

**House of Lords European Union Committee Call for Evidence
Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: the EU contribution**

Response of the Mixed Economy Group of colleges (MEG) and Businet

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This response is produced on behalf of the Mixed Economy Group of colleges (MEG) and Businet. Further details of both groups are given in Note 1 to this response.
- 1.2 The Mixed Economy Group represents those English Further Education colleges (FECs) which have a significant, established, strategic and developmental role in the provision of Higher Education (HE). Currently, 39 colleges belong to the group, all of which have a minimum of 500 HE FTE: half have more than 1,000 HE FTE. Member colleges focus on the complementary aims of widening participation amongst groups and individuals currently under-represented in Higher Education and working with employers to ensure that higher level skills are developed and recognised in the workplace.
- 1.3 The Businet network is currently represented in 21 European countries with a membership of nearly 100 institutions. Members are drawn from across the full range of higher education providers, a number of which are private institutions. All members share a strong vocational orientation and enjoy established robust relationships with the employers with whom they engage. The employer base incorporates both public and private sector enterprises and in the case of the private sector covers a broad spectrum from small companies to multinationals. The current General Manager and immediate past President of Businet are both based in New College Durham, a MEG member college
- 1.4 What follows are our combined views on the lessons that can be learned from the English experience of HE in FE at a time of great change and the European perception of that experience as seen through the eyes of our Businet partners. We know that Governments across the UK and Europe are increasingly concerned to see positive outcomes from their investment in higher education. Equally, students are increasingly aware that a first degree in itself is no guarantee of employment. Economic growth in any country in times of a world recession is difficult, but it will be led by the application of higher-level skills to current technical barriers. A credible, modern system for the provision of HE is thus of interest to policy-makers, providers of higher education, students and employers in all nations.

2. Key Issues

- 2.1 Many of the issues and solutions raised in the EU Commission's communication¹ have direct parallels in the current situation facing HE in England. There is a shared concern to increase the percentage of the population with a degree-level qualification and to do so in a setting of an ageing population. There is a shared need to do this at minimal cost to the public purse and to deliver HE in a wider variety of forms and between a wider variety of institutions than has previously been the case. We have common cause in seeking to widen participation in HE and promote greater social mobility. Note 2 sets out the distinctive role of the English FE college in delivering HE and we consider this relevant to the European Commission's proposal.
- 2.2 Overall, our purpose in this response is to stress the need for a holistic approach to the modernisation of HE. A new, EU-wide definition of HE is urgently needed, which must cover higher-level skills and professional training as well as the more traditional academic understanding of the term. Under this new definition, the modernisation process must link *operational* matters as well as *policy* principles. The view of the MEG membership is that an artificial distinction is currently drawn in England between policies for Skills and policies for HE. Until a holistic approach is adopted to policy development across both sectors, it will always be difficult to address the needs of those who wish to pursue higher-level skills, whether from the work-place or from school. We also share the Commission's concern to ensure that transition and progression between FE/HE/Skills is made more streamlined and that any artificial barriers are removed.
- 2.3 We agree with the Commission that there is a need for a more diverse HE landscape which can respond to the needs of learners with differing aspirations and expectations. We believe it is essential that the systems and structures for the design and delivery of HE are made more open and accessible and not simply derived from the traditional model based on three year full time honours provision. As FE colleges, MEG members enrol students from their local communities who might not otherwise be able or willing to study. They provide higher level skills qualifications in a range of vocational disciplines to support local employers. Colleges also offer value for money by focusing on teaching and learning, with smaller class sizes and longer student contact hours. Colleges also understand the needs of students for support in their learning and offer a real alternative to a "traditional" HE experience. Part time and mature students feature strongly in the college offer.
- 2.4 In terms of promoting student progression to HE, colleges play a major role in the social mobility agenda shared by all political parties. Some English colleges have progression rates of 33% for students moving from the college's own Level 3 provision to college-based HE. Given that the majority of these students do not come from families with a tradition of university education, this is a major contribution to local social and economic development.
- 2.5 Many European countries are now reviewing their HE funding and finance arrangements. MEG has concerns that the new fees regime in England could act as a disincentive to students drawn from backgrounds historically underrepresented in HE. Although the impact of new Access Agreements and National Scholarship Funds cannot yet be judged, there are concerns that the

¹ Supporting Growth and Jobs: An agenda for the modernisation of Europe's Higher Education systems. September 2011

inevitable bureaucracy which surrounds all such schemes will act as a further disincentive for such students.

