# UHI Transformation: Engagement Analysis

Report by The Diffley Partnership

May 2025

**Diffley**
Partnership

# Contents

# Executive Summary

## Purpose of the Research

This report was commissioned by the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) as part of the development of its Transformation programme. The aim of this transformation is to establish a more integrated, efficient, and sustainable tertiary education institution serving the Highlands and Islands, Moray, and Perthshire regions.

This engagement research sought to gather stakeholder feedback on early proposals, understand perceptions of integration and transformation, and inform the next phase of work toward a Full Business Case (FBC).

## Methodology

UHI designed a mixed-methods engagement programme combining:
- An online survey (551 valid responses),
- Focus groups (staff, students, practitioners),
- Online and face-to-face meetings (20–30 events),
- Informal engagement (e.g., via the student association, social media),

Survey participants included staff, students, both student and staff, and other stakeholders, with representation from all UHI partners.

The Diffley Partnership led the analysis of the survey responses and of the collated notes by UHI from the staff engagement sessions.

Quantitative analysis was conducted for the closed survey responses. Qualitative analysis included thematically coding feedback from staff sessions and conducting thematic analysis of the survey results.

While findings are robust, the open nature of the survey means the sample is non-probability and cannot be generalised to the full UHI population.

## Key Findings by Chapter

### Chapter 2: Staff Engagement Sessions

Main themes included:

- **Uncertainty about mergers**: Staff raised concerns about guiding principles for mergers, fairness in employment terms, and lessons learned from previous mergers, particularly UHI NWH.
- **Lack of transparency and clarity**: Many were unclear on the content, authorship, and decision-making processes around the Full Business Case (FBC).
- **Divergent views on transformation options**: Clarification was sought on specific models (Options 3, 4, 5, and 6), with some favouring an incremental or hybrid approach.
- **Concerns over decision-making power**: Staff questioned whether non-transforming partners would influence decisions affecting the whole network.
- **Career development and equity**: There were strong calls for standardised pay, promotion pathways, and better support for professional growth.
- **Job security and role changes**: Fears about redundancies and role consolidations were prominent, alongside questions about remote working and local delivery arrangements.
- **Terms and conditions**: Staff expressed anxiety over potential impacts on employment contracts, pensions and national bargaining frameworks including the contractual tensions that exist within the UHI partnership's tertiary arrangement.

## Chapter 3: Perceptions of Transformation

- **Mission:** More than half of survey respondents agreed UHI is achieving its mission, while a fifth disagreed. To support UHI's mission there were calls to improve alignment with community and industry needs, deliver more responsive curricula, and foster stronger internal collaboration.

- **Principles of transformation:** Strong agreement with all listed principles, especially enhancing student experience and remaining geographically dispersed was found in the survey. Lower levels of support were found for single-point accountability and full tertiary alignment.
  - **Additional principles:** Respondents suggested including stronger collaboration, community engagement, sustainability, streamlined operations, and unified branding.

- **Positioning for regional economic growth:** Views were mixed on whether UHI is well-positioned to support economic and social benefits. Suggestions included focusing on sector-relevant qualifications and strengthening regional engagement strategies.

## Chapter 4: Perceptions of Integration

- **Priorities for integration:** Integrated teaching and operational excellence garnered the most support. Environmental sustainability was the lowest priority.
  - **Additional priorities:** These included locally responsive provision, staff wellbeing and progression, equitable contracts, and student-centred improvements.

- **Benefits of integration:** Respondents valued enhanced student experience, staff development, and improved culture. However, some felt current benefits already exist in certain partners, raising questions about value added by integration.

- **Challenges of integration:** The majority of survey respondents anticipated disadvantages from integration, primarily:
  - Redundancies due to duplication,
  - Loss of local identity and autonomy,
  - Detriments to the student experience through reduced local support and increased online delivery,
  - Differing terms and conditions,
  - Resistance to cultural and structural change.

- **Community impact:** Staff were especially concerned about negative impacts on island, rural, and smaller partners, including centralisation, reduced visibility, and diminished access. Some saw potential for increased support to these regions under an integrated model.

## Chapter 5: Engagement Preferences

- Preferred communication channels:
  - Email updates and webinars were most preferred overall.
  - Staff strongly favoured email and the SharePoint site.
  - Students preferred social media.

- A multi-channel approach is needed, with emphasis on direct digital communications for staff and accessible formats for other stakeholders.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The engagement analysis reveals a complex and sometimes conflicting set of perspectives. There is broad support for UHI's mission and many of the transformation principles, but significant concerns remain around transparency, equity, and local responsiveness.

This report provides a vital evidence base to inform the next phase of the transformation process and ensure that changes reflect the values, needs, and ambitions of UHI's diverse community.

As the Full Business Case is developed, it is critical that:
- Staff and stakeholders are actively engaged in shaping proposals,
- Local identity and community impact are carefully balanced with strategic integration,
- Career development and equitable working conditions are prioritised,
- Communication is transparent, regular, and tailored to diverse stakeholder needs.

Based upon the analysis we conducted, our recommendations for engagement and analysis towards the Full Business Case are that UHI continues to:

- Ensure clarity of important terms relating to business planning and change management
- Optimise sequencing of provided materials and then asking for views
- Design future surveys to include routed sections
- Ensure sufficient resource for engagement sessions as part of a multi-channel approach.

# 1. Context and approach

This chapter explains the context of our research commission for UHI, the research conducted by UHI to inform the Transformation programme and our approach to analyse and present results within this report.

## 1.1 Context

The UHI partnership comprising seven academic colleges, three specialist colleges and the university, is collaboratively designing a programme of transformation aimed at establishing a new operating model. This initiative aims to enhance institutional efficiency, effectiveness, and financial sustainability. The aspiration is to create an integrated, financially robust, responsive, and ambitious tertiary institution that will be effectively placed to serve the Highlands and Islands, Moray and Perthshire region's education and training requirements.

A key step in this process has been the creation of an Outline Business Case (OBC) which lays the groundwork for establishing a more integrated institution. The objective is to identify and develop an operating model that most effectively aligns with the UHI partnership's ambitions for sustainability, growth, and prosperity.

The OBC will transition into a comprehensive Full Business Case (FBC), presenting the details of the proposed new operating model.

## 1.2 UHI phase one engagement

The purpose of the UHI stakeholder engagement programme is to gather key stakeholder perspectives on UHI, its value, and how any changes resulting from the Transformation programme can continue to support UHI's mission of delivering a 'transformational impact on the people, communities, and economy of its regions'.

Engagement was designed to gain feedback and key insights from UHI's key stakeholders on its early proposals of a more integrated partnership.

UHI designed and delivered a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods to gather feedback:
- An online survey
- Online meetings (comments to be captured/signpost to email and survey to make comment, potentially between 20–30 meetings

- Feedback from informal engagement activities such chance occurrences with the Highlands and Islands Student Association (HISA) and students
- Media
- Social media

- Bespoke website

UHI designed an online survey to be completed by students, staff, those who are both students and staff and any other stakeholder (Appendix A). The survey was open from 24 March to 2 May 2025 and received 551 complete responses (see section 1.3 for achieved survey response profile).

Diffley Partnership observed two staff meetings to understand what was covered verbally and presented in slides. The sessions had core elements, but were tailored for different partners and varied depending on numbers of attendees and the context of each partner. Questions were raised during each engagement session by attendees.

## 1.2 Analysis and Reporting by Diffley Partnership

Firstly, Diffley Partnership reviewed the questions raised at engagement sessions held for each UHI partner, raising codes for the key themes and issues discussed. Using a systematic approach, researchers could easily identify prevalence, contrast and commonality in viewpoints and determine overarching 'master questions' (codes) summarising similar queries. These were compared with the existing Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on UHI's Transformation website, to see where questions have already been addressed by UHI and determine indicative questions that UHI can use to update its Transformation FAQ page. The thematic analysis of these questions are included within this report in chapter 2.

Diffley Partnership were commissioned to clean, organise and analyse the results of the survey. A dataset of responses was provided which contained 546 responses. An additional 5 responses were returned in Gaelic. These were translated and manually input to the survey dataset.

Analysis of the survey is presented in chapters 3 to 5 of this report.

The survey was designed in a way which did not include advanced routing, but where the same, or similar, question was asked to different types of respondent. One survey link was issued, and questions differed based on stakeholder type (e.g. staff, student, etc). Some questions had different wording; where possible these questions have been grouped together and any differences in question wording has been included within a footnote.

Survey findings indicate the prevalence of views and experiences surrounding transformation and integration. Where percentages do not sum to 100%, this is due to rounding, the exclusion of 'don't know' or 'N/A' categories, or multiple answers.

Aggregate percentages (e.g. 'satisfied'/'not satisfied') are calculated from the absolute values. Therefore, aggregate percentages may differ from the sum of individual scores due to rounding of percentage totals. Throughout the report, an asterisk (*) denotes any value of less than half a percent and a dash (–) denotes zero. For questions where the number of responses is less than 30, the number of times a response has been selected (n) rather than the percentage (%) is given.

Sub-group analysis has been completed by respondent type, where possible. As the survey was open to all, without a defined sampling method, the sample is non-probability in nature. This means that the findings cannot be generalised to the full population of UHI staff, students and other stakeholders.

Answers to open-ended questions are analysed and reported thematically. This data is qualitative in nature and therefore it is not appropriate to draw conclusions from this type of data about the prevalence of particular views or experiences but rather to indicate the range of different views expressed by respondents.

## 1.3 Achieved Survey Response Profile

Between the 11 UHI partners there are 2,500 staff members, 36,000 students and around 50 learning centres. The regions across the Highlands and Islands, Moray and Perthshire include seven local authorities and nine health boards, spanning across two-thirds of Scotland. The achieved survey sample is included within Table 1.1.

Please note that the question relating to UHI partner was worded differently per each respondent group. Students were asked "Which UHI partner are you enrolled with?", staff were asked "Which UHI partner(s) are you employed with?" while those who are both student and staff were asked both questions. Other stakeholders were also asked about the UHI partner they were most connected with through the question "Which UHI partner(s) are you most associated with? (tick all that apply)".

UHI Partner affiliation is broken down by organisational role in Table 1.2.

**Table 1.1: Sample profile**

| | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Total | 551 | 100 |
| **Relationship to the UHI partnership** | | |
| Student | 144 | 26 |
| Staff | 325 | 60 |
| Both student and staff | 25 | 5 |
| Other | 52 | 9 |
| **UHI Partner** | | |
| UHI Argyll | 50 | 9 |
| UHI Inverness | 109 | 20 |
| UHI Moray | 45 | 8 |
| UHI North, West and Hebrides | 101 | 18 |
| UHI Orkney | 43 | 8 |
| UHI Perth | 90 | 16 |
| UHI Shetland | 36 | 7 |
| Highland Theological College (HTC) | 3 | 1 |
| Sabhal Mòr Ostaig | 5 | 1 |
| Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) | 7 | 1 |
| Directly enrolled with the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) – including Centre for History and Centre for Rural Health Sciences | 6 | 1 |
| UHI Executive Office | 87 | 16 |
| Not sure/Unsure | 5 | 1 |

**Table 1.2: UHI Partner, by role**

| UHI Partner, by Role | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Student | | Staff | | Both student and staff | | Other | |
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| **Total** | **144** | **100** | **325** | **100** | **25** | **100** | **52** | **100** |
| UHI Argyll | 7 | 5 | 38 | 12 | 3 | 12 | 2 | 4 |
| UHI Inverness | 39 | 27 | 47 | 14 | 14 | 56 | 9 | 17 |
| UHI Moray | 11 | 8 | 28 | 8 | 2 | 8 | 4 | 8 |
| UHI North, West and Hebrides | 22 | 15 | 53 | 16 | 13 | 52 | 13 | 25 |
| UHI Orkney | 18 | 13 | 12 | 4 | 6 | 24 | 7 | 13 |
| UHI Perth | 23 | 16 | 46 | 14 | 5 | 20 | 16 | 31 |
| UHI Shetland | 10 | 7 | 20 | 6 | 3 | 12 | 3 | 6 |
| Highland Theological College (HTC) | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Sabhal Mòr Ostaig | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 8 | 0 | 0 |
| Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) | 1 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Directly enrolled with the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) – including Centre for History and Centre for Rural Health Sciences | 6 | 4 | N/A | N/A | 0 | 0 | N/A | N/A |
| UHI Executive Office | N/A | N/A | 79 | 24 | 3 | 12 | 8 | 15 |
| Not sure/Unsure | 3 | 2 | N/A | N/A | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 |

## 1.4 Report structure

Chapter 2 of this report includes an analysis of the questions raised within staff engagement sessions.

Chapters 3 to 5 consider each aspect of the survey:
- Perceptions of Transformation
- Perceptions of Integration
- Engagement through Transformation
- Student experience and the Curriculum

The report concludes with considerations to inform future research towards UHI's Full Business Case (FBC).

# 2. Staff Engagement Sessions

This chapter provides analysis of the key questions raised at staff engagement meetings held by University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI). The question bank compiled and provided by UHI has been thematic analysed and the key themes are discussed within this chapter.

Key themes emerging from these sessions are outlined in section 2.1. It should be noted that these are not exhaustive but constitute the main points of interest across the sessions.

Master questions/themes relating to existing sections and questions on UHI's Transformation FAQ page, as well as suggested additions and those categorised as 'miscellaneous', are included within Appendix B.

## 2.1 Key themes emerging from staff engagement sessions

Staff who attended the engagement sessions discussed, and asked questions about, a wide range of topics linked to UHI's Transformation. The key themes from across these sessions are considered below.

### 2.1.1 Plans for mergers

There were several questions around plans for mergers as part of the transformation.

One staff member from UHI's Executive Office asked **whether there are any formed guiding principles to guide decisions**. Using the example of employment terms and conditions, where some academic partners have higher pay scales or more annual leave than others, they asked whether a guiding principle would "i). align to EO, or ii). rise each of these to the 'highest' available between merging partners, iii). find an 'average' from each partner that balances out such considerations, or something else?". In essence, they sought reassurance around how the Transformation process would ensure consistency or fairness when coming to decisions on changes.

Relatedly, several staff members from across partners referred to **UHI NWH (North, West and Hebrides)**, which was created through a merger, and asked whether there was any indication or consensus that it has been successful. They asked **if there had been an independent analysis of this merger**, including to determine "the efficiencies created and the improvements to the resources available for teaching and to the students". Others asked when the **lessons learned** from the NWH merger would be available for partners and the wider UHI body to draw on.

Linked to this, a staff member from UHI NWH asked what UHI are doing as an organisation to **ensure that the changes being put in place at UHI NWH will be as closely aligned with the future 'Transformation' vision as possible**", so as not to duplicate or waste effort:

> "What are we doing as an organisation to make sure that the changes we are putting in place at UHI NWH will be as closely aligned with the future vision of UHI as possible so that the work we are doing isn't undone with further mergers? Giving staff time to bed down as UHI NWH is great, but not if it changes completely again in another few years. It would be better to be already aligning, where possible" – [Staff member at UHI NWH engagement session].

In a similar vein, a staff member at one of UHI's 'drop-in' sessions asked **what actions could be taken to merge services across the partnership, and what other actions could be taken to deliver on the direction of the transformation project, before the Full Business Case is approved**. This indicates some thinking about whether UHI will, or should, initiate (perhaps smaller scale) mergers in the interim as work is being done to approve the Full Business Case.

## 2.1.2 Outline and Full Business Cases

While most staff asked questions around the details and timing of the Full Business Case (FBC), some from UHI Inverness asked **if the Outline Business Case would be shared with staff across the partnership**. They noted feeling like they were "still somewhere in the dark" and "not really sure what the detail of [the Transformation] is".

Staff from UHI Shetland and Argyll branches asked **who is responsible for writing the Full Business Case**, while those from UHI Argyll also wished to know **if the task of writing the FBC is going to tender**.

Others asked about the **timeline for consultation** on, **and implementation** of, the Full Business Case:

> "What is the FBC [Full Business Case] timeline? And once the option has been finalised, what's the timeline following that?" – [Staff member at UHI Perth].

Indeed, a staff member from UHI Shetland observed that the Full Business Case is set to be developed over the next year and asked how long the remainder of the change process is expected to take.

Similarly, staff from UHI NWH asked **how staff can feed into consultations on the Full Business Case**, while those from UHI Inverness wanted to know **how the questions and queries raised during these consultations will be formally recorded and considered** in developing the FBC.

Staff from multiple partners asked about the **content of the Full Business Case**. Staff from UHI NWH asked if the preferred option will be identified in the FBC, while an employee of UHI Shetland wanted to know the total number of options that will be considered in the FBC:

> "Will a Full Business Case be made up for three options or for one option only?" – [Staff member at UHI Shetland].

Similarly, a staff member from UHI's Executive Office queried whether the details of the financial benefits would be outlined in the FBC.

## 2.1.3 Options presented for Transformation

Several staff members asked for further explanation of some of the options presented for the Transformation.

Staff from UHI Inverness requested clarification on what **Option 3** (Change/transformation within current constitutional structures) involves.

Meanwhile, those from UHI's Executive Office asked for a brief explanation on the **differences between Option 4** (Use mergers to deliver a smaller number of partners) and **Option 5** (Use mergers to create a consolidated college), and **queried why Option 5 has been ruled out**.

Indeed, staff from UHI NWH asked what the benefits of a single college (in the form of Option 5) would be compared to a single tertiary institution (Option 6). An attendee at a general drop-in session also inquired about the potential to revisit Option 5:

> "If the Scottish Parliament doesn't produce a tertiary framework that suits the Full Business Case, would option 5 be re-visited, or is option 5 completely off the table of possibility?" – [Staff member at one of UHI's drop-in sessions].

Staff at the UHI Inverness engagement session had many questions about **Option 6** (Use mergers to deliver a new tertiary institution). One employee asked if Option 6 would have an impact on further education provision or funding. Another observed that UHI consider Option 6 to be the preferred option, and asked what some of the other UHI partners are "hoping for". They also wanted to know what UHI see as some of the main barriers in relation to Option 6.

One UHI Inverness staff member considered the **merits of Options 3,4 and 6**, particularly the 'quick wins' that can be afforded by Option 3 as a stepping stone to Option 6:

> "I like that there's a common sense for Options 3, 4 and 6. There's a need for an immediate change. Moving to options six makes sense, and making quick wins of Option 3 now makes

perfect sense. An evolutionary approach to a single institution" – [Staff member at UHI Inverness].

