SCOTTISH FUNDING COUNCIL CALL FOR EVIDENCE: A REVIEW OF COHERENT PROVISION AND SUSTAINABILITY IN FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION (SFC/CE/01/2020)

AUGUST 2020

RESPONSE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

To: reviewsecretariat@sfc.ac.uk

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Scotland faces extraordinary challenges in 2020 in the wake of a global pandemic and Britain's exit from the European Union. A review of the Scottish tertiary sector at this time is important to ensure that the sector is appropriately equipped to maximise its contribution to the national recovery and the future prosperity and welfare of Scotland's population. The Scottish sector is diverse and has many strengths which should be celebrated. This review offers an opportunity to carry out a fundamental appraisal of the characteristics of the further and higher education sector that would best support and promote its continued success. A long-term review using a comparative perspective will make the Scottish sector even stronger, protecting and reinforcing its strong national role and international reputation. The University of Aberdeen makes the following recommendations:

- This review of coherence and sustainability of further and higher education in Scotland should be a comprehensive long-term review of the sector rather than a pandemic response review
- The review should draw upon the extensive evidence available relating to the characteristics of high-performing systems of tertiary education
- Institutional autonomy should be protected as a key driver of innovation and quality in research and teaching
- The diversity of the sector should be protected to maintain responsiveness to the variety of teaching and research needs
- Regulations and bureaucracy should be kept to a minimum to allow the sector to remain agile and efficient
- The distinctive strengths of the Scottish sector should be protected and built on
- The review should support and facilitate collaboration between institutions in the tertiary sector and in wider society for the benefit of regional economies and communities
- The review should aim to strengthen Scottish universities' international standing and global links
- Inclusion and access should continue to be at the forefront of Scottish educational policy
- The review should encourage a fundamental consideration of the student journey and the sector's engagement with wider society and business with the aim to promote flexibility and interconnectedness for the benefit of Scotland
- There should be sustainable funding of the sector to support its international competitiveness and contribution to Scotland's global reputation

INTRODUCTION

The University of Aberdeen welcomes the SFC review of coherent provision and sustainability in further and higher education. The sector was already preparing for the impact of Britain's exit from the European Union when the Covid-19 pandemic occurred. The pandemic will have a lasting impact on societies and economies across the world and the challenges facing Scotland are therefore considerable. It is important and right to carry out a full review of the Scottish tertiary sector at this point to ensure that Scottish further and higher education is well equipped to support economic and societal recovery.

However, it is important that his review looks beyond the pandemic; while Covid-19 clearly presents the global community with extraordinary challenges, the review should not be restricted to being a pandemic response plan, but should be seen as an opportunity to reinforce existing strengths, take advantage of new opportunities, and address both external threats and internal weaknesses facing the tertiary education sector in the long term. The aim should be to strengthen the Scottish sector further and maximise its contribution to internationally leading research and education, and to the prosperity and welfare of Scotland's population in the long term.

The Scottish tertiary sector is diverse with a strong global reputation. It is important that this diversity and the differing strengths of individual institutions is protected and developed further. This review should seek to strengthen universities' abilities to serve their core purpose of education and using knowledge for the benefit of all, while taking account of the different needs and preferences of communities in their localities and region.

It is vital that we protect the strong international reputation and the global networks that Scottish universities have nurtured over the years. The internationalisation of Scottish higher education is not limited to student recruitment. While international student recruitment provides important income to Scottish universities, this is not where the greatest benefits of the internationalisation of higher education are evident; overseas students enrich the university experience of all our students, they contribute greatly to the Scottish economy, and enhance further Scotland's reputation worldwide, and through our international graduates lifelong global links with Scotland are forged. Strong international links open opportunities to Scottish students through student exchanges and other outward mobility which enriches the student experience and enhances language skills and cultural understanding for the benefit of Scottish society. This internationalisation is also evident in strong research partnerships between Scotland's universities and universities and industry across the globe and the prestige in which leading international organisations hold Scottish higher education.

