



national union of students scotland

**The Response of NUS Scotland to the
Joint Future Thinking Taskforce
Report:
New Horizons: Responding to the
Challenges of the 21st Century**

September 2008

 | submission
scotland

NUS Scotland

NUS Scotland is a federation of local student organisations in Scotland, comprising over 60 local campus student organisations that are affiliated to the National Union of Students of the United Kingdom (NUS). NUS Scotland is an autonomous, but integral, part of the National Union of Students. The students' associations in membership of NUS Scotland account for 85% of students in Higher Education and over 95% of students in Further Education in Scotland.

Students' Associations affiliated to NUS retain autonomy over all policy areas, and may choose to make individual students' association submissions based on local policy. NUS Scotland operates a democratic forum for policy and debate on national issues affecting students and NUS Scotland's role is to reflect the collective position.

Introduction

NUS Scotland is broadly supportive of the direction that the taskforce is suggesting in its report 'New Horizons'. The report contains an outline of how the university sector could work with the Scottish Government to make Scotland 'wealthier and fairer', 'smarter', 'healthier', 'safer and stronger', and 'greener', and also how universities' contribution to the economy can be better recognised and utilised. However, it does not note how these changes will be implemented.

It is disappointing that the report does not recognise, unlike the OECD report 'Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society', that any changes to universities, their funding and operation, will have a huge impact on the lives of students, and that any changes need to be underpinned by a comprehensive student support system. NUS Scotland, along with many other key stakeholders, believes that the student voice should be heard and considered before any changes are implemented so that their full impact can be properly assessed. To date NUS Scotland has not been included in the taskforce membership, nor in the proposed tripartite membership, and this has caused great concern. The work of the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce has opened up an opportunity for wider discussion about the implications of the changes and this opportunity should not be wasted.

The Government's Skills Strategy provides a focus for the New Horizons report and the strategy states: *'we believe that all of our providers – colleges, universities, Community Learning, schools, private training providers, voluntary sector organisations and the Scottish Prison service are part of one and the same learning system, geared towards helping individuals develop the skills they need and with all providers understanding and supporting the transitions individuals make both into and out of particular courses or programmes'*. This can only be achieved if the learner is given the opportunity to contribute to this discussion.

The NUS Scotland response highlights how students will be affected by the changes proposed in the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce's interim report. It also shows how students can contribute to their universities, both while attending their institution, and after they have graduated, to help universities optimise and shape their contribution during the next 20 years to the Scottish economy.

Response to Questions

NUS Scotland is pleased to respond to the questions posed by the Scottish Government and Joint Future Thinking Taskforce (JFTT) following the publication of the paper '***New Horizons: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century***'. The JFTT proposes some fundamental changes to universities' decision-making processes and to the way they are funded. These will have a massive impact on students. We have, therefore, also taken this opportunity to highlight how the changes will affect students and raise any concerns about how any changes may impact upon the student body.

What robust sources of evidence could be used to demonstrate universities' contribution to higher levels of sustainable economic growth?

Many robust sources of evidence which illustrate universities' contribution to higher levels of sustainable economic growth already exist, these include: graduate employment, which shows how effective universities are at educating students so they are enabled to contribute to the Scottish economy; and student satisfaction, which measures whether students are confident with the support and learning experience they receive at university and that it will benefit them in the long-term.

Given the Scottish Government's – and wider education sector's – commitment to widening access, the government could also consider measuring how the income of different socio-economic groups changes as they progress through university education. This will help to measure the effectiveness of the widening access agenda at improving the economic contribution of lower-income groups.

How should universities and their governing bodies respond to a relationship which is lighter touch and more focused on outcomes, giving greater autonomy in delivery?

Following the Taskforce summit on 20 August the JFTT clarified that lighter touch would mean '*that non-essential work such as some statistics collections and the requirement for estates strategies from all institutions might cease. This would enable the SFC to focus on pursuing [Scottish Government] priorities, such as widening access*¹'. Many universities perform well, providing excellent learning opportunities and a rewarding experience to their students. For this reason NUS Scotland does not object to a lighter touch relationship between universities and their governing bodies.

¹ Taskforce Summit – points raised in plenary:
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges/16640/hetaskforce/plenary>

We also believe that although a light touch will be appropriate for the majority of universities, measures should be in place to identify those universities which are underperforming and to encourage improvement in their performance. Students should have equal access to quality learning, involvement and experience in Scotland, regardless of the institution they attend.

The effectiveness of any monitoring system will be reliant on whether the outcomes that universities will be measured against are reasonable, realistic, and reflect the true needs of Scotland and Scotland's students. We believe that the outcomes set for universities to aspire to should therefore include:

Learning and Teaching: Students will leave university with a full range of skills and knowledge which will enable them to contribute fully to society, the economy, and to Scotland throughout their lifetime.

