

Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Universities: UCU Scotland response to the Interim Report

20 August 2008

Executive Summary

- UCU Scotland has called for an expeditiously conducted but well-researched and widely consulted-over report on Scottish Higher Education. This is the moment for such a once-in-a-generation exercise, for which New Horizons will be no substitute.
- The content and tone of the report reflects strongly the membership of the Taskforce, and the lack of serious outside consultation. The Taskforce has proved an entirely inadequate forum for defining and addressing the broader challenges for higher education. There is an urgent need for a full consultative process involving all stakeholders.
- The interim report proposes new relationships centring on a greater focus on supposedly measurable outcomes, particularly of direct benefits to the economy. In contrast the UCU Scotland and STUC vision is based on a people-centred approach where the staff of universities are valued and given real opportunities to develop. This approach could show a way forward more likely to actually achieve the outcomes the government desires, because it would engage and empower those who work at all levels in the universities.
- A change in the role of the Scottish Funding Council [SFC] is a key element in the report's proposals but explicit clarification is needed that the proposed changes in the SFC's role will meet the requirements of The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005.
- We and others have often highlighted the benefits that universities provide to a "knowledge economy". But we also point to the failure of industry to make full use of these benefits, or to contribute substantially and impartially to the resources needed to enhance them. Nothing in New Horizons addresses this important problem.
- Any new funding arrangements need to be widely understood and open to scrutiny. We are concerned that, without sensitive but authoritative monitoring, strategic resources, such as the Horizon Fund, may be administered without due regard to the need to consult fully, support, assist in the professional development of, and reward equitably the staff actually carrying out the strategy.
- Substantial changes in funding methodology, coinciding with the impact of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise on funding, could cause severe damage to the finances of some universities. The unrealistic timescale proposed for the SFC to prepare for the changes, for consultation and for implementation give particular cause for concern.

Introduction

The Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Universities [the Taskforce], set up at the end of 2007, issued an interim report entitled *New Horizons* at the end of June 2008. On the initiative of the University and College Union Scotland [UCU Scotland], the trade unions had requested at least a consultative event and it was later announced that a short seminar, for which this provisional background paper has been prepared, would take place on 20 August.

From the beginning of the process UCU Scotland has pointed out that the Taskforce was far too narrowly based to fulfil its declared purpose of “responding to the challenges of the 21st century” for Scotland’s universities and planning for the next twenty years. No representatives of teaching, research and academic-related staff (for whom UCU Scotland is the main trade union), support staff, the university governing bodies, students, parents, or any “stakeholders” other than the government, the civil service, the funding council (statutorily required in such an exercise) and the university principals’ body Universities Scotland [US] were invited to participate in the Taskforce. Nor were these broader interests seriously consulted.

No convincing reason has been given for excluding staff and student representatives who for many years have had an important and legitimate involvement in the development of Scottish higher education policy and good practice. And the lack of participation by the chairs of governing bodies was emblematic of this lack of rationale, since the governing bodies’ role in overseeing university management is addressed in the interim report.

A much wider conversation with those directly involved in making Scotland’s universities work is needed if the challenges of the 21st century are to be defined, widely understood, and tackled effectively – making use *inter alia* of the intellectual talent in the universities to generate ideas and to ensure that teachers, researchers and their academic teams are collegially involved in achieving broadly agreed policy ends. The danger is that a great opportunity will be missed. The short 20 August seminar is welcome but is in no way a substitute for the discussion that is needed.¹

As a democratic organisation, UCU Scotland develops its policies on such fundamental matters as the long-term future of Scottish higher education through our Congress and Executive Committee, which represents our members in local branches. The *modus operandi* of the Taskforce and the timing of the 20 August seminar mean that we have not

¹ We note that the six meetings of the Taskforce were not intended to be the end of a process, merely the beginning; and that, with publication of this interim report, only the first phase of its work has come to an end. But it seems that the opportunity for wider discussion and debate will *culminate* in the 20 August “stakeholder” conference, where, in one brief afternoon, the Taskforce expects “to hear the views of governing bodies, unions, university staff and students and key players in the lifelong learning landscape such as ASC, SQA, and SDS amongst others”. There is also to be consultation with industry and business interests.

been able to have any proper consultation with our members about the New Horizons report; accordingly, only a very provisional response is possible at this stage.

