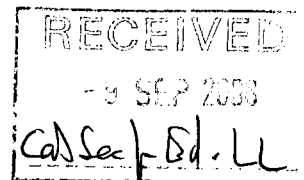




University of
Strathclyde
Glasgow

8 September 2008

Fiona Hyslop MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning
Cabinet Secretariat
Room 4W.01
St Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh, EH1 3DG



Dear Ms Hyslop

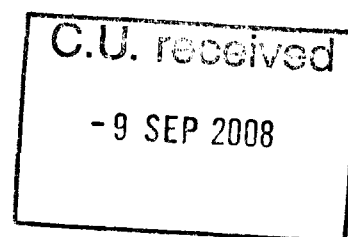
**Response to the Interim Report of the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Universities
*New Horizons: responding to the challenges of the 21st century***

I am please to enclose the University of Strathclyde's response to the Interim Report of the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce.

Yours sincerely

C. Court

Catherine Court
Administrative Officer
Governance, Management and Policy



cc.

Sir Muir Russell, Convener of Universities Scotland
Mark Batho, Chief Executive, Scottish Funding Council
Education and Training Directorate, Europa Building
David Caldwell, Director of Universities Scotland



A Response from the University of Strathclyde to the Interim Report from the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce for Universities

The University of Strathclyde is committed to the advancement of society through excellence in research, education and knowledge exchange, and creative engagement with partner organisations – locally, nationally and internationally.

The University's Strategic Plan focuses on research, education and knowledge exchange. The University already has extensive international links and is a global player in areas such as business, engineering and science. It is our objective to extend and deepen these international activities by developing and enhancing alliances with international partners. Furthermore, in addition to having a significant proportion of Scotland's international student population and postgraduate instructional provision, the University has a considerable history of productive engagement with the wider community through, for example, CPD in a wide variety of forms and an entrepreneurial network to support staff, students and alumni develop ideas into viable businesses. The University makes a significant contribution to the economy and wellbeing of Scotland and, therefore, is well placed to contribute to the debate on the future of higher education in Scotland.

This response is based on the University Management Committee's consideration of the Interim Report at its meeting on 1 July and also takes into account the comments received from members of the University Court. The University also supports the response made by the Committee of Chairs of Scottish Higher Education Institutions.

There were a number of good messages contained in the paper, which included the following:

- a. The high value, and significant size and scope, of the Universities sector was noted and welcomed, together with several references to the considerable contribution already being made to the Scottish economy and the wellbeing of Scottish interests more generally.
- b. There was welcome recognition of the autonomy of Scottish universities (and of the diversified income streams institutions have been generating).
- c. There was appropriate recognition of the fundamental place of research within universities and of the essential link that should exist between teaching and research.
- d. There was a welcome reference to the desire to make Scottish higher education more competitive internationally, although there was no real discussion of the measures necessary to close the gaps on international competitors and hence no real insight into or analysis of the Scottish sector's current position with respect to this.

These positive features, however, can be contrasted with a number of other comments in the draft that have a more worrying resonance. Our comments can be grouped into the following areas:

Governance Issues

The document seemed to be imbued with a politicised tone which at times is almost messianic, with references to the 'Purpose' being capitalised. It is unclear in much of the document whether this 'Purpose' refers to the political programme of the Government or the economic programme, or indeed whether these are separated at all in the minds of the authors.

The interim report assumes that the existing relationship between the Scottish Government, the Funding Council and the Universities should be viewed as a “fundamental principle”, but the essence of this relationship is that the funding council is indeed a *funding* body and not a *planning* body. There were implicit suggestions that the HE sector might well become subjected to greater planning and monitoring from external agencies. There is also concern over the role, remit and composition of the Tripartite Advisory Group and how this would operate in practice. It is particularly unclear whether this new group would have planning powers. The roles and responsibilities of the Funding Council and the proposed Tripartite Advisory Group need careful consideration.

The relationship, and tension, between academic pursuit in Higher Education Institutions and Government aims and objectives needs to be clear and transparent. Too close an alliance with Government, in terms of being an uncritical vehicle solely funded to deliver on aspects of Government policy, is inappropriate. Universities must continue to be allowed to use their autonomy to analyse government policy critically, particularly in areas of the social sciences. It was not clear what would be the funding implications for individual institutions if they were to use their academic freedom to question Government policy/approaches in the spirit of genuine academic debate. Would they be accused of having ceased to support the ‘Purpose’? If so, would this be reflected in funding decisions?