Student Involvement: Students will have the opportunity to mould their own learning experience where possible and to contribute fully to the management of their learning experience.

Student Experience: During their time at university students will be provided with opportunities which will enable them to widen their experiences and will receive the support they need to pursue their studies and maximise their potential.

The Scottish Funding Council will have a key role in the development and measurement of the outcomes for universities, and should consult upon their content before they are finalised.

What will this new relationship mean for the Scottish Funding Council and its new corporate plan?

Given their work developing outcomes for universities, the Scottish Funding Council's new corporate plan should centre on the development of outcomes, their measurement, and how their introduction will change the way universities are monitored by the SFC. It should also show how the outcomes fit in with the strategic direction of the SFC, Scottish Government and the university sector as a whole.

What elements of Government funding for universities should be included in the general and horizon funding streams?

NUS Scotland understands that the general fund will cover the operational costs of universities. We believe that funding streams essential to the wellbeing and learning experience of students should be included in this funding stream, such as the Disabled Students Premium, discretionary fund, and widening access premium.

The report highlights how universities have important roles to 'develop higher skill levels', 'attract people into Scotland' and 'training the workforce'. It can only achieve these goals if prospective students wish to enter university education and choose to remain within university education. Therefore for universities to be successful at achieving their goals, funding streams that protect student welfare and ensure quality of learning for students should be maintained and protected within the general funding stream.

We understand that the horizon fund will cover innovative work which will help to develop universities and their working practices. However it is not clear as yet whether this funding will be additional money or a top-slicing of the funding that universities currently receive. Ideally, given the existing and well-publicised shortfall in university funding, we would like to see additional money for the horizon fund. If this is not the case, then, depending on how large the top-slicing of the existing funding will be, we will have great concerns that students may see their support services cut as a result. In this situation we would call upon the Government to provide some measure of assurance that student services will not be jeopardised by this proposal.

The Government has not given a clear steer on whether the strategic direction of the horizon fund will be government or institution led. NUS Scotland has no preference on this issue; however, we feel that whatever is decided, students should have an avenue to contribute to any discussions about how this funding is allocated. Should the horizon fund be directed into research, many postgraduate students will be affected by any proposals. Similarly should the fund be directed into innovative teaching practices or university services, students will also be affected.

NUS Scotland also believes that the horizon and general funding streams should be managed in such away that they do not encourage universities to specialise to such an extent that they limit the courses and services they provide. NUS Scotland is not against universities specialising in particular areas, however, this should not be at the detriment of availability and/or quality of other courses – this would restrict student choice and limit opportunities to learn in Scotland.

How can our universities help develop the absorptive capacity of businesses, particularly micro, small, and medium sized enterprises?

Businesses are one of the main beneficiaries of the university system, as they benefit from a well-educated workforce and strong research capability. Universities should be encouraged to form closer links with the Sector Skills Council(s) who will be able to inform them of the needs of different business sectors with regards to both staffing and research needs. Sector Skills Councils can be contacted through the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils in Scotland. All Alliance activity in Scotland is led and delivered through the four strategic working groups: the Employer Engagement Strategic Group, the Labour Market Intelligence, the Qualifications and Learning Strategic Group, and the Partnerships Strategic Group. Universities could engage with these working groups to develop joint projects and strong partnerships which will enable businesses to build capacity and universities to become more responsive to the needs of the Scottish economy.

How can our universities maximise the benefits of undertaking both research and teaching (given the Taskforce's rejection of teaching only universities)?

NUS Scotland supports the taskforce's rejection of teaching only universities. We believe that students benefit from learning at universities which have a strong research element as this attracts the best staff to a university and can provide inspiration for students. It also means that courses are continuously evolving to address the most relevant issues of the day, and that businesses and government are likely to be more actively engaged with a university. A strong research capacity also provides opportunities for students to go on and do postgraduate courses at their preferred university.

NUS Scotland believes that there is scope for students – both undergraduates and postgraduate – to take a more active role in the research undertaken by their institution. Some subjects, such as archaeology, already give their students opportunities to become involved in this aspect of their university's work over summer holidays, whilst other courses already incorporate an element of fieldwork and independent research (e.g. dissertations). This benefits students by showing them how their coursework can be used in practice, and provides them with a taste of how the workplace can operate.

However, research should not be prioritised at the expense of learning and teaching. In response to the question 'What elements of Government funding for universities should be included in the general and horizon funding streams?' we noted how the government can only achieve its aims through the student body, therefore teaching and learning must remain a high priority for universities. It cannot be emphasised enough, that today's

students will become tomorrow's business leaders, researchers, ambassadors, and even university principals. Every student therefore needs to receive a minimum standard of teaching which will enable them to develop their potential and contribute fully to Scotland in 2028.