In this preliminary statement, however, we want to emphasise the urgent need for a full consultative process involving all “stakeholders”, with a particular emphasis on the key role of the academic profession. This requires recognition that the shape of Scottish higher education over the next twenty years and beyond is a vital question for Scotland’s democracy, not something that can be determined by a small elite group. Our stress on this point is in tune with the distinctively broad consultative approach to the development of policy in partnership with civil society that is at the basis of Scotland’s parliamentary system of government.

The historical context

In mid-2007 there seemed to be a justified hope that the new Scottish National Party Government would seek to involve the nation’s academics in discussion of how Scotland’s distinctive educational history, in which the universities have, since the 15th century, had a key role, can be made once again to help define Scotland’s identity in the internationally competitive 21st century. There has not been a major, intellectually informed review of the fundamental purposes of any of the UK’s university sectors since the Robbins Report of the 1960s, at which time George Elder Davie also published his provocative ideas about the potential for a particular Scottish approach (The Democratic Intellect and later The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect). The conjunction of the election of a Scottish Nationalist Government with a widely perceived approaching crisis in the universities provides an opportunity for a national, intellectually informed, evidence-based discussion about the future direction – or directions – of what is still the Scottish university system. Such an initiative could show a democratic policy-making way forward to the UK as a whole.

The immediate problem

UCU Scotland welcomed several encouraging announcements concerning higher education made in the early months of the government elected in May 2007, and the Cabinet Secretary’s personally very open approach. In particular we noted positively the government’s reinforced commitment to publicly funded undergraduate education. The Taskforce, however, was set up peremptorily late in the year in the wake of what was perceived as a disappointing funding settlement, and with university principals reiterating the anxiety that top-up fees in England (and particularly the threat that the cap will soon be lifted) will create a serious competitive funding deficit for the Scottish universities. The very limited membership of the Taskforce suggested that it was designed simply to arrive at an interim short-term agreement on dealing with this concern, but it soon acquired the much grander role of “addressing the challenges of the 21st century”.

The content and tone of the report reflects strongly the membership of the Taskforce, and the lack of serious outside consultation. We think the Taskforce has proved an entirely

inadequate forum for defining and addressing the broader challenges. New Horizons is certainly not the draft for the once-in-a-generation review of higher education the Taskforce seemed to promise. We nevertheless want to see its final report, however limited our own influence on it, become a starting point for the type of discussion we believe necessary. We note the interim report's commitment to ongoing discussion and consultation, but stress that this, if it is to be meaningful, will take longer than seems to be currently contemplated. This is a time for vision, not quick-fix answers, and we believe that many of our members have the expertise and experience to help create it.

The legislative background

To turn to the interim report as it stands. A change in the role of the Scottish Funding Council [SFC] is a key element in its proposals. We welcome the fact that no new legislation is proposed to change the SFC's powers (such as to apply conditions to its grants) and obligations (such as to consult stakeholders). However, explicit clarification is needed that the proposed changes in the SFC's role will meet the requirements of The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005. SFC has developed its engagement with stakeholders over many years and, at least until there is a major democratic review of the system as a whole, this constructive relationship should continue on the present basis as the Council develops its new corporate plan and other policy initiatives.

The phrase "a lighter touch" is used: its meaning in practice needs careful discussion. If it implies the removal of superfluous detailed monitoring and a stronger focus on high-level outcomes, this is likely to be welcomed by UCU Scotland. Less monitoring but stronger accountability was the theme behind SFC's Monitoring Evaluation and Accountability Review to which we contributed. In a lighter-touch regime compliance with the Financial Memorandum will become even more important and we would expect the SFC to agree. The staff we represent, however, will want to see strong guidance to principals and university managers to reverse the trend in university governance towards top-down managerialism and to replace it with effective systems of collegial decision-making suitable for the 21st century.

