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Graduating to Success

A HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGY
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



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FOREWORD FROM THE MINISTER

Welcome to the first Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland.

The higher education sector is central to the future development of the economy. Our institutions play a critical role in terms of addressing the skill needs of the workforce of tomorrow and developing our knowledge economy through engaging in research and development.

The Programme for Government establishes that the economy is the number one priority for the Executive. The Economic Strategy sets out in much greater detail the economic vision and the policies and programmes that will make this vision a reality.

The higher education sector has made a positive contribution to the cultural and economic life in Northern Ireland. It is diverse in its provision with a reputation for excellence in teaching, learning and research. However, there are a number of distinct and difficult challenges ahead that the sector needs to face.

This Strategy now complements the *Success Through Skills: Transforming Futures Strategy*, which was launched last year, and the *Further Education Means Business Strategy* in demonstrating my Department's integrated approach to providing skills, supporting people and contributing to the creation of jobs.

Our efforts come at a time of increased global competition and more challenging public finances. Our higher education institutions (HEIs) have a proud history of achievement and excellent international reputations.

A Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland provides us with a strong strategic focus for the future, and a framework for further developing a dynamic, high quality, world-renowned higher education sector.

The vision for higher education in Northern Ireland to 2020 is ambitious and challenging, but I believe that it is achievable. I urge the higher education sector to work in partnership with government, business, students and other stakeholders to meet the expectations of this Strategy.

I thank the Steering Group, chaired by Sir Graeme Davies, and all those stakeholders who have worked with the Department throughout the process of developing this Strategy. Their knowledge and experience has been of great value in completing this important piece of work.

Our people are our greatest asset; we must ensure that they are able to achieve their full potential.



Dr Stephen Farry MLA
Minister for Employment and Learning

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction and vision

Higher education has a central role to play in the Executive's plans for economic growth, investment and social inclusion. This important sector requires a strategic vision for the future in order to build upon its achievements to date and face the challenges of the future.

The vision for higher education is one of a sector which is vibrant and of international calibre; which pursues excellence in teaching and research; which plays a pivotal role in the development of a modern, sustainable, knowledge-based economy; which supports a confident, shared society; and which recognises and values diversity.

This document sets out in detail the direction for higher education policy in Northern Ireland for the period to 2020. The Department for Employment and Learning will work in co-operation with higher education institutions, industry, government departments and agencies and other stakeholders to implement the proposals in this Strategy.

The Strategy's four guiding principles are responsiveness, quality, accessibility and flexibility.

More responsive to the needs of the economy

Higher education must be responsive to the needs of the economy, with an emphasis on meeting the skills needs of industry; maximising the potential of research and development (R&D); and promoting knowledge transfer.

A supply of high quality graduates is vital for economic success. In recognition of this, the Strategy promotes graduate employability and skills. It also encourages the upskilling and reskilling of those already in the workforce. The Department will support the higher education sector in achieving an increase in: (i) the number of people attaining Level 4-8 qualifications; and (ii) the number of people attaining graduate and postgraduate qualifications in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects.

The Department will encourage the higher education sector to rebalance the current academic profile, with a greater emphasis on STEM and economically relevant subjects; to offer more part-time study opportunities for those in the workplace; and to establish an initiative which will offer higher education places to unemployed people in priority skills areas at Levels 6-8.

Innovation is a key element of the Economic Strategy, and the Higher Education Strategy will support innovation through the pursuit of research and development excellence, overseas institutional research partnerships, knowledge transfer and university-business collaboration.

Mainstream research funding at the very least will be maintained during the current Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) period to 2015. The Department will work with the sector to seek additional outside investment to promote world-leading R&D in Northern Ireland. Knowledge transfer will continue to be supported by Departmental funding and supplemented by "Connected", a programme which enables higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) to identify and meet the knowledge transfer needs of businesses.

The Department encourages closer collaboration between the higher education and business sectors to exploit the commercial potential of new ideas.

A higher quality learning experience

Higher education must deliver a learning experience of the highest quality, supported by a fit-for-purpose quality assurance framework; provide opportunities for students to improve their employability skills; and maintain a supportive learning environment.

The Strategy has a strong emphasis on the quality of the student experience. Excellence in teaching will be a priority. To this end, the Department will continue to support the Higher Education Academy (HEA), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and valuable programmes such as the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme. A single quality assurance framework for all institutions will be developed in co-operation with the QAA.

The Strategy proposes that all students should have the opportunity to develop a distinctive portfolio of skills and attributes that will enhance their employability and set them apart from their peers. The Department, the higher education providers, industry and individual students will each make a contribution to this aim in providing personal development and work experience opportunities alongside a relevant and up-to-date curriculum.

Students should also be supported throughout their academic career. A Learner Agreement will be developed in order to clearly articulate the roles and responsibilities of institutions and students, including new grievance and complaints procedures.

Looking further afield, the sector must raise its international profile and set challenging targets for attracting international students to Northern Ireland. Higher education providers will be encouraged to broaden and deepen their overseas partnerships for mutual benefit. Learners and staff will be encouraged to take up international mobility opportunities, including work placements overseas. By 2020, international student recruitment should be catching up with the rest of the UK.

A more accessible higher education sector

Higher education must be accessible to all who have the ability to benefit. The Department remains committed to accessibility in higher education and to the provision of academic and pastoral support to all students. A Widening Participation Strategy will set out the Department's future policy on this issue with particular emphasis on students with disabilities or from a disadvantaged background.

The Department will also improve rural access to higher education, in partnership with the higher education and further education sectors. There will be a pilot of university bases at the further education colleges (FECs) with the aim of enabling higher education students to access learning resources in locations throughout Northern Ireland.

The Strategy proposes a systematic approach to community engagement on a local, national and international basis, taking account of best practice in the UK and elsewhere. It is intended that such activity will become embedded within higher education institutions. Higher education students and staff will also be encouraged and supported to develop entrepreneurial solutions to social challenges.

The intellectual potential of higher education should be maximised by closer co-operation between the sector and government on policy issues. This may be done on an ongoing basis or in the form of short-term projects. The Department will support such engagement between the sector and other government departments.

Higher education providers will be encouraged to facilitate student flows between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; to minimise the obstacles to cross-border undergraduate mobility; and to collaborate on an all-island basis on teaching and learning, where possible.

A more flexible lifelong learning environment

Higher education must be flexible in delivery and in funding. Lifelong learning must be at the heart of the system and new routes into, and through, higher education must be developed. This will be supported by a revised funding model and an appropriate governance structure.

The Strategy aims to create a lifelong learning system; to increase part-time and postgraduate capacity within the sector; to give the further education sector an increased role in the delivery of intermediate higher education provision; to continually review the curriculum to ensure that it remains relevant and up-to-date; and to provide greater support for economically relevant subjects.

Flexible provision will, of course, require flexible funding. The Strategy proposes to enhance the funding model in order to support a lifelong learning ethos. The sector must become more efficient in terms of value for money. Significant efficiency improvements have been agreed for the current CSR period, and the Department will expect the sector to assess the scope for further improvements on an ongoing basis, including consideration of the potential offered by shared services. In the longer term, the flexibility of the new funding model should enable student numbers and support costs to be controlled. There will be a review of the Maximum Student Number (MASN) policy.

A two-stage study of teacher education infrastructure has begun. It is anticipated that this study will deliver proposals for a more integrated system of delivery and funding for teacher education in Northern Ireland.

The new delivery and funding arrangements will be supported by an effective governance and accountability framework, which will balance public accountability with institutional autonomy.

Implementation

Sixteen initial projects have been developed in order to implement the proposals contained within the Strategy. Each project will be assigned a project manager. The implementation of the Strategy will be overseen by an Implementation Committee, comprising key senior stakeholders. The sixteen projects are detailed in the appendix to this document.

SECTION ONE

HIGHER EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND: HISTORY, ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

1.1 Introduction

Higher education transforms, enriches and inspires. In recent years, Northern Ireland's higher education sector has delivered substantial benefits to the local economy. Opportunities to participate in and benefit from higher education have expanded significantly; the quality of teaching and the student experience have improved; and the universities have established a strong research base which is internationally recognised. Our local higher education providers have also played a key role in engaging with the community, benefiting not just those directly involved in higher education but society as a whole.

However, the world is changing rapidly and, just as other sectors of our society and economy have to respond to these changes, so does the higher education sector. The 'traditional' 18-21-year-old student cohort, the funding for whom accounts for a substantial proportion of the higher education sector's income, is contracting. Northern Ireland's economy is demanding a higher level of relevant skills, and economic success is increasingly dependent on knowledge transfer and innovation. Learners, both full-time and part-time, have greater expectations of teaching quality and the 'student experience'. The population is becoming more mobile, the higher education sector more competitive and the funding environment distinctly more difficult.

Against this background, this Strategy has set out a framework for the strategic development of the sector in the period to 2020. It recognises the achievements of the higher education sector, and acknowledges the contribution that it has made to social and economic development in recent years. It outlines proposals on how the sector can build on its successes and meet the challenges of the second decade of the 21st Century.

1.1.2 The higher education sector in Northern Ireland

Higher education in Northern Ireland has existed for over 150 years. Throughout that time the sector has grown and developed, and today it plays a pivotal role in the creation of a sustainable knowledge-based economy and an inclusive society.

