

RESPONSE TO THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT GREEN PAPER ON THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND

PASCAL International Observatory

PASCAL International Observatory is pleased to contribute to the policy debate on higher education in Scotland in response to the Scottish Government's Green Paper.

The European Centre of PASCAL is based at the University of Glasgow. PASCAL has other Centres in Melbourne, Illinois and Pretoria, and maintains a network of expert Associates around the world, all drawn from senior positions in policy organisations or academia. PASCAL Observatory seeks to bring research and policy together, and is focussed on issues of place, social capital, lifelong learning and innovation. A major programme of PASCAL, the PURE programme, is working on the regional engagement of higher education with local cities and regions, in 17 diverse regions around the world. PASCAL can therefore bring both a particular interest in Scottish Higher Education, and a more general perspective based on worldwide experience.

Response to the Green Paper

PASCAL welcomes the approach taken in the Green Paper in placing Higher Education in Scotland in its historical context and in the context of the education system in Scotland as a whole. PASCAL welcomes too the grounding of the subsequent discussion of issues on a statement of purposes of, and guiding principles for, Higher Education in Scotland. This provides a good basis for the formulation of policies and funding mechanisms to implement a vision for Scottish Higher Education. It is essential to keep such a vision in mind to justify a Scottish solution in times of severe economic constraint.

In this response, we offer some observations first on the purpose and principles offered in the Green Paper, before moving on to particular points relating to provision and funding, and an attempt to provide some answers to the three questions posed at the end of the Ministerial Foreword.

The Role of Higher Education in Scotland

The Green Paper rightly draws attention to three broad strands in the mission of universities in Scotland, namely to teaching, research, and what is referred to as knowledge transfer. PASCAL

would endorse these strands, but would want to ensure that the third is understood in terms much broader than may be implied by the term 'knowledge transfer'.

This third mission, sometimes referred to as community service or regional engagement, embraces a whole range of relationships between HEIs and the regions and communities in which they are located which facilitates among other things, knowledge transfer and, importantly, knowledge exchange. Research undertaken by PASCAL in diverse regions around the world within its PURE programme, confirms that these often complex relationships can and do serve both higher education institutions and the region. For HEIs, they serve to enrich teaching and the student experience and encourage the development of research possibilities and activity; for regions, regional competitiveness and social and cultural well-being are advanced. HEIs have important contributions to make to their regions not only through knowledge transfer and the stimulation of innovation for local business, but also in human capital formation, social capital growth, forging international connections, skills development, cultural awareness and sustainability. Knowledge transfer and exchange relates to both ideas and to people as staff and students link with communities, businesses and social enterprises to the benefit of the region. PASCAL would urge that this third mission is given prominent recognition, and suitably promoted and underpinned.

A second key point in relation to the role of HE in Scotland relates to its relevance and importance at all stages of the lifecycle, and not just at the 'front end' as young people make the transition from school to further and higher education. Whilst the Green Paper rightly explores a number of issues about this transition and the need for HEIs to adjust their offerings in the light of the changing school curriculum and in particular in Scotland, the Curriculum for Excellence, PASCAL would suggest that the lifelong learning perspective is not developed as fully as it should be. Rapid technological change and the changing economic and employment possibilities it brings creates a demand for continuing education at higher levels among mature students who will be at different stages of the lifecycle, and for whom more part-time provision, and shorter courses for up-rating or changing knowledge and skill requirements, or for personal development, will be vital. It is important that the HE offer and the support arrangements associated with participation are further developed to make learning as normal an activity through the life course as participation in other social and cultural pursuits.

Guiding Principles

PASCAL Observatory endorses the guiding principles set out on pages 3 and 4 of the Green Paper. Here we concentrate on only some of them, which seem to us as being of particular importance.

Getting in: Access

The first guiding principle is fundamental. The HE system should give all those who can benefit from HE the opportunity to do so, removing barriers to access where they exist. There is now significant research in Scotland, which consistently identifies a number of barriers to participation in HE for both young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and mature students. Real efforts have been made by many of Scotland's HEIs to address these, with some successes, although, overall, with a limited impact. There is a need to build on these initiatives.

It is suggested that developments might best be concentrated on three areas: more flexible routes in, more intermediate exit points with some recognised qualification, and more flexible stage points for re-entry and completion. The achievement of these will involve more systematic adoption of options which are often already available in some places or circumstances, including recognition of prior learning (RPL), more systematic progression through colleges to university, wider availability of so-called 'short cycle degrees', more shorter continuing education programmes, and more flexible student support arrangements which adapt to more 'episodic' participation in HE. We return to support arrangements separately below.

The current funding challenges to HEIs in Scotland may endanger some long-standing and well-regarded work in this area through departments of adult and continuing education, including shorter accredited HE which for many is an important ladder for progression. We would urge that the Government gives attention to assuring this activity, which is perceived by some as being at the margins in some institutions. In relation to RPL whilst we very much support the principle, there must be acknowledgement that rhetoric is somewhat in advance of practice, and despite at least two decades of discussion, there remains a need for a consistent, fair and efficient system both with respect to access and support for lifelong learners.

Getting through: Teaching and Learning in HE

Teaching and learning should be learner-centred (principle 3), and designed around the needs of the learner. It is important that teaching quality is maintained, both in terms of contact hours and in the expertise of those doing the teaching. There is already evidence of reductions on both of these factors in the face of pressures on institutional funding to date. The increasing diversity of learners arising from widening access and lifelong learning initiatives requires increasing attention to teaching and learning, rather than less, if a sound learning experience is to be provided. A mechanism for ensuring the sustaining of the quality of teaching and learning is essential. Practical steps, such as the scheduling of courses, and opening hours of libraries and laboratories can be of immense significance for the learning experience of especially part-time learners.