Further, if a "lighter touch" is to inform a new relationship between the SFC and universities, clarity is needed about what happens if a university administration materially fails to meet its obligation to its own staff, students or the public. UCU Scotland will continue to insist that the case for greater public investment is already well made, and it is likely to become more compelling still in the immediate future. But additional funding requires more assurances of good practice, not fewer. Failures in university management and governance – including failures to serve the broader academic interest (including the active promotion of "academic freedom") and the public good – occur, and there must be effective monitoring and accountability. The Scottish government, the parliament and Audit Scotland (on behalf of the public) must be sure that, in these circumstances, the SFC's "light touch" is from a hand attached to a strong arm.

“Challenges” and responses

The consequence of the Taskforce’s narrow basis is that the interim report aspires to major changes in the outcomes from universities without developing a broader perspective on the role of universities in a modern Scotland or even an intellectually sound rationale for the changes desired. Instead the report repeats the familiar need to develop a “knowledge economy” and seeks to work towards this end by tinkering with funding streams and conceding increased control to university principals at the expense of the established mechanisms for safeguarding the public interest, including the interests of university staff and their right to be fully involved in the decision-making processes of their institutions.

It seems that future funding is to be predicated in part on the principals rising to the government’s “challenges”. On one interpretation this could mean little change from the current process centred on ministerial guidance letters. The Scottish government will still have to formulate guidance and the SFC, as legislated, will have the responsibility to carry it out. The Tripartite Advisory Group [TAG] proposed in the interim report, on this interpretation, will simply offer advice; but unlike the Government and the SFC it will have neither democratic accountability nor law-given authority. The SFC’s existing advisory responsibility, and the objectivity of its position as independent from both the government and the university principals, mean, we would suppose, that its advice will continue to be prioritised. In that case, the TAG will do little more than give US and the principals slightly more formalised access to government ministers and civil servants than they already enjoy.

While this would be unobjectionable in itself, and other stakeholders could presumably seek parallel regular meetings, the concern must be that something more is intended; and that there is indeed an implication that the role of the SFC, which has a duty to respond to the concerns of key stakeholders, and not only the principals, is to be downgraded.

Changing roles

Two major changes in policy are proposed in the interim report, which appear to downgrade the intermediary role of the funding council. First is the statement:

Regulation by the Scottish Funding Council will be significantly relaxed and a new “lighter touch” approach adopted to managing the relationship with institutions, in consultation with the universities through a new Tripartite Advisory Group.

And second:

Setting objectives for the university sector as at present using Ministerial guidance but extending this to include advice from the Tripartite Advisory Group, which will help to identify strategic outputs and outcomes which can be monitored by the Scottish Funding Council.

Our concern is that this could involve unelected principals directly in policy formulation, which is the role of government and parliament in consultation with all stakeholders; and, conversely, that the government could be able directly to interfere in the decisions made by the universities, which are, and should remain, autonomous funded bodies. Currently government guidance is reflected in funding allocations and operational regulation by the SFC, which acts as a politically neutral buffer between the universities and government. This stand-apart arrangement has consistently been supported by UCU Scotland. It allows us a proper democratic input by focusing our attention on the quality of the ministerial guidance, the appropriateness of the SFC's funding methodology and the effectiveness of its regulation and monitoring.

The democratic deficit developing in universities does not derive directly from excessive government involvement but primarily from the erosion (or worse) of internal collegial decision-making. And while we support continuing university autonomy, it has become ever clearer that this is not the same thing as, or even in itself an effective safeguard for, academic freedom. The ability of university staff to make their concerns and ideas known to, and effectively considered within, the higher education system requires that their representative institutions can address themselves to the relatively neutral SFC, with the assurance that it has effective powers. Any change to this system would require very serious scrutiny and wide consultation – precisely what has been lacking in the Taskforce's methodology.

Over the years it has been essential for ministerial guidance to address aspects of people management in which the sector's performance has been lacking. This has included guidance in key areas such as compliance with employment law, equal pay and opportunities and reducing university reliance on fixed-term contracts. Principals and university managers have too often proved themselves willing to depict the very unsatisfactory (and as has recently been shown in the case of *Ball v University of Aberdeen*, sometimes unlawful) staffing practices of universities as if they represented the best of all possible worlds.² It would not be right for such views to have a privileged position within the policy-making process, as it is suggested the TAG should have.

