

STUC Presentation

Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Higher Education

The Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) is Scotland's trade union centre, representing nearly 645,000 workers and their families throughout Scotland. Its purpose is to co-ordinate and articulate the views of trade unionists as workers and citizens. The STUC welcomes the opportunity to present its views to the Taskforce. We believe it is crucial that those involved in delivering higher education are included in the dialogue on future developments in the sector.

People Centred Learning

The STUC's vision for higher education is one that is centred around people. Ours can be seen as an eighth model for the Taskforce to consider, which promotes a system of people centred learning, oriented around:

- widening access to higher education;
- the needs of the learner and supporting individuals through learning;
- valuing, developing and involving staff;
- harnessing all the expertise available in our universities to best shape Scotland's social, economic, political and cultural development and its contribution to the wider world.

Widening access to higher education

Widening access to higher education to improve Scotland's society and economy is vital. The STUC believes that every person in Scotland should have the right to study at degree level (SCQF level 10) at some stage during a lifetime. Such a provision would be available on a full time or part time basis, for those showing the ability to benefit from higher education and would be provided in accordance with the principle of free education for all.

There are currently significant barriers for specific groups of people in accessing higher education:

- Funding and fees remain an obstacle for many. Current funding for part time degree study is patchy and complex. We

welcome the conversion of the additional support of £500 for part time students from a loan into a grant for new and existing students earning £18K or less studying at 50% or more of a full time course. But most part-time students still have no access to loans or grants. With average HE course fees for a complete part-time degree of around £4,800, existing support is inadequate for most. Even the modest support provided by the Individual Learning Account is not available for courses in an HEI. A radical shake-up of funding to provide greater support for those in the middle income range (£18K-£30K) to engage in higher learning is required. The minimum income for students should be raised to £7000 and all students given access to the young students bursary.

- People are receptive for study at HE level at different points during their lifetime, but the current system does not easily facilitate this. Evidence suggests that people from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to be receptive or reap the full benefits of HE aged 17-21, but are more prepared and can gain from higher education at later stages in life.
- Current modes of delivery may be unsuitable for many potential students. When the right to access free education which we advocate is introduced, the growth in demand from working people would mean that provision has to respond and be delivered in flexible and imaginative ways that accommodate working practices and caring commitments. If we are to build a knowledge economy, businesses must also give time off for employees to access higher education courses.

There will be significant benefits for Scotland from widening access and providing free higher education for all:

- Education to degree level has been shown to improve an individual's life chances in terms of employment experience, socio-economic mobility, family life, health and opportunities.
- Future Skills Scotland projections of Scotland's labour market show that by 2017 Scotland will need an additional 138,000 workers with first degree qualifications, and 198,000 with postgraduate qualifications, underlining the need for a highly skilled workforce.

- It will support the development of a high skill economy, where we look at job design and skills development.
- Scotland can reap the social and economic benefits of advanced adult education policies.

Focus on the learner

Our people centred model envisages a system that supports learners and assists them to progress through learning. Strong student involvement at local institution level, and the development of the current Scottish initiative to gain a strategic involvement of student representatives at sector level, would enhance student engagement and influence in learning provision. The STUC's role in representing the learner in the workplace would be widely acknowledged.

The system would personalise learning, allowing flexibility, collective learning, and challenging stereotypes. Individuals would be empowered to function and co-operate successfully in a global economy and society. It is a system that would provide support for learners, identifying those who need additional support to succeed, and delivering this. The multiple and/or complex needs of all learners would be recognised and addressed, enabling learners to balance caring, family and work responsibilities successfully with learning. The growing network of Union Learning Reps would demystify higher education for workers, supporting them on their learning journeys. The Memorandum of Understanding between the STUC and the Open University would be strengthened, and similar agreements initiated in other institutions, to support more workers to access higher learning.

The role of staff in providing guidance and support, both academic advice and financial and "pastoral" care is critical. Work of this kind would be highly esteemed and never regarded as an inferior activity to academic research.

Valuing and developing all staff in higher education

Our model is founded on recognition that higher education is, more than most, a "people industry". The quality of education, knowledge transfer, research, student support, and the learning environment, is dependent upon recruiting, developing and retaining highly motivated staff.

Our people centred model envisages the involvement of staff not only in the delivery of learning but in the development of policy and the learning environment. Strong staff involvement at local institution level and the development of strategic involvement of staff representatives at sector level, would enhance staff engagement and influence in learning provision allowing a much greater sense of professional ownership. We would reverse decades of managerialism, which has de-motivated higher education staff by devaluing their professional expertise, to liberate energy through trust and empowerment.

To release the full potential of all staff, the system would deliver well managed institutions with modern human resource management approaches where partnership working with the recognised trade unions is at the heart. This would mean effective workplace relations and good employment practices. While a well found HR presence is required in every HEI, long experience shows that the pooling of expertise, through collaboration saving unnecessary duplication of effort by sector level partnership work with the unions, will deliver good employment practice more securely and in a less patchy, wasteful, conflicting and incomplete way.

The promotion of equality would be seen not as a burdensome consequence of employment legislation. Rather it would be an opportunity to be involved in the proactive implementation of the wide range of equality duties in service delivery, policy development and employment practice. This would ensure that everyone in the sector is equally valued and all obstacles to employment and progression are dismantled.

