



**Ashbrook**  
RESEARCH & CONSULTANCY

**UHI: RURAL AND ISLANDS COLLEGE MERGER  
CONSULTATION RESPONSE**

**November 2022**

**PREPARED FOR: UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides  
and UHI West Highland**

**UHI: Rural and Islands College Merger  
Consultation Response**

**Ashbrook Research & Consultancy Ltd**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **The Staff Perspective**

- Staff are largely supportive of the case for the merger, the vision, mission and values of the proposed college and the proposed governance arrangements
- Over half of staff believe that the merger will help to protect local jobs (with a third believing that this will not be the case), almost two thirds believe that the merger will provide greater opportunities for staff development (with a quarter not believing that this will be the case), two thirds believe that the merger will enhance the student experience at the three colleges (with 1 in 5 not believing this will be the case), 4 out of 5 believe that the merger will provide more course options for students choosing to study at the three colleges (with less than 1 in 10 not believing that this will be the case) and three quarters believe that the merger will help focus the collective strengths of the three colleges so that they can better support the needs and ambitions of their local communities (with around 1 in 6 believing that this will not be the case)
- Staff place a high level of importance upon a wide range of factors pertaining to the new college, with the highest level of importance being placed on the new institution providing an excellent student experience regardless of location or mode of study
- 4 out of 5 staff have concerns about the merger, with 3 in 10 having concerns 'to a great extent'
- Staff identified a wide range of positives or strengths about the merger, particularly in terms of the merger providing a better service to students, wider course choices being available, the merger representing a more sustainable funding model, the merger making good business sense, the merger resulting in a better and/or stronger college, the opportunity to

have better collaboration, the opportunity to be more innovative in terms of course delivery and greater opportunities for staff to work as part of a team. In addition, a further primary positive identified were beliefs that the merger is necessary and 'needs to happen'

- The main negatives or weaknesses about the merger which were identified by staff focused around job security and/or job losses and a perceived lack of information that is available to staff about the merger
- Over half of staff had a preference for the colleges to move to a collective identity after the merger, a quarter had a preference for the colleges to retain their own names, and 1 in 7 had no preference in this regard
- Three quarters of staff believe that the merger will positively impact and strengthen the activities of the three colleges (with 1 in 7 believing that this will not be the case)
- It was apparent from the consultation process that staff had a wide range of questions about the merger, many of these being specific in nature. However, those which were raised most commonly tended to fall under two main headings:
  - Job-related questions (primarily around the potential for job losses or reduced hours as a result of the merger and the implications of the merger for terms and conditions of staff)
  - Process-related questions (primarily around the amount and proportion of online learning which will be delivered, how teams will work together, how the merger will ensure that the input and views of all departments and staff will be heard and whether there will be a headquarters or lead campus)
- Staff most commonly stated that they would like to see a range of improvements as a result of the merger, primarily in terms of refreshing and expanding the curriculum, retaining good local management,

engaging more effectively with schools and local communities and involving staff more in shaping and influencing the merged college

- Staff most notably believe that learners could be supported more effectively by ensuring that there is the maintenance of face-to-face contact with students in order to build relationships, provide support and build the confidence of learners
- There was a general consensus amongst staff that they didn't feel sufficiently part of the merger process and it was equally apparent that there was a notable desire for staff to be involved in this process once – or if – the merger is confirmed to be going ahead
- It was primarily believed by staff that the greatest challenges they face that relate to the merger were those of ensuring that staff feel empowered in respect of influencing change, ensuring effective communication, ensuring that all staff have the opportunity to put their views forward and ensuring that timelines are communicated and that lead times for changes are achievable
- Staff primarily believe that they would be made to feel part of one organisation if they could participate in open conversations and their feedback is taken on board

### **The External Audience Perspective**

- The external audiences (including members of the public, former students or apprentices, political representatives, local businesses/ employers, school or education service providers, students enrolled in another UHI partner/UHI and staff members employed at another UHI partner or UHI) very largely supported the case for the merger and the vision, mission and values of the proposed college, with qualitative evidence indicating that this was for a wide range of reasons

- Around three quarters of those in the external audiences believe that the merger will provide more course options for students (with 1 in 5 believing that this will be to little or no extent), almost 3 out of 5 believe that the merger will help to protect local jobs (with a third believing that this will be to little or no extent) and 7 out of 10 believe that the merger will help focus the collective strengths of the three colleges so that they can better support the needs and ambitions of their local communities (with a quarter believing that this will be to little or no extent)
- The external audiences place high priority on a wide range of factors pertaining to the new college, with highest levels of priority being placed on the new institution providing an excellent student experience regardless of location or mode of study
- Approaching two thirds of those in the external audiences had concerns about the merger, with the qualitative data gathered suggesting that these concerns primarily focus around fears about job cuts and centre closures (including the number and type of potential job cuts). Indeed, it should also be stressed that there were a wide range of other more specific concerns noted by stakeholders
- The primary positives or strengths about the merger identified by those in the external audiences included that the merger provides a more sustainable funding model, that the merged college will work better in supporting communities, that the merged college will have a wider reach than the existing three colleges, opportunities for staff to work with different people, travel opportunities for students, that the merged college will have a bigger and better brand and the extent to which there was a willingness amongst a number of stakeholders to support the merger on an ongoing basis
- The main negatives or weaknesses of the merger identified were most notable in terms of fears about the loss of local responsiveness, the

centralisation of facilities resulting in staff/facility losses, existing colleges losing their identity and the potential loss of smaller centres

- Those in the external audiences were relatively evenly split in terms of having a preference for the colleges to continue to retain their own names or moving to a collective identity
- Stakeholders identified a range of challenges which they believed pertained to the merger, including technical difficulties of working across 19 learning centres and campuses, working with teams across such a dispersed geographical area, the uncertainty that the merger has raised for audiences such as students, staff, stakeholders, employers and local communities and the time available to prepare for changes which will result from the merger
- Stakeholders also raised a considerable range of questions about the merger, including, for example, the extent to which there is support for the merger across the three colleges, how Gaelic will be incorporated into the merged college curriculum/teaching, the extent of involvement with a sufficiently wide range of partners, the colleges position and processes in relation to international students, if the research function of the merged college would be sufficiently funded and where the required investment in technology will come from

### **The Student Perspective**

- Students largely supported the case for the merger and the vision, mission and values of the proposed college
- Almost 3 out of 5 students believe that the merger will impact on their student experience positively (with 1 in 5 believing that the merger will impact on their student experience negatively)

- Students place a high level of importance on a range of factors pertaining to the new college, with the highest level of importance being placed on enhancing support and advice around student funding. In addition, the qualitative evidence gathered indicated that another significant student priority was that of ensuring sufficient face-to-face teaching is delivered
- Students have a strong preference for face-to-face learning which was for a range of reasons. Despite this, however, there were a number of benefits identified which were associated with online learning, with these primarily focusing around removing the need for students to travel to college, online learning allowing access to courses for those who live in particularly remote areas and beliefs that some courses won't run due to small numbers of students living on or close to campuses if they are not delivered online
- 4 out of 5 students believe that the merger will provide more course options to students choosing to study at the three colleges (with few students believing that this will only be to little or no extent)
- In contrast, a number of negatives were identified as being associated with online learning, including references to negative online learning experiences, perceptions of the unfairness of students having to learn online due to accommodation issues and learners not always fully engaging during online learning
- Almost two thirds of students have concerns about the merger
- Students identified a wide range of positives or strengths associated with the merger, including the merger resulting in wider course choice, representing a more stable funding situation, resulting in better services for students and benefits associated with the pooling of resources
- In contrast, students noted no main negatives or weaknesses about the merger

- Students primarily believe that improvements that could be made as a result of the merger focused around improving facilities and equipment, promoting a positive campus environment/atmosphere and funding and encouraging clubs for students
- Almost half of students identified 'as a student of UHI', a third identified 'as a student of their local college' and 1 in 5 'as both'
- Over 2 out of 5 students stated that they would prefer that the colleges should continue to retain their own names, a quarter had a preference for the colleges to move to a collective identity and a further quarter had no preference in this regard
- Students had a wide range of questions about the merger which primarily were learning related, funding related and process related

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report highlights findings to emerge from a review of a consultation process pertaining to the Rural and Islands College Merger being considered by UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland.

The consultation process was based on the derivation of information from three key audiences:

- Staff employed by UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland
- External audiences (including members of the public, former students or apprentices, political representatives, local businesses/employers, further education service providers, students enrolled in another UHI partner/UHI and staff members employed at another UHI partner or UHI)
- Students enrolled at UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland

In particular, constituent elements of the consultation process incorporated:

- An online survey of staff, students and external audiences (from which 76 responses were received from staff, 201 from students and 62 from the external audiences)
- Formal e-mail submissions from external stakeholders (16 of which were received)
- External stakeholder meetings (24 of which were undertaken, incorporating over 170 individuals)
- Comments cards on campuses (of which 11 were completed)
- Online public information sessions (which were attended by 16 individuals, including staff from across the UHI partnership and external stakeholders)

- Face-to-face drop-in sessions with the colleges' Merger Co-ordinator (16 of which took place)
- Staff focus groups (of which 19 were undertaken with 61 staff across UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland)

It is our considered view that the consultation process was fit for purpose, comprehensive and effective.

Sections 2.0 to 4.0 inclusive detail the outcomes of the analysis of the consultation data gathered, both from a quantitative and qualitative perspective, whilst section 5.0 provides a series of concluding comments.

Section 4.1 details variances in the quantitative data gathered through the student survey on the basis of the college at which a student was studying. However, it is not possible to do this for the quantitative data gathered through the surveys of staff and external audiences as the sample of respondents is insufficient to allow any data to be presented.

Finally, Appendix I contains emailed submissions from named organisations and groups who agreed, as per the privacy notice, for their submission to be attributed to them in this report. Submissions from political representative are also included, with their permission.

It should be noted that a consultation on the college name and identity has ran concurrently with the consultation on the merger proposal and business case. This took place as a separate exercise and, therefore, views on college name and identity do not feature in this report. Survey responses on whether a merged college should retain the existing college names or move to one collective identity was captured during the consultation on the merger proposal and business case and will be considered by the merger programme team. The consultation exercise on name and identity concluded at the end of October 2022.

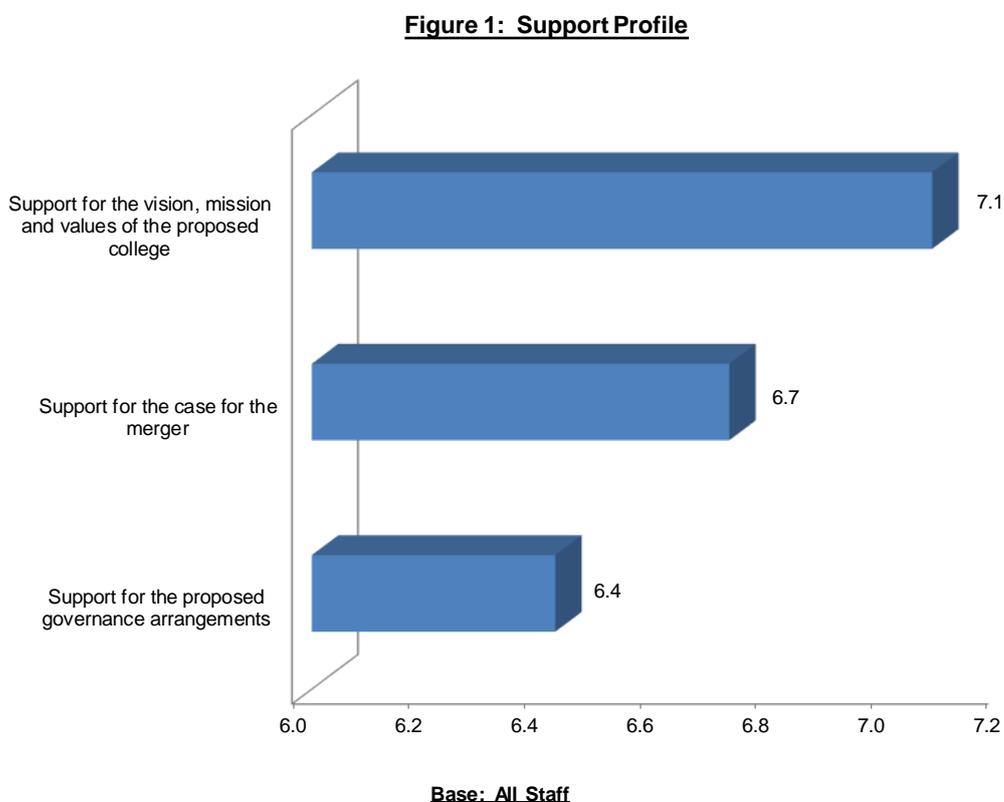
The Partnership Board leading the merger programme are due to consider all feedback on college name and identity by the end of November 2022.

## 2.0 THE STAFF PERSPECTIVE

### 2.1 Quantitative Profile

#### 2.1.1 Support Strength Profile

*“How strongly would you support the case for the merger/the vision, mission and values of the proposed college/the proposed governance arrangements?”*



When staff were asked how strongly they supported the case for the merger, the vision, mission and values of the proposed college and the proposed governance arrangements, on a scale from 1 to 10, where ‘1’ was ‘don’t support at all’ and ‘10’ was ‘very strongly support’, from Figure 1, it can be seen that the average scores for each of the indicators noted above were as follows:

- Support for the case for the merger = 6.7 out of a possible 10
- Support for the vision, mission and values of the proposed college = 7.1

- Support for the proposed governance arrangements = 6.4

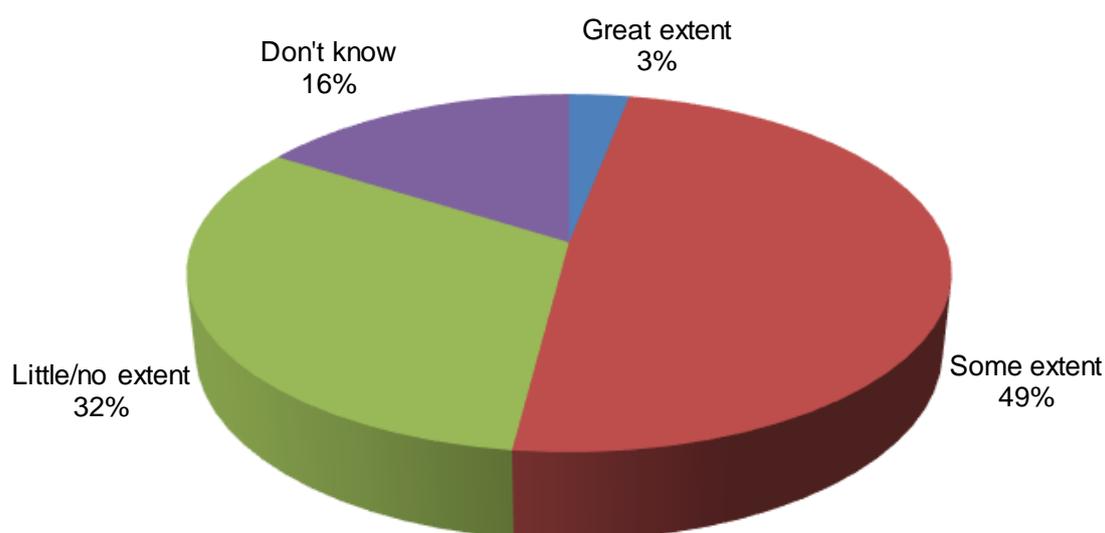
Further examination of the data indicated that, in all three cases, strongest support was found amongst staff in UHI West Highland, i.e.:

- Support for the case for the merger (7.1 compared to 6.6 and 6.2 respectively for staff in UHI North Highland and UHI Outer Hebrides)
- Support for the vision, mission and values of the proposed college (7.6 compared to 7.0 and 6.1 respectively for staff in UHI North Highland and UHI Outer Hebrides)
- Support for the proposed governance arrangements (6.9 compared to 6.5 and 5.4 respectively for those in UHI North Highland and UHI Outer Hebrides)

### 2.1.2 Impact Profile

*“To what extent do you believe the merger will help to protect local jobs?”*

**Figure 2: Extent to Which the Merger will Help to Protect Local Jobs**



**Base: All Staff**

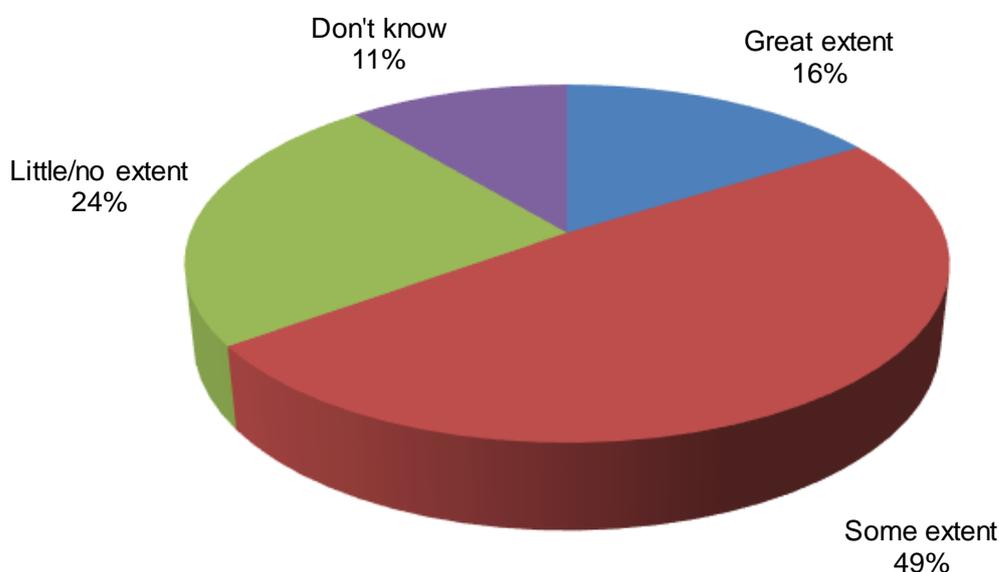
From Figure 2, it can be seen that over half of staff (52%) believed that the merger will help to protect local jobs, although it should be stressed that it was very largely believed that this would be the case ‘to some extent’ (49%) rather than ‘to a great extent’ (3%).

Figure 2 also indicates that a third of staff (32%) believed that the merger will help to protect local jobs ‘to little or no extent’, whilst 1 in 6 (16%) felt unable to express an opinion here.

Further examination of the data indicated that staff at UHI West Highland were most likely to believe that the merger will help to protect local jobs (59% compared to 50% and 43% respectively for those in UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI North Highland).

*“To what extent do you believe the merger will provide greater opportunities for staff development?”*

**Figure 3: Extent to Which the Merger will Provide Greater Opportunities for Staff Development**



**Base: All Staff**

From Figure 3, it can be seen that almost two thirds of staff (65%) believed that the merger will provide greater opportunities for staff development, with 1 in 6 (16%) specifically believing that this will be ‘to a great extent’.

Figure 3 also indicates that a quarter of staff (24%) believed that the merger will provide greater opportunities for staff development ‘to little or no extent’, whilst 1 in 10 (11%) felt unable to express an opinion here.

Further examination of the data indicated that staff at UHI West Highland were far more likely to believe that the merger will provide greater opportunities for staff development (77% compared to 57% and 56% respectively for staff at UHI North Highland and UHI Outer Hebrides).

*“To what extent do you believe the merger will enhance the student experience at UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland?”*

**Figure 4: Extent to Which the Merger will Enhance the Student Experience**

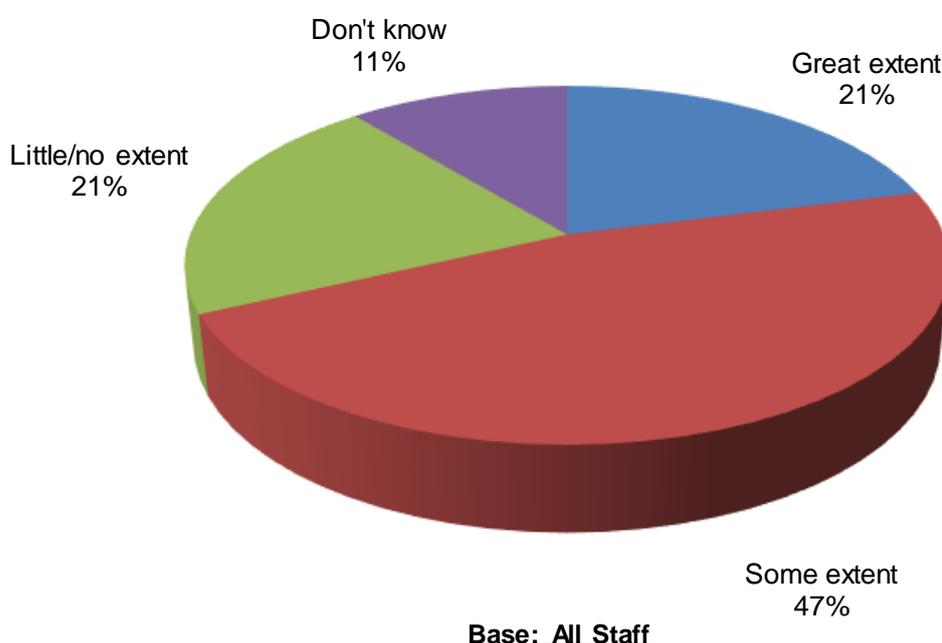


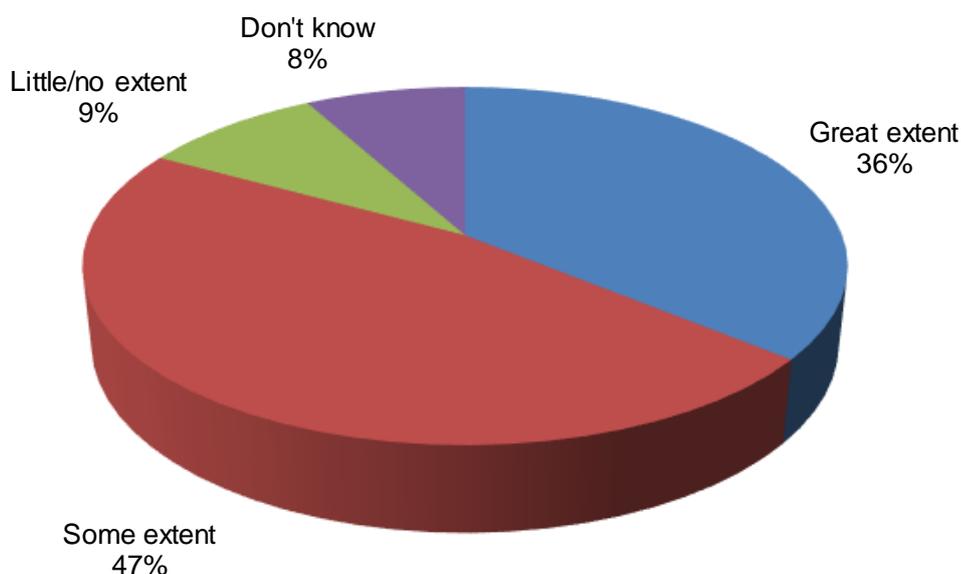
Figure 4 indicates that two thirds of staff (68%) believed that the merger will enhance the student experience at the three colleges, with 1 in 5 (21%) specifically believing that this will be ‘to a great extent’.

