

Speaking note: Scottish higher education: a model at the service of society

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, thank you for inviting us to your beautiful city.

I know that many of you had hoped to meet our Cabinet Secretary for Education, Mike Russell. He had very much wanted to be here today, but he has been unwell. And for once, has decided to obey the instructions of his doctor!

Let me begin by commenting on our surroundings today. It is the first time that I have seen this place. Gaudi created a truly inspiring work of art.

Catalan architecture is also very much a part of our Scottish Parliament. Some of you may know that it was designed by the late Eric Miralles, who sadly died before his greatest work was completed.

Part of what connects Scotland and Catalonia is our love of the arts and culture. We see it very much as being a central part of our identities.

Just as Gaudi and Barcelona are inexplicably tied to one another, so too are Charles Rennie McIntosh and Scotland.

For Gaudi it was buildings like this or his unfinished masterpiece La Sagrada Familia. For McIntosh it is the Glasgow School of Art or his School in Scotland Street, also in Glasgow.

The Scotland Street School is now a museum of education but the Glasgow School of Art continues to this day as an important provider of Scottish Higher Education.

It remains one of Europe's pre-eminent higher education institutions for practice-led, studio-based education in the visual creative disciplines

It continues to grow its reputation throughout Europe and beyond and has increased its research and knowledge exchange activities accordingly.

The Glasgow School of Art is a perfect example of how Higher Education is flourishing in Scotland and why our universities continue to play a crucial role within our society.

Scotland is a small country of just over 5 million people – fewer than Catalonia.

Whilst our land mass is greater, our population is quite densely located in a central belt, comprising cities such as Edinburgh, Glasgow, Stirling, St Andrew's, Paisley and Dundee.

Outside of this belt we have to the north Aberdeen and Inverness, and to the south Dumfries.

Between them, these cities are home to the 19 Higher Education Institutions of Scotland.

Currently there are over 280 thousand students studying higher education courses. Around three quarters come from within the UK- mainly from Scotland.

About one quarter of our higher education students come from outside the UK, mostly from China, India, the USA, and of course, the European Union.

Higher Education in General

Scotland takes education at all levels, very seriously. We are proud of the number of universities that we have in the World's Top 200 – no fewer than four. We are proud of our track record in research – we have one of the most productive academic research communities in the world.

We see education as the basis of social progress. It is the means by which we realise our potential. It is the means by which we satisfy our ambition. It is the means by which we maximise the contribution that we can make to life in Scotland and beyond.

Our belief in the importance of education is based on liberal values and a belief in the autonomy of higher education institutions. We often use the term – “the democratic intellect” – as a shorthand way of explaining the ideal that we are trying to sustain in our approach to higher education.

The term was first used by George Elder Davie in 1961 to describe Scotland’s determination to provide a broadly based education in the 19th Century. Davie investigated the way in which Scotland’s universities worked. He explained their blending science and the humanities in the creation of a rounded education. Davie’s investigation of Scottish Universities over a hundred years ago, is relevant today.

A belief in the democratic intellect in part explains why we still combine both the teaching and research in all of our universities. It explains why our universities are still independent of government – and why they will remain so.

But the world does not stand still. Three challenges are right at the fore of public policy towards higher education. And in Scotland we have had to face them directly. Let me tell you about the challenges and how we have responded to them.

First, Higher Education is now more widely enjoyed than ever before. Over half of Scotland's young people now study a course of higher education. Compare that with the situation thirty years ago when I first went to university – only around one in ten young people entered higher education in those days.

Across the United Kingdom, each nation has had to think how to meet this substantially increased cost, in a climate of public expenditure that is perhaps best described as “difficult”.

Second, elsewhere in the world, particularly in Asia, new universities are being created that will rival the research facilities of the very best in Europe and America. How will we maintain our standing in research amidst such tough competition?

Third, as a result of our wish for mass participation in an age of austerity, and amidst the rise of powerful new international research competitors, what should happen to the relationship

between higher education and government? Is the liberal model of autonomous institutions too old-fashioned to survive?

Our response to these challenges

Let me begin by setting out our response to the first of these challenges.

As far as the provision of undergraduate teaching is concerned, the approach that we have adopted in Scotland is closer to that found in many European states, than the approach adopted in England.

Many of you will know that in England, Universities are now allowed, in certain circumstances, to charge students up to ten thousand Euros for each year of higher education. It is part of an attempt to create a market for higher education, closer to America, than elsewhere in Europe.

