

Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education

Response from Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Scotland's National Centre for Gaelic Language and Culture

Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important and timely review of further and higher education in Scotland. Naturally, we do so from our unique perspective as Scotland's only Gaelic immersive university level college. This brief response does not, therefore, set out to address all the issues raised in the consultation document, but rather it focuses on those issues which are most closely related to Sabhal Mòr Ostaig's mission, which is to play a leading, dynamic role in the revitalisation of the Gaelic language, culture and its communities in Scotland and internationally.

National Strategy

We see in this review an opportunity for the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council to facilitate the realisation of the National Gaelic Plan for 2018-23 and, more specifically, the objective included in both FE and HE Outcome Agreement guidance, that Outcome Agreements should:

*“include actions in support of **parity of esteem for Gaelic** and to encourage its **visibility and use by speakers among their staff, students and others with whom they engage, as well as maintenance and development of their provision, where relevant, for Gaelic learners.**”*

This consultation presents an opportunity to take a strategic overview of the provision of further and higher education in support of Gaelic language and culture. We believe that there is scope for greater cooperation based on complementary strengths and potential synergies between the various HEIs and other agencies engaged in the promotion of Gaelic language and culture, with Sabhal Mòr Ostaig playing a pivotal role in that endeavour.

The importance of Gaelic language and culture

Against a backdrop of worrying economic news and even more concerning public health crisis, we must remember the vital importance of culture to a thriving economy and a healthy society. In the Gaelic context, there are several valuable research and economic impact pieces which verify the interlinkage of cultural and economic revival and growth nationally (e.g. *Gaelic and the Economy...*(2016); and *Ar Stòras Gàidhlig* (2014) ('Our Gaelic Assets'), which estimated that Gaelic was worth up to £148.5 million per year in 2014 to the Scottish economy). Gaelic language and culture are of fundamental importance to Scotland's cultural life, both nationally and internationally – there is no question that Gaelic culture underpins Scotland the brand on the international stage. We know that the Scottish Government and SFC share that view, and we

hope and expect that it will be given due consideration in the course of this review – both FE and HE have a crucial role to play in ensuring the future of our Gaelic language, as conservators, innovators and catalysts.

Diversity of the sector

The consultation paper refers to the FE and HE sectors as an ‘ecosystem’. A defining characteristic of a healthy ecosystem is its diversity so we would urge Scottish Government and the SFC not to lose sight of the value of the sector’s diversity (range of choice/possibilities) in pursuit of efficiencies and rationalisation. Whilst not currently officially designated as such (although we meet the criteria), we take heart from the fact that the consultation paper refers to ‘specialist institutions’ throughout.

Access

We are wholly supportive of the priority that Scottish Government attaches to fair access and we believe that fair access should formally acknowledge minority language rights and, therefore, Gaelic immersive education should be viewed as an inalienable right for those who would wish to pursue it.

Digitalisation

There is no doubt that the current crisis has focused our minds on innovative means of programme delivery. Scottish Government may wish to consider exceptional investment in infrastructure to enable, for example, specialist institutions to fully exploit the world-wide potential offered by on-line delivery, underpinned by Scottish higher education’s reputation for excellence.

Further dialogue

Sabhal Mòr Ostaig welcomes this opportunity to contribute to this consultation. We would welcome further opportunities for dialogue in Phases 2 and 3 of the review, to discuss, for example, how to ensure that the potential options for change in Scotland’s recovery planning include, protect and strengthen Scottish cultural and educational diversity.