

## **HEDG response to The Higher Education Academy: Future Work and Structure HEDG Planning Group September 2010**

In August 2010 Craig Mahoney, Chief Executive, the Higher Education Academy asked for views and comments on the draft paper he circulated about proposed changes to the vision, mission, focus and structure of the Higher Education Academy (HEA).

The **Heads of Educational Development Group** (<http://www.hedg.ac.uk>) represents senior institutional leaders with a direct responsibility for learning and teaching enhancement at over 110 Higher Education Institutions in the UK. HEDG members have in common their responsibility for translating institutional strategy and vision into academic practice. This may be through academic staff development, educational innovation projects, Postgraduate programmes for new or experienced staff, curriculum development and research projects, or through their contributions to committees, advice and guidance work, regional networks and through many other routes. At the same time, HEDG members tend to be those people on institutional boards and committees who bring the voice of academic practice to the consideration of strategy makers and policy setters. Heads of Educational Development have the additional responsibility of working with their own team of staff, as well as keeping abreast of national/international developments and initiatives to support their institutions and colleagues. Many of us, but not all, will also have a brief for HE research to help inform our institutions.

As a group we welcome the new enthusiasm and openness to comments that is articulated in this HEA statement. Each of our institutions will have taken the opportunity to respond to the request individually; this response provides a broadly based commentary from the HEDG community as a whole.

### **Vision and Mission**

#### **Are the revised Vision and Mission relevant to UK Higher Education?**

The revised vision and mission make a welcome reference to excellent teaching as a complementary focus to learning (which had become dominant in the previous vision). The HEA was originally formed to champion the professional development of teachers and HEDG members would support this renewed emphasis. While we appreciate the need to align the HEA's mission with those strategic bodies which have a role to play in auditing the quality of learning and teaching, there may be a missed opportunity in the vision to champion the importance of creativity and diversity especially through disciplines as an aspect of your work. In particular, we feel that it is critical to emphasize the importance of a partnership between the HEA and students through student representative bodies in the revised mission.

The reference to graduate outcomes and employment prospects is not entirely new – there have been high profile HEA initiatives in this area in the past; what is significant in the new vision is the overt emphasis on the impact graduates can have on society and the economy. There are other organizations which have led this agenda but it is politically timely for the HEA to address graduate impact alongside others with expertise in the area.

We have a comment to make about the 'capability of the HEA to generate funding from other sources' (p.4). This has been debated by HEDG in the past and there are ongoing concerns that the HEA might become a competitor for funding which might otherwise be distributed to Universities. We commend the model adopted by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council which focuses on generating strategic research and development funding from National and Regional government and then acting as a distributor of that funding to HEIs who, often in collaboration, run major research projects on behalf of the sector.

## Focus

### **Is the revised focus clear and appropriate? What aspects of the HEA's work should be further developed, or more highly promoted, in the HE sector?**

The focus of the HEA work as described seems to us to capture much of what happens at present. There do not seem to be many additional activities mentioned which is probably realistic; neither does there seem to be a reduction in activity. This seems surprising at a time of financial stringency. Perhaps the statement should be clearer about priorities and should identify for stakeholders where activity will be cut back in a period of austerity.

There are opportunities associated with financial stringencies for opening up discussions on how those areas which will no longer be supported might be jointly taken forward by other organizations including HEDG members. For example, one of the strengths of the HEA is undoubtedly its Subject Centres (although not all have equal credibility with their constituent subjects). The paper tends to underplay their significance and it would benefit from a clearer statement about the role and future of Subject Centres. Opportunities to share their future funding and development with Subject Associations might usefully be discussed.

Closer working with well established Education Development units could also be a way forward. It would be to our joint advantage to ensure that the Academy and our units exchange experiences of learning and teaching enhancement, development and recognition more directly than previously. For instance, because Heads of Educational Development are invariably involved in the setting and implementation of staff policy in relation to teaching, their advice and support could be highly beneficial in relation to the way in which the Academy discharges its responsibilities in relation to professional standards of teaching.