The fact that existing students will be the future business leaders of Scotland is an opportunity for universities today. Getting students more involved in the wider work of universities will mean that when they are graduates in the workplace they will be more likely to recognise the capability of universities and the range of services they can provide to the economy, and to therefore utilise them.

How best can we support a growth in the number of postgraduate students?

At present the main barrier for young people entering postgraduate courses is funding. NUS Scotland receives many enquiries from postgraduate students looking for funding and several have expressed doubts about pursuing a postgraduate qualification when they discover the limited support they would receive and impact this would have on their finances.

Undergraduates can apply for student loans and many other forms of financial support. In most cases this funding is determined by the person's individual circumstances, e.g. their household income. In contrast postgraduate funding is mostly determined by the course they are taking and how accessible the funding stream is.

Research councils fund research and training activities in different areas of research ranging across the arts and humanities, social sciences, engineering and physical sciences and the medical and life sciences. The postgraduate courses they fund are usually focused on developing high-level skills and competencies for professional practice, and for research. They therefore do not suit some postgraduate courses. The Postgraduate Students' Allowances Scheme (PSAS) only funds certain full-time vocational courses, mostly at diploma level. Again, this funding does not cover many postgraduate courses.

Those courses that are not supported by either option already mentioned in this section are usually either linked with, and funded by, business, or are funded by the student themselves. In addition, when funding is available and it is outwith the mainstream funding streams it is not always widely advertised to prospective students. As a result the majority of postgraduate courses are simply too expensive for many recent graduates who are already in debt. This restricts student choice, and stifles innovative study.

We believe postgraduate support should be based on a student's actual means, not their course of study, although added incentives could be provided for certain courses where appropriate.

What does the recognition of universities as a key sector mean in practice?

NUS Scotland is unclear what the taskforce report means when referring to universities as a key sector. Unlike many business sectors, universities cover such a broad range of subjects that it is difficult to see how they can be referred to as a sector similar to Financial and Business Services or Life Sciences. However, NUS Scotland does agree that wider recognition is needed by businesses of the contribution that universities – and colleges – make to the Scottish economy. Many of the proposals contained in the document look to address this issue, and we hope that the suggestions contained in this consultation response will contribute to this work.

Making it happen

The Taskforce and Scottish Government have proposed that one of the key next steps to take the proposals of the report forward is the creation of a Tripartite Group. Very little information has been provided about the Tripartite Group's remit, although its membership has been proposed and is expected to include the Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council and Universities Scotland. The only information currently available on the Tripartite Group is that it will act *'as the forum through which the sector offers its views on how [these] new funding arrangements should be and are operating'*².

This response has described in detail how the new arrangements described in the New Horizons report will have a huge impact on the lives of students in Scotland. NUS Scotland therefore believes that students should have a voice to comment on the new funding arrangements.

It has been suggested that too many members on the Tripartite group will slow down discussions, and comparisons have been made with RoSCo to illustrate this. RoSCo was a completely different project which encompassed a number of strands, and reviewed every aspect of the college sector. In contrast, the description of the Tripartite Group suggests that it will have an ongoing monitoring role. NUS Scotland already sits on several groups of this type including the Roundtable Forum, the Skills Committee, Disabled Students' Stakeholder Group, Further Education Student Support Advisory Group, Widening Access

² New Horizons: responding to the challenges of the 21st century:
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges/16640/hetaskforce/newhorizons>

Committee and many more. Given NUS Scotland's proven track record of effective contributions to these groups it is disappointing that the Scottish Government feels that NUS Scotland would not similarly be a valuable member of the Tripartite Group.

Another reason given for NUS Scotland's exclusion from the Tripartite Group is that the discussions would be of a technical nature and therefore would not be of interest to students. To date, as no full description of the Tripartite Group's role has been provided, it has not been made clear how technical/administrative the discussions will be and in what areas the discussions will be focused. There are many areas where technical discussions would be of interest to students, such as the balance between research and teaching, linkages between business and courses (and the impact this will have on future employability), and the administration of students services'. Any operational changes will have an impact on the student experience and it is important that this is acknowledged as part of any discussion.

In the event that it is agreed that the Tripartite Group's decision-making will not impact on the lives of students, NUS Scotland feels that, given the importance of the proposed changes, students should have some way of discussing and raising concerns about the new funding arrangements and how they are operating. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning has indicated that the Student Summit already provides an opportunity for students to discuss key issues affecting the sector. However, the Student Summit is not publicly recognised, does not have an established remit, and covers a complexity of issues of which only one is university management. It is doubtful that the student summit could be used as an effective forum for discussing detailed funding and operational issues. For this reason NUS Scotland believes that further discussion is needed between NUS Scotland and the Scottish Government about how students can best contribute and express their views.

Submitted by and on behalf of the Scottish Executive Committee

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