

19/11/07

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing to express the Institute's concern at the recent proposal to phase out funding for the majority of students in England and Northern Ireland who are studying for a qualification that is equivalent to, or lower than, a qualification that they already hold, the so-called "equivalent or lower qualifications" (ELQs).

A number of influential meetings and reports, including the Lisbon Agenda, the government's own Next Steps document, the Leitch Review and the recent review by Lord Sainsbury have identified the need for more physical scientists, engineers and mathematicians, as well as noting the shortage in other strategically important areas such as modern languages. Of particular importance is the shortage of properly qualified teachers and, more relevant to the ELQs, the shortage of people with an adequate knowledge base to train as a specialist teacher.

As you will be aware, HEFCE has funded a number of programmes to encourage more HE students in strategically important subjects. Our own *Stimulating Physics* project falls into this category as do others in mathematics, engineering, chemistry and modern languages. In addition, the Open University (OU) is heavily involved with initiatives that are attempting to recruit more scientists and linguists. It is hard to see any coherence of policy in trying to encourage more graduates in these areas while removing funding to allow people to change their career paths appropriately.

The government has recognised that the shortage of physics teachers is very severe and has set in place a number of initiatives to ameliorate the situation, some of which are in partnership with the Institute. With fewer than 3000 UK physics graduates a year, it will not be possible to remedy the 5000+ shortage of physics specialists via that route. An alternative, which has been commended by both the Institute and the Training and Development Agency, is that specific OU physics modules offer sufficient preparation for a candidate to enter initial teacher training (ITT) as a physics specialist. However, since anyone applying for ITT must be a graduate, this route into teaching will fall foul of the ELQ policy. In other words, the proposal will be removing funding from precisely the people who we are trying to attract as physics specialist teachers.

The Institute would urge DIUS to reconsider its ELQ policy. While there may be an argument for charging leisure learners the full cost for their education, strategically important subjects must surely be seen as an exception in the current UK context of skill shortages.

I am, of course, happy to discuss this issue further if you thought it appropriate.

Yours sincerely,

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