

## **A new 'University Challenge': consultation on proposals for new higher education centres.**

### **1994 Group response**

**17 October 2008**

The following forms the response of the 1994 Group to HEFCE consultation 'A new 'University Challenge': consultation on proposals for new higher education centres' (2008/27). For detailed responses to the individual questions raised in the consultation document, please see the submissions from individual member institutions.

Members of the 1994 Group are: University of Bath; Birkbeck, University of London; Durham University; University of East Anglia; University of Essex; University of Exeter; Goldsmiths, University of London; Lancaster University; University of Leicester; Loughborough University; Queen Mary, University of London; Royal Holloway, University of London; University of Reading; University of St Andrews; School of Oriental and African Studies; University of Surrey; University of Sussex; and University of York.

The Group recognises the key influence that Higher Education has in regards to the regeneration and economic development of specific regions and civic centres. All our institutions play a vital role in their local and regional communities, and there are prominent examples of 1994 Group institutions being involved in joint initiatives to develop new campuses and HE centres. These include the University Campus Suffolk (University of East Anglia & University of Exeter), the University of Essex at Southend, Lancaster University with Blackpool and the Fylde College, Lancaster University with Blackburn College, Combined Universities in Cornwall (including the University of Exeter), and the University Centre Hastings (including the University of Sussex).

We are therefore sympathetic to the goals set out in the Government's 'New "University Challenge"' policy framework to ensure those who can benefit get the opportunity to study at University, and to strengthen the skills base across the entire UK workforce. However, we believe that achievement of these goals through establishment of small-scale higher education (HE) centres in areas currently without a local HE influence will need to be thought through carefully.

There is a worry that the small HE centres envisaged are unlikely to be of sufficient scale to achieve an effective and high-quality solution to the issues they are designed to address. Above all other factors, a critical mass of staff and students is needed to provide the facilities and environment, such as access to sport and culture, which is necessary to provide a high quality student experience. Equally, whilst we are supportive of the emphasis on the development of skills, this approach might be somewhat narrow and does not fully reflect the wide ranging impact a successful and high quality HE centre will have in "stimulating entrepreneurship and drawing in private investment as a result of improvements to the area" (para 49).

The detailed concerns of the Group are as follows:

- There seems to be an almost exclusive focus on the need for HE centres to deliver skills for local employers. For the new centres to achieve maximum benefit, this

localised approach needs to be combined with a broader assessment of national skills needs and to their relevance to industries that are going to be of importance in the future to the UK as a leader in the global economy.

- For the centres to achieve the full benefits envisaged, an equal emphasis must be placed on other contributions in addition to skills development made by the presence of HE in local communities, such as the cultural and economic regeneration encouraged by the influx of international students and staff. In recognition of this and other key benefits, we hope that there will be substantial scope for HE centres to reflect the various aspects of partner universities' missions.
- As the underlying approach of the project seems to be to provide access to the lower levels of HE, in terms of entry grades and the mode of delivery, there is doubt whether the new centres will substantially increase or improve access to research-led teaching which is key to the delivery of the highest quality student experience. We would hope that an important factor for institutions to demonstrate within their bids would be their ability to provide a high standard and quality of HE.

Finally, we query the amount of funding which will be available to implement the initiative. If, as we understand, the fund in question is in large part taking over from the Strategic Development Fund, and in that sense is not 'new' money, we wonder how this will impact on other strategic projects in the sector in particular in relation to investment in the existing centres and collaborations.

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