



CHESS Response to Joint Future Thinking Taskforce Interim Report: New Horizons

Introduction

The Coalition of Higher Education Students in Scotland (CHESS) exists to promote and enhance the position of students in higher education in Scotland and act as their voice on national issues. By listening to CHESS as a national student body you can be assured that you are listening to the voice of 100,000 Higher Education students in Scottish institutions. CHESS reflects the commitment to voicing concerns on issues that really matter to students.

CHESS were the only student group that submitted a consultation document to the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce, and believe that this lack of student input negatively affected the interim report, New Horizons. CHESS believes that the involvement of student representatives in future discussions and meetings regarding the future of funding in Higher Education is essential, as they hold a huge stake in the outcomes of these processes. Student involvement allows them to shape the future of our institutions and to help develop the graduate economy thus ensuring a smarter, wealthier and fairer Scotland.

This response will cover four main areas:

- Funding
- Widening Access
- Government Influence
- Student Support

Funding

There is growing concern regarding the widening gap between funding for Universities in England and Scotland. This concern is likely to grow with the discussion around lifting the cap on tuition fees in England. Scotland has a world-leading Higher Education sector, which plays a key role in supporting and strengthening the Scottish economy. It is essential that it is treated as such.

CHESS welcomes the new funding streams being established, as it believes the Horizon Fund has the potential to develop innovative and interesting new ideas within the Higher Education sector.

It is essential that the Scottish Government clarify that all current core activities will remain funded at the same, or increased, levels and that funds being delivered through the Horizon Fund will be from additional sources.

CHESS believes that certain key activities should be ring-fenced as General Fund issues (i.e. widening access, support for learning and teaching, student support funding) and that these areas are of such integral importance to the Higher Education sector that they should not be left to a few specialist institutions funded through the Horizon Fund.

CHESS also believes the Taskforce should make clear the percentage of funding that they recommend should be delivered via the General Fund, and the percentage that should be delivered through the Horizon Fund.

Widening Access

While CHESS does not believe Higher Education is the correct path for all young people in Scotland, it is a key element of lifelong learning and should be available to all with the sufficient drive and ability. This should be regardless of social background, family history or financial limitations.

CHESS believes that widening access programmes should be funded through the General Fund thus acknowledging its fundamental importance to the future of Higher Education and lifelong learning and is concerned that neither the interim report (New Horizons) nor the Stakeholder Summit on the Interim Report made it clear that this would happen.

Widening access should be a priority for all HE institutions, not for a small selection of post-'92 Universities.

Government Influence

A key aspect of the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce is the 'light touch' relationship between the Scottish Funding Council and Institutions. This is a welcome addition, which acknowledges the autonomy of institutions and allows them to develop their areas of excellence.

However, this seems incongruous with the number of performance indicators and the Horizon Fund objectives being set by the Scottish Funding Council and Government, who will be pursuing their own agenda.

CHESS seeks clarity over this matter, and a true reflection of practice in the final report.

Student Support

Student support was notable for its absence from the New Horizons report. Students are vital for a wealthier and fairer Scotland and a smarter Higher Education sector. CHESS believes it is essential that student support and funding for students are subject to an independent review at the same time as the review of University funding.

CHESS acknowledges the step forward with the abolition of the Graduate Endowment, but rejects the belief written in the report that this restores the principle of free education. For the large number of part time students who study in Scotland as part of the lifelong learning agenda, tuition fees are still a huge concern, and can have a significant effect on whether or not to enter Higher Education.

Higher Education is still an incredibly expensive experience, with average student debt reaching £13,500. The Scottish Government's pledge to 'Dump the Debt' and replace loans with grants has not been fulfilled. The Scottish Government also legislated for a Minimum Income Guarantee, which it again has not progressed with.

CHESS believes that the Scottish Government should follow through on their promises to dump the student debt, replace loans with grants, introduce the minimum income guarantee, and remove tuition fees for part time students.

Conclusion

CHESS welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce's Interim Report, and has identified these key issues as areas where the Report falls short or lacks information.

CHESS also believes that a significant number of measures must still be taken to fulfil the Government's pledges on the future of student debt, income and widening access, which the Interim Report does not fully address. Issues such as the sources of funding, tuition fees for part-time students and the provision of wider access are at the heart of discussion of the future of the HE sector, and the nature of the Government's relationship with this sector is of fundamental importance to the course that Higher Education will take in the coming years.

CHESS requests that the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce investigate the points raised in this response fully, and incorporate the results into the next Report. CHESS also requests that the level of student input into the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce be reviewed, to allow the sector's largest stakeholder group greater involvement in the discussion that will define the future of Higher Education in Scotland.

1. New Horizons : Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century, 2.51
2. Push Student Debt Survey 2008
3. Abolition of Graduate Endowment (Scotland) Act 2008