



Creating the University of the Highlands and Islands

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

**A Response to the Scottish Executive's Consultation Paper and
Associated Bill on the Merger of
The Scottish Further Education Funding Council
and The Scottish Higher Education Funding Council**

UHI Millennium Institute

Response to the Scottish Executive's Consultation Paper and Associated Bill on the Merger of SHEFC and SFEFC

1 Introduction

- 1.1 UHI welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Consultation Paper and associated Bill on the proposed merger of the Higher and Further Education Funding Councils.
- 1.2 Since UHI is the leading institution in Scotland joining up further and higher education provision under the auspices of a single institution we welcome the anticipated simplification a single tertiary funding council might bring to our relationship with our core funders. We particularly welcome the positive recognition and highlighting of UHI and its mission in the Consultation Paper.
- 1.3 We willingly share the Executive's four key priorities:
 - Growing the economy
 - Delivering excellence in public services
 - Supporting strong communities
 - Developing an ambitious and confident Scotland

Contemporary analyses suggest that universities are central to each of these priorities. A smart, successful Highlands and Islands needs a university. The University of the Highlands and Islands aims to be a university in and of and for this currently underprovided part of Scotland. We are greatly encouraged by the Partnership Agreement's commitment to create the University of the Highlands and Islands.

Sustainable communities in the Highlands and Islands need further and higher education provision, tailored to their needs, delivered close to home, and that recognises the social and community aspects of education. Distance education provision should provide for choice rather than be the only available alternative.

- 1.4 The Consultation Paper seeks a closer integration between the work of the Funding Councils and the Enterprise Networks. UHI was the creation of the precursor of Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and has continued to benefit from a close association with HIE and its LECs. Unlike Scottish Enterprise, HIE has a remit that extends beyond the economic to the social aspects of regional development. UHI's mission is to enhance and underpin the economic, social,

cultural, and educational development of the Highlands and Islands. Our mission, in these respects, is coterminous with that of HIE.

1.5 This consultation is being conducted at a time of increasingly divergent development in the UK systems of higher and further higher education (see Parry et al, 2004). In Scotland we must ensure that the advantages we undoubtedly enjoy are maintained and strengthened. Of particular importance are Higher National Qualifications (HNQs) and the role they play in joining up higher education provision in further education colleges and degree level study in higher education institutions. HNQs provide Scotland with a considerable advantage in that they:

- continue to be developed in close consultation with employers and recognised and valued by employers as exit qualifications in their own right and,
- are increasingly being used and developed as stepping stones to degree level study.

The latter underpins the currently much higher level of higher education participation compared to England and Wales. Elsewhere in the UK foundation degrees are being introduced to replace HNQs or to fill gaps left by the lack of HNQ provision. Currently there are multiple and often confusing aspects of the mission of further education colleges elsewhere in the UK with a growing array of qualifications that have yet to be established and accepted in the labour market and with students.

If we can continue to adapt and improve HNQs, through the ongoing programme of HN modernisation, we have every opportunity in Scotland of keeping things simple, straightforward and understandable to our various audiences and stakeholders, most notably students and employers.

1.6 In the UK there is a venerable tradition of universities enjoying a high degree of autonomy from the state (compared to, for example, continental European systems and public sector higher education in the United States). Since 1919 an intermediary, or buffer, body has been located between Government and universities (Bekhradnia, 2004). In the circumstances of the current proposals, the new tertiary funding council will only discharge its appropriate contemporary and traditional functions if the members and executive of that council fully understand the diverse missions and cultures of the various institutions gathered together under the auspices of the new council. In Scotland we have the considerable advantage of scale. If the

current excellent levels of communication between key players (principals, chairs of governing bodies, funding council executives and ministers) **within** the higher and further education sectors, can be extended to dialogue **across** these two sectors, on the same basis of openness and trust, then there is every possibility that these new arrangements will work in the national interest.

- 1.7 The Chief Executive of the Funding Councils, in meetings convened to discuss the consultation paper and Bill, has made the point that we should focus our attention on the Bill and that the Bill should be kept to the minimum necessary to effect the merger of the two funding councils and to discharge the responsibilities of good government at an appropriate level, i.e. not to try to micro-manage the system through legislation. What can be left to the annual ministerial letter of guidance to the Council and the new Council's conditions of grant letter to the institutions should be left to these vehicles and not incorporated in the Bill. We wholeheartedly agree with this position.

2 HNQs, SCQF and Quality

- 2.1 The agreement and implementation of the SCQF means that Scotland is at the leading edge internationally of providing real progression routes between vocational and academic courses. The present reform of the HNQ's curriculum design under the SQA HN Review has made it possible for colleges to support learners on programmes that better reflect up-to-date knowledge and skills requirements, are less focussed on discrete assessment goals than in the past, and provide a better platform for lifelong learning and for academic progression. UHI also believes that it is important that the review and development of SQA HNQ curriculum is informed by HE practice, in particular the HE architecture including subject benchmarks, to ensure that real progression is possible. UHI is concerned that potentially, with a number of universities ceasing to offer HNQs, SQA curriculum developments may not take these on board and this opportunity may not be fully realised. The delays in the implementation of the review by SQA and the shortfall in development funding for centres that are revalidating specialist HNQs are also matters of concern.
- 2.2 Staff in UHI colleges who work between SQA and degree awards have quickly grasped the significance of credit rating and progression between levels and the new guidelines from SACCA are seen by UHI as being very helpful in supporting FE/HE credit based links. UHI is in a key position to support the development of HNQs as progression awards for lifelong learning. UHI would like greater involvement at strategic level with HNQ development and design, but this has resource implications. UHI is aware that a funding bid to support HNQ

development in centres is currently being considered by the Scottish Executive. UHI believes this additional funding is essential to ensure HNQs, developed by centres rather than SQA, can be revalidated within the proposed revalidation timescale.

