

Bill Rammell MP
Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education
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21 January 2008

Dear Mr Rammell

Thank you for your letter of 12 December 2007. I am glad to hear that you will be looking at ways forward for strategically important subjects within the new policy for equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs).

Given the lack of consultation prior to the announcement in September 2007, it is unfortunate that the government will not wait for the outcome of the IUS Committee inquiry before implementing the policy. However, in that context, it will be crucial for the support of strategically important subjects that the current proposals are amended.

In the House of Commons debate on the 8 January 2008, John Denham promised that '...for those wishing to study science, maths, engineering, modern languages, education, some medical disciplines and other strategically important subjects, ELQ funding is protected'; however, this is a misleading representation of HEFCE's proposal.

HEFCE is suggesting a targeted allocation for strategically important and vulnerable subjects (SIVSs) based on historic student numbers, which would, by definition, prevent any organic or institution-led growth in these areas. Further, higher education institutions would be allowed to use the funding as they choose: either to help ELQ learners, or to help first-time students. Given the government's current message on widening participation, a more strategic approach for institutions would be to focus on the latter group. The opportunity for ELQ learners to reskill in appropriate subjects therefore remains totally unprotected.

To safeguard the provision for ELQ learners to study SIVSs, an exemption is required for those subjects, in line with those proposed for foundation degrees and Initial Teacher Training. This would address the concerns raised in my previous letter, particularly with respect to the severe shortage of physics specialist teachers. Teachers qualified in other subjects must be supported in reskilling as physics specialists through undergraduate level study; and mature candidates, whether or not they are already qualified to degree level, should be supported in studying physics to prepare for a career change, particularly on courses such as the Open University (OU) Certificate in Physics, which has been commended by

the Institute as a suitable preparation for Initial Teacher Training as a physics specialist.

We remain concerned about the impact the new policy will have on the OU, which currently provides the only specialist part-time, distance-learning undergraduate level physics in the UK. There are also various concerns about how the policy will be implemented at the OU, particularly given their unique enrolment system, where students register on a modular basis, rather than for a full programme of study.

The government should make it clear to HEFCE that a full and permanent exemption from the proposed funding withdrawal is required for all SIVSs.

Yours sincerely

Professor Peter Main
Director, Education and Science