Figure 4 also indicates that 1 in 5 staff (21%) believed that the merger will enhance the student experience 'to little or no extent', whilst 1 in 10 (11%) felt unable to express an opinion.

Further examination of the data indicated that staff at UHI West Highland were most likely to believe that the merger will enhance the student experience at the three colleges (75% compared to 64% and 63% respectively for those at UHI North Highland and UHI Outer Hebrides).

*"To what extent do you believe the merger will provide more course options for students choosing to study at UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland?"*

**Figure 5: Extent to Which the Merger will Provide More Course Options for Students**



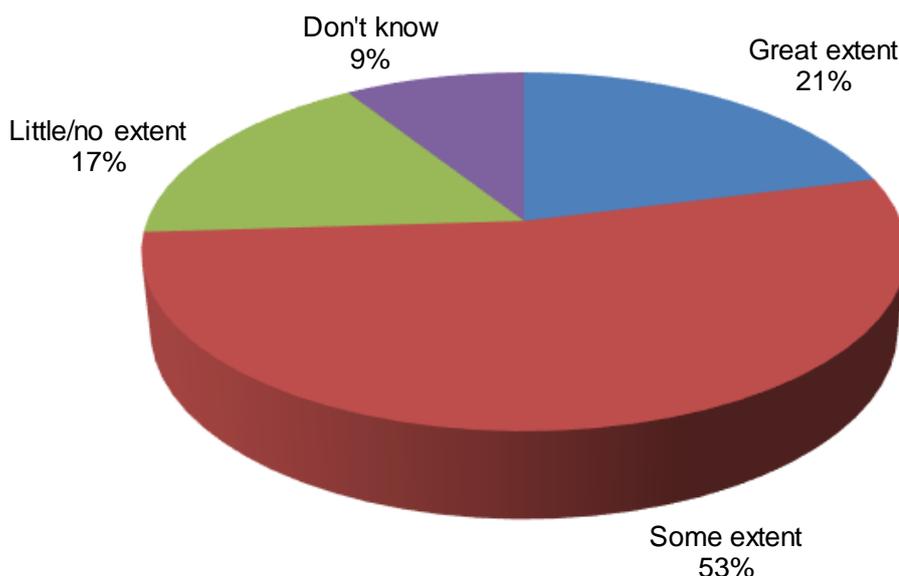
**Base: All Staff**

From Figure 5, it can be seen that over 4 out of 5 staff (83%) believed that the merger will provide more course options for students choosing to study at the three colleges, with over a third (36%) specifically believing that this will be 'to a great extent'.

Further examination of the data indicated no notable variances here on the basis of who the college staff were employed by.

*“To what extent do you believe the merger will help focus the collective strengths of UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland so that they can better support the needs and ambitions of their local communities?”*

**Figure 6: Extent to Which the Merger will Help Focus the Collective Strengths of UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland**



**Base: All Staff**

From Figure 6, it can be seen that three quarters of staff (74%) believed that the merger will help focus the collective strengths of the three colleges so that they can better support the needs and ambitions of their local communities, with 1 in 5 staff (21%) specifically believing that this will be ‘to a great extent’.

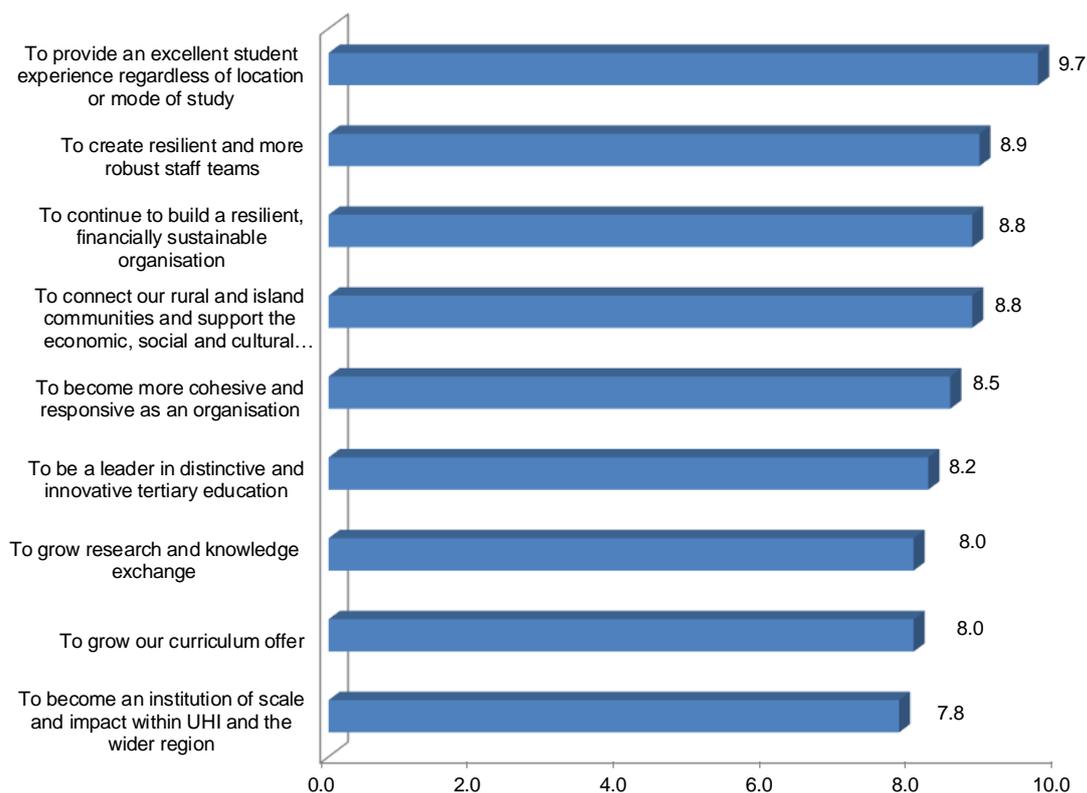
Figure 6 also indicates that around 1 in 6 staff (17%) believed that the merger will help focus the collective strengths of the three colleges ‘to little or no extent’, with 1 in 10 (9%) feeling unable to express an opinion.

Further examination of the data indicated that staff at UHI Outer Hebrides were least likely to believe that the merger will help focus the collective strengths of the three colleges (56% compared to 82% and 75% respectively for those at UHI North Highland and UHI West Highland).

### 2.1.3 Priorities Profile

*“How strong a priority would the following be for the new college, on a scale from 1 to 10, where ‘1’ is ‘not a priority at all’ and ‘10’ is ‘a very strong priority?’”*

**Figure 7: Priority Strength Profile**



**Base: All Staff**

When staff were asked how strongly a range of factors should be for the new college, on a scale from 1 to 10, where ‘1’ was ‘not a priority at all’ and ‘10’ was a ‘very strong priority’, Figure 7 indicates high average scores across all of the factors under consideration, ranging from 7.8 out of a possible 10 in terms of the new institution ‘to become an institution of scale and impact within UHI and the wider region’ to 9.7 out of possible 10 in relation to the institution ‘to provide an excellent student experience regardless of location or mode of study’.

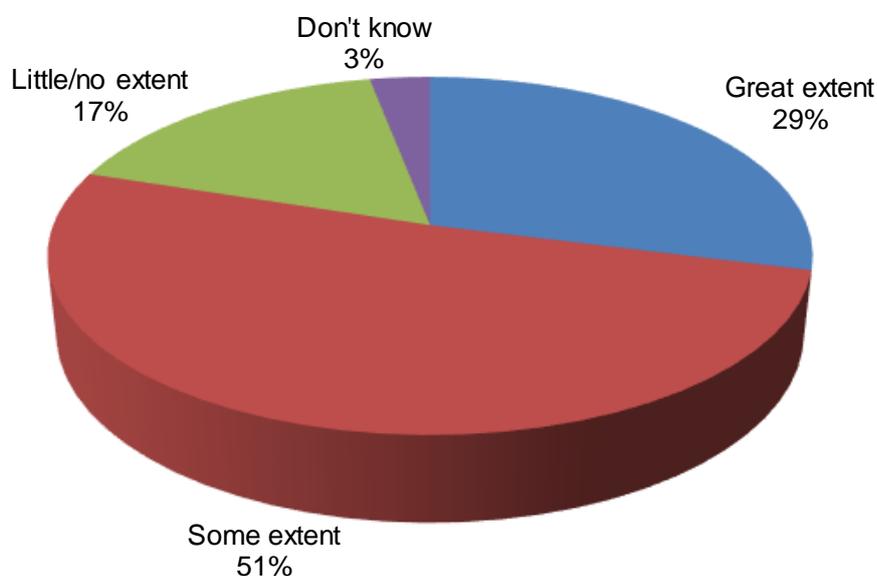
Further examination of the data indicated that the average scores noted in Figure 7 tended to be highest amongst staff at UHI West

Highland, although, in some cases, the variances between staff at UHI West Highland and those at the other two colleges were relatively marginal.

#### 2.1.4 Concerns About the Merger

*“To what extent do you have concerns about the merger?”*

**Figure 8: Extent to Which There are Concerns About the Merger**



**Base: All Staff**

From Figure 8, it can be seen that 4 out of 5 staff (80%) stated that they had concerns about the merger, with 3 in 10 (29%) having concerns ‘to a great extent’.

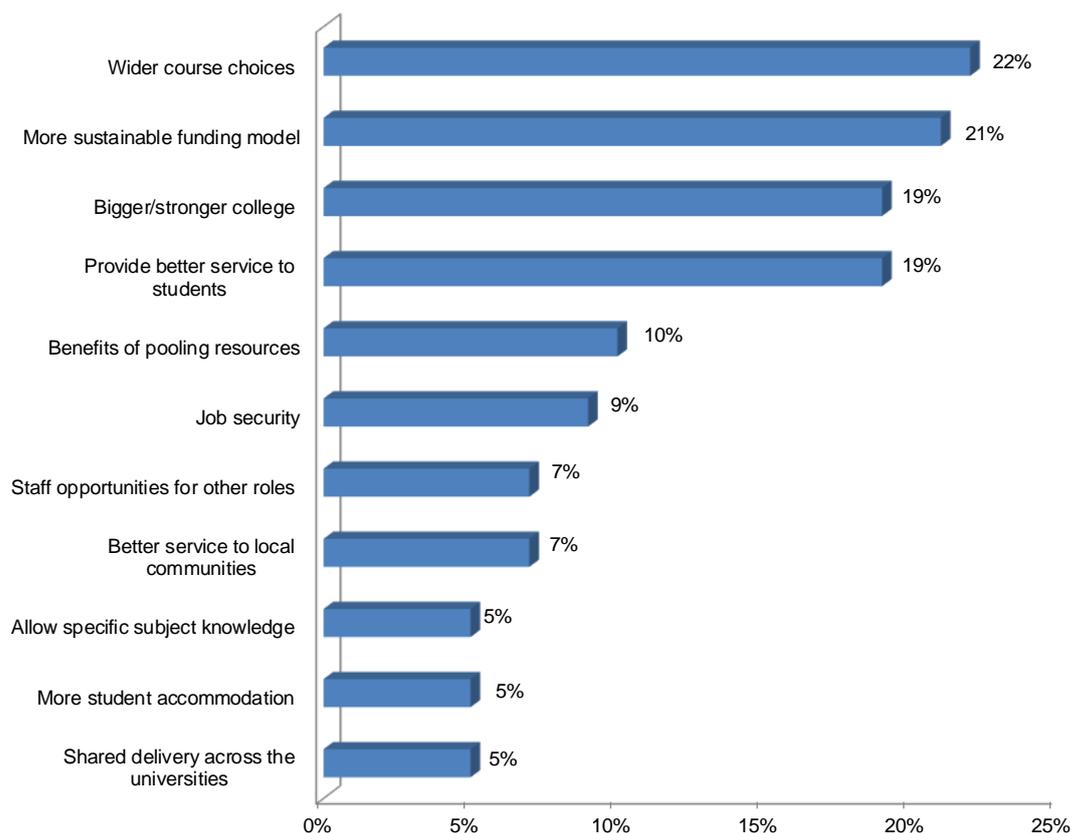
Figure 8 also indicates that around 1 in 6 staff (17%) stated that they had concerns ‘to little or no extent’ about the merger, with a very small proportion of staff (only 3%) feeling unable to express an opinion.

Further examination of the data indicated that staff at UHI West Highland were least likely to state that they had concerns about the merger (69% compared to 94% and 86% respectively for those at UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI North Highland).

## 2.1.5 Perceived Positives/Strengths and Negatives/Weaknesses About the Merger

*“What do you believe to be the main positives or strengths about the merger, if any?”*

**Figure 9: Perceived Main Positives/Strengths About the Merger (Unprompted)**



**Base: Staff Providing a Response**

When staff were asked – on an unprompted basis – what they believed to be the main positives or strengths about the merger, Figure 9 indicates that their **primary responses** focused around:

- Wider course choices being available (22%)
- The merger providing a more sustainable funding model (21%)
- Having a better and/or stronger college (19%)
- Providing a better service to students (19%)

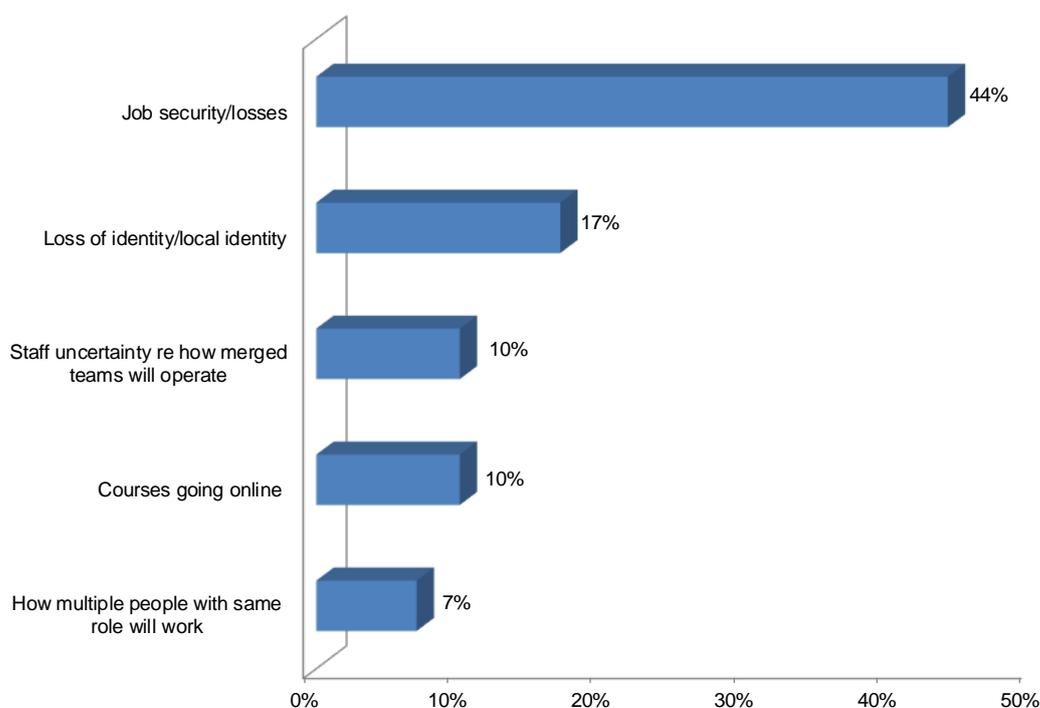
Thereafter, **secondary unprompted mention** was made here of a number of other main positives or strengths about the merger, including:

- Benefits associated with the pooling of resources (10%)
- Job security (9%)
- Staff opportunities in other roles (7%)
- Providing a better service to local communities (7%)

It should be noted that the number of respondents providing an unprompted response here is insufficient to allow a meaningful breakdown of the outcomes noted in Figure 9 on the basis of the college at which they worked. This also applies to the outcomes noted in Figure 10 below.

*“What do you believe to be the main negatives or weakness about the merger, if any?”*

**Figure 10: Perceived Main Negatives/Weaknesses About the Merger (Unprompted)**



**Base: Staff Providing a Response**

When staff were asked – again, on an unprompted basis – what they believed to be the main negatives or weaknesses about the merger, Figure 10 indicates that their **primary responses** focused around ‘job security and/or job losses’ (44%).

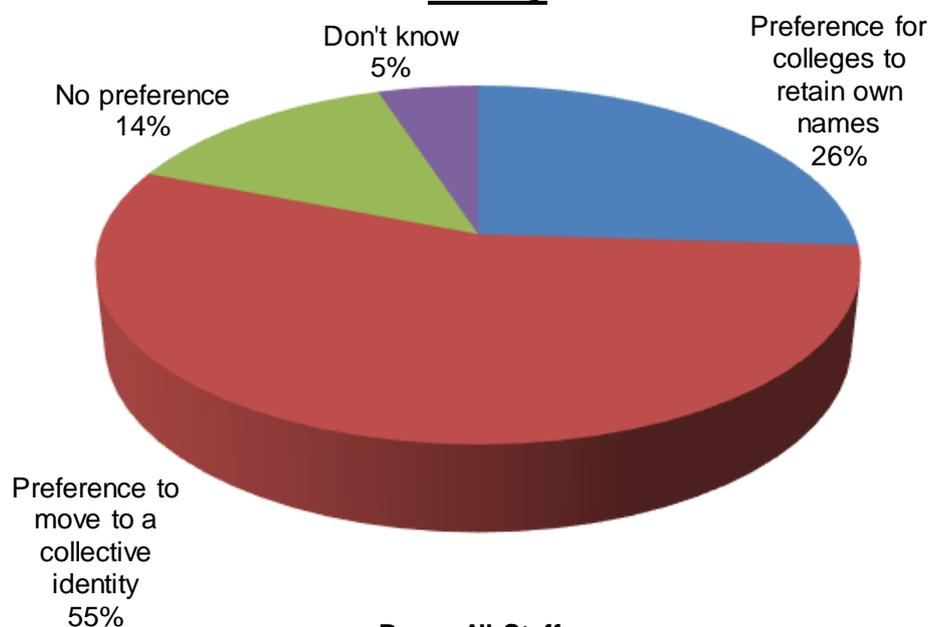
Thereafter, **secondary unprompted mention** was made here of:

- Loss of identity and/or local identity (17%)
- Staff being uncertain about how merged teams will operate (10%)
- More courses being online (10%)
- How multiple people with the same role will work together (7%)

### 2.1.6 Other Considerations

*“Do you believe that the colleges should continue to retain their own names or move to a collective identity?”*

**Figure 11: Preferences re Colleges Continuing to Retain their Own Names or Move to a Collective Identity**



**Base: All Staff**

From Figure 11, it can be seen that staff most commonly stated that their preference would be for ‘the colleges to move to a collective identity’ (55%).

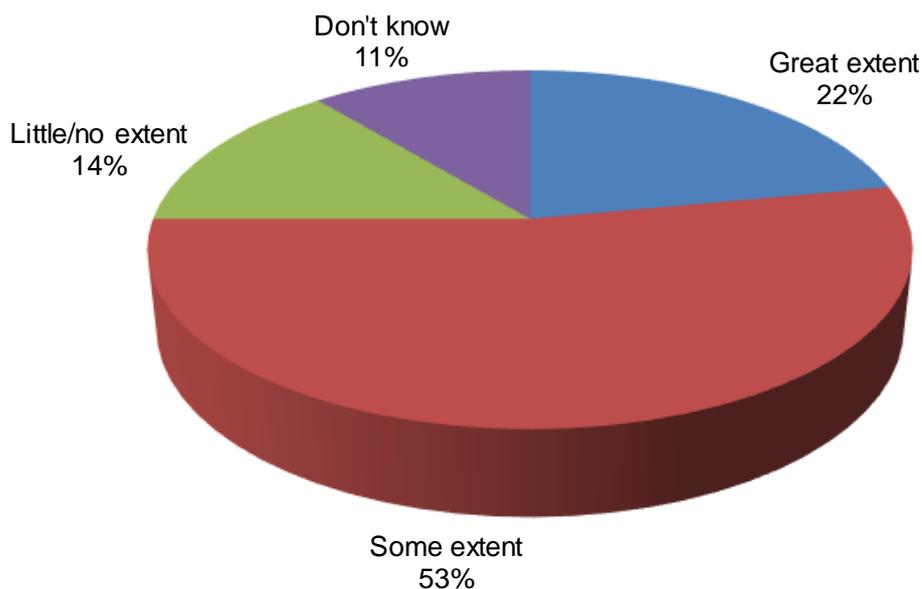
Thereafter, a quarter of staff (26%) expressed a preference for ‘the colleges to retain their own names’.