For a sector review to have an impact, it is important that the review is ambitious and wide in scope, looking not only at individual universities in isolation but considering how the sector as a whole should be sustained and nurtured. The review should also have a strong long-range perspective so as to future-proof any changes made and avoid unintended constraints placed by current policy assumptions. It should be informed by the past so as to learn from our history, and should be comparative in nature, seeking to identify and learn from best practice in other higher education systems across the world. There is an abundance of research evidence on high-performing higher education systems, and this review should be directly informed by that work.

The University launched in February 2020 its new institutional strategy, Aberdeen 2040, which sets an ambitious strategic direction for the University over the next 20 years under the four headings of *Inclusive*, *International*, *Interdisciplinary*, and *Sustainable*. At the heart of the strategy is the foundational purpose as set out by Bishop Elphinstone in 1495: *Open to all and dedicated to the pursuit of truth in the service of others.* The University has accelerated some of the commitments made within the new Strategy to support the national response to Covid-19, through *inter alia* an ambitious provision of short courses to support modular learning and reskilling focusing on supporting industries' needs, blended and online education, research aimed at combatting Covid-19 and its impact, and flexible educational provision to minimise the disruption to learners. The University is also committed to maximising its contributions to an 'inclusive and net zero' economic recovery. Our response to this consultation reflects our foundational purpose which we believe has wider resonance for the role and contribution of the sector in the decades ahead. The University looks forward to supporting the outcomes of the sector review through its new institutional Aberdeen 2040 Strategy.

This response was approved by University Court on 21 August 2020.

University of Aberdeen
24 August 2020

a) **What do you think works well in the current further and higher education arrangements that we should keep in order to secure Scotland's inclusive social and economic recovery from the current pandemic? How can we best preserve and strengthen those features of education, research and innovation in Scotland that we most prize, in a very challenging funding environment?**

<u>What works well?</u>

The Scottish HE sector has a strong **international reputation**, with four Scottish universities ranking top 200 in the world (Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings 2020) and international liaison is supported through work with various partners such as the Scottish Government, SFC, British Council, The Royal Society of Edinburgh, Universities Scotland, SDI, Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise. This collaboration has been effective and should be nurtured going forward.

There is a strong and consistent focus on **inclusion and broadening access** across the sector led by the Scottish Government and the SFC. Progress in this area has been treated as a priority across the sector and this should continue. At Aberdeen, the University has made good progress in increasing access from SIMD20 areas (doubled from 4.5% to 9% last year), in spite of obvious geographical challenges, articulation from colleges to the University are increasing year-on-year, and *Inclusion* will be one of four key priority areas for the University going forward.

There has been good progress made in maturing provision of **digital** as well as face-to-face learning across Scotland as evidenced by a range of online courses now available across the sector, moves to offer blended learning, and the SFC's dedicated funding towards Upskilling. The University of Aberdeen has embraced the move to a more varied approach to learning, enabling students to adapt a study mode that suits their circumstances and supporting local industry. Through our *On Demand* learning platform we offer a wide range of online degrees and short courses with uptake growing rapidly. The short course portfolio has been very successfully linked to the SFC's Upskilling Fund with a near 100% uptake of funding in 2019/20.

Scotland should be proud of the strong **collaborative partnerships in learning and teaching** as evidenced by the Enhancement Theme collaboration and the strong partnership with *sparqs*, aimed at improving the learning experience of students through close innovative working between institutions, staff and students.

The Scottish sector has a very **strong international research profile** which needs to be protected. Support for excellent research is vital for mitigating the combined effects on the higher education sector of Brexit and Covid-19. For REF2014, Scottish institutions employed 12.2% of all submitted researchers; the percentage of research across Scotland graded at least 3* was slightly higher than that for England (76.93% Scotland; 76.02% England; 76.98% Wales and 74.55% Northern Ireland), and our percentage of 'unfunded' research (achieving a grading of 2* or less) was lower than that of England and Northern Ireland. However, there are challenges inherent in the devolved structure of the research and innovation landscape across the UK which will be discussed further below.

Collaboration in research and research support functions is a particular feature of Scottish higher education that fosters varied research activity ranging from fundamental research to applied research in all areas, evidenced by joint submissions to REF exercises, pooling initiatives and networks of research support professionals which encourage exchange of views and good practice. The University of Aberdeen is prioritising collaborative approaches to research in its Aberdeen 2040 strategy through enhanced focus on interdisciplinary research. The review should consider ways in which this strong research culture can be strengthened further as collaboration is extremely important for academic impact and international esteem.