Looking at the options more generally, staff at UHI Inverness asked about the **proposed timelines for the different options,** to get a sense of how long each one would take. Employees from UHI Shetland noted how decisions were made to narrow the initial list of six options to three, and wanted to know where they could **access the notes or minutes that outline the rationale behind these choices**.

## 2.1.4 Voting on a new model and the partners involved in decision-making

Staff at UHI Inverness had a range of questions around any process of voting on a new model (which UHI have said are not part of the process) and wondered which partners would be involved in decision-making. Some employees asked **how decisions will be made if there is no voting process**.

Another asked **if the proposed models (options) will be published and made available for scrutiny**, and queried the extent to which details on the models, including economic information, will be obtainable:

> "Will the models mentioned be published and made available for scrutiny? That is the inputs/assumptions/details of the models, rather than just the results? Will economic, financial models, etc., become available for scrutiny for staff?" – [Staff member at UHI Inverness].

Others considered the possibility that an overall decision on the options is not reached, and asked **if the Scottish Government would impose a solution** if this were the case.

Several UHI Inverness employees inquired **whether the academic partners who are not part of the transformation**, or have different governance arrangements, **will be able to vote on or influence a new model**, and asked h**ow they could affect decisions if not fully involved**.

There was particular interest in whether those from UHI Orkney, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Highland Theological College and Scottish Association for Marine Science will be involved in decision-making for Options 4 and 6, as it was felt that these options would not directly impact these partners:

> "Will Orkney, SMO, HTC, and SAMs be part of the decision-making process for the two models (4 and 6) which does not have a direct effect on them compared to the other partners" – [Staff member at UHI Inverness].

## 2.1.5 Staff career development

Staff from across UHI had questions on plans for staff career development as part of the Transformation project.

Those from UHI's Executive Office asked **how Transformation will "allow for academic's career development"** and wanted to know if UHI would "align all academic posts with national grades and allow for transparent promotion".  Relatedly, an employee at UHI Inverness felt that there is not pay equity across the partnership, and asked if the new model can provide "more unified job roles and pay equity".

Those at UHI Inverness felt that **UHI academic staff do not currently have the same career development opportunities as other universities**, and inquired whether career development plans will "ever allow senior lectureships or other routes for academic staff to develop through research and teaching activity, without having to go into management".

Relatedly, a staff member attending one of UHI's drop-in sessions questioned **how UHI are planning to invest in staff development** if teaching cover is not adequately budgeted for:

> "How are you planning to invest in staff development if there's no budget for teaching cover? It's tricky to take opportunities when we can't step away from the classroom" – [Staff member at a UHI drop-in session].

## 2.1.6 Changes to staff numbers and roles

Several staff members from across the UHI partnership asked **whether the transformation will lead to redundances**, with one from UHI Argyll stating that "merger is [sic] all about savings, we are all worried about redundancies".

Similarly, an employee at UHI Inverness asked "what work has been done on calculating redundancies across the network on each of the options". They also queried the potential impact of the 'Transformation' programme on the **job security** of staff, and wondered whether any models would have particularly strong bearing on this:

> **"**What will the impact on job security be following the change programme? Do any of the choices have a greater or lesser impact? Inverness have worked extremely hard to make sure we are very efficient at maintaining that job security" – [Staff member at UHI Inverness].

Relatedly, a staff member from UHI Shetland asked if the Outline Business Case projected savings over a three to five-year period and, if so, **whether these savings are expected to be achieved**

**without staff reductions**. An employee of UHI Perth asked whether new systems and processes would lead to staff cuts.

Another UHI Perth staff member asked if there are any **plans for target staff-to-student ratios**, which may also influence staff numbers and the risk of redundancies, while colleagues from UHI Shetland wondered if the programme might **impact the need for local staff in rural partners**.

There was also **consideration of the recruitment of staff in regard to a rise in online-based courses**, which may reduce the need for partner staff to be locally based:

> "I suppose I was thinking more about future recruitment for staff. With courses going online more – would there be a need to recruit local staff when they could do the same job from a more central area. Just a thought." – [Staff member at UHI Shetland].

There were also questions around **potential changes to job roles**, as staff from UHI NWH queried whether the transformation will lead to "more consolidation of functions and roles":

> "What can we expect in terms of some of those options and is there an expectation that those roles will change and there may be some redundancies?" – [Staff member at UHI NWH]

Similarly, staff at UHI Shetland felt that the 'Transformation' programme suggests a **potential need for role rationalisation**, and wondered how this should be approached:

> "While it may be too early for definitive answers, should this be approached through centralisation or local delivery?" – [Staff member at UHI Shetland].

Another colleague at UHI Perth considered the **effects of a more centralised model on staff time and geography**, particularly in staff from across regions needed to move or travel to another UHI campus. As noted below, they wanted to know whether there would be opportunities for staff to undertake their work remotely:

> "If a job is changed to all place services, will there be opportunities for remote working so people don't have to move and could still carry on?" – [Staff member at UHI Perth].

## 2.1.7 Impact on terms and conditions, contracts and pensions

Staff at UHI Perth and UHI Argyll inquired about the **likelihood of changes to terms and conditions** as a result of the 'Transformation' programme.

There were also queries about the **potential impact on pensions** from staff at UHI Inverness and UHI Perth, with colleagues from Inverness asking whether impacts on pensions have been included in discussions, as they had "not seen them mentioned on the Transformation website".

Looking to contracts, an employee of UHI Shetland asked **if there is a settled view on the need to change existing contracts of employment**. In the same vein, staff from UHI Shetland wondered **if there are plans to transition certain staff out of further education contracts**:

> "I understand that some staff across UHI are on higher education contracts rather than further education contracts. Is there a plan to transition certain staff out of further education contracts and national bargaining?" – [Staff member at UHI Shetland].

An employee at UHI Perth also raised the point around national bargaining, and asked for consideration of enabling staff to have similar research contracts to other universities:

> "Staff and professional development, I would like to understand where that all ties in and is research a focus and consideration? We're bound by national bargaining, but can the option of staff to have a research contract like other universities be considered?" – [Staff member at UHI Shetland].

## 2.2 Master questions emerging from analysis of staff engagement meetings

The master questions from engagement meetings with each partner were combined and analysed. These were compared with the existing Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on UHI's Transformation website[1], to identify where questions have already been addressed by UHI and determine indicative questions that UHI can use to update its Transformation FAQ page. The full analysis is included in Appendix B. This includes:

- **Master questions/themes relating to existing sections and questions** on UHI's Transformation FAQ page, for UHI to consider and update. In some cases, suggestions have been made additional master questions that relate to, but are not currently answered within, existing sections.
- **Miscellaneous master questions** that do not appear to relate to existing sections, which UHI may want to provide responses to.

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[1] https://www.transformation.uhi.ac.uk/en/frequently-asked-questions/

For clarity, the existing sections on the UHI Transformation FAQ page are:

- Why the UHI partnership needs to change and the timeline for transformation (N.B These questions do not currently fall under a section heading but are grouped together on the page)
- Transformation Process
- Learning, teaching and the student experience
- Staff engagement

## 2.3 Conclusion

The staff engagement sessions surfaced a wide range of views and questions, highlighting both interest in and uncertainty about the UHI transformation programme. Key themes included the need for clarity on proposed merger plans, the structure and timeline of the Full Business Case (FBC) and the rationale behind specific transformation options. Staff expressed concerns about fairness in decision-making, particularly regarding employment terms, pay equity and the potential for redundancies. There was also strong interest in ensuring career development opportunities and maintaining local responsiveness within a more integrated model.

Overall, the sessions revealed a desire for transparent communication, inclusive decision-making and reassurance that the transformation will enhance, rather than erode, the values and strengths of the UHI partnership. Staff contributions also pointed to the importance of learning from previous merger experiences and ensuring any proposed changes are responsive to local contexts and institutional differences. These insights provide valuable direction for shaping the Full Business Case and maintaining trust throughout the transformation process.

# 3. Perceptions of Transformation

This chapter includes perceptions of the current UHI mission before exploring seven principles to enable transformation for the UHI partnership to achieve this mission. These questions were asked within the survey and were open to staff, both student and staff, and other stakeholders.

## 3.1 Current Mission

Overall, 57% of respondents agreed that that the UHI partnership is currently delivering on its mission of having a transformational impact on the people, communities and economy of its regions and incorporation its four founding principles (13% strongly agree, 45% tend to agree). However, almost a quarter (23%) disagreed and a fifth (19%) neither agreed nor disagreed (Figure 3.1).

**Figure 3.1: Do you agree the UHI partnership is currently delivering on its mission of having 'a transformational impact on the people, communities and economy of its regions' and incorporating its four founding principles?**



| Strongly agree | Tend to agree | Neither agree nor disagree |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Tend to disagree | Strongly disagree | |
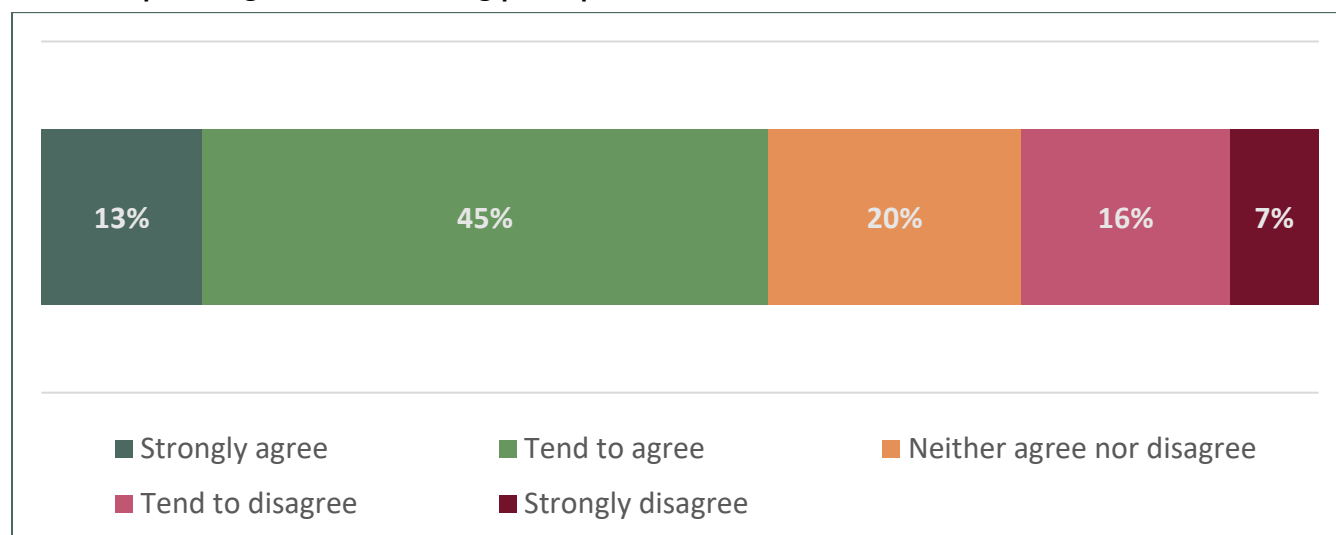
Base: Staff, Both student and staff, Other (407)

In reply to open-text questions on **what improvements the UHI partnership should make to better fulfil its mission and uphold its founding principles**, there was as a strong sentiment among respondents that UHI must **listen and respond to the needs of communities, businesses and industry**. Some staff felt there needs to be "much better understanding and connectivity with the communities and businesses of our region to drive decision making", with another pointing to the importance of ensuring UHI students are equipped with the right skills and knowledge for current and future job markets:

"In order to drive economic growth we need to become more current and up to date with what business need and want in the partnership areas. Teaching students with old systems, equipment and ideas are not going to help transform our students into motivated staff for businesses to employ. We need to be striding in front of business and trade in their relevant subjects. We need to be current and up to date with the curriculum we deploy to provide competitive students to the job markets" – [UHI staff].

Indeed, one staff member suggested that UHI tailor each centre to the local demands of employers and students, noting "diversity is [UHI's] strength". It was felt that more investment in communities would help to deliver social change, and that offering more in the way of entry level courses would provide educational opportunities for all. Others noted how improvements could be made to sync school holidays with UHI holidays, as the current disconnect "has an enormous impact on delivery for both staff and students" and "sends [the] wrong message about this being a 'community' college".

Several respondents classified as both students and staff echoed this sentiment, calling for more visibility in communities and a focus on courses that would help fill the job vacancy areas in local communities. They also saw UHI as important in encouraging local young people, particularly those who face challenges in engaging with education, to study and develop both 'hard' and 'soft' skills:

"We should be working with our communities and schools more to offer young people who face significant challenges to engage in education and have a sense of purpose. We should be concentrating on our softer skills as well as the academic and have these courses valued at the highest levels" – [UHI staff member and student].

Looking more widely, those classed as both students and staff also suggested ways to encourage local communities to acquire new skills and knowledge, including weekend courses:

"Create a range of taster, evening or weekend courses that will appeal to those who may be retired or with disposable income but do not want to do a full year course, such as DIY skills, joinery for beginners, construction for beginners, sewing classes, life drawing, [or] intro[duction] to CAD" – [UHI staff member and student].

Similarly, 'other' respondents asked that UHI continue to develop its links with businesses, get more involved in local issues and strengthen its local presence.

Moving on, all types of respondents felt that **UHI's partnership does not work together effectively in its current form**, causing delays and other issues:

> "The partnership is very political and doesn't work efficiently together. Due to this, many issues and delays are caused, adding additional workloads to staff that are already at capacity due to cuts being made. Only change can fix these issues" – [UHI staff].

One staff member noted that there "needs to be better cross partnership awareness of what is being carried out at each partner – across the full tertiary provision". They highlighted opportunities to increase efficiency, including:

> "to make [the] best use of specialist resources, to maximise benefit from specialist resources and facilities to signpost students and stakeholders more efficiently, to enhance interdisciplinary research, to develop new teaching content and to streamline and innovate in our delivery". – [UHI staff].

Several UHI staff members felt that UHI's founding principles are threatened where partners see themselves as individual entities in competition with one another, as opposed to a collective. They also emphasised the importance of building stronger relations between partners and having clearer, more unified messaging:

> "To see itself as one institution instead of separate and potentially competing institutions, one real partnership instead of a group of individual partners. Part of this is ensuring that the identity of UHI remains as local as each of the partners, and not something distinctive and different. Having worked at one of the partners previously, there was an impression that UHI EO was somehow not as representative as that partner, and that UHI EO thought of itself as better/above the partners". – [UHI staff].

> "One of the key challenges I've observed is the level of administrative complexity and, at times, apparent political tension between partners, which makes it difficult to maintain a shared sense of purpose or see the broader picture of the partnership. Local meetings and briefings tend to (understandably) focus on the financial health of individual institutions, but this often comes at the expense of discussion around collective impact or progress toward shared goals. Developing collaborative work across partners has also felt like an uphill effort, largely due to a lack of synergy, alignment, and consistent communication between institutions. This fragmentation can limit our ability to function as a coherent partnership and weakens our potential to deliver on UHI's mission at scale". – [UHI staff]

Looking to those classed as both students and staff, a few agreed that UHI should be more of a partnership, with partners co-ordinating and communicating with one another and bridging the disconnect:

> "To be more of a partnership – I do not mean in the form of a merger, just to be more transparent, helpful to one another. In some ways it feels like on paper the colleges form a

partnership, but in reality there is still a disconnect, there is not as much 'working together' as there should be, there is still a lot of competition between shared resources" – [UHI staff member and student].

Again, other respondents shared this sentiment, with one stating that the current partnership is "too fragmented and is not delivering its potential".

Relatedly, a **need to streamline services and avoid duplications** was a recurring theme in responses, with one 'other' respondent observing that the "current situation of multiple colleges leads to unnecessary duplication of job roles and courses, waste of resources, competition between the colleges, and general confusion for both students and staff". Indeed, some UHI staff suggested streamlining, and removing overlap in, some functions, including UHI's support services and management structure:

> "Having functions on each campus essentially doing the same job – there is so much that could be streamlined. This would save money and that money could reduce deficits and then be reinvested given more money [sic] for new projects, to be put back into research and generally giving an amazing student experience" – [UHI staff].

Another key theme across respondents was a need for UHI to **invest in opportunities, courses, equipment, technology and wider facilities** in order to better fulfil its mission and uphold its founding principles.

One staff member felt that UHI ought to focus on "developing courses and alternative instruments of assessment that are designed for our modes of delivery and for our students", while another simply advised that UHI be "be more visionary in the courses [they] offer". Indeed, another staff member presented a range of suggestions on ways to expand and upgrade courses and technologies and reduce barriers like digital poverty:

> "Expand flexible learning pathways, including more short courses, micro-credentials, and part-time study options for working adults. Expand the use of immersive and interactive technologies (e.g., VR, AI-assisted learning) to improve engagement. Increase support for lecturers in using technology effectively, ensuring consistency in digital delivery across partner institutions. Address digital poverty by improving access to devices and internet connectivity for students in remote areas. Provide more incubation spaces, funding advice, and mentoring for student and staff-led start-ups" – [UHI staff].

One respondent who was both a student and staff member advised that UHI "invest more money into resources to keep equipment and technology to industry standards" as opposed to what they saw as "wasting money on top heavy management roles". Meanwhile, a few 'other' respondents

believed that UHI should have a "much more integrated and coherently communicated curriculum" and "a student experience that looks and feels like a university".

Some additional suggestions from staff, those classified as both students and staff and other respondents – on how the UHI partnership should make to better fulfil its mission and uphold its founding principles – can be found in Appendix D.

## 3.2 Principles of Transformation

In another closed question, respondents were given a list of seven principles to enable transformation and could agree or disagree that these principles are necessary for the UHI partnership to achieve its mission (Figure 3.2).

The vast majority of respondents agreed (either strongly or tended to) that the principles to enhance student experience (90%), enhance our ability to deliver learning, teaching and research (91%) and to remain geographically dispersed, delivering the educational needs of our communities (90%) are necessary for achieving the mission.

The majority were also in agreement with the principles to ensure locally–led approach and empowerment for communities (86%) and to provide greater staff opportunities (84%).

Two thirds of respondents (67%) agreed with the principle to enhance decision making through single point accountability. While 14% disagreed with this principle, a fifth (20%) neither agreed nor disagreed suggesting some uncertainty.

Overall, 59% of respondents agreed with the principle to become fully tertiary in everything that we do. A quarter (25%) neither agreed nor disagreed while 17% disagreed.