- 2.3 UHI's partner colleges find themselves under the scrutiny of a number of different quality monitoring bodies, with different demands. This necessarily means that additional resource is spent on quality audit preparation and has the potential to detract from quality enhancement initiatives. Undoubtedly this audit burden will be familiar throughout parts of the tertiary sector. The merger of the Funding Councils may allow this difficulty to be resolved.

3 Funding Issues

- 3.1 While we welcome the support and prominence given to UHI in paragraphs 90-95 we would wish to insert an element of caution. UHI developed as a community-based institution. It is a federal and collegiate institution where subsidiarity is central to its ability to deliver on key aspects of its mission.
- 3.2 Funding should follow mission. Widening access to higher education, in both social and geographical terms, incurs additional costs above baseline funding.
- 3.3 Funding for years one and two of higher education programmes should be maintained at parity with years three and four, or even increased, in institutions catering for non-traditional entrants. Widening access to non-traditional entrants requires educational, social and individual support in order to sustain participation. The ethos and culture in UHI's partner colleges is strongly student-centred and often based on smaller classes and more one-to-one support than is the norm in HEIs. UHI's success in widening access to previously excluded groups would be undermined if differential funding by level resulted in years one and two being funded less generously than years three and four.
- 3.4 Widening access provision has often overlooked geographical aspects. Non-traditional entrants generally do not want, nor flourish, in the context of distance learning provision with little or no contact with fellow students or tutors. Close to home provision, supported and enhanced by the best of electronic means, offers a proven route to offering equality of higher education opportunities throughout Scotland. The provision of further and higher education to communities in the South and South-West of Scotland and in the Highlands and Islands requires a **funding premium** recognising the

additional costs of provision to these areas. Sustainable communities in these parts of Scotland will benefit enormously by having universities dedicated to meeting their particular and specific needs.

- 3.5 We welcome what appears to be a recognition that student support provision in the further and higher education sectors requires attention (paragraph 113). In particular, student support should encourage articulation between HNQs and degree-level study rather than acting as a barrier as can be the case at present where there is no automatic entitlement to SAAS funding.

4 Research and Knowledge Transfer

- 4.1 There is now a clear and uncontested proposition that regions depend greatly on universities to be a central driver in the economic, social and cultural development of a region. It is therefore incumbent on government and the funding council to ensure that all regions of Scotland are provided with such a necessary part of the infrastructure of a successful region. The Highlands and Islands, and South and South-West Scotland are currently severely restrained and restricted given the lack of a fully fledged university with a developed research infrastructure.
- 4.2 'Branch plants' of existing institutions are welcome in the Highlands and Islands. But experience suggests that branch plants are often scaled down or closed down when the economy is less vibrant. Great economies have rarely been built on branch plants. The more peripheral areas of Scotland require a higher education institution or institutions dedicated to their often specific needs and to the specific opportunities available in the region.
- 4.3 We welcome the recognition in paragraph 64 that further education colleges contribute to knowledge transfer and that it is proposed that colleges will have access to funding to support such activity.

5 Terminology and the Proposed Division in STEPS

- 5.1 We agree with the suggestion that the new council be titled the Universities and Colleges Funding Council.
- 5.2 We might also want to follow the Irish and use the term 'third level' to describe the sector; a term likely to be more quickly and easily understood by the public at large than 'tertiary'.
- 5.3 The division of STEPS (a term to be avoided) into 'higher education institutions' and 'ancient and chartered universities' raises concerns

that this division might be used, at some future stage, as the basis for differential funding. Since, from discussion during the consultation period, this does not appear to be the intention of the drafters of the Consultation Paper, this division might now be sensibly set aside.

6 Conclusion

- 6.1 We welcome the proposed merger of the Funding Councils. Providing the new Council positively embraces the diversity of provision provided through existing institutions and fully recognises the considerable achievements in both sectors, then we can look forward to the future with some degree of optimism.
- 6.2 HNQs must be nurtured and supported given the central role they have assumed in providing for articulation and the widening of access to higher education. Quality must be a central focus of the new Council and again the considerable achievement of the Scottish agencies should be recognised as new measures are introduced to standardise regimes.
- 6.3 Parity of esteem, or mutual respect and recognition, must be accorded to the institutions making up the tertiary sector. Whilst missions must be reviewed in the light of changing circumstances and opportunities, 'academic drift', as occurred in the polytechnics in an earlier era, must be discouraged.
- 6.4 Finally, the Bill should focus on merging the two Funding Councils. Given the size and scale of Scotland, other key aspects of the evolving Scottish system can be left to the multiple and overlapping interactions between Ministers, Parliament, civil servants, and the institutions and their leaders and staff.

References

- Bekhradnia, B. 'Government, Funding Councils and Universities: How Should They Relate?', Higher Education Policy Institute, Oxford, 2004
- Parry, G., Davies, P. and Williams, J., 'Differences, Diversity and Distinctiveness: Higher Education in the Learning and Skills Sector'. Learning and Skills Development Agency, London, 2004