

Withdrawal of funding for equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs)

Consultation question 1: Have we responded appropriately to the Government's instruction that certain categories of student should be exempt in the light of the Student Fees (Qualifying Courses and Persons) (England) Regulations and Education (Student Support) Regulations?

Agree

Paragraphs 22 and 23 consider the treatment of prior qualifications achieved from a non-UK institution. We would remark that Admissions Tutors are advised (via UCAS, and others) that certain BA or BSc awards made by overseas universities should be treated as roughly equivalent to 'A-Level' standard when considering them as qualifications for admissions to UK first degree courses. The wording of paragraph 23 suggests that such candidates would fall foul of the ELQ policy, although they would previously have been funded.

Consultation question 2: Do you agree with our proposal to continue providing public funding for students studying for a foundation degree as an equivalent or lower qualification (ELQ)?

Agree

In principle, any continuing support is desirable, although there are very few Foundation Degrees offered in the UK whose content is substantially mathematical. It is not clear that a student taking advantage of the Foundation Degree exemption would not subsequently fall foul of the ELQ policy if progressing to 'First Degree' level.

Consultation question 3: Do you agree with our proposal to allow students studying for an ELQ to count towards the delivery of separately monitored co-funded additional student numbers (ASNs)?

Agree

We agree with the proposal, although co-funding is only applicable to near-market disciplines. Mathematical sciences is one area which delivers important skills for many areas of employment but is not sufficiently close to any one industry to attract much co-funding – this is evident from the difficulties in getting employers to fund mathematical sciences MScs.

We would like to highlight that the sentence 'some employers may find that a single, well-designed higher education module meets the training needs of their workforce' in paragraph 28 would also be particularly applicable to mathematics teachers wishing to increase their knowledge of the subject. See also our response to question 4.

Presumably those not studying for an ELQ would also count towards the delivery of ASNs.

Consultation question 4: Do you agree with the proposal to introduce an allocation for strategically important and vulnerable subjects (SIVS), calculated on the basis of ELQ numbers studying SIVS?

Disagree

Marking our response to this question as 'disagree' should not be interpreted as not supporting the concept of protection for SIVS.

The proposal provides welcome protection for the funding of current levels of students studying SIVS, but the allocation method is not dynamic and would prevent the UK from responding to changes in national needs. Whilst it is understandable that the proposal has

not been developed to incentivise growth, it is precisely the strategically important and vulnerable subjects that need to be grown beyond current levels – this has been acknowledged by HEFCE itself.

The mathematical sciences community is grateful for HEFCE's support for projects such as *more maths grads*, and for the government's recognition of the shortage of suitably qualified specialist mathematics teachers. It is hard to see any coherence in policy in trying to encourage more graduates and promote growth in this strategically important area while simultaneously removing the funding that would allow more people to improve their skills or change their career paths appropriately. We would strongly recommend, therefore, that support for mathematical sciences is in the form of a complete exemption from the ELQ policy, rather than via the proposed targeted allocation.

We also have serious reservations over the criterion suggested for deciding which students would be classified as studying a SIVS, as we believe that the ability to acquire even relatively small amounts of mathematical sciences training must not be hindered. ELQ students contemplating a career change into school mathematics teaching or those already teaching and wishing to enhance their teaching of mathematics will often derive the relevant knowledge and skills from just a few mathematical sciences modules, and this needs to be recognised by the policy. Likewise, many other graduates in employment become better equipped to contribute effectively within their jobs through study of a relatively small amount of mathematics, compensating for the shortcomings of school mathematical education over so many years. We would suggest that national needs would be best met by regarding a much greater number of part-time mathematics ELQ students as exempt (or at least eligible for some degree of support via a targeted allocation) than just those studying for a full (second) degree programme with substantial mathematical content. The sums involved would be very small as a proportion of the total mathematics spend, but would have a substantial impact on take-up of the opportunities for valuable retraining and upskilling. Compensating for the deficiencies of the past will take many years to remedy – this element of funding should be built in to budgets well beyond 2011.

'Mathematics' is listed as a SIVS in Annex C of the consultation document. We would expect HEFCE to interpret 'mathematics' in this context as including pure and applied mathematics, statistics and operational research (i.e. the 'mathematical sciences') when considering exemption or targeted allocation for SIVS.

Consultation question 5: Do you agree that we should provide a supplement to the part-time targeted allocation?

Agree

We agree with this proposal, but are concerned that the level and duration of the supplement will be inadequate to sustain support for ELQ students of mathematics.

The need for retraining and upskilling in mathematical sciences is well recognised – this is vital to the health of the economy and is a key part of government policy and the Leitch agenda on skills and 'lifelong learning'. The most realistic way in which this upskilling of the workforce can be achieved is by part-time study, and it is vital therefore that changes to funding do not discourage this. A review of the funding of part-time education had been promised during the implementation of the most recent White paper on Higher Education; we would urge that any implementation of the ELQ policy should only be done alongside such a review, and that the interests and benefits of part-time mathematics education should mitigate any reduction of funds to a much greater extent than currently proposed.

It should be noted that not all employers are willing to support employees in obtaining qualifications which might ultimately enable them to leave and find more rewarding work elsewhere – part-time study can be used as a way around this. The take-up of part-time

education is known to be price-sensitive, and the supplement needs to be large enough to ensure that universities are not forced to price their courses beyond these students' means.

HEFCE is spending large sums of money on Lifelong Learning Networks, which make little sense if disincentives to part-time study are not avoided.

Consultation question 6: Do you agree with our proposal to provide 'safety net' funding to maintain each institution's grant at a comparable 2007-08 level in cash terms?

Agree

Safety-netting is essential to allow HEIs to adjust to the new policies. We agree with this proposal, but are concerned that the level of this support does not allow for inflation and that this support would be given only over a relatively short period.

Consultation question 7: Do you consider that the ELQ policy outlined in this document is likely to have a differential impact on students, depending on their gender, race, whether they have a disability, or any other extraneous factors? If so, how might this be mitigated?

Don't know

We do not have any evidence to suggest whether there would be a differential impact.

We believe that, given the necessary aptitude, studying to achieve even a modest increase in their proficiency in the mathematical sciences is one of the more accessible ways for people to improve their economic or self-worth, independence or security. We deprecate any change in policy which will tend to deter those, who for reasons of gender, race or ethnicity, disability, or other extraneous factors (or any combination of these) would be more likely to take advantage of such studies from so doing.

Consultation question 8: Do you have any further comments?

It is not clear that a student with an integrated master's qualification (referred to as MMath below, but including MPhys, MSci etc) would still receive HEFCE funding for an MSc course, given that both qualifications would be at the 'second cycle' level in terms of the Bologna Process.

It is important to realise the different purposes that MMath and MSc courses can serve. Many mathematical MScs act as a 'conversion' for specialism in an area useful for employment – such specialism would not normally be available on an MMath course. The suggestion that completing an MMath course would disqualify a student from funding for a more specialist MSc course would be very unfortunate. MSc courses can also serve as training for those who are returning to the discipline after a period in employment and who would be using the course as a route to a PhD or another career.

With this in mind we welcome the sentiment in paragraph 13 '...the Government's new policy implies that progression into, or through, higher education should continue to attract public funding'. It is important to ensure that the MMath-MSc route is seen as 'progression through' higher education in this context; the policy might usefully distinguish between integrated master's qualifications (MMath etc) and free-standing master's qualifications (MSc) to clarify this point.