**Figure 3.2: Do you agree that each of the following seven principles to enable transformation are necessary for the UHI partnership to achieve its mission?**



| Principle | Strongly agree | Tend to agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Tend to disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Enhance student experience | 72% | 18% | 6% | | |
| Enhance our ability to deliver learning, teaching and research | 70% | 20% | 6% | | |
| Remain geographically dispersed, delivering the educational needs of our communities | 70% | 20% | 8% | | |
| Ensure locally-led approach and empowerment for communities | 67% | 18% | 9% | | |
| Provide greater staff opportunities | 59% | 25% | 11% | | |
| Enhance decision making through single point accountability | 39% | 28% | 20% | 7% | 6% |
| Become fully tertiary in everything that we do | 35% | 23% | 25% | 9% | 8% |

Base: Staff, Both student and staff, Other (407)

26

Staff, those classed as both students and staff and 'other' respondents answered open-text questions on **what key principles – that would better support the UHI partnership in achieving its mission – they thought were missing from the list**.

Many staff members and those classified as both students and staff felt that a principle **encouraging collaboration and the sharing of best practice** across all partnerships would be useful. One staff member discussed a need for UHI partners to approach "problem solving together rather than apart", collaborate and be "solutions focused". There was a sense that UHI partners ought to communicate more effectively between themselves and better harness alternative positions and arguments, ways of thinking and differences of views and opinion. Indeed, one staff member asked:

> "Could there be some sort of over-riding principal that the UHI partners should work together to make UHI a success?" – [UHI staff].

Looking to respondents who are both students and staff, they shared the importance of improving cross-partner culture:

> "Improve trust and communication to facilitate better sharing of ideas and best practice thereby improving efficiencies within departments" – [UHI staff member and student].

Another UHI student and staff member commented that strengthening collaboration between UHI partners would help to foster a more "unified academic culture".

A second key suggested principle was that UHI should **work closely with local communities, organisations and businesses** as much as possible, including the co-creation of courses and opportunities to deliver local impact. The need for UHI to be proactive in doing this was summarised by one staff member:

> "UHI needs to be more than an educational institution.  It needs to be proactive, the voice of the community, facilitating and working with all groups to make a strong and significant contribution to the local area.  UHI should go to the community, not wait for the community to come to UHI" – [UHI staff].

A staff member and student felt that "collaboration within our communities is something that is left out [in the list of principles]". Some of the 'other' respondents also raised this, with one suggesting that "co-creation and partnership as a principle of how we treat students (and potentially other stakeholders)" be added as a principle, and another emphasising the value of "making local communities aware of what UHI provides" and "making UHI involved in local projects".

Respondents from across the staff, both students and staff and 'other' categories called for a principle around **sustainability** to be added The term sustainability could take on different

meanings. Several staff members suggested including a principle on UHI's commitment to sustainability and the environment, with one nothing that "the term "sustainability" has (rightly, perhaps) fallen out of fashion, but one might still expect to see it somewhere in this list".

Meanwhile, a student and staff member felt that a principle on integrating "sustainability and climate resilience into UHI's educational, operational, and research strategies" would help the UHI partnership to achieve its mission. One 'other' respondent saw sustainability as involving "top notch and sustainable facilities [and] sustainability of local areas and economy drivers", while another discussed the importance of emphasising and demonstrating "the continuity which UHI can bring".

Similar to the principle on enhancing decision-making through a single point of accountability, several respondents felt that UHI should have a principle focused on a more **streamlined structure and one clear brand** to help achieve its mission. One staff member advised that "the move must be to streamline professional service and support functions, as well as reduce the number of 'directors' on each campus", with some other staff members calling for the centralisation of leadership and management. Indeed, a respondent who is both student and staff member suggested ways that the streamlining of enrolment could be achieved in the context of dispersed local partners:

> "Having a single identity and ways to align operations though dispersed, e.g. enrolment through a single UHI portal which is then shared with local partners" – [UHI staff member and student].

One 'other' respondent expressed a similar sentiment and suggested having "one central HR [human resources] and one central accounts [department] with hubs at each college campus". Another emphasised the value of having "one brand, one experience, one UHI" with "equivalence of experience for all – both students and staff".

Again, additional suggestions from staff, those classified as both students and staff and other respondents – on key principles that would better support the UHI partnership in achieving its mission, which they feel are missing from the existing list– can be found in Appendix D.

## 3.3 Economic and Social Benefits

Other respondents were asked whether they agreed that the UHI partnership was well-positioned to ensure that economic and social benefits across the Highlands and Islands, Moray, and Perthshire regions were met, including fulfilling the requirements of the renewable energy transition.

Around a third of respondents (31%) neither agreed nor disagreed, indicating uncertainty or a lack of strong opinion. Meanwhile, 21% tended to agree and 15% strongly agreed that UHI was well-positioned in this regard.

Conversely, 17% tended to disagree, and an equal proportion (15%) strongly disagreed, suggesting that views were mixed, with a relatively even spread across the response options.

**Figure 3.3: Do you agree that the UHI partnership is well-positioned to ensure that the economic and social benefits across the Highlands and Islands, Moray and Perthshire regions are met, such as fulfilling the requirements of the renewable energy transition?**
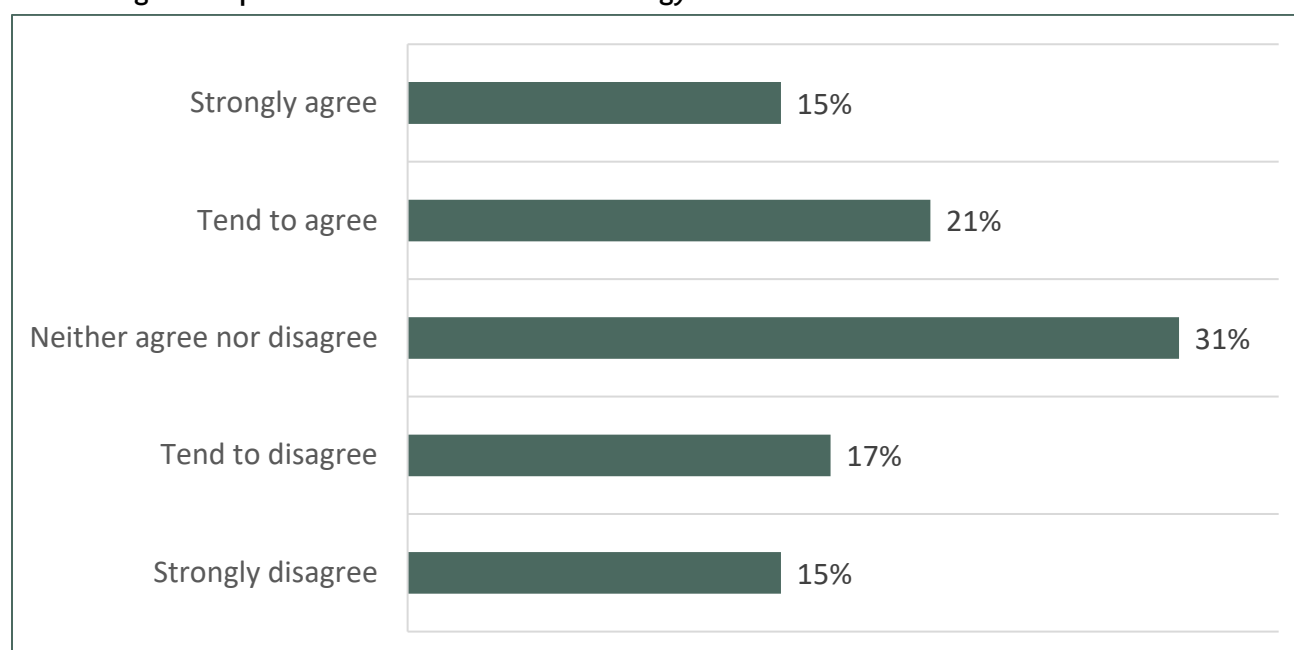


Base: Others (52)

'Other' respondents were then given the opportunity to suggest ways that the UHI partnership could strengthen its position to better meet major economic opportunities in the region, such as the renewable energy transition.

Respondents emphasised how UHI could achieve this by **ensuring it offers "sector-relevant qualifications** across the board, with opportunities for student progression" and that the appropriate **courses are "developed and ready to be delivered in as flexible a manner as possible**". Another respondent felt that UHI should **provide apprenticeship opportunities** for a range of student types, including young people, mature students and those undertaking career transitions.

One respondent believed that UHI should "stop focusing on the hyper-local approach" and **work to attract people from outside the region** through targeted advertising for distance learning courses, adding that these individuals could then "be in a position to apply for jobs in the region,

and move as necessary". Others commented that "UHI needs to be able to **act as a regional university with a national and international relevance, not as a collection of local interests**", with single points of contact and clarity on the departments or teams that businesses and other interested personnel should be approaching.

One respondent advised that UHI should "**focus on the foundational economy**, i.e. housing, care, hospitality, to ensure there is an economy to unlock" the major opportunities in the region. Another commented how UHI could strengthen its position through **undertaking research or providing guidance on topics linked to these opportunities**:

> "Focus on these opportunities through targeted applied research. Renewable energy is one theme, but there are others, particularly related to land-based sectors such as forestry, estate management, and agriculture – as well as the balancing acts between ecosystem management and, for instance, carbon storage and hydropower".

Several suggested that UHI could "**be a vocal proponent of renewable energy**" and "work to articulate better how local people and businesses can prepare to benefit from the opportunities" and "challenge perceptions many have of what the impact of renewable energy development might have". Some advised that UHI utilise its topic knowledge and position to **develop stronger links with local community groups**:

> "The big problem is convincing the public as to what UHI does for the local community. Many people ask 'What does UHI do?'. Here is a great opportunity for UHI to shout out 'Hey, this is what we do for local communities'. I would have the principal from each UHI partner give a presentation at a local venue, e.g. Eden Court, telling the public who would be invited to attend, as to what their institution does for the local community. 'This is what we can offer your community'".

Others advised that UHI could gain further understanding of the renewable energy transition by **having discussions and developing links with renewable energy companies**, such as engineers working in wave power and other relevant industries.

However, a few respondents **warned against having too great of a focus on renewable energy**, noting "if you only focus on renewable energy, it will come at a cost for other subject areas". Another believed that the "renewable energy transition is something that still has its flaws" and needs more research. Some felt that UHI should begin by working further on learning opportunities "which are important to the area and [have] slipped", with one respondent asking that their partner organisation "stop cutting crucial funding to departments the principal feels are 'not important' enough".

## 3.4 Conclusion

Feedback on UHI's current mission and transformation principles revealed broad support for the institution's overarching goals, but also highlighted concerns about its current effectiveness and cohesion. While over half of respondents agreed that UHI is delivering on its mission, many noted the need for stronger alignment with local community and industry needs, modernised curricula and improved internal collaboration across partners.

Respondents widely supported most proposed transformation principles, particularly those focused on enhancing student experience and maintaining a geographically dispersed model. However, there was more limited support for single-point accountability and fully tertiary alignment, with some expressing uncertainty or disagreement. Additional principles were recommended, including stronger collaboration between partners, deeper community engagement, sustainability, streamlined operations and unified branding.

Views were mixed on whether UHI is well-positioned to drive economic and social benefit across its regions. Respondents suggested that realising this potential will require proactive engagement with regional opportunities, particularly in sectors like renewable energy, and a clear articulation of UHI's role in economic development.

In summary, respondents endorsed the need for transformation but emphasised that its success depends on practical reforms that enhance collaboration, responsiveness, and clarity of purpose across the UHI partnership.

# 4. Perceptions of Integration

This chapter includes the results from survey questions on priorities for integration, benefits of integration, challenges of integration and the impact of integration.

## 4.1 Priorities for integration

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with five priorities for the UHI partnership as it moves toward becoming more integrated (Figure 4.1).

The vast majority of respondents agreed with the priority of teaching, learning and support to deliver a high-quality connected curriculum (93% agree, including 77% strongly agree). A strong majority also supported operational excellence as a fully integrated, sustainable and people-oriented organisation (82% agree) and enterprise and growth to support financial sustainability (88% agree).

Support was slightly lower for the priority to enhance research and innovation impact, with 84% agreeing and 12% disagreeing. The lowest level of agreement was for environmental sustainability, with 79% in agreement and 18% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. A small proportion (4% or less) strongly or tended to disagree with any of the priorities.

**Figure 4.1: Do you agree that these are the main priorities for the UHI partnership as it moves toward becoming more integrated?**



| Priority | Strongly agree | Tend to agree | Neither agree nor disagree |
|---|---|---|---|
| Teaching, learning and support to deliver a high-quality connected curriculum | 77% | 16% | 5% |
| Operational excellence as a fully integrated, sustainable and people-oriented organisation | 60% | 21% | 10% |
| Enterprise and growth, helping lead to a financially sustainable institution | 59% | 29% | 6% |
| Enhancing our research and innovation impact | 49% | 34% | 12% |
| Environmental sustainability | 45% | 34% | 18% |

■ Strongly agree   ■ Tend to agree   ■ Neither agree nor disagree
■ Tend to disagree   ■ Strongly disagree

Base: Staff, Both student and staff (353)

UHI staff and those classified as both staff and students had the opportunity to suggest additional priorities. The most common suggestion from staff related to **providing opportunities and courses to suits the needs of local areas**, with one staff member summarising:

"We are all so widely dispersed, it does not feel possible to have a "one size fits all" approach" – [UHI staff].

Another staff member stressed the need to prioritise "delivering a curriculum that is needed for local communities, and ensuring that our physical bases are accessible to all our communities". Many discussed UHI's value in being connected to local communities and having a "social and civic impact", with asking that UHI listen to the people who live and work in their communities when making decisions on delivery:

> "Actually establishing and delivering what students and employers WANT in the Highlands and Islands, and that isn't necessarily degrees" – [UHI staff].

Many staff also felt that **opportunities to develop and progress their careers** should be an additional priority. Some suggested that UHI should ensure staff are supported to develop their areas of expertise, while one advising that UHI "leverage the skills and knowledge of existing staff out with the confines of a job title and allow progression and development paths". Another provided further examples of ways to enable meaningful staff development:

> "Opportunities for meaningful staff growth and development – senior lectureships? Research/teaching contracts?  Becoming a 'proper' university?  Going fully face-to-face with degree teaching" – [UHI staff].

The **wellbeing and satisfaction of staff and students** was commonly mentioned. Some pointed to a need to enhance the student experience in the same way as other universities, including clubs, societies, and linking with businesses to create offers and benefits for students:

> "Do we even have links with local business for student discount, or that can offer student nights? The prices of our canteen are a constant complaint from the students. Prioritise the student experience" – [UHI staff].

Another staff member suggested increasing student support "both educationally and emotionally to allow for fullest engagement with studies".

One felt that "the mental health and wellbeing of staff should be a key priority for the UHI partnership, not an afterthought", while another advised that "staff satisfaction and equity should be explicitly set out as a priority given the severe disparities in terms and conditions currently".

Similarly, there was a sense that UHI should prioritise **improving the culture for staff**, with one advising that UHI should work to "be a fair, supportive and equitable organisation". Building on this sentiment, others suggested that improving "organisational culture so staff are working together in a positive, professional and efficient way":

> "Be an equitable organisation, which treats all its staff equally, i.e. without the current divide between HE and FE staff.  And without the bickering, competition, and variable working conditions and contracts across the different APs" – [UHI staff].

A few staff members saw staff contracts as a barrier to achieving some of the existing priorities and felt this "needs to be sorted". One staff member called for "parity of lecturing staff conditions and contracts, in terms of pay, contact hours, time off, pensions etc [sic]".

A small number of respondents classified as both staff and students recommended additional priorities for the UHI partnership as it moves toward becoming more integrated. One suggested linking in with values around trustworthiness, **ensuring that UHI is seen as "a provider of choice"** among students and wider communities. Similarly, another emphasised the importance of **using UHI's unique geographic location as an asset in attracting and retaining staff and students** from across Scotland, the wider UK and beyond:

> "Turning our unique location into an opportunity to attract and retain the best staff and students – I think we do need to serve our local communities, but the best way to do this is to become a centre of excellence that looks outward and aims to attract and retain high quality staff and students from well beyond the Highlands and Islands, not a parochial college 'for local people'" – [UHI staff member and student].

Indeed, respondents classified as both students and staff shared their dual perspective, noting that **student needs and priorities** should be at the forefront of UHI's agenda:

> "Student's needs and priorities should be at the top of this list; they are our clients and without them we do not exist. If the transformation will not improve or reduce barriers to student applications or improve numbers, it should not be done" – [UHI staff member and student].

Similar to staff, respondents who are both students and staff felt that UHI should work with local employers "to factor in the requirements they have, ensuring courses reflect employment opportunities in local areas".

Again, additional suggestions from staff, those classified as both students and staff and other respondents – on additional key main priorities for the UHI partnership as it moves toward becoming more integrated – can be found in Appendix D.

## 4.2 Benefits of integration

Staff (staff and those who are both student and staff) were asked how important they consider a series of proposed benefits of a more integrated UHI partnership (Figure 4.2).

The vast majority considered maintaining a high-quality student experience to be important, with 90% rating it as very important and a further 8% as somewhat important. Most also rated ensuring

the needs of local communities are met (97%) and cultivating a more positive culture (98%) as important benefits of integration.

Three-quarters (74%) viewed improved job satisfaction and recognition as very important, with nearly all staff (98%) rating it as important overall. Similarly, 96% of staff considered opportunities for growth and professional development important, including 71% who said it is very important.

Two-thirds (68%) rated a consistent employee experience as very important, and a further 25% as somewhat important. The benefit rated least important was boosting efficiency and resilience by consolidating resources and reducing duplication, though 90% of respondents still considered it important, with 58% rating it very important and 32% somewhat important.

**Figure 4.2: As a member of staff within the UHI partnership, how important do you consider the following proposed benefits for a more integrated partnership?**



| | Very important | Somewhat important | Not very important | Not important at all |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Maintaining high quality student experience | 90% | 8% | | |
| Ensuring needs of local communities are met | 80% | 18% | | |
| Cultivating a more positive culture | 77% | 20% | | |
| Improved job satisfaction and recognition | 74% | 24% | | |
| Opportunities for growth and professional development | 71% | 25% | | |
| Consistent employee experience | 68% | 25% | 5% | |
| Boosting efficiency and resilience by consolidating resources and reducing duplication | 58% | 32% | 6% | |

■ Very important  ■ Somewhat important  ■ Not very important  ■ Not important at all

Base: Staff, Both student and staff (355)

UHI staff and those classified as both staff and students suggested additional benefits that a more integrated partnership could bring for staff.

