



Eurybase

The Information Database on Education Systems in Europe

The Education System in England, Wales, Northern Ireland

2007/08



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6.2. Ongoing Debates and future developments

In 2002, the Welsh Assembly Government set out its strategy for the higher education sector in Wales, 'Reaching Higher: Higher Education and the Learning Country.' (WAG, 2002b). The strategy highlighted the disproportionately large number of small institutions in Wales, and called for substantial reconfiguration of the sector in terms of collaboration and mergers, in return for additional investment.

The process for applying to university has recently been the focus for debate. One aspect of the current applications process which has raised concern is the use of predicted examination results as part of the assessment of applicants – final exam results being unavailable at the time of application. Predicted grades are, however, often inaccurate. In 2003, the then, Secretary of State for Education and Skills asked Professor Steven Schwartz to lead an independent review on admissions to higher education. The final report of the review, 'Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice' (DfES, 2004e) examined the current admissions systems in universities and produced a set of common principles for the basis of fair admissions for universities to adopt. In May 2006, the then DfES launched a consultation on improving the higher education applications process and, in autumn 2006, a UK-wide 'Delivery Partnership' was set up to implement reforms to the higher education applications process following the Government's response to the Schwartz review. Higher education institutions are autonomous in admissions matters, and the Partnership is therefore a higher education sector-led partnership of different education stakeholders. There will be a two-stage process of reform:

- Changes to the current HE applications process by 2008-09
- A review in 2010/11 with a view to considering further the implementation of a Post Qualification Application (PQA) system from 2012.

For more information, see the Delivery Partnership's web pages:

<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/activities/admissions.asp>

In England, proposals for a national credit framework for recording student achievement in higher education were published in 2006 (Universities UK, 2006). See [6.11.](#)

In July 2007, the Government announced changes to the student support system in England that will substantially increase the number of students entitled to maintenance grants from 2008/09. Under the new arrangements, it is estimated that two thirds of students will receive some grant each year, compared to just over a half under the current system. In addition, the Government has set out plans to change the delivery arrangements for student financial support. Currently, in England, responsibility for assessing financial support entitlement is a matter for the student's local authority, but payments are made by the Student Loans Company (SLC). This system will be replaced from 2009/10 by a primarily online service with the SLC as the single, national delivery organisation.

Public funding for research in higher education in the UK is administered under a dual support system, in which the higher education funding bodies provide block grant funding to support the research infrastructure, and grants for specific projects and programmes are provided by the Research Councils (see [2.8.4.2.](#)), charities, the European Union and government departments. At present, funding for the research infrastructure is informed by the research assessment exercise (RAE) (see [2.8.4.2.](#)). The RAE has generated some controversy in the light of its high cost and the fact that it may tend to inhibit certain initiatives on the part of the academic community. After the next RAE in 2008, it will be succeeded by a new, more metrics-based framework. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is currently consulting on its proposals for a Research Excellence Framework (REF) to replace the RAE. Details of the proposals are available on HEFCE's REF web pages: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/assessment/reform/>.

The UK is currently working towards implementation of the Bologna Process reforms. Unlike many of the signatory countries, the UK already had a two-cycle system in place. The UK Higher Education Europe Unit, a sector-wide body, is responsible for raising awareness of European issues affecting UK higher education and for coordinating UK involvement in European initiatives and debates including the Bologna Process (see [11.5.3.](#)). In April 2007, in the immediate run up to the London Ministerial Summit on 17-18 May 2007, the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee published a report on its inquiry into the Bologna Process (GB. Parliament. House of Commons. Education and Skills

Committee, 2007).

The Education and Skills Select Committee (see 9.5.) was disbanded following the 2007 reorganisation of the government departments with responsibility for education (see 6.1.). A new Innovation, Universities and Skills Select Committee was established in session 2007/08 to examine the administration, expenditure and policy of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), including higher education. In January 2008 the Government agreed to change the name of the select committee to the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee to reflect the importance of cross-departmental scrutiny of science by the House of Commons.

In October 2007, the Steering Group on Measuring and Recording Student Achievement, chaired by Professor Robert Burgess, reported on degree classification in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The report (Universities UK, 2007) concluded that the honours degree classification system (which grades bachelors degrees awarded with honours) is no longer fit for purpose. It recommended the development of a Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), which will incorporate and build upon the Diploma Supplement.

Bibliography: Beyond the Honours Degree Classification: the Burgess Group Final Report (UUK, 2007)
Bibliography: Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice (DfES, 2004e)

Bibliography: Proposals for National Arrangements for the Use of Academic Credit in Higher Education in England (Universities UK, 2006)

Bibliography: Reaching Higher. Higher Education and the Learning Country (WAG, 2002b)

Bibliography: The Bologna Process: Fourth Report of Session 2006–07 (GB. Parliament. House of Commons, 2007c)

Institutions: Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS)

Institutions: Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)

Institutions: Student Loans Company Ltd.

Institutions: The Europe Unit

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Glossary

Local authority (*Local education authorities, LEA, local education authorities, LEAs, local education authority, local authority, local authorities, LAs, LA,*): The 'local authority' referred to in this database is the tier of local government with responsibility for education. Until recently, the function of the local authority in respect of education was universally described by the term 'local education authority' (LEA). Although the term 'LEA' is still in common usage, and still features in education legislation, it is now Government policy that it should no longer be used. This reflects the Government's key agenda to improve outcomes for children by promoting greater cooperation between agencies delivering children's services and the requirement introduced by the Children Act 2004 for local authorities in England to appoint a Director for Children's Services (DCS). It is anticipated that legislative references to the 'local education authority' will be converted to 'local authority' in due course. See [2.6.3.1.].

Secretary of State (*Secretaries of State, Secretary of State's,*): A government Minister (appointed by the Prime Minister) who is responsible for a government department. The Secretary of State is a member of the Cabinet and is assisted by the Ministers of State and Parliamentary Under-Secretaries. The Secretary of State for Education and Skills is accountable to Parliament for giving direction to and controlling the public education system in England. In Wales similar duties are carried out by the Assembly Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning and, in Northern Ireland by the Executive's Minister for Education and the Minister for Employment and Learning.