1.1.3 History

In the mid-19th Century, Queen Victoria founded Queen's College in Belfast. In 1908, the College became a self-governing institution and was renamed the Queen's University of Belfast. Parallel developments in Londonderry saw the opening of Magee College in 1865. Northern Ireland's first teacher training college, St. Mary's College, was established in 1900. Its second, Stranmillis College, opened its doors in 1922.

More recent developments saw the establishment of the University of Ulster, The Open University and the Ulster Polytechnic in the late 1960s and 1970s. In the 1990s, full-time higher education courses (HE in FE) were established in the majority of further education colleges (FECs) and part-time courses in all sixteen FECs. These were merged in 2007 into six regional colleges which now deliver the vast majority of higher national certificates, diplomas and foundation degrees.

The expansion of higher education in the latter half of the 20th Century was driven by a variety of factors, including higher education policy, improvements in educational attainment and a growth in demand for graduate-level skills. These factors continue to be relevant today.

1.1.4 The higher education sector today

Higher education in Northern Ireland is delivered principally through two universities, Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and the University of Ulster (Ulster), and two University Colleges, St. Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College. In academic year (AY) 2010/11, 52,000 students were enrolled at these four institutions. The Open University in Ireland also makes a significant contribution to the higher education sector, with 4,865 students from Northern Ireland enrolled in AY 2010/11. In addition, the six further education colleges deliver a broad range of higher education courses, with 11,005 students enrolled in AY 2010/11.

1.1.5 Role and activities of the higher education sector

Our higher education providers do not only provide a high quality learning experience; they also play a key role in meeting the skills needs of the local economy, by providing a supply of highly qualified graduates and by reskilling and upskilling the existing workforce.

The universities are also a major source of research and development activity. As such, they are critical to the development of a knowledge-based economy, capable of attracting foreign investment and high-value jobs. The universities have also developed a number of highly successful 'spin-out' companies.

Activities in this area include the development of strategic external partnerships with industry and higher education institutions in Great Britain (GB), the Republic of Ireland (ROI), Europe and further afield. In addition, a recent report completed by the University of Strathclyde, on behalf of Universities UK, showed that the HEIs directly employ large numbers of people in occupations spanning the whole spectrum of skills and qualifications; that institutional expenditure generates substantial additional employment and output outside the sector; and that the international revenue earned by the institutions, together with the expenditure of the international students whom they attract, means that they constitute an important source of service sector export revenue for Northern Ireland.

1.1.6 The funding of higher education in Northern Ireland

The higher education sector has two distinct funding models. One model is used for funding the universities and university colleges, while the other is used to fund the provision of higher education in further education, delivered by the FECs. In both instances, individual students contribute significantly to the costs of their education and training.

In AY 2011/12, the Department provided around £200 million in recurrent funding between Queen's University, the University of Ulster, Stranmillis University College and St. Mary's University College. Higher education in further education is funded by the Department through the FE funding mechanism, with agreed delivery targets to the value of £26.97 million being provided in AY 2011/12.

1.1.7 Student support

The Department provides a range of financial support measures for full-time undergraduates in higher education. These include tuition fee loans; maintenance loans; maintenance grants; parents' learning allowance; disabled students allowance; and childcare grants. Part-time undergraduates who are studying at least 50% of an equivalent full-time course can also apply for student support in the form of fee grants and course grants. In 2010/11, £301 million of student support was paid to undergraduates by the Department, an increase of £141 million in total since 2005/06.

1.2 Achievements and challenges

1.2.1 Achievements of the higher education sector

The higher education sector has made a positive contribution to cultural and economic life in Northern Ireland, and this presents a strong platform on which to build for the future. The sector can point to a number of significant achievements over the last decade:

Economic impact

The sector has had a positive impact on the local economy, generating significant additional investment from external sources. Internationally, our local universities have an excellent profile in regard to research. In the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), of the research submitted by Queen's University, the University of Ulster and The Open University, 50% was judged to be either world-leading or internationally excellent.

Student satisfaction

Northern Ireland's universities and university colleges have high levels of student satisfaction, with 83% declaring themselves satisfied with their course in the 2011 National Student Survey (NSS), which is consistent with the UK average. The Open University scored 93% in the 2011 NSS.

Participation rates

Northern Ireland's higher education participation rates are the highest in the UK. In AY 2009/10, the higher education age participation index was 50.7%, around double the figure from AY 1989/90. Representation from students from lower socio-economic groups is higher than the UK average, with 39.4% of young full-time first degree entrants in 2010/11 coming from age-adjusted Socio-Economic Classification Groups 4-7. This is well above the UK average of 30.6%.

1.2.2. Future challenges

As we look forward to 2020, the sector faces a number of challenges:

Demographic trends

It is estimated that the cohort of 18-21-year-olds, on which university funding for teaching and learning has been traditionally based, will reduce in size by 9.4% between 2012 and 2020. If not replaced by other activities, this could in turn lead to a significant reduction in income for the sector.

Problems with retention

Approximately 8.3% of full-time first degree entrants to Northern Ireland HEIs in 2009/10 were no longer in higher education following their year of entry. This compares favourably with the rest of the UK, where the average 'drop-out' rate is 8.6%. However, there is still room for improvement.

Student expectations

In line with social trends generally, and in view of their contribution to the cost of higher education, expectations in terms of the quality of the student experience are likely to increase.

Relevance of academic offering

Higher education institutions must ensure that their current offering continues to satisfy not only the aspirations of potential and existing students, but the requirements of the market in which they operate. This will require a change in the current profile of courses offered as the sector responds, for example, to the increased demand for STEM qualifications.

Expectations of the Executive and Assembly

The Executive and Assembly will expect, on behalf of taxpayers, to achieve value for money from the considerable public investment in higher education and to ensure that the sector continues to meet local economic and social needs.

Finance

The public funding base, on which the sector is dependent, is likely to be significantly constrained for the foreseeable future. This is also likely to apply to external funding sources. The sector will face challenges in maintaining its competitive position nationally and globally. Improvements in efficiency, and expenditure savings, will continue to be sought – for example, by improving co-operation and reducing duplication across the sector.

There are many changes and challenges on the horizon for higher education. However, although there are risks, there are also opportunities which can be exploited to provide a more responsive, flexible and accessible system of higher education for the social and economic benefit of Northern Ireland.

The following sections set out the Department's vision for higher education and a strategic framework within which this vision can be realised.

SECTION TWO

A VISION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: 2012-2020

2.1 Introduction

The Executive is committed to building a prosperous, fair and inclusive society, supported by a vibrant and dynamic economy and a rich and sustainable environmental heritage.

The higher education sector makes a key contribution to the achievement of the twin goals of social justice and economic prosperity. It does so by providing a supply of highly qualified graduates across a range of disciplines with the skills and attributes sought by employers; fostering a spirit of enterprise and innovation to create growth in the private sector; generating wealth within the economy; and enriching the social and cultural landscape of Northern Ireland.

In making these contributions, the sector works at different levels:

- at the individual level: by helping people to maximise their potential through a commitment to excellent teaching; and by providing learners with the skills and attributes needed to succeed in an increasingly competitive labour market;
- at the regional economy level: by meeting the skills needs of employers; by promoting excellence in R&D, knowledge transfer and innovation; and by acting as a catalyst to attract investment and sustain growth;
- at the community level: through outreach activities; forging links with local communities; and building confidence and aspiration; and
- at the wider societal level: by contributing to the development of a more shared and inclusive society; by promoting diversity and cultural development; and by a commitment to lifelong learning.

The vision for the future development of higher education in Northern Ireland must address all of these interests. They are not, however, mutually exclusive. Underpinning all four levels is the concept that education is life-enhancing and contributes to the enrichment of the economy and society.

2.2 A vision for higher education

Taking account of these factors, and the challenges the sector faces, the vision for higher education over the next decade is:

A sector which is vibrant and of international calibre; which pursues excellence in teaching and research; which plays a pivotal role in the development of a modern, sustainable, knowledge-based economy; which supports a confident, shared society; and which recognises and values diversity.

In particular, a sector that will be recognised for:

- its ability to equip individuals with the distinctive range and quality of skills and attributes needed for an increasingly competitive international workplace;
- its excellence in research;
- its willingness to work in partnership with industry to promote knowledge transfer and drive innovation;

- the professionalism of its teaching and its commitment to quality;
- its support for students and its fairness in maximising opportunities for all who are able to benefit;
- its accessibility to learners and its engagement with local communities, contributing to their regeneration, diversity and sustainability;
- its flexibility in responding to the needs of learners and other stakeholders, including business;
- its willingness to engage globally; and
- the rigour of its governance.

SECTION THREE

MORE RESPONSIVE TO THE NEEDS OF THE ECONOMY

3.1 Introduction

The higher education sector contributes to the development of the local economy in a variety of ways, including:

- ensuring an appropriate supply of good quality graduates at Levels 4-8 with the skills to meet the needs of the economy;
- helping to generate investment in the local economy through research and development activity and international collaboration; and
- promoting knowledge transfer and innovation.

3.2 Meeting the skills needs of the economy

A review of the current academic offering within the higher education sector reveals that a higher proportion of students undertake first degrees (Level 6) in Northern Ireland compared with the rest of the UK. These account for 65% of total enrolments in this region, compared with 59% in the rest of the UK. Conversely, 14% of total undergraduate enrolments are at Levels 4-5 in Northern Ireland, compared with 18% in the rest of the UK.