Both groups felt that a more integrated partnership could **improve job security** and job satisfaction for staff, once decisions on the Transformation have been made and set. Staff discussed this aspect the most, with one summarising the benefits of improved efficiency and organisational reputation:

> "If we do it right then it will lead to job security as a direct result of boosted efficiency. We will improve our reputation as a 'great place to work' if we improve job satisfaction and establish a consistently positive culture" – [UHI staff member].

Similarly, one staff member felt the transformation could help to reduce stress levels among staff "due to a more coherent and clear operational structure/processes, provided job security is guaranteed". Another felt that a reduction in management structure and the duplication of services would greatly benefit UHI staff, in simplifying the structure.

**Stronger staff voice and representation** was seen as also seen as a key benefit. Many staff commented that a more integrated partnership could help to build a stronger sense of staff belonging and community across the Highlands and Islands region and add a "more collegiate feel to work".

Another staff member felt that "staff would feel more valued and connected to the wider academic mission, improving engagement and collaboration", helping to "promote transparency, empowerment and better alignment between top-level decisions and staff realities". The same respondent suggested that:

> "Staff could pilot new ideas and innovations more easily with system-wide support. Staff spend less time navigating bureaucratic differences between institutions and more time teaching, researching, and supporting students. New and mid-career staff, in particular, benefit from shared expertise and reduced isolation" – [UHI staff].

In the same vein, some felt that efforts towards a more integrated partnership could enhance staff's ability to "shape how their department works through a democratic process to create better outcomes", with one staff member advising:

> "It would be productive for existing cross-partnership departmental groups to work on a collective vision of how their department can be improved […] Giving staff a sincere, productive route to engage with the transformation and solve problems they've probably encountered for years will make it a success because these are the people with the knowledge of what those departments do day-to-day, the problems and frustrations that

they encounter regularly, and how things can be done better. These insights will be invaluable as decisions are being made and will evidence that UHI is genuinely listening to us and taking things on board" – [UHI staff].

Indeed, a respondent classified as both student and staff discussed "continued opportunities for staff to be involved in projects such as transformation, skills sharing and encouraging more partnership activity" as a result of a more integrated partnership.

Many staff felt that a more integrated partnership presented opportunities for **collaboration and the sharing of ideas and best practice** across partners. At a foundational level, it was felt that the integration could help staff become more aware of "who everyone in the partnership is and who to go to for which queries".

One staff member observed how the move could facilitate "better awareness and understanding of synergies and overlaps in terms of teaching, curriculum development, research, and less incentive to compete, more to collaborate". This sentiment was echoed by others, who felt the existing relationship between partners is 'fractured':

> "At present the fractured and disparate nature of the relationship between the different Academic Partners creates a silo-ing effect. A bonus of greater integration would be greater chance for cross-fertilisation of ideas, best practice, etc., leading to its own improvements and efficiencies" – [UHI staff].

Meanwhile, some respondents did not see any benefits of an integrated partnership. One noted that they are "not convinced that an integrated partnership will bring any benefits to staff, with another saying they "struggle to see benefits [of] a merging of the partnership".

A few respondents, particularly those who declared in their written response that they worked for UHI Inverness, felt that their partner organisation already enjoyed the benefits listed. They therefore did not see the merger as producing additional benefits for them but acknowledged the potential gains for other partners:

> "These benefits are already in place at UHI Inverness. There is a very low turnover of staff, indicating high employee satisfaction and good opportunities for development as well as a positive culture. I know this is not the case at all academic partners so they probably would have some benefits from merging but I cannot see any benefits for us unless the merger leads to less EO duplication of the work we already do and less payment by academic partners to EO for this duplicated work" – [UHI staff].

Furthermore, a respondent classified as both student and staff member advised that "consideration should be made to the negatives [resulting from a more integrated partnership] and how to address and mediate those".

Again, further suggestions from staff, those classified as both students and staff and other respondents – on additional benefits that a more integrated partnership could bring for staff – can be found in Appendix D.

Other stakeholders were also asked how important they consider various key benefits in shaping the impact of a more integrated UHI partnership on communities (Figure 4.3).

Enhanced employability skills were viewed as the most important benefit, 86% rated this as very important and 14% as somewhat important. A strong majority also viewed reinvestment in local opportunities (such as skills development and commercial activity) as important (96%), including 75% who said it is very important.

Around three-quarters of respondents rated responsiveness to local needs through a single point of contact as important (92%), while 65% valued a curriculum tailored to local and regional employment opportunities, and 63% believed measuring and promoting UHI's tangible economic impact is important.

Improved visibility of local priorities, such as cultural and linguistic identity, is rated the least important of the listed benefits. While still important to a majority (71%), only 44% said it is very important, and 29% considered it not very or not at all important.

**Figure 4.3: How important are the following key benefits in shaping the impact of a more integrated UHI partnership on communities?**
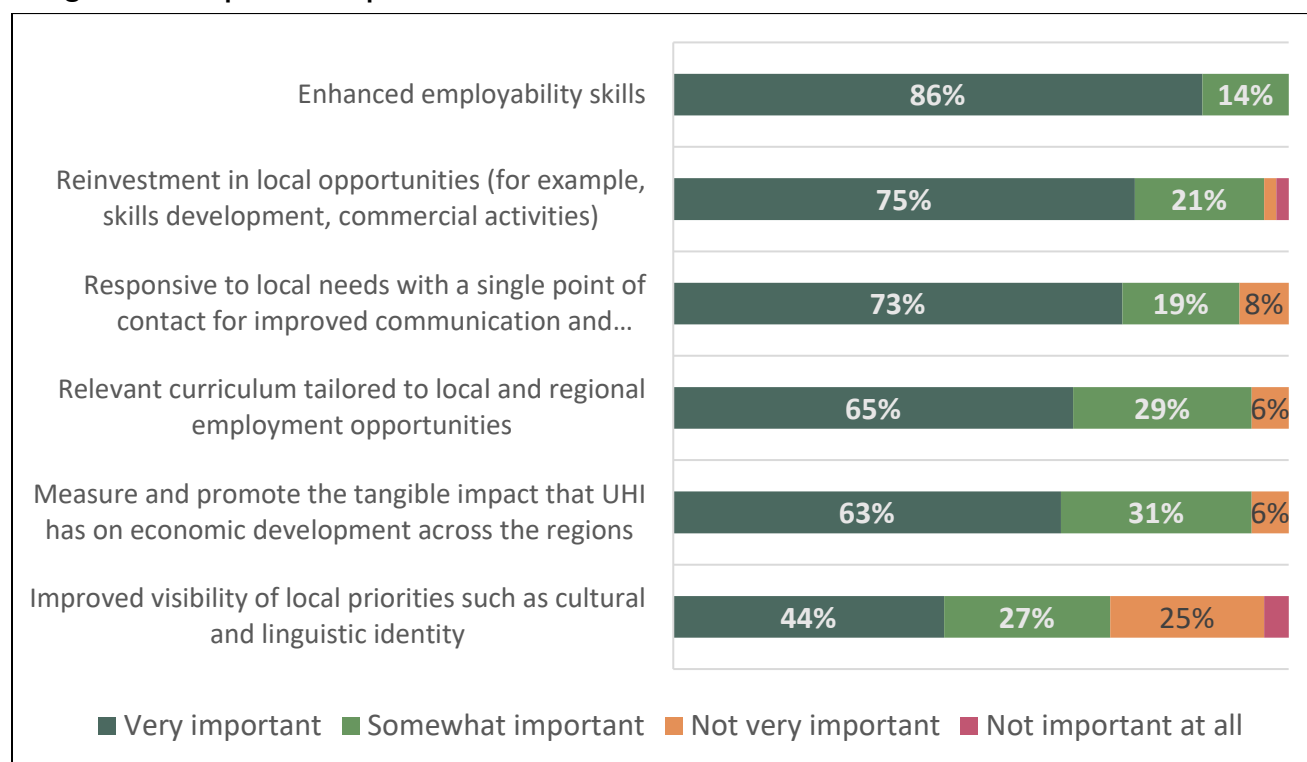


Base: Other (52)

Several respondents belonging to the 'other' category suggested additional key benefits in shaping the impact of a more integrated UHI partnership on communities.

Some felt that a more integrated partnership could **encourage and increase involvement with stakeholders, community partners and wider communities**. Others suggested that it could **allow for applied research that is responsive to the needs of the region's communities**, and draws in good practice from other similar regions:

> "This can often be done in partnership with academic and research institutions based, or active, in such regions. Given that there is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (Wester Ross Biosphere) that covers over 500,000 hectares of the region, a more effective partnership with this could bring many benefits not just for Wester Ross but the region as a whole" – ['Other' respondent].

Similarly, one respondent felt it could lead to an **improved focus on the issues facing, and needs of, young people**, thus helping to address wider social issues:

"Improved "youth" agenda. We have older generations across public agencies trying to solve youth migration / depopulation and trends aren't being addressed. Investing in Gaelic or third sector doesn't equal youth culture. ie, Does Oban have a student union?" – ['Other' respondent].

Meanwhile, one respondent believed that the key benefits outlined by UHI "are heavily couched in terms of the local" and raised that a more regional view could be taken to identify benefits across the Highlands and Islands as a whole, "not just a lot of localities stuck together".

Another respondent said they did not understand "why these benefits can't be achieved with the status quo" and felt it had "not been communicated as to why Transformation is required for the above benefits". A separate respondent did not feel that these benefits would be achieved by a merger, and saw it as "reduc[ing] staff numbers to save money but to the detriment of the students and the island community".

## 4.3 Challenges of integration

When asked whether they foresee any disadvantages or challenges with becoming a more integrated partnership, nearly three-quarters of respondents (72%) said yes. A smaller proportion (10%) said no, while 18% were unsure.

This suggests that while there is broad support for integration in other parts of the survey, many respondents are also aware of potential risks or complications that could arise during the change process.

**Figure 4.4: Do you foresee any disadvantages or challenges with becoming a more integrated partnership?**
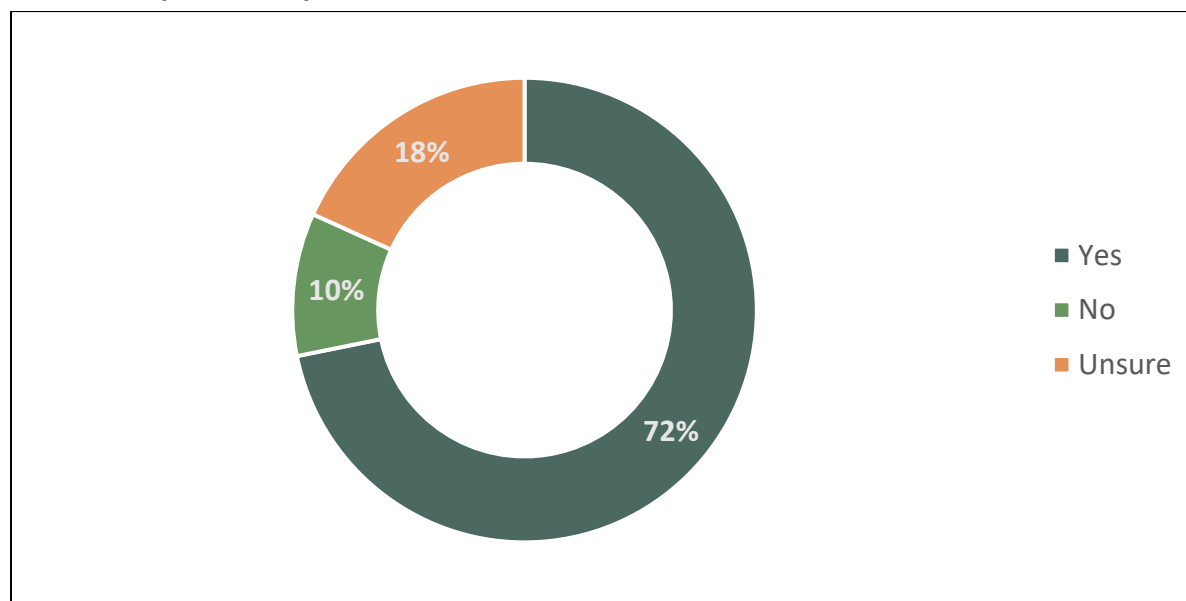


Base: Staff, Both student and staff (360)

To explore this further, respondents who selected yes were invited to provide additional information on the disadvantages or challenges they could foresee from becoming more integrated.

Many were concerned about potential for **job losses** as a result of a more integrated UHI partnership. One staff member wrote that while "integration is a good thing, [they] suspect it will uncover significant amounts of duplication which will lead to job cuts", with another noting "if we are looking at integrating systems and streamlining systems, will we need the same amount of staff on the ground at each institution".

Others raised the point that redundancies led by duplication of roles may lead to "bad feeling amongst those who lose colleagues in this process or teams that are split up, removed or relocated", depleting staff relationships and morale:

> "Where this turnover or change in staffing is to be expected in any 'transformation', this could make political issues between partners or teams, which can already be fraught/competitive, even more so" – [UHI staff].

One staff member pointed to their recent experience of the NWH merger, which led to the "loss of so many good members of staff" and were concerned about this happening again, on a larger scale and across the partnership. There were also concerns that some redundancies would be made in order "to reduce deficits that some of the partnership have accrued".

Likewise, respondents classified as both staff and students commented that integration and mergers will ultimately place people at risk of redundancy, particularly if smaller centres are considered less economically viable than larger ones.

In addition, respondents saw a **loss of local identity and lack of decision making power** at individual campuses as a disadvantage of integration.

Overall views on this loss of identity were summarised by a respondent in the 'both staff and student' category, who noted that different UHI partners have their own institutional cultures, teaching styles and ways of operating, meaning a shift towards full integration might face resistance from staff. They observed a need for UHI to strike a balance between its regional and international needs and goals, and to look closely at what model or identity will best serve students, staff and communities:

> "If UHI focuses too much on regional needs, it may struggle to attract international students and funding. If UHI leans too much into international partnerships, it may weaken its commitment to local communities. Faculty and students might feel uncertain about UHI's identity during the transition" – [UHI staff].

There were also concerns that the voices of smaller colleges could be lost or diluted by a more integrated organisation, meaning the "needs of smaller communities [are] not known and met":

> "I fear more centralisation to Inverness and Perth and less understanding of the diversity of our local communities across our geographical area" – [UHI staff].

> "Local identity and leadership could be eroded, smaller colleges could have a reduced voice, local priorities could be undermined by an integrated strategic agenda" – [UHI staff].

Similarly, some respondents worried that integration could lead to centralised decisions that do not take account of local contexts.

Moving on, several staff members and those classified as both students and staff felt that a more integrated UHI partnership could have **negative impacts on the student experience and student numbers**. A few staff members felt that that the number of students applying to, and studying at, UHI would "inevitabl[y] fall" due to the "disruption" of the integration process. One believed that a greater level of integration would cause "more confusion for students applying to courses [on] where they study", adding that such a scenario is "already happening in the UHI NWH merger".

There were fears that a more integrated partnership would increase the distance between students and lecturers, as well as other core figures like librarians and IT support technicians, having a detrimental effect on the student experience and making face-to-face support more difficult:

44

> "Students may find themselves unable to get face to face help from support staff such as librarian, IT, finance, student records if these services are centralised. At our college, the librarian is often the first port of call for students who need help with anything from curriculum to computers to a friendly shoulder to cry on" – [UHI staff].

Indeed, a respondent who is both a UHI staff member and student worried that greater integration within the partnership could bring an increased reliance on online learning, and saw this as something that students are wanting to move away from as they seek face-to-face connection and socialisation:

> "The pandemic had left our new learners not wanting to engage with the online space and if we become one then this is what we will be moving to".

Many respondents raised the negative impacts of **changes to contracts and terms and conditions** as a challenge. Some were concerned that a more integrated UHI partnership could mean "worse terms and conditions for staff if contracts are varied", with one staff member worried about "potentially less favourable pay and conditions for staff if UHI leaves the public sector and becomes a private HE institution".

Others felt there could be challenges in terms of consistency in pensions, holidays and salaries and "producing contracts that align with staff duties". Indeed, one staff member believed it could be difficult to obtain consensus on new terms and conditions "as staff who are advantaged in one respect, e.g. annual leave, will be reluctant to give this up". Another described these matters as "enormous challenges" in bringing academic partners onboard for the Transformation process.

Further responses from staff and those classified as both students and staff – on the disadvantages or challenges they could foresee from becoming a more integrated partnership – can be found in Appendix D.

## 4.4 Impact of integration

Respondents were asked whether they thought any communities or groups (such as islands communities) could be impacted by the change process. Responses were evenly split as 47% selected yes, 9% selected no and a further 45% were unsure (Figure 4.5).

**Figure 4.5: Do you think there are any communities or groups (such as island communities) that could be impacted by the change process?**
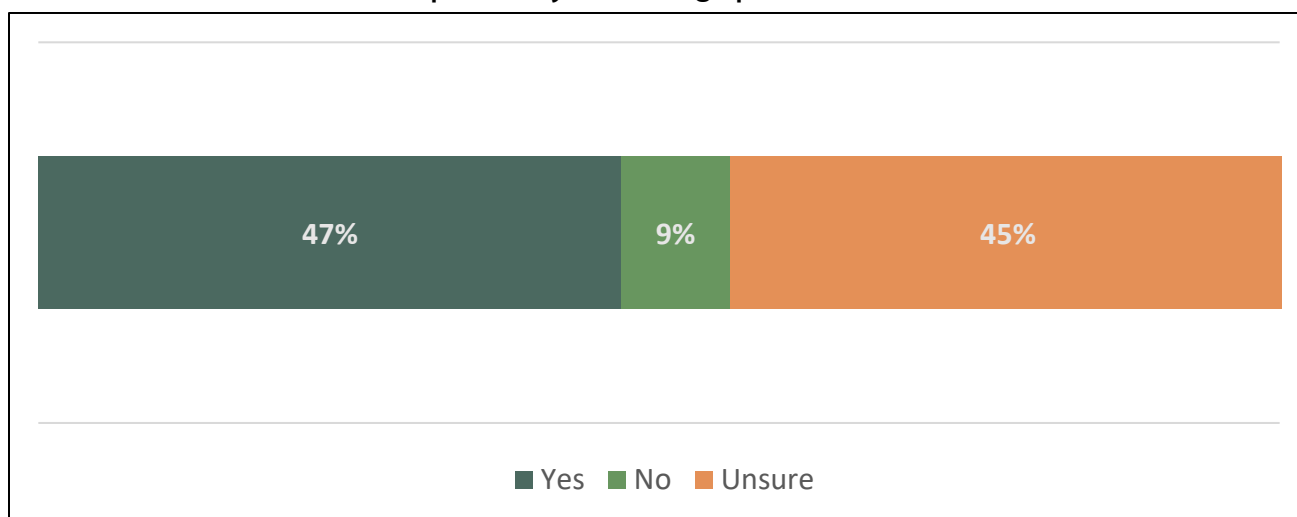


Base: All (556)

Notably, views varied by respondent type. A clear majority of staff (56%) and those who identified as both student and staff (60%) selected yes, when considering if specific communities or groups could be impacted by the change process (Figure 4.6).