Scotland has a versatile and outward looking HE sector which nurtures and thrives on international collaboration and attracts the best researchers from across the world. It is important that attitudes and processes in Scottish higher education **remain welcoming to European and international staff and students as** the cultural, economic and skills benefits to the nation are

valuable in our recovery. The University of Aberdeen, ranking 28th in the world in the latest THE World University Ranking for International Outlook, is proud of its international staff base (nearly 24% of our academic staff are non-UK nationals, 15% of our staff are EU nationals), its multicultural student population (42% of our students are non-UK nationals, 26% of our students are EU nationals), the strong and growing interest in student exchanges, e.g. through Erasmus Plus, and its strong international connections, e.g. through the University's Doha Campus and extensive collaborations with Chinese universities.

The Scottish tertiary sector benefits from a positive and **supportive relationship with SFC** and a high level of collaboration and partnership in addressing challenges. This has become particularly evident in the response to Brexit and Covid-19. It is important that this positive relationship continues in future.

Universities in Scotland also undoubtedly have a strong **civic role.** They are a major employer all over the country and contribute to the economic, social and cultural life of their communities. The University of Aberdeen is actively engaged with the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework and monitors performance against the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. The University is a signatory to the Civic University Agreement, collaborates with Aberdeen City Council on the Community Planning Aberdeen Project, holds major festivals such as May Festival every year and liaises closely with local employers and industry partners e.g. through Knowledge Transfer Partnerships projects, provision of short courses to individuals and business, consultancy, CPD and insights to the business community.

Universities play important partnership roles and are major contributors to **regional economic development,** e.g. through Region City Deals where universities are key partners in driving an increase in innovation and regional industrial R&D capacity. The University of Aberdeen plays an important role in the Aberdeen Region City Deal. One of the early achievements has resulted in the delivery of the National Decommissioning Centre in partnership with the Oil and Gas Technology Centre (OGTC) based at the University. Working with Opportunity North East to support Life Science, Digital and Food and Drink Industries, has increased the collaborative links between business and universities and other stakeholders, for example NHS Grampian and the Councils, enhancing the routes for commercialisation of research and supporting public sector delivery of improved services.

The immense contributions of hundreds of thousands of Scottish university **alumni** to the economic and social well-being of Scotland and wider UK cannot be overstated. Scottish alumni can be found in every walk of life as leaders in healthcare, government, justice, business, education, social services, arts and culture, and more. Their leadership is building our economic and social structures, and driving change and innovation here and throughout the UK. Our alumni diaspora, historically and in the present day, are ambassadors for Scotland and they contribute to a better, more just world.

Finally, the **autonomy** of universities is important not only for their own performance in research and education and their many contributions to economic prosperity and social justice. Universities are also a crucial independent voice in a democratic society that thrives on debate and diversity of views. Universities must continue to enrich and improve policy decisions by offering genuinely unbiased expertise and evidence.

How do we preserve and strengthen those features?

The higher education sector in the UK has come under increased criticism in recent years for being out of touch with society, with questions posed about academic quality, the relevance of university research, value for money, and growing internationalisation. History has demonstrated that education and research plays a key role in helping economies finding their way out of major recessions (e.g. UUK HEFCE Recession to Recovery Project 2010, HEPI 2020, UUK Seminar Report 2010). A review of HE in Scotland presents an opportunity to reclaim this narrative by demonstrating that the tertiary sector is central to and a key driver in leading economic and societal recovery.

At the same time, it is vital that the Scottish tertiary sector is **appropriately funded** and that **bureaucracy and regulations are kept to the minimum** to allow the sector to remain agile and responsive. The sustainability of the sector needs to be secured and the review should therefore include a thorough reappraisal of the funding and regulatory model with the aim to offer appropriate public funding for the unit of resource for teaching and research. There is considerable evidence in specialist higher education journals, and elsewhere, on 'what works' to promote the performance of higher education systems. The review should draw upon this evidence.

It is important to continue the furthering of the **equalities agenda** to facilitate access for women, carers, the socio-economically disadvantaged, looking beyond the current SIMD20 measure for more nuanced measures of deprivation, and ethnic minorities.