A key issue for the sector in the future will be to rebalance the profile of higher education provision so that the qualifications offered more closely reflect the needs of the economy, and so that graduates develop the skills needed to exploit future employment opportunities. There will also be a need to direct enrolment activity towards those already in the workplace and to reduce dependence on the full-time 18-21-year-old cohort. Any emerging changes from this process should respect the continuity of arts and humanities provision.

Currently, Northern Ireland performs relatively well in terms of the proportion of students enrolled in STEM subjects compared with the UK average. In 2010/11, 46% of enrolments here were in STEM-related disciplines, in comparison with the UK average of 42%. Interestingly, medicine, dentistry and subjects allied to medicine account for 41% of overall STEM enrolments here, compared with 35% in the UK as a whole. However, the proportion of students in other science, technology, engineering and mathematical disciplines (as a proportion of overall enrolments) here was similar to the UK average, at around 27%.

Even though we have comparable numbers of STEM graduates with the rest of the UK, we will need more in the future. The Oxford Economics report *Forecasting Future Skills Needs in Northern Ireland* identified the need for more graduates undertaking STEM and economically relevant subjects. The Department's *Success Through STEM Strategy*, echoed these findings and made a number of cross-Departmental recommendations to support an increase in the numbers studying STEM subjects.

This is further reflected by the Department's Skills Strategy, *Success through Skills: Transforming Futures*, which has identified an increasing need for people with higher level skills; ranging from higher national certificates and vocational qualifications (Level 4) to doctoral degrees (Level 8).

With almost 80% of the 2020 workforce having already completed their compulsory school education, it will also be necessary to upskill and reskill the current workforce to a higher level in order to meet future skills needs. The two key strategic targets for higher education are:

- increasing the proportion of those people in employment with Level 4-8 skills and above to at least 44% by 2020, from a baseline of 33.2% in 2008; and
- increasing the proportion of those qualifying from local higher education providers with graduate and postgraduate level courses in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects (with an emphasis on physical and biological sciences, mathematical and computer science, engineering and technology) to at least 22% by 2020, from a baseline of 18% in 2008.

The Department has already committed, in the Programme for Government, to the target of increasing the uptake of economically relevant STEM subjects at a higher education level by funding an additional 700 places by 2014/15.

The Department will consider options to further support and incentivise choice in these areas, including supplementing the scholarship and bursary funding currently provided by the universities.

As highlighted in the Department's 2006 further education strategy, *Further Education Means Business*, the FECs are well placed to deliver vocational and technical higher education courses aimed at upskilling and reskilling the workforce. They are ideally positioned to provide an avenue into higher education, delivering intermediate-level qualifications. As set out in the Skills Strategy, the Department will increase the number of such qualifications, for example Foundation Degrees, from a baseline of 1,132 in 2012 to 2,500 by 2015.

The Department will also consider how the alignment of higher education qualifications can be structured in order to ensure flexibility in provision and progression. The Department will work with the HEIs, FECs and other stakeholders to implement an effective process for the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) in order to facilitate entry to intermediate-level courses for those who have with non-traditional or no qualifications; in particular, mature students already in the workforce.

The Department will also consider the possibility of establishing an initiative aimed at people who are economically inactive but able to benefit from higher education, giving them the opportunity to undertake an economically relevant higher education course in priority skills areas at Levels 6-8. The aim of this initiative will be to encourage people to upskill and reskill to a high level, and to build the skills capacity of the potential workforce for the long term.

Postgraduate provision, both taught and research-based, in areas of economic importance, has the potential to contribute to the development of a knowledge-based economy. Although the number of postgraduate enrolments increased by 9% between 2000/01 and 2010/11, the numbers in Wales, Scotland and England increased by 54%, 36% and 30% respectively over the same period. The Department will, therefore, increase the number of funded PhD places over the period to 2020, and will encourage the universities to seek additional private sector funding for PhD provision. The Department will consider funding additional places in areas of economic relevance, and matching funding for places which are financially supported by business and philanthropy. The Department aims to double the number of postgraduate awards by 2020.

In summary, the key changes envisaged include:

- adjustments to the current academic profile to provide a greater emphasis on STEM and economically relevant subjects, including more postgraduate opportunities;
- more part-time courses and opportunities at Levels 4-5 to upskill and reskill; and
- more PhD places.

3.3 Generating investment in the economy

Higher education is not only a place of learning but a place of discovery. The Department is committed to supporting a vibrant, world-class research and development environment, and provides in the region of £50 million per annum in baseline funding for R&D. The recently published *Northern Ireland Economic Strategy* recognises the importance of this funding in supporting innovation and research in the local economy.

Innovation, R&D and Creativity is a key theme of the Economic Strategy, and one to which the higher education sector will be expected to make a significant contribution. Universities will continue to be the dominant source of such activity in the local economy. If the ambitions of the Economic Strategy are to be realised, government will continue to have an important role in encouraging the pursuit of excellence in this area and in supporting the translation of R&D into commercial opportunities and scientific breakthroughs.

For the economy to grow in terms of high-value jobs and investment, priority must be given to innovation, R&D and creativity. There is, however, a risk that, given the differing funding structures for higher education across the UK, and expenditure trends elsewhere, Northern Ireland may fall behind in this regard. Over the planning period, and subject to resources, the Department will increase research and development infrastructure funding for our universities in order to maintain their competitive position with the rest of the UK.

The Department also acknowledges that the universities operate in a highly competitive international arena where research excellence is at a premium. From 2014, the quality of the research base in Northern Ireland will be assessed through the new UK-wide Research Excellence Framework (REF) which will, for the first time, measure the impact of the research undertaken by the universities at a regional, national and international level. In the current framework, both the two local universities and The Open University are in the top one-third of the UK performance tables. The Department will encourage the universities to improve their performance in the REF in 2014 and beyond.

The Department recognises the value of research in the local economy. However, there is also an important need to ensure the international competitiveness of our universities in this area in order to bid successfully for external funding and attract Foreign Direct Investment. The Department will, therefore, place a greater emphasis on world-leading and internationally excellent research in its funding model, whilst also ensuring that it takes into account the current and future needs of the economy.

In addition to receiving mainstream research funding from the Department, there will continue to be a requirement for the universities to draw down funding for specific research projects from external funders such as the UK Research Councils, the European Union (EU) and charities. The Economic Strategy acknowledges the importance of business and academia applying for national and EU funding and programmes, stipulating that 100 applications for transnational R&D funding should be secured during the current budget period.

External funding streams will continue to focus on the need for increased collaboration and co-operation, enabling researchers to have access to a wider range of facilities and equipment

through the pooling of resources and expertise. Northern Ireland's universities are well placed to build on existing research partnerships within the UK and Ireland and further afield, further enhancing their international reputations and acting as a catalyst for economic development. This will also help them to respond to calls from Research Councils and other funding bodies, concentrating their funding on research centres of proven excellence which have the critical mass and multi-disciplinary capacity to compete at an international level.

The Department also encourages collaborative approaches that exploit Northern Ireland's geographical position within Europe and internationally, in particular cross-border research partnerships with the Republic of Ireland and new and existing links with the United States. The Department will maintain funding for the US-Ireland Research & Development Partnership, which aims to increase the level of R&D collaboration among researchers and industry in the United States, Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The Department will also bid for further funding for the Strengthening the All-Ireland Research Base programme, in order to develop and strengthen links with the Republic of Ireland through collaborative research of social and economic importance.

The desire for enhanced collaboration and co-operation on an international and cross-border basis is also a catalyst for the proposed establishment of a European Research Area Framework by 2014. Among other things, this will facilitate enhanced collaboration under the European Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP7) and its successor, Horizon 2020. The Department, together with other government departments and agencies, will support the higher education sector's contribution towards achieving the Barroso Taskforce target of a 20% increase in the drawdown of European competitive funding by 2015. As a result, a significant increase in R&D funding over the period 2014-2020 should be possible.

With an economy dominated by small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the Department will encourage HEIs to increase the involvement of SMEs in Framework applications, which will, over time, help to widen the R&D base in the local economy.

The Department also supports the institutions in continuing to develop and increase their overseas research collaboration partnerships, which will be of direct economic benefit in terms of foreign trade, investment and promotion.

3.4 Knowledge transfer and innovation

It is through the transfer of knowledge to the local economy that the higher education sector's contribution to wider society is maximised. The commercialisation of the research base in Northern Ireland has been identified as a critical factor in stimulating economic growth and job creation. During 2009/10, approximately £50 million of investment was generated from companies, public bodies and third sector organisations through key knowledge transfer services such as consultancy and contract research by the universities. In the same year, Northern Ireland's universities had the highest number of 'spin-out' companies per institution in the UK (defined as having some HEI ownership and having survived at least 3 years). With twenty per institution, this is almost four times more than the UK average for established/sustainable spin-outs.

There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that considerable benefit is generated by knowledge transfer between universities and business, with a company being four times more likely to innovate if it is in a collaborative relationship with a university.

