

Lews Castle College

Response to the Scottish Executive consultation Paper on the Merger of SFEFC and SHEFC

Lews Castle College welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper. As an incorporated college, it has a clear identity, to which it remains resolutely committed. As an Academic Partner of UHI Millennium Institute, (UHI), it supports the submission made by UHI in response to the consultation paper.

The college's response is informed by its understanding that the identity and legal status of colleges and universities will not change, and that the merger will allow a more strategic overview and more effective use of public funds, without compromising the autonomy of colleges and universities.

Specific responses below refer to paragraphs in the consultation document and sections of the draft Bill.

Current funding. (Para 38). The reference to national priorities is acknowledged and we concur with the statement on the need for strategic focusing of resources. However, the local environment is of particular significance to colleges, and of even more importance to small colleges in remote and fragile areas. It is essential that the merger results in enhanced ability of colleges to meet the needs of their immediate communities, as well as contributing to national priorities, in, for example, workforce development.

The Changing Landscape. (Paras 48-50) We acknowledge the blurring of boundaries between Universities/HEIs and colleges, and to a lesser extent between colleges and some aspects of secondary school education. This leads to a degree of flexibility that is particularly important to colleges in remote areas, serving sparse populations. The merger and Bill should not compromise such colleges' flexibility in this regard.

Parity of esteem. (Para 51). We question how legislation can achieve parity of esteem. However, we support any proposal to ensure parity of treatment.

Autonomy. (Paras 65 and 66). We believe that this level of autonomy is essential if colleges are to continue to fulfil their local mission in relation to individuals, communities and employers, as well as contributing to national priorities. We question whether the proposal in the consultation paper, though not yet in the Bill, to refer student complaints to the Public Services Ombudsman as final arbiter, is consistent with this autonomy.

Role of the New Body. We are broadly in support of the proposals as set out in this section of the consultation paper. In particular, we agree with the explicit requirement for the merged councils to deal with issues at sub national level, and ensure comprehensive coverage, including geographical coverage, and we understand this to be confirmation that the access roles of colleges will be supported and safeguarded

Responsiveness and relevance of learning provision. (Para 81). The involvement of STEPS in community planning partnerships and local economic forums is critical to ensuring responsiveness and relevance of provision.

Coherence of provision and collaboration between providers. The references in this section to UHI Millennium Institute and its Academic Partners acknowledge the achievement of this collaborative, collegiate partnership. The UHI model has facilitated the development of higher education activity, including both teaching and research, at the same time as ensuring that the academic partners, especially those that are further education colleges, continue to exercise their responsibilities to their local communities, in respect of further education, vocational training, and higher education.

Funding. We support Section 3 of the UHI response in this. In particular, we believe there are strong cases to be made for enhanced funding to support costs in the most remote parts of Scotland of meeting the access agenda, and providing for students hitherto excluded from higher education by the combination of geography and personal/family circumstances. The creation of a single funding council will remove the current split in distribution of Scottish Executive funding, which does not acknowledge the higher education work being undertaken in colleges. The draft Bill (Section 22) will allow the creation of new STEPS, and that is a concern particularly for colleges, as pressure to create new STEPS is likely to be in the sector that is currently further education. There is a danger that finite resources will be spread even more thinly.

Powers and duties of the new Body. (Para 116 and Section 8)) We support the intention to extend to universities and HEIs the same ministerial duty to secure adequacy and efficiency of provision. However, the experience of the FE sector has demonstrated that these concepts are difficult to define, and will vary according to the circumstances of providers. We support the ASC contention that that a key principle is the need to for decisions to be taken as near as possible to the point of delivery.

Research and Knowledge Transfer. (Para 120) We support the recognition of the important role of further education colleges in knowledge transfer, and would welcome the requirement that funds be provided to encourage and facilitate their greater involvement. This is particularly important in areas of Scotland where the further education college is the only significant provider of both further and higher education.

Governance, Organisation and Management. We broadly support the proposals in this section, and the express desire not to interfere with existing arrangements for the constitution and make-up of the governing body (Para 128). In common with many institutions, we are concerned at the proposal that the Chief Executive of the new body will have a right to call for and attend extra-ordinary meetings of the governing body of a STEP (Para 129. and section 13).