- 2.6 It is also uncertain as to how employers will be able to pay the fees of their employees without incurring a penalty for early repayment. Such a penalty would be perverse, given the drive to encourage employers to assume financial responsibility for their employees' training. A change in mind-set is needed by employers: many simply refuse to pay for any training at any level. There is a need to reinstate a sense of employer responsibility for the development of employees, on the basis that this will be repaid in terms of both staff loyalty and higher company profit margins.

3. Specific Issues

3.1 Teaching and Learning

FECs teach year round and outside of normal working hours. Despite their varied backgrounds, staff have a shared commitment to teaching and learning, which is viewed as the prime activity of all college staff at both FE and HE level. It is a condition of service that all staff employed in an FE college possess or are in the process of gaining, a teaching qualification. This requirement extends to those who teach HE.

- 3.1.1 The focus is on recruiting staff with current and credible skills rather than using a large component of the college budget to fund staff to undertake academic research. College teaching staff are recruited primarily as teachers. Discussions with the NUS have demonstrated that HE in FE students value teaching skills. Good teaching has much in common across all sectors and should be encouraged and developed. Teaching and learning is the core purpose of most HE in FE and not Research, as in many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).
- 3.1.2 HE in FE staff do not always enter teaching directly from an academic background. Most have relevant industrial experience, giving them immediate credibility with employers working within the same sector. They are able to contextualise the more academic learning undertaken by students, helping them to see the point of theoretical components in largely vocational courses. Recent BIS and HEFCE consultation documents acknowledge the "dual professional" status of HE teaching staff. This is a distinctive feature of HE in FE and one which could be built upon in order to create a cohesive programme offer which retained credibility with employers.
- 3.1.3 An English HE in FE professional is emerging, who is at the cutting edge of his/her profession and has expectations in terms of CPD but wishes to teach rather than focus on traditional academic research.
- 3.1.4 Like some HEIs, FECs also work closely with Chartered Institutes and other professional bodies, thereby ensuring that course content is always up-to-date and acting as a bridge between employees and relevant bodies in terms of CPD. Impact is enhanced by the industry-active status of many PT FE staff.

3.2 Widening Participation

- 3.2.1 In certain institutions the higher skills offer clearly helps to fill regional skills gaps that HEIs are unable or unwilling to address. The currency of the HE in FE offer in the form of Foundation degrees is strong: it is subject to annual

review and regular updates, ensuring that it meets the needs of a changing job market.

- 3.2.2 In the North East of England and in the South West, it is the FE sector which is addressing HE cold spots, through the provision of a range of vocational courses which can be pursued on a full time, part-time or distance learning basis.
- 3.2.3 MEG understands the Europe-wide pressures on public funding. However, some of the implications of the new funding approach carry significant risk that students from widening participation backgrounds will be more reluctant to participate.
- 3.2.4 The level and quality of support for non-traditional HE learners is much more intensive and specialised than that found in conventional HEIs. The support structures continue through from FE and can remain in place for the duration of each student's higher-level study. The emphasis on retention and achievement is much more pronounced than in HEIs.
- 3.2.5 With regards to learner progression into employment or up skilling, FECs and the students who choose to study there place a distinct emphasis on jobs and employability for graduates, usually aligned to local job markets. Promotion and career progression are regarded as important for those already in work but studying part-time

