

Consultative Meeting on

Fees Review

Held Wednesday 24 September 2003

Organisations Represented:

Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology, Fáilte Ireland, FÁS, Further Education and Training Awards Council, Higher Education Colleges Association, Higher Education and Training Awards Council, Irish Vocational Education Association, Teagasc, Union of Students in Ireland

The Meeting was chaired by:

Seán Ó Foghlú, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

Introduction

Mr Ó Foghlú briefly outlined the legal background to the review of fees and the request for this review from the Department of Education and Science. The policy approach of the Authority to date was also outlined along with a summary of the existing practices in the area of fees. The issues arising were summarised as a basis for considering options for the way forward.

The Discussion Paper identified possible principles in relation to the approach which should be taken by the Authority in recommending a balance for funding of the Councils between fees and grant. Building on these principles four options were presented for consideration. In addition those who made submissions were asked to answer three questions. These questions concerned the functions of the Awards Councils, the issues to be considered in the discussion of fees and consideration of the way forward.

Mr Ó Foghlú thanked those who had made submissions and invited those organisations to briefly outline their approach to the meeting in a short presentation. He stressed that the advice of the Authority has been sought on fees and that it is a matter for the Department, after consultation with the Councils, to make a decision on fees.

Presentations

The Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Council of Directors of the Institutes of Technology, the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education Colleges Association, Teagasc and FÁS made short presentations to the meeting and answered questions of clarification.

Discussions on issues emerging

The Authority made a short presentation on the issues arising both from the Discussion Paper and the submissions. These issues were divided into two groups – (1) overarching

issues and (2) specific issues. The remainder of the meeting concentrated on discussing these issues.

(1) Overarching Issues

The legal requirement on the Councils to charge fees for services.

Under section 61 of the Qualifications Act 1999 it is stated that “a relevant body shall charge, receive and recover fees, in relation to the performance of its functions”. The current situation therefore is that both Councils should charge fees for services provided. There was some discussion as to whether this meant that they had to charge fees for just some of their services. The context set by the Department in seeking the advice of the Authority on fees was noted. There was a strong feeling that there needs to be significant investment by the State in the work of the Councils and that this was reflected in the context set by the Department.

Fee arrangements for the two Councils

Should there be the same or different general arrangements?

Many present considered that arrangements should be based on common principles. This, however, did not necessarily mean that the same fees would be charged by each Council. The Further Education and Training Awards Council’s awards tended to be made to learners who were the most disadvantaged and, therefore, in order to encourage people to enter the education system it was considered that the level of fees should not be a barrier to entry.

Should there be the same or different levels of fees?

A number of points were made in this area:

- Some considered that it would be unfair if one of the Councils was funded to a significantly greater extent by fees than the other.
- It was acknowledged that due to the background and tradition of education and training at further and higher level the discussion on fees is very complex.
- The concept of applying a formula to the calculation of fees across both Councils sounds attractive but could cause difficulties. Custom and practice is important to keep in mind, it is hard to apply a fee to those who do not pay currently.
- The number of students and the number of different providers in the Further Education and Training Awards Council system means that the scale and complexity of the fees issue is different from that in the higher education and training area.
- In the interests of equality of treatment, where similar awards, perhaps at the same level, are being provided, then the charges for these awards should be the same.

- It would be reasonable to suppose that where the same course is being provided by a number of different providers but students are paying different fees (for whatever reason) that students will choose the provider charging the lowest fee.
- It would appear that where there are medical card holders taking a programme of study leading to a Further Education and Training Awards Council award the State is not refunding to the Council the full fee for each student. This means that other students attending these courses may be subsidising these students. The query was raised as to why this money could not be provided to the Councils by the Department of Health and the Department of Social and Family Affairs.
- Some considered that awards at the same level in the framework should cost the same to the student.
- As the Further Education and Training Awards Council was in a transition period some considered that there was very little add on service being provided by the Council at present and that, therefore, it would be unfair to charge fees. However, as the services develop then the Council could legitimately attract increased fee income.
- It was noted that providers are providing much assistance to the Councils in relation to the development of policies.

Arrangements for providers

The following points were made:

- Some considered that the cost arising to public and private providers should be the same.
- Others considered that public providers should not pay for the services of the Council as the Council is state-funded.

Extent to which additional costs are passed on to the learner.

The following points were made:

- There are different student support systems at different levels. A study of student support systems would be interesting as it would highlight the different arrangements which exist in the different sectors. For example, a student pursuing a higher education and training award on a part time basis pays more than a full time student pursuing the same course. It was questioned that given that there is not a single model for the existing education and training system, it is very difficult to have a single fees structure model.
- It was indicated by some public providers that in the current financial circumstances any additional costs arising would have to be passed on to learners.
- Some public providers indicated that there would need to be negotiations with stakeholders should any additional cost be passed to learners.

The changing role of the Councils over the next 5-10 years

The following points were made:

- The key points to make in this area are related to the work of the Councils in relation to the move to new standards as the framework develops, developing a new interaction with providers in relation to quality assurance and the increased provision of delegated authority. As a result of this changing role there would be a need to review any recommendations on fees over a period of time.
- Standard setting is a national activity and, therefore, it should not be part of a fees package.
- As the Institutes of Technology opt for delegation of authority over the next 5 – 10 years the Higher Education and Training Awards Council's fee income under existing arrangements would decrease substantially over the decade.
- There was a general recognition that both Councils' roles would evolve significantly over the next 5 years.

(2) Specific Issues

If fees are charged for particular services to which services should they apply?

The following points were made:

- Some areas of the work of the Councils could have an overarching fee applied while individual fees for other services would be more applicable.
- On page 24 of the discussion document a number of areas were identified as key functions for the Councils. It was suggested that in the area of making awards and validating programmes that it might be appropriate for individual fees to apply. There are other areas (e.g., agreeing quality assurance procedures and reviewing their effectiveness, ensuring fairness and consistency of assessment processes, satisfying the Councils in relation to arrangements for the protection of learners) where an overarching fee might be deemed to be more appropriate.

How would fees be calculated?

The following points were made:

- The question was raised as to whether fees should be charged per provider, per learner or a combination of both.
- In terms of validation fees, some considered that the activity of validating a programme of study was independent of the number of students that might follow that programme and that, therefore, it would be more applicable to charge a fee to the provider for this validation process. There was concern expressed in relation to validation fees being the same fee even when a programme of study identical to that being submitted has already gone through the validation process. The

validation of programmes of study for courses held outside the State also raised some debate.

- In terms of calculating the actual fee there are two ways of looking at this. On the one hand the inputs into the validation system should be the method of calculating its cost, while on the other it was suggested that the fee paid for validation was a contribution towards the cost of that validation and did not in fact cover the full cost of the validation process. The point was also made that evaluations were normally carried out by peers and these peers were often from other providers and did not receive payment for this exercise.

How to define the precise nature of the fee structure and the level of a particular fee

The following points were made:

- It is acknowledged that there must be a balance when looking at a particular fee between what could be deemed to be policy and development inputs and what were operational inputs.
- It was suggested that the key issue should be the additional cost of providing the service rather than the staff and accommodation costs.
- It was suggested that it could be overly bureaucratic to try and cost every activity to too great an extent.

Conclusion

Mr Ó Foghlú thanked the group for its input into the discussion. Notes of the meeting would be forwarded to each of the participants. Participants were invited to make further submissions or supplement their existing submission if they so wished. This additional material was requested by Friday 3rd October 2003.

The Authority is aiming to advise the Department in November.