The Scottish HE sector should be proud of its international reputation and should continue to **foster and enhance global connections** to ensure that Scotland remains a strong and globally relevant economy. Scotland will need a clear and decisive plan to mitigate the impact that our exit from the EU will have on our international profile. While members of the EU, the international context for the sector was to a large extent defined by EU frameworks and directives, with Scotland having its own voice. With our imminent exit from the EU, the international context in which we operate will have to be re-defined, and it is vital that Scotland is represented as an equal partner in discussions and negotiations internationally.

We must **protect and strengthen the Scottish research base**. The QR/REG allocations per submitted FTE in Scotland and Wales are higher than those in England and Northern Ireland and any move to harmonise funding arrangements for research with those employed by Research England could destabilise the Scottish research base significantly. While HEFCE/Research England have allocated relatively smaller amounts to institutions in support of research, their funding formula has favoured 4* research more explicitly than that used by the SFC. REG funding is vital for institutions in terms of their ability to explore new research areas and innovative ways of supporting and enabling research.

There should be meaningful **investment in digital and online provision** to improve the reach, impact and resilience of the sector.

Graduate Apprenticeships offer a new way for universities to partner with industry through the blending of academic study with skills development and work-based learning, which in turn supports the Scottish Government's Future Skills Action Plan.

The **emphasis on skills development** should continue but this narrative needs to be nuanced to include an appreciation of the contribution that meta-skills across all disciplines make to economic and societal development.

The Scottish Government and the SFC have in recent years increasingly emphasised the need for **regional collaborations** to address local challenges and to ensure even regional development across the country. This approach should be continued and is particularly important now that evidence suggests that major disrupters like Covid-19 and Brexit will disproportionally impact the north-east of Scotland.

b) **What do you think colleges, universities and specialist institutions should stop doing, or do differently, in order to contribute effectively to an inclusive social and economic recovery? (You may wish to comment on teaching and skills development, sectoral and employer needs and employability, research, innovation and knowledge exchange, widening access and equalities issues).**

What should we stop doing?

There is no universal answer to this question as each institution should have the **autonomy** to make decisions about their priorities in light of their strategies. As noted above, care should be taken to nurture initiative and agility without unnecessary constraining regulation. All universities will want to contribute to an inclusive social and economic recovery through teaching and skills

development, meeting sectoral and employer needs and employability, strong research, innovation and knowledge exchange, widening access and support to equalities issues. However, the way in which they approach and address these areas should be left to each institution to allow them to adjust their response to their own strengths and socioeconomic circumstances.

<u>What should we do differently?</u>

This review should focus on key transformative actions required for the sector to contribute effectively to an inclusive social and economic recovery. Reviewing and revisiting **the funding model** for Scottish tertiary education should be the cornerstone of this review. Universities should not have to rely on international student recruitment to balance the books; an appropriately funded sector will ensure that each institution is able to contribute to economic growth and societal welfare. Lessons from other funding models in different HE systems should directly inform decisions on the level and sources of funding.

The SFC has in recent years promoted **greater regional collaboration** and cooperation. As noted above, this effort should continue but consideration should be given to removing direct overlaps of provision within the same geographical areas that cannot be shown to meet the needs of different types of students, businesses and other stakeholders, with the aim to create the strongest possible provision in each region. The University of Aberdeen will continue its strong engagement with regional partnerships as described under section a) above to strengthen the economic and social resilience of the region and protect its strong international profile.

Graduate Apprenticeships offer an opportunity to grow connectedness with regional employers to meet sectoral and employer needs, but the current funding model and timelines for creation and delivery of the programmes generate potential barriers to this provision being expanded.

The University of Aberdeen has increased its academic capacity in key areas to support its newly developed Strategy, Aberdeen 2040, particularly in support of health and wellbeing, energy transition and addressing net zero, environmental sustainably and data science. As part of the investment, we have recognised the role of business schools in supporting economic recovery and scale up of the company base in Scotland. We support the SFC ambition for the **provision of scale-up education across Scotland**, and would encourage the expansion from a pilot phase to delivering accredited provision.