Just 18% of students selected yes, with nearly three-quarters (72%) selecting unsure. In contrast, 63% of other stakeholder selected yes.

**Figure 4.6: Do you think there are any communities or groups (such as island communities) that could be impacted by the change process? By role**
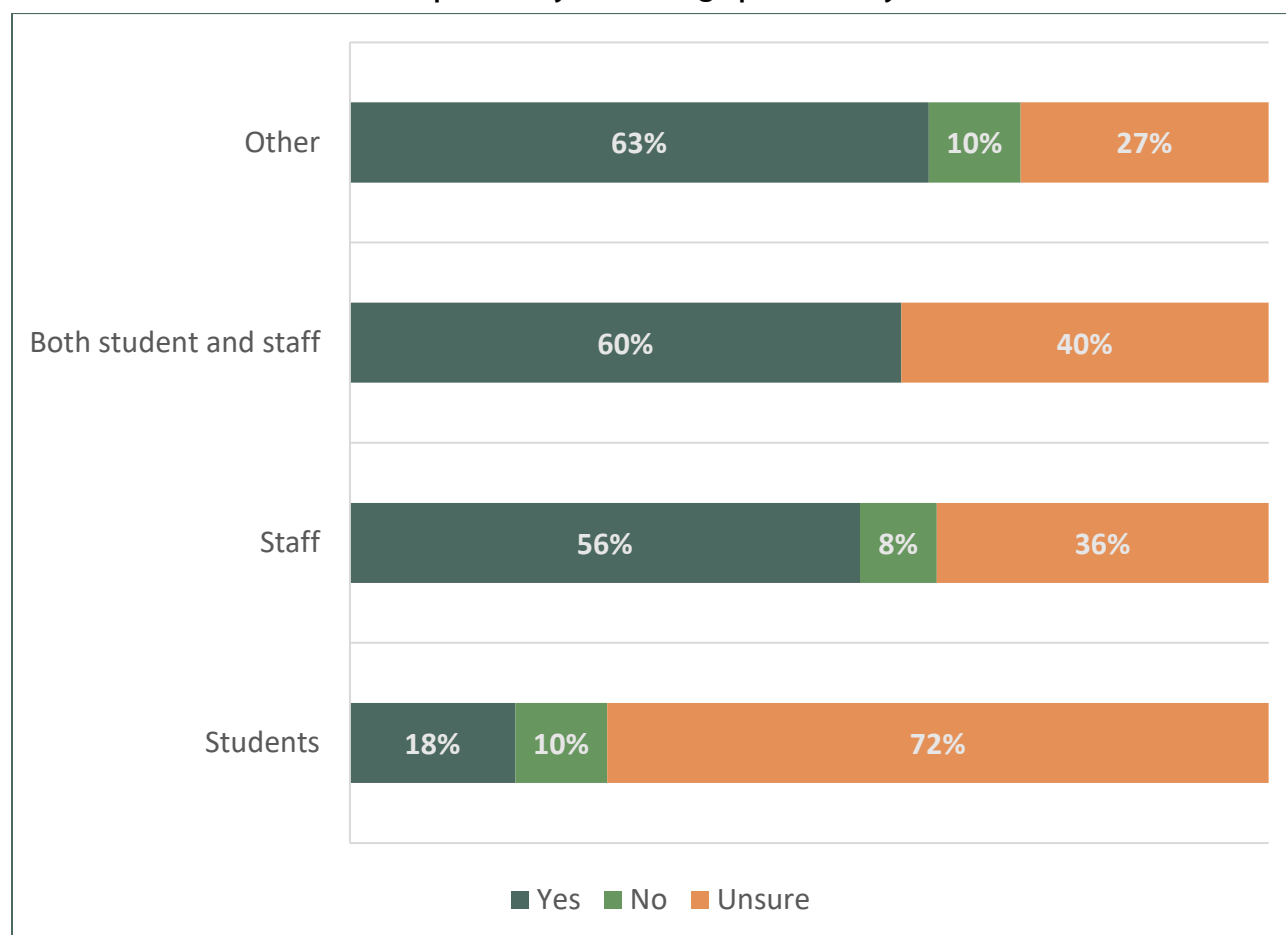


Base: Student (144), Staff (335), Both student and staff (25), Other (52)

To understand this perspective in more depth, respondents who believed communities or groups could be impacted were asked "what communities or groups do you think will be impacted and in what way?" Their responses highlight the specific populations respondents felt may be most affected, and the nature of the anticipated impacts

Respondents were highly concerned that the change process would have **negative impacts on island partners and communities**. One staff member outlined the crux of these concerns, believing that "a major risk of integration is that the offer will be centralised, taking valuable opportunities for learning and training away from island communities where it is needed most". Some staff said they work at UHI's island partners and felt that "[these partners] have different needs that are often overlooked".

Both staff and respondents classified as staff and students described how the services provided by smaller learning centres, including those on the islands, "have more impact locally" and that this

should be taken into account when deciding on changes to service levels. Indeed, one respondent who is both student and staff member at UHI was of the view that "island communities need both FE [Further Education] and HE [Higher Education] provision to sustain communities".

There were worries that island partners would "lose out" due to smaller numbers and not being financially profitable, or that staff based on the islands would face barriers to attending more centralised in-person events:

> "Also a danger that particularly island-based staff are sidelined as a result of not being able to attend in person events in Inverness/Perth- already an issue as there is no money now for travel for normal lecturing staff, as there was in the past" – [UHI staff].

Similarly, there were concerns about **the impact on rural and remote partners more generally**. One student and staff member raised how any centralisation or virtualisation of support services, including registry, student support, student records and admissions could mean that "there isn't someone on hand to help" students who are based away from centralised partners.

Several staff members believed that centralisations following restructure would disadvantage remote and rural partners from a resource and decision-making perspective, "resulting in a lot of frustration, more stress and less confidence from stakeholders in local provision in rural and island areas." One staff member highlighted that rural communities "are a key reason why UHI was created", with another noting that while rural communities may "require a lot more support", learners in these areas "need to be able to access the same level of service as those based more urban areas".

However, others discussed the **potential positive impacts of integration on the islands and smaller partners specifically**, with one member of staff suggesting that these partners "should benefit as they will receive more supports from UHI as one joint operation model".

As detailed in the graph above, respondents also considered the impact of the change process on **students**. Some UHI staff believed that the Transformation process risked a decline in enrolments from local students where they perceive "that what is on offer no longer meets local needs" and instead apply to traditional universities in cities, causing local depopulation:

> "If courses are streamlined, or removed from the curriculum, this may remove course choice for students, which could force them away from their home locations.  This might not be beneficial for either the students or the home locations" – [UHI staff]

> "Amalgamation of courses may lead to reduced local offerings of courses which may negatively impact student experience " – [UHI staff].

While some 'other' respondents were also worried about a loss of access to courses, a few staff members expressed worries that "everyday FE students" could be forgotten about in the context of the greater integration:

> "At the moment, we have a USP, as a college teaching FE, within a university. I fear a more integrated partnership would jeopardise that" – [UHI staff].

There were similar concerns that any move away from in-person teaching as part of the change process could disadvantage students with "weak IT skills" and those who need more support:

> "A surprising number of students struggle with technology such as Brightspace and Teams. They benefit from in-person teaching" – [UHI staff].

As discussed in other sections, several respondents commented on the potential impacts of the change process on **staff**. Some staff members believed that the consolidation of resources would lead to a reduction in staff numbers across the partnership – particularly in support services – and saw this as a risk factor for "resentment towards the least affected locations/departments". Relatedly, there were concerns that staff would face additional workloads "brought about by poorly thought-out or implemented changes".

Both staff and respondents classified as students and staff believed that UHI staff could feel isolated or undervalued if they have limited input into central decisions, having a detrimental impact on morale and job satisfaction:

> "I also worry that staff and in particular frontline, student-facing staff, will not be consulted or involved in any meaningful way and that this will have a negative impact on their job satisfaction and consequently on student experience and outcomes".

Numerous respondents highlighted that the change process was likely to impact **all partners across the UHI network**, as well as all **communities connected to the UHI region**. As one staff member noted, "every community could be impacted if the organisation reduces campus size and number of staff".

A staff member and student wondered if UHI might struggle to maintain an established presence in local communities amidst the Transformation process. This sentiment was shared by respondents in the 'other' category, with one highlighting the value of UHI being 'on the ground' and visible in local communities, as well as the risks tied to integration:

> "UHI (including academic partners and learning centres) is present in many communities across the region, and people in these communities often relate more directly to their local academic partner ('college' or 'tech').  However, for financial and other reasons, greater integration of all parts of UHI would appear to be desirable.  This could lead to a loss of

identity for the constituent parts of UHI, especially if principals and boards of local academic partners disappear.  It is vital that people in all communities across the Highlands and Islands (and Moray and Perthshire) feel that UHI is THEIR tertiary institution, offering opportunities and support – from apprenticeships to postgraduate research" – ['Other' respondent].

Similarly, a different respondent in the 'other' category suggested ways to mitigate this risk, stating that "UHI should be a local authority format with each partner being seen as a separate entity so that local communities [sic] voices are heard".

All local communities. The relationships with stakeholders may also be affected. There is a lack of clarity on what this will look like for each local area.

Respondents also raised that **relationship building with external localised partners** – like businesses and charities – may suffer as a result of the change process, as one staff member elaborated:

"Local charities and businesses which we work with will suffer as decision making is centralised and the importance of these relationships becomes academic as opposed to personal" – [UHI staff].

In particular, it was felt that local businesses, including those on the islands, could be negatively affected if there is a lack of local courses to drive student and graduate employment in the area. One staff member and student observed how the impact on businesses would depend on what opportunities are available and how these are offered and managed:

"A rural business looking for training or new potential student operating/living in an area 2+hours away from a college centre (for example) should have the exact same opportunities available to them as one based within one of the more urban locations" – [UHI staff member and student].

## 4.5 Conclusion

Survey responses indicated broad support for UHI's proposed integration priorities, especially those focused on improving teaching, operational excellence, and financial sustainability. However, respondents also emphasised the importance of ensuring that integration remains responsive to the needs of local communities, students, and staff across the diverse geographic region.

Most respondents recognised key benefits of a more integrated partnership, including improved student experience, enhanced staff development, and greater consistency in services. Staff also identified opportunities for stronger collaboration, shared expertise, and more coherent working practices across the partnership. However, several concerns were raised—most notably the risk of job losses, erosion of local identity, unequal terms and conditions, and reduced access to support services, particularly in rural and island areas.

Perceptions of the likely impact of integration were mixed. While some believed it could strengthen the partnership and improve efficiency, others feared negative consequences for students, staff morale, and community relationships. Respondents stressed the need to preserve what is valued locally while addressing duplication and inconsistency.

In summary, integration was viewed as both an opportunity and a challenge. To realise its benefits, respondents called for a balanced, inclusive approach that protects local distinctiveness, safeguards staff and student experience and maintains strong links with the communities UHI serves.

# 5. Engagement During Transformation

This chapter includes the results from survey questions on communication and engagement as the UHI partnership changes.

## 5.1 Engagement Channels

Respondents were asked how they would prefer to receive updates and stay engaged throughout the change process. The most preferred option were email updates, selected by the vast majority of respondents (80%)

A further 45% selected online meetings or webinars, while other communication channels were less frequently chosen. This includes website updates (26%), in-person drop-in events (21%), or social media updates (21%). Just 4% selected other methods.

This suggests that while digital communication is strongly preferred, especially via direct email and webinars, in-person and broader public channels are less commonly favoured.

**Figure 5.1: As the UHI partnership changes, how would you prefer to be kept informed and engaged with? (tick all that apply)**
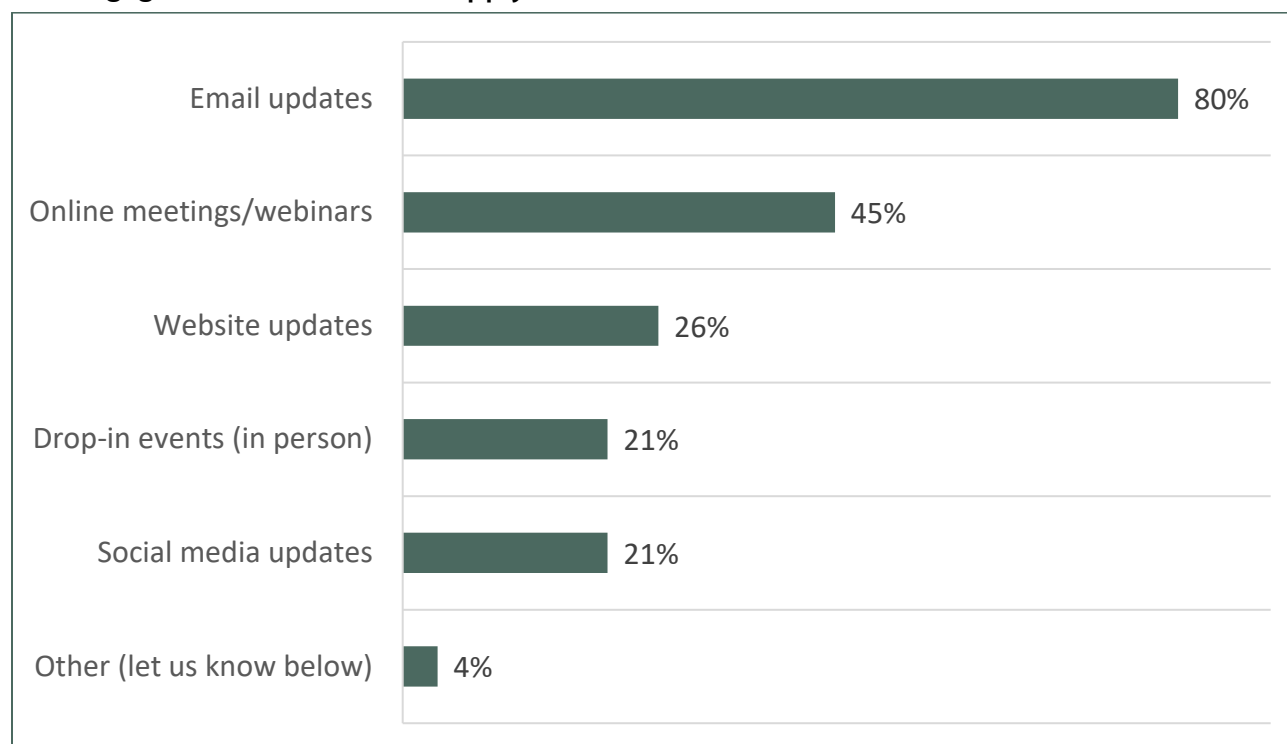


Base: All (551)

Preferred methods of communication and engagement varied by role.

Across all groups, email updates were the most popular choice, especially among staff (84%) and students (83%). Those who identified as both student and staff (68%) and those in the 'other' group (58%) also preferred this channel.

Online meetings or webinars were the second most preferred method for staff (62%) and those in the both student and staff group (48%), but were less popular among students (15%) and other stakeholders (13%).

Around half of all staff preferred to be engaged through the UHI Transformation SharePoint site (staff 56%, both student and staff 44%). Drop-in events (in person) were preferred by 36% of the both student and staff group, compared with 25% of staff, 17% of the 'other' group, and just 10% of students.

Website updates were selected by 38% of staff and around a quarter of the other groups (28% both; 27% students and other).

Social media updates were most popular among students (37%), followed by staff (32%), the 'both' group (24%), and the 'other' group (21%).

Only a small proportion selected 'other' methods: 8% of staff, 4% of students, 2% of the 'both' group, and none from the 'other' group.

This breakdown suggested that while email was the dominant communication method across all roles, secondary preferences varied, highlighting the importance of a flexible, multi-channel approach for inclusive engagement.

**Figure 5.2: As the UHI partnership changes, how would you prefer to be kept informed and engaged with? (tick all that apply)**

**Email updates**
- Staff: 84%
- Both student and staff: 68%
- Students: 83%
- Others: 58%

**Online meetings/webinars**
- Staff: 62%
- Both student and staff: 48%
- Students: 15%
- Others: 13%

**UHI Transformation SharePoint site**
- Staff: 56%
- Both student and staff: 44%

**Drop-in events (in person)**
- Staff: 25%
- Both student and staff: 36%
- Students: 10%
- Others: 17%

**Website updates**
- Staff: 22%
- Both student and staff: 28%
- Students: 38%
- Others: 27%

**Social media updates**
- Staff: 14%
- Both student and staff: 24%
- Students: 32%
- Others: 37%

**Other (let us know below)**
- Staff: 4%
- Both student and staff: 0%
- Students: 2%
- Others: 8%

Legend: Staff, Both student and staff, Students, Others

Base: Staff (330), Students (144), Both student and staff (25), Other (52)

## 5.2 Other Engagement Methods

A small number of **students** responded to an open question asking the **other ways they would like to be informed and engaged**. One cited text messages, another suggested TV adverts and a third student felt this could be achieved through constant, clear and transparent communication with HISA.

Meanwhile, several **staff** members suggested additional methods of communication or engagement. A few outlined the importance of addressing as many staff as possible, and recommended staff conferences involving Q&A sessions with leadership/Executive Office. They emphasised the significance of including sufficient time for Q&A sessions, to ensure staff feel that their views are being listened to and taken on board:

> "It's essential that you address as many staff as possible and that might be in many different ways.  Staff conferences with Q&A afterwards is CRTICAL.  Please do not address the staff and then walk away and move onto the next presenter" – [UHI staff].

One staff member suggested that these meetings be held in each campus, while another advised that meetings be scheduled at a more convenient time for lecturing staff:

> "The lunchtime meet[ing]s tend to clash with lecturing staff teaching classes which is not good planning.  How about a breakfast and coffee meeting, curriculum area meetings in the lecture theatre?" – [UHI staff].