Figure 11 also indicates that around 1 in 7 staff (14%) had no preference in this regard, with a very small proportion (5%) feeling unable to express an opinion.

Further examination of the data indicated that staff at UHI West Highland were least likely to state a preference for ‘the colleges to retain their own names’ (19% compared to 32% and 31% respectively for those at UHI North Highland and UHI Outer Hebrides). In addition, staff at UHI West Highland were most likely to state that they had no preference in this regard (19% compared to, for example, 11% for those at UHI North Highland).

*“To what extent do you think the merger will positively impact and strengthen the activities of UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland?”*

**Figure 12: Extent of Positive Impact/Strengthening Activities for the Three Universities**



**Base: All Staff**

From Figure 12, it can be seen that three quarters of staff (75%) believed that the merger will positively impact and strengthen the activities of the three colleges, with over 1 in 5 (22%) specifically believing that this will be the case 'to a great extent'.

Figure 12 also indicates that around 1 in 7 staff (14%) believed that the merger will positively impact and strengthen the activities of the three colleges 'to little or no extent', whilst 1 in 10 (11%) felt unable to express an opinion.

## 2.2 Qualitative Profile

Staff participating in the consultation process noted general views about the merger which fell into four categories:

- Positives
- Negatives
- Concerns
- Questions

### 2.2.1 Positives About the Merger

For staff, their **primary positives** about the merger focused around:

- The merger making good business sense, including as a response to funding challenges, economies of scale and having a single Executive Team (although, in relation to the latter, it should be noted that a number of respondents had concerns about 'what this would look like')
- The opportunity to have better collaboration (including the sharing of best practice in terms of learning/teaching and professional services)
- The opportunity to be more innovative in terms of course delivery and in areas such as staff secondments/release to industry

- More opportunities for staff to work as part of a team (including to work as part of a stronger team)

Thereafter, **more specific positives** were noted in relation to:

- The potential of the merger being good if staff can be empowered and can fully contribute to the new college
- Beliefs that the new college will provide opportunities for collaboration
- A belief that marketing budgets could be greater (thereby allowing the merged college to promote itself more effectively)
- Ensuring financial viability
- Providing opportunities for greater career progression for staff
- The potential to increase the expertise of college staff through recruitment (i.e. the merged college being more attractive to more experienced/qualified staff)
- Opportunities to increase the range of provision
- The potential to address local accommodation issues
- The merged college having a 'bigger voice in UHI', i.e. as a function of the three existing colleges being relatively small

In the context of the outcomes noted above, it should be noted that a number of staff expressed their belief that the merger is necessary and *"needs to happen"*.

### 2.2.2 Negatives About the Merger

The **primary negatives** noted by staff about the merger focused around:

- The potential for redundancies (or reduced hours) where there is a duplication of roles within departments/functions or the overstaffing of functions

- Beliefs that there had been a lack of information available to staff and, in particular, a belief that the information provided to date was at high/strategic level and lacked detail, with no clear plan being communicated to staff

Thereafter, **secondary negatives** related to:

- Lack of clarity regarding the financial impact of the merger (including, for example, the impact of the financial deficits at UHI North Highland and UHI Outer Hebrides)
- Fears about the potential loss of face-to-face teaching (which it was felt would lead to a loss of interaction with – and the potential to build relationships with – students)
- The economic viability of running 19 learning centres and campuses (which, it was feared, could lead to the closure of some centres)
- Beliefs that some students will not be attracted to online learning and may not be able to cope with it (which may have an impact on applicant numbers)

Finally, **more specific mention** was made of negatives relating to:

- How learning is delivered not being sufficiently influenced by those who teach
- Loss of community identity
- The potential need for staff to move to new locations
- Senior management team members not being on-site
- Fears about the potential loss of the Islands Allowance
- Increased class sizes meaning more marking for teaching staff

It should also be noted that there were beliefs that the merger may be a reaction to “*smaller colleges being poor relations within UHI*” and not being sufficiently ‘listened to’.

### 2.2.3 Concerns About the Merger

It should be noted that the **primary staff concerns** about the merger which emerged related to:

- Terms and conditions associated with the new college
- The amount of teaching that will be undertaken on a face-to-face basis, which was linked to a concern about ensuring sufficient face-to-face learning is undertaken in a blended approach to teaching (in order to promote the student experience of attending college)
- Raising expectations which were too high and potentially unachievable

Thereafter, **other concerns** noted were **more specific** in nature and related to, for example:

- Staff potentially having to reapply for their jobs
- The impact of the merger on staff roles within their centre
- The size of the research function of the new college
- Beliefs that challenges and opportunities may be different in a few years as the learning environment changes
- How merged teams will work
- Beliefs that the merger is 'a done deal' (potentially due to the amount of investment that has been put into it to date)

Finally, it should be noted that **specific reference** was made here to a desire to ensure a degree of face-to-face interaction between staff who will be working together on a primarily remote basis.

### 2.2.4 Questions About the Merger

It was apparent from the consultation process that staff had a wide range of questions about the merger, with many of the questions

raised being specific in nature. However, those which were raised tended to fall under two main headings:

- Job-related questions
- Process-related questions

The **primary job-related questions** raised included:

- Will there be job losses or reduced hours as a result of the merger (including through voluntary severance, early retirement or short-term contracts not being renewed)? This was the **principal primary** job-related concern raised by staff
- What will the implications of the merger be for the terms and conditions of staff?
- Will there be a greater amount and proportion of online learning (based around concerns about the implications of loss of face-to-face teaching)?
- How will teams work together?

The **secondary job-related questions** raised included:

- Will the student experience be better (and, indeed, how will it be better)?
- Will the Islands Allowance be retained?
- Will there still be access to – and the same flexibility of – existing local structures?
- Will staff have to reapply for their jobs?

There were a wide range of other **more specific job-related** questions asked. These included:

- Will there be support for staff throughout the merger process?
- What will the duplication of roles mean for teaching and non-teaching staff?

- What will be the impact resulting from the merger in terms of personal working relationships?
- What will be the impact of the merger on the job evaluation process?
- Have all risks of the merger been captured?

The **primary process-related questions** raised included:

- How will the merger ensure that the input and views of all departments and staff will be heard (*“not just those who shout loudest”*)?
- Will there be a headquarters or lead campus?
- What the management structure ‘would look like’ (including the potential role of two – soon to be – ‘former Principals’)
- How student services will work
- Why the merger process applies to only these three colleges

A range of other questions were raised by staff on a **secondary basis** that were **process related**, including:

- What will the management structure look like in the merged model (including where the Principal would be based – which, it was felt – may negatively impact on the campuses at which he or she wasn’t based)?
- What are the timelines for the process and, in particular, when do specific parts of the process require to be completed by?
- What will be the balance between Scottish, rest of UK and international students?
- How will student accommodation issues be addressed?

There were also a wide range of other **more specific process-related** questions asked. These included:

- Will there be specialities in each campus?

- Is there pressure on the three existing Boards to make “*a quick decision*”?
- What will student support look like in the merged college?
- Will very remote rural centres be protected?
- How will job alignment be achieved?
- How will the transition board work?
- What will happen if the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council don't support the merger?
- Will there be student representation in the merged college?

### **2.2.5 Improvements Staff Would Like to See as a Result of the Merger**

When those participating in the consultation process were asked to identify improvements they would like to see as a result of the merger, the **most notable responses** focused around:

- Refreshing and expanding the curriculum (including developing more courses to degree level)
- Involving staff more in shaping and influencing the future college (including “*hearing the staff voice*”)
- Retaining good local management (including accessibility to – and flexibility of – localised structures)
- Engaging more effectively with local schools and local communities

Thereafter, a range of **other suggestions** were made regarding improvements that staff would like to see as a result of the merger, including:

- The updating of IT resources
- Adopting a more innovative management structure (including promoting the identity and role of managers)
- Improving communications (which is seen as being a massive challenge)

- Working together more effectively as UHI (in terms of, for example, sharing good practice and promoting working relationships)
- Providing more accommodation for students (at an affordable price)
- Simplifying and streamlining paperwork (for example, in relation to the enrolment and admissions processes)
- Ensuring that sufficient staff support is in place for students
- Ensuring sufficient staffing and financial resources to deliver a quality product/service
- Protecting rural centres
- Allowing staff to specialise in their own areas of expertise
- Future-proofing the colleges' name (in order to allow for other colleges to merge with it in future)
- Increasing job opportunities within the college

### 2.2.6 Supporting Learners Effectively

There were relatively few responses when staff were asked how the new college could better support learners. However, it is of interest to note that **principal mention** was made here of desires to ensure that there is the maintenance of face-to-face contact with students (in order to build relationships, provide support and build confidence of learners), with a particular emphasis being placed on small class sizes.

Thereafter, **more specific mention** was made here of:

- Committing to supporting students on a face-to-face basis
- Managers *“remembering that students are the priority and that staff are there for them and to deliver for them”*
- The curriculum *“providing the opportunity to study from anywhere”*

### 2.2.7 Staff Feeling Part of the Merger Process

There was a general consensus amongst staff that they did not feel sufficiently part of the merger process (and had not been sufficiently

consulted about it). It was equally apparent that there was a notable desire for staff to be involved in the merger process if the merger is confirmed and implementation is being considered. In particular, there was a desire for staff to get more involved in working groups, focus groups and in other ways.

It should also be noted that staff made reference to feeling remote and 'at arm's length' in relation to the process.

Furthermore, it should be noted that there were references made here to:

- A desire to become involved when staff 'need' to be involved (although, in this regard, it was recognised that the nature and timing of involvement may vary between different staff and different departments)
- Being unable to tell if staff feel part of the merger process until 'lower-level details come out'

In the context of the outcomes noted above, it should be stressed that a number of those participating in the focus groups **did not** express a desire to have a greater role in the merger process due to:

- Their current workload being excessive and having no desire to add to it
- Concerns that *"negatives could be exacerbated by staff contribution"*

### **2.2.8 Biggest Challenges Facing Staff that Relate to the Merger**

It was **primarily believed** by staff that the **biggest challenges** facing them that relate to the merger were those of:

- Ensuring that staff feel empowered in respect of influencing change

- Ensuring effective communications (including two-way communications and regular team meetings)
- Ensuring that all staff have the opportunity to put their views forward and, in particular, that *“everyone’s views can be heard”*
- Ensuring that timelines are communicated and that lead times for changes are achievable (including a desire to be informed about *“what won’t be happening”*)

Thereafter, **more specific mention** was made here of:

- Dealing with staff uncertainty regarding the implications of departmental overstaffing
- Ensuring that there is a focus on creating teams and making staff feel part of their team
- Ensuring that management show compassion (and, as part of this, deliver their duty of care)
- Addressing and mitigating *“the feeling of ‘fear’ within staff”*
- Avoiding staff being protective of their own function, area or department

### **2.2.9 Making Staff Feel Part of One Organisation**

There was a **notable belief** that staff could be made to feel part of one organisation if they *“participate in open conversations and their feedback is taken on board”*.

Thereafter, **more specific mention** was made here of:

- Meeting with opposite numbers in the merged college
- Conducting departmental meetings that share best practice
- Giving a commitment to respond to staff when they make their views known
- Ensuring that reviews, surveys and so on are acted upon and results reported back

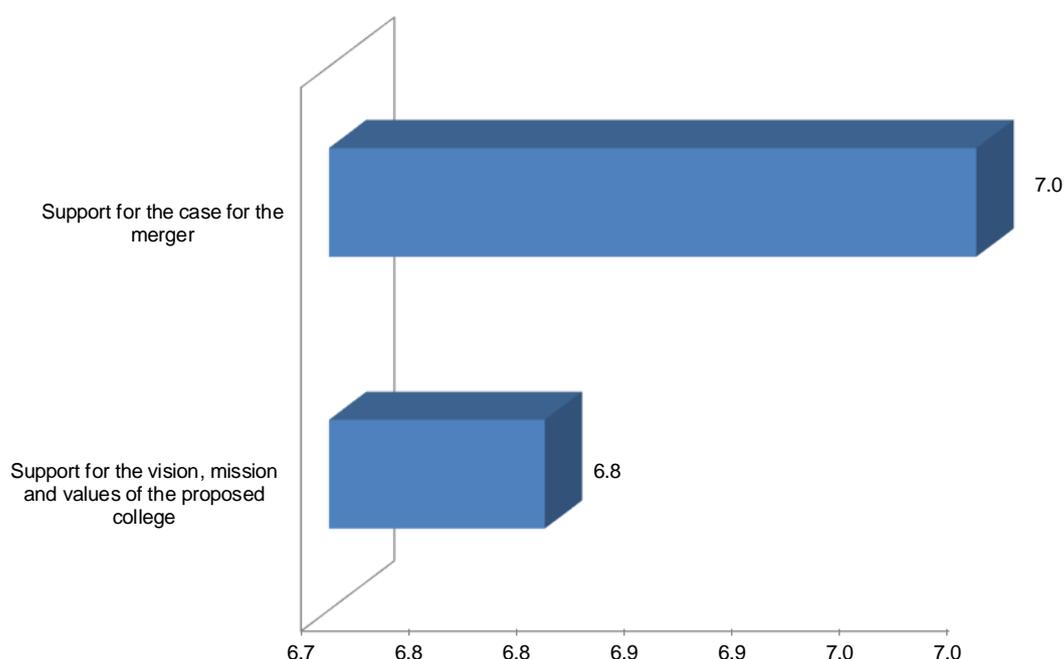
### 3.0 THE EXTERNAL AUDIENCE PERSPECTIVE

#### 3.1 Quantitative Profile

##### 3.1.1 Support Strength Profile

*“How strongly would you support the case for the merger and the vision, mission and values of the proposed college?”*

**Figure 13: Support Profile**



**Base: All in the External Audiences**

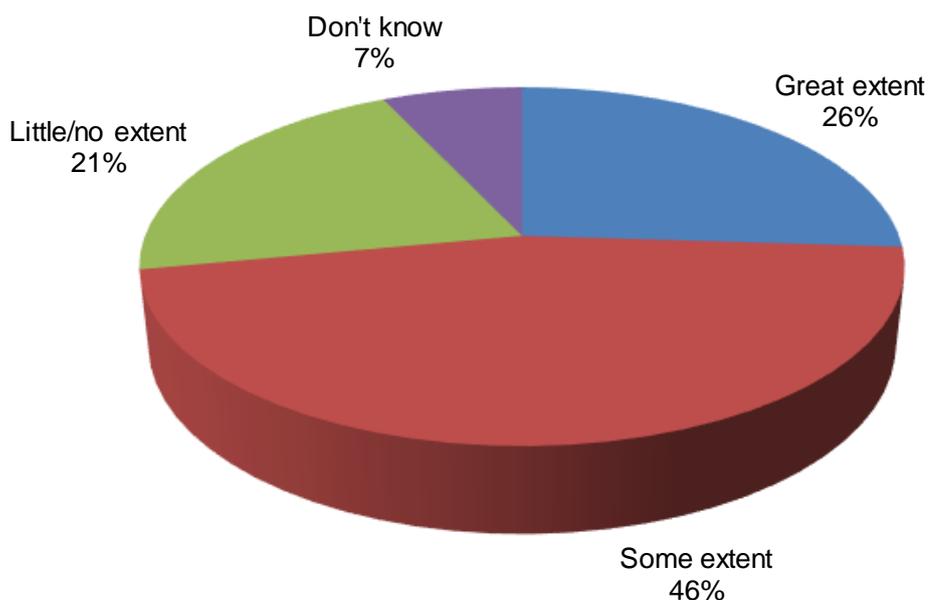
When those in the external audiences were asked how strongly they supported the case for the merger and the vision, mission and values of the proposed college on a scale from 1 to 10, where ‘1’ was ‘don’t support at all’ and ‘10’ was ‘very strongly support’, Figure 13 indicates that the average scores for both of these indicators were as follows:

- Support for the case for the merger = 7.0 out of a possible 10
- Support for the vision, mission and values of the proposed college = 6.8

### 3.1.2 Impact Profile

*“To what extent do you believe the merger will provide more course options to students choosing to study at UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland?”*

**Figure 14: Extent to Which the Merger will Provide More Course Options for Students**



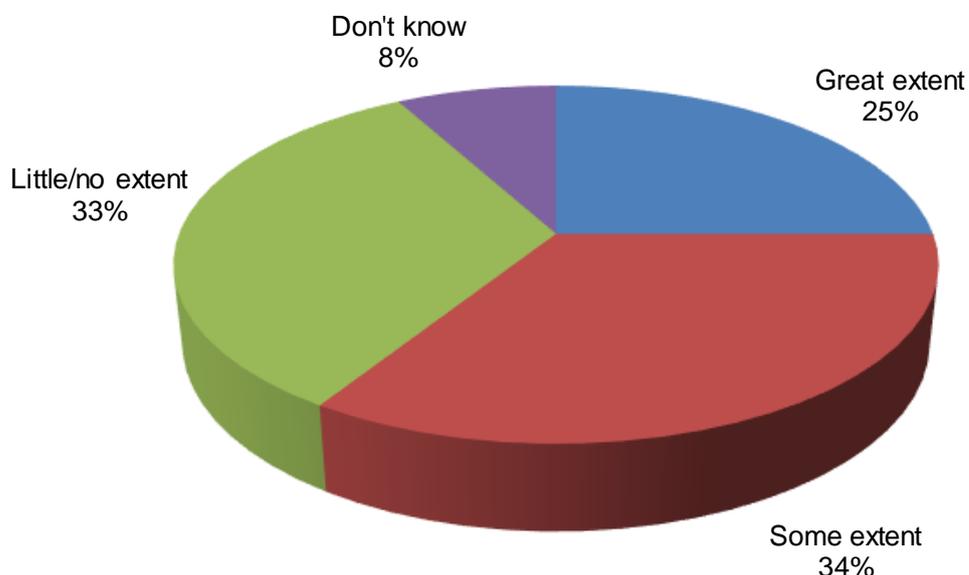
**Base: All in the External Audiences**

Figure 14 indicates that approaching three quarters of those in the external audiences (72%) believed that the merger will provide more course options for students choosing to study at the three colleges, with a quarter (26%) specifically believing that this would be ‘to a great extent’.

Figure 14 also indicates that around 1 in 5 respondents (21%) believed that the merger will provide more course options to students ‘to little or no extent’, whilst around 1 in 14 respondents (7%) felt unable to express an opinion in this regard.

*“To what extent do you believe the merger will help to protect local jobs?”*

**Figure 15: Extent to Which the Merger will Help to Protect Local Jobs**



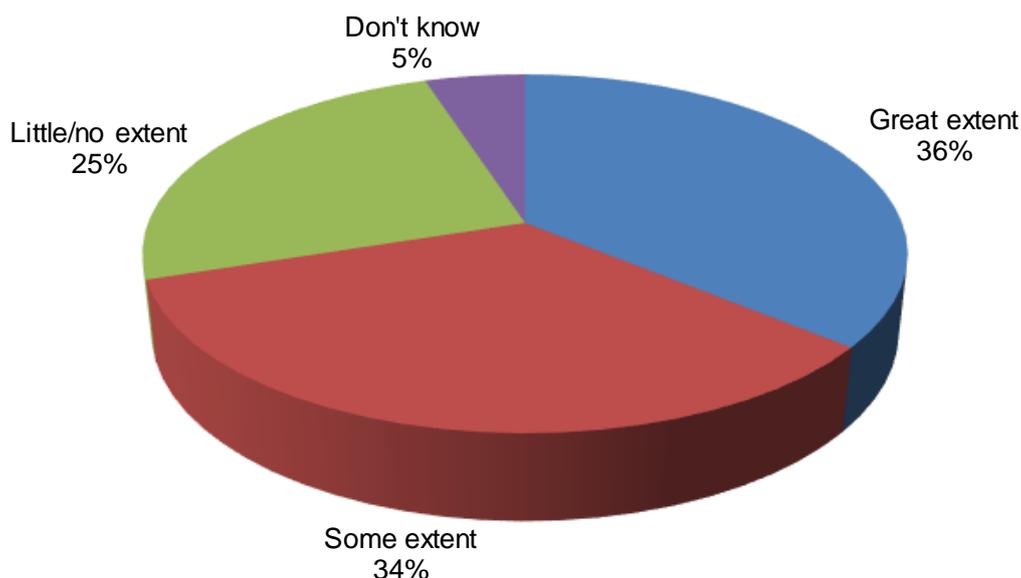
**Base: All in the External Audiences**

From Figure 15, it can be seen that almost 3 out of 5 of those in the external audiences (59%) believed that the merger will help to protect local jobs, with a quarter (25%) specifically believing that this will be the case ‘to a great extent’.

Figure 15 also indicates that a third of respondents (33%) believed that the merger will help to protect local jobs ‘to little or no extent’, whilst 1 in 12 (8%) felt unable to express an opinion.