The Department, therefore, remains committed to the core funding of current knowledge transfer activities, supplemented by “Connected”, a programme which enables universities and FECs to identify and meet the knowledge transfer needs of businesses; for example, by developing prototypes for new products or resolving problems through innovation. In recognition of the importance of such activity, the Department will increase funding for the next rounds of Connected and the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) in support of knowledge transfer.

By July 2013, through the current round of HEIF, the universities will have undertaken 1,140 business engagements, secured £6.94 million in consultancy and secured £863,000 in income from Intellectual Property. The Department will develop and implement a new formula funding model for HEIF from 2013 and support this by implementing a new Connected programme from 2014.

These initiatives, in particular HEIF, also play a key role in underpinning the entrepreneurial ethos of our universities, with a focus on embracing change and delivering economic benefit through promoting entrepreneurship and innovation.

At a regional level, it is also critical that the universities’ relationships with the Northern Ireland Science Park are strengthened in order to optimise the potential success of commercial opportunities arising from research activity. This is a key aspect of the Science Park’s role as a commercial and research-driven centre for knowledge-based industries.

Communication between, and within, the sector and industry must be improved in order to aid curriculum development and facilitate work placements, sandwich courses and scholarships. The sector must ensure that staff are accessible to industry and receptive to industry knowledge. Professional development, in co-operation with the business sector, will not only benefit staff but also ensure that students are being taught an up-to-date and industry-relevant curriculum.

3.5 Overview

The Department is committed to supporting the development of a more responsive higher education sector which is better placed to contribute to the local economy by:

- upskilling and reskilling the current and future workforce to Levels 4-8;
- offering a profile of courses which is better aligned to the needs of the local economy, with a greater emphasis on STEM and economically relevant subjects;
- enhancing the R&D base and encouraging the universities to improve their performance in the post-2014 Research Excellence Framework; and
- increasing knowledge transfer activity and developing better links with SMEs.

These actions are further developed within the projects at the end of this document.

SECTION FOUR

A HIGHER QUALITY LEARNING EXPERIENCE

4.1 Introduction

Ensuring high quality teaching and learning, enhancing the employability prospects of students and maintaining a supportive learning environment are important factors which contribute to the overall quality of higher education.

For the student, teaching quality is a key measure of the success of his or her higher education experience. The Department will continue to support high quality teaching and learning in a variety of ways:

- by maintaining its support for the work of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) which, in turn, supports the higher education sector in providing the best possible learning experience;
- by working with the HEA in developing Northern Ireland-specific initiatives which meet the needs of the sector;
- by encouraging the higher education sector to support staff in gaining recognition as an associate, fellow, senior fellow or principal fellow of the Academy; and
- by rewarding teaching excellence through the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS).

The Department will also continue to support the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in reviewing the quality of higher education provision in Northern Ireland's universities and university colleges. From 2016, a single quality assurance framework for higher education in Northern Ireland will be created, incorporating HE in FE. This will ensure consistency in quality assurance across the sector.

4.2 A more supportive environment

Learners should be supported throughout their higher education experience, providing them with the opportunity to grow, not only in knowledge, but as people. They must also be aware of the opportunities and benefits that higher education has to offer.

Approximately 8.3% of full-time first degree students at the universities, and 18.2% of those undertaking HE in FE courses, were no longer in higher education following their year of entry in 2010/11. In the same year, among part-time first degree students, 19.7% at the universities and 7.7% in HE in FE were no longer in higher education following entry two years previously. Retention rates vary significantly from institution to institution and this disparity must be addressed.

Retention is a complex and multifaceted issue, influenced by various personal, social and academic factors. However, the figures above prompt concerns about the support provided to those entering higher education, the information available to prospective students before entry, and whether each student is best suited to their course or mode of learning.

The Department, in co-operation with the sector, will work to ensure that retention rates are improved and the Department expects higher education institutions to improve their performance in this regard year-on-year. In order to achieve this, they should improve their pre-entry and induction processes to help prepare students for entering higher education, and enhance the pastoral support offered to existing students.

Specific actions aimed at improving retention rates among students from Socio-Economic Classification Groups 5-7 will be outlined in the Department's forthcoming Strategy on widening participation.

Higher education institutions will be expected to develop a Learner Agreement, which will set out the respective roles and responsibilities of the learner and the institution. This will clarify the expectations of each party and help to ensure that all learners have a positive and enriching higher education experience.

It is important that there are clear and transparent measures in place to support learners throughout their studies, including clear avenues for grievances. All learners undertaking a higher education course should have access to a standardised, clear and independent grievance procedure, regardless of where they study. The Department will, therefore, ensure that the Learner Agreement is supported by a standardised grievance procedure used by all higher education providers. The Department will also consider whether there is merit in extending the remit of the Ombudsman to include higher education grievances, to complement the sector's own procedures.

4.3 Enhancing employability

Higher education institutions must provide students with opportunities to develop a portfolio of skills, attributes and experiences that will set them apart in the world of employment. The portfolio should include personal development, creative thinking allied to enterprise and innovation, international mobility opportunities and embedding employability skills within the curriculum. This will ultimately help to make Northern Ireland graduates distinctive and put them at an advantage in the global marketplace.

The Department expects the institutions to ensure that all learners have the opportunity to undertake a period of work placement whilst undertaking a higher education course. This includes work experience, voluntary and community work and work outside term time, all of which may be either directly or indirectly linked to their course. The business sector will be encouraged to support such opportunities and this will be further developed by the Department's *Success through Skills: Transforming Futures Employer Engagement Plan*, under which the Department, together with employers, aims to increase the number of placements and scholarships available.

In supporting employability, the Department welcomes the recommendations put forward in *Languages for the Future: The Northern Ireland Languages Strategy*, commissioned by the Department of Education, for all higher education providers to offer extended training in language competence. The Department encourages the institutions to address their language strategies through their corporate planning processes and to expand provision for all learners, thus improving their employment prospects.

The Department expects institutions to accredit and recognise the skills and experiences, academic and otherwise, that learners develop throughout their higher education careers through an achievement record. The Department will, therefore, in co-operation with the sector, support the introduction of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), which is intended to supplement the traditional degree classification. The Department will also extend the HEAR to HE in FE, in order to provide a standardised record of achievement across the sector.

4.4 Enhancing international opportunities

The last few decades have witnessed the accelerating globalisation of education and the increasing international mobility of students and academics alike. This mobility reflects the general expansion and growth in importance of the global knowledge economy. International experiences broaden horizons, stimulate creativity and build confidence. Academics and business leaders acknowledge the diverse range of benefits to be gained from international experience.

A strong higher education sector with an international reputation and globally competitive standing can attract high quality students, researchers and staff from around the world. Trade links can be enhanced and foreign direct investment decisions positively influenced. Additional income can be earned from tuition fees and from research collaborations with universities and organisations overseas.

The benefits of international placements have also been recognised by the European Commission. In December 2007, its Lisbon Report called for such experience to become a standard part of higher education. The European Council concluded in November 2008 that 'every young person should have the opportunity to take part in some form of mobility whether this is during their studies or training, in the form of work placement, or in the context of voluntary activities.' The Leuven Communiqué of 29 April 2009 stated that, in 2020, at least 20% of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) should have a study or training period abroad.

The Department will, therefore, ensure that every learner has the opportunity to undertake an international mobility programme, whether through government-funded programmes or those provided by individual institutions. The Department wishes to make learners aware of the benefits of international mobility, especially for future employment.

There are, of course, other less tangible but equally important benefits of internationalisation in higher education. International study and work placements provide opportunities for intercultural learning which, in turn, enables people to live and work harmoniously. Incoming international students and staff enrich the diversity of Northern Ireland's campuses. Participation by Northern Ireland students and staff in programmes of teaching, learning and research abroad enhances their experience and career prospects. Structured institutional partnerships with overseas institutions can open doors to commercial opportunities.

However, when compared with the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland is lagging significantly behind in terms of international and European activity. Overseas enrolments, which include European and international learners, account for 4.4% of total enrolments here (excluding students from the Republic of Ireland). This is significantly lower than England (16.3%), Scotland (18.6%) and Wales (19.2%).

Northern Ireland's political past, and its consequent impact on inward student mobility and investment, has led to a lower share of the international student market than would otherwise have been the case. Although significant steps have been taken by local institutions in building their international activity and developing international partnerships, there remains considerable opportunity for expansion. There is scope for more students and researchers to be attracted here and for 'home' students to become more internationally mobile. By 2020, the institutions should have reviewed and revised their international strategies. They should also have established, and met, challenging targets to improve their international performance.

The Department recognises that UK Border Agency (UKBA) regulations may create barriers to international inward mobility under the Tier Four system. However, the Department continues to encourage the sector to continue to work with the UKBA to ensure that they maintain their 'highly trusted sponsor' status in order to facilitate inward student mobility.

Transnational education is also attracting increasing attention and it is forecast that global demand for this type of learning will increase even faster than demand among international students to study overseas. The Department welcomes the institutions' actions in embracing the opportunity to generate additional income from the international higher education market.

Over the planning period, the higher education institutions should seek to expand their international activity by:

- attracting more students from abroad;
- encouraging more 'home' students to avail of international mobility opportunities; and
- further developing their portfolio of overseas institutional partnerships.

