**The Post 16 Education Review**

**Heriot Watt University Student Union Response**

**December 2011**

**Introduction**

Heriot-Watt University Student Union is the representative body for students who study at Heriot-Watt University. 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.

We have a number of concerns with these proposals, especially the suggestion of university mergers. In addition we are extremely concerned that these changes are primarily economically driven, and that mature students do not form part of this review. We are also worried about how some of the details outlined in this review will affect potential RUK, EU and international students in the future.

**What more can the Government and its partners do to encourage more articulation between colleges and university?**

Increased articulation and collaboration between institutions should be encouraged by the Government, but certain aspects would need to be led by students, sabbaticals, and student reps to ensure that student interests are paramount. We do not want changes driven solely by financial savings, or by what the Government or University Officials think would be best for students. Although there is talk of Student Union involvement, this has to be the case at all levels of decision making. Unions can offer each other support through meetings and gatherings such as the Edinburgh Student Forum, where city wide student issues are discussed. Student Union leaders and reps from FE and HE through similar Forums could work closer together to share their skills and expertise in order to have a stronger voice and protect teaching and learning to ensure the student experience is fully considered.

Student partnership agreements should be a partnership rather than an obligation, and the Government should ensure that NUS Scotland and student officers and reps are fully consulted before any changes are made.

However, with mergers on the table the collective voice of Student Unions could be compromised. Each college or university would only have one Union, even if three are merged. This has the potential to reduce the combined student voice and reduce student representation if not supported correctly. With the student experience at the core of current quality assurance measures, it is critical the Government provides dedicated resources to preserving the quality of student representation during either articulation agreements or mergers.

If HN qualifications are to be changed to allow more students to progress into 2nd or 3rd year of a degree, we would still like the four year degree to be protected. We are already worried that universities are looking to restructure their degree courses based around RUK students and a three year degree could already be in the pipeline. No one wants to see unnecessary duplication as students’ progress through their studies. However, not all students will feel comfortable going into 2nd or 3rd year of a degree. The transition from college to university for a mature student who may have been out of learning for many years could be compromised if the transition is not smooth and seamless. Some 2nd/3rd year teaching in some institutions may be highly advanced so individual choice should still be allowed. The main benefit of a four year degree is the flexibility it presents and the chance for students, especially non traditional students, to integrate into a new system, even if it means repeating some of the learning. Universities also need to recognise HN students as a group of students in their own right, who would also need a formal induction process.

Mentoring schemes between colleges and universities should be encouraged as these schemes can help the transition for non traditional college students going to university. Prospective students could attend a few classes at university, to find out more about the culture they would be expected to learn in.

**What scope is there to make the transition from school to university more effective for learners, while reducing unnecessary duplication?**

If the Government envisions AH as being the norm to go on to university, we believe more support for non-traditional pupils would be required in order to help these students to stay on and complete these qualifications. This would be an essential part to widening participation. Although EMA will help to financially support these students, and EMA should continue to be protected, we believe additional mentoring support and readily accessible support services will also be required.

A Levels should be encouraged in more subject areas, especially outside of Maths and English to encourage pupils to think more widely about what they could study in further or higher education. College cuts should not affect any student from gaining the correct qualifications, including Highers, AH, and NCs, to gain entry or direct entry into university. A number of students, especially poorer students, could suffer if courses are cut. Some high schools do not offer Highers in every subject or offer any AH. Thus college learning is vital to ensure students have the variety of subject areas, which will help ensure students gain entry onto their chosen university course in a subject area they choose. Visits to schools from university students would be a good way for school pupils to find out more about life at university and the variety of subject areas available.

If there are to be changes to the UCAS admission system and prospective students are required to apply for a place at university after they have received their exam results, a number of considerations will need to be taken into account. Any changes to the application deadline could force universities to change their academic year and we are strongly opposed to this. We believe exam marks should be given back earlier, and any changes which aim to restructure the academic year should be avoided. The new system would also have to take into account any appeal processes, or extenuating circumstances that prospective students may encounter. We would not like to see any student having to defer entry to university while they await additional results or appeals.

**How can the quality and coherence of PhD training be improved?**

Improving the training that PhD students receive is not just about quality or coherence, other issues need to be considered as well. More needs to be done locally and nationally to improve awareness of what a PhD entails, and what funding and resources are available to prospective and current PhD students. More signposting and resources should be made available for students about where they can study a PhD in their chosen topic. It also needs to be made clear that a PhD is not just about research, it can also help skills development going beyond the world of academia. There also seems to be a difficulty in institutions organising training sessions when an unforeseen topic comes up mid-semester. Training seems to be provided on topics/ideas an institution thinks a student needs rather than what students may find they actually need. The quality of training also varies depending on who administers it. A more standardised, but flexible approach to training, would be beneficial for PhD students.

**Given the financial constraints, should we prioritise an entitlement based approach or the level of payment each student receives? What other options are there?**

There should be a minimum financial entitlement for everyone, irrespective of status, and then additional financial support should be structured on a tiered approach based on a student’s individual need. The current means test does not fully establish or take into account individual circumstances of a student or their family. A more detailed discussion is needed to identify circumstances that could result in having a negative financial impact on each student. For example, some students have been outcast from their families, but the Government still expects the family to contribute funding to the student in question, even though additional financial help may not ever be given. Poorer students, mature students and student parents should still receive the maximum financial support they can. This will help to ensure that widening participation is central to the funding system.

