities and decide how best to invest limited resources, it is unlikely that funding for lifelong learning will increase, and whilst lifelong learning and social mobility still appear to be embedded in policy documents, this does not tend to be followed up by funding decisions, except in relation to vocational and employer led provision. Within this context, the EUA Charter, which currently has very low visibility, is unlikely to have an impact on developments in the UK.