



**The Robert Gordon University
Response to the Interim Report of the
Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Universities**

9 September 2008

The Robert Gordon University is pleased to have this opportunity to respond to the Interim Report of the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Universities. In the interim report the Scottish Government outlined three challenges for the university sector. In the first half of this response we will outline the ways in which we are to meet these challenges. In the second half of this response we will amplify the challenges outlined by Universities Scotland.

Activities aligned with the Scottish Government's policy frameworks

One of the Scottish Government's strategic objectives is to secure that 'we are better educated, more skilled and more successful, renowned for our research and innovation'. As one of the best modern universities in the UK, The Robert Gordon University is proud of its graduate employability track record and the closeness to business and the public sector demonstrated through its commitment to placement learning and expanding its provision of continued professional development. Within its most recent Strategic Plan, *A Clear Future*, we laid out the belief that we have a very clear role to play in the future success of Scotland and the North East. This belief is based upon the significant contribution to Scotland's success and economic growth, for instance:

- In the last three years we have been responsible for 6 business start-ups (3 of which have had an initial investment of more than £100,000) as well as 43 invention disclosures, 12 initial patent filings and 12 license agreements. In addition to this we are in the process of developing a module in entrepreneurship that will be available for all students in the University to study.
- The University's research portfolio is focused on applied areas of relevance to industry and relevant service sectors, with our potential being recognised in that we were the first university in Scotland to have achieved a partnership with a venture capital company to support technology transfer and provide investment for spin out companies. One early indicator of success in technology transfer has been Gas2 Ltd who

secured £10million of external investment in May 2008 based on intellectual property from research that was undertaken by Professor Edward Gobina of the School of Engineering.

- The Centre for Obesity Research and Epidemiology (CORE) led by Professor Iain Broom has been at the forefront of obesity research at both a national and international level. CORE also manages Counterweight, a leading weight management programme, that is operated across Scotland and many NHS trusts in England. The research performed in CORE is in direct response to the rapidly developing research on the challenges that obesity will present the Health Service over the next 25 years and an example of knowledge transfer in a non-commercial setting.
- Only 12.9% of our 2007 graduates were not in jobs requiring a degree six months after graduation – this is the lowest percentage of any institution in Scotland and places us as the third best performing University in the UK alongside the University of Cambridge and just after the London School of Economics and Imperial College.

Learning provision in universities must become more flexible

We welcome the inclusion within the main body of the text of the interim report of reference to the 2007 Memorandum of Understanding between Aberdeen College and The Robert Gordon University, by which Aberdeen College became an Associate College of The Robert Gordon University. This agreement aims to enhance and increase the number of 2+2 programmes that are currently offered by both institutions. Currently most of the College's HND programmes articulate onto an RGU degree course. In taking this partnership forward over the next academic session we are exploring:

- the development of a website specifically highlighting the wide range of 2+2 courses that exist;
- the use of joint teaching teams across the institutions as well as pursuing joint staff development opportunities;
- the possibility of articulation from one of our degree courses onto a College HND course – where this outcome may best suit the needs of some students;
- discussing how we can align our student support and guidance systems to better support 2+2 students.

In addition to enhancing the opportunities and provision for widening access through colleges, we have also, in the last few years, increased the accreditation of corporate and other public bodies' professional development opportunities. These have included courses delivered by NHS Greater Glasgow and NHS Grampian and an MSc in Completions and Well Servicing Engineering and an MSc in Well Design and Engineering which are partly delivered by Shell. This allows us to develop and assist others to develop lifelong learning opportunities allowing employers the ability to upskill and re-skill their workforce.

Universities contribute to a knowledge economy through engagement with SMEs

Our most recent Strategic Plan has highlighted the importance of further developing and enriching our engagement with business. Given our geographical location and the ambitions for Scottish universities to be internationally competitive we have conceived of our engagement with business being as much with large and multinational companies as with SMEs. If we are to produce graduates who will be employable in an increasingly globalised economy then we will need to engage with large and multinational companies. Given this, while acknowledging the number of SMEs in Scotland, it seems odd that the interim report of the taskforce is so silent on the crucial role that universities can play working with large and multinational companies. It should not be forgotten that universities do have positive economic impact that reaches far into the economy and much of this is with large and multi-national companies. The role of universities in providing high-quality, highly-skilled graduates helping to attract multi-nationals to invest in our economy and locality should not be ignored.

