

The Open University

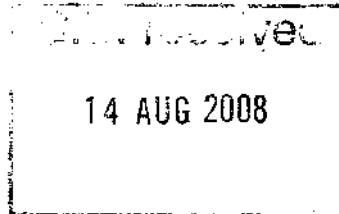
The Open University in  
Scotland

10 Drumsheugh Gardens  
Edinburgh  
EH3 7QJ

Tel +44 (0) 131 226 3851  
Fax +44 (0) 131 220 6730  
scotland@open.ac.uk  
www.open.ac.uk/scotland

8 August 2008

Fiona Hyslop MSP  
Cabinet Secretary  
Education & Lifelong Learning  
Scottish Executive  
Europa Building  
450 Argyle Street  
Glasgow G2 8LG



Ref: PWS/ME/08082469

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

We have read with interest the interim report of the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Universities, *New Horizons*. As part of the ongoing discussion around the report's proposals I thought it might be useful to offer some initial reactions on the report from the perspective of The Open University in Scotland as the major part-time higher education provider, and our comments are attached.

The Open University welcomes and supports the strong emphasis in the report on the need for university provision to become significantly more flexible in the future. We believe the OU has a central and essential role to play and offer you our full support to working in partnership to achieving Scotland's skills and learning objectives.

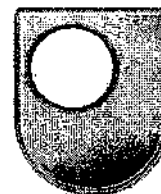
As ever, we would be pleased to discuss further any of the points we raise in our comments with you or your officials.

Y sincerely,

**PETER SYME**  
Director, Scotland

Enc





## **New Horizons: responding to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

### **The Interim Report of the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Universities**

The *New Horizons* report is a critically important document, in providing a welcome outline of the proposed new relationships between the Scottish Government, Scottish Funding Council and the university sector.

As part of the ongoing discussion and debate under way before the stakeholder conference on 20 August, The Open University in Scotland would like to offer some initial reactions to the report and to highlight some of the key ways in which we believe we can make a major contribution towards responding to some of the challenges set out in the report.

#### **The need for increased flexibility of provision**

The report places a strong emphasis on the need for university provision to become significantly more flexible in order to respond to changing skills needs, changing demography and a more diverse student population.

The Open University agrees entirely with this view and we offer our full support in rising to the challenge. As Scotland's leading provider of flexible learning, we believe The Open University has an essential and central role to play.

As the report confirms, it is essential that more of Scotland's working age population – and more employers – embrace the concept of lifelong learning and recognise the benefits of upskilling and reskilling on an ongoing basis throughout their lives. Part-time learning can offer people of all ages, backgrounds, and from all geographical locations the flexibility and opportunity to develop their skills without taking time out of work, or away from their caring or domestic responsibilities. It will be impossible otherwise for the majority of Scotland's working population to commit the necessary time and resources to learning and skills development.

#### **Investing in the future**

As new funding methodologies are devised and developed it will be essential to create a system which places flexible learning at its core, within an appropriate framework of fees, funding and financial support.

We welcome in principle the general proposal to 'fund the right provision in the right universities,' and note with interest the proposal to create two new funds with clear measures of success. There is of course much detail to be considered before the full implications of the two funds are clear. However, in principle, greater flexibility afforded to institutions in allocating and moving GFU funding to meet institutional priorities is a welcome development. Similarly, we see the advantage in using the HFU to allow institutions to play to their particular strengths and help achieve Scottish Government priorities. We outline below three broad areas where The Open University can make an important contribution to achieving key Government strategies and priorities.

In relation to student fees and financial support, it will be impossible to address many of the challenges raised in the report unless a fair and equitable system is put in place. Section 2.51 of *New Horizons* states that "the abolition of the graduate endowment fee has restored the principle of

free education in Scotland". This is not yet the case. Part-time higher education students continue to pay tuition fees.

The introduction of the £500 ILA from August 2008 is a welcome development, but should still be seen as an interim step. In the medium term, this differing treatment is not only inequitable but is distorting the market in higher education, with ramifications for Scotland's skill-set and its prospects of sustained economic growth. The effects can be seen both in terms of declining recruitment to certain part-time courses and qualifications, and a decrease in participation from key target groups, most notably amongst men.

As the new roles and relationships between universities, the Scottish Funding Council and the Scottish Government are developed, we have a real opportunity to ensure that this inequity is addressed and that flexible, part-time learning is embedded as a central plank in Scotland's plans to become a high-skill, globally competitive economy.

## **The Open University's contribution**

While the specific roles and strengths of individual institutions will clearly be the subject of detailed discussion as the new funding methodologies are developed, at this stage we would like to highlight three broad areas where we believe The Open University can make a particularly strong contribution towards addressing some of the issues identified in the report. (These link directly to our response to the challenges set by the Scottish Government's skills strategy).

### **1. Delivering skills for work**

We can offer a unique package of expertise and experience in the design and provision of flexible, accessible learning programmes, specifically designed to fit with the needs of people with jobs and other commitments, supported by the latest technologies, and delivered direct to homes and workplaces in every part of Scotland.

The report highlights the need to address the ongoing disparities by social class in learner participation. Our open entry system brings higher education within the reach of people across Scotland of all kinds of educational backgrounds. We offer over 500 courses of differing levels, lengths and intensity of study, most of which require no previous qualifications, and which meet the varying needs that learners have at different stages in their lives and careers.

### **2. Meeting the challenges of Scotland's demography & geography**

We can offer learners in all age groups the chance to select the level and pace of study that best meets their abilities, needs and expectations, helping them build confidence as they progress and giving them the best possible chance of success. Our expertise in building programmes for geographically-dispersed groups of learners means we can provide learners with access to the same learning experience and support irrespective of where they live, and where or when they choose to study.

### **3. Working towards one coherent education system**

Both *New Horizons* and *Skills for Scotland* highlight the importance of creating an integrated lifelong learning system, supported by collaborative partnerships between institutions, to improve access and articulation. The Open University unique position in Scottish higher education combines local engagement with global perspective, enabling us to work across boundaries and to facilitate an integrated, flexible approach to lifelong learning. Working with schools, colleges and other universities, we are able to provide highly flexible progression routes and pathways. Our modular courses and qualifications, fully linked to the SCQF, enable learners to step on and off the learning ladder, to transfer credit from previous study and to choose the level, pace and mode of learning which suits them best at different times in their lives.