

# UNIVERSITY *of* ABERTAY DUNDEE

## RESPONSE

### A CHANGING LANDSCAPE FOR TERTIARY EDUCATION AND RESEARCH IN SCOTLAND

#### Foreword

1 This document constitutes the response of the University of Abertay Dundee (Abertay) to the Scottish Executive's Consultation Paper on the Merger of The Scottish Further Education Funding Council and The Scottish Higher Education Funding Council.

#### Introduction

2 The post-school education system in Scotland provides a key underpinning for the Scottish Executive's 'Smart Successful Scotland' strategy and provides an essential infrastructure for the delivery of lifelong learning. Anything that further supports that system will be of benefit to Scotland, while anything that restricts it is likely to be damaging. The current substantial divide between the further education (FE) and higher education (HE) sectors, which is manifest in the difficulties many students have in transferring successfully from Colleges to Universities, is a damaging factor in the development of lifelong learning. Processes which improve the articulation between FE and HE are therefore beneficial and must be enhanced and supported.

3 However, despite the need to improve articulation there is a real need to distinguish between the objectives of FE and HE. FE is designed to provide skills training and at its best produces students who can move rapidly into employment, especially at more technical levels. FE also has a huge role to play in wider participation locally and regionally and, if FE/HE linkages were better, would be the natural route into Universities for many of those with non-standard qualifications. The role of HE is to develop thinking at a more generic level and with a more national and international perspective. Abertay very much supports the view of the Scottish Executive that all those who can benefit from the HE experience should be allowed to participate, and be facilitated to do so.

4 The Scottish Credit & Qualifications Framework (SCQF) provides the means by which lifelong learners should be able to make a seamless transition from College to University (and from University to College). However, despite the presence of clear overlaps in curriculum, such an easy transition is not yet the case, with many institutions, particularly the older universities, failing to implement the SCQF to its fullest extent. The proposed merger of the funding councils constitutes a further step in developing seamless post-school education, but must be accompanied by a real willingness to ensure that the benefits of the SCQF are fully realised.

5 Abertay does not believe that the distinction between the FE processes and qualifications and those of HE should be blurred. Students need to be clear about the differences in approach and outcome and their respective advantages and disadvantages. However, despite these differences, progression from FE to HE (or indeed in transfer the other way) should be encouraged and facilitated.

6 Improving articulation between FECs and HEIs, and exploiting to the full the opportunities afforded by the SCQF, will lead to an enormous gain for students, and for the nation. Less time will be wasted by students duplicating their learning by, in effect, repeating years of courses in different institutions, and the total number of 'student years' could potentially be reduced. Whilst merging the Funding Councils might not necessarily be a prerequisite of closer links between FE and HE, the significance of the message sent out to the post-school sector by the proposed merger should not be underestimated.

#### *Specific issues*

- Overall, Abertay considers that the proposed merger of SHEFC and SFEFC will enable the more effective development of a lifelong learning strategy for Scotland and the creation of a more co-ordinated contribution to the Smart Successful Scotland strategy. By doing so, it is likely that the link between education and wealth generation will be greatly enhanced.
- Abertay considers that the proposed funding council merger will inevitably hasten the development of a seamless post-school education system which allows learners to progress smoothly to whatever stage is most appropriate to them at any particular stage in their lives. The proposed merger will facilitate all institutions across FE and HE to commit to implement the SCQF to its fullest extent, as it constitutes the 'toolkit' essential to enabling students to transfer between institutions.
- Abertay supports the proposal that a distinction be retained between FE, with its concentration on skills development and wide participation, and HE with its emphasis on the development of creative thinking. However, in agreement with the consultation paper, we do not believe that the difference of mission in FE and HE should be a barrier to articulation.
- The proposals suggest that the merger of the funding councils will not realise cost savings. At a time of governmental focus on eliminating wasteful bureaucracy and encouraging innovation and entrepreneurialism, it is a little disappointing that it appears that efficiencies cannot be gained and the University would encourage the Scottish executive to revisit this issue.
- Abertay interprets the consultation paper as the first stage in a process that will result in closer cooperation between FECs and HEIs. The paper asks how such a process could be facilitated. Full funding of initiatives resulting in closer ties and for feasibility studies regarding alignment of provision represents a probable way forward (see also *Mechanisms for Improved FE/HE Networking* below).