The interim report also suggests that the principals will be involved directly in decisions relating to the spending review:

To cement the new relationship, a dialogue will be held at Cabinet between Scottish Ministers and Universities Scotland before the next Spending Review.

Yet this advisory role to government is actually the legislative responsibility of the SFC. And, given its legislative duty to consult stakeholders, the SFC can speak with greater authority when advising government than can Universities Scotland which, despite its title, is in fact the organisation of the principals rather than of the universities (the whole

² Such a view was expressed at the short Taskforce session on 6 May: see footnote below.

university community from the Court or governing body which has ultimate legal authority, to the community of scholars, of staff and the student body). UCU Scotland also submits evidence to the spending reviews but no mention is made in the interim report of how our views and those of other stakeholders will be given equal weight. This contrasts with the broad stakeholder involvement reflected in the HE review ahead of SSR [Scottish Spending Review] 2004 in which UCU Scotland representatives played a full part, with civil servants, in preparing an informed case to government.

Funding linked to “success”

It is clear that the Government does not at present have complete confidence that the universities are meeting Scotland’s economic and skills strategies to the extent existing resource allows. In the negotiations of which the Taskforce discussions seem to have consisted, the principals seem to have been prepared to concede this in return for their proposed greater personal autonomy in institutional policy-making. UCU Scotland, in its submissions to recent spending reviews has (as has US) consistently outlined the benefits of higher education to Scottish society, its culture and people, as well as to the country’s economy, including the equipping of a 21st-century labour force. For our part, we retain our confidence in these statements, and in the case already made for further public resources to keep pace with change and continue to make even greater contributions to the future of Scotland and its citizens.

Along with others we have highlighted the benefits that universities provide to a “knowledge economy”. But we have also pointed to the failure of industry to make full use of these benefits, or to contribute substantially and impartially to the resources needed to enhance them. Nothing in New Horizons addresses this important problem. Yet some of the challenges stated by the Scottish government cannot be met by universities unless business is encouraged to make a greater contribution to, and to understand better, the work of universities; and to base its greater involvement on sympathetic engagement with academics and how they work in the productive tradition of academic freedom, rather than on exhortations to them to pursue a directly “business agenda”.

How business and universities should engage has been a matter of considerable commentary. It is a complex issue but the failure of the Taskforce seriously to address it even in a preliminary way is of concern, and could open the door, despite the Government’s declared commitment to a social-democratic approach to policy, to the encroachment of the neo-liberal agenda apparent in higher education policy elsewhere, and in some areas of the Scottish university system already.

The main concern of – or “challenge” from – Universities Scotland, linked to their view that principals can deliver government goals if given more institutional control, amounts to a call for extra funding, with an increase in student numbers particularly at postgraduate level playing a key role in achieving this. The main new emphasis in the US approach to additional funding is that the development of new funding streams will enable university

managements to spend on particular projects with less SFC supervision of that spending. Any move in this direction must, in our view, be simultaneously linked to the enhancement of collegial participation in strategic planning and decision-making so that there is an obligation to show that university communities are convinced of the efficacy of, and committed to the success of, such projects.

We therefore support the call to Government to increase higher education spending, particularly to meet the funding deficit that the fee regime in England is widely predicted to produce and even to give Scotland's universities an economically desirable competitive advantage. We note, however, that the link made in the interim report between additional resource and the achievement of government goals over a considerable period avoids the immediate issue of underfunding (which in the short term has been alleviated but by no means resolved by recent releases of one-off tranches of public money). It also gives this and future governments considerable room for manoeuvre, rather than giving the universities any real guarantees. Further, we record our major concern at the creation of new funding streams into universities unconstrained by SFC monitoring of how the money is spent. This will do nothing to alleviate the perception of academic and other staff that unaccountable (or not effectively discussed) managerial financial decision-making may not result in the most equitable and effective disposition of resources – a prerequisite for maintaining collegial morale and therefore enabling institutions democratically to serve the public good.

