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Universities going green

At a time when environmental issues are at the forefront of the global political agenda, it comes as no surprise that the green credentials of universities are coming under greater scrutiny. In the recent G8 conference the environment and climate change was one of the main themes and the G8 declaration specifically referred to promoting education for sustainable development and encouraging actions leading to a more sustainable and low carbon society. In some cases universities are following the political tide, but in many cases they are ahead of the game. As the ranking and measuring of university activity becomes increasingly influential, environmental responsibility is emerging as a new and important measure of performance. The UK-based organisation People and Planet now produces an annual Green League Table on the environmental performance of universities in the UK. The Table ranks institutions by the traditional UK degree classifications (First, 2:1, 2:2 etc...) judging such aspects as their carbon emissions, level of recycling and water usage and their environmental policy. It aims to improve standards by recognising good and exposing poor practice. The 2008 Table, with 121 participating universities, reveals significant improvements in the sector with 71% of universities cutting their carbon emissions, 20% increasing the proportion of renewable energy used, a 25% increase in full-time environmental staff and 97% of UK universities having a publicly available environment policy. However, universities are cautioned against complacency with a long way to go before they are 'exemplars of best practice'.

A similar initiative in the US and Canada is the College Report Card produced by the Sustainable Endowments Institute. The 200 colleges and universities with the largest endowments are graded from A to F based on their performance in, among other things, climate change and energy; food and recycling; green building; transportation and investment priorities. On climate change and energy 14% of the institutions received an 'A' grade, with 45% of the institutions making a commitment to fight climate change through cutting carbon emissions and 30% making long term commitments to carbon neutrality. Whilst these figures represent a significant increase on previous years it highlights that in this field the UK is doing relatively well by comparison.

National and governmental strategic directions are also driving change. In June this year the UK the Higher Education Funding Council for England published a progress report and consultation on sustainable development in higher education. Key issues in the report include:

- Making sustainable development a central part of the UK funding strategy for future development.

- Tackling the perception that society is not moving forward fast enough especially where climate change is concerned.
- Encouraging universities to contribute to sustainable development through teaching and research, as campus managers, as employers and as protagonists in their local communities.
- Supporting the momentum for change.

Universities have a considerable role to play in responding to the critical concerns arising from the environment. They face mounting internal and external pressure to improve their performance in this area and the message coming through from the growing policy debate seems to be that those universities failing to 'go green' will increasingly do so at their peril.

Sources: Green League Table for Environmental Performance. People and Planet (July 2008) at: <http://peopleandplanet.org/gogreen/greenleague2008>. College Sustainability Report Card. Sustainable Endowments Institute (October 2007) at: www.endowmentinstitute.org/sustainability. Sustainable development in higher education: Consultation on 2008 update to strategic statement and action plan. HEFCE (June 2008) at: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08_18/08_18.doc.

Protest against cut in funding for Commonwealth Scholarships

A meeting was convened in London earlier this month to protest against the recent decision by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to withdraw its contribution to the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP). Distinguished former scholars including Germaine Greer and Professor Sir George Bain gathered to speak out against the cuts and argued that the decision was based on weak evidence and would have a negative impact not only on students and universities, but on society more broadly. While the CSFP was the main casualty of recent budget cuts at the FCO, the Chevening scholarship scheme supported by the FCO will also be seriously affected. The withdrawal of funding will end CSFP scholarships to the UK for students from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, The Bahamas, Cyprus and Malta. (Scholarships to the 'developing Commonwealth' are sponsored separately by the Department for International Development who have confirmed an increase in funding to the scheme following a favourable review of the Plan in 2007.) The government has defended its decision in terms of a strategic re-focus of priorities emphasising:

- The cultivation of relationships between the UK and international leaders of the future
- Support for countries such as China and India, that are considered critical to future foreign policy success.
- A more active role selecting and engaging with scholars and establishing long-term relationships with them.
- Redirecting scholarship savings to support priority programmes such as those focussed on climate change and the environment.

While these are reasonable objectives, there was general consensus within the meeting that the FCO had lost sight of the considerable impact of the CSFP across the Commonwealth, its capacity to deliver to stated objectives and to generate leaders both within and beyond the political and academic spheres. At a time when the UK is competing for international students and seeking to build strong international relations, withdrawing the relatively small investment of GBP2 million per annum from an historic and highly regarded scheme was considered, at best, ill-considered, and at worst irresponsible. Other criticisms included:

- The impact will reverberate around the Commonwealth, making it difficult to convince other countries to invest in the scheme and potentially encouraging other countries to follow suit and withdraw funding for the CSFP.
- The cuts will send out a symbolic message that the UK is not interested in fostering diversity and supporting the competitive position and profile of its universities.
- It shows a disregard for the values of the Commonwealth and was based on poor evidence.