*“To what extent do you believe that the merger will help focus the collective strengths of UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland so that they can better support the needs and ambitions of their local communities?”*

**Figure 16: Extent to Which the Merger will Help Focus the Collective Strengths of UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland**



**Base: All in the External Audiences**

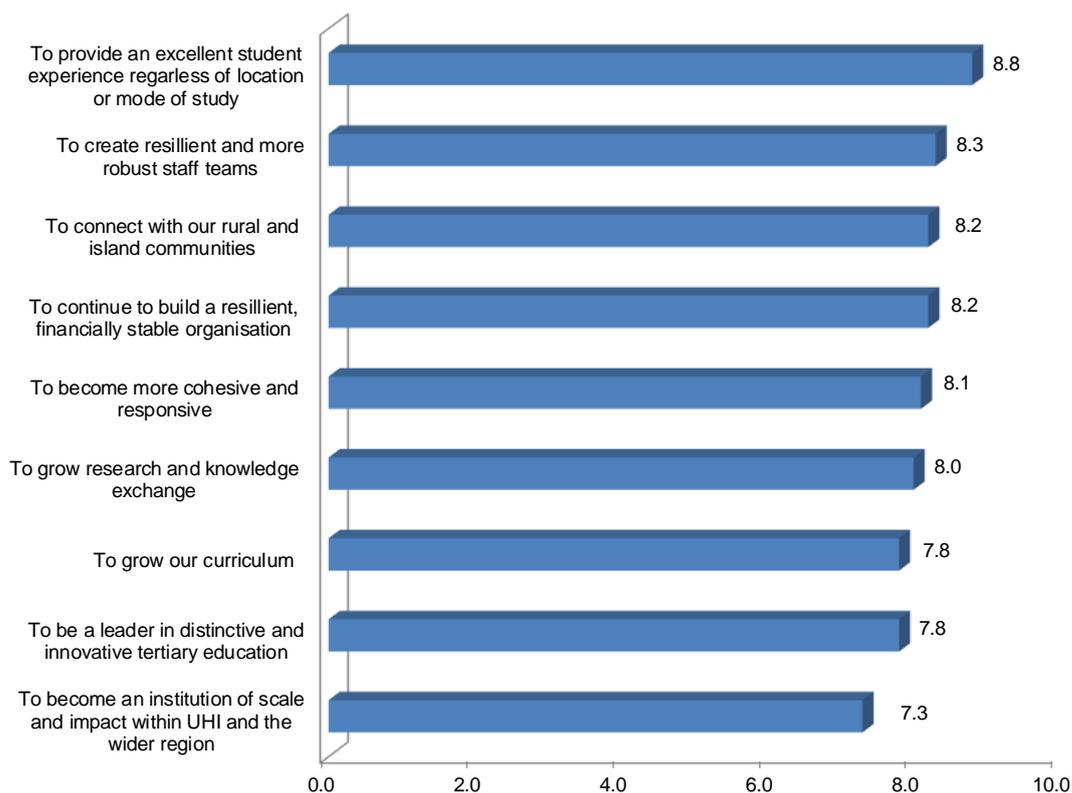
Figure 16 indicates that 7 out of 10 of those in the external audiences (70%) believed that the merger will help focus the collective strengths of the three colleges so that they can better support the needs and ambitions of their local communities, with over a third of respondents (36%) specifically believing that this will be the case ‘to a great extent’.

Figure 16 also indicates that a quarter of those in the external audiences (25%) believed that the merger will help focus the collective strengths of the three colleges ‘to little or no extent’, whilst 1 in 20 respondents (5%) felt unable to express an opinion here.

### 3.1.3 Priorities Profile

*“How strong a priority would the following be for the new college, on a scale from 1 to 10, where ‘1’ is ‘not a priority at all’ and ‘10’ is ‘a very strong priority’?”*

**Figure 17: Priority Strength Profile**



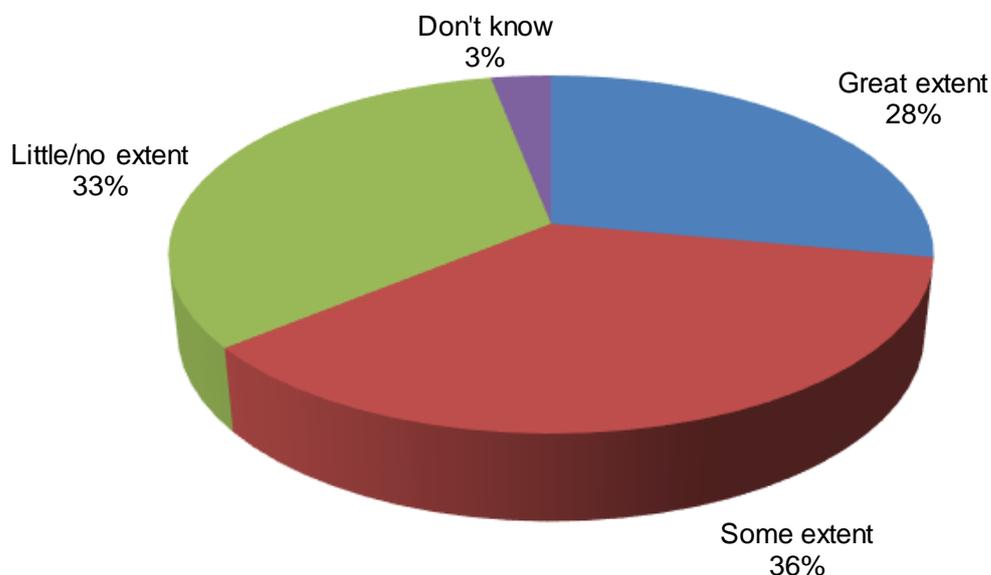
**Base: All in the External Audiences**

When those in the external audiences were asked how strong a priority a range of factors would be for the new college on a scale from 1 to 10, where ‘1’ was ‘not a priority at all’ and ‘10’ was ‘a very strong priority’, Figure 17 indicates that there were high average scores across all of the factors under consideration, ranging from 7.3 out of a possible 10 in terms of the college ‘to become an institution of scale and impact within UHI and the wider region’ to 8.8 out of a possible 10 in relation to the college ‘providing an excellent student experience regardless of location or mode of study’.

### 3.1.4 Concerns About the Merger

*“To what extent do you have concerns about the merger?”*

**Figure 18: Extent to Which There are Concerns About the Merger**



**Base: All in the External Audiences**

From Figure 18, it can be seen that approaching two thirds of those in the external audiences (64%) stated that they had concerns about the merger, with nearly 3 out of 10 (28%) describing these concerns to be ‘to a great extent’.

Figure 18 also indicates that a third of those in the external audiences (33%) had concerns about the merger to only ‘little or no extent’, whilst very few respondents (only 3%) felt unable to express an opinion in this regard.

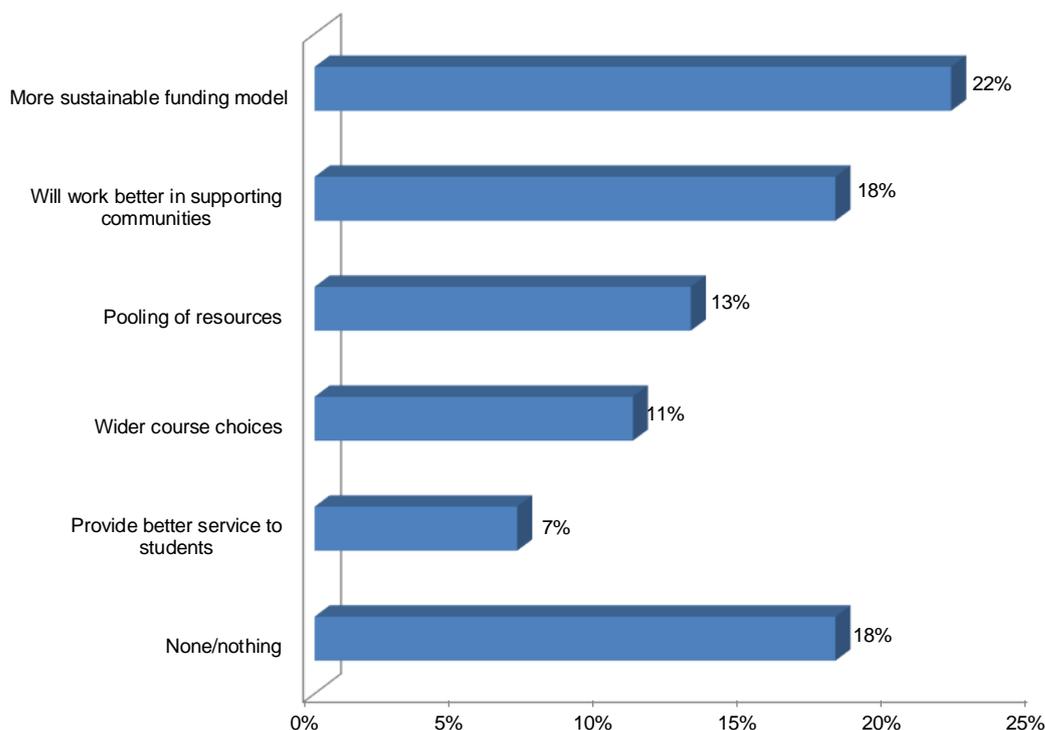
### 3.1.5 Perceived Positives/Strengths and Negatives/Weaknesses About the Merger

Those in the external audiences were asked – on an unprompted basis – what they believed to be the perceived main positives/strengths and main negatives/weaknesses about the merger. In this regard, it should be stressed that the outcomes presented in Figures 19 and 20 are

highly indicative in nature and that this should be borne in mind when considering them.

*“What do you believe to be the main positives or strengths about the merger, if any?”*

**Figure 19: Perceived Main Positives/Strengths About the Merger (Unprompted) - Highly Indicative**



**Base: All Respondents Providing a Response**

From Figure 19, it can be seen that the **primary main positives or strengths** about the merger identified – on an unprompted basis – by those in the external audiences were:

- That the merger provided a more sustainable funding model (22%)
- That the merged college will work better in supporting communities (18%)

Thereafter, a number of **other** main positives or strengths about the merger were noted, including:

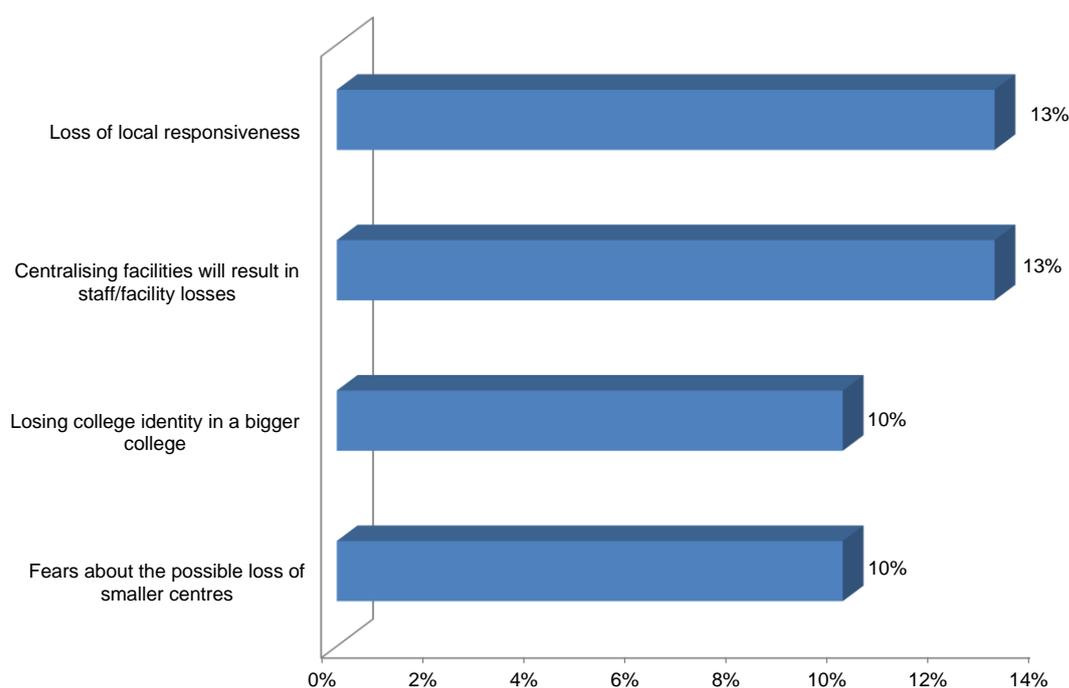
- The pooling of resources (13%)

- Wider course choices (11%)

It is also of interest to note from Figure 19 that almost 1 in 5 of those in the external audiences (18%) were unable to identify **any** main positives or strengths about the merger.

*“What do you believe to be the main negatives or weaknesses about the merger, if any?”*

**Figure 20: Perceived Main Negatives/Weaknesses About the Merger (Unprompted) - Highly Indicative**



**Base: All Respondents Providing a Response**

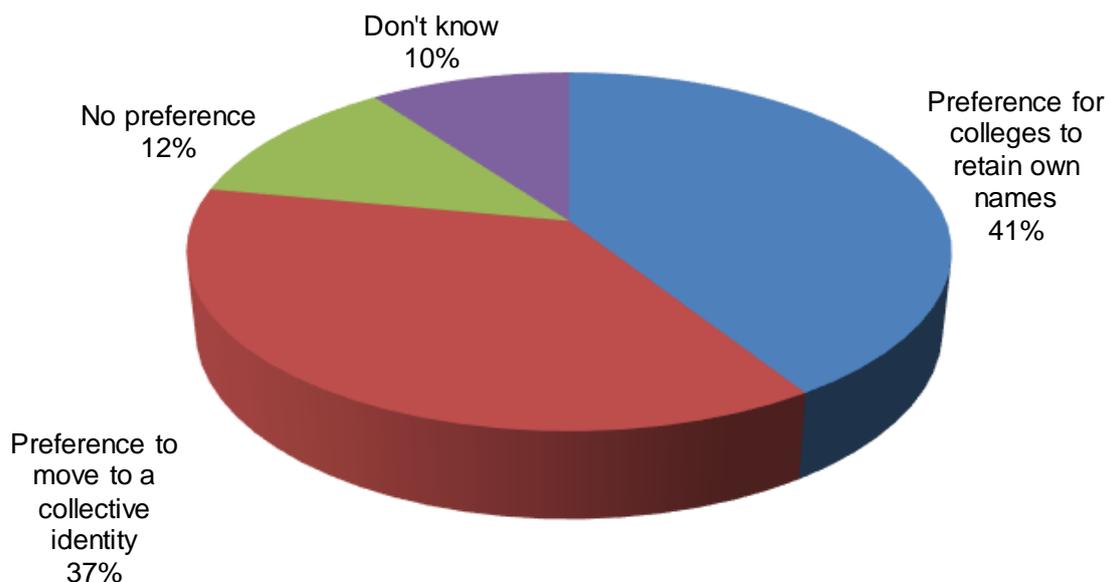
From Figure 20, it can be seen that those in the external audiences **most notably** identified four unprompted perceived main negatives/weaknesses about the merger, namely:

- Loss of local responsiveness (13%)
- The centralisation of facilities resulting in staff/facility losses (13%)
- The three colleges losing their identities in a bigger college (10%)
- Fear about the possible closure of smaller centres (10%)

### 3.1.6 College Name Preferences

*“Do you believe that the colleges should continue to retain their own names or move to a collective identity?”*

**Figure 21: Preferences re Colleges Continuing to Retain their Own Names or Move to a Collective Identity**



**Base: All in the External Audiences**

From Figure 21, it can be seen that those in the external audiences were relatively evenly split in terms of preferences for:

- The colleges to continue to retain their own names (41%)
- The colleges to move to a collective identity (37%)

Figure 21 also indicates that 1 in 8 respondents (12%) stated they had no preference in this regard, whilst 1 in 10 (10%) felt unable to express an opinion.

## 3.2 Stakeholder Qualitative Profile

### 3.2.1 Stakeholder Supportiveness of the Merger

There was **notable support** for the merger amongst stakeholders taking part in the consultation process. This was for a wide range of reasons, which fell under five key headings (which are not necessarily mutually exclusive).

#### Impact of the Merger Per Se

- Providing an opportunity to build a sustainable future for Highlands and Islands colleges
- Reflecting ambitions for the region
- Promoting Scotland internationally

#### Impact of the Merger on Local Communities

- Helping protect communities from potential Brexit and COVID-19 impacts on their economy
- Helping to address the issue of depopulation
- Attracting 'talent' to local communities (including staff)

#### Opportunities

- Providing an opportunity to grow skills, research and innovation
- Developing the potential to support environmental benefits (including opportunities relating to the zero-carbon agenda)
- Providing opportunities for growth in the region in terms of the availability of suitably skilled and qualified individuals to work in expanding sectors within the region

### **Benefits**

- Being positive for all key parties (including the college itself, staff, students, employers and others in the local communities)
- Improving the potential for partnership and collaborative working, both internally and with the private and public sectors
- Accruing social and cultural benefits and, in particular, the college's role in developing the regional culture (through, for example, its commitment to Gaelic)
- The benefits associated with streamlining and service sharing

### **College Related**

- Making the college more financially sustainable
- Accruing efficiencies in terms of staffing structures, professional/academic expertise and helping to grow research/innovation locally
- Establishing a 'more powerful college'
- Providing the opportunity to broaden curriculum choice
- Benefiting from economies of scale
- Providing the opportunity for the merged college to position itself to take advantage of the growth potential of the region

### **3.2.2 Positives About the Merger**

In addition to the range of reasons for most of those in the external audiences being supportive of the merger, a number of **other positives** were noted about it, including:

- The merged college having a wider reach than the existing three colleges
- The opportunity for staff to work with different people
- Travel opportunities for students
- The merged college having a bigger and better brand than the three existing colleges

- The vision and priorities of the merged college aligning with those of key stakeholders
- Opportunities to deliver skills which will better meet the needs of local employers

A **further positive** to emerge here was the willingness of a number of stakeholders to continue to support the merger, including providing assistance where they could through facilitating/advocating funding support, raising a motion in parliament and raising the profile of the merger through social media.

Indeed, it should be stressed that, in part, the factors leading to support for the merger – together with the positives noted above – were seen as being a function of the business case being well presented and the efforts of the merger team.

### 3.2.3 Negatives About the Merger

The **main negatives or weaknesses** of the merger identified by the external audiences were most notable in terms of:

- The loss of local responsiveness
- The centralisation of facilities resulting in staff/facility losses
- The existing colleges losing their identity in a bigger college
- The potential loss of smaller centres

It should also be noted that there was a belief that there are already a number of economies of scale which are accrued under the UHI umbrella and, therefore, that there's not a need for the merger to seek such economies of scale.

### 3.2.4 Requirements Relating to the Merger

In the context of the outcomes noted above, it is of interest to note that a number of stakeholders taking part in the consultation process noted their belief that there were a number of requirements which would have to be satisfied in relation to the process going forward, with **primary mention** in this regard being made of a need for further information and analysis to be provided to stakeholders (including financial information), more data in terms of support for the merger (e.g. in relation to student growth predictions) and more details regarding the proposed mechanisms for the merger.

In addition, **more specific requirements** were noted in relation to:

- The need for the merged college to address student accommodation issues
- The need for the merged college to address potential broadband issues
- Seeking political unity regarding agreement with the merger
- For all key partners to work together to ensure the success of the merged college
- Ensuring sufficient training for Gaelic medium teachers
- The need to adopt an inclusive approach to seeking further views of – and consultation with – students, staff and the wider community
- The need for management to allow staff to support students more effectively than is currently the case

### 3.2.5 Stakeholder Concerns

Despite the general support amongst stakeholders for the merger, a number of concerns were apparent, with these **primarily** focusing around fear of centre closures (including the number and type of job cuts through voluntary severance or redundancy).

Thereafter, a wide range of **other concerns** were noted which fell under three main headings.

