

Margaret Hodge MP
Minister for Higher Education
Department for Education & Skills
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Corporate Watch

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4th March 2003

Dear Mrs Hodge,

Re: need for 'joined up thinking': higher education policy and climate change

We are writing to draw your attention to a potential conflict between government policies on higher education and on climate change, and to request your intervention. We enclose a copy of our new report, 'Degrees of Capture', which examines the relationship between Britain's universities and the oil industry, and how this relationship impacts on the economics of the energy market.

You may have seen the Energy White Paper published last week by your colleagues in the Department of Trade & Industry. In order to prevent dangerous levels of climate change, the White Paper set a target of reducing our emissions of carbon dioxide (and hence reducing our use of fossil fuels) by 60% by 2050.

Climate change is a particularly interesting problem, from a higher education perspective. On the one hand, it is academia (in fields ranging from Physics to Geography to Economics) that has been foremost in developing our understanding of the problem, and in proposing solutions. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change consists of several hundred scientists from 90 countries – over 70 of them from Britain.

The IPCC's most recent report found that global average temperatures are likely to rise by between 2° and 6°C over the next century – causing widespread ecological disruption and economic damage, as well as threats to human health and the creation of many environmental refugees. The government's recent Energy White Paper estimates that each tonne of carbon emitted to the atmosphere causes £70 of damage – a unit cost that is increasing by £1/tC per year. Global emissions amount to 6 billion tonnes of carbon per year.

On the other hand, academia plays a key role in developing the technologies and skills which serve the economy. In the case of the oil industry, this latter role conflicts with the imperative to prevent climate change.

The report finds that a huge amount of university research resources are devoted to developing the technologies and exploring new geological zones for the oil industry. This increases our dependence on fossil fuels, and actually undermines the development of renewable energies such as wind, tidal and solar – in contradiction of the policy set out in the Energy White Paper. Meanwhile, many degree courses are increasingly being skewed towards simply servicing the oil industry's training needs. The oil industry now expects much of the training of its new recruits to have been paid for by the taxpayer, rather than providing

the training itself. By acquiescing in this, government policy is helping to build up the skills which take the economy in the wrong direction.

We note that the recent Higher Education White Paper re-emphasised the goal of higher education supporting the needs of business. If this is to be the approach, it is essential that this objective is qualified by the need not to undermine other areas of policy. In particular, considerations of public interest and of academic independence must take precedence over private interests.

We request that you work with your colleagues in the DTI and DEFRA to ensure that higher education policy is compatible with climate change policy. We further request that you review the principles of higher education policy so as to incorporate the broader public interest, and that you issue specific advice to universities that they avoid supporting unsustainable energies.

We look forward to hearing what action you and your colleagues in DfES will be taking.

Yours sincerely,

Greg Muttitt
PLATFORM

Andrew Simms
New Economics Foundation

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