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Corporate Watch

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Cc: Ross Finnie MSP,
Minister for the Environment and Rural Development

4th March 2003

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

We are writing to draw your attention to our new report, 'Degrees of Capture', which reveals some disturbing findings on climate change strategy and the higher education sector. The report examines the relationship between Britain's universities and the oil industry, and how this relationship impacts on the economics of the energy market. Scottish Universities feature heavily in the report's findings, and the report includes case studies of Aberdeen, Dundee and Heriot-Watt Universities in section 2, and Robert Gordon University in section 8.

You may have seen the Energy White Paper published last week by the UK 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.

The most recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found that global average temperatures are likely to rise by between 2 °C 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 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.

'Degrees of Capture' finds that the current balance of university-based energy research and development (R&D) increases our dependence on fossil fuels, and actually undermines the development of renewable energies. Oil and gas R&D, subsidised to the tune of £40 million by government departments and Research Councils, dwarfs renewable energy R&D.

On top of climate change considerations, it would also be in the interests of competition and innovation for government support to be focused on small, nascent industries, such as renewable energy, rather than mature, profitable industries such as oil and gas. The fossil fuel industry has the resources to fund R&D by itself, while the renewable sector is dependent on initial investment to get established. As the North Sea declines as an oil-producing area, Scotland's future will lie in renewable energies, especially offshore wind. Some are

taking up this challenge; for example, as the case study in the enclosed report shows, Robert Gordon University is very involved in developing renewable energy technologies.

‘Degrees of Capture’ also finds that only about 7% of oil-focused R&D deals with safety and environmental aspects of oil production.

We request that you review the funding of energy R&D in the higher education sector, with a view to phasing out all subsidies for fossil fuel R&D, in favour of renewable energy R&D, with the exception of oil and gas R&D which directly relates to mitigating the negative environmental and safety impacts of operations. We further request that you issue specific advice to universities that they avoid supporting unsustainable energies.

More broadly, we believe that the underlying reason for this conflict of policy is the historical unqualified gearing of science policy toward ‘wealth creation’. It is imperative that these goals do not take precedence over other policy priorities. We request that you review the principles of higher education policy so as to incorporate the broader public interest.

We look forward to hearing what action you and your colleagues in the Scottish Executive will be taking to ensure that energy policy, environmental policy and science policy are coordinated.

Yours sincerely,

Greg Muttitt
PLATFORM

Andrew Simms
New Economics Foundation

Rebecca Spencer
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