3.3 Employer Engagement

- 3.3.1 FE Colleges work with employers: this is part of their identity and comes from a long tradition dating back in many cases to the early years of the last century or earlier. For much of their history they have worked with part-time as well as full time adults, and are aware of the particular needs of those who are learning whilst earning.
- 3.3.2 Crucial to this is the degree of confidence that employers have in their local colleges. This is hard-won, and reflects a heavy investment in time by business support staff, tutors and assessors, who all nurture the HE/employer relationship. The proven ability of FECs to re-tool to meet new demands rapidly and to a high standard maintains this crucial factor.
- 3.3.3 Foundation degrees (Fds) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) are large components of the HE in delivered in English FE colleges. Fds must involve employers in the design of the qualification and employers sit on the Programme Boards convened to monitor Fds and HNs. As such, they offer a valuable source of information for college staff and can help to ensure that programme content is current and relevant.
- 3.3.4 Delivering employability is not the sole responsibility of colleges and universities. There is also a need for employers to take more interest in the curricula offered by local HE providers. It is easy to complain about graduate employability - but past and current research suggests that relatively few employers take a proactive role in this process.²

² European Commission: Flash Eurobarometer 304: Employers' perception of graduate employability. Analytical report 2010.)

- 3.3.5 MEG colleges work with employers and validating universities to offer Fds. Based on the experience of many colleges, there is a tension between the employers' needs for higher level skills and the universities' requirement for a high level of academic content in a skills- based qualification. Methods of assessment are also a source of tension, as those who possess vocational qualifications are unlikely to have the essay-writing skills expected in traditional written assessment.
- 3.3.6 Finally, within England apprenticeship numbers are set to increase significantly. A key role for colleges will come in ensuring that routes exist to higher level technical qualifications for the young people and adults who are recruited to this scheme. It is unlikely that HEIs will have the staff expertise to rise to this challenge, particularly in areas where there is not a tradition of higher-level qualifications.

3.4 Student Mobility

- 3.4.1 We consider that student and staff mobility can be strengthened through the operation of effective networks. As a network organisation Businet is aware of the volume of mobility movements which have been generated over many years by its member organisations coming together in an atmosphere of mutual trust and confidence
- 3.4.2 Businet members confirm that the volume of mobility activity they engage in has been enhanced significantly by their membership of the network. Experience suggests that the most effective promotion of Erasmus opportunities, for example, is provided by students who have participated. Erasmus ambassadors drawn from the UK HE community who are engaged to present their experiences to prospective Erasmus students are likely to have the greatest impact in raising the mobility figures for UK students studying in other members states. Crucially, the extensive opportunities for UK students to study at institutions in other members states where the language of tuition is English are perhaps not as well-known as they should be.
- 3.4.3 Linked to this, mobility of labour to fill higher-level skills shortages can also be encouraged through more and better course transfer arrangements between two or more EU HE institutions. Individual Businet members report active recruitment of skilled English-speaking HE graduates to fill vacancies in their home countries - but the means of circulating such vacancy information is haphazard.

3.5 Value for Money

- 3.5.1 Colleges have a lower cost base. All of their resources are devoted to teaching and student support. College staff are teachers, not researchers, and they develop their skills accordingly. College resources are directed towards the success of their students, without the distraction of primary research or the need to publish papers. Because of the greater number of hours taught by staff, the flexible approaches taken to staffing by colleges and lower salary and facility costs, college-delivered HE provision offers better value for money for all concerned.

3.6 Opportunities to Promote Alternative Progression Routes into Higher Education

- 3.6.1 Research funded by fdf and MEG³ revealed that Work-Based Learning and HE teams can work in silos within the same college. By enhancing staff CPD, building HE modules into existing Apprenticeship programmes and ensuring that Fds /HNs are discussed at employer programme boards it is possible to cover gaps in the knowledge of all parties.
- 3.6.2 Knowledge about Higher Level Apprenticeships, in particular, is uneven, with many school and FE college advisers still not having a secure grasp of the options available. Employers are still unaware of the opportunities in their sector, suggesting that Sector Skills Councils and professional bodies could play a greater role in clarifying and promoting this route to HE. More data is needed, which should be more readily accessible to adults, students, staff and employers.
- 3.6.7 The development of more flexible routes between FE and HE, and an analysis of the benefits of two-year “Accelerated courses” of HE will be helpful in opening up HE to adult students.