Encouraging universities to enhance their **consultancy services** to businesses through the business schools and other specialists, expanding access to specialist facilities within universities and creating flexible space for business incubation and collaboration with industry, would increase industrial R&D and accelerate the translation of the research. The University already supports incubation of companies and collaborates with ONE to expand the provision of appropriate facilities to support the growth of the life science industry in Aberdeen.

c) **How can colleges, universities and specialist institutions best support Scotland's international connectedness and competitiveness in the post-pandemic, post-EU membership environment?**

For universities to continue to support international connectedness and competitiveness it is vital to protect the sector's **attractiveness to global talent**. This can be done by protecting universities' ability to recruit staff and students from across the world and to continue to offer them a welcoming environment while keeping open opportunities for Scottish students to enrich their learning through international outward mobility. Collaboration and networking across Scotland and Europe should be encouraged to help the sector remain agile, innovative and to overcome some of the barriers that are being erected.

Furthermore, in the context of a post-pandemic world and environmental concerns around global travel, the review should seek ways to produce a **structural step-change in our thinking about tertiary education with a focus on flexibility and interconnectedness**: what it means to be a student, the student journey, our research and the connectedness with the wider society. From this change in perspective, universities and colleges should be supported in implementing strategies to facilitate:

- **Flexible delivery** at all levels to support up/reskilling in Scotland and abroad, e.g. via transnational education.
- **Flexible entry points** – a clearer framework for entry points into Scottish HE, including widened pathways from college to university
- **Flexible exit points** with an ability for students to accumulate qualifications over time without being in full-time education – and care taken not to create perverse incentives that would work against this development e.g. as seen through ranking measures that are focused on full-time students all progressing through the university system at the same pace (e.g. measures for completion rates, retention etc)
- Research that provides collaborative and truly **interdisciplinary solutions** and contributes to social, economic and cultural recovery from the pandemic but also to a longer term healthy societal development, through prioritisation of research in the areas of the climate and environment, sustainability, health, wellbeing and inclusion
- Research into **business-facing innovation** and being responsive to working with business to enhance the industrial R&D capacity.
- Flexible approaches and incentives to provide **access to university expertise**, its research facilities, provision of incubator facilities and entrepreneurship, programmes to support business start-up and scale up.
- Systemic changes that allow a deeper and **more dynamic relationship between colleges, universities and employers** so as to create a truly interactive system of university education and economic activity for all students, e.g. through placements and internships.

Scotland's international connectedness depends on our ability to recruit, retain and develop the best staff and students from all over the world. It is often their informal networks and connections that evolve into more formal and strategic partnerships and enable the exchange of practices and approaches across HEIs and non-academic partners. With research impact increasingly important to HE funders abroad as well the UK, there is a common agenda of collaboration and engagement that HEIs can seek to exploit. What will be required is a robust framework enabling and supporting reaching out to academic and non-academic partners across the world. Ensuring that universities are a key partner in Scotland's ambition to increase the level and value of foreign direct investment is key in demonstrating the ability of delivering the TEAM Scotland ambitions.

Scottish University **alumni** are uniquely placed as business and community leaders across the globe. Engaging and utilizing this critical and committed network to build and strengthen international connectedness and competitiveness is a vast, untapped resource. Working with Scottish universities to activate this network should be a key element of any international strategy for competitiveness going forward.

d) **What opportunities and threats does the post-pandemic environment hold for colleges, universities and specialist institutions? For institutional leaders, how are you planning to address these challenges and opportunities?**

Opportunities and threats posed by the post-pandemic environment

The SFC has reported that the Scottish HE sector may face a loss of £450-500M in academic year 2020/21 alone as a result of the pandemic owing to loss of international student fee income, loss of income from accommodation and services and loss of research income. These are serious challenges that are further compounded by Britain's exit from the EU and a strong societal narrative which is often hostile to the higher education sector. Higher education in Scotland faces enormous challenges in securing sustainability in the short term while trying to respond to a fast-changing environment.

