

Napier University response to the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Universities interim report.

Napier University welcomes much of the interim report of the Joint Futures Thinking Taskforce on Universities as a platform from which Higher Education in Scotland can develop.

We welcome the recognition that Higher Education in Scotland is strong and that there is robust evidence of the significant contribution the sector already makes to the Scottish economy and society and specifically to the Scottish Government's Purpose and Strategic Objectives. We therefore strongly support the commitment to maintaining investment in universities at a level broadly comparable with the rest of the UK.

Napier University has a strong track record in delivering teaching and applied research which is directly relevant to and transferable to the Scottish economy – activity which directly supports the Scottish Government's Purpose. Our success in this area is evidenced by our status as the top university in Scotland for graduate employment. It is the case, however, that since the modern universities acquired their new status in the early 1990s there has been little change in the proportion of public funds available to us to promote and build capacity in applied research areas in particular. We therefore welcome the recognition in the interim report that there is a case for reviewing the model through which research and knowledge transfer is funded. There is ample evidence that universities like Napier can, with modest investment in capacity building, quickly make a significant impact on supporting industry. The collaboration between Napier and Queen Margaret Universities, now being expanded to incorporate some of the Further Education Colleges, known as the 2KT project is an excellent example of how releasing latent capacity in higher education can directly benefit firms. For example, modest investment through the 2KT project and the Knowledge Transfer Grant has stimulated a significant increase in Proof of Concept activity in the University.

We welcome the recognition that in future it will be desirable to deliver higher education more flexibly. Flexible delivery and meeting the needs of all our students is a key part of our own strategy as is delivering the learning support required by students undertaking a range of patterns of study – at home and overseas. This also supports our mutual objective to provide an education, and associated career and life prospects, to all who can benefit from it.

We also welcome the emphasis in the interim report on the benefits of collaboration between institutions. Collaboration with institutions in Scotland and overseas has been central to our development. In particular we have been leaders in collaborating with Further Education Colleges and developing articulation routes for students moving between the two sectors. We agree that “new tertiary education partnerships and collaborations between institutions will ... be increasingly attractive to potential students” not least because of the new opportunities for flexible learning such collaboration has the potential to provide. Such collaboration also strongly supports the

objectives of the Scottish Government's Skills Strategy in facilitating the movement of students between further and higher education.

We also agree, however, that collaboration works when it occurs between willing partners who recognise that they will be able to deliver something new, or better, or more efficiently than they are able to deliver individually. Collaboration is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

We welcome the recognition that there are private sources of funding for higher education which have the potential to grow and we particularly welcome the recognition that the matched funding scheme in England for philanthropic giving merits consideration in Scotland.

In that context we feel that, focussed as it is on the relationship between the universities, the Scottish Government and Scottish Funding Council, the report gives insufficient recognition to the range of sources of income which universities rely on and the range of stakeholders with which, as autonomous institutions, they must engage.

We feel that we are unable to comment in detail on the proposed new funding streams, the general and horizon funds, as it is unclear how these will operate and how much of a change, in practice, from the present mix of formulaic and ring-fenced funds the new model will represent. We would support targeted investment in capacity building as outlined above if that were to be one of the objectives of the horizon fund. And we welcome the commitment in principle to impose fewer restrictions on how universities may spend at least the general fund element of Scottish public funding. However there are sections in the report which seem to imply a more interventionist role on the part of either government or the Funding Council which would concern us and we would welcome the opportunity to comment on more detailed information about how performance would be measured in the proposed new funding model.

On the broader relationship between the universities, the Funding Council and the Scottish Government we recognise that the work of the Taskforce itself has brought a new and positive dimension to the relationship and we welcome the proposal to take this forward through a new Tripartite Advisory Group though we think that further consideration needs to be given to the operation of this group to ensure that it is truly influential.

We hope these observations are helpful to the next stage of deliberations of the Taskforce. We look forward to the final report of this work and to the Scottish Funding Council's response to the interim report and their analysis of the relationship between the present and proposed future funding mechanism.