Funding streams and their management

At present there are many funding streams that underlie university policy. However the two main streams for teaching and research account for the majority of SFC funding. The minor streams are used to fund activity at the margins. This funding has made a difference to the smaller and newer universities but the big research-led institutions still rely on the main funding streams. The minor funding streams have helped to change policy in universities and it is noticeable that universities have rarely acted vigorously on government or SFC policy if no funding levers are applied. The interim report seeks to remove these funding levers and leave all decisions to the Principals:

Associated with this would be a new funding arrangement, comprising: a General Fund for Universities (GFU) to cover the Scottish Government share of the cost of all mainstream activities; and a Horizon Fund for Universities (HFU) which would support specific incentive based arrangements with individual institutions. This will provide greater clarity for both Government and universities of the benefits each is delivering for the other.

We find this rhetoric defining the relationship of the universities to society in terms of some kind of deal with the government disturbing. Moreover, the university principals' record in managing such funds to the satisfaction of government is by no means unblemished.

To give three examples. First, the teaching and research estates funding streams were subsumed into the main streams with the proviso that universities maintain their estates. A few years later the evidence gathered for the spending review showed a massive lack of investment in estates, forcing the government to insist on ring-fenced funds for capital in SSR 2004. Second, universities are obliged to keep accurate records of staff and students, but when the disabled students' funding stream was introduced it was found that these records were quite inadequate. The whole grant had to be recalculated after universities discovered how many disabled students they were supposed to cater for. Moreover it was the introduction of this funding stream that raised awareness of the issues for disabled students and ensured that universities began to meet their obligation to keep the relevant records accurately. Third, the implementation of the 2004 UK pay framework in Scotland – crucial to the retention of high-quality academic and academic-related staff – ultimately depended on ministerial guidance giving the SFC an enforcement remit.³ Such examples of the use of funding levers to ensure compliance with public policy should be borne in mind when considering proposals to downgrade the monitoring role of the SFC in the use of public funds.

We note that the SFC is presently in the middle of a review of its teaching funding stream and has already held consultations and meetings. This effort will now need to be re-directed and accelerated. The process began in June 2006 but did not envisage making changes to the funding stream until 2009, a timescale that reflects the complexity of such changes and the perceived danger, based on past experience, of rushing them. The interim report envisages a total revision of funding being implemented in six months. There is a real danger that existing tried-and-tested consultative and planning arrangements will be scrapped and replaced with a more arbitrary method of decision-making.

At the very least any new arrangements need to be widely understood and open to scrutiny. We are concerned that, without sensitive but authoritative monitoring, strategic resources, such as the Horizon Fund, may be administered without due regard to the need to consult fully, support, assist in the professional development of, and reward equitably the staff actually carrying out the strategy.

Measuring success

The report lists a number of areas in which universities are challenged to “succeed” from now on. Many seem to be restatements of what already occurs. But what is disturbing is that the staff, on whom any “success” depends, are being excluded from consideration.

³ Principals in Scotland lobbied successfully for a clause in the 2004 UK pay framework agreement stating that the implementation of the agreement by 1 August 2006 would be subject to devolved funding arrangements (i.e. the Scottish Spending Review outcome). Only when the funding for pay had been specifically earmarked by the government did universities in Scotland commit to implementation of the deal and even then Ministerial guidance and SFC enforcement was required. In one case, we understand, the threat of funding claw-back had to be used to achieve implementation.

Indeed, an eight-word bullet point is the only substantial mention of staff in the whole New Horizons document. References to “universities” are nearly always to management rather than to the endeavour of the collegial whole.

The one brief reference to staff, moreover, is not concerned to reflect an understanding of how academic work is actually carried out. Rather, it seems to suggest a greater business involvement in the academic process of a quite different sort from that discussed above. What seems to be envisaged, on the contrary, is that employers should determine the skills to be taught in universities, and even be involved, not simply in expressing informed opinions about what is taught (as is their right as citizens) but directly in developing curricula and the content of lectures.

The suggestion is in stark contrast to the idea that “universities” (as the interim report uses the term) should have greater autonomy. If pursued, it would impose the most intrusive possible control on the universities as properly understood – the collegial whole⁴. It would undermine academic freedom, including the responsibility of both lecturers and, in some cases, professional bodies to uphold standards. We seem today to live in a period when it is constantly necessary to remind those in authority, both in society generally and even within the universities themselves, that academic freedom is a (if not indeed the) sine qua non of a university.