### **Teaching/Learning Concerns**

- The impact of the merger on staff (including, for example, their day-to-day work)
- The extent to which students will learn online
- The position of Gaelic in the merged college
- The lack of “*the social side of learning for students*” in the context of online learning

### **Financial Concerns**

- Reductions in ongoing funding of research in rural centres
- A degree of scepticism about the business case (including beliefs amongst some stakeholders that the financial case for the merger will not be made)
- Smaller centres becoming unviable as a result of the merger
- The merger not being primarily based on the educational needs of students but on financial considerations
- The potential impact of inflation costs on the business case

### **Other Miscellaneous Concerns**

- The danger of ‘losing connection’ with local communities
- Concerns about the depletion of the UHI brand and the loss of identity of the three existing colleges
- The potential impact on established partnership working models and arrangements
- The ability of the merged college to link island strategies with an overall education strategy for the merged college

- The lack of mention in information provided to date regarding students with disabilities and additional support needs (particularly in the context of online learning)
- Members of the public having concerns regarding the closure of local centres which they make use of

### **3.2.6 Challenges Pertaining to the Merger**

In the context of the outcomes presented in this section of the report, it should be noted that a number of challenges were identified by stakeholders pertaining to the merger, including:

- Potential difficulties associated with working across three principal sites and a wide range of smaller centres
- Challenges relating to teams working across a wide range of locations (pertaining to, for example, systems and file sharing) and teams adopting different working practices or approaches
- The uncertainty that the merger has raised for audiences such as students, staff, stakeholders, employers and local communities
- The time available to prepare for changes which will result from the merger
- Real time funding cuts and the declining demographic

### **3.2.7 Questions About the Merger**

It should be stressed that, in the context of balance of support in favour of the merger, a **considerable number** of questions were raised by stakeholders, including:

- What the level of support is for the merger across the three colleges
- The extent of involvement with a sufficiently wide range of partners
- How Gaelic will be incorporated into the merged college's curriculum and teaching

- What the college's position and processes will be in relation to international students
- How the research function of the merged college would be sufficiently funded
- Where the required investment in technology will come from

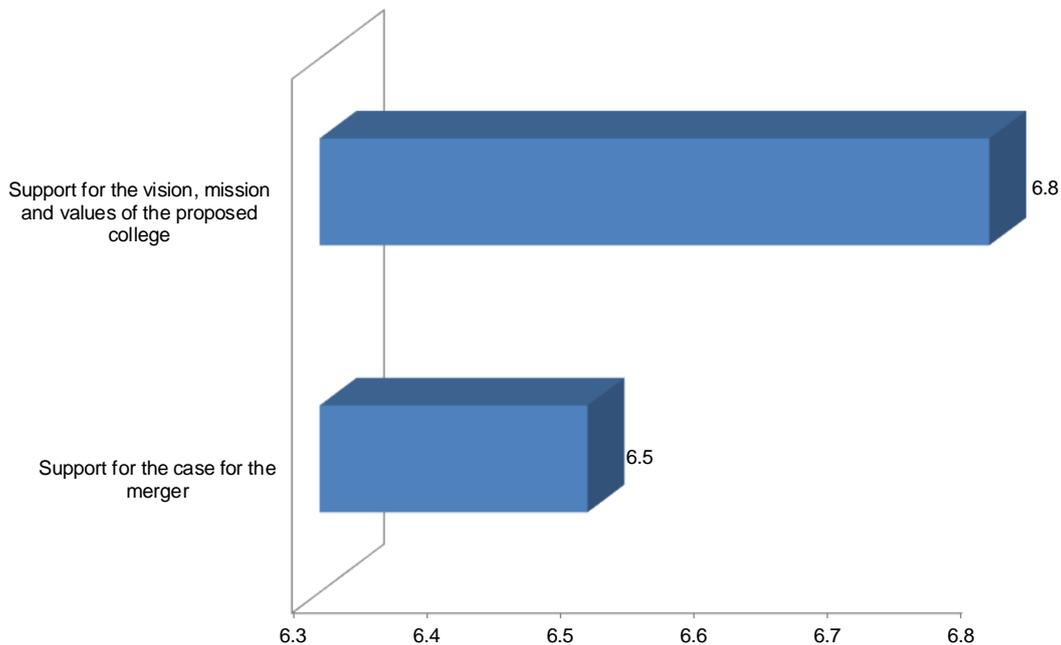
## 4.0 THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

### 4.1 Quantitative Profile

#### 4.1.1 Support Strength Profile

*“How strongly would you support the case for the merger and the vision, mission and values of the proposed college on a scale from 1 to 10, where ‘1’ is ‘don’t support at all’ and ‘10’ is ‘very strongly support’?”*

**Figure 22: Support Profile**



**Base: All Students**

From Figure 22, it can be seen that, when students were asked how strongly they would support the case for the vision, mission and values of the proposed college, on a scale from 1 to 10, where ‘1’ is ‘don’t support at all’ and ‘10’ is ‘very strongly support’, an average score of 6.8 out of 10 was provided.

Thereafter, an average score of 6.5 out of a possible 10 was provided in relation to how strongly students supported the case for the merger.

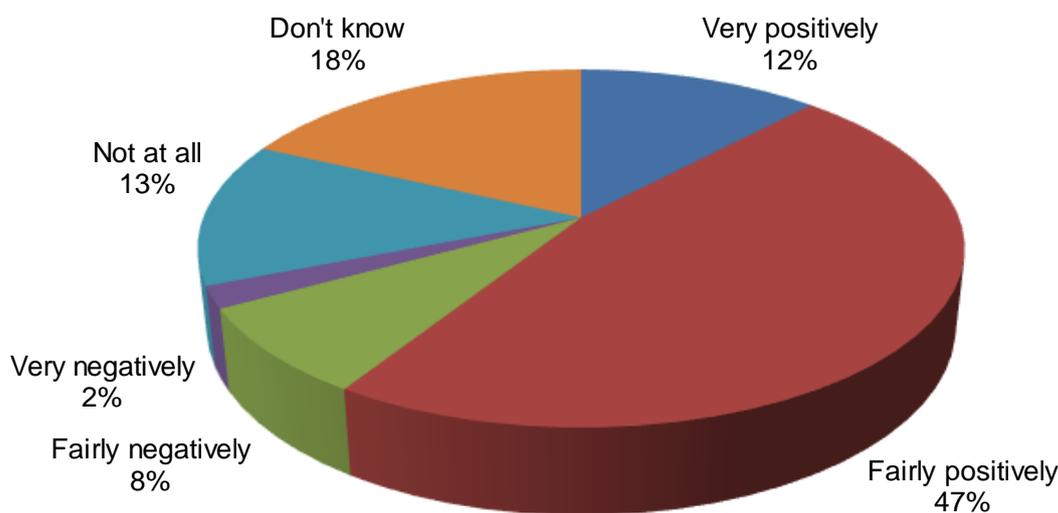
Further examination of the data indicated that support for the case for the merger was highest amongst students from UHI Outer Hebrides (7.5 compared to 6.3 and 6.2 for those from UHI North Highland and UHI West Highland).

Further examination of the data also indicated that support for the vision, mission and values of the proposed colleges were also highest amongst students at UHI Outer Hebrides (7.9 compared to 6.6 for students in both UHI North Highland and UHI West Highland).

#### 4.1.2 The Impact of the Merger on the Student Experience

*“Do you think that the merger will impact on your student experience positively, negatively or not at all?”*

**Figure 23: Extent to Which the Merger will Impact on Your Student Experience**



**Base: All Students**

Figure 23 indicates that almost 3 out of 5 students (59%) believed that the merger will impact positively on their student experience, although this was far more likely to be fairly positively (47%) rather than very positively (12%).

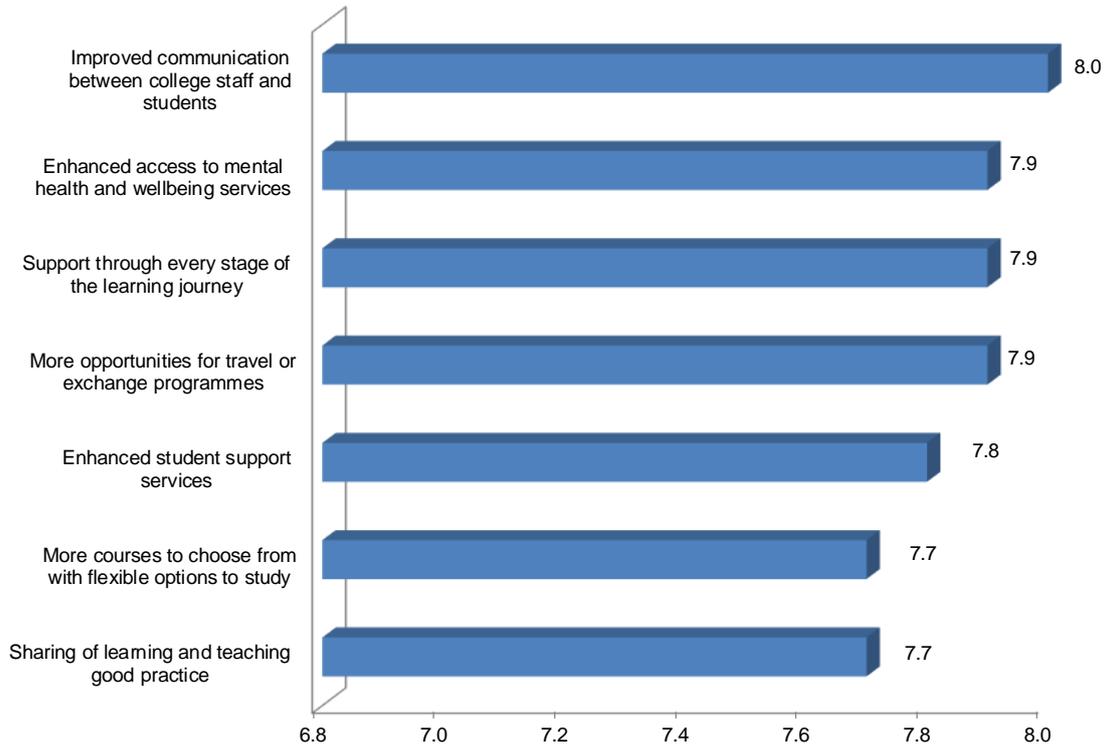
In addition, Figure 23 indicates that 1 in 10 students (10%) believed that the merger will impact negatively on their student experience, that around 1 in 8 students (13%) didn't believe that the merger will have any impact on their student experience, whilst approaching 1 in 5 (18%) felt unable to express an opinion.

Further examination of the data indicated that students at UHI West Highland were least likely to believe that the merger will impact positively on their student experience (39% compared to 65% for those in the two other colleges). In part, this is due to students at UHI West Highland being most likely to believe that the merger will impact negatively on their student experience (19% compared to, for example, 5% for those at UHI North Highland) and students from UHI West Highland being most likely to provide a 'don't know' response here (27% compared to, for example, 6% for those at UHI Outer Hebrides).

### 4.1.3 Priorities Profile

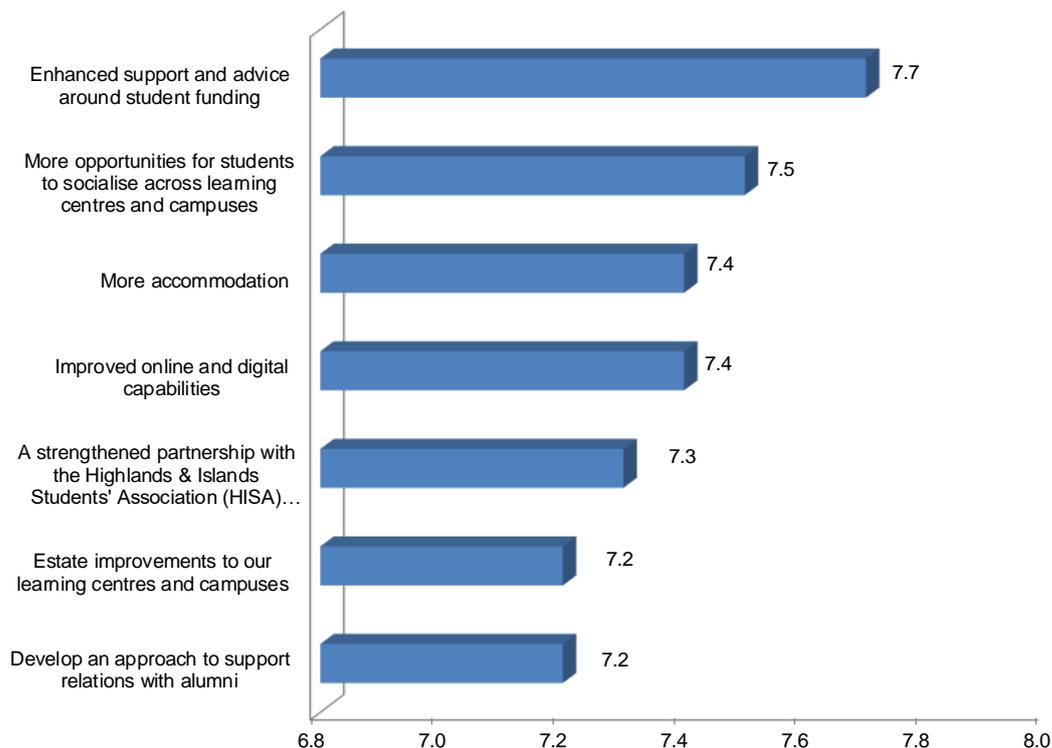
*“How strong a priority would the following be for a new college, on a scale from 1 to 10, where ‘1’ is ‘not a priority at all’ and ‘10’ is ‘a very strong priority’?”*

**Figure 24: Priority Strength Profile**



**Base: All Students**

**Figure 25: Priority Strength Profile**



**Base: All Students**

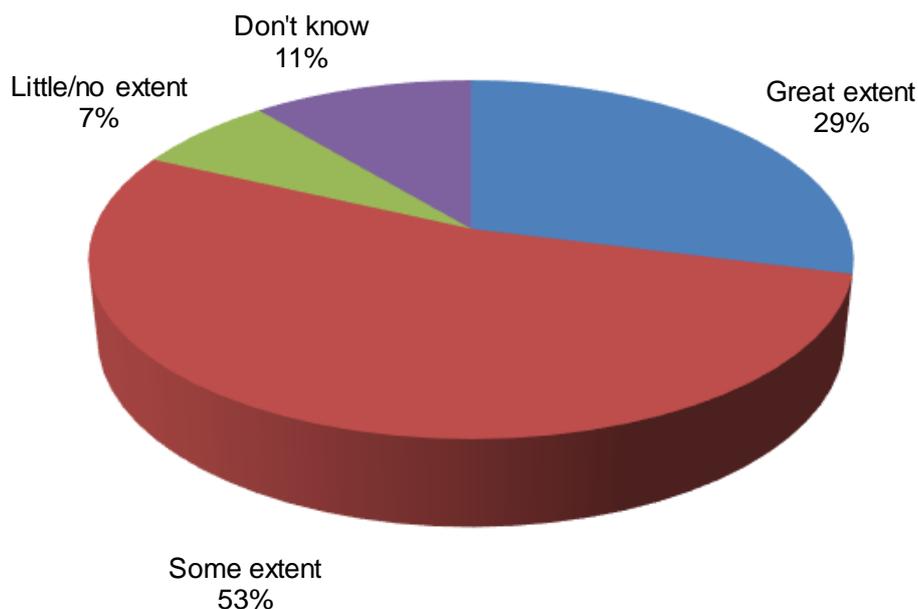
When students were asked how important a range of factors would be for the new college, on a scale from 1 to 10, where '1' was 'not a priority at all' and '10' was a 'very strong priority', Figures 24 and 25 indicate that there were high average scores across all factors under consideration, ranging from 7.2 out of a possible 10 in terms of the new institution 'developing an approach to support relations with alumni so they continue to feel part of the community' to 8.0 out of a possible 10 in relation to 'improved communication between the college, staff and students creating a stronger sense of community'.

Further examination of the data indicated that the average scores noted in Figures 24 and 25 tended to be highest amongst students at UHI Outer Hebrides, although in some cases the variances between students at UHI Outer Hebrides and the two other colleges were marginal.

#### 4.1.4 Impact Profile

*“To what extent do you believe the merger will provide more course options to students choosing to study at UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland?”*

**Figure 26: Extent to Which the Merger will Provide More Course Options for Students**



**Base: All Students**

From Figure 26, it can be seen that over 4 out of 5 students (82%) believed that the merger will provide more course options to students choosing to study at the three colleges, with this being more likely to be believed to be ‘to some extent’ (53%) rather than ‘to a great extent’ (29%).

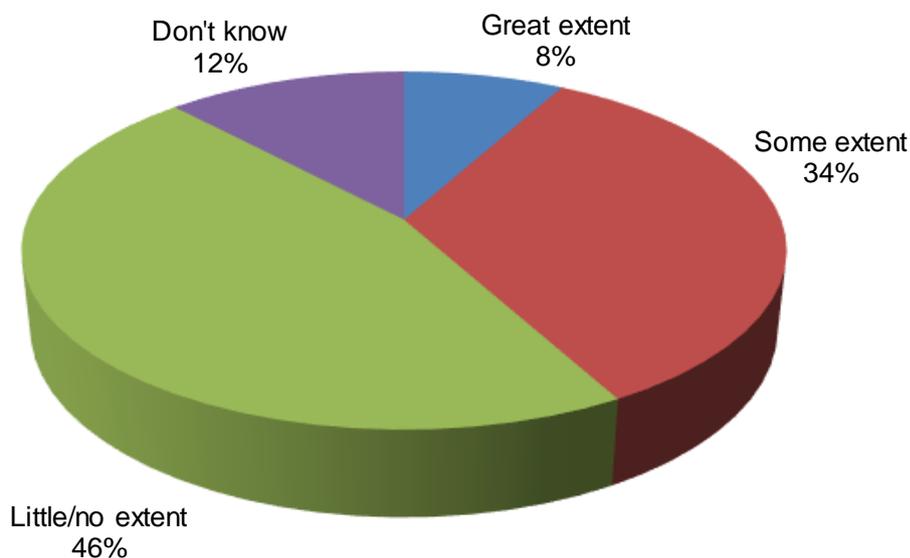
Figure 26 also indicates that few students (only 7%) believed that the merger will provide more course options to students choosing to study at the three colleges ‘to little or no extent’, whilst 1 in 10 felt unable to express an opinion (11%).

It should be noted that further examination of the data indicated no notable variances here on the basis of where a student was studying.

#### 4.1.5 Extent of Concerns About the Merger

*“To what extent do you have concerns about the merger?”*

**Figure 27: Extent of Concerns About the Merger**



**Base: All Students**

Figure 27 indicates that just over 2 out of 5 students (42%) had concerns about the merger, with 1 in 12 (8%) having concerns ‘to a great extent’ and a third (34%) having concerns ‘to some extent’.

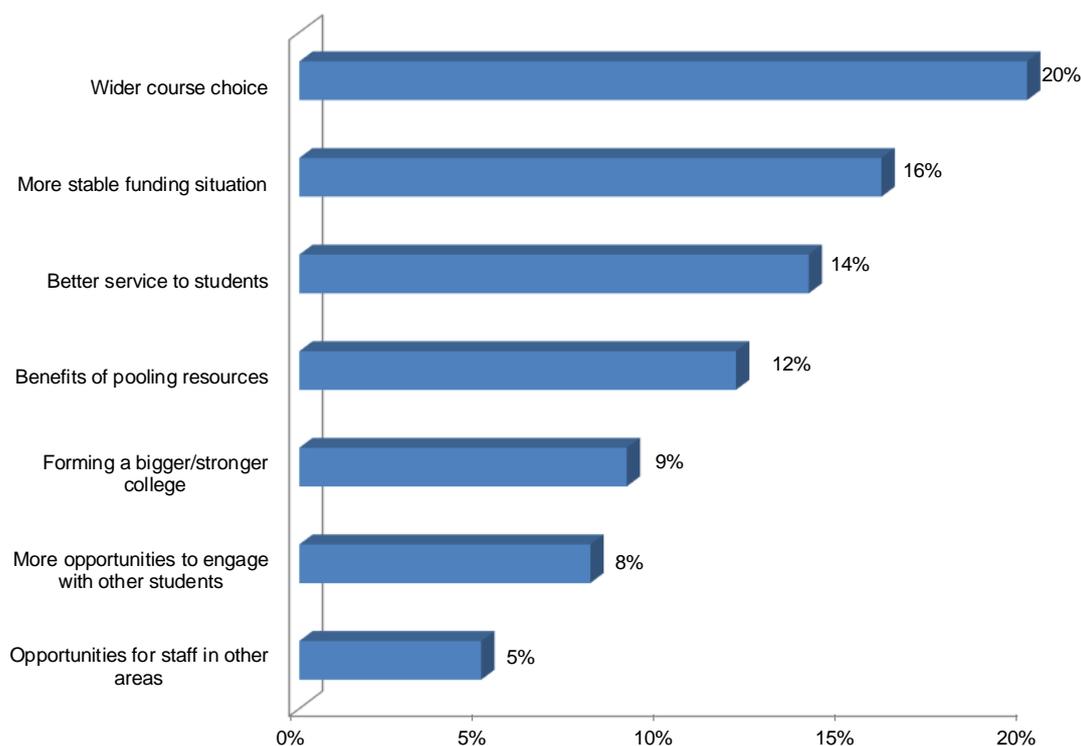
Figure 27 also indicates that approaching half of students (46%) had concerns ‘to little or no extent’ about the merger, with 1 in 8 (12%) feeling unable to express an opinion here.

Further examination of the data indicated that students at UHI West Highland were most likely to have concerns about the merger (56% compared to 37% and 41% respectively for those at UHI North Highland and UHI Outer Hebrides).

#### 4.1.6 Perceived Main Positives/Strengths and Main Negatives/ Weaknesses About the Merger

*“What do you believe to be the main positives or strengths about the merger, if any?”*

**Figure 28: Perceived Main Positives/Strengths About the Merger  
(Unprompted) - Highly Indicative**



**Base: All Respondents Providing a Response**

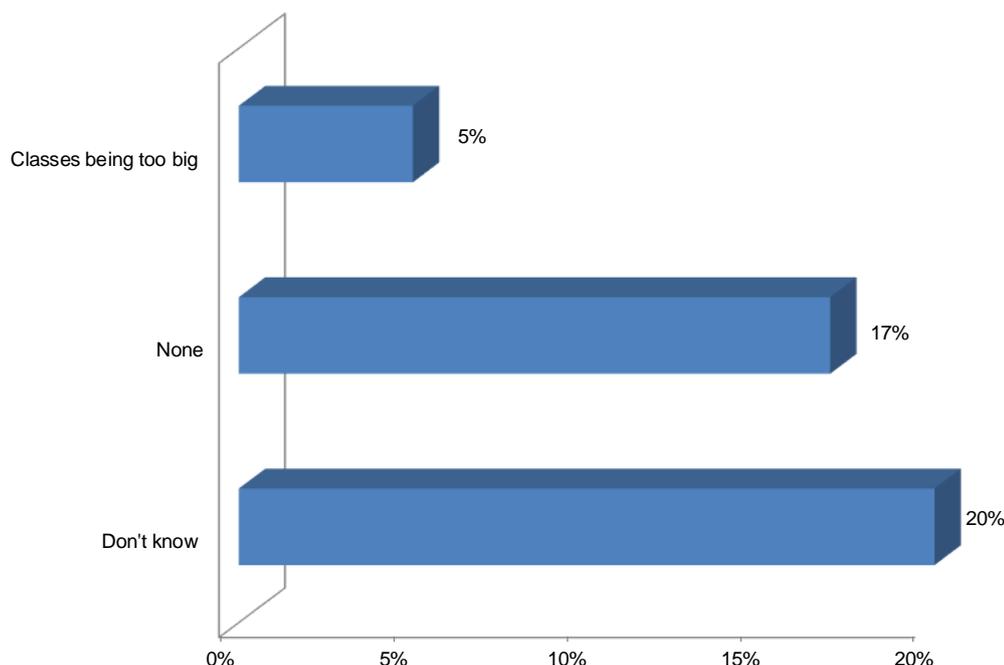
When students were asked – on an unprompted basis – what they believed to be the main positives or strengths about the merger, if any, Figure 28 indicates that their **principal responses** focused around the merger:

- Resulting in wider course choices (20%)
- Providing a more stable funding situation (16%)
- Resulting in a better service for students (14%)
- Resulting in benefits from the pooling of resources (12%)

It should be noted that the outcomes noted above are on a highly indicative basis due to the percentage of students who provided a response. This also applies to the outcomes noted in Figure 29 below.