4.5 Overview

The Department is committed to maintaining a high quality learning experience in higher education by:

- ensuring high quality teaching for all students undertaking a higher education course;
- maintaining a supportive learning environment through the recruitment, retention and progression for all students;
- enhancing the employability prospects of students; and
- encouraging the sector to explore new opportunities associated with international activity.

These actions are further developed within the projects at the end of this document.

SECTION FIVE

A MORE ACCESSIBLE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

5.1 Introduction

Higher education should be accessible to all of those with the ability to benefit from it. The Department is committed to ensuring that those who are most able but least likely to participate are given every encouragement to consider, and benefit from, higher education. This involves providing prospective students with the right information to help them make informed choices. It also includes supporting people who might otherwise face barriers to their participation, and enhancing the sector's engagement with the community and with government.

5.2 Provision of high quality information for prospective students

For all prospective students, the selection of institutions and specific courses is critical. It can affect career choices and potential employability. It can even have an impact on their wellbeing. In order to make informed choices, students need access to relevant, up-to-date, high quality, readily comparable information.

A report commissioned on behalf of the UK higher education sector in 2010 considered what type of information was appropriate, how it should be delivered, who should provide it, and how it could support potential students in choosing where to study. The report recommended that the delivery of such information should change, and that its profile should be raised, particularly at schools and colleges. In order to implement these recommendations, the Department is currently working with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the other UK devolved administrations to develop a format for publishing Key Information Sets (KIS) which will provide comparable, standardised information about undergraduate courses in higher education institutions.

The Department will also make relevant higher education information accessible via a single web-based platform, and develop and implement a centralised awareness-raising campaign about the benefits of higher education. For prospective students from other countries, the platform will act as a gateway to higher education in Northern Ireland, with everything that they need to know available in one place. This will be supported by a branding campaign, which will examine how Northern Ireland can promote its higher education sector to target international markets.

5.3 Widening participation in higher education

At approximately 50%, Northern Ireland's higher education sector now has the highest participation rate in the United Kingdom. In 2009/10, almost 40% of young full-time first degree entrants were from Socio-Economic Classification Groups 4-7, compared with 31% in both England and Wales and 27% in Scotland, reflecting the strong commitment to widening participation within our higher education sector. The Department remains committed to ensuring that any able individual can gain access to the higher education course that is right for them, irrespective of their personal circumstances or social background.

There remain, however, pockets of under-representation within certain socio-economic groups. The Department and the sector will continue to work in partnership to ensure that prospective students within these groups are given support in terms of aspiration, attainment and access to higher education.

These challenges will be further explored within the Department's Strategy on widening participation, which will take account of the cross-departmental nature of this issue.

5.4 Community engagement

Universities, university colleges and further education colleges are communities in themselves. They have their own identities, a sense of belonging and common values. But, as recipients of significant public funding, they have an obligation beyond their teaching and research commitments to contribute to the social, cultural and economic life of the wider community.

Northern Ireland's higher education institutions can be proud of their record in reaching out to the community through sport, music, art, literature, drama and educational activities which are open to the public. They also have valuable links with schools, statutory agencies, community groups and the voluntary sector.

The Department encourages the institutions to adopt a systematic approach to social and community engagement, based on best practice in institutions throughout the UK¹³. This includes developing partnerships with voluntary organisations and the wider community; engagement with schools to raise awareness and aspiration in regard to higher education; student and staff volunteering; student-run projects for community members, especially those facing cultural or social problems; work experience and placements; and fundraising activities. The institutions may also engage with local communities on social challenges and contribute to the development of local solutions. Ultimately, the Department expects community engagement to become embedded within higher education institutions.

The Higher Education Community Engagement Model (HECEM), which was developed in 2003 by a number of Russell Group universities, and has been in widespread use since 2006, is a useful tool for developing, reviewing and enhancing higher education community engagement strategies. It also enables the sharing of good practice and benchmarking exercises. The Department will encourage the sector to use the HECEM to support their work in this regard.

The Department believes that the sector, as well as the communities with which it works, will benefit from such activities. It can lead to new opportunities for learning and research, aid communication of the benefits of higher education, help to maintain good community relations, contribute to the local economy, increase social cohesion and active citizenship, promote diversity and provide staff and students with opportunities for personal development.

5.5 Academia informing government policy

The higher education sector is a valuable resource for society. Its emphasis on critical thinking and leadership means that it has the potential to play a vital role in developing imaginative solutions to help shape future policy. The intellectual capacity of higher education staff, students and alumni should be recognised as an important tool in influencing thinking in a wide range of government policy areas.

¹³ <http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/community/communityengagement/>

The Department will facilitate engagement between the sector and government departments on a wide range of policy issues. Higher education providers will be encouraged to participate in ‘think tank’ activities in partnership with government, encouraging dialogue on policy and practice within a safe environment.

5.6 Rural access to higher education

Higher education should be made more accessible to those in rural areas by offering wider geographical access to higher education. This may be enabled by the establishment of learning and study facilities at the FECs. The Department believes that the geographical reach of the FECs makes them ideally located to serve higher education students throughout Northern Ireland.

The Department will work with the higher and further education sectors to develop a pilot scheme for the creation of university bases at the FECs. This will provide the opportunity for higher education students to undertake part of their course locally, with access to university materials and resources.

5.7 Cross-border co-operation and student mobility

Cross-border co-operation and undergraduate mobility between institutions in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are important from an economic, social and cultural perspective. Such activity has the potential to drive the growth of the all-island economy, broaden the pool of graduates both north and south and support the ongoing peace process. The Department is committed to supporting cross-border co-operation in teaching and learning, with the aim of increasing understanding, sharing good practice and enabling students to move freely between the two jurisdictions.

The issue of North-South undergraduate mobility was the subject of a report in 2011 by the IBEC-CBI Joint Business Council¹⁴, which identified several factors acting as an inhibitor in this regard, such as a lack of information about the other jurisdiction’s education system, tuition fees, confusion regarding entry criteria and differences in application processes. The Department is committed to working on an all-Ireland basis to remove barriers, real or perceived, to student mobility.

All three Northern Ireland universities are members of Universities Ireland, with The Open University providing courses and qualifications in both jurisdictions. The Department will continue to fund Universities Ireland to promote co-operation and understanding in higher education north and south, as well as a number of specific all-Ireland projects. The Department will also work in partnership with the Department of Education and Skills in the Republic of Ireland to support the work of the Joint Business Council in promoting undergraduate mobility across the island of Ireland.

The Department will support HEIs in collaborating on teaching and learning on a cross-border basis, in particular where it is geographically advantageous to do so, and where there are benefits for the institutions involved and for students.

¹⁴ <http://www.jointbusinesscouncil.com/people/documents/UndergraduatestudyJBCFINALVERSION4070711.pdf>

5.8 Overview

The Department is committed to supporting accessibility within higher education by:

- ensuring that information on the higher education sector is accessible and of the highest quality for all prospective students;
- promoting a systematic approach to community engagement by the higher education sector;
- facilitating engagement between the sector and government on a wide range of policy issues;
- improving access to higher education in rural areas; and
- supporting cross-border co-operation and student mobility.

These actions are further developed within the projects at the end of this document.

SECTION SIX

A MORE FLEXIBLE LIFELONG LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

6.1 Introduction

There are a number of factors which will drive change in the delivery of higher education over the next few years.

Firstly, in the past, higher education has mainly been the preserve of ‘traditional’ learners, i.e. those who enter higher education through A-level and further education routes as full-time undergraduates. However, it is projected that the population of 18-21-year-olds will decrease by 9.4% between 2012 and 2020. Secondly, although tuition fees have been capped in Northern Ireland for ‘home’ students, higher education will continue to be regarded as an expensive option. Thirdly, many of those who will seek access to higher education will also need flexibility in delivery; for example, those who wish to upskill and reskill while in the workplace. And finally, technological advances and lifestyle choices will drive change in the way that learning is provided in the future.

The sector will need to respond to the changing higher education market and the differing needs of students by adopting more flexible solutions for delivery.

6.2 Supporting lifelong learning

Learners should have the opportunity to learn in an environment that suits them, supported by a wide range of teaching methods and modes of study. Access to, and routes through, higher education should be easily identifiable for prospective and existing learners. The Department, in co-operation with stakeholders, will develop a formal, recognised credit framework for higher education in Northern Ireland. By 2017, the Department aims to have in place a single credit and qualifications framework to support flexible learning, in which progression routes are easily identifiable and understandable.

The new credit framework and flexible learning system will support modular learning, whereby courses are made up of individually credited modules which, when combined, can lead to a higher education qualification. This will provide the opportunity for various learner ‘types’ to undertake a higher education course at a time, a place and a pace that suits them. This will increase the opportunities available for part-time study, which will benefit not only first-time and returning students, but also those who are already in the workplace, as they will be able to study without having to take a break from employment.

The Department will encourage the sector to introduce a modular learning approach to enable learners to transfer between institutions and, where applicable, ‘bank’ completed modules.

6.3 More part-time provision

The introduction of a modular approach to higher education will mean a significant extension of part-time provision. This is an area where Northern Ireland lags behind the rest of the UK. The number of part-time enrolments here has fallen in recent years. For example, in 2010/11, 30% of students were studying on a part-time basis in Northern Ireland, compared with 33% in 1998/99. Over the planning period, the Department expects the higher education sector to make courses increasingly available on a part-time basis. As a first step, the Department has allocated additional funding to the FECs to support the delivery of part-time intermediate qualifications.