It is too early to tell how this very bold experiment might turn out. Amongst universities, few have believed that it is wise to try to compete on price – fearing their reputation will be fatally damaged. And in the short term at least it seems to have led to a substantial decline in the numbers of people seeking a university place.

In Scotland, we have rejected a market solution and the uncertainty that it will bring for students and universities. This is because the Scottish Government firmly believes that access to higher education should be based on the ability to learn and not the ability to pay.

Those of you who are economists and accountants will know that this is significant commitment. Universities in England are amongst the most direct competitors of Scottish Universities. And to maintain the competitive position of Scottish Universities, we have provided them with sufficient public funds to match the tuition fee income that their counter-parts in England expected to receive when they set their fees.

What our policy says to the people of Scotland is that no matter where you live, no matter what the 'tradition' is within your family, no matter what all your friends are aiming for, no matter what some might expect of you in terms of "your place" in society, if you have the ambition, and you have the ability we will stand with you and give you both the opportunity and the support to be all that you can be, by means of excellent higher education.

What our policy says to universities in Scotland is that they are in receipt of significant public confidence.

In rejecting the market, we have re-affirmed our belief that access to higher education is a powerful means of creating social progress and a more just society. And it is for this reason that we take so seriously widening access to Higher Education, so that its students come more evenly from the whole spectrum of Scottish society.

Widening Access

‘Poverty is not destiny’ says the Ontario Educator, Avis Glaze. There is talent and potential aplenty in every part of Scotland. And yet only 11 per cent of those within our universities come from the 20 per cent poorest neighbourhoods. There is still much too steep a slope for many young people to climb.

Now I accept that widening access is also about changing other aspects of our education system too. That is why we are making fundamental changes to our curriculum in schools. We are making substantial changes in our technical and vocational education. And these changes are being combined with new routes into higher education that will help us to ensure that it recruits more students from households that have not in the past benefitted from a university education. Once these students have gained a university place, it is important that their Universities give them every possible type of assistance in completing their course.

Over time, our hope is that all these measures will work together to create a society in Scotland in which there is unfettered access to good quality higher education based on intellectual merit, both in theory and practice.

Research

You will sense that there is a strong cultural and moral element in our approach to higher education. In truth there is an economic element too.

Higher education is a fundamental part of Scotland's economic future. It will help us not just to develop a flexible and creative workforce, but it keep us at the forefront of knowledge. And with that in mind, let me now turn to the subject of research.

For small economies – like that of Scotland - it is important to exploit every comparative advantage. At the moment, research produced in Scottish universities is cited by other researchers around the world more often than any other country, in comparison to our Gross Domestic Product.

Our future will depend upon our keeping abreast of our global competitors within subjects such as medicine, biological sciences, mathematics, physics and the social sciences. We

will do this by being outward looking in our approach and vigorous in the commercial exploitation of new ideas.

That is why the Scottish Government's Economic Strategy identifies Universities as one of the seven key growth sectors of the Scottish economy, alongside with Life Sciences, Creative Industries, Energy, Finance, Food and Drink, and Tourism.

Our aim, is to deliver a collaborative research base that remains highly competitive internationally. The way in which we achieve this goal is through a substantial measure of collaboration.

In recent years, we have developed the concept of "research pooling" to encourage greater collaboration between networks of researchers across universities. Research pooling has helped us to create a new and distinctive research landscape across Scotland's universities. By concentrating investment on networks of comparative advantage, we have created powerful, well-resourced communities that now attract research talent from across the world.

International collaboration is widespread and growing.. Our close relationship with the European Union is of enormous value. Since 2007, Scotland has attracted 437 million euros in

funding from the current Framework Programme. China, India, and the USA figure strongly in collaborative activity too.

Last week we formally opened a world class Fraunhofer Research Centre in Glasgow for the study of photonics. It is one a number of significant initiatives announced by Strathclyde University this past year in advanced manufacturing and energy.

Elsewhere, we are putting in place a number of Innovation Centres. Their purpose is to bring together industry, academia and communities across a range of key and high growth sectors. This week, our First Minister, Alex Salmond will open three new Innovation Centres in stratified medicine, sensors and imaging systems, and digital health.

Soon we will also announce the next steps in our development of a Single Knowledge Exchange Office. It will serve as a single point of contact for companies wishing to do R&D business with our Universities.

