

DINNER/DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The future role of universities in Scotland

Held at The University of Glasgow on 3rd November, 2008

Chair: **The Earl of Selborne KBE FRS**
Chairman, The Foundation for Science and Technology

Speakers: **Sir Muir Russell KCB FRSE**
Principal, University of Glasgow
Sir Drummond Bone FRSE
Former Vice-Chancellor, Liverpool University
Dr John Brown FRSE
Chairman, Scottish Biomedical

SIR MUIR RUSSELL outlined the background to the setting up of the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce¹. He explained that the trigger had been a disappointing Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) settlement for higher education in autumn 2007, as part of the CSR, the universities had made a strong case for increased investment based on knowledge transfer, the excellence of research and the international nature of HE. The CSR settlement did not increase significantly over the three year period, and in order to avoid a stand off the Taskforce had been established between the Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council and Universities Scotland to map out the way forward. The interim report recognised the good performance of HE in teaching and research, the social, cultural and economic benefits of universities, supported the retention of the dual funding mechanism, and wished to retain broad comparability of funding with English universities. It was proposed that a tripartite body be established between the bodies on the Taskforce, that the universities would have an annual meeting with the Scottish Cabinet, and there would be a lighter touch regulatory role by the SFC.

The funding of the Scottish universities is currently on a different path from those in England, with tuition fees currently ruled out by the Scottish Government. There is different charitable legislation and regulation in Scotland. A good match exists between HE and parts of the public sector such as Scottish NHS and Scottish Government Rural Affairs. In terms of the relationship with the UK, the Scottish Universities compete very successfully for funding from the research councils, securing 12 per cent of the funding; hence maintaining good relations at a UK level are important. There is also a demographic challenge ahead, with a projected population

decrease in the 18 to 22 age range, depending upon migration patterns. Universities may need to work differently to encourage people at different stages of their career to engage with HE.

SIR DRUMMOND BONE offered a perspective from his experience in Scotland and England. He believed that the Scottish system had an advantage due to the flexibility of the four year degree. Demographics were a challenge, and there was a need to continue to be successful in attracting overseas students to maintain vitality. Previous success in attracting overseas students has been in a period of economic growth, and the current economic situation may make this more difficult to sustain. It is also in the interests of Scottish HE to encourage more students and academics to spend some of their career abroad. The four year degree can provide the flexibility to incorporate placements at overseas universities as part of the undergraduate degree. In terms of overseas students studying in Scotland, fees are only part of the issue on price sensitivity, are living costs far more significant. The cultural assimilation of foreign students needs to be improved, and the quality of infrastructure needs to be enhanced. In recruiting staff there is global competition, and Scotland needs to be able to offer a high quality HE environment, competitive living costs, and portable international education for the children of academics from overseas. In funding it is important that the universities maximise the range of sources of funding to achieve stability. Technology transfer was well advanced in Scottish HE; however there remained a demand side problem in the Scottish economy. The university sector in Scotland already provides a high economic multiplier which needs to be recognised.

DR JOHN BROWN observed that in the global economy it is possible for countries to compete on cost or on quality and innovation. For a developed economy such as Scotland has, it is clear that the

¹ Joint Future Thinking Taskforce Report:
www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges/16640/hetaskforce

only choice is the latter. We are competing with city states around the world, and to do so successfully we need to produce graduates with good disciplinary skills, but also with the ability to think critically. The practical skills required by industry need to improve, and there are strong potential benefits from incorporating work placements into degree programmes. There is also a need for access to top quality equipment, which could perhaps be achieved through pooling of resources. Universities still have a long way to go in research transfer, and are too cautious that they could be giving away a commercially lucrative idea. Universities are not the place to commercialise ideas. The key role for the universities in economic development is at the heart of hubs in key sectors providing access by industry to the expertise of staff and high quality graduates, alongside legal and financial experience. Government could do more to drive innovation through procurement policies and encouraging partnerships between the public sector and business to solve problems.

In the open discussion a number of speakers expressed concerns about the future funding of the universities. It was widely recognised that there is a need to increase the overall funding to maintain competitiveness, both within the UK and internationally. As tuition fees were currently being ruled out, the current CSR had not delivered a sufficient increase, and the Taskforce had not provided any new money, it is unclear where additional funds would come from. The case is being made by some English universities for a significant increase in the fee bands, and speakers were not confident that the resources would be found from elsewhere in the public sector in Scotland to retain broad comparability in university income of the sector North and South of the border. There existed a pressing need for the universities to make the case unequivocally of the economic contribution that they make to support the case for funding for the next CSR. Some speakers argued that the universities should promote the case for fees as without this component their competitiveness would be likely to decline from the current strong position international. It was observed that Scotland faced a fork in the road in HE.

Other speakers questioned whether schools were producing the correct range of skills for young people, with the view being expressed that in many cases schools develop pupils who can pass exams, but who lack the practical skills needed at university and in the workplace. The status of technology and engineering had been downgraded, and this needs to be reversed as the country needs some of the brightest young people to choose careers in these areas. Careers advice needs to reflect this, and the level of knowledge of science, engineering and technology in primary schools needs to increase.

It was also suggested that the success in recruiting overseas students could decline, as the investment that has been taking place in some countries, such as China, could lead to more of their students staying

at home due to the quality of the infrastructure and education available. This could put further pressure on available resources. It was widely agreed that there needed to be more of a two way exchange of staff and students to develop the relationship with HE institutions in other countries.

Bristow Muldoon

Useful Web Links:

The Foundation for Science and Technology:

www.foundation.org.uk

Joint Future Thinking Taskforce Report:

www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges/16640/hetaskforce

The Royal Society of Edinburgh

www.royalsoced.org.uk

The Scottish Funding Council:

www.sfc.ac.uk

University of Glasgow:

www.gla.ac.uk

Universities of Scotland:

www.universities-scotland.ac.uk

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