This review offers an opportunity to look beyond this short-term horizon at ways in which the sector can be strengthened to make it more resilient, emerging stronger and better equipped to face similar challenges in future while at the same time meeting societal and student needs. Key

actions here are to (i) carry out a **full review of the funding model** for Scottish higher education; while international student recruitment should continue and should be encouraged it is not viable for this income source to be considered a way to subsidise other teaching and research activity, (ii) to **reimagine the student journey** to create a flexible delivery model and a more agile tertiary education sector, (iii) deeper exploration of the **connectivity between universities and wider society**, including the public, industry and employers, to facilitate a more dynamic and flexible collaboration and societal engagement with both education and research, to support economic development, innovation and entrepreneurship.

<u>How is the University of Aberdeen planning to address these challenges and opportunities?</u>

As noted above, the University of Aberdeen launched its 20-year strategy, Aberdeen 2040, in February this year. Examples of commitments made in the Strategy that will form part of Aberdeen's contribution to the challenges and opportunities facing us, include:

- As part of our *Educational* strategy we will offer a flexible curriculum, offer challenge-led teaching that allows students to learn by tackling real-world problems, and provide work-based learning. The Covid-19 situation has led to adaptations across the sector in the context of the learning experience. This valuable work and changes that have been made should be part of a sector-wide approach to further developing the flexibility of learning and skills development as part of an embedded approach to the learning experience. Areas such as employability and entrepreneurship have been adjusted in the blended environment and potentially offer opportunities for development across the sector.
- Under the *Interdisciplinary* strand of the strategy, the University has committed to working across internal structures and geographical boundaries to develop creative solutions to practical and societal problems. Our teaching and research will be driven by curiosity and the desire to broaden our horizons, fostered through interdisciplinary learning for all our students, working with external stakeholders to build partnerships and continue to develop our digital systems to support interdisciplinary exchange and innovation.
- As part of our *International* strand, we will continue to strengthen our diversity and multicultural profile, equip our graduates for global employment through our curriculum and teaching, and provide all our students with an international experience.
- Commitments within the *Sustainable* strand include a strong focus on environmental sustainability to meet stretching standards and targets, investment in education and research to develop the people, ideas and actions that help us fulfil our purpose, and to ensure the University's financial sustainability through diversification of income sources, financial planning and responsible use of funding.

For more information about the University of Aberdeen 20-year strategy, Aberdeen 2040, visit https://www.abdn.ac.uk/2040/.

e) **What forms of collaboration within the tertiary education eco-system would best enable a coherent and effective response to these challenges and opportunities?**

As noted above, **collaboration across the sector in both teaching and research** should continue to address the challenges identified under question d). Efforts to allow students to progress seamlessly from college to university should continue so as to offer all learners the opportunity to progress in line with their ambitions. There should be strong support for open research, with a national or co-ordinated regional approach to research sharing that supports coordination, speed and value for money.

A distinctive strength of the Scottish sector is **partnership working in learning and teaching**, e.g. close partnership between universities through the Enhancement Themes and partnership working with students through *sparqs* which has created a uniquely collegial sector working in tandem with various agencies.

The **collaborative approach adopted by Scottish institutions in research** and research support functions differs significantly to that adopted in England. Continued collaboration across institutions in Scotland and support for the establishment of wider UK and international networks will be vital post Brexit. Future funding and incentives may be directed to encourage and support collaborative networks, as well as maintaining our presence in some of the established EU networks as a third country partner.

Finally, **regional collaboration** should be encouraged and supported. The University of Aberdeen is fully committed to strategic collaboration with RGU and NESCol for the social and economic benefit of the north-east of Scotland. The University of Aberdeen, RGU and NESCol have already commenced discussions on collaboration to promote social and economic recovery in the region building on the partnership approach within the ACRD.

The review should avoid leaping to the conclusion that institutional mergers will aid efficiency and collaboration and should instead consider carefully whether partnerships based on meaningful complementarity are more fruitful than accidents of geography. Research evidence shows that structural change involving formal mergers is costly in the short-term and distracts attention from substantive organisational objectives.

f) **How can SFC, alongside government and other enterprise, skills and education-focused agencies, best support colleges, universities and specialist institutions to make their full contribution to Scotland's inclusive, green and education-led recovery? In particular, you may wish to draw out:**