One of the industries that we hope will benefit most from our investment in Higher Education is life sciences.

The Scottish life sciences sector provides employment for around thirty two thousand people in 640 companies. In 2009 their turnover was estimated at nearly 4 billion Euros. By 2020 we hope to double this figure.

Higher Education Governance

Let's now turn to the third challenge facing higher education. The challenge of governance.

I said at the beginning that Scotland believed in the “democratic intellect” and that this in part explains why we have turned away from “market solutions” to the issue of paying for higher education.

In the response to the challenge of global competition, our approach has been to make sure our research is competitive by promoting collaboration with international university and business partners.

But with such extensive government support what happens to institutional autonomy? Has it weakened in the face of increasing state support?

The Scottish Government's answer to this question is “no”. Institutional autonomy is a foundation of our approach to higher

education and it will remain so. We stand at the forefront of the Bologna process.

But there are two features of university governance that are worth drawing to your attention.

First of all, there is a new Code of Governance. We believe that autonomy does not in itself guarantee good governance. Rather, good governance is the guarantee of autonomy.

For this reason we have asked the Chairs of Court of Scottish Universities to draft a uniquely Scottish code of good governance for Scottish higher education institutions. That work is well underway. It will be a benchmark for good governance, developed for higher education, by higher education.

Second, we have put in place a requirement for there to be Outcome Agreements. These agreements are struck between individual Universities and, importantly, the independent Scottish funding Council – not the Scottish Government. It is by means of these agreements that we hope to demonstrate the return on substantial public investment in world class higher education.

Introduced for the first time this academic year, outcome agreements mark a distinctive change in our relationship with universities.

They cover the important things I have already mentioned including the commitment by institutions to; additional provision in science, mathematics, engineering and technology; widening access; and, the development of our Single Knowledge Exchange.

They cover the general issue of efficiency too. For next academic year our high level priorities include real terms efficiency improvements around 2 per cent. Improvements in efficiency will be reinvested in more university places, wider access, and the skills required by our growth industries. They will also help pay for investment in our Innovation Centres.

It is our belief that, taken together, the new Code of Governance and Outcome Agreements will bring about a relationship between universities and the state that will make for “responsible autonomy”.

Conclusion

If the Cabinet Secretary had been here today I think that he would have concluded as follows.

In Scotland we have fashioned a distinctive course for Higher Education. We are trying to be true to our values in promoting the “democratic intellect”. We are working hard to make sure that the widest possible range of people can obtain access to higher education. The ability to learn, not the ability to pay is our guiding light.

We have rejected the idea of a market for higher education teaching, staying closer to the pattern generally found in Europe than in the rest of the United Kingdom.

We see our commitment to excellence as the key to our future. It will require us to collaborate in new ways with the strongest universities and the most innovative businesses across the world.

Our approach is founded upon the autonomy of our institutions. But that autonomy requires good governance and strong leadership.

As educationalists we strive to share what we have learnt and pass that wisdom on to others. Not because we have to but because it is the correct thing to do.

Education changes lives. It provides opportunity. It allows our young people to enhance themselves academically and socially.

I began today by speaking about the artistic and cultural links that Scotland and Catalonia share.

We also share similar traits in how we wish to appear to the outside world. We strive to be seen as outward looking, self-determined, progressive, caring and humane.

A few weeks ago in Edinburgh we launched a university scholarship in the name of Scottish Olympian Eric Liddle – you may recall a film ‘Chariots of Fire’ that told his story?

As well as being an outstanding athlete, Eric was a student of the University of Edinburgh. But he was also a Scottish missionary who travelled to China to spread Christianity. He displayed many of the qualities that Scottish people like.

His path is similar to your own Vincente Ferrer Moncho, the humanitarian and philanthropist who spent his years in Southern India, working to improve the lives of poor people through missionary work.

Like Liddell, Moncho looked beyond his own borders to show that having a national identity does not stop at the front door, and that as citizens of the world, we have an obligation to others less fortunate.

Like Liddell he also died in the foreign land he worked in.

And like Liddell he too has an educational award bearing his name here in Catalonia.

Both these great men have shown what can be achieved by global citizenship. They both leave a legacy of learning, understanding, and most of all, values based upon achievement for the benefit of others. Their approach to life has shaped our approach to education.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your time today, it is a privilege to be here.