Again, many staff stressed the need for genuine engagement with staff and the provision of honest responses. There was a sense that email updates are "easy to distribute" but can feel impersonal, and that staff would appreciate the opportunity to discuss the details of the integration process in a face-to-face manner:

> "I want online meetings where EO team give answers, not platitudes or political statements or non-answers. I want facts, figures, statistics and clear reasoning" – [UHI staff].

Some staff suggested engagement via surveys, polls and interactive FAQs. One called for a dedicated Transformation app, while another felt communication via union representatives would be useful.

Respondents who classify as **both students and staff** did not suggest any additional methods of communication or engagement. Meanwhile, a small number of **'other'** respondents answered this question. One said that they do not need to be informed, while another said they were not interested as they had "found a course [they] needed to complete for [their work] elsewhere". An

UHI alumni commented on the ways they stay informed with news and updates, perceiving that email updates are more 'glossy' or 'sanitised':

> "I receive email updates as alumnus of the university, so I am already updated, albeit in sanitised 'official version' form. I am also in regular contact with former staff members and current student members, so I also get the 'real' version of what life is 'really' like on the inside both corporately and academically". – ['Other' respondent].

Meanwhile, students were also given the opportunity to submit any additional questions or comments they had about the change process,

Many of these comments centred around a desire for more information on the changes, as one student simply asked, "What is the change process?".

Some felt that the changes mentioned "seem vague", while others stated that they were not sure 'on the specifics' and what the changes would mean for them:

> "It's hard to comment when there seems to be so much uncertainty about the changes and the extent of the changes" – [UHI student]

> "There are very few details about what the new operating model will actually mean. The points on website use a lot of jargon but don't actually 'say' much" – [UHI student].

One student said they were "confused as to what 'change' [was] being referred to in the survey", pointing to localised changes at their UHI partner as opposed to wider wholesale change:

> "In Shetland, change is due in a campus move so I have referenced to that in regards to why change effects rural communities" – [UHI student]

A few students thought that **communications on the day-to-day impacts of the changes had been poor** and **asked that UHI be more transparent with students about the change process**:

> "We know it's happening, we just want updates" – [UHI student].

Some students were wary that the change process was **driven by a need to save money, rather than a desire for genuine changes to the staff and student experience**. Meanwhile, one student was worried that the Transformation process would lead to a **heavier focus on STEM** (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) courses, reducing the opportunity to study other topics:

> "Is this change driven by economics or a desire to focus more on STEM. I'm concerned that a change in focus, towards purely STEM subjects, reduces the opportunities for students on History, Literature, Culture and Heritage degrees. Loss of excellent staff in Lews Castle College meant that I was unable to undertake specific modules" – [UHI student].

## 5.3 Conclusion

Stakeholders expressed clear preferences for how they would like to remain informed and involved throughout the transformation process. Email updates were the most widely preferred method of communication, particularly among staff and students, followed by online meetings or webinars and the UHI Transformation SharePoint site. Other methods, such as drop-in events, website updates, and social media, were less commonly selected but still held value for some groups.

Preferences varied slightly by stakeholder role, underscoring the need for a flexible and inclusive approach to communication. Direct, accessible digital channels were consistently favoured, with staff in particular showing strong interest in timely updates and opportunities for dialogue. Students showed a slightly greater preference for social media and more public-facing formats.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of using multiple communication methods to ensure that all groups remain engaged and informed. Transparent, consistent updates and opportunities for feedback will be essential to building trust and supporting participation throughout the transformation journey.

# 6. Student experience and the Curriculum

This chapter includes the results from survey questions on student experience, the curriculum and skills development.
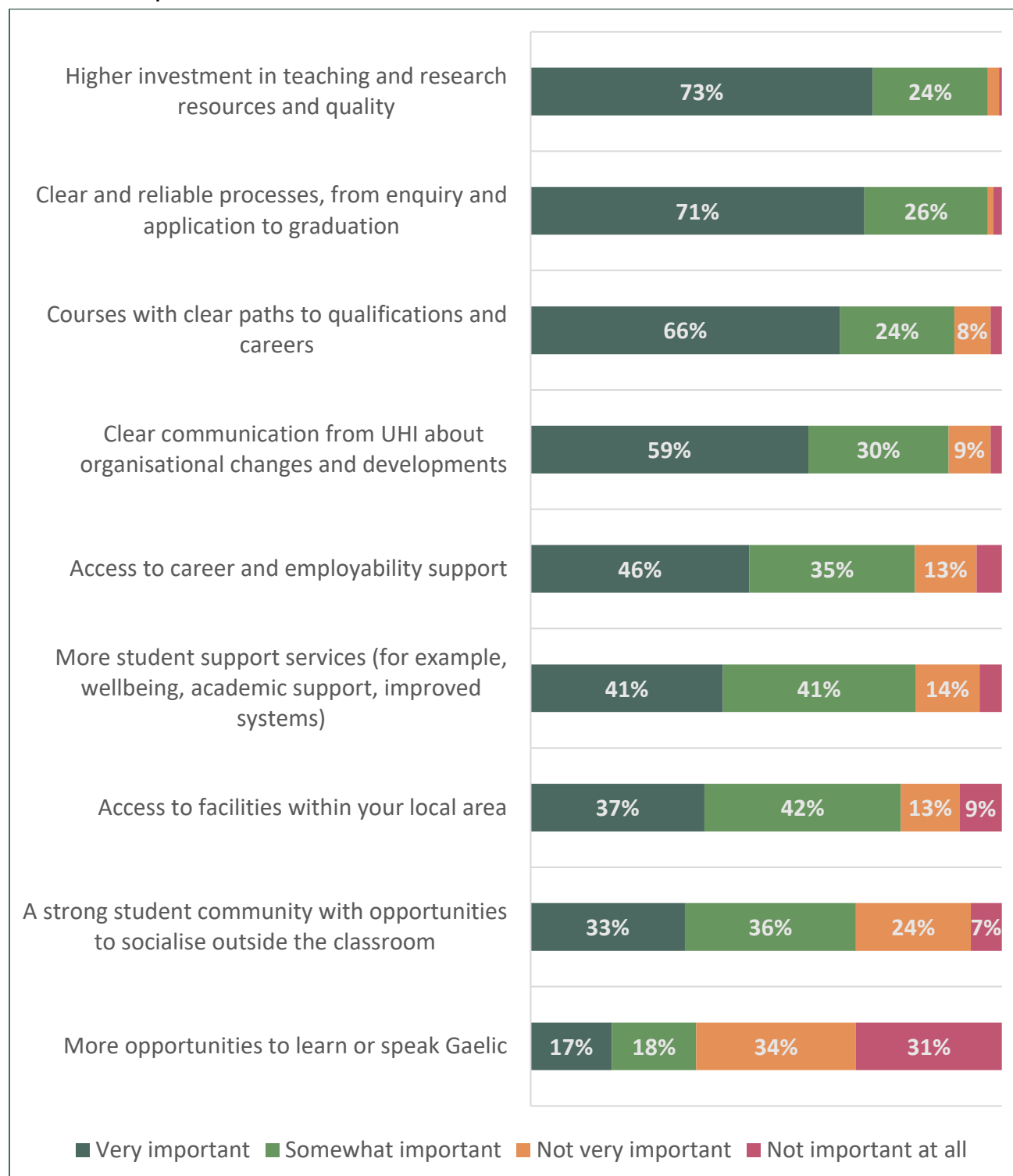
## 6.1 Student Experience

Students (Students and both student and staff) were asked how important various factors were to their experience as a student enrolled at one of the UHI academic partners. The most frequently selected factor as "very important" was higher investment in teaching and research resources and quality, chosen by 73% of respondents (Figure 6.1). This was followed closely by clear and reliable processes from enquiry and application to graduation (71%), and courses with clear paths to qualifications and careers (66%).

Clear communication from UHI about organisational changes and developments was also seen as a priority, with 59% rating it as very important. Access to career and employability support (46%), more student support services (41%), and access to local facilities (37%) received more mixed responses, though still considered very important by a significant portion of respondents.

A strong student community with opportunities to socialise outside the classroom was rated very important by 33%, while only 17% considered more opportunities to learn or speak Gaelic as very important. This latter option also had the highest proportion of students who said it was not very important (34%) or not important at all (31%).

**Figure 6.1: How important are the following to your experience as a student enrolled at one of the UHI academic partners?:**



Higher investment in teaching and research resources and quality: Very important 73%, Somewhat important 24%

Clear and reliable processes, from enquiry and application to graduation: Very important 71%, Somewhat important 26%

Courses with clear paths to qualifications and careers: Very important 66%, Somewhat important 24%, Not very important 8%

Clear communication from UHI about organisational changes and developments: Very important 59%, Somewhat important 30%, Not very important 9%

Access to career and employability support: Very important 46%, Somewhat important 35%, Not very important 13%

More student support services (for example, wellbeing, academic support, improved systems): Very important 41%, Somewhat important 41%, Not very important 14%

Access to facilities within your local area: Very important 37%, Somewhat important 42%, Not very important 13%, Not important at all 9%

A strong student community with opportunities to socialise outside the classroom: Very important 33%, Somewhat important 36%, Not very important 24%, Not important at all 7%

More opportunities to learn or speak Gaelic: Very important 17%, Somewhat important 18%, Not very important 34%, Not important at all 31%

■ Very important  ■ Somewhat important  ■ Not very important  ■ Not important at all

Base: Students (144), Both student and staff (25)

A majority of students called for **more on-campus classes and social activities**, to encourage students to connect, socialise and build relationships. Students mentioned the formative nature of the college experience and felt that more face-to-face learning opportunities, 'hang-out' spaces and on-campus activities would be useful in bringing students together:

> "While there is a convenience in the online nature of courses, I have heard people comment that they would prefer more 'on campus' classes as they don't feel able to build the same relationships as a student group online only" – [UHI student].

Similarly, many students stated that their course is fully online and felt that **more could be done to help online students feel more involved and have a greater sense of belonging**. One student observed how "there hasn't really been any social element [to their course], which is a bit disappointing". They also mentioned struggling with some elements of the course, which had "got a lot harder in the last year", signalling that they would have appreciated a greater sense of camaraderie with their course mates.

Another wholly online-based student suggested that local partners could host events for students to meet up in-person and foster a sense of community, with others sharing this sentiment:

> "I am a 100% online student; I lived in the UHI Argyll area previously, now moved to UHI NWH and have had no engagement with anyone in the centre. My degree course is taught by lecturers based throughout the network, and the students are similarly scattered across the country, and overseas. It might be useful for the local centres to occasionally host events for remote learning students so we have some sense of community" – [UHI student].

A need for **better access to lecturers and other teaching staff** was also raised, with one student asking that "appropriately qualified staff and technicians [be] on site for more than one day a week" so that students can reach them more easily. Another student felt that their experience had been "guided self-learning", adding that they "would like to benefit a bit more from the lecturers' experiences and expertise" as they had expected.

Another key theme related to the **provision of clearer guidance on course content and assessments**. One student advised having "clear course directive[s] and pathways which do not change for the duration of the course[s]", to ensure transparency. Others felt that more could be done to help students understand what is required when assessments are set, including "clear deadlines to motivate a consistent approach to applying your learning".

Further responses from students – on what they think could be improved in relation to their academic or student experience – can be found in Appendix D.

## 6.2 Curriculum and Skills

Other respondents were asked whether they agreed that UHI's current curriculum aligned with local workforce needs and provided education and training suited to current and future regional job opportunities. One third of respondents (33%) tended to agree with this statement, while a further 10% strongly agreed.

However, a notable proportion expressed reservations, with 21% tending to disagree and 17% strongly disagreeing. Meanwhile, 19% neither agreed nor disagreed, indicating a degree of uncertainty or mixed views on the relevance of the curriculum to regional job markets.

**Figure 6.2: Do you agree that UHI's current curriculum aligns with the local workforce needs and provides education and training suited to current and future regional job opportunities?**
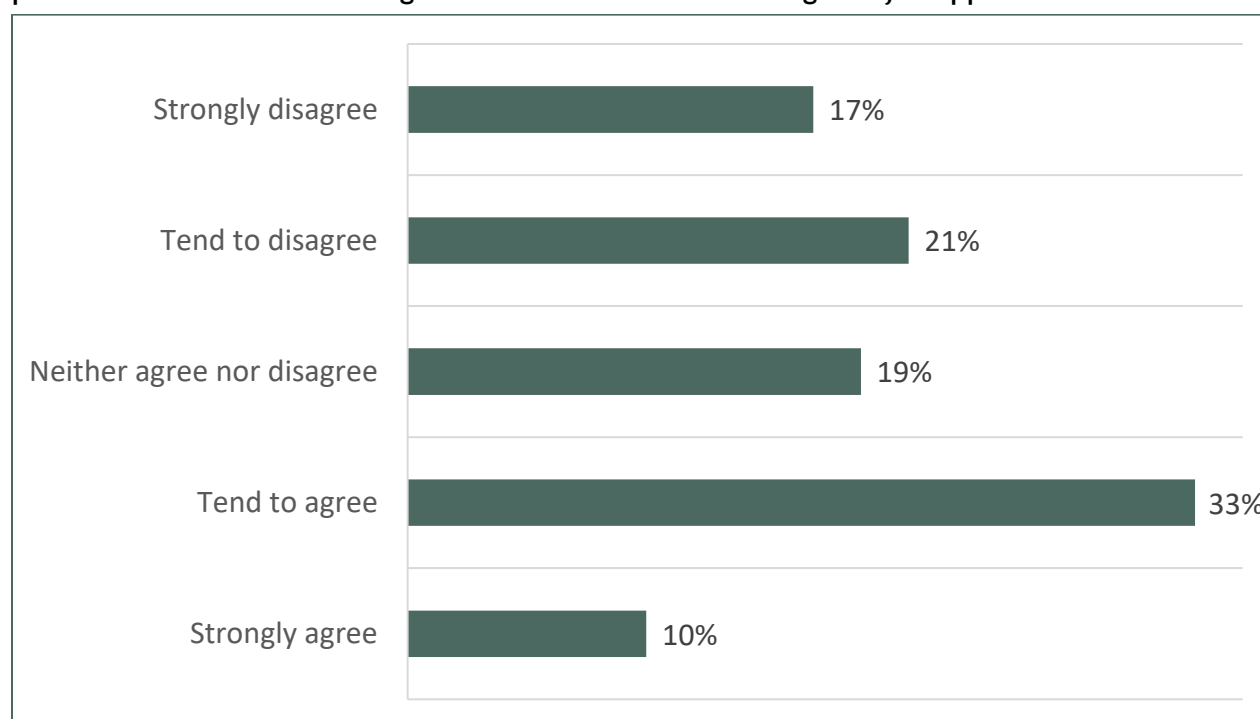


Base: Others (52)

Respondents in the 'other' category was asked to share their views on how the UHI partnership improve in ensuring its curriculum aligns with future regional job opportunities.

Several respondents felt that UHI should **improve its engagement with local employers and businesses** in order to build its credibility and reach. Indeed, one respondent commented that they "really cannot see how UHI gets involved with local job opportunities".

Another respondent advised that UHI undertake "far better engagement with grass root business, not just the great and the good" and "explain the advantages of engagement with UHI to micro and small business". Someone else suggested "a two-way process in actively working alongside HIE [Highlands and Islands Enterprise], job centres, CABs [Citizens Advice Bureaus] and other public agencies", as well as local authorities' planning services "who will have early notice of proposed developments".

Relatedly, some respondents suggested that UHI commission, or work with commercial research companies to undertake, **data gathering on future job opportunities and sector needs.** This was seen as helpful in enabling UHI to plan courses to feed into these opportunities:

> "Surveys to businesses to understand staffing and sectorial employment needs and training" – ['Other' respondent]

> "Continue to look to local drivers, workforce data etc and use this to drive change. One size does not fit all the colleges within UHI so local management and teaching staff should drive this" – ['Other' respondent].

Several 'other' respondents recommended that UHI should r**eview its courses and content regularly**, and discontinue units or modules with low numbers.

One respondent suggested that UHI "remove duplication of courses at APs", and undertake "much clearer engagement on course development", while another described UHI's current curriculum as 'bloated':

> "Curriculum is bloated. Courses become overly specialised too early" – ['Other' respondent].

Others identified **issues that can arise where curriculum are hyper-focused on local areas and regions, limiting the transferability of knowledge**:

> "Creating a curriculum too deeply rooted in any one geographical location can detract from overall quality and the need for the transmission of skills, not just snippets of knowledge" – ['Other' respondent]

> "The curriculum needs to prepare students for a wide range of skills that will give them opportunities in a future that is hard to predict - so don't be overly committed to the short term and the purely local" – ['Other' respondent].

Indeed, one respondent felt that UHI should **focus on scoping current job opportunities as well as 'future' ones**, as "awaiting the new means less or no focus on the existing".

Again, further views from 'other' respondents – on ways the UHI partnership could improve in ensuring its curriculum aligns with future regional job opportunities – can be found in Appendix D.

## 6.3 Conclusion

Stakeholders provided a range of reflections and suggestions for future research and engagement as UHI continues to develop its Full Business Case. There was a strong appetite for continued transparency and opportunities for meaningful input, particularly from staff and those directly affected by proposed changes. Many respondents called for more detailed information about the options under consideration, including their financial implications, timelines, and likely impact on staff, students, and communities.

Respondents also emphasised the need for feedback mechanisms to be visibly acted upon, with clear evidence that contributions are shaping decision–making. Suggestions included regular updates, wider consultation on specific proposals, and mechanisms to capture local insights, especially from rural and island partners.

Looking ahead, stakeholders encouraged UHI to build on this initial engagement by deepening dialogue, maintaining openness, and involving diverse voices across the partnership. Ongoing communication and co-development will be critical in ensuring that future decisions are both informed and supported by those most affected.

# 7. Recommendations for Future Research

This final chapter includes recommendations derived from our analysis and reporting of the survey, coding of Q&As, observations of engagement sessions and discussion with the contract manager. These are for UHI to consider in preparing or contracting consultation towards the FBC.

## Ensuring Clarity

Business cases and change management are areas which feature jargon and management speak. We believe it would be helpful for the team to create a glossary of terms used so that any staff, students or stakeholders unsure of terms can check these.

Furthermore, this could help clarify what UHI means, or any involved consultants mean by key terms. Even the terms Outline Business Case and Full Business Case could benefit from an overarching definition.

UHI should also continue to sense check that as far as possible any materials are in Plain English and acronyms for business terms are spelt out in full.

## Optimum Sequencing

As can be seen in report above, people engaging in sessions or replying to the survey were requesting to see the Outline Business Case before they could form their views. It is important that UHI makes any documentation, or a summary of documentation available in advance of asking for views. Even if already provided in advance, keep signposting to the documentation in case people have missed communications.