As Heads of Educational Development Groups we are in an excellent position to efficiently and effectively facilitate the dissemination of HE Academy (and other) findings, resources, and support opportunities into targeted communities our institutions; these routes are unlikely to be accessible to the Academy directly. In the early years of the Academy the concept of indirect dissemination through our units was not always seen as strategically desirable by the HEA. In the current financial climate and working with the new leadership at the HEA we continue to be interested in a discussion about how we could usefully work together. For example, Subject Centres can already ensure effective dissemination of their materials to academics in institutions with an eager interest in teaching in the relevant subject. With the support of educational or staff development teams, relevant information can also reach casual staff, the ever fluctuating community of teaching assistants, those colleagues with a potential but not yet active interest, and those new to the profession.

HEDG members have been actively engaged in discussions with the HEA about future revisions to the UK Professional Standards Framework. We are pleased to see this described as a future priority and would like to see the proposed minor revisions to align the accreditation system with the standards taken forward as soon as possible. The paper also refers to the future development of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme and this is broadly welcomed. However, there is some concern about the fellowship projects which are no longer part of the scheme in 2010-11. Some further consultation on this would be desirable and you may wish to consider the award scheme operated in Australia as part of the review.

We have already mentioned how important student engagement has become and are aware that this is already being taken forward by the HEA. We would like the Academy to consider whether there is scope for more pro-active involvement of students or their representatives. We welcome the focus on surveys and the research into the student learning experience, but would suggest that, like many HEIs, the Academy seeks direct student input into development activities. One approach might be to expand on the collaborative HE Academy and NUS project led by Ant Bagshaw regarding student engagement and evaluation.

As the consultation document suggests the reward and recognition of teaching is an area in which further work is needed, building on the two reports you published with the University of Leicester in 2009-10. There is a gap between the 'rhetoric and the reality' in many HEIs which the HEA could help to address by working at a National level with strategically influential bodies. HEDG members have a particular interest in highlighting the link between teaching and research in pursuing this agenda. Where discipline research underpins teaching and therefore engenders an interest in how students learn we feel that academic communities become more open to policies and procedures aimed at 'reducing the gap'.

Finally, we support the idea that the HEA should work more closely with the senior academic leaders in our HEIs to meet their needs for research informed data to support their teaching and learning strategies. The HEA could usefully articulate the kind of approaches it will adopt in the future to meet these institutional needs and to develop relationships beyond the current PVC network.

## **Organisation**

### **Which of the models described do you prefer and why?**

Given the imminent reduction in funding which the HEA can expect we conclude that there will inevitably be less sites in the future. Some sort of 'matrix' arrangement where geographically dispersed foci can provide local support while at the same time retaining the best of the characteristics of the Subject Centres may be the most effective way of operating. This is perhaps best represented by Model 2. In the current financial climate it must be accepted that many HEIs which have hosted and paid substantial contributions towards maintaining HEA Subject Centres may wish to renegotiate these financial arrangements. HEDG members could potentially be able to help broker these arrangements and this is something we might usefully discuss at our meeting with the Chief Executive in November.

The HEA might consider investing more heavily in improved telematic systems at its reduced number of sites. This would allow virtual attendance at events and would set a good example in reducing the carbon footprint of its employees and participants in its many activities.

### **General comments: working together**

We would like to stress how much we view the Academy's role to be similar to ours, divided mostly by our difference in context. Educational Development units could be described as being placed between the academic community and central senior management while the Academy could be perceived to be placed between academic institutions and national stakeholders. Where our members seek to steer and support educational development in individual institutions, the Academy steers and supports educational development across the sector. We share not dissimilar reward and recognition agendas, student learning experience development responsibilities, scholarship remits and policy influencing intentions.

Based on the understanding of the similarities and differences this entails, we would welcome a more open and constructive working relationship with the Academy than we have been able to establish previously. HEDG already works closely with the HEA through its membership of the 'reference group' and many HEDG members have contributed over the years to HEA committees, projects and initiatives. In the future, we hope to work even more closely and more effectively, in an environment that fosters mutual respect and through established or new routes, with the Academy. We believe that we share a common agenda, and that Heads of Educational Development are an important route for the Academy to link directly to institutional senior managers, teaching practitioners and students. We particularly welcome the opportunity to discuss shared agendas and challenges with Craig Mahoney during the HEDG Autumn meeting at which he has agreed to speak.