- **How scarce public resources should be prioritised to drive recovery**
- **Particular areas of collaboration between agencies that would best support the sectors' contributions**
- **Adaptations to SFC's funding and accountability frameworks to promote agile and collaborative action by the sectors to build Scotland's recovery**
- **How SFC's funding and accountability frameworks should ensure that equality and wide access to education opportunity are promoted as key elements of the recovery for younger people and adults**
- **What support SFC and government could give institutions to adapt to a changed environment**

While prioritisation of resources and target setting within the tertiary sector has been beneficial to create change in certain areas, e.g. in relation to widening access, it is important that prioritisation of resources to support the sector's contribution to an inclusive, green and education-led recovery is not overly prescriptive. The **diversity** of the Scottish higher and further education sector is one of its strengths that should be preserved. Individual institutions should therefore continue to have autonomy in deciding on the ways in which they will meet societal and institutional aspirations.

However, overall prioritisation of public resources whereby the tertiary education sector is considered an **integral part of the national recovery strategy** would be very much welcomed. The University of Aberdeen has, in its Aberdeen 2040 Strategy, identified the following five key interdisciplinary challenges: Energy Transition, Social Inclusion and Cultural Diversity, Environment and Biodiversity, Data and Artificial Intelligence, and Health, Nutrition and Wellbeing. To both support our strategy and the revitalisation of the sector we would welcome prioritisation of the following areas:

- Investment in a **sustainable funding regime** for the sector
- Investment in further strengthening our **shared international vision** in the sector, maintaining an open and welcoming environment for international students and staff and providing funding to facilitate collaboration.
- Investment in close collaboration with key national agencies to support the continued **internationalisation** of Scottish higher education
- **Prioritised investment in research** that leverages additional resources into Scotland and ensures Scotland's universities retain their global ranking – noting that global

rankings are 70% based on research metrics. However, should no additional funding be available for research, we should consider ways in which existing funds can be deployed more effectively, and how some of the administrative burden can be shared or eased. The following are some suggestions for consideration:

- o Collaborative/partnership working requires longer time horizons and often involve higher risks than conventional research activity. The assessment and reporting requirements imposed by funders work against commitment to such activities. Focus on frameworks that support longer term ambitions and projects, and reward engagement outwith Scotland as well as within, would benefit both research and education as well as, in the longer term, the economy and society overall.
- o Some administrative burdens could be shared across a number of institutions or even the sector as a whole – a pan-Scottish approach to open access/open research would allow us to pool resources, expertise and outcomes, share repositories and enable us to present Scotland's science output as a whole. Similarly, doctoral training centres and multi-institutional graduate schools have demonstrated that joint provision can be offered by institutions that otherwise compete for resources and could provide a blueprint for further initiatives around staff development for researchers and research support staff.
- o Review reporting requirements for HESA, REF, UKRI and SFC for duplication and overlap and eliminate or adapt requirements as appropriate. Review REF in particular – the commitment to a 'light touch' exercise that was given by the funding councils in the wake of REF2014 was not fulfilled for REF2021 which has proved to be administratively more complex and resource intensive than any previous exercise.

- **Prioritised investment in key social, economic, cultural and environmental challenges** to support skills development and minimise social deprivation, including continuation of skills funding and the SFC museums grant. The museums grant enables the University of Aberdeen collections to have a significant impact beyond the University – for local communities, as part of the national research infrastructure and as the basis for international collaboration.

- Investment in closer **collaboration with key national agencies**, e.g. enterprise agencies, to support the move **to a more flexible educational system** delivered in tandem with economic partners. As part of this, consider wider collaboration across new boundaries, e.g. partnerships with the tertiary sector around Science Centres as drivers in awareness raising and participation in STEM.

- Invest and build on the **sector collaboration** in other areas, e.g. in relation to the Public Sector Action Plan and Cyber Resilience Framework to share cost effective best practice.

- Investment in **open research** and shareable teaching resource, supporting institutions as they seek to move supply chains to a fairer and more sustainable cost base with suppliers of content.

- More proactive and positive role by the SFC in the inception, development and utilisation of **shared services** within the tertiary sector and across other sectors.

- Investment in **green transformation**, including a meaningful exploration of the circular economy, e.g. starting with ICT equipment.

- **Reduced bureaucracy** and a simplified approach to sector accountability with clear and concise guidance to the sector and significant institutional autonomy in the ways in which national strategies are supported at institutional level.