## Survey design

Organising the survey data before analysis and reporting took some time as routing was not set up for the survey. We recommend that key categories of respondent are agreed upon, question routing designed accordingly and then fully tested before issue for any upcoming online surveys. This can lead to a more efficient process towards analysis and reporting.

Routing within the one survey is also preferrable to issuing different versions of surveys for different internal target audiences as it avoids confusion.

## Engagement sessions

The two engagement sessions we attended were very well facilitated. Slides were utilised, explained and there were pauses to ask participants if any clarification was needed. It was also clear that a lot of work had been put into preparing for the session so that the partner leading could keep to the core messages but tailor their delivery. There was time for questions and answers within the sessions themselves.

Although we were not directly involved, we recommend that these types of sessions are extremely valuable to include towards the Full Business Case. We can see that these are resource intensive for UHI and we understand that more sessions were conducted than originally planned. Going forward we recommend UHI builds in enough internal or contracted resource to hold similar sessions, catering for the preparation and follow up tasks.

# Appendix A: Questionnaire

ASK ALL

1. What is your relationship to the UHI partnership?

- Student
- Staff
- Both student and staff
- Other

**STUDENT**

ASK IF Q1 = STUDENT

2. Which UHI partner are you enrolled with?

- UHI Argyll
- UHI Inverness
- UHI Moray
- UHI North, West and Hebrides
- UHI Orkney
- UHI Perth
- UHI Shetland
- Highland Theological college (HTC)
- Sabhal Mòr Ostaig
- Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS)
- Directly enrolled with the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) – including UHI Centre for History and UHI Centre for Rural Health Sciences
- Not sure

ASK IF Q1 = STUDENT

3. How important are the following to your experience as a student enrolled at one of the UHI academic partners?

- Courses with clear paths to qualifications and careers
- Higher investment in teaching resources and quality
- More student support services (e.g. wellbeing, academic support, improved systems)
- Reliable communication and clear processes from enquiry to application right through to graduation
- Strong student community and engagement opportunities to socialise with other students out with the classroom

- Access to career and employability support
- Improved support for Gaelic
- Access to buildings and facilities within your local area
- Clear communication from UHI about transformation changes and developments

SCALE: Very important, Somewhat important, Not very important, Not important at all

ASK IF Q1 = STUDENT

4.      What do you think could be improved in your academic or student experience?

TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = STUDENT

5.      Do you think there are any communities or groups (such as island communities) that could be impacted by the change process?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

ASK IF Q1 = STUDENT

6. What communities or groups do you think will be impacted and in what way?

TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = STUDENT

7.      Are there any additional questions or comments you have about the change process?

ASK IF Q1 = STUDENT

8. Please specify your questions or comments in the text box below

ASK IF Q1 = STUDENT

9. What's the best way for us to keep you informed and engaged during the UHI partnership's change process? (tick all that apply)

- Email updates
- Drop-in events
- Online meetings/webinars
- Website updates
- Social media updates
- Other (please specify) (TEXT BOX)

ASK IF Q1 = STUDENT

10. What other ways can we keep you informed and engaged?

**STAFF**

11.      Which UHI partner are you employed with?
o        UHI Argyll
o        UHI Inverness
o        UHI Moray
o        UHI North, West and Hebrides
o        UHI Orkney
o        UHI Perth
o        UHI Shetland
o        HTC
o        Sabhal Mòr Ostaig
o        Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS)
o        University of the Highlands and Islands (Executive Office)

12.      Do you agree the UHI partnership is currently delivering on its mission of having 'a transformational impact on the people, communities and economy of its regions' and incorporating its four founding principles?

- Strongly agree
- Tend to agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Tend to disagree
- Strongly disagree

13. What improvements do you think the UHI partnership should make to better fulfil its mission and uphold it founding principles?
TEXT BOX

14.      Do you agree that each of the following seven principles to enable transformation are necessary for the UHI partnership to achieve its mission?

- Enhance our ability to deliver learning, teaching and research
- Enhance student experience
- Remain geographically dispersed, delivering the educational needs of our communities
- Ensure locally led approach and empowerment for communities

- Provide greater staff opportunities
- Enhance decision making through single point accountability
- Become fully tertiary in everything that we do

SCALE: Strongly agree, tend to agree, neither agree nor disagree, tend to disagree, strongly disagree

ASK IF Q1 = STAFF

15. Are there any key principles missing that would better support the UHI partnership in achieving its mission?

TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = STAFF

16. Do you agree that these are the main priorities for the UHI partnership as it moves toward becoming more integrated?

- Teaching, learning and support to deliver a high-quality connected curriculum
- Enhancing our research & innovation impact
- Enterprise & growth, helping lead to a financially sustainable institution
- Environmental sustainability

ASK IF Q1 = STAFF

17. Are there any additional priorities that are not listed? TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = STAFF

18. As a member of staff within the UHI partnership, how important do you consider the following proposed benefits for a more integrated partnership?

- Consistent employee experience
- Opportunities for growth and professional development
- Boosting efficiency and resilience by consolidating resources and reducing duplication
- Cultivating a more positive culture
- Improved job satisfaction and recognition
- Maintaining high quality student experience
- Ensuring needs of local communities are met

ASK IF Q1 = STAFF

19. Do you feel there are additional benefits for staff not listed above that a more integrated partnership could bring?

TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = STAFF

20. Do you foresee any disadvantages or challenges with becoming a more integrated partnership?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

ASK IF Q1 = STAFF

21. Please provide additional information on the disadvantages or challenges you forsee from becoming more integrated.
TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = STAFF

22. Do you think there are any communities or groups (such as island communities) that could be impacted by the change process?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

ASK IF Q1 = STAFF

23. What communities or groups do you think will be impacted and in what way?
TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = STAFF

24. As the UHI partnership changes, how do you want to be kept informed and engaged with? (tick all that apply)

- UHI Transformation SharePoint site
- Email updates
- Website updates
- Scial media updates
- Drop-in events (in person)
- Online meetings/webinars
- Other (let us know below)

25. Please add any additional methods of communication or engagement that are not included in the question above.
TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = STAFF
26. Do you have any additional feedback you would like to include in this survey?
TEXT BOX

BOTH STUDENT AND STAFF

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STAFF
27. Which UHI partner are you enrolled with?
- UHI Argyll
- UHI Inverness
- UHI Moray
- UHI North, West and Hebrides
- UHI Orkney
- UHI Perth
- UHI Shetland
- Highland Theological College (HTC)
- Sabhal Mòr Ostaig
- Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS)
- Directly enrolled with the University of the Highlands and Islands

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STAFF
28. How important are the following to your experience as a student enrolled at one of the UHI academic partners?
- Courses with clear paths to qualifications and careers
- Higher investment in teaching resources and quality
- More student support services (e.g. wellbeing, academic support, improved systems)
- Reliable communication and clear processes from enquiry to application right through to graduation
- Strong student community and engagement opportunities to socialise with other students out with the classroom
- Access to career and employability support
- Improved support for Gaelic
- Access to buildings and facilities within your local area

- Clear communication from UHI about transformation changes and developments

SCALE: Very important, Somewhat important, Not very important, Not important at all

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT
29. What do you think could be improved in your academic or student experience?
TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT
30. Which UHI partner(s) are you employed with?
- UHI Argyll
- UHI Inverness
- UHI Moray
- UHI North, West and Hebrides
- UHI Orkney
- UHI Perth
- UHI Shetland
- HTC
- Sabhal Mòr Ostaig
- Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS)
- UHI Executive Office

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT
31. Do you agree the UHI partnership is currently delivering on its mission of having 'a transformational impact on the people, communities and economy of their regions' and incorporating their four founding principles?
- Strongly agree
- Tend to agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Tend to disagree
- Strongly disagree

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT
32. What improvements do you think the UHI partnership should make to better fulfil its mission and uphold it founding principles?
TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT
33. Do you agree that each of the following seven principles to enable transformation are necessary for the UHI partnership to achieve its mission?

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- Enhance our ability to deliver learning, teaching and research
- Enhance student experience
- Remain geographically dispersed, delivering the educational needs of our communities
- Ensure locally led approach and empowerment for communities
- Provide greater staff opportunities
- Enhance decision making through single point accountability
- Become fully tertiary in everything that we do

SCALE: Strongly agree, tend to agree, neither agree nor disagree, tend to disagree, strongly disagree

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT

34. Are there any key principles missing that would better support the UHI partnership in achieving its mission?
TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT

35. Do you agree that these are the main priorities for the UHI partnership as it moves toward becoming more integrated?
- Teaching, learning and support to deliver a high-quality connected curriculum
- Enhancing our research & innovation impact
- Enterprise & growth, helping lead to a financially sustainable institution
- Environmental sustainability

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT

36. Are there any additional priorities that are not listed? TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT

37. As a member of staff within the UHI partnership, how important do you consider the following proposed benefits for a more integrated partnership?
- Consistent employee experience
- Opportunities for growth and professional development
- Boosting efficiency and resilience by consolidating resources and reducing duplication
- Cultivating a more positive culture
- Improved job satisfaction and recognition
- Maintaining high quality student experience
- Ensuring needs of local communities are met

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT

38. Do you feel there are additional benefits for staff not listed above?

TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT

39. Do you foresee any disadvantages or challenges with becoming a more integrated partnership?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT

40. Please provide additional information on the disadvantages or challenges you foresee from becoming more integrated.

TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT

41. Do you think there are any communities or groups (such as island communities) that could be impacted by the change process?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT

42. What communities or groups do you think will be impacted and in what way?

TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT

43. As the UHI partnership changes, how do you want to be kept informed and engaged with? (tick all that apply)

- UHI Transformation SharePoint site
- Email updates
- Website updates
- Social media updates
- Drop-in events (in person)
- Online meetings/webinars
- Other (let us know below)

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT

44. Please add any additional methods of communication or engagement that are not included in the question above.

TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = BOTH STUDENT AND STUDENT

45. Do you have any additional feedback you would like to include in this survey?

TEXT BOX

OTHER

ASK IF Q1 = OTHER

47. Please provide details about your relationship with the UHI partnership (such as parent, external partner, public sector organisation, and so on).

ASK IF Q1 = OTHER

48. Which UHI partner(s) are you most associated with? (tick all that apply)

- UHI Argyll
- UHI Inverness
- UHI Moray
- UHI North, West and Hebrides
- UHI Orkney
- UHI Perth
- UHI Shetland
- HTC
- Sabhal Mòr Ostaig
- Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS)
- UHI Executive Office
- Unsure

ASK IF Q1 = OTHER

49. Do you agree the UHI partnership is currently delivering on its mission of having 'a transformational impact on the people, communities and economy of their regions' and incorporating their four founding principles?

- Strongly agree
- Tend to agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Tend to disagree
- Strongly disagree

ASK IF Q1 = OTHER

50. What improvements do you think the UHI partnership should make to better fulfil its mission and uphold it founding principles?
TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = OTHER

51. Do you agree that each of the following seven principles to enable transformation are necessary for the UHI partnership to achieve its mission?
- Enhance our ability to deliver learning, teaching and research
- Enhance student experience
- Remain geographically dispersed, delivering the educational needs of our communities
- Ensure locally led approach and empowerment for communities
- Provide greater staff opportunities
- Enhance decision making through single point accountability
- Become fully tertiary in everything that we do

SCALE: Strongly agree, tend to agree, neither agree nor disagree, tend to disagree, strongly disagree

ASK IF Q1 = OTHER

52. Are there any key principles missing that would better support the UHI partnership in achieving its mission?
TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = OTHER

53. How important are the following key benefits in shaping the impact of a more integrated UHI partnership on communities?
- Enhanced employability skills
- Reinvestment in local opportunities (for example, skills development, commercial activities)
- Relevant curriculum tailored to local and regional employment opportunities
- Improved visibility of local priorities such as cultural and linguistic identity
- Measure and promote the tangible impact that UHI has on economic development across the regions
- Responsive to local needs with a single point of contact for improved communication and engagement

SCALE: Very important, somewhat important, not very important, not important at all

ASK IF Q1 = OTHER

54. Are there any additional benefits that are not listed in the above question?

TEXT BOX

55. Do you agree that UHI's current curriculum aligns with the local workforce needs and provides education and training suited to current and future regional job opportunities?
- Strongly agree
- Tend to agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Tend to disagree
- Strongly disagree

56. How could the UHI partnership improve in ensuring its curriculum aligns with future regional job opportunities?
TEXT BOX

57. Do you agree that the UHI partnership is well-positioned to ensure that the economic and social benefits across the Highlands and Islands, Moray and Perthshire regions are met, such as fulfilling the requirements of the renewable energy transition?
- Strongly agree
- Tend to agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Tend to disagree
- Strongly disagree

58. How can the UHI partnership strengthen its position to better meet major economic opportunities in the region, such as the renewable energy transition?

59. Do you think there are any communities or groups (such as island communities) that could be impacted by the change process?
- Yes
- No
- Unsure

60. What communities or groups do you think will be impacted and in what way?
TEXT BOX

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ASK IF Q1 = OTHER

61. Are there any additional questions or comments you have about the change process?

- Yes
- No

ASK IF Q1 = OTHER

62. Please specify your questions or comments in the text box below.

TEXT BOX

ASK IF Q1 = OTHER

63. As the UHI partnership changes, how would you prefer to be kept informed and engaged with? (tick all that apply)

- Email updates
- Website updates
- Social media updates
- Dro-in events (in person)
- Online meetings/webinars
- Other (let us know below)

ASK IF Q1 = OTHER

64. Please add any additional methods of communication or engagement that are not included in the question above.

# Appendix B: Master questions (existing FAQs)

**Master questions relating to existing FAQ page sections and questions**

The following master questions relate to existing sections and questions on UHI's Transformation FAQ page. In some cases, Diffley Partnership have suggested additional master questions and themes that relate to, but are not currently answered within, existing sections – these are marked in <span style="color:red">red</span> text. UHI may wish to consider and update their FAQ page in line with this analysis.

## Why the UHI partnership needs to change and the timeline for transformation

**Why does the UHI partnership need to change?**

- Query around agreement that status quo is 'not sustainable':

    o "Partners have agreed that the status quo is 'not sustainable' – Was that unanimous? Or just a majority consensus?"

**What are the estimated timescales of the transformation process?**

- Timescale for end point:

    o "I get the impression it will take several years for the full transformation to take place particularly if we go for the one institution route. Is there a time scale for the end point?"

- Timescale for implementation:

    o Once you've got the feedback and it goes to court for approval and other processes, what's your timescale for implementation?

- How soon will impact of any changes be felt:

    o How soon will we start to feel any impact or change?"

- Question on timeframe to ensure viability and meeting the long process:

    o "The need to change is clear for efficiency and effectiveness, and specifically to ensure financial viability. This is the start of a long process. What is the timeframe to ensure viability and meeting the long process?"

**What is the Scottish Government and Scottish Funding Council's stance on this process?**

- Queries around potential difficulties in discussions with Scottish Funding Council:

    o "The approach presented today could be seen as a gradual transition toward a fully tertiary university model. However, I'd like to ask about the challenges in maintaining a clear distinction between further and higher education, particularly given that the Scottish Funding Council does not permit cross-financing between higher and further education programmes. With this gradualist approach, do you anticipate that maintaining this separation will pose difficulties in our discussions with the Scottish Funding Council?"

- Single solution preferred by Scottish Funding Council – so all partners need to be in agreement on what this is?

    o "You mentioned the SFC preference was for a single solution. Does that mean all partners need to be in agreement, or that the SFC has said they want it to be option 6?"

- To what level will the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) support us?

**What is a new 'operating model' for the UHI partnership?**

- Concerns about dismantling of UHI – is this happening?:

    o "What would cause the breakup of the UHI and are you having to plan for such an event?"

- Merger plans– questions:

    o "Where does all this leave colleagues at UHI Orkney and the other academic partners not included in the merger plans? Will we not have a two-tier university?" "What is the situation for UHI Orkney, HTC or SAMS – are they excluded from the merger?"

    o "The merger initiatives to date have followed a relatively slow process. How does the suggested transformation process address the urgent issues of the difficult financial situation in the university?"

- Mergers – is there any formed guiding principles to guide decisions around these?

    o "I'm curious, should there be mergers, as to whether there's any formed guiding principles to guide decisions. E.g. with employment terms and conditions, some academic partners have higher pay scales, some have more annual leave, etc.  Would

a guiding principle to i). align to EO, or ii). to rise each of these to the 'highest' available between merging partners, iii). find an 'average' from each partner that balances out such considerations, or something else?"

- Pre-existing merger – questions and reflections:

  - "Given that UHI North, West and Hebrides have been created through a merger, has there been an independent analysis of this merger? Including the efficiencies created and the improvements to the resources available for teaching and to the students".

  - How will we learn from the merger? What are we doing as an organisation to make sure that the changes we are putting in place as UHI NWH will be as closely aligned with the future vision of UHI as possible so that the work we are doing isn't undone with further mergers?

  - When will the NWH merger lessons learnt be available we can draw on? Has it worked/is it viewed as successful?

- Need for role rationalisation? Through centralisation or localised delivery?

  - "This suggests a potential need for role rationalisation. While it may be too early for definitive answers, should this be approached through centralisation or local delivery?"

- Principles:

  - "What does the principle about being fully tertiary mean – is that financial or academic?"

- Incorporated colleges and integration/ Incorporation:

  - "I read on the SharePoint page that UHI Shetland is not an incorporated college, does this mean we will be the first in the integration process?"

  - "Would any merged UHI college be incorporated?"

- Does one single point of accountability effectively mean one legal (and financial) entity? Current academic partners have separate legal and financial responsibilities, so looks like amalgamation into one entity?

- Do you have any thoughts on whether the university has a preferred position from a leadership perspective?

- Closer integration and maintaining local autonomy:

  - "How can we resolve the apparent contradiction between closer integration and maintaining local autonomy? Is it possible to achieve both simultaneously?"

**(DP suggestion) – Explanation of the options (between dissolution of UHI and one institution)**

- What does Option 3 involve?

- Options 4 (Use mergers to deliver a smaller number of partners) and 5 (Use mergers to create a consolidated college) – differences and why 5 was ruled out:

  - "Can you please briefly explain the difference between options 4 and 5 on the continuum and why 5 was ruled out?"

- Option 5:

  - "What might be the benefits of a single college (option 5) rather than a single tertiary institution (option 6)?"

  - "If the Scottish Parliament doesn't produce a tertiary framework that suits the Full Business Case, would option 5 be re-visited, or is option 5 completely off the table of possibility?"