**Should delivery of financial support – irrespective of where people learn – be centralised? What are the pros and cons of this approach?**

The delivery of financial support for HE should continue to be centralised. The delivery of FE financial support should be looked at in more detail. There is the possibility that FE funding could be administrated regionally, but this would require careful considerations and further consultation. Decentralised support for FE can help the most vulnerable students as it gives a more supportive and localised arrangement for students to access help. However, SAAS has had its problems, and some of our students are still waiting on loans and support. SAAS needs to be resourced and staffed effectively to ensure that students do not unnecessarily wait for vital funding. This issue is even more exasperated when poorer and non-traditional students are waiting for fees and funds. These students cannot afford to top up their income if they have not received their loans and/or grants. This issue has caused some students to consider leaving their studies, and these students are accessing our support services more as they face additional financial, economical and emotional stress.

We approve of the move towards a minimum £7,000 income for the students from poorer backgrounds, and think that while resources are tight, this should be targeted. More and more students are working and some students even need to work two jobs just so they can stay at university. Additional financial support should be at a level that reduces or eliminates the need for any students to work two jobs. Individual institutions know their students, so discretionary funds should still be administered locally in each institution. These funds should be protected and increased as discretionary funds can form a vital part of some students’ income. Childcare and additional funding are important financial considerations for parents who want to go to college or university. It needs to be made easier for parents to access extra funding and to find suitable and affordable childcare.

We also agree with the idea of a simpler funding system, but not to the detriment of any reduction to student financial support. We have concerns that a new funding system could reduce entitlement cut off points, meaning some students who qualify now might not qualify for the same support under a new system. We would like guarantees that no students will lose out under the new funding system.

**In what circumstances would it be appropriate and fair to expect people to pay for their learning?**

We do not agree with fees of any kind, so we welcome the news that Scottish students will not need to pay fees to study in Scotland. However Scottish students are expected to pay up to £9,000 fees per year when they study anywhere else in the rest of the UK. This could be seen as a punishment for Scottish students who want to study elsewhere in the rest of the UK. The Welsh Assembly has committed to funding any additional fee costs for Welsh students who study outside Wales. We would like to see the Scottish Government also committing to this for Scottish students.

We do not agree with the quadrupling of RUK fees. We believe this is far too high and will hinder non-traditional students from lower socio-economic backgrounds from coming to a Scottish University. At least 20% of the RUK tuition fee should be invested in fee waivers, bursaries and accommodation grants, and 90% of this should go towards widening access initiatives and improving teaching and learning and improving the student experience.

Giving universities individual flexibility to set their own fees might be beneficial to the university, but it sets in place the marketisation of education. This will mean that students may well choose a university, not because it is the best university for them to study at, but because it is the cheapest. We do not want to see any student having to make decisions based on price rather than quality or academic ability.

We do not agree with the principle of an EU management fee, and we do not believe this will be legal under EU regulations. We would like any evidence on this that the Scottish Government may hold released so it can be assessed and scrutinised. We value our EU students and do not want to see them being charged unfairly. EU students bring many economic and cultural benefits to Scotland when they come and study here. More EU students come to the UK to study than Scottish students go abroad. Therefore, more should be done to encourage EU and international exchanges, especially to get more Scottish students to take part in an exchange programme or an Erasmus scheme. This would be a more positive and proactive approach than charging a Management Fee to EU students, as returning Scottish students will bring more cultural awareness, skills, languages and value to Scotland.

We are an international university with around thirty per cent international students studying on our UK campuses. International students cannot be used to further fund any financial shortfalls. If we are to attract more international students, they cannot be seen as cash cows.

**University mergers**

We do not agree with university mergers, and the recent failed attempt by the Scottish Funding Council to merge Abertay and Dundee University shows how misguided a university merger could be. We would never like to see any forced mergers, or the threat of funding being removed if a proposed merger does not go ahead. However, if any college or university mergers do go ahead, students and their needs should be paramount to any decision and not be an afterthought. Each institution ultimately knows its student base and this should always be remembered just after any merger and this should be taken into account when further decisions are made.

After a merger, courses need to be protected and locality for students is a must, especially for widening access. Courses that may overlap in a merged institution do not necessarily mean that these courses are exactly the same. Subject choice is imperative for students who want to tailor their courses and their student experience to their specific needs in an environment which suits them.

Historically it has been shown that during and immediately after mergers there is a negative impact on the student experience. The Scottish Government should provided ring fenced resources for the Scottish Funding Council to work with NUS Scotland and the Student Unions of merging institutions to ensure that the student experience remains unaffected. A review of previous experiences from other merged UK institutions should be conducted immediately to develop understanding of good practice during the process. This should form the basis of institution guidance on mergers from the Scottish Government. This guidance should be attached to a review method with penalties for failure to consider the students during the merger process.