

EIS UHI Newsletter

March 2018

Update from EIS FELA Regional Committee

UHI “integration” proposals: our questions

Members in UHI will be aware of proposals circulated by management in partner colleges outlining the intentions of four partner colleges—Inverness, Moray, Lews Castle and North Highland—to ‘integrate’ with Executive Office. Perth recently withdrew from the immediate proposal, deciding to maintain a ‘watching brief’ and expressing concerns over timescale and due diligence.

These proposals have potentially far-reaching implications for staff and students not only at the four partner colleges directly involved, but at all UHI partners and potentially across the sector.

UHI reps from the four colleges met in Inverness on 6 March along with Sara O’Hagan (Perth College and Chair of the EIS UHI regional committee), national EIS FELA office bearers and full time officials to discuss our concerns in greater depth ahead of a meeting later the same day with Clive Mulholland, UHI Principal, Gary Coutts, Chair of UHI Court, Blair Sandison, Chair of North Highland College and the Principals of the colleges involved.

We have identified a number of key issues and concerns with the proposal—not least the initial timescales and the vague nature of the proposals—is it a bird? A plane? An integration? Or simply a good old-fashioned merger?

First and foremost, we must have an educational rationale for any new tertiary entity which guarantees no erosion of FE in the Highlands. While UHI is by no means perfect, it is a model which fundamentally works. It delivers Further and Higher Education to thousands of students in their local communities, underpinned by teaching staff who work collaboratively across the UHI partner networks—often to an extent not found in merged central belt colleges.

Would integration deliver a better experience for learners? Would it facilitate closer working between staff? We await the evidence—but there is a real danger that in seeking “closer working”, real damage is done to the existing successful model. In particular, we have raised concerns about the potential impact on face to face Further Education provision.

Legally, we believe the proposal as it stands amounts to a merger, and staff would be protected by TUPE legislation. This is not a panacea—while TUPE protection is not time limited, it gives no guarantees regarding future outcomes of national bargaining, and would not cover new staff.

The gains won through national bargaining were hard fought

and the result of sustained, national industrial action. We will not give these up without a fight.

There are also real concerns over pensions, as merger into a university could potentially see provision transfer to USS, the crisis-hit HE pension fund.

At present, management cannot answer these questions. They cannot tell us who the ‘host’ would be and who our future employer would be, and they cannot provide a meaningful justification for merger.

Mergers in the central belt have not delivered more streamlined services for students. They have not saved a significant amount of money, and they have not improved the range of programmes offered to learners at either FE or HE level. In fact, they have seen a centralisation of services, the loss of thousands of experienced staff through voluntary severance, and a steep rise in cases of work related stress.

The EIS regionally and nationally will actively seek to ensure the job and pension security of our members and a national bargaining framework which includes all colleges and all lecturers.

This must start with UHI EO recognising trade unions and entering into detailed consultation and negotiation.

We look forward to this and will keep you updated!