*“What do you believe to be the main negatives or weaknesses about the merger, if any?”*

**Figure 29: Perceived Main Negatives/Weaknesses About the Merger (Unprompted) - Highly Indicative**



**Base: All Respondents Providing a Response**

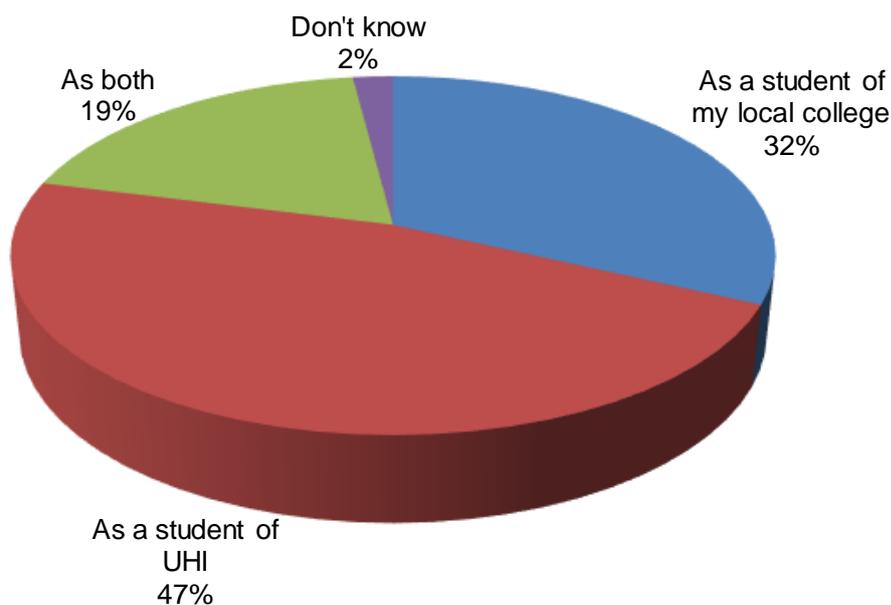
Figure 29 indicates that, when students were asked – again, on an unprompted basis – what they believed to be the main negatives or weaknesses about the merger, none emerged with any significance, i.e. the most common response (provided by 5% of those providing a response) was that of ‘classes being too large’.

Indeed, it should also be noted that over 1 in 6 respondents here (17%) stated that they could identify **no** main negatives or weaknesses about the merger (on an unprompted basis), whilst 1 in 5 (20%) felt unable to provide a response.

#### 4.1.7 Other Considerations

*“Do you identify as a student of your local college (i.e. UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides or UHI West Highland) or as a UHI student more generally?”*

**Figure 30: Extent of Identification as a Student with Local College or UHI More Generally**



**Base: All Students**

Figure 30 indicates that almost half of students (47%) identified ‘as a student of UHI’, whilst a third (32%) identified ‘as a student of their local college’, with 1 in 5 (19%) identifying ‘as both’ and very few (2%) feeling unable to express an opinion in this regard.

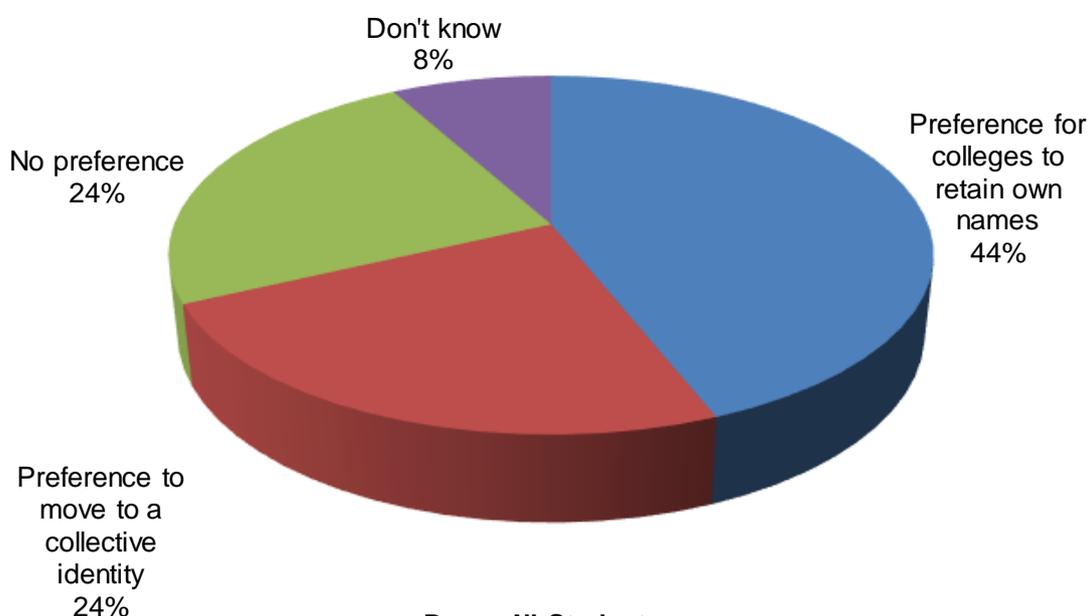
Further examination of the data indicated that:

- Students at UHI West Highland were most likely to identify as a student of their local college (39% compared to, for example, 23% for students at UHI Outer Hebrides)
- Students at UHI West Highland were least likely to identify as a student of UHI (37% compared to 51% and 46% respectively for those at UHI North Highland and UHI Outer Hebrides)

- Students at UHI North Highland were least likely to identify as both a student of their local college and a student of UHI (14%), with this most likely to be the case amongst those at UHI Outer Hebrides (31%)

*“Do you believe that the colleges should continue to retain their own names – UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland – or move to a collective identity?”*

**Figure 31: Preferences re Colleges Continuing to Retain their Own Names or Move to a Collective Identity**



**Base: All Students**

From Figure 31, it can be seen that students most commonly stated that they would prefer that colleges should continue to retain their own names (44%). Thereafter – excluding those feeling unable to express an opinion here (8%) – students were equally split in terms of:

- Having no preference (24%)
- Having a preference to move to a collective identity (24%)

## 4.2 Qualitative Profile

### 4.2.1 General Views About the Merger

When students were asked to express their general views about the merger, the overwhelming majority of their responses were in the form of questions rather than views.

The questions which were posed fell under four headings which were as follows:

#### Learning Related

The learning-related questions focused around:

- The meaning of multicampus delivery
- If lectures will be online rather than on campus
- If there would be greater online learning
- The potential to study in a separate location for a period of time (for example, for a semester)
- The potential for a wider variety of practical elements of courses if more staff were recruited
- If courses could be available at more than one location
- If student support will change from being on campus
- If there will be new lecturers
- If any of the colleges will deliver new courses

#### Funding Related

The funding-related questions included:

- If there will be more funding for the college if it attracts more students
- If there would there be more funding for equipment

- If the colleges' budget will increase
- If students will be able to set priorities for spending
- If student funding will increase

### **Process Related**

The process-related questions included:

- If the merger has taken into account the views of students
- If they would be provided with details about the approval process
- If students will have a say in the implementation plan as well as in the consultation process
- How the process will work and is planning in place for it

### **Other Questions**

Other process-related questions included:

- Will the merger make the college too big or disorganised
- If student support will change from being on campus
- If college locations will change
- If the college logo will change

#### **4.2.2 Positives About the Merger**

The comments provided by students with regard to **positives** about the merger primarily related to teaching and learning, i.e.:

- Larger classes (making some courses more viable and allowing more interaction with other students)
- More streamlined approach to the delivery of learning
- The potential for more choice in terms of the way that courses are delivered
- The potential for a greater variety of courses and languages

- The potential for opportunities for students to study, travel and live in a variety of locations
- Greater opportunities for practical elements of courses
- The potential for more courses to be offered

Thereafter, a number of miscellaneous **positives** were also identified, including:

- Potentially better funding
- Having a variety of campuses and attractive locations
- The merged college resulting in a bigger student voice as it will be a larger college
- Opportunities for a greater mix and diversity of students
- Better opportunities for more student clubs and memberships
- If there will be opportunities to deliver student support services more effectively due to there being a bigger support team
- The potential for increases library services
- Greater opportunities to share best practice

#### 4.2.3 Negatives About the Merger

Comments provided by students with regard to **negatives** about the college merge focused around:

- Concerns about workload for lecturers if class sizes are increased
- Communication challenges (due to local management) resulting in *“the potential for confusion and disorganisation”*
- Increased class sizes making learning less personal
- Concerns about changes in student support which is delivered on campus
- Less opportunities for ‘practical learning’ if there is an increase in online delivery
- Classes and campuses becoming too crowded
- Resources required to achieve the merger

- Accommodation issues not being addressed
- Fear of the potential for the loss of face-to-face teaching

#### 4.2.4 The Current Student Experience

In the context of the outcomes detailed in this section of the report, it should be noted that a number of comments were made regarding the 'current' student experience in the existing colleges, with these principally relating to the **positives** of:

- Having small class sizes which result in more of a 'personal touch'
- Students being close to their local community (where "*everyone knows each other*")
- Knowing lecturers well
- Having a good student services team

#### 4.2.5 Improvements that Can be Made as a Result of the Merger

When the students were asked what improvements could be made as a result of the merger, their **primary responses** focused around:

- Improving facilities and equipment
- Promoting a positive campus environment/atmosphere (including increasing social space and holding social/community events)
- Funding and promoting clubs for students (for example, to allow more clubs to be established and for clubs to be better equipped)

Thereafter, **secondary mention** was made here of:

- Addressing student accommodation issues
- Ensuring better communications (including in relation to student accommodation issues)
- Improving on campus Wi-Fi

Furthermore, **more specific mention** was made here of improvements that could be made as a result of the merger in terms of:

- Avoiding adding to lecturers' existing high workload
- Arranging deals with hotels and restaurants for student discounts
- Facilitating access to the local job market for part-time employment
- Introducing a booking system for use of college facilities outwith college hours
- Ensuring that students feel part of "*a course community*"
- Having a face-to-face induction in order to meet other students/classmates
- Simplifying the college website

Finally, it should be noted that reference was made by some students to the need for there to be a smooth transition from the existing colleges to the merged college.

#### 4.2.6 Student Priorities

When students were asked what was important to them in terms of the merger, their **primary response** focused around 'ensuring sufficient face-to-face teaching', as this would allow students to build better relationships with staff (with a particular emphasis being placed on this), would make students more engaged in their learning and would provide better opportunities for social interaction.

Thereafter, **secondary mention** was made here of:

- Having access to better resources, technology and equipment
- Lecturers (in terms of having an appropriate workload, building a good relationship with them and them being happy)
- A focus on on-campus face-to-face support (but with an online support option as well)

- Accessibility of the college (i.e. being easy to get there and more funding being provided for travel)
- An increased variety of courses being available

Finally, **more specific mention** was made here of student priorities in terms of:

- Ensuring that students feel part of their local community
- Having sufficient practical aspects of courses, where applicable
- Having access to good equipment
- Promoting greater diversity within the student community
- Promoting greater interaction with other students
- Having opportunities to visit other campuses (which would promote students feeling part of the college community)

#### **4.2.7 Pros and Cons of Online Versus Face-to-Face Learning**

There was a general consensus amongst students participating in the focus groups that **face-to-face learning was preferable**. This was for a number of reasons, including beliefs that:

- Students are more engaged when learning on a face-to-face basis
- Students focus better in a classroom setting
- It's easier to understand what is being taught
- The social benefits of face-to-face interaction

Despite this, however, there were seen as being a number of benefits associated with online learning, with these **primarily** focusing around:

- Removing the need for students to travel to college
- Allowing access to courses for those who live in particularly remote areas
- Beliefs that some courses wouldn't run if not taught online (due to small numbers of students living on or close to campuses)

In contrast, a number of **negatives** were identified relating to online learning, including:

- References to negative online learning experiences (including during lockdown)
- The perceived unfairness of students having to learn online due to accommodation issues (particularly for those studying courses with significant practical elements)
- Learners not engaging during online learning (for example, by turning their cameras off)
- Beliefs that, during the course of online learning, teachers tend to “*present rather than teach*” (with, again, this being a particular issue for those studying courses with significant practical elements)

In the context of the comments noted above, it is of interest to note that **significant reference** was made for the need for there to be flexibility in terms of both online learning and support by having both face-to-face and online options (including, potentially, students having the opportunity to learn online one day per week).

It was also suggested that students should be provided with the opportunity to learn online on campus.

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS

It is apparent from this report that the consultation process gathered an enormous range of quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to the proposed merger of UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland and, based on the analysis of these data, a range of conclusions can be drawn.

### **Conclusion 1: Support**

It is encouraging that the staff, the external audiences and students largely support the merger and its vision, mission and values, whilst staff are also largely supportive of the merger's proposed governance arrangements.

### **Conclusion 2: Positives and Positive Impacts**

There are a wide range of perceived positives associated with the merger, including its potential to increase opportunities for staff development, enhance the existing student experience, provide more course options for students and help to focus the collective strengths of the three existing colleges.

In addition, staff and stakeholders believe that the merger has the potential to have a significant impact on local communities in the broader region, including protecting local jobs.

The willingness of key stakeholders to continue to support and promote the merger.

### **Conclusion 3: Negatives and Concerns**

All three audiences identified a range of negatives and weaknesses of the merger, with notable concerns about the potential for job losses, reductions in working hours and fears about the closure of smaller centres.

Staff do not believe they have been sufficiently involved in – and consulted about – the merger process to date.

### **Conclusion 4: Challenges**

All three audiences identified a wide range of significant priorities for the merger.

All three audiences had a significant range of questions relating to the merger.

Staff and students believe that there could be a range of improvements that could come out of the merger.

Staff had a desire to be more involved in – and consulted about – the merger if it is confirmed and moves into consideration of its implementation.

Staff and students expressed a desire for face-to-face learning to continue to be an important delivery mechanism within the merged college, whilst recognising that there is a requirement for a blended approach to be adopted which is appropriate and effective.

There are mixed views about the name of the new college, with staff and students having clear – but contradictory – preferences and those in the external audiences having split preferences.

### **Overarching Conclusion**

Based on the evidence collected from the consultation process and the subsequent analysis of this evidence, there is a strong argument for the merger of UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland to proceed, subject to the caveat of the negatives and concerns noted in the consultation process – together with the challenges identified in the consultation process – being considered and responded to.

**APPENDIX I**

**E-MAIL SUBMISSIONS FROM STAKEHOLDERS**

**Email response from Alasdair Allan MSP for the Western Isles. Dated 26 September 2022**

I write in support of the proposed merger of UHI North Highland, UHI West Highland, and UHI Outer Hebrides, the latter being situated within the constituency I represent as a Member of the Scottish Parliament.

I met with representatives from UHI Outer Hebrides recently to discuss the proposed merger and I believe that the consolidation of the three colleges into a single organisation would bring multiple benefits for the Highland and Islands region, its communities, along with the staff and students of the university.

The merger will create a new college of considerable size within the University of the Highlands and Islands, inclusive of 9,000 students, 600 staff and 19 rural and island campuses and learning centres. Such an institution would benefit from efficiencies in staffing structure, financial resource and professional and academic expertise, help to grow research and innovation, and increase impact within the region. It is clear that the capacity for partnership and collaborative work, both internally and with the private and public sectors, would be improved.

The ongoing success of UHI demonstrates how this institution has created significant value for the region, not only in economic terms, but socially and culturally too. I am particularly keen on the college's role in developing our regional culture, identity and language, including the organisation's commitments for Gaelic, and I hope that the merger will broaden the capacity to revitalise the area's linguistic heritage.

My hope would be that this move will lead to a strengthening of the local offering at the college's campuses in the Western Isles, and I would support it based on that understanding.

I would be grateful if you would consider this letter as part of the consultation on the proposed merger of UHI Outer Hebrides, UHI North Highland, and UHI West Highland.  
Yours sincerely,

**Alasdair Allan MSP**  
**Western Isles**

## **Email response from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar SNP Group. Dated 13 October 2022**

The following is the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar SNP Group response to the proposed UHI Outer Hebrides merger:

1) We have concerns that the merger is not primarily based on the educational needs of students but on financial reasons. Which raises other concerns as to why other colleges would merge with one that is in financial difficulty. UHI Outer Hebrides seems very vulnerable to a take over rather than a merger and has there been an economic impact assessment done in terms of the community?

2) The UHI Outer Hebrides is currently autonomous and can be responsive to specific islands needs but when that autonomy is replaced by a centralised board or decision-making body, it will be difficult to link in with island strategies and an overall education strategy for the islands where decisions must take into consideration other factors in other localities. Partnerships and alignments with schools etc will be affected as we have seen with the holidays.

3) Gaelic provision is a major concern and we are very uncomfortable that Gaelic lecturers are being taken away from the delivery of courses which will have an impact on the Gaelic teaching in the Outer Hebrides which should be a leader in terms of the language and protective of Gaelic legacy.

With these serious concerns, the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar SNP Group would be opposed to this merger.

## **Email response from EIS. Dated October 2022**

The EIS remains supportive of elements of the proposal for merger, with qualifications, but members have still not expressed a concrete view on support or opposition to the merger. The EIS welcomes the commitment to no compulsory redundancies as a result of the merger and to recommendations that the new college would become a signatory to the National Recognition and Procedure Agreement and be an incorporated, public, college.

### **Qualified Support**

There are potential benefits to bringing all tertiary education into one entity across the West and North Highlands and Western Isles. The merger could generate more coherent planning of such provision across the area as outlined in the 'Benefits to Students' and 'Benefits to Staff' sections of the proposal. EIS members are proud of the learning and teaching within each of the colleges to date and wish to ensure there remains an accessible, diverse and relevant curriculum offer at a local level. EIS members want to ensure further education courses continue to be offered throughout the North and West Highlands and Islands, as well as any ongoing higher education offers. EIS member recognise the distinct difference between the needs of prospective Further and Higher education students and do not wish to see an increase in Higher education or research targets to the detriment of Further education.

Members support a merger which allows for continued provision of tertiary education which highlights and sustains the local cultural and geographical nuances of the area.

EIS members are enthusiastic about the curriculum choices which could be offered, but they want to ensure the number of jobs are sufficient, and the terms and conditions of these jobs are decent and secure, in order to guarantee a diverse and sustainable curriculum. Members are keen to see and be involved in a strategic review of the curriculum as this has been promised as forthcoming from UHI for some time.

EIS members welcome the opportunity to work across a larger geographical area within the UHI community. Although members point out that they already work in partnership and through networks within UHI, they are encouraged that these supportive and collaborative bonds will be strengthened, logical and consistent.

Another element of the proposal which EIS members support is that the three colleges would no longer be 'competing' for funding from UHI/SFC. The EIS hopes this will ensure a sustained provision of professional jobs throughout the North and West Highlands and Islands.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rural-islands-merger.uhi.ac.uk/have-your-say/>

There could be further benefits through an enhanced student experience, particularly from a greater range of extra-curricular activities, providing a more holistic educational experience. However, any such benefits outlined in the consultation document will only be realised if adequate resources are dedicated towards investment.

## **Concerns**

EIS members do not want tasks to be duplicated. However, members do not wish the merger to decrease staff numbers in the new college. There is a feeling that the three colleges have already been 'hollowed out' and are running with low staff numbers. Members would prefer to see re-skilling, diversification of skills and recruitment in the rural areas as opposed to redundancies or other job losses otherwise there is a risk that there will be a decrease in rural lecturing jobs.

As evidenced by previous college mergers and other organisational restructures, there is a substantial risk of highly experienced, knowledgeable and skilled staff being lost in restructure. This disruption and loss of expertise would only make it harder for student numbers to be maintained, far less increased.

The EIS believes that education should be for education's sake. This is particularly true of tertiary education which should not only be a vocational offer but should also contribute to the health and wellbeing of the local community, regardless of age or financial or educational background. Whilst the EIS understands the funding constraints in the Further Education sector, indeed across all of the public sector, education as a universal principle must be at the core of the merger. The increased reliance on commercial income streams and the college being utilised to support 'micro, small and medium sized businesses' causes concern as the EIS believes educational provision should not be determined by employers' or by private sector business needs. The hope from this proposal would be a wider curriculum offer which also expresses students' (and prospective students) desire to learn; not only a desire to be employed locally or to be entrepreneurial. Furthermore, there is no mention of how this support would be targeted and strategic. The EIS does not believe it is the job of lecturers to provide labour for any business, but, potentially, for those which meet key national or sectoral strategic priorities.