6.4 A more flexible learning environment

Over the next decade, the delivery of higher education is likely to become more diversified, where elements of contact tuition are combined with technology-based training.

Technological advances in the next decade will continue to influence the way in which higher education is delivered. Such advances will provide many students, particularly mature students or those engaged in employment, with new learning and training opportunities. Distance learning and online learning are likely to expand further in the future as students seek flexibility.

The Open University, which has been at the forefront of distance learning since 1969, offers the majority of its courses with an online component. Online learning has also been embraced by the University of Ulster through Campus One, and Queen's University's via Queen's Online. It is vital that the sector expand its online provision over the planning period.

It is expected that these measures will provide each student with an opportunity to undertake a higher education qualification that suits his or her needs, whether undertaking a part-time qualification, work-based learning or a 'traditional' full-time undergraduate degree.

6.5 An enhanced funding system

The Department has traditionally applied the English funding model in determining financial allocations for Northern Ireland's universities. However, this model will be subject to substantial change as a result of the new fees regime in England, whereby tuition fees will make up a larger share of higher education funding. As tuition fees for Northern Ireland-domiciled undergraduates are to remain at their current level (subject only to inflationary increases), the Department will continue to be a major funder of higher education at the universities and university colleges here. As the new English higher education funding system will become increasingly unsuitable for Northern Ireland, its introduction provides a useful opportunity to review the existing funding model for universities and university colleges here.

In AY 2013/14, funding for The Open University in Northern Ireland will be devolved to the Department. This is the final stage in the devolution agenda for The Open University across the UK, following successful transitions to the respective funding authorities in Scotland and Wales.

These, and other changes outlined in this Strategy, illustrate the need for a new funding system. The funding model must be able to support flexible learning, in particular an increase in part-time provision. It should encourage efficiency, organisational improvement and strategic change, while at the same time providing stability and sustainability for the sector.

The enhanced funding system must respect the autonomy of the institutions, but it should also reflect the need for accountability for the use of public funds in an appropriate way, and promote good governance.

In regard to higher education in further education, the Department will examine the current funding structure and consider whether it would be beneficial for HE in FE to follow the same funding model as the universities and university colleges.

6.6 Responding to changes in demand

Currently, the capacity of the higher education system is managed through the Maximum Student Number (MaSN), a control mechanism under which each institution is subject to an imposed maximum number of full-time undergraduate students. The purpose of MaSN is to

contain expenditure, particularly that associated with student support costs. However, although the system provides for some tolerances around the ceiling, and does not apply to part-time students, it is restrictive and offers little flexibility to institutions in responding to changes in demand.

MaSN only applies to Northern Ireland universities and colleges. It does not apply to higher education institutions in the rest of the UK. Access to those, subject to students meeting academic requirements, is not controlled.

Forecasting the impact of changes to the fee regimes elsewhere in the UK is difficult. The Department will continue to closely monitor the position and will seek additional resources to provide more places locally should demand continue to increase. Such increases may have to be balanced by reductions in places in the rest of the UK if additional student support costs are to be avoided.

In the longer term, the revised funding model should ensure sufficient flexibility to enable student numbers and support costs to be controlled. This will result in a review of MaSN by 2016.

The Department acknowledges that demand for places here will increase as a result of changes in tuition fees in the rest of the UK. An additional £3 million per annum is being made available by 2014/15 to finance 700 additional student places in STEM disciplines.

The Department is currently undertaking a two-stage study of teacher education infrastructure to examine the composition and affordability of the current system. The first phase will be an objective analysis of the financial stability and sustainability of the two university colleges. The second phase will set out options for a more shared and integrated system for delivery of, and funding for, teacher education.

6.7 A more efficient system

The sector has committed to a significant improvement in efficiency over the next three years as part of the 2010 CSR settlement. This will amount to annual cash savings of approximately £30 million delivered by 2014/15, compared to the 2010/11 baseline.

The Department will expect the sector to continue to identify opportunities for further savings over the planning period. This will involve securing improvements in the costing of operational activities, more systematic benchmarking and the monitoring and application of best practice elsewhere, including the provision of services on a shared basis where it is sensible to do so.

6.8 Governance and accountability

An enhanced higher education learning and funding model will require an enhanced governance and accountability structure between the Department and the universities and university colleges.

The universities are legally autonomous corporate institutions with charitable status, and are accountable through their governing bodies. It is important that the sector demonstrates adherence to the highest standards of corporate governance and, as primary funder, the Department must be assured that the corporate governance arrangements are fit for purpose. Significant taxpayer resources are devoted to higher education each year and the Department is fully conscious of the need to secure assurance of the effective use of these. However, it will be necessary to ensure that the process for doing so is not unduly onerous.

6.8.1 Governance

The governance arrangements within higher education are strong, and HEFCE has judged them to be 'satisfactory' at Queen's University and the University of Ulster. However, in a review of the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) guide by Professor Frank Clark CBE, it was highlighted that governance arrangements could be strengthened. The Department will work with the universities to enhance these arrangements where appropriate. The universities must also review their arrangements for engaging with stakeholders such as government, employer organisations and local councils, and satisfy themselves that these are effective and fit for purpose in the modern era.

Higher education in further education is subject to the same governance arrangements as the further education sector. As the sole funder of the further education colleges, including HE in FE, the Department will consider how the governance and accountability structures may be revised to support any extension of the higher education funding model to HE in FE.

6.8.2 Accountability

The Department will consider amending the requirements placed on the universities in relation to the sale, transfer and lease of buildings and facilities financed entirely or partly with Departmental funds. In addition, the Department will liaise with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) to consider adopting a 'lighter touch' capital investment framework, which will still provide the necessary assurances regarding the deployment of public finances.

6.8.3 Assurance

The Department is content that the assurance framework between the Department and the universities and university colleges is robust and that all of the assurances required are reasonable and appropriate, and do not impose an undue accountability burden.

6.8.4 Audit and security

It is important that the degree of scrutiny applied to the universities and university colleges is proportionate in reflecting risk. However, the institutions believe that there is significant duplication of audit coverage due to the requirements of other funders, on top of those of the Department and internal and external auditors. The Department will seek to ensure that such areas of duplication are minimised where possible, in an attempt to lessen the administrative burden.

6.9 Overview

In summary, the development of a more flexible higher education sector will lead to:

- the introduction of a flexible modular learning system which supports an ethos of lifelong learning, underpinned by a new credit framework;
- an increase in part-time study;
- a review of MaSN;
- the development of a new system for funding the sector, including examination of the funding model for part-time students; and
- a more efficient and effective system with an enhanced governance and accountability framework, which reflects the balance between institutional autonomy and the need for public accountability.

These actions are further developed within the projects at the end of this document.

SECTION SEVEN: ACHIEVING THE VISION

A PROGRAMME FOR DELIVERY

7.1 Implementation

In order to ensure effective implementation of the Strategy, the Department has outlined sixteen projects in the appendix to this document. These projects outline how the Department will make the vision for higher education a reality.

7.2 Governance and management arrangement overview

Implementation will be overseen by an Implementation Committee which will be chaired by a senior official within the Department.

A Project Steering Group will be established, headed by the Senior Responsible Officer for the implementation of the Strategy. The Project Steering Group will be responsible for ensuring the delivery of the projects and will be accountable to the Implementation Committee.

Each project will be assigned a project manager, who will be accountable to the Project Steering Group.

7.3 Project overview

The projects outline the actions required to achieve the goals set out in this Strategy. Some projects will deliver short-term and medium-term outcomes; others will have long-term outcomes. Each project provides a detailed description of the actions required for its delivery, the expected outcomes and the impact that it will have.

7.4 Financing delivery of the strategy

The Strategy will be financed, subject to resource availability, through a balanced programme of redeployment, efficiency improvements and additional funding. The implementation of those aspects of the Strategy which are dependent on new additional funding will be subject to affordability considerations and the outcome of future spending reviews by government.

APPENDIX

A HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

DELIVERING THE VISION

This section sets out how the Department and the higher education sector will give effect to the vision for higher education. For the first phase of implementation, sixteen projects have been identified by the Department.

Although the majority of the Strategy's aims will be realised in the long term, the projects provide the first steps that need to be taken in achieving the Department's vision for the future of the higher education sector.

MORE RESPONSIVE TO THE NEEDS OF THE ECONOMY

The Department is committed to supporting the higher education sector in becoming more responsive to the needs of the economy. By 2020, at least 44% of the current workforce will have gained qualifications at Levels 4-8. Course provision will be better aligned to the needs of the local economy, with a greater emphasis on STEM and economically relevant subjects. Northern Ireland's R&D base will be enhanced. Knowledge transfer activity will be increased and better links with industry will be developed.

Project One

Increase the number of students undertaking higher education courses in economically relevant subjects.

Action:

The Executive's Programme for Government emphasises the importance of increasing the number of students undertaking higher level courses in economically relevant subjects and the Department is committed to achieving this objective.

As stated in *Success through Skills: Transforming Futures* and the STEM Strategy, *Success through STEM*, the Department aims to increase the numbers of graduates and postgraduates in economically relevant subjects (with an emphasis on physical and biological sciences, mathematical and computer science, engineering and technology) to at least 22% in 2020, from a baseline of 18% in 2008.