- Above all, it was asserted that the decision goes against the enlightened self interest of the UK. Scholarships should be viewed as a way of enriching the UK sector by attracting the 'best of the best', as Germaine Greer put it scholarships and fellowships are not an act of benevolence but "a way of hitching your wagon to a star".

While a campaign against the cut has been launched by the Council for Education in the Commonwealth there is general pessimism about any immediate prospect of the decision being reversed.

Sources: Council for Education in the Commonwealth at: <http://www.cecomm.org.uk/details.php?id=59>. Open letter to The Times, July 14 2008: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/letters/article4326054.ece>. FCO Written Ministerial Statement 13 March 2008 at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmtoday/cmwms/archive/080313.htm>

Review processes underway

In March 2008 VC Net 76 reported on the announcement of a major strategic review of higher education in Australia, which is meant to herald a change in direction for the new Australian government and a firmer commitment to the investment in skills, knowledge and innovation. In June a discussion paper was released as part of this review. The consultation addresses the functions and characteristics of the Australian sector and issues are focussed on nine key challenges, including, but not limited to, meeting labour market and industry needs, connecting higher education with other education and training sectors and enhancing higher education's contribution to Australia's economic, social and cultural capital. It assesses Australia's demographic profile and potential areas of skills shortage as well as the need to broaden participation in higher education beyond the traditional school-leaving cohort. This focus is a reflection of the widespread concern that higher education must serve national economic development and progression. As with so many national policy initiatives and trends there is often a significant degree of international cross-fertilisation and the Australian discussion paper quotes from a recent UK consultation paper released by the Department for Innovation Universities and Skills – 'Higher Education at Work: High Skills, High Value'. This paper emphasises the need to 'equip the workforce with skills required for an innovative and competitive economy' and develop a strategy 'driven by demand from employers and learners.' A report on the UK consultation outcomes is due in October 2008 while the Australian review will be completed by the end of the year (with the deadline for the consultation submissions at the July) and is set to inform the Government's policy agenda for higher education in 2009 and 2010 and contribute to the long term strategic vision for the sector. We will continue to monitor the progress of the Australian and UK reviews with keen interest.

Sources: Review of Australian Higher Education: Discussion Paper Australia. Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (June 2008) at: www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/policy_issues_reviews/reviews/highered_review Higher Education at Work: High Skills, High Value (HLSS 4/08). Department for Innovation, Universities, and Skills (April 08) at: http://www.dius.gov.uk/consultations/documents/Higher_Education_at_Work.pdf

Key Publications - July 2008

This is a new section of VC Net. Each edition will highlight recent publications in higher education. It is not a comprehensive list but aims to draw attention to a few select publications judged to be of interest and relevance to our readers.

- **Higher Education in the World: New Challenges and Emerging Roles for Human and Social Development** (GUNI Series on the Social Commitment of Universities, 3) (GUNI; 978-0-230-00048-3; 2008 (www.guni-rmies.net/info/default.php?id=119)). The third edition of a themed annual analysis, reviewing the role of HE nationally and regionally in the context of globalisation. Includes related statistics and bibliography.
- **Learning Leaders in Times of Change: Academic Leadership Capabilities for Australian Higher Education** (Scott, G.; Coates, H.; Anderson, M.; 978-0-86431-978-4; Australian Council for Educational Research; Australian Learning and Teaching Council; University of Western Sydney;

2008 (www.acer.edu.au/documents/UWSACER_CarrickLeadershipReport.pdf) A study based on: a survey of over 500 learning and teaching leaders in Australian universities, workshops, and reviews. It focuses on the realities of leadership roles.

- **The Composition, Challenges and Changes in the Top Team Structures of UK Higher Education Institutions: Development Report** (Research and Development Series) (Kennie, T.; Woodfield, S.; 978-1-906627-00-3; Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (www.lfhe.ac.uk/research/projects/woodkensurrey.html) (www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications/research.html)). A practical guide for HE management which analyses changing roles for senior staff, specifically comparing established and more recently founded institutions.
- **Whispers of Change: Female Staff Numbers in Commonwealth Universities** (Singh, J.; 978-0-85143-0232; ACU; 2008 (www.acu.ac.uk) (contact: d.garland@acu.ac.uk)). The third such report reviewing the participation of women in senior management, administrative and academic positions in Commonwealth universities.

The authors, Jay Kubler, and Nick Mulhern, are always pleased to receive comments on the usefulness and content of this briefing. News from other Commonwealth countries, which might be of wider interest, is also most welcome. They can be contacted by e-mail on vcnet@acu.ac.uk or by fax on +44 (0)20 7387 2655.