Members are concerned about the financial rationale used to explain this merger proposal. Members feel there has been a deliberate hollowing out of the three colleges over the past few years in order to make the case for merger more palatable. There remains a concern that the new college will continue to face financial challenges, particularly with higher housing, transport and energy costs across the locale but falling school rolls. EIS members understand that no other island-based college in Scotland makes a surplus, and, in fact, that great surpluses are not necessary. The EIS is concerned about the apparent need to show the college making money instead of showing that the college is fulfilling a local need. An

accounting deficit is not the same as the college being in debt therefore financial decisions should not be taken which jeopardise jobs or inclusive, wide-ranging and accessible curriculum offers. The new college will continue to be majority funded by SFC via UHI but members hope the new college will not then have to compete with other UHI colleges for this funding.

Members are also concerned about centralisation of funds or decision-making within the new college. The remit, scope and decision-making powers of the Local Advisory Committees requires to be clarified. The interaction between these committees, the new college Board and UHI has to be clear in terms of remit. Local accountability and local decision-making is important; but overall accountability and decision-making has to be transparent.

Members are keen that face to face learning and teaching remains a priority for the college. Online learning provision has been pioneered within UHI and it is often very successful. However, it is not a replacement for physical teaching spaces. This is particularly important for practical subjects, vulnerable or hard to reach students, students with additional support needs or some disabilities and for ensuring a vibrant and supportive student community.

### **Requests**

The EIS expects to see sustainable permanent hours for lecturing staff, with no reduction in teaching hours.

Members need to ensure there is no detriment as a result of the merger and that all terms and conditions are harmonised to the 'best' position where there are discrepancies.

Resolving issues around permanent variable hour contracts and any inappropriate use of instructor assessor contracts is key for the EIS.

EIS members need to be provided with the best possible redundancy package if offers are to be genuinely considered.

Learning and teaching needs to be front and centre of investment which means adequately investing in lecturing staff.

The EIS wishes to see best practice within each local college examined and prioritised in the new college.

### **Priorities**

Of the list suggested in the consultation survey, the following are the priorities for EIS members from 1 to 10:



## **Name**

On the whole, EIS members did not like the name UHI Atlantic. There was no consensus on the name but 'North and West Highlands and Islands UHI' was frequently suggested. There was a consensus that the name should be consistent across all three colleges and not too corporate or American.

## **EIS response**

**October 2022**

**Email response from Emma Roddick, MSP for the Highlands and Islands. Dated 2nd September 2022.**

I am writing today to express my support for the proposed merger of UHI West Highland with UHI North Highland and UHI Outer Hebrides.

The merger to create a single organisation is a wonderful opportunity to build a sustainable future for Highland and Island colleges. I believe it is important to be ambitious for our region and this is a chance to develop an organisation that is resilient and to develop our potential to support a blue and green economy.

The new college can protect our communities dealing with the post-Brexit and post-Covid challenges as well as help realise Net Zero by developing and growing skills, research, and innovation to unlock opportunities in education, as well as jobs which are vital to the Highlands, Highland communities, and the environment.

I look forward to seeing the excellence of our Highland and Island Colleges being developed and sustained for all. I believe the collaboration will ensure an exciting future in education for the region.

Yours sincerely,

**Emma Roddick MSP  
Highlands and Islands**

**Email response from Kate Forbes, MSP for Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch. Dated 14 October 2022**

To Whom it May Concern,

I am writing to you to express my support for the proposed merger of UHI West Highland with UHI North Highland and UHI Outer Hebrides.

The case for the merger is robust with each college facing similar challenges in a rural context, namely a real-term funding cuts and a declining demographic. Equally, all three have the opportunities for significant and transformative growth which would be better realised together as a more cohesive and financially stable organisation.

This is certainly an exciting strategic opportunity for the Highlands and Islands, and one that will undoubtedly bolster economic transformation across the region. Indeed, through its innovative curriculum, the University of the Highlands and Islands strives to create ambitious economic opportunities that not only challenge decline in the region, but actually drive growth and front a new industrial revolution in the region. I believe UHI is particularly well- placed to meet the well-documented challenges around Gaelic medium education, and particularly teacher training.

By joining together and combining collective talent, skill, and capital, I believe that the proposals contained within the merger will help to create a more efficient and resilient organisation which provides a broad range of economic and academic opportunities for Highlanders and Islanders. It is with great pleasure that I write to commend the proposed merger.

Yours faithfully,

**Kate Forbes MSP**  
**Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch**

**Email response from Maree Todd, MSP for Caithness, Sutherland and Ross. Dated 26 October 2022.**

I am writing today in my capacity as MSP for Caithness, Sutherland & Ross in support of the proposed merger of UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland.

Following meetings with representatives from UHI North Highland in my constituency, I believe this is a positive move which delivers for all parties - the college, the staff, students, and the communities they serve.

As an MSP representing a rural constituency that is facing the threats of depopulation, I believe that education and skills development with a clear pathway to employment will be integral to retaining and attracting people to live and work here and reversing this trend. My constituency has vast renewable energy potential and UHI North Highland college are well positioned to provide the courses and training to meet the needs of the renewable industry, along with future opportunities in engineering, advanced manufacturing, and the space sector. The merger will allow UHI North Highland College to continue its presence in the community, whilst also providing greater capacity to respond to the economic opportunities of the area.

As a major employer in the area, I am encouraged by the proposals for the merger which seek to make the colleges more financially sustainable whilst protecting jobs. The additional investment the merger offers will also deliver for the students who will benefit from additional course choices, more student support, an even better student experience and a stronger student voice.

I would be grateful if you could accept this letter as a contribution to the consultation on the proposed merger of UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland.

Best wishes,

**Maree Todd MSP  
Caithness, Sutherland & Ross**



To grow research and knowledge exchange which has a positive impact on our communities	<input type="radio"/>									
To become more cohesive and responsive as an organisation, so that we can respond to growth opportunities	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>								
To provide an excellent student experience regardless of location or mode of study	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>								
To create resilient and more robust staff teams	<input type="radio"/>									

7. To what extent do you have concerns about the merger?

1.

To a great extent  
 To some extent  
 To little/no extent  
 Don't know

8. What do you believe to be the main positives or strengths about the merger, if any? **(Please type in below and remember to avoid providing personal information)**

SDS is supportive of the rationale and proposed benefits. The aims of the merger complement the objectives of the UHI Islands Strategy to ensure that the curriculum at all levels is aligned with key sector priorities and emerging opportunities. We would anticipate a strong partnership between the leadership of merged colleges, LAs & stakeholders. The merger should offer more opportunities for deeper & wider collaboration around the delivery of work-based learning especially FAs. The shared capacity and expertise of employer engagement work should enhance and increase the offer available for learners in the region and strengthen partnership working with local employers.

9. What do you believe to be the main negatives or weaknesses about the merger, if any? **(Please type in below and remember to avoid providing personal information)**

The merger must continue to meet the needs of local employers in each region-through continued employer engagement and alignment of learning provision. The merged curriculum must continue to provide opportunities for enhanced learning, new qualifications, and industry training focused on emerging opportunities, upskilling & re-skilling to retain and attract workers. It must ensure that school and college curricula is planned and delivered in tandem to create clear and seamless pathways from school to FE/HE to employment and from the workplace to FE/HE to support career progression, labour market resilience and secure work.

**Email response from Highlands and Islands Enterprise. Dated 14 October 2022.**

CONSULTATION RESPONSE

Better together: public consultation on proposed merger of UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland Colleges

Respondents have the choice to respond by an online survey or by email.

Name: Morven Fancey  
Email: morven.fancey@hient.co.uk  
Are you responding as an individual or organisation: Organisation  
Highlands and Islands Enterprise

Preference in respect of publication: Publish with name

**1. How strongly would you support the case for the merger, on a scale from 1 to 10, where '1' is don't support at all and '10' is very strongly support?**

HIE is still instinctively supportive of the merger as it is an opportunity for growth in the region. It is an important development for growing the education, research, innovation and knowledge exchange footprint in the region. The merger has a transformative ambition and requires all key partners to be working together to ensure the success and future of the new merged college.

HIE will work closely with the new merged college as it gets established and to share our expertise and potential opportunities for the region.

**2. How strongly do you support the vision, mission and values of the proposed college, on a scale from 1 to 10, where '1' is don't support at all and '10' is very strongly support?**

HIE is a supporter of the vision, mission and values of the proposed college. The merger aligns with HIE's vision and priorities as per the Strategic Plan 2019-2022 and HIE's Operating Plan 2022 and will be an enabler to:

- Increasing the numbers of people choosing to live work and study in our region
- Highlighting the importance of academia, education and skills as priority areas providing the conditions for growth
- Successful productive and resilient businesses and strong, capable and resourceful communities
- Working in partnership with key partners such as UHI, Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and Skills Development Scotland

**3. To what extent do you believe the merger will provide more course options to students choosing to study at UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland?**

To some extent

The new merged college will deliver in over 19 sites and will be embedded in their local communities. This should enable the offering and mobilisation of a wider educational offer across all sites including virtual delivery. The streamlined background services should create more opportunity to focus on the frontline delivery. A sense of place is so important and fundamental, and, as a larger college, it will be able to more easily achieve the numbers required to make courses affordable and deliverable at scale.

This is also about managing the balance of courses which are rooted in their place (such as the Visual Arts at Taigh Chearsabhagh in North Uist) with the opportunity for delivery elsewhere in the new college's catchment area. There is a need to ensure courses with local identity, do not lose their uniqueness within the new college and do have the opportunity for delivery throughout the new college's catchment area.

**4. To what extent do you believe the merger will help to protect local jobs?**

To some extent

Within the consultation document it does expressly state that there will be no compulsory redundancies. The merger should also allow for a skills portfolio to be delivered to meet the needs of local employers to help protect local jobs within the college's catchment area. There is also an added advantage of a college of scale being able to attract new staff and new people to the area.

By streamlining the background services and creating bigger teams across the 19 sites the new merged institution should be able to offer better provision and enhanced services. HIE is supportive of the creation of a people strategy and a new staffing structure. This will ensure staff are enabled to deliver where needed and by working together the region can deliver a robust and unique education offering playing to the region's strengths.

**5. To what extent do you believe that the merger will help focus the collective strengths of UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland, so that they can better support the needs and ambitions of their local communities?**

To some extent

HIE will work closely with the new merged college as it gets established and to share our expertise and potential opportunities for the region. We have highlighted below the need for the merged college to pay particular attention to population and talent attraction, finances and sustainability and college status:

Population and Talent Attraction

Two of the areas (North Highland and Outer Hebrides) are within Scotland's re-population zones and the new merged institution will require to play a key role in attracting students to the area, as well as staff and their families too. This is recognised within the business case that the merger will create an anchor institution, with a voice for the region to enable the new college to be part of the talent attraction solution.

With regards to talent attraction, the new merged college will play to the region's strengths with the ability to lever bigger opportunities from the unique local education and research opportunities such as energy, languages, marine, arts and creativity – and streamline these within an anchor institution. A larger, merged college will be better enabled to attract staff and students through its unique education offerings and be able to align further and higher education with sector growth and offer opportunities for skills and upskilling that are fit for purpose. The new college will have a very distinctive offering and a greater influencing role with better opportunities for collaborating.

HIE will work with the new merged college's senior team particularly sharing information on population projections and long-term regional trends. Growth for the college enables growth for the region and vice versa.

## Finances and Sustainability

The individual colleges are not equally financially strong entities, but they do have the track record of being able to manage their own finances at a local level. With a merged model, there are benefits and savings to be made from streamlining/sharing services. This needs to be an essential part of the process of building an efficient footprint for delivery of education in the region. A potential fear is the streamlining and saving of background functions but not then having the ability to grow due to the constraints with core funding.

HIE will work in partnership with the new merged college to ensure growth is achieved. The merged college will identify curriculum areas suitable for growth and a fit with the financial model. SFC core funding currently provides limited growth but commercial income, which is more volatile, can provide the opportunity, being careful not to over promise within the financial constraints.

## College Status

In HIE's initial response in February 2022, we would still encourage decisions around the status (i.e. incorporated/unincorporated) of any proposed merger to be widely consulted on to ensure the necessary levels of flexibility are in place so that development funds secured can be maximised to best effect. Flexibility will be required to grow and diversify curriculum in the way that businesses and communities require. The ability to utilise effectively development funds over multiple financial years will be important.

**6. How strong a priority should the following be for the proposed new college, on a scale from 1 to 10, where '1' is not a priority at all and '10' is very strong priority? (Please provide a response for each option)**

1.

	1 - not a priority at all	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 - a very strong priority
To continue to build a resilient, financially sustainable organisation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
To become an institution of scale and impact within UHI and the wider region	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To connect our rural and island communities and play a key role in supporting the economic, social and cultural needs of our region	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
To be a leader in distinctive and innovative tertiary education	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To grow our curriculum offer, particularly in areas linked to our research and commercial opportunities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To grow research and knowledge exchange which has a positive impact on our communities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**7. To what extent do you have concerns about the merger?**

To some extent

All three colleges face similar challenges in the remote, rural and island contexts, including real-term funding cuts and a declining demographic. They also all have similar opportunities for growth, which by coming together they should have a better ability to realise and more opportunities of scale.

By coming together, the merger should create a more resilient, cohesive, and financially sustainable organisation with capacity to grow, seize opportunities based on their collective ambitions, and support the communities they will serve.

**8. What do you believe to be the main positives or strengths about the merger, if any? (Please type in below and remember to avoid providing personal information)**

Governance

A successful merger could provide healthy challenge and solution to the future governance of the UHI, changing the dynamic of a large partnership which has struggled to behave as 'ONE-UHI' over the last two decades. There will be opportunities to better collaborate with other larger colleges in the UHI, such as Inverness College and Scotland wide. The regional presence of an anchor institution will enable a greater influencing role for the west coast and island communities within strategic fora such as the Regional Economic Partnership (REP) and COHI. Working in partnership with HIE, there is also the opportunity for a greater impact on the delivery of NSET within the region's most rural and remote areas.

The new entity will still allow for local differences. Each of the three local areas will establish an Advisory Board which HIE will be invited to join. The intention of the local Advisory Board is likely to ensure proportionate equity of activity/investment etc across all three areas, alignment across the provision (and therefore enhancement of the offer in each location), ambition for local and unique offerings that are responsive to local needs/opportunities, and retain the energy and enthusiasm behind local endeavour.

**9. What do you believe to be the main negatives or weaknesses about the merger, if any? (Please type in below and remember to avoid providing personal information)**

This merger should be considered in the context of the wider governance issues that UHI has struggled with since its inception. Whilst other possible merger opportunities have been discussed over the years, this is the first significant development that has been supported from within and is likely to have an impact on further changes that will affect the overall shape and form of the partnership. The strength of the three-way partnership across the colleges has been encouraging with three committed and enthusiastic college Principals working together in a pragmatic manner. This provides a degree of optimism for a new un-forced merger within UHI and will be a good test case for future development.

**10. Do you believe that the colleges should continue to retain their own names – UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland – or move to a collective identity?**

No preference

We believe local identity is important for communities as is being part of the wider UHI brand; we also appreciate the value of being able to refer to the three as a single entity particularly at regional and national level and consideration should be given to whether there is a way to achieve both.

## Email response from Bòrd na Gàidhlig. Dated 12 October 2022

<p><b>Co-chomhairle Aonadh Colaistean Dùthchail is Eileanan OGE</b></p> <p><b>Freagairt Bhòrd na Gàidhlig</b></p> <p><b>12 Dàmhair 2022</b></p>	<p><b>UHI Rural and Islands College Merger Consultation</b></p> <p><b>Response by Bòrd na Gàidhlig</b></p> <p><b>12 October 2022</b></p>
<p>Ann a bhith ag ullachadh ar freagairt, tha sinn a’ toirt fa-near gur i a’ Ghàidhlig aon de na prìomh raointean a chaidh a thogail aig na tachartasan airson a’ chiad cho-chomhairleachaidh air an aonadh a tha ga mholadh. Tha sinn cuideachd mothachail air àite nan colaistean mar phrìomh luchd-fastaidh ionadail – gu sònraichte na 139 obraichean anns na h-Eileanan an Iar.</p> <p>Tha sinn gu mòr a’ cur fàilte air na diofar aithrisean agus geallaidhean don Ghàidhlig anns a’ mholadh aonaidh agus sgrìobhainn cùis-gnothaich. Gu sònraichte:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gus ath-bheothachadh na Gàidhlig a ghluasad air adhart.</li> <li>• Ro-innleachd Ghàidhlig mar aon de ghrunn phrìomh ro-innleachdan agus planaichean.</li> <li>• Gàidhlig mar aon de shia roinnean/fo-roinnean a chì fàs agus ùr-ghnàthachadh sa churraicealam aice.</li> <li>• Toirt comas do chultar na sgìre againn tro chànan na Gàidhlig, dual-chainntean roinneil, agus cultaran Lochlannach.</li> <li>• Na molaidhean mionaideach mun churraicealam aig 5.4.2 den sgrìobhainn, a’ nochdadh na Gàidhlig mar phrìomh roinn airson colaiste aonaichte.</li> <li>• Tuilleadh togail air a’ chom-pàirteachas le Bòrd na Gàidhlig.</li> </ul> <p>Tha sinn cuideachd toilichte gum bi na molaidhean “a’ daingneachadh ar prìomh àite ann an leasachadh curraicealam na Gàidhlig agus foghlam tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig air feadh na Gàidhealtachd agus nan Eileanan Siar”.</p> <p>Mar sin, san fharsaingeachd, tha sinn an dùil gum bi àitean Gàidhlig, ann an teagasg is rannsachadh, agus cleachdadh na Gàidhlig, air a neartachadh taobh a-staigh an structair ùir</p> <p>A thuilleadh air sin, bhiodh sinn ag iarraidh a' Ghàidhlig fhaicinn mar chuspair a bhuineas ri iomadh raon ann an rannsachadh agus teagasg na Colaiste – m.e., ann an turasachd agus na gnìomhachasan cruthachail. Tha sin le sùil ri comas na Gàidhlig</p>	<p>In framing our response, we note that Gaelic was one of the main areas raised during the events for the initial consultation on the proposed merger. We would also highlight the existing colleges’ role as major local employers - and particularly so with 139 jobs in the Outer Hebrides.</p> <p>We very much welcome the various statements on, and commitments to, Gaelic in the merger proposal and business case document. In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To drive forward the revitalisation of Gaelic.</li> <li>• A Gaelic language strategy as one of several key strategies and plans.</li> <li>• Gaelic as one of six sectors/sub-sectors which will see growth and innovation in its curriculum.</li> <li>• Enabling our region’s culture through Gaelic language, regional dialects, and Nordic cultures.</li> <li>• The detailed curriculum proposals at 5.4.2 of the document, reflecting Gaelic Language as a key priority sector for a merged college.</li> <li>• Further building of the partnership with Bòrd na Gàidhlig.</li> </ul> <p>We also welcome the statement that the proposals will “cement our leading position developing Gaelic language and Gaelic medium curriculum across the Highlands and Outer Hebrides”.</p> <p>Thus, overall, we expect the role of Gaelic, in teaching, research and using Gaelic, to be strengthened within the new structure.</p> <p>In addition, we would want to see Gaelic as a cross cutting theme in the College’s research and teaching - e.g., in tourism and creative industries. That is with a view to realising the potential of Gaelic as an</p>

mar sho-mhaoin eaconamach a thoirt gu buil. Rinn an aithisg, *Ar Stòras Gàidhlig*<sup>1</sup>, tomhas air an luach eaconamach a bheir a' Ghàidhlig do dh'Alba. Fhuair e a-mach gu bheil gnòthaichean anns na gnìomhachasan cruthachail, turasachd, dualchas, agus roinnean bìdh is deoch gu sònraichte a' faighinn buannachd bho bhith a' cleachdadh na Gàidhlig, agus gu bheil comas aig seo luach eaconamach cudromach a thoirt a-steach.

Tha iomradh air duilleag 24 den sgrìobhainn de *dh'fhìreantachd, tùs, agus dualchas* mar aon de na Prìomh Chothroman Roinneil. Tha e ag ràdh gu bheil iad seo "nam prìomh bhrosnachadh airson turasachd, Gnìomhachasan Cruthachail agus biadh is deoch. A' meudachadh àite na Gàidhlig". Tha feum air an dà sheantans seo a cheangal ann an dòigh nas soilleire gus dèanamh cinnteach gu bheil comas na Gàidhlig mar sho-mhaoin eaconamach ri fhaicinn tarsainn teagasg agus rannsachadh na Colaiste.

Tha barrachd de chleachdadh na Gàidhlig ann an gnìomhachd ghnòthachasan agus na treas roinne a' riochdachadh ùr-ghnàthachadh – a tha tòrr nas fharsainge na dìreach a bhith a' toirt a-steach teicneòlas ùr/nas fheàrr

Tha sinn a' coimhead air adhart ri bhith a' faicinn tuilleadh leasachaidh air na molaidhean a tha sa phàipear. Gu sònraichte, farsaingeachd agus susbaint na ro-innleachd Ghàidhlig agus mar a bhiodh sin a' freagairt air a' Phlana Ghàidhlig a chaidh a mholadh.

Bhiodh sinn a' dùileachadh gum biodh suaicheantas agus dearbh-aithne làirsinneach Colaiste aonaichte, co-dhiù, dà-chànanach agus mar sin a' gabhail a-steach Gàidhlig, a' toirt follaiseachd co-ionann don chànan.