Outcome:

- By 2012/13, there will be an additional 180 places for students undertaking an economically relevant STEM course.
- By March 2013, the universities will bring forward proposals for rebalancing the profile of their courses, so that the qualifications offered more closely reflect the needs of the economy.
- By 2013/14, there will be an additional 360 places for students undertaking an economically relevant STEM course.
- By 2014, the Department will have considered options for establishing an initiative aimed at economically inactive people.
- By 2014, the Department will have considered options to support students who undertake a priority economically relevant subject at a university in Northern Ireland.
- By 2014/15, there will be an additional 700 places for students undertaking an economically relevant STEM course.
- By 2020, the number of students in higher education institutions in Northern Ireland with Level 6-8 qualifications in economically relevant subjects (with an emphasis on physical and biological sciences, mathematical and computer science, engineering and technology) will have increased to at least 22% from a baseline of 18% in 2008.

Impact:

More students will be undertaking a higher education course in economically relevant subjects, supported by a number of Departmental initiatives, which will ultimately benefit the economy.

Project Two

Support internationally excellent and world-leading research and development.

Action:

The Department will maintain mainstream research funding at an appropriate level to ensure that the universities continue to develop and sustain an internationally excellent and world-leading research base during the current CSR period.

The Department, in conjunction with the other UK funding bodies, will also introduce the Research Excellence Framework (REF), a system for assessing the quality of research in UK universities. Assessment will be based on three measures: research outputs, research impact and the research environment.

In the current framework, both the two local universities and The Open University are in the top one-third of the UK performance tables. By 2020, the Department will encourage the universities to improve their performance under REF. A number of initiatives will be taken forward to support this goal:

- From AY 2012/13, the Department will promote world-leading and internationally excellent research. It will also ensure that current and future research funding models take into account the needs of the local economy.
- The Department will fund 50 additional PhD places in each of the academic years 2013/14, 2014/15 and 2015/16, with the aim of doubling the total number of postgraduate awards to 1,000 by 2020, subject to resources. The universities will be invited to develop plans to match this growth via external funding.
- The universities will develop and implement plans to ensure a significant increase in the drawdown of funding of EU research funding over the period to 2020. These plans should provide for greater involvement by SMEs in Framework applications. The Department will assist the universities in this area by investing in the infrastructure needed to sustain this improvement.
- Subject to resources, the Department will consider supporting planned developments which will strengthen the universities' contribution to research and innovation in the local community.

Outcome:

- By 2014, the first REF assessment will have taken place.
- By 2014, the majority of the Department's mainstream research funding will reward world-leading and internationally excellent research, whilst also taking account of the needs of the economy.
- By 2020, it is expected that Northern Ireland's universities will improve their performance under REF.
- By 2020, the Department, in partnership with the universities, will have doubled the number of postgraduate awards to 1,000.
- By 2020, the universities will have significantly increased their drawdown of European funds compared with the period 2007-13.

Impact:

The increased focus on internationally excellent and world-leading research and development at the universities will strengthen their research capacity and also benefit the Northern Ireland economy.

Project Three

Build upon and increase sustainable knowledge transfer activities.

Action:

The commercialisation of the research base has been identified as a critical factor in the stimulation of economic growth and job creation. The Department remains committed to the core funding of current knowledge transfer activities and will:

- maintain funding for the universities' knowledge transfer activities through the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) until 2013 and through the joint HE/FE Connected programme until 2014;
- increase funding for the next rounds of HEIF and Connected to further underpin business and community engagement by both the higher and further education sectors;
- develop and implement a new formula funding model for HEIF from 2013, to be administered as part of the universities' annual core funding allocation. In this way, the Department will further embed business and community engagement through knowledge transfer as a key element within the universities' strategic priorities; and
- complement the investment in HEIF by developing and implementing a new Connected programme from 2014. This will further enhance the holistic approach of the higher and further education sectors to meeting the knowledge transfer needs of business and the wider community, fostered under Connected to date and endorsed in the Government's response to the MATRIX report.

Outcome:

- By July 2013, through the current round of HEIF, the universities will have undertaken 1,140 business engagements, secured £6.94 million in consultancy and secured £863,000 in income from Intellectual Property.
- By August 2013, the Department will have developed and implemented a new formula funding model for HEIF to be administered as part of the universities' annual core funding allocation.
- By March 2014, through the Connected programme, the universities and FECs will have established 14 major sectoral projects with local companies involving at least one regional college and one university, and undertaken 155 projects on behalf of local companies.
- By April 2014, the Department will have developed and implemented a third round of the Connected programme in order to build upon and sustain the progress to date in terms of collaborative working and knowledge transfer between the FE and HE sectors, and knowledge transfer between these sectors and businesses.

Impact

The Department will help to facilitate knowledge transfer activities which will benefit both the economy and the higher education sector.

A HIGHER QUALITY LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The Department is committed to maintaining a high quality learning experience in higher education. By 2020, a high quality teaching and learning experience will be ensured. The employability prospects of graduates will be enhanced. The higher education sector in Northern Ireland will be known for its supportive learning environment; improved recruitment, retention and progression; and increased international student and staff mobility.

Project Four

Develop a single quality assurance framework for all higher education providers in Northern Ireland.

Action:

The Department currently co-funds the work of the QAA in reviewing the quality of higher education provision in Northern Ireland. The universities are quality assured through the Institutional Review method, and higher education in further education by the QAA's Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) method.

In order to ensure continuity in quality assurance in Northern Ireland's higher education sector, a single review system will be introduced across all higher education institutions.

Outcome:

- By 2016, the Department will have introduced a single quality review system throughout all institutions providing higher education courses.

Impact:

The higher education sector will benefit from a 'fit for purpose' quality assurance framework, and its standard of teaching will be recognised as being of the highest quality.

Project Five

Create a more supportive learning environment.

Action

Students must be provided with the highest quality experience from admission to graduation. They must be supported throughout their academic career to achieve their full potential.

The Department expects the sector to develop effective pre-entry and induction processes to help prepare students for entering higher education.

The higher education institutions will be expected to develop a Learner Agreement, which will set out the respective roles and responsibilities of the student and the institution. This agreement will clarify the expectations of each party and help to ensure that all students have a positive and enriching higher education experience.

Northern Ireland's higher education institutions must provide appropriate and effective academic and pastoral support for all students. They should also continue to place a high strategic priority on the retention and progression of all students, in particular non-traditional students, and communicate this effectively to academic and support staff. The Department expects higher education providers to improve their retention performance.

The Department will continue to consider whether there is merit in extending the remit of the Ombudsman to include higher education grievances.

Outcome:

- By 2013, Learner Agreements will be in place.
- By 2014, HEIs will have improved their pre-entry, induction and pastoral support for all prospective and existing students. All students will be supported throughout the higher education learning cycle, from pre-entry to graduation.
- By 2015, there will be a clear and standardised internal grievance procedure throughout the sector. The remit of the Ombudsman may be extended to include higher education learner grievances.
- Between now and 2020, retention rates will improve year-on-year.

Impact:

Students will be supported by a variety of measures throughout higher education and retention rates will be improved.

Project Six

Enhance the employability prospects of graduates.

Action:

Graduate employability is crucial in today's competitive workplace. All students must be provided with opportunities to develop a portfolio of skills, attributes and experiences that will give them an advantage in this regard. This should include personal development, creative thinking allied to enterprise and innovation, international mobility opportunities and embedding employability within the curriculum. All students should have the opportunity to undertake a period of work placement whilst undertaking a higher education course.

The Department expects the higher education sector to ensure that every student has the opportunity to avail of a work placement. The Department encourages the HEIs to facilitate opportunities for international student and staff mobility, whether through government or EU-funded programmes and initiatives, or those provided by individual institutions. The Department and the HEIs will communicate the benefits of international mobility, especially for future employment, and aim to increase applications for these initiatives and programmes.

Extracurricular skills, activities and experiences will be recorded by HEIs as part of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). The Department, in co-operation with the institutions, will support the extension of the HEAR across the higher education sector in Northern Ireland.

Outcome:

- By 2014, the universities and university colleges will have adopted the HEAR.
- By 2015, all providers of higher education in further education will have adopted the HEAR.
- By 2015/16, there will be a 10% increase in the number of higher education students undertaking a period of work or study in another country, with a year-on-year improvement thereafter.
- By 2018, all learners will have a HEAR.
- By 2020, all higher education students will have the opportunity to avail of a work placement.

Impact:

Northern Ireland graduates will have a distinctive portfolio of skills and knowledge that will set them apart in the international graduate labour market.

Project Seven

Increase Northern Ireland's international higher education activity.

Action

The higher education sector has developed a wide network of mutually beneficial links with institutions and other organisations overseas. However, opportunities exist for the sector to increase its share of the international student market. The Department recognises the negative impact that Northern Ireland's political past has had on inward international student flows and investment opportunities. However, as we move forward, it is important that the sector addresses its performance in attracting international students and starts to gain a larger proportion of the UK's market share.

Over the planning period, the sector should seek to increase its international activity by attracting more students from abroad, encouraging more 'home' students and staff to avail of international mobility opportunities and further developing its portfolio of overseas institutional partnerships.