#### **Diversity of mission**

7 Abertay welcomes the emphasis in the consultation paper on the need for diversity in the tertiary education sector. Abertay is emerging as a new type of University, developing new subject areas (such as computer arts), profiling Scotland internationally (for example, through its Dare to be Digital competition) and working in totally novel and distinctive ways. Diversity of mission however can only be maintained if funding mechanisms are designed which are sensitive to institutional diversity. Abertay considers that SHEFC, with its various funding initiatives, has in the past been in some

part sensitive to this issue. However, we strongly believe that there is an urgent need for the merged Funding Council to engage in more creative and innovative thinking about how institutions are funded so that diversity and distinctiveness is supported. It must also ensure that those institutions that align themselves with, and contribute to, the achievement of national priorities are properly rewarded.

8 SHEFC, as it currently exists, has a tendency towards micromanagement and often seems to take an overly mechanistic approach to funding decisions. This must not be carried forward into the merged body. Abertay considers that the proposals as they stand do not propose a sufficiently radical overhaul of executive structures and staffing to be certain that the new Council will have the capacity and capability to be able to meet these challenges.

9 The threat to innovation in the tertiary education sector is exemplified by the introduction of the Transparency Review (TRAC) and full economic costing (FEC) of research. Between them TRAC and FEC will help to stifle new developments and creativity within the university sector and particularly among the new universities. The imposition of the joint burden of TRAC and FEC is being driven by the desire, south of the border, to develop a somewhat different tertiary education sector. Its introduction north of the border is inconsistent in policy terms with the stated intention of the Scottish Executive that all universities should be research active and will seriously compromise the research activities of Scotland's new universities in particular.

#### *Response to specific issues*

- Abertay rejects the categorisation of universities put forward in the consultation. This proposed differentiation of universities is unnecessary and has the potential to harm the image of Scottish higher education, particularly in overseas markets, at a time when there is great pride in the strong branding and image of Scottish higher education.
- The Scottish Executive should demonstrate its confidence in the ability of a diverse Scottish higher education sector, with enterprising and dynamic leadership and governance, to strategically respond to their markets and to exploit new opportunities that present themselves, rather than look to plan institutions.
- Abertay considers that the Scottish Executive could further enhance the Bill by recognising the need for diversity, and should introduce clauses that free up opportunities for organisations to be distinctive, innovative and forward-thinking. The new Council must have the capacity and capability to find ways to fund diverse institutions making distinctive contributions to Scotland and not take a 'one size fits all' approach to funding.

#### **Research**

10 Scotland's older Universities continue to be forthright in calling on Ministers to maintain the status quo that is provided by the dual support system. Their aspiration is to compete for research prestige with institutions such as Harvard and MIT. That aspiration is flawed. It ignores the fact that those universities are private institutions with access to enormous endowment income; levels of funding that could never be matched by the public purse in Scotland. Moreover, even if Scotland could afford to do so, it is highly questionable that it should. A much more pressing need is to respond to the agenda of working for a smart, successful Scotland, focusing our research on fields

of strategic importance that are aligned with the needs of our industries and that can enable us to translate academic innovation into economic advantage.

11 To some extent the desire for Universities to support their research has subverted arguments about the linkage between FE and HE and we believe that a rethink of research funding in universities is therefore timely. Indeed, Abertay would very strongly support the abolition of the dual funding mechanism, with its hugely expensive RAE process. That system was designed to provide an appropriate research infrastructure for all institutions, but has failed to achieve its purpose, particularly in respect of the needs of the new universities.

12 Most research funding rewards past performance and does not facilitate future success or support emerging excellence. The proportion of SHEFC research funding received by each University (including Abertay) has barely altered in the past 10 years. Yet during that time, Abertay has trebled its total research income. Other organisations that fund research, including the research councils, have therefore recognised the increasing relevance of Abertay's research and have been keen to support it with a greater share of the funds they have available, but the model used by the Funding Council has failed to do so. It would therefore be far more appropriate and equitable to allocate all research funding on a competitive basis through the research councils.

13 Finally, research funded by the Scottish Executive should be more closely joined up with joint initiatives from the new Funding Council, SEERAD, Scottish Executive, Scottish Fisheries Research Service, SHERT, etc. being coordinated centrally and in conjunction with the UK Research Councils. Research of direct economic relevance must be better recognised and supported, with funding initiatives taking cognisance of possible benefits to the economic, social and cultural development of Scotland.