Funding Issues

It was not expected that the Task Force would solve the acute funding issues facing universities, but the central thrust of the paper: that there should be ‘something for something’, is worryingly vague. The basic thrust of the paper is highly instrumentalist: universities’ main role is to enhance the Scottish economy, an aim to which all other aims appear subordinate. This raises a number of issues: some, such as the freedom to carry out critical social science studies, are mentioned above; others centre on the hardness of the promise of ‘competitive’ funding. It is not clear, even with endorsement from the universities, that there would be *any* additional funding, much less the kind of additional funding that Scotland’s universities will need to remain globally competitive.

The proposal to allocate funding in 2 streams, through the General Fund for Universities (GFU) and the Horizon Fund for Universities (HFU) was also met with some caution. There is little information on how such a mechanism would be applied and indeed an approach which would orientate more towards funding the right provision in the right institution than ever before suggests the opposite of a ‘lighter touch’. There is no reference to the *balance* of funding that should exist between the two proposed funds and it was noted that even quite modest sums available through HFU could have a disproportionate impact on universities’ behaviour, which might not be beneficial. Furthermore, there is no indication of the definition of ‘core activities’ or assurances that the HFU would not simply be a new form of top slicing. There are concerns that the HFU would rapidly become a planning instrument which would lead to universities having to apply for basic funding that they might have expected from the GFU, with serious consequences for their autonomy and freedom of action.

KPI Issues

It is unclear whether the KPIs highlighted in section 1.17 are intended to be suggestions around which genuine, and measurable, indicators can be determined by the sector, or whether these are being proposed as sensible *actual* KPIs that the sector will be asked to accept. If the latter, the University of Strathclyde could not support these proposed KPIs since they are largely based on value judgements. Furthermore, there would need to be clarity regarding whether it was for the sector as a whole to demonstrate that achievement against indicators or for individual institutions.

In terms of the interim report, the responsibility for delivering a positive outcome for the Scottish economy appears to rest almost entirely on the shoulders of the universities. However, there are clearly roles that need to be played by other agencies, both internal to Scotland and external. This is particularly the case in relation to the issue of the effective engagement of the HE sector with SMEs. This engagement is critical given the nature of the Scottish economy and the plethora of smaller companies characterising it, but the cost of engagement is very high, and universities will continue to rely on third parties such as Scottish Enterprise and KTP Centres to assist in partnership development.

Research Issues

The document is highly focussed on the Scottish economy, but much of the research income obtained by Scottish universities is derived from the Research Councils that have a UK-wide agenda, and which tend to fund pre-competitive research designed, at least in part, to sustain the UK science-base as a whole, rather than that pertaining to Scotland alone. Clarification is required regarding the expected contribution of universities to the Government's Scottish Science Agenda; it would be a concern if the view being taken was that universities in Scotland should be discouraged from developing strengths in the science base not relevant to Scottish industry. However, if it is intended that consultation be held with the Scottish Industrial Base about developing the relevant strengths, detail would be required on how this would be funded. There is a danger that any such direction of activities in universities would stray into planning processes and the debate on the diminution of universities autonomy.

The highly instrumentalist tone of the document leaves little room for research into the humanities or social sciences. It would not be appropriate for research in these areas not to be funded in Scotland, or for the Government to instruct the SFC to disburse QR funding only to those areas identified as economically significant. Where would this leave the funding of cultural research? And where does it leave areas of legitimate scientific enquiry such as genetic modification and nuclear power which may not fit with the political 'Purpose'?

Other Issues

With regard to Section 2.48 there is a lack of clarity with respect to the type and duration of Scottish degree programmes that might exist, and the reference to a "blended" undergraduate and taught postgraduate experience needs to be defined. The draft document is also unclear as to whether the suggestions in paragraph 2.48 imply a move towards a blurring of the boundary between Further and Higher Education, a move that would not be welcome.

Finally, throughout the document there are mixed messages with respect to the purpose of collaboration, which do not necessarily lead to the conclusion shown in the 'challenges' section of the paper. However, it is clear that top-down mergers are not regarded as sensible and that appropriate collaborations should be developed instead. On this basis, the purpose of introducing the various different models in section 3.3 is difficult to understand. These models are not analysed in any substantive way, and are, indeed, dismissed with the most cursory of comments. The assumption is that they will not be considered further; is this correct?

MMM (CC), 8 September 2008