In achieving these aims, the Department encourages the institutions to:

- review their international strategies and set appropriate objectives and targets to ensure that they can start to improve Northern Ireland's share of the international student market;
- ensure that their campuses are welcoming and safe places for international students, and convey this positive message clearly in their marketing strategies;
- continue to work with the UK Border Agency to ensure that they maintain their 'highly trusted sponsor' status; and
- facilitate international secondments for their staff on a reciprocal basis. This may be done via existing staff mobility programmes or on a bilateral basis between institutions.

Outcome:

- By 2014, the institutions will have reviewed their international strategies and set challenging targets to enhance their international standing.
- By 2020, there will be a substantial increase in international engagement through collaborative teaching and research arrangements.
- By 2020, there will be a significant increase in inward and outward international mobility, moving towards a doubling of activity compared with the 2010 baseline.

Impact:

Northern Ireland's market share of the international student market will increase, and our higher education sector will become more diverse.

A MORE ACCESSIBLE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

The Department encourages the higher education sector to be accessible in the widest sense. This, of course, entails continued support for widening participation, but it also includes improved information for students; a systematic approach to community engagement; enhanced rural access to higher education increased engagement between the sector and government on policy issues; greater cross-border co-operation; and improved undergraduate mobility between north and south.

Project Eight

Improve information in regard to higher education.

Action:

Information for prospective students must be accurate, relevant, easily accessible and of the highest possible quality, in order to assist them in their decision-making in regard to higher education.

The Department encourages the sector to improve the quality of information, advice and guidance available to students. Currently, information is available from a wide range of sources, such as the National Student Survey, Unistats and the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education Survey. Following a UK-wide consultation on changes to information published by institutions in 2011, the Department has worked with HEFCE and the other devolved administrations to develop a format for publishing Key Information Sets (KIS) which will provide comparable, standardised information about undergraduate courses. The Department and the sector will continue to review and update the KIS methodology as appropriate.

The Department will work with HEIs to make all relevant higher education information accessible via a single web-based portal, and develop and implement an awareness-raising campaign about the benefits of higher education. The portal will include information on courses, financial support, learning and teaching assessment methods, the cost of living, student satisfaction, future career prospects and other relevant information. This will be supported by a Northern Ireland branding campaign with an international focus.

Outcome:

- By 2014, students will be able to access high quality, relevant and timely information on all aspects of higher education in Northern Ireland.

Impact:

Students will be better informed regarding all aspects of higher education, and will be able to make informed choices regarding their course. This has the potential to contribute to improvements in retention and progression. The increased availability of information has the potential to attract not only more international students, but also investors who wish to capitalise on Northern Ireland's graduate expertise and research base.

Project Nine

Enhance engagement between the higher education sector, the community and government.

Action:

The Department encourages the institutions to review their social and community engagement strategies and adopt a systematic approach to such engagement, based on best practice throughout the UK and overseas, and to use their skills and expertise to benefit and engage effectively with local communities.

The Department will facilitate engagement between the sector and government departments on a wide range of policy issues. This may take the form of individual projects or long-term partnerships. The Department and the sector will consider options for taking forward this work.

Outcome:

- By 2015, the higher education institutions will have reviewed their strategies for social and community engagement, and such activity will become embedded within each institution.
- By 2015, the Department and the sector will have developed a mechanism to support policy dialogue and engagement between the sector and government.

Impact:

The higher education institutions will maximise the use of their intellectual resources for the benefit of society.

Project Ten

Establish university bases at the further education colleges.

Action:

The geographical reach of the FECs makes them ideally located to serve local communities throughout Northern Ireland. The Department, in co-operation with the higher and further education sectors, will develop a pilot scheme for the creation of university bases at the further education colleges. This will provide the opportunity for higher education students to undertake distance learning, with access to the university materials and resources they need on a planned basis.

The pilot will take place at one FEC in 2013/14, with a review in 2014/15. By 2020, subject to the outcome of the review, identified FECs will provide access to university resources.

Outcome:

- By 2014, a pilot scheme for the creation of a university base will begin at one of the FECs.
- By 2015, the pilot will be reviewed.
- By 2020, subject to the outcome of the review, identified FECs will provide access to university resources.

Impact:

Higher education students will be able to access learning and library resources in a place that suits them.

Project Eleven

Facilitate cross-border co-operation and student mobility.

Action

There is considerable scope for cross-border co-operation in higher education, particularly in border areas. The Department will support the HEIs in seeking opportunities for collaboration in teaching and learning.

The Department will work in partnership with the HEIs and the Irish Government to reduce the obstacles to student mobility between north and south, and to implement the recommendations of the IBEC-CBI Joint Business Council report on undergraduate mobility. The HEIs will be expected to set their own targets for increasing student flows between the two jurisdictions, and to contribute to promoting mobility through:

- increased visibility at careers fairs in the Republic of Ireland;
- better information and communication; and
- clear admissions processes between institutions in both jurisdictions.

Outcome:

- By 2013, the HEIs will have identified opportunities for north-south co-operation in teaching and learning.
- By 2020, the HEIs will have established, and met, targets on increased cross-border student mobility.

Impact:

Co-operation and links between higher education institutions in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland will be improved, and student mobility will be enhanced.

A FLEXIBLE LIFELONG LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The Department is committed to supporting flexibility within the higher education sector in Northern Ireland. By 2020, the higher education sector in Northern Ireland will fully support lifelong learning and clear, flexible pathways into and through higher education will be in place. This will be facilitated by a revised funding system and a review of MaSN (Maximum Student Number). There will be an enhanced governance and accountability framework that balances government priorities with institutional autonomy.

Project Twelve

Establish a flexible lifelong learning system.

Action:

Access to, and routes through, higher education should be easily identifiable for prospective and existing students. The Department will work in co-operation with the QAA and stakeholders in creating a new credit framework for higher education in Northern Ireland.

The Department will also consider amalgamating the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) and the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) into a single qualifications and credit system. This will create a clear and transparent framework for all higher education qualifications and facilitate modular learning. It will also facilitate progression from further education to higher education – a key recommendation in the Department's *Success Through STEM Strategy*.

Outcome:

- By 2017, students will be able to identify opportunities for lifelong learning through a single, recognised qualifications and credit framework.
- By 2018, modular learning will be available to all students in higher education.

Impact:

There will be increased flexibility and a lifelong learning ethos within the sector.

Project Thirteen

Review the higher education funding model.

Action:

The Department will review and revise the higher education funding model in order to ensure more flexibility in support of modular learning and to take account of changes in demographics and student demand.

An enhanced funding model should facilitate additional capacity, support an increase in part-time provision, focus on economically relevant activity, encourage shared resources and expertise, and ensure stability and sustainability.

Outcome:

- By 2020, a flexible higher education funding model for Northern Ireland will be in place.

Impact:

The funding model for higher education will provide the sector with financial security and sustainability, and the flexibility to respond to changing needs and demographics.

Project Fourteen

Achieve efficiency savings within the sector.

Action:

The Department recognises the commitment that the universities have made to significantly improving efficiency over the next three years as part of the 2010 CSR settlement. Given the overall financial context, the Department encourages the institutions to continue to review opportunities to secure further improvements in efficiency within institutions and across the sector. This should include assessing the scope for improving efficiency through the provision of services on a shared basis where appropriate.

Outcome:

- By 2014/15, the sector will have secured annual savings amounting to some £30 million over the 2010/11 baseline.
- By 2015/16, the sector will have considered the potential for savings through the provision of services on a shared basis.

Impact:

- Efficiency will be improved and opportunities for shared service provision will be identified.

Project Fifteen

Review the Maximum Student Number (MaSN).

Action:

The Department recognises the restrictions imposed by the Maximum Student Number (MaSN), to which each higher education institution in Northern Ireland is subject.

As a result of changes in the tuition fee regime in the rest of the UK, the Department acknowledges that demand for full-time undergraduate places in Northern Ireland may increase.

The Department, in light of the restrictions that MaSN may impose on full-time undergraduate places, will conduct a review of the control mechanism. In particular, the review will consider how future demand may be met within an increasingly restrictive higher education budget.

The outcome of the review will form an evidence base that will contribute to the overall funding model project, helping to support a flexible lifelong learning environment.

Outcome:

- By 2016, a review of MaSN will have taken place.

Impact:

Recommendations on the future funding of full-time undergraduates will be published and will inform a wider review into the funding of higher education.

Project Sixteen

Enhance the governance and accountability framework.

Action:

The governance and accountability structure between the Department and the universities and university colleges must recognise the institutions' autonomy and also the role of the Department in safeguarding public finances.

The Department will review the existing governance and accountability framework, and also consider amending the requirements placed on the universities in relation to the sale, transfer and lease of buildings and facilities financed entirely or partly with Departmental funds. In addition, the Department will work with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) to consider the possibility of adopting a 'lighter touch' capital investment framework.

The Department also recognises that there are areas of duplication in regard to audit coverage and will seek to ensure that these are minimised where possible.

Outcome:

- By 2015/16, the Department, in co-operation with the institutions, will have reviewed the governance and accountability framework for higher education.

Impact:

The Department and the universities will have a clearer understanding of their roles and responsibilities. The governance framework will acknowledge the autonomy of the higher education institutions but also the need to ensure value for money for taxpayers.



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