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AUDREY JAMIE
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**EDINBURGH'S
TELFORD COLLEGE**

RRH/JU

1 July 2004

Merger of the Funding Councils Team
Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Dept.
2nd Floor, Europa Building
450 Argyle Street
GLASGOW
G2 8LG

Audrey
for file

Dear Sir/Madam

MERGER OF THE FUNDING COUNCILS FOR FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

On behalf of the Board of Management of Edinburgh's Telford College I am pleased to respond to the consultation paper and draft bill on the merger of the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Councils.

Overall we welcome the proposal. We believe that it has the potential to aid the implementation of the Executive's Lifelong Learning Strategy and allow individuals' progression through or across the Scottish Credit Qualifications Framework (SCQF). Also it should enhance collaboration between further and higher education providers. However a number of issues must be addressed if it is to maximise its potential and these form the essence of our response.

- 1 We welcome the underlying theme of developing parity of esteem between the current Further Education Colleges (FECs) and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) but recognise the benefits of diversity. They both have distinctive contributions to make but their boundaries must overlap. For the benefit of all stakeholders the new STEFC must ensure the speedy development of the SCQF to ensure that it can be embedded within *all* STEPS to ensure that these boundaries are not barriers.
- 2 In terms of the STEFC being able to disperse funds to non-publicly funded bodies, while we recognise that this activity is undertaken through the Scottish Enterprise (SE) and Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) networks, we accept that it would be potentially useful for STEFC to have a similar role. We would urge that Ministers insist that the new Council and SE/HIE set out a detailed agreement as to their relationship in taking forward (funding of) the skills agenda and that this is done *before* any new STEPS are designated. This exercise should not rule out the possible movement of funding streams between the Enterprise bodies and the Funding Council.

- 3 We welcome the move towards levelling the playing field in terms of unit of resource at SCQF levels 7 and 8 and believe that this is crucial. We do recognise the distinctive nature of HEIs to provide an education, research and training infrastructure appropriate for these and higher levels and we would not seek to expand our provision above level 8. However, what should not be forgotten is the crucial role of FECs in terms of the complementary infrastructure required to offer adequate provision *below* level 7 and the resource intensive nature of much of this work, in particular when set within the social inclusion and inclusiveness agendas. Also the recent consultation on schools/college partnerships has clearly exemplified the extent, value and indeed resources required for such (joint) provision.
- 4 Turning now to mergers, we welcome the more pro-active stance indicated for the STEFC than hitherto has been taken by either the SHEFC or the SFEFC. We believe that opportunities exist for institutional mergers within the current FE Sector and consequently welcome the power of Ministers to ask STEPS to evaluate the feasibility of merger. Discussion concerning mergers between HEIs or between FECs should be entered into on the basis of open and transparent criteria, developed by the STEFC and the Executive.
- 5 Mergers between HEIs and FECs need to be treated much more cautiously and will need to pay particular attention to the mission of the HEI involved. We can see potential benefits but, unlike mergers between similar types of institutions, consider that there are risks in terms of what might be removed from the lifelong learning 'map' should such mergers take place. Also in our experience it has been the power of close collaboration and not merger considerations that maximise articulation opportunities, so that any such merger proposal would need to examine whether it is necessary as well as sufficient to obtain the proposed benefits.
- 6 We welcome the power for Ministers to earmark funds for particular specialist needs. If Scotland is going to realise the ambitions of *Life Through Learning; Learning Through for Life* as well as a *Smart, Successful Scotland* then some focussed, informed and innovative intervention will be needed to provide the skills development for the skills gaps that might exist.

Finally, the consultation specifically asks for any views that we might have of the operation of the joint Executive within the current Funding Councils. Apart from a few individuals from the College who have served on working groups or for other reasons been closer to the operation of the Councils we have not seen any difference at this stage. In terms of joint working, more important was the publication of a joint Corporate Plan, which we found helpful both through participation in its development and its actual content.

Yours faithfully
Ray Harris

DR RAY HARRIS
Principal and Chief Executive