Tha sinn toilichte gun deach Measadh Buaidh Co-ionannachd a' phròiseact aonaidh nas fhaide na dìreach buidhnean le feartan dìonta. 'S e sin, gu robh e a' gabhail a-steach an dà chuid coimhearsnachdan dùthchail air tìr-mòr agus coimhearsnachdan dùthchail nan eileanan.

Tha mòran dhiubh sin nan coimhearsnachdan far a bheil a' Ghàidhlig fhathast an ìre mhath làidir. Chan e a-mhàin gu bheil a' Ghàidhlig cudromach do na coimhearsnachdan sin. Tha seasmhachd nan coimhearsnachdan deatamach airson seasmhachd agus fàs leantainneach na Gàidhlig. Bidh sin an

economic asset. The report, *Ar Stòras Gàidhlig*<sup>2</sup>, measured the economic value Gaelic brings to Scotland. It found that businesses in the creative industries, tourism, heritage, and food and drink sectors in particular benefit from their use of Gaelic, and that this has the potential to bring significant economic value.

Page 24 of the document includes a reference to *authenticity, provenance, and heritage* as one of several Key Regional Opportunities. It states these are "key drivers for tourism, Creative Industries and food and drink. Maximising the role of the Gaelic language". There is a need to link these two sentences more explicitly to ensure that the potential of Gaelic as an economic asset is reflected across the College's teaching and research.

Greater use of Gaelic in the activities of businesses and the third sector represents innovation - which is much broader than simply the introduction of new/better technology.

We look forward to seeing the further development of the proposals contained in the document. In particular, the scope and content of the Gaelic strategy and how that would fit with the suggested Gaelic Language Plan.

We would expect logos and other visual identities of a merged College to, at least, be bilingual and thus include Gaelic, giving equal prominence to the language.

We welcome that the Equality Impact Assessment of the merger project went beyond simply groups covered by protected characteristics. That is, it included both rural mainland communities and rural island communities.

Many of these are communities where Gaelic remains relatively strong. The Gaelic language is not only important to these communities. Their sustainability is essential to the continued sustainability and growth of the Gaelic language. That will depend, in no small part, on the range and quality of provision of

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hie.co.uk/media/5585/hieplusreportplus2014plusfinalplusonline.pdf>

<p>urra, gun teagamh, air roghainn agus càileachd foghlaim is trèanaidh tro mheadhan na Gàidhlig agus mun Ghàidhlig.</p> <p>Tha sinn a’ tuigsinn gum bi an aithris “Thèid beachdachadh cuideachd air dleasan OGE a thaobh Measadh Buaidh air Coimhearsnachdan Eileanach (MBCE)” a’ ciallachadh gun tèid MBCE a dhèanamh airson a’ phròiseact aonachaidh. A’ nochdadh stiùireadh Riaghaltas na h-Alba a chaidh ùrachadh o chionn ghoirid, feumaidh seo a’ bhuidh air a’ Ghàidhlig a ghabhail a-steach.</p> <p>Tha sinn a’ moladh gun toirear aire do Phlana Gàidhlig Chomann Oileanach na Gàidhealtachd ’s nan Eilean agus gun tèid beachdan oileanach is luchd-obrach aig a bheil Gàidhlig a shireadh.</p>	<p>education and training through the medium of Gaelic and about Gaelic.</p> <p>We understand the statement “Due consideration will also be given to the UHI’s obligations regarding Island Communities Impact Assessments” to mean that an ICIA for the merger project will be undertaken. Reflecting the recently refreshed Scottish Government guidance, this will have to include the impacts on the Gaelic language.</p> <p>We recommend that the the Highlands and Islands Students’ Association Gaelic Plan is taken into consideration as well as the views and considerations of Gaelic speaking students and staff actively sought.</p>
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## **Email response from Unison Scotland. Dated October 2022.**

At October 2022, UNISON Scotland is not in a position to endorse or oppose the proposed merger of North Highland College, West Highland College and UHI Outer Hebrides.

Through a series of discussions between trade unions and management representatives we have gained a series of welcome assurances, but we do have some concerns, many of which are common to any public service merger.

We welcome the constructive dialogue with management representatives to date, and welcome the following specific commitments:

\*A guarantee of no compulsory redundancies as a result of the merger

\*A guarantee that the new college will follow nationally agreed terms and conditions and will be a signatory to the NRPA

\*Clarity that the new college will remain clearly within the public sector

\*Assurance that structural changes relating to any merger will not cause detriment to pensions in any way

\*West Highland College will now offer the quality Local Government Pension Scheme to its support staff.

We have sought more detailed assurances on long-term job security in the event of merger, and a complete moratorium on outsourcing campus jobs, and we intend to keep pressing for these assurances in the coming months. We will also continue work to ensure all employment conditions not currently covered by national terms and conditions are 'levelled' up, not down in new contracts agreed through collective bargaining.

These colleges are important 'anchor' employers in their communities, with the security and spending power that comes with unionised, public service employment. Such jobs are particularly important in rural areas, where lack of employment and opportunity contributes to depopulation, poverty and demographic challenges. UNISON Scotland opposes and will oppose any attempt to reduce the quantity and quality of jobs in the areas served by any new merged college, as we do for the current employers.

In terms of specific concerns, we would name the following:

\*We regret that a merger on this basis is deemed necessary due to the funding position in the sector, and the overall financial position of the three colleges. The current colleges serve very distinct communities separated by significant distance. UNISON Scotland supports the comments of EIS-FELA on the importance of education for its own sake, and the need to ensure this is properly resourced to serve the people. We have not had significant numbers of members seeking UNISON's outright opposition to merger, but it is crucial any merged entity does not reduce employment or concentrate further staffing cuts in any of the affected areas.

\*Based on our experience of other public service mergers and centralisation processes, we are unconvinced that significant efficiency savings can be achieved for re-investment without impacting on jobs, workloads and working conditions. Due to previous budget cuts in the sector and at the three colleges, they all have very lean staffing on the support side – there is nothing left to cut without compromising basic operations and the health of staff.

UNISON Scotland will engage with our members, our local representatives and the employers throughout any merger process, and we reserve the right to revise our position in light of new information or a change in sentiment among our members.

**Lorcan Mullen UNISON Scotland**  
**Regional Organiser / Head of HE & FE**

## Email response from Highlands and Islands Enterprise. Dated 14 October 2022.

### CONSULTATION RESPONSE

Better together: public consultation on proposed merger of UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland Colleges

Respondents have the choice to respond by an online survey or by email.

Name: Morven Fancey  
Email: morven.fancey@hient.co.uk  
Are you responding as an individual or organisation: Organisation  
Highlands and Islands Enterprise

Preference in respect of publication: Publish with name

1. How strongly would you support the case for the merger, on a scale from 1 to 10, where '1' is *don't support at all* and '10' is *very strongly support*?

HIE is still instinctively supportive of the merger as it is an opportunity for growth in the region. It is an important development for growing the education, research, innovation and knowledge exchange footprint in the region. The merger has a transformative ambition and requires all key partners to be working together to ensure the success and future of the new merged college.

HIE will work closely with the new merged college as it gets established and to share our expertise and potential opportunities for the region.

2. How strongly do you support the vision, mission and values of the proposed college, on a scale from 1 to 10, where '1' is *don't support at all* and '10' is *very strongly support*?

HIE is a supporter of the vision, mission and values of the proposed college. The merger aligns with HIE's vision and priorities as per the [Strategic Plan 2019-2022](#) and [HIE's Operating Plan 2022](#) and will be an enabler to:

- Increasing the numbers of people choosing to live work and study in our region
- Highlighting the importance of academia, education and skills as priority areas providing the conditions for growth
- Successful productive and resilient businesses and strong, capable and resourceful communities
- Working in partnership with key partners such as UHI, Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and Skills Development Scotland

3. To what extent do you believe the merger will provide more course options to students choosing to study at UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland?

- To a great extent
- To some extent
- To little/no extent
- Don't know

The new merged college will deliver in over 19 sites and will be embedded in their local communities. This should enable the offering and mobilisation of a wider educational offer across all sites including virtual delivery. The streamlined background services should create more opportunity to focus on the frontline delivery. A sense of place is so important and fundamental, and, as a larger college, it will be able to more easily achieve the numbers required to make courses affordable and deliverable at scale.

This is also about managing the balance of courses which are rooted in their place (such as the Visual Arts at Taigh Chearsabhagh in North Uist) with the opportunity for delivery elsewhere in the new college's catchment area. There is a need to ensure courses with local identity, do not lose their uniqueness within the new college and do have the opportunity for delivery throughout the new college's catchment area.

4. To what extent do you believe the merger will help to protect local jobs?

- To a great extent
- To some extent
- To little/no extent
- Don't know

Within the consultation document it does expressly state that there will be no compulsory redundancies. The merger should also allow for a skills portfolio to be delivered to meet the needs of local employers to help protect local jobs within the college's catchment area. There is also an added advantage of a college of scale being able to attract new staff and new people to the area.

By streamlining the background services and creating bigger teams across the 19 sites the new merged institution should be able to offer better provision and enhanced services. HIE is supportive of the creation of a people strategy and a new staffing structure. This will ensure staff are enabled to deliver where needed and by working together the region can deliver a robust and unique education offering playing to the region's strengths.

5. To what extent do you believe that the merger will help focus the collective strengths of UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland, so that they can better support the needs and ambitions of their local communities?

- To a great extent
- To some extent
- To little/no extent
- Don't know

HIE will work closely with the new merged college as it gets established and to share our expertise and potential opportunities for the region. We have highlighted below the need for the merged college to pay particular attention to population and talent attraction, finances and sustainability and college status:

#### Population and Talent Attraction

Two of the areas (North Highland and Outer Hebrides) are within Scotland's re-population zones and the new merged institution will require to play a key role in attracting students to the area, as well as staff and their families too. This is recognised within the business case that the merger will create an anchor institution, with a voice for the region to enable the new college to be part of the talent attraction solution.

With regards to talent attraction, the new merged college will play to the region's strengths with the ability to lever bigger opportunities from the unique local education and research opportunities such as energy, languages, marine, arts and creativity – and streamline these within an anchor institution. A larger, merged college will be better enabled to attract staff and students through its unique education offerings and be able to align further and higher education with sector growth and offer opportunities for skills and upskilling that are fit for purpose. The new college will have a very distinctive offering and a greater influencing role with better opportunities for collaborating.

HIE will work with the new merged college's senior team particularly sharing information on population projections and long-term regional trends. Growth for the college enables growth for the region and vice versa.

#### Finances and Sustainability

The individual colleges are not equally financially strong entities, but they do have the track record of being able to manage their own finances at a local level. With a merged model, there are benefits and savings to be made from streamlining/sharing services. This needs to be an essential part of the process of building an efficient footprint for delivery of education in the region. A potential fear is the streamlining and saving of background functions but not then having the ability to grow due to the constraints with core funding.

HIE will work in partnership with the new merged college to ensure growth is achieved. The merged college will identify curriculum areas suitable for growth and a fit with the financial model. SFC core funding currently provides limited growth but commercial income, which is more volatile, can provide the opportunity, being careful not to over promise within the financial constraints.

## College Status

In HIE's initial response in February 2022, we would still encourage decisions around the status (i.e. incorporated/unincorporated) of any proposed merger to be widely consulted on to ensure the necessary levels of flexibility are in place so that development funds secured can be maximised to best effect. Flexibility will be required to grow and diversify curriculum in the way that businesses and communities require. The ability to utilise effectively development funds over multiple financial years will be important.

6. How strong a priority should the following be for the proposed new college, on a scale from 1 to 10, where '1' is *not a priority at all* and '10' is *very strong priority*? (Please provide a response for each option)

	1 - not a priority at all	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 - a very strong priority
To continue to build a resilient, financially sustainable organisation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>

To become an institution of scale and impact within UHI and the wider region	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>							
To connect our rural and island communities and play a key role in supporting the economic, social and cultural needs of our region	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>								
To be a leader in distinctive and innovative tertiary education	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>							
To grow our curriculum offer, particularly in areas linked to our research and commercial opportunities	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>							
To grow research and knowledge exchange which has a positive impact on our communities	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>							
To become more cohesive and responsive as an organisation, so that we can respond to growth opportunities	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>								
To provide an excellent student experience regardless of location or mode of study	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>								
To create resilient and more robust staff teams	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>							

7. To what extent do you have concerns about the merger?

- To a great extent
- To some extent
- To little/no extent
- Don't know

All three colleges face similar challenges in the remote, rural and island contexts, including real-term funding cuts and a declining demographic. They also all have similar opportunities for growth, which by coming together they should have a better ability to realise and more opportunities of scale.

By coming together, the merger should create a more resilient, cohesive, and financially sustainable organisation with capacity to grow, seize opportunities based on their collective ambitions, and support the communities they will serve.

8. What do you believe to be the main positives or strengths about the merger, if any?  
(Please type in below and remember to avoid providing personal information)

Governance

A successful merger could provide healthy challenge and solution to the future governance of the UHI, changing the dynamic of a large partnership which has struggled to behave as 'ONE-UHI' over the last two decades. There will be opportunities to better collaborate with other larger colleges in the UHI, such as Inverness College and Scotland wide. The regional presence of an anchor institution will enable a greater influencing role for the west coast and island communities within strategic fora such as the Regional Economic Partnership (REP) and COHI. Working in partnership with HIE, there is also the opportunity for a greater impact on the delivery of NSET within the region's most rural and remote areas.

The new entity will still allow for local differences. Each of the three local areas will establish an Advisory Board which HIE will be invited to join. The intention of the local Advisory Board is likely to ensure proportionate equity of activity/investment etc across all three areas, alignment across the provision (and therefore enhancement of the offer in each location), ambition for local and unique offerings that are responsive to local needs/opportunities, and retain the energy and enthusiasm behind local endeavour.

9. What do you believe to be the main negatives or weaknesses about the merger, if any?  
(Please type in below and remember to avoid providing personal information)

This merger should be considered in the context of the wider governance issues that UHI has struggled with since its inception. Whilst other possible merger opportunities have been discussed over the years, this is the first significant development that has been supported from within and is likely to have an impact on further changes that will affect the overall shape and form of the partnership. The strength of the three-way partnership across the colleges has been encouraging with three committed and enthusiastic college Principals working together in a pragmatic manner. This provides a degree of optimism for a new unforced merger within UHI and will be a good test case for future development.

10. Do you believe that the colleges should continue to retain their own names – UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland – or move to a collective identity?

- Preference for colleges to retain their own names
- Preference to move to a collective identity
- No preference
- Don't know

We believe local identity is important for communities as is being part of the wider UHI brand; we also appreciate the value of being able to refer to the three as a single entity particularly at regional and national level and consideration should be given to whether there is a way to achieve both.

Finally, there are two questions about yourself. These will only be used to help us analyse the data we gather from you.

Which of the following would best describe you? *Required*

- Individual/member of the public
- Political representative
- Local business/employer
- Former student/apprentice
- Parent
- Public Sector organisation/department
- Private Sector organisation/partner
- School or education service provider
- Community Group
- Third Sector organisation or charity
- Student enrolled at another UHI partner/UHI
- Staff member employed at another UHI partner/UHI
- Other

Are you located in... *Required*

- Outer Hebrides (UHI Outer Hebrides area)
- North West of Scotland (UHI West Highland area)
- North/North East of Scotland (UHI North Highland area)
- Other

## **Response from Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar – Late Response**

The Comhairle would like to thank officers of UHI for taking the time to meet both elected Members and Officers and taking the time to answer questions.

It is recognised that in these challenging times all organisations are obliged to consider changes which ensures that current and future needs of communities are met.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar approaches the Consultation from this perspective:

**Educational Needs of our Communities:** UHI in the Outer Hebrides must, first of all, provide a service that meets the needs of the Islands. Educational provision should be determined by the learning needs of those who live in the community. Working in partnership with the Comhairle and other key partners such as Skills Development Scotland can provide the data and needs analysis of the community and support focused service development.

**Islands Impact Assessment:** it is essential that an Islands Impact Assessment is carried out as any change in the delivery plans of local services affects people across our Islands. A well-researched and prepared Islands Impact Assessment should provide strong evidence that consideration has been given to island communities.

**Shared Resources:** with the merger of all support services including Finance/IT/HR/Legal, the Comhairle is seeking evidence and assurance that these and other similar functions and posts will be allocated in a fair and equitable manner across the three areas, not just in the short term but also in the long-term. It is vitally important to our community that there remains access to high quality jobs in these sectors. The recent advertisement of a shared Director-level post for Finance & Resources with a requirement that the post be based at the Fort William college centre is not encouraging. There are reports that the senior IT post will be based at North Highland College. Surely all posts should be advertised on a location-neutral basis, or, if there is an intention to spread Director-level posts among the three Colleges, why has this strategy not been communicated to partners and local authorities? Clarity on these issues is urgently required.

**Governance Structure and Local Advisory Board:** it is essential to the Comhairle as a key partner that clarity on the proposed Leadership and Governance Structure is provided, and additional information on the development of Local Advisory Boards is required quickly. It has been acknowledged by UHI that there will be a focus in the early years post-merger on ensuring equity across all three communities, which is to be commended. It is only with a strong Local Advisory Board (LAB) that the long term aims of communities will be fully understood. We emphasise that retaining a clear understanding and responding to the needs of the communities must be core to this process. With this in mind, a strong partnership relationship going forward but also a seat around the table alongside local businesses through the DYW Board will be essential. What will the LAB's reporting lines be to the new College Board and what account will the new Board be required to take of its recommendations?

**Gàidhlig:** the Comhairle promotes wherever possible a policy of 'Gaelic First' and seeks assurance as to how the Gaelic identity of UHI in both Further and Higher Education in the Outer Hebrides will be continued and promoted in the context of a merged College.

**Identity/Branding:** the Comhairle understands from recent discussion that another rebranding exercise is proposed should the merger go ahead. The Comhairle wishes to express its concern that any further rebranding is likely to cause further distancing of the identity of local campuses from their Island roots and local identity.

**Equity of Provision:** the Comhairle would welcome the wider and more sustainable curriculum offer that is being proposed by the merger. Having a curriculum based on equity and specifically regional equity of access, Personalisation and Choice, Parity of Esteem, which is driven by data, evidence and the Scottish Government 15-24 Learner Journey is a welcome baseline for all delivery.

The functional 15-24 Learner Journey (particularly senior phase design) requires collaboration across education providers in the development, delivery and review of provision ensuring that progression pathways and transition arrangements between providers are clear and well supported. This will require to:

- be accessible and understandable to learners and parents and signpost the offer that is actually available to them in their area individually and as families
- support all young people to participate in education, employment and training
- increase personalisation and choice – putting learners in control of what and how they learn
- enable regional equity of access
- promote parity of esteem, using the SCQF to set out all types of learning on offer, without hierarchies
- support growth of provision, increasing the range of learning options available to young people
- be data/evidence driven
- be future-focused and promote different flexible approaches to learning – physical, digital and shared across education providers'

**School Timetables:** it is acknowledged that not all schools across the three regions will be on a harmonised timetable and will have varying holiday allocations. The Comhairle would welcome additional information regarding proposed plans to meet the needs of all schools.

**'Remote Rural' Offer:** all local learning centres in the Outer Hebrides provide vital resources to the local community but there is concern, particularly for smaller centres such as the learning centres in Uist and Barra. While there was recognition at the meetings with UHI representatives as to the vital nature of these centres, the Comhairle seeks further reassurance that the offer available through these centres will continue to grow and how that will be taken forward. Also, there is an opportunity and need to address the provision of accommodation for students and the thus far under-developed concept of *university communities* or of Stornoway as a *university town*.

**Progression Pathways/Assessment for Prior Learning:** the Comhairle recognises the costs associated with university education and with young people leaving the Island to attend university. During the consultation discussions held there was discussion of increased curriculum choice which is welcome. The Comhairle would welcome a detailed educational rationale mapping out potential pathways, such as an HNC/D pathway locally which still provides options for a final year at a mainland city campus.

The Comhairle wishes to thank UHI for the opportunity to submit a response and looks forward to further and early engagement on the matters set out above.

Malcolm Burr  
Chief Executive,  
on behalf of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

8 November 2022



**Please ask for:** Councillor John Finlayson  
**Direct Dial:** 07787152227  
**E-Mail:** john.finlayson.cllr@highland.gov.uk  
**Ref:** **Merger- UHI OH/ UHI WH**

Dear Dr Foxley,

**Merger of UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland**

I wish to thank you and your colleagues for attending the meeting of the Highland Council Education Committee on Wednesday 23 November 2022 to provide an overview of the merger between UHI North Highland, UHI Outer Hebrides and UHI West Highland, and allow members to ask questions.

As was discussed at Committee, it is clear, that a merger will create a more sustainable college, which will have more capacity and resource to better serve the needs of our rural and island communities in the North and West Highlands.

I also believe that the merged college, to be known as UHI North, West and Hebrides, has the potential to play a key role in supporting the economic development of our region, including growth opportunities in the blue and green economy, health and social care sector, as well as tourism, food and drink and STEM.

Myself and my colleagues were particularly pleased to see the commitment to the Gaelic language from the merged college and believe you are well placed to respond to the well-documented challenges faced in relation to the recruitment of GM teachers.

Of course other challenges around connectivity, transport, and accommodation in our rural and island communities are very much to the fore and myself and fellow members are committed to working in partnership with the merged college to encourage more people to live, stay and work in rural Highland.

This merger of course also presents further opportunities for collaboration, and we look forward to working with you, and colleagues, in the future, and wish you every success with this project.

Best wishes,

**John Finlayson**  
**Councillor**  
**Eilean a' Cheo Ward**  
**Chair- Highland Council Education Committee**

**Councillor John Finlayson**  
Ward 10: Eilean a' Cheo

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