

The Royal Society *of* Edinburgh

Royal Society of Edinburgh Submission

The Interim Report of the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Universities

1. The Royal Society of Edinburgh welcomes the opportunity to comment upon the Interim Report of the Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Universities. The RSE recognises that Scotland's Higher Education system is one of the country's greatest strengths, and that our universities contribute enormously to life in Scotland in many ways. Scotland's universities do contribute to economic growth, but they also make a far wider contribution to civic society and the culture of the nation.
2. The Scottish Government's five strategic objectives and its economic strategy and targets will not be achieved without a strong higher education sector. The work of universities in teaching and research, coupled with their increasingly effective knowledge transfer activities are a key component of building a knowledge economy. In this context, Scotland has much to be proud of in its universities. They are one of its internationally competitive strengths. The technical excellence that they represent is a major attractor for research-intensive inward investment and has led to the creation of an increasing number of spin-out and start-up companies and the attraction of much international talent to Scotland.
3. The establishment of the Joint Future Thinking Task Force took place following the publication of the Scottish Government's Budget Bill in late 2008, following which the Scottish universities expressed disappointment that the funding proposals that had been submitted by Universities Scotland had not been met.
4. In responding to the Interim Report of the Joint Future Thinking Task Force the RSE would wish to make a number of overarching observations as follows.
5. The Interim Report correctly recognises that the university sector in Scotland is competing on an international level, and currently is performing very well on the global stage. Scotland must keep abreast and preferably ahead, of the moving target of international excellence if our universities are to remain the vital national assets that they now are. As such we welcome the challenge in the Report to ensure that Scotland is within the top decile internationally in percentage of GDP invested in its universities, and the top quartile of OECD countries for national investment in research, development and innovation by 2028. In doing so, the RSE believes that it is essential that a programme for achieving these levels of investment with interim staging posts is set out, in order that the delivery from the Scottish Government towards these middle distance goals can be measured.

6. The Report also indicates that within the context of the funding model that broad overall comparability of investment should be maintained with regard to the rest of the UK. The RSE believes that this is extremely important in securing the international competitiveness of the Scottish universities; as, if Scotland were to fall significantly below the levels of investment in universities in other parts of the UK, then the ability to secure the best researchers and students would be undermined. In order to achieve this aim it is important that a detailed analysis of the current resourcing level of the Scottish universities in comparison with their cousins in other parts of the UK is carried out, and the RSE would recommend that the Scottish Government, Universities Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) commission a detailed analysis of the current comparative position, taking into account all sources of funding.
7. The Report indicates a reduction in Funding Council oversight of the Universities in exchange for university commitment to address the priorities, particularly economic, of the Scottish Government. Whilst a reduction in oversight might seem to be a good thing, experience in higher education has shown that accountability for public money is far better exercised through a buffer body such as the SFC rather than directly through government. Examples abound in Europe whereby the efficiency of the universities to react to opportunity and need are dramatically inhibited because of direct accountability to government. This proposed change might well lead to a reduction in the freedom of the universities to operate efficiently and creatively. Moreover, current SFC oversight is light and not oppressive, except if a university were to get in to financial difficulties.
8. The universities in Scotland already contribute effectively to the Scottish economy, however the Report seems to assume a direct in-out relationship between the public funding of research and economic prosperity. There are many studies that have shown, even in the USA that a short term and direct relationship does not work.
9. Within the full context of public sector support for the universities in Scotland, the RSE strongly believes that the UK Research Councils work well, and ensure the high level of international reputation of UK research. The Scottish higher education community engages successfully with the Research Councils, achieves a high level of competitive funding on the basis of the quality of research in Scotland's universities and research institutes, and therefore the RSE supports the retention of this model.

Additional Information and References

Copies of this response are available from the RSE's Consultations Officer, Mr. William Hardie (email: evidenceadvice@royalsoced.org.uk) and from the RSE web site (www.royalsoced.org.uk).

September 2008