#### *Specific issues*

- Abertay considers that the University sector should review its research provision on a cross institution basis (as in the current 'pooling exercise'). However, this should not be done as an adjunct to extracting more funds from the Executive for research, but rather to improve efficiency.
- The dual support system for University research should be abolished, or the research funding awarded by the new Council should be directly related to Research Council income to ensure it reflects current performance and future potential rather than a historic position.
- Infrastructure support for research should be available to any institution that receives funding from a UK Research Council.
- Research in the education sector should be joined seamlessly to other Executive-funded research in Scotland.
- Investment in new universities must be addressed immediately and radically. When they were created, no investment was made to provide them with an appropriate research infrastructure; they were simply placed in competition against the old universities. Despite this, many new universities have progressed enormously in their capacity and capability to undertake research and in their success in obtaining research council grants. It is essential that the infrastructure

requirements of the new universities are properly addressed by the new funding council to ensure that they can achieve their full potential.

### **Mechanisms for improved FE/HE networking**

14 Of specific interest to Abertay, and an area in which it is recognised within the Consultation Paper as contributing significantly, is fostering the linkages between FE and HE (through, for example, the Abertay Fife University Project – AFUP). The AFUP, which now includes Glenrothes College, has recently been supplemented by new formal links between Abertay and Dundee, Elmwood and Angus Colleges, with links now being formed with Falkirk College also. We propose two methods by which such linkages could be enhanced: (a) the development of regional, or national, sets of colleges delivering a ‘Collegiate Tertiary Education’ system for Scotland or for regions of Scotland; and (b) the facilitation of specific mergers between parties, where such mergers are ‘driven by a belief in their value shared by the organisations concerned’ (from the Consultation Paper).

15 A Collegiate Tertiary Education system: ease of progression of students through different institutions, coupled with facilitated lifelong learning, needs closer ties between geographically related institutions and, in the case of specialist subject areas, closer ties in discipline-related institutions. This has started, and there are numerous agreements being signed between potential partner institutions. However, there is limited earmarked funding available to assist in this process. We would suggest that there should be significant rewards to institutions that develop efficient articulation agreements and such rewards should be used to facilitate the development of formal networks of appropriate organisations resulting, ultimately, in a more collegiate style approach to FE/HE provision. For example, it would make sense for all new programme developments in institution A to be discussed with other institutions within the local, or discipline network, to ensure the alignment of the curriculum and facilitate articulation using the SCQF. It is understood that not all programme areas would be suitable for articulation (e.g. medicine) but the vast majority of students in FE/HE should be on programmes that would allow them easy transfer to other institutions as appropriate.

16 Closer alignment of organisations coupled with alignment of institutional core values may, in time, result in institutions wishing to merge. Whilst we would support any facilitation to help mergers, we believe that they should emerge naturally and progressively as a result of co-operation over extended time periods. We do not believe that enforced mergers would be sensible, desirable or workable. Institutions in the sector should be encouraged (and funded where necessary) to undertake initiatives that lead to the sharing of support services wherever possible (for example, libraries, payroll functions, IT, HR, finance offices etc). Restrictions to facilitating such economies should be removed.

#### *Specific issues*

- Abertay would be interested in developing a collegiate scheme of this type in the Tayside/Fife area with a view to developing a network including all Colleges in within commuting distance of Dundee.
- Abertay requests that specific funding is earmarked to allow Colleges and Universities to work more closely together in all areas of curriculum development and delivery with a view to forming effective networks

- Funding should be available to facilitate mergers where organisations can demonstrate common values and benefits for students.

## **Funding**

17 A merger of the sectors could, indeed should, result in increased efficiency. Abertay's view is that such efficiencies should not result in lower funding levels to the sector, nor to increase expenditure in research. Rather, it should be used to invest in teaching and in the levels of support provided to institutions recruiting students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. It is likely also that improved articulation will result in loss of funded numbers across the sector. There should be an immediate change to this resulting in rewards for effective articulation arrangements.

18 The types of Wider Participation processes undertaken by Colleges and some Universities are complex and expensive and their true cost needs to be recognised financially. Recruitment to Colleges and Universities should have a baseline reward but more finance should be added where the need is the greatest. In addition institutions undertaking innovative teaching projects, such as the RGU virtual campus, should attract additional funds.

### *Response to specific issues*

- Effective articulation should be rewarded in some way, perhaps by a higher fee which recognises: (a) that efficiency of the education system is being improved; and (b) that bridging mechanisms to help students move more easily from FE to HE need to be developed.
- Innovation in teaching should be rewarded financially.
- The true cost of recruiting and teaching students from disadvantaged backgrounds and ensuring their subsequent achievement should be recognised and additional funding made available to the Colleges and those Universities who have specific, and successful, Wider Participation initiatives.
- The overall level of funding for FE/ HE should not be reduced simply because efficiency has improved: savings should be returned to teaching and to the support of wider participation strategies.