**Your Scotland, Your Referendum Consultation**

**Heriot Watt University Student Union Response**

**May 2012**

**Introduction**

Heriot Watt University Student Union is the representative body for students who study at Heriot-Watt University, and we represent approximately 7000 students. We exist to empower our student community to engage in and shape every aspect of student life. We work in collaboration with our University to create effective contributors to society now and for the future. We provide advice and representation on a range of student issues and deliver campaigns and activities focused on improving the student experience.

The Union has responded to this consultation because we believe that ALL our eligible students should be able to decide the future of Scotland. When school leavers join Heriot Watt University as Freshers, a considerable number of these students are not eighteen when they arrive. Because of this, we believe that the voting age should be reduced to sixteen, but not just for the Independence Referendum, but for the sustained future as well.

The Union does not just represent Scottish students; we represent every student studying at Heriot Watt. For this reason, the Union does not expect to take a position on either side of the debate. However, we believe the debate should be a fair and balanced from all sides, and the debate should be easy to understand and free of jargon. This will help to ensure that our students can have the facts and be fully informed in order to make their own judgement. There should also be a commitment from all interested parties that any questions which relate to their statistics or perceived outcomes will be answered with a clear and satisfactory response.

**QUESTION 2:**

**What are your views on the proposed timetable and voting arrangements?**

Students and young people are the future of Scotland, so for this reason, it is important that they have every chance to help shape the future of Scotland. The Independence Referendum is a once in a lifetime opportunity to discuss and debate Scotland’s future. Therefore, it is vitally important that it is done right and as many people as possible are engaged in the debate and not deterred or prevented from getting involved and voting. A high turnout for this referendum is essential. For this reason, the Union believes the vote should take place after students start, or return to, University for the academic year. If we are to engage our members in the referendum, we would need our students on campus when the vote is scheduled. This would mean having the vote in October or November to give our Union time to engage with our students on campus. Having the referendum at a time when students are at University gives us the opportunity to engage with our students, and the chance to explain the importance of such an important referendum.

Our Union will work closely with NUS Scotland and through the Edinburgh Student Forum to educate and inform students on the issues, and encourage them to make their voices heard in this important decision. For this to be successful we would welcome any opportunity to work with the Scottish Government and other stakeholders to both develop and deliver such activity to ensure greater engagement from students.

**QUESTION 3**

**What are your views on the inclusion of a second question in the referendum and the voting system that could be used?**

The Union does not have a conclusive view either way as to whether a second question should be included on the ballot paper at this time, although we do believe this has the potential to cause confusion for voters around the national priorities and what each policy would mean for Scotland. If two questions appear on the referendum paper, it is imperative that the public are fully informed about the implications of both options.

We do have some concerns on how the votes may be considered. If two questions are present on the referendum ballot, we strongly believe the option that gets the most yes preferences should be deemed as the preferred option. If more people prefer the devo max option, this should be pursued rather than independence, even if the independence vote gets over 50 per cent stating yes.

One option which would help to make it easier for the people of Scotland to decide their preference is to use the Single Transferrable Voting system and get people to rank their preference in order. This would mean that a third option – the Status Quo, could also be included. This would help people to rank their preferences in the order they would like to see them.

**QUESTION 6:**

**What are your views on the idea that the referendum could be held on a Saturday or on other ways which would facilitate voting?**

We welcome any efforts to increase voter turnout in this referendum, however, we believe that a Saturday vote would not be in the best interests for students. Increasingly, more students work at weekends, or use their weekends to go home to see family and friends. For this reason voting in person might not suit a lot of students. However, we are supportive of other efforts to increase voter turnout. We are particularly supportive of any efforts to move towards the option of voting online. We also support more accessible voting in places other than traditional polling stations such as libraries, and the ability to vote at place of work or study.

**QUESTION 7:**

**What are your views on extending the franchise to those aged 16 and 17 years who are eligible to be registered on the electoral register?**

Heriot Watt University Student Union is fully supportive in allowing sixteen and seventeen year olds to be granted a vote in the Independence Referendum, and we support any further moves which aim to extend this right past the referendum. Sixteen and seventeen year olds are old enough to make informed choices about their future and the future of their country. With challenges being faced by successive governments, issues can no longer be dealt with using the previous style of only thinking four years ahead. Changes made today (even more so in referendums, especially on independence) will impact on the next generation, not just the next election. For this reason, the next generation should be given the option of fully voicing their opinions.

However, the Union is concerned that not all sixteen and seventeen year olds will be granted the right to vote in the Independence Referendum. We appreciate that this might be out of the Scottish Parliaments jurisdiction as this policy is constrained by the eligibility criteria set out in the Electoral Register. Under these sanctions, some Scottish young people will not be able to vote in the

referendum while others would. This is a really important issue to address, especially if this policy could be rolled out beyond the referendum. We are deeply concerned that this will cause confusion and disenfranchise some younger people who fall into this group. Partial votes at sixteen could lead to young people arriving at the ballot box only to be told they are ineligible to vote, and also may stop other from voting who think they might fall into this category, but don’t. This could also have serious negative impacts for the future political engagement of young people.

Therefore, we strongly believe that extending the vote to sixteen and seventeen year olds for the Independence Referendum should mean that ALL people who fall into this age group get to vote, rather than only a few and we are very keen to see action taken to make this a reality. We understand that this will require changes to the Electoral Registration process to enable everyone who will be aged sixteen or over on the date of the referendum to be included on the register and therefore be able to vote. For this reason, we urge the Scottish and UK Government to work together to grant all sixteen and seventeen year olds the right to vote in the referendum and beyond.

**Votes at sixteen beyond the Independence Referendum**

The Union would also like to see voting allowed at sixteen and seventeen for all elections and referendums in the future, regardless of the outcome of the Independence Referendum. We do not want voting at sixteen and seventeen to be a one off event. We believe this right should not be a token gesture as part of the Independence Referendum. We would like all parties who support lowering the voting age to work together on this issue, and to ensure that the voting age is lowered to sixteen for the sustainable future. This would ensure that young people can have their say on a whole range of issues which affect their daily lives, and make sure that they are encouraged to get involved in democracy and take an interest in their country and the way it is run.

**QUESTION 9:**

**Do you have any other comments about the proposals in the draft Referendum (Scotland) Bill?**

The Independence Referendum will be a monumental vote for the people of Scotland. Because of the magnitude of the changes that the result could set in motion, it is imperative that the

surrounding debates, and the arrangements for how the decision will ultimately be taken, are made as inclusive and accessible as possible. No one can predict with upmost certainty what will happen to Scotland if it decides to be independent from the rest of the UK. For this reason, both sides of the debate need to be as fully informed and factual as possible, and not use scaremongering to get their point across. We are worried that these tactics may disengage students and cause them not to take part in the debate or to vote in the referendum.

Alongside NUS, we want clarity by the UK Government about what further powers will be considered for Scotland in the event of a vote against Scottish independence. In addition, students and young people need further information on the implications of a vote for independence. These facts will help students to be fully informed and help them to decide whether independence is in their best interests.