Getting on: HE and employability

We have argued earlier for the need to recognise the close and complex relationship HE has with the surrounding region. Whilst not the only outcome from participation in HE, clearly facilitating student access to employment in business, public services or elsewhere is vital. The PASCAL PURE study of regional engagement in 17 regions in 4 continents uncovered many imaginative ways in which students and employers were able to link which enhanced student learning, encouraged entrepreneurship and business skills, whilst at the same time demonstrating to employers how higher education institutions could help them with the innovation of new products or business processes. Again, these activities should become more mainstream, with appropriate support arrangements.

Lifelong learners learn when they are ready, and are motivated either by economic necessity (keeping or finding a job) or to further their personal development. Learners require comprehensive non-biased information systems, counselling services, academic credit for individual research, and portable credits which can be accumulated for a degree or other credential. Good practice examples of all of these are available from which Scotland can learn.

There are also examples of substantial university-based programmes of continuing education, either on topics of priority interest or focussed on specific skill develop requirements. These are an essential component of an HE contribution to lifelong learning, and to the development of learning organisations and learning cities and regions. Again, we would urge that such HEI-based activities

become more mainstream, with appropriate support arrangements, to which we will turn below. As we have already indicated, there is a real danger in Scotland that our own HE systems of adult and continuing education may be lost in the context of funding constraints at a time when the importance of the contribution of continuing education is rising.

Research

It is important to maintain the global excellence of research within Scottish universities for the reasons given in the Green Paper. Whilst Scotland has particular needs and interests, PASCAL would not favour funding being restricted to government-defined priorities: research drives innovation and should be supported to do so in known areas but also in areas as yet unknown or in fields which might be identified by a variety of stakeholders within and outwith Scotland. Scottish HEIs should be encouraged to develop international links both for facilitating a Scottish contribution to emerging ideas around the globe, but also to help import emerging ideas to Scottish contexts.

It is very apparent that Scottish universities, in common with universities elsewhere, take different stances towards an international research focus. It is the PASCAL view that there is nothing incompatible between a global, research intensive focus and one which is more regionally or locally focused. Each perspective can demonstrably enhance the other. Locally defined issues, in business, in public administration or in communities, can help define questions for more fundamental research; at the same time local solutions can be framed in the light of more broad-based knowledge and experience.

Funding mechanisms

We have argued that HE in Scotland should reflect both a commitment to lifelong learning and open access for all who can benefit at different stages of the life course, and also a commitment to place. Both of these require continuing high standards of teaching and learning, and of research. It is an enormous challenge to develop funding and support mechanisms to support this view of the role of HE.

Our starting point is that, seen in this light, Scottish universities should be mainly publically funded and seen as essentially a public good, important for the regional and national economy, for the

quality of professional and public services, and for bringing important benefits not only to participants but to non-participants too.

We would not favour more market-based solutions as proposed in England, or which operate in some other countries. There are a number of other models that Scotland can learn from, not least those found in many Nordic countries; England need not be the benchmark. Moves away from public funding towards more market-based solutions have a number of observable consequences which are summarised below:

- reducing student access;
- reductions to the costs and quality of teaching through use of lower level staff and fewer contact hours;
- more online teaching, often with reduced HE support;
- rising tuition fees as costs are increasingly shifted to students;
- increasing dominance of so-called STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and medicine);
- changes to the distribution of international students; and
- concentration on research at the expense of teaching and the 'third mission'.

None of these are desirable given the orientation we have proposed above. Rather we need a mainly public funded system which supports teaching and research, which facilitates learning at different stages, and which incentivises regional engagement. It is suggested that such a solution requires scrutiny of funding in both colleges and universities together, may involve some kind of entitlement to support at the individual level which can be flexibly deployed through time, and which might also include an element of the overall package dependent on the approval of some kind of community learning partnership of regionally-based stakeholders. If the role of HE is to be sustained in the broad context of the wider education system then the largest share of funds should be administered by an arms-length body with a remit like the current SFC.

It is conceivable to think of the flexible use of public funds allocated to training and employment to be used to support flexible participation in HE, especially in enhanced continuing education programmes. Regions should recognise that universities are a vital community asset, and should be able to place demands on the sector to help close the engagement gap which is frequently observable between HE and their local stakeholders.

In conclusion

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to go further into the details of how such an approach would work, it does provide a basis for some answers to the 3 questions posed by the Minister in his foreword to the Green Paper.

How to enhance the role of higher education in contributing to Scotland's success?

We have emphasised making a reality of the idea of lifelong learning through developing more 'episodic learning' opportunities, much enhanced, more entrepreneurial approach to continuing education, and an emphasis on place, and engagement with regional development solutions.

How can current resources be used more efficiently?

If publically funded higher education is seen as essentially a public good, then a number of programmes can be used to support the contribution of HE, such as colleges, training and employment and health as well as the HE budget itself. The distribution of funds might include an element dependent on the agreement of regional stakeholders in some kind of formal partnership with HE providers.

How to increase funding to ensure Scottish HE remains competitive nationally and internationally?

The answer to the second question above should lever in some additional funds and produce efficiencies in the system. In addition, tax laws could encourage philanthropic giving, and institutions could be more entrepreneurial in the development and marketing of specific services for business, and should be encouraged to maximise alumni contributions.

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