Even were it agreed, through democratic discussion and review, that the sort of national outcomes outlined in the interim report could be appropriately applied to “measuring the success” of universities, we are unclear how what is proposed here would work. The projected outcomes are at a very general level and do not cover all the relevant ground. It is hard to see how indicators related to these outcomes could be used to arrive at measures of the achievements and impact of a particular university that would command broad assent. We note too, with reference to points made above, that the attempt to make such a regime work would depend on enhancing the role of the SFC, and making use of its experience, not downgrading it.

Sustainability

In any change in funding the SFC will continue to have a focus on ensuring that year-on-year changes are manageable for individual universities. When the SFC simplified the teaching funding methodology after the last review, it was realised that the plans would have led to major changes in funding for individual universities. These plans had to be modified as some universities were being rewarded for over-recruitment while those who had sound financial plans were penalised and faced large deficits.

⁴ The collegial whole of a university is reflected in governance instruments in which academic staff are generally members of the University and the powers of Court are balanced by the responsibilities of Senate for academic affairs.

Substantial changes in funding methodology, coinciding with the impact of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise on funding, could cause severe damage to the finances of some universities. The unrealistic timescale proposed for the SFC to prepare for the changes, for consultation and for implementation give particular cause for concern.

The responsibilities of universities as employers in relation to compliance with employment legislation, including consultation with the recognised unions to avoid redundancies, are among their most important responsibilities. The Scottish government will need to consider carefully possible unintended consequences of precipitate changes in funding methodology and allocations, such as financial shock, resultant disruption to considered planning and the likelihood in such circumstances of breakdowns in industrial relations.

Governing bodies

In recent times SFC has put a greater emphasis on the role of governing bodies to ensure that universities meet their conditions of grant. Though we have welcomed this greater involvement we have been concerned that university courts often rubber stamp decisions taken by the principals and senior management team. The taskforce also sees a greater role for governing bodies:

Strong governance, challenge and leadership from governing bodies, to ensure universities play an active part in this new set of relationships.

However governing bodies are only concerned with their own institution, which they are increasingly encouraged to see as in competition with others rather than as part of the social and intellectual goals of society as a whole. Court members are volunteers with a limited time commitment and experience suggests that they rarely take senior management to task over their decisions. Some governors tell us that they feel uninvolved and not fully informed and, that, in practice, they lack the power to hold management to account. In some cases there is a feeling that lay members of courts have unequal influence, depending on which sector of the broader community they come from or whether or not they support a particular management agenda. Non-executive directors in all sectors face a real challenge in balancing their role of supporting but also challenging executive management. In universities we believe that in most cases they are not able to carry out this role effectively.

A fresh look at the composition of university courts and support for and training of university court members should be one of the subject matters in the broader democratic discussion of the future of Scotland's universities we are proposing. University governing bodies must continue to be seen as sui generis, purpose-designed for collegial institutions, not as clones from a business-corporation template. We believe there should be a much enhanced involvement of staff governors, and more stable input from student representatives – those, in other words, with direct access to the university community. Such representatives should be encouraged to brief lay governors about campus views and

concerns rather than be made to feel that the proper business of court is only what senior management wants to have discussed and endorsed.

Advisory bodies

Another notable omission from the interim report, in its enthusiasm for the new relationship to be cemented in TAG, is the FE & HE Round Table, a body which meets at least twice a year, usually chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, and which has wide stakeholder involvement. It has recently been extended to include representation from the chairs of university courts and deals with issues that are at a higher level than detailed funding arrangements. This has been a most successful forum, its extension to higher education coming in the light of the effectiveness of the earlier FE forum, and there has been no suggestion that it has outlived its usefulness. Like the proposed TAG, the Round Table is an advisory forum: it simply generates advice from a wider constituency and addresses wider issues than merely funding.

Our vision of a people-centred university system

The STUC, with input from UCU Scotland, submitted to the Taskforce its own model based on a people-centred university system (see Appendix). It took at face value the way in which the agenda had been set: to envisage the shape of Scottish higher education in 2028. It set out a vision based on the central role of the students being educated at, and the staff working in our universities and how they need to be supported in the years ahead. While this provisional UCU Scotland response to the interim report is separate from the STUC document, we will be happy to develop our own ideas within the context of that document.