Security of employment would be a given, with a decisive move away from the use of fixed term contracts and casualised hourly paid employment, and the constant haemorrhaging of talent from institutions, and thus also from Scotland's science base. The whole sector will work together as associated employers so that no-one need be redundant where they can make a contribution to Scotland's higher education system. There will also be collaborative arrangements with other employers so that, for example, a hiatus in research funding would become an opportunity for a business, public sector or voluntary organisation to gain research expertise on secondment, instead of, as at present, result in redundancy of the researcher. We understand, of course, that getting from where we are today to such an effective means of retaining talent, will involve new approaches to

skills audit, talent pool management, funding mechanisms and may involve contractual changes, with a need for partnership work with the unions and extensive consultation with our members.

Continuing professional development (CPD) for all staff in the sector, both support and academic, is crucial. The STUC sees value in recommending a minimum of six days per year CPD for all staff in the sector (as has commendably been agreed for FE), with pro rata minimum entitlements for part time staff. This CPD would be delivered in a manner that is sensitive, accessible and supportive to the needs of all staff, particularly of support staff, and is supported by Union Learning Representatives.

Progressive Accountable System

This progressive, transparent and accountable system builds on the current relationships between the Scottish Government, higher education institutions, the Scottish Funding Council, the trade unions and students. This system has the crucial feature of democratic accountability provided by the link to the Scottish Government, through the Further and Higher Education Act 2005, the Ministerial Guidance letter, and ongoing scrutiny through a Committee of the Scottish Parliament. This model recognises and facilitates the role of higher education in Scotland's social, political, economic and cultural development. Our model enables the Scottish Parliament to influence the direction of higher education.

A strengthening of the Financial Memorandum between the SFC and institutions would broaden the scope of the memorandum to reflect the wider responsibilities of institutions. This refreshed Governance Memorandum would clarify the range of responsibilities institutions have - in terms of good governance, financial management, human resources, planning and operational matters – and underline the high governance standards expected.

The Scottish Government would do more to support employers to fully utilise people's skills, and to invest in learning and skills development through procurement policies. A social partnership model would see the Scottish Government, employers and trade unions working together to support people through learning and to utilise their talents.

An entirely new funding methodology will be required to support a system in which activity is freed up, esteemed and rewarded along a much broader front. At present, for example, academic staff are

constrained by the narrow requirements of a research funding methodology which overvalues publications of a particular kind. Other types of academic activity such as direct pastoral care of students and practical contributions to the wider community in Scotland are, in practice, undervalued. The current funding methodology does not meet Scotland's broad needs from higher education. Even teaching remains undervalued and this despite the fact that the majority of Scottish Government funding for HE is indeed for teaching. The problem is that the research funding is more variable and activity in HEIs chases the money which can be gained by adapting that activity.

The new funding model - which we acknowledge will require hard work and the widest consultation to develop - will facilitate broader and more effective contributions from academics and institutions for Scotland. This funding would produce useful outcomes for Scotland's social, economic, political and cultural life.

Our key idea is that academic activity will be oriented around the concept of "contribution to Scotland and the wider world". Respect for the individuality of academics and for academic freedom means that no concept of relevance can be promulgated which is narrowly oriented around economic, let alone business goals. Such a concept could only ever resonate with a minority within the academic community. The broad concept of contribution to Scotland and the wider world can provide motivation, esteem and reward for contributions which include the following examples (and there will be many others):

- high quality teaching and learner support,
- applied research and collaboration for business, public services and the voluntary sector,
- fundamental and curiosity driven research which may advance the frontiers of knowledge (for global benefit) and sometimes generates unpredictable inventions which may contribute directly to Scotland's economy, society or health,
- social policy contributions to the quality of public policy and public services in Scotland, which, can help develop the best evidence-based policies,
- the preservation, interpretation and development of Scottish culture,
- work of international importance which may save lives, avoid conflict, or benefit the environment.

Appendix

We believe that there is much that academics currently do quietly but for which they have little recognition and which is insufficiently disseminated and available to Scottish society. There is also much valuable work that academics *could do* but which they do not feel free to do because management (driven by current funding methodology) treat it as being of no value and choke off resource (time and funding) for such activity. We are convinced that there is considerable added value to be obtained for Scotland as the culture in higher education changes to one of an enthusiastic, self confident involvement in contributing to Scotland and the wider world in innumerable individually specific, expert ways. Normally one would expect such a culture change to take decades. However, it is quite conceivable that the move to a new and liberating funding methodology would, given the sector's existing high degree of responsiveness to funding levers, result in an explosive release of productive energy and the culture change might occur quite quickly. One of the basic ingredients of transformative change is that the introduction of change through partnership with the unions would give it a broad base and promote the widest possible involvement, understanding and trust.

It will be apparent that our model of the higher education system of the future cannot survive apart from Scottish society. It is entirely dependant on a vision of a Scotland in which Scottish Government and the wider society actively welcome the broadest possible contribution from our university community and take on board the fact that this contribution will at times be challenging and discomforting, as well as progressive, innovative and enlightening.

Scottish Trades Union Congress

17 April 2008