3.7 Access to Information about HE

- 3.7.1 We support the Commission’s wish to improve the current arrangements. Taking the example of the current NSS and proposed KIS criteria within England, we note that many of these benchmarks are not easily applied to HE delivered in FECs or, more importantly, may not be of interest to the students who propose to pursue their HE in this environment. This generally-older group of students are less interested in the more social aspects of HEI provision, for example, but value a high level of teaching hours and evidence that staff have a teaching qualification. For students intending to pursue a vocational qualification, staff currency in their profession is an important selection criterion but one that is rarely easy to establish.

3.8 Quality Issues

- 3.8.1 The goals of Bologna can only ultimately be realised when the language of European HE and the quality systems that support and regulate HE across the Member states, are sufficiently closely aligned that the remaining barriers are eliminated.
- 3.8.2 We consider that in terms of quality systems the work of the English Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) provides a model which could be rolled out across the EU. We recognise the many barriers that may restrict such an approach, but nevertheless believe that the UK’s contribution to quality assurance and enhancement offers an approach which provides a route towards closer integration between HEIs in the Member states.
- 3.8.3 If such difficulties can be overcome, we consider that the QAA approach to the guardianship of quality has many merits. We propose a Kite Marking initiative which draws heavily on the English experience of quality assurance.

4. Recommendations

³ Apprentice Progression: interim report on action research. (fdf/MEG 2010)

- 4.1 Against this background, MEG and Businet offer the following advice to the EU Commission. At operational level:
- 4.1.1 Sharing of good practice has been in our (MEG and Businet) experience one of the most powerful tools in driving forward positive change. Good practice conferences could usefully be promoted and managed through the EU to showcase innovative educational ideas covering curriculum design, partnership working, staff and student mobility, internationalisation at home, project activity, and research.
- 4.1.2 EU-wide annual dissemination of market intelligence data drawn from across all sectors which accurately predicts where the higher level skills shortages and thus opportunities for graduate employment will be located regionally. These data sets will assist institutions in their forward planning, their promotion of study programmes to prospective students, their development of new (and innovative) curriculums and by extension their engagement with employers to inform and support such development work.
- 4.2 Strategically, we suggest that:
- 4.2.1 A holistic approach to higher-level skills and traditional HE is needed, both in England and in Europe. This must reflect the reality of a work-based, ageing population that may wish to pursue higher study otherwise and elsewhere than through a traditional full-time course at a university. Greater acknowledgement that HE can be delivered in a number of institutions, can cover professional as well as academic training and can serve a number of different markets is needed. If this could be referenced in advertisements and in information about student finance it is likely that more adults will then consider progression from vocational routes.
- 4.2.3 An EU-wide, universal Careers Education Information Advice and Guidance service will benefit adult entrants to HE. Within England, the detailed face-to-face discussions appreciated by adults who are in work but who are contemplating HE are not available to them – after age 18, this service is limited to those who are unemployed. Access to impartial guidance is therefore uneven and currently omits the very group that the English (and European) Government is trying to draw in to HE in order to up-skill the workforce. Across the EU, similar unfettered access to impartial guidance will reap similar benefits
- 4.2.4 Older students are more likely to be in full-time employment. All relevant information about HE needs to be readily accessible, relevant and easy to understand. Information benchmarks must cover areas of interest to this age group, rather than focus on the interests of a more traditional school leaver cohort.
- 4.2.5 Mobility of students and thus national economic vitality will be increased by more course transfer agreements between EU institutions and by the provision of employment data on a sector-by-sector, country-by-country basis. Eg Denmark is actively seeking higher-skilled nationals from other countries to fill skills shortages.
- 4.2.6 National measures to facilitate and support dialogue between employers and HEIs. We note that it seems more common to find HEIs engaging with employers from the standpoint of their own organisational interests rather

than from a broader view of the economic wellbeing of their individual Member state or the European Union as a whole. This offers a bottom-up rather than a top-down model. Although the latter may be more difficult to accomplish it would seem that there is an imperative to promote a “bigger picture” approach.