Over the last three years our licensing income from SMEs has increased by roughly 690% and our consultancy income from SMEs has increased by 2110%. Our relationships with employers as providers of student placements – an established strength of RGU – mean that annually many of our students experience work and bring benefits to SMEs. It should also be considered that in encouraging co-operation between universities and SMEs it would be prudent to examine the means by which the demand for university services could be stimulated. Furthermore, consideration will need to be given to how SMEs can best be supported to develop the capacity to absorb knowledge from universities. Interaction with SMEs is a strategic priority for RGU, but creating a demand for university outputs is a much broader enterprise development activity that universities alone can deliver.

Realising the New Horizons: Delivering for the 21st century

In the most recent funding settlement for universities, funding for teaching has received a significantly smaller increase than that provided for research: funding for teaching in 2008-09 increased by 2.7% as opposed to an increase in research funding of 5.9%. Overall this has meant that this year's funding settlement has favoured the eight traditional universities (giving them an average increase of 3.87%) over the six modern universities (which have received an average increase of just 2%). Our belief is that much of the Government's skills agenda will have to be realised from the teaching budget and that modern universities, having the closer relationships with business, will be key players in delivering this agenda. The funding differentials that have been introduced with the most recent allocation of grant means that a university such as The Robert Gordon University will be hindered from

continuing to meet the Government's priorities let alone improve our ability to do so.

This is particularly true when one considers the increases in teaching funding that institutions in England have received for 2008-09. As one of the best modern universities in the UK we benchmark ourselves against the best in the UK. This is because we also compete against them in order to recruit the best staff to our institution so that we can develop and deliver curricula appropriate to meeting Scotland's needs. In order to keep abreast and continue to develop innovative teaching techniques as well as other support services to facilitate learning it will be crucial that our funding for such enhancements does not fall behind universities in other part of the UK. To do otherwise would be to risk that Scottish graduates will lack skills and attributes which other UK graduates possess. Whereas teaching grants increased by an average of 2.7% in Scotland in 2008-09, within England they have increased by 4.1% this year. In order to deliver the Scottish Government's priorities over the coming years it is crucial, not only that the General Universities Fund maintains parity with funding for universities in the rest of the UK, and that the monies dedicated to fund teaching within Scottish universities maintain parity with the funds reserved for teaching within those in the rest of the UK. The need to provide funding to address this increasing disparity between the teaching and research grant is all the more important if, as anticipated, there is an increased quality and volume of research in Scotland through the RAE. If there is no new money and research continues to be rewarded more favourably than teaching then this will lead to significant difficulties in universities delivering on the elements of Government's priorities, in our case, on our core strategic objectives as described above.

With regard to the General and Horizon funds we would welcome considerably more detail on the proposals that are included within the interim report. Particularly we would have serious concerns if any process for distributing the Horizon Fund between institutions led to complex and bureaucratic procedures. It should be borne in mind that when HEFCE has distributed smaller amounts of funding through such mechanisms this has disadvantaged smaller institutions that generally have less capacity to respond to such processes than larger institutions. With regard to the General Fund, we accept that universities make significant contributions to Scotland's economy, society and culture. Nevertheless, it must be noted that universities' outcomes take a number of years to achieve (for example, developments in research or the four years it takes to complete an undergraduate degree course) whereas Government's objectives are frequently shorter and more immediate. Finally, we would welcome clarity on the balance of funds between the General and Horizon funds.

Conclusion

As one of the UK's leading modern universities we see ourselves as delivering on many of the Government's priorities:

- widening access particularly from local colleges, rural communities and other under-represented groups;
- producing highly-employable professional graduates for the public and private sectors;
- engaging with employers in the development of not merely an undergraduate curriculum but also in assisting them develop and deliver their own CPD activities; and
- developing and maintaining a portfolio of research activities that are aligned to the needs of the economy and society.

Significantly reducing our funding for teaching dramatically impacts upon our abilities to invest in new and emerging ways of supporting learners to develop the skills required by our economy. It is important therefore that the funding available for teaching within Scotland's universities matches the ambitions set by the Scottish Government in their own National Performance Framework and distilled within the interim report of the taskforce.

We welcome this opportunity to respond to the interim report and are looking forward to further discussion around the areas we have highlighted when the final report is published.