But the STUC model⁵ does not get a mention in New Horizons, and the ideas behind it are ignored. Instead the interim report concentrates on structural changes that fail to address the wider issue of the purpose of universities in the period to 2028. This omission suggests that the Scottish government and US agree that change can be managed in a top-down manner and that staff and students do not have a strategic contribution to make to the goals of higher education going beyond their individual job description, or the delivery of particular courses of study and of research programmes. This is the wrong way to proceed.

⁵ The unions, including UCU Scotland and led by STUC, were expected to present their views in 5-10 minutes in a half-hour meeting with the Taskforce on 6 May. Despite the absurdly short time allowed, those including the Cabinet Secretary who responded to the STUC vision statement on behalf of the Taskforce, gave it an unequivocal welcome. Indeed some of the principals believed (erroneously it has to be said) that their universities were already managing and developing people in the way we envisaged for the future. The STUC vision statement, the positive response of the Taskforce members on the day and indeed even the fact of the meeting having taken place has now however been ignored, as the brief detail of meetings included in the annex does not even mention the STUC presentation and discussion on 6 May.

The interim report proposes new relationships centring on a greater focus on supposedly measurable outcomes, particularly of direct benefits to the economy, whereas the STUC vision is based on a people-centred approach where the staff of universities are valued and given real opportunities to develop. We continue to believe – and would be happy to be invited to further detailed discussions about this – that the STUC approach could show a way forward towards actually achieving the outcomes the government desires, because it would engage and empower those who work in the universities at all levels.⁶

New Horizons and the need for a new approach

In this interim response to the Taskforce's interim report, we have tried, within a constrained timescale at a difficult time of year, to point to some of the dangers inherent in the course of action proposed. We would prefer to be discussing the "challenges of the 21st century" in a way that allowed for more radical and far-reaching proposals for change that are historically literate, evidence-based and vision-led. We see the present conjuncture of circumstances as providing opportunities as well as dangers; but they are opportunities that can be seized only by encouraging a far wider harnessing of the intellectual talent of the universities than the Taskforce's approach has so far involved. We are realistic in recognising that the government has its own time-constraints and is perhaps unlikely to do more than make minor adjustments to the Taskforce proposals in response to the limited consultative process that is now in place. This will inevitably tend to put us, as a trade union, in a position of prioritising our defensive role, scrutinising every development to ensure, as best we can, that the interests of our members are not compromised.

We are determined however that UCU Scotland will also seek to play a more positive and creative part in determining (or at least proposing) ways forward for Scotland's in-some-ways unique university system that address new challenges by showing confidence in, and harnessing the talents of, university communities as a whole, not simply a narrow group of senior managers. It is in that spirit that we offer these provisional thoughts on the interim

⁶ The strategy will require an investment in staff training and development, with staff having "ownership" of the Continuing Professional Development [CPD] involved. Presently staff training is management-led, not demand-led and coverage is very patchy, and non-existent for some. If principals are serious about meeting the government's challenges then staff must be convinced that training and development is beneficial and relate to their real needs as they perceive them. Otherwise this initiative, like others before it, will fail to make a significant contribution the step-change in Scotland's economic performance that is sought. CPD for capacity-building in new approaches to graduate employability – and skills-utilisation by, and better engagement with, employers – would be required; but staff will be unwilling to undergo such training if it is seen as simply another knee-jerk, top-down initiative. In marked contrast to the Further Education Review of Scotland's Colleges, ROSCO, which received a positive response from the Cabinet Secretary, there a lack of focus in *New Horizons* on supporting staff development. This is one area in which we would look to further consultation before any implementation of the Taskforce proposals.

Taskforce report, New Horizons. Whatever the Taskforce's conclusions, and the government's actions to carry them out, UCU Scotland will be consulting our members over the coming months, not only about their immediate trade-union concerns, but about the future direction of institutions which are crucial to Scotland's future, and which are sustained, and will continue to be improved, primarily by their teaching, their research and their contributions to the work of the academic team.

Terry Brotherstone, President UCU Scotland

David Bleiman, Assistant General Secretary Scotland

August 2008

Appendix: A people centred university system (STUC Vision Statement)