- 4.2.7 The 40% target for participation in higher education across the EU by 2020 is a crude aspiration. A more focused approach is to devise more specific targets which are directed towards encouraging participation in programmes where graduates would be entering employment sectors known to be/ anticipated to be areas of skill shortage by 2020. This would be of greater value to HEIs in their longer term planning.
- 4.2.8 A Quality kite mark initiative from the EU is suggested. This would drive forward a shared EU-wide concept of quality. Funding should be made available to support this initiative.

5. Conclusion

We believe that we have a unique view of the HE (and higher skills) agenda across Europe and England. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the MEG and Businet view in more detail with Committee members.

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Note 1

About MEG and Businet

MEG colleges have a focus on the delivery of higher level vocational skills. This is seen in the heavy commitment to qualifications which link the colleges with their local employers. The ability to gain Foundation degree Awarding Powers (FDAP) consolidates this focus, enabling greater control of the means to meet employer need.

MEG has a high profile. This is based on its measured and evidence-based approach to policy issues which is in turn drawn from its members' contributions to discussions and research papers. The group serves as a network for senior practitioners of HE in FE, enabling them to discuss policy and practice informally between regular termly meetings. MEG carries out research on a regular basis and is regarded as a source of informed opinion by a range of Government, academic and employer organisations.

Businet was founded in 1987 by a group of European higher education institutions seeking to develop European programmes in business and to promote academic, employment based and cultural opportunities for their students and staff. The current General Manager and immediate past President of Businet are both based in New College Durham, a MEG member college

Businet holds two Conferences each year, one for academic staff and one for students. The themes of these conferences are, respectively, future issues in European higher education, and employability skills.

This response to the House of Lords Call for Evidence therefore brings together the expertise and experience of both membership organisations. We have read the European Commission's communication "Supporting Growth and Jobs: An agenda for the modernisation of Europe's Higher Education systems" and are familiar with other EU documents such as "New Skills New Jobs" and the recent Flash Eurobarometer survey on employer views of student employability. Views expressed during the recent annual Businet conference in Istanbul make it clear that members have a good understanding of the issues in their own countries and are aware of the role of the European Commission in relation to the policies being considered or pursued by their own governments.

We recognise that the Commission cannot intervene in the policy-making of individual Member states, but equally we welcome its role as an impartial observer/adviser. It has a unique over-view of the current arrangements for HE across the Member States and can offer a valuable perspective on what is working well and where more effort has to be made. Whilst it cannot and should not intervene in national decision-making, we consider that the points made in "An agenda for Modernisation" are valid ones, given the current financial, educational and skill landscape facing most member states. More specifically, the points made in the communication closely replicate those made in the recent White Paper on Higher Education issues by the Business, Innovation and Skills Department in June 2011⁴. MEG was broadly supportive of that document and is thus minded to endorse many of the points made by the EU Commission.

Note 2

The role of English Colleges in the delivery of HE

This can be summarised as:

- Working locally with communities and employers

⁴ Students at the Heart of the System BIS June 2011

- Providing progression routes for students from FE levels 1-3 to higher technician levels, for both full-time students and part-time students in employment
- Employing tutors and other professional staff who are often actively employed elsewhere, undertaking relevant professional/higher technical skills and activities which can be contextualised into the teaching/learning process
- Delivering the majority of apprenticeship programmes across the country. They are therefore best-positioned to develop and deliver progression routes to higher-skills development locally