- Option 6:

  - "You said option 6 was our preferred option. What are some of the other partners hoping for?"

  - "What do you see as some of the main barriers in relation to option 6?"

  - "If option 6 happens, will it impact on our further education provision or funding?"

- Decisions have been made to narrow the options from six to three. Where can we access the notes or minutes that outline the rationale behind these choices?

**(DP suggestion) – Specific concerns about mergers**

- How can you ensure that financially strong colleges do not absorb other college deficits?

  - "UHI Argyll is financially in quite a strong position, how can you ensure that we don't absorb other college deficit?"

- Are each of the partners going to complete their recovery plans before the business case is initiated? Each partner needs to sort own finances before entering into any transformation processes:

  - "Each institution should get their own house in order before they can move forward with a transformation process. Issues are often senior management issues and should be addressed first. All partners need to sort their own finances before entering into any transformation processes"

- Why would it make business sense to become one institution? If the only partner that is growing or has the potential to grow at the moment is Inverness, why would we want to weaken our position?

  - "Not knowing the figures but knowing most of the academic partners are going through some sort of restructure and/or redundancy process, I'm having difficulty understanding why it would make business sense to become one institution. If the only partner that is growing or has the potential to grow at the moment is Inverness, why would we want to weaken our position?"

**(DP suggestion) – Questions/concerns about integration**

- If we move to a single institution, will we lose our great leadership currently out there? Is the intention that there will be a new operational structure that people would apply for? Will there be roles that we'll need to apply for?

**(DP suggestion) – Questions around specific university partners**

- Could Shetland have a similar model to Orkney?

  - "If it was a full merger, it would just be six of the partners. Is there any possibility, bearing in mind local decision making and delivery, we could look at something similar to the Orkney model or specialist partners?"

**(DP suggestion) – Centralisation – concerns**

- UHI said no centralisation. But if so, what areas are being looked at as being centralised and in what form?

  - You've stated there isn't to be centralisation.  Is this about centralising everything to Inverness for example?  Is centralisation looking more at systems and processes? If so, what areas are being looked at as being centralised and in what form?

- You stated that local decision making will be maintained. How do we ensure that we don't become centralised?

- Concerns about centralisation and decision making:

  - If we do go through with a merger, governors are mainly voluntary. For Argyll, at what point do we lose our decision making?

**(DP suggestion) – Questions around funding**

- Where did the funding decreases come from?

**(DP suggestion) – How much savings need to be made at each partner?**

- Would be good to fully understand how much savings need to be made at each partner:

  - "We're seeing things in the news across educational institutions across Scotland about redundancies. There's nothing there for staff to fully understand the financial position, it would be good to fully understand how much savings need to be made at each partner. It seems strange to me where everyone is in financial difficulty except us"

**(DP suggestion) –Reinvestment of savings**

- Where are the savings likely to come from that will allow them to be reinvested?

  - "The benefits and opportunities are to be welcomed. I struggle with the line that says 'savings will be reinvested' given the financial challenges we're facing. Where are the savings likely to come from that will allow them to be reinvested?"

- How can we reinvest realised savings?

**(DP suggestion) –Questions around top slicing**

- Top slicing – queries:

  - "Will there be a breakdown of how the current top slice is used? Will there be comparisons with other institutions that have a similar system of top slicing.  To be honest the top-slice sounds a bit arbitrary. I'd like to know what the money is been used for, what are our regional strategic board using this funding as well do with it?"

- "As part of the business case, will there be a breakdown of how the top slice is used? What is the money being used for, and how does it compare to other regional strategic bodies?"

**<span style="color:red">(DP suggestion) – Questions around workstreams</span>**

- Who sits on these work streams?

- Will staff groups be created as part of the transformation process to inform the various workstreams?

**What challenges do you anticipate in implementing the new operating model, and how do you plan to address them?**

There were no new relevant questions

**How does the proposed operating model align with UHI's Strategic Plan 2030?**

There were no new relevant questions

**Which partners are involved in the development of the new operating model?**

- Who's writing the business case and is it going to tender?

- Who makes the final decision on how the systems will change and what systems and processes will look like through the transformation?

- How are recommendations made to court? What is the decision-making process and who is involved? Who ultimately makes the decision?

- Would the Scottish Government impose a solution if there was no overall decision?

**<span style="color:red">(DP suggestion) – Additional questions on voting</span>**

- If there is no voting how will the decisions be made?

  - How are decisions made if no votes are taken? Is it equitable?

- Will the models mentioned be available for scrutiny?

  - "That is the inputs/assumptions/details of the models, rather than just the results? Will economic, financial models, etc., become available for scrutiny for staff?"

- Do the academic partners who are not part of the transformation still get a vote within what the future looks like?

    o How can partners who are not part of the transformation affect decisions if not fully involved?

    o Why are partners who have a different governance arrangement allowed to vote on a new model?

**UHI Principles to enable transformation**

- Could you elaborate on point five of the Seven Principles of Transformation?

- UHI principles – enhancing single point accountability:

    o "Does one single point of accountability effectively mean one legal (and financial) entity? Current academic partners have separate legal and financial responsibilities, so looks like amalgamation into one entity?"

    o "In the UHI principles, it says it will enhance single point accountability and also retain local delivery. How do you see that balance?"

**What will be included in the Full Business Case?**

- Will the details of the financial benefits be outlined in the Full Business Case?

- How many options will it have?

- Will the preferred option be identified in Full Business Case and how will that decision be made?

**Will I get the opportunity to share my perspective on the Full Business Case?**

- What is the timeline for consultation on full business case? How can staff feed into this?

- How will the questions and queries raised during these consultations be formally recorded and considered in developing the 'Business Case'?

- How do you identify a clear preferred option without becoming overwhelmed by differing viewpoints?

**When do you expect the Full Business Case to be complete?**

- What is the timeline for full business case? And what is the timeline once the option is finalised?

**<span style="color:red">Miscellaneous (Transformation Process)</span>**

- Pensions – have impacts on pensions been discussed/considered?

- How will best practice be decided and how will it be measured?

- Will there be satellite colleges?

- Request for updates on other transformation initiatives and projects – and are these being integrated?

## Learning, teaching and the student experience

**<span style="color:red">(DP suggestion) – Proposed benefits to staff</span>**

- How will proposed outcomes for staff be achieved and measured?

  - "The proposed outcomes for staff are vague in detail, how is this to be achieved and how will they be measured?"

- How will Transformation allow for academics' career development?

- How are you planning to invest in staff development if there's no budget for teaching cover? It's tricky to take opportunities when we can't step away from the classroom.

- Will the transformation reduce the divide between research and teaching?

  - "Will it not take some time to sort out contracts so that research and teaching can be integral… this is always a stumbling block – how is the transformation dealing with this?"

- How will the UHI Transformation facilitate 'cultivating a more positive culture'?

**How will the changes impact my course of study?  Will my course be stopped?**

- My concern is that curriculum will be going down only to what gets the numbers. We offer niche subjects which don't get a lot of numbers. Are we going to strip down our curriculum?

- Will there be more of a move towards online learning so as to offer a broader curriculum to all partners?

**How have students been included in the decision-making process, given their critical role as stakeholders?**

- Can HISA have more prominence as a stakeholder in the Transformation programme?

  o "HISA have requested that they have more prominence as a stakeholder in the Transformation programme and should be considered as such by the Transition Executive Board. As the body representing students, they feel they should have more official representation and have requested that commitment from the board".

- How are academic partners speaking to students, and how they are involved in the decision-making process?

  o "It is stated that students are at the centre of decision making, but it is less clear how academic partners are speaking to students, and how they are involved in the decision-making process".

- Is engagement relatable to students? How can it be made more relatable/less jargonistic?

  o "Some of the language contains too much jargon and students can not relate to it"

- Are the students going to be invited to future consultations – as working groups?

**Will I lose any facilities from my current studies?**

There were no new relevant questions

**Can I continue studying at my chosen location?**

There were no new relevant questions

**What are the benefits to current and future UHI students? This change says that it will increase the proportion of resources spent on students, but what will this mean in practice?**

- The second principle says that it will increase the proportion of the resources that are spent on our students. How is this going to be achieved?

**<span style="color:red">Miscellaneous (Learning, teaching and the student experience)</span>**

- Will there be a further move away from FE education and more towards HE?

o   "My concern is from a student perspective. I worry that we will move further away from FE education and more towards HE.  We can call it what we like but are still a community college for very local young people".

## Staff Engagement

**What mechanisms will be put in place to ensure the staff voice is heard going forward?**

- Query about how information is being passed to those not able to be at staff engagement sessions:

    o   "For those not able to make today's session is there a second date or how do they get the same information as it is not being recorded?"

    o   "Will engagement meetings be recorded?"

- Is there an option to submit questions anonymously?

- Is there an opportunity to continue to engage? As this all needs further discussion.

- How can I get involved in the focus groups?

- How will you demonstrate that our voices are being heard, and this isn't just a tick box exercise? What assurances can you give?

**How will a new operating model affect job roles, and is there a risk of staff redundancies?**

- Reassurances sought around redundancies and restructuring in Executive Office in the immediate future:

    o   "We have been through a lot of changes ourselves in Executive Office. Will there be a reassurance that no further changes will take place in the way of redundancies and restructuring in Executive Office in the immediate future, if there is potential that this project could potentially lead for further redundancies across the partnership including Executive Office, due to streamlining services?"

- Concerns around redundancies across the piece:

    o   "Did the Outline Business Case project savings over a three to five-year period? If so, were these savings expected to be achieved without staff reductions?"

-     o   "What work has been done on calculating redundancies across the network on each of the options?"

-     o   "Merger is all about savings, we are all worried about redundancies. Will there be changes to terms and conditions and redundancies?"

- [Related to above] Will there be changes to terms and conditions?

- Is there a target staff to student ratio in the plans?

- Is the streamlining of staff likely to be progressed into the streamlining of work and processes?

- What form could potentially an optimised staff deployment across the region have, within the operational excellence context of the strategic vision 2030?

**<span style="color:red">(DP suggestion) – What are the potential changes for staff in regard to promotions, contracts and pay?</span>**

- Will you align all academic posts with national grades and allow for transparent promotion?

- Potential changes to contracts:

  -   o   "Is there a settled view on the need to change the contract of employment the existing contract?"

  -   o   "I understand that some staff across UHI are on higher education contracts rather than further education contracts. Is there a plan to transition certain staff out of further education contracts and national bargaining?"

  -   o   "[Regarding] staff and professional development, I would like to understand where that all ties in and is research a focus and consideration? We're bound by national bargaining, but can the option of staff to have a research contract like other universities be considered?"

- Can the new model provide more unified job roles and pay equity?

  -   o   "I would say that there isn't pay equity across the partnership. Can the new model provide more unified job roles and pay equity?"

  -   o   "How can we become more integrated if we can't have equity with pay scales and other conditions. I would hate for us to come out with less pay and reduced job

security. Those things need to be agreed beforehand, it wouldn't be fair for our staff if we were to be placed in that situation."

**How are you engaging with trade unions?**

- What about the Unions? What options are going to the unions? Is it all 6 or only 3?

- Have there been discussions with unions about contracts?

**Miscellaneous (Staff engagement)**

- Why are we here/being engaged? Questions sound similar to those that have been asked before

- Because of how early we are in the transformation process, I don't understand the consequences of what is being asked of me?

- Will focus groups be broken down by topic?

- Will GTCS registration cover university lecturers, if we become one university?

- Will there be a non-union panel to represent staff members who are not and do not feel represented by trade unions?

## Miscellaneous master questions

The following master questions/themes have been categorised as miscellaneous and do not appear to relate to existing sections. UHI may wish to provide responses to these questions on their FAQ page.

- How were the potential positive outcomes for staff and students arrived at?

    o "How were the potential positive outcomes for staff and students identified, if the data gathering hasn't yet begun? Was this on the basis of verbal consultations with partner leaders?"

- Availability of minutes from board/committee meetings:

    o "In terms of accountability, can the minutes of board meetings/ sub-committees be made available so that we can be informed and analyse discussion on these matters?"

- Can UHI explore/learn from the approaches of other education institutions?

- o "Are there any current operating models that operate such a wide geographic area that we can take learnings from?"

- o "How many other institutions in the UK operate with a fully tertiary structure? It might be worth exploring. Additionally, as we navigate various challenges—particularly those related to areas like differing employment contracts, which can be a significant hurdle when considering integration—should we take a closer look at how other institutions have managed similar complexities?"

- Rather than looking at what can be consolidated centrally – what from Executive Office can be shared out between the academic partners?

- Has Executive Office already made a decision on the option it would prefer?

- Are there any plans to disband the UHI Regional Strategic board?

- Will there be an option for partners to opt out?

  - o "You mentioned that some of the partners (e.g. HTC, SAMS etc.) will have the option to fully participate in discussions then decide whether they wish to opt out, once they have the full picture – is that option also available to UHI Inverness? If it becomes apparent that being part of one tertiary organisation will not benefit our students and staff, will we also have the option to opt out?"

- What are the main changes to the bill, that UHI would like to see?

# Appendix C: Topline Results

The topline results will be merged into this document.

# Appendix D: Additional Themes

This appendix outlines further emerging themes from several of the open-text questions, in addition to the core themes conveyed in the main text. These are organised by the chapter headings and subheadings.

Each section explains whether questions were open to staff, both student and staff and/or 'other' stakeholders. Points are listed for each audience, while quotes have been added to provide further illustration where appropriate.

## Chapter 3. Perceptions of Transformation

### 3.1 Current Mission

Some additional suggestions from staff, those classified as both students and staff and other respondents – on **how the UHI partnership should make to better fulfil its mission and uphold its founding principles** – are listed below.

**Additional views from staff**:

- Ensure greater accountability, particularly financial accountability of partners:

  "The transformational impact is possible because of sound management, financial accountability, the use of monitored KPIs and an innovative approach. This is not the case at other academic partners and particularly at EO where financial accountability seems to be completely lacking, leading to vast amounts of debt".

- Consider and improve staff morale – particularly in the context of possible redundancies:

  "Higher regard given to staff to try to reverse the very low staff morale that can be seen throughout".

  "Take care when making redundancy decisions of losing valuable expertise and of the toll this takes on other staff, mentally and workload-wise. It is difficult to drive transformational change when the workload burden becomes so great there is no time and/or energy for development".

- Fairer funding distribution "including vastly reduced or removed 'top-slice' which does not deliver value for money) to enable provision of a wide range of course options to even [the] most geographically isolated communities".

- Review the current funding model for universities in Scotland, including UHI:

    "I think a funding model has to be reviewed and a discussion with Scottish Government needs to be held. Universities in Scotland and across the whole of UK are struggling and it is clear that the current funding model for universities is not sustainable. However, it does not mean that one of the solutions is reduction of number of staff, as it has currently been, and not just across the UHI but other universities as this has a direct impact on teaching quality, research output and student experience".

- Increase face-to-face teaching and delivery.

- Dismantle or reduce the size of UHI's Executive Office, to free up funds and share the running of UHI across college partners:

    "As originally envisaged, UHI EO should be significantly smaller, the EO top slice decreased and the additional funding should be allocated to the academic partners who deliver the FE/ HE courses".

- Ensure accessible and high quality education is as equitable across the partnership as possible, including support and facilities for students.

- Enable further opportunities for, and investment in, research:

    "Research is one of UHI's activities that really ties UHI together as a whole, and by supporting MRes and PhD students it is also an important element of making UHI a 'tertiary' institution [...] I hope that UHI will realise that its research capacity and its (locally, nationally and internationally well-regarded) research staff are a boon to the UHI Mission and continue to support it regardless of the complications involved in the UHI Transformation".

- Develop more tertiary structures, particularly around staff contracts:

    "Using FE contracts with T&Cs agreed to fit the requirements of FE across Scotland is a poor fit for staff engaged in HE teaching. I don't think we should adopt the structures of existing universities, but some middle ground is required".

**Additional views from respondents who are both students and staff**:

- Improve internal communications.

- Improve support for staff, including "better CPD, more interaction between partnership colleges so that [they] can learn from other staff who are delivering similar courses [and] opportunities to meet other staff".

- Improve UHI's wider reputation and image:

   "My experience within the communities served by UHI is that there is quite a lot of reputational damage that needs to be turned around. I keep meeting people who used to be involved with UHI as employees or in other capacities, who have left because they perceive it to be dysfunctional – bureaucratic and lacking in effective performance management".

- Work closely with businesses to create more internships, apprenticeships, and job placement programs that align with industry needs. This includes links with main and emerging industries linked to sustainability and renewables:

   "Better links with the main and emerging industries in the area from renewables – wind and tidal energy, construction as well as tourism and sustainability. Training for participants in eco-tourism, adventure tourism, environmental projects (peatland restoration, community land ownership, reforestation) and land management should be at the top of the agenda as well as providing more traditional skills such as crofting".

**Additional views from 'other' respondents**:

- Centralise and simplify the Executive Office to reduce excessive costs.

- Improve marketing and widen scope with respect to delivering online-based courses.

- Offer affordable (not privately run) accommodation in all campuses so that students, particularly working-class young people and mature students returning to education, can join UHI.

- Ensure teaching and support staff are supported and given realistic tasks and responsibilities

- Apply research and apply findings in practical ways – publicise findings, which could include practical and sustainable ways to embed best practice in policies, strategies and service delivery.

- Be more responsive to queries and requests for information:

"Answer emails within a week, postgraduate emails I have sent have taken almost over a month to have a response. I am a prospective customer but lost my motivation because I've waited so long".

## 3.2 Principles of Transformation

Some additional suggestions from staff, those classified as both students and staff and other respondents – on **key principles that would better support the UHI partnership in achieving its mission, which they feel are missing from the existing list** – are listed below.

**Additional views from staff**:

- Ensure complete transparency and accountability in decision–making and senior management and leadership.

- Embed digital innovation and connectivity:

    "Embed digital transformation to enhance delivery of learning, teaching and research and improve business performance and efficiency".

- Ensure there are sufficient support services:

    "Sufficient support services to allow proper time spent to support growth opportunities and overall transformation".

- Be strategic leaders in the Highlands and Islands region:

    "I feel we could be more ambitious about being strategic leaders in the region.  As noted there is significant investment planned for the highlands and islands and we need to be credible actors at the table so that we can maximise the benefit to the region and maximise our potential impact and growth".

- Support students to progress from UHI as confident, empowered individuals:

    "Progression from UHI feeling confident and empowered in all aspects not just the qualification they achieve".

- A focus on improved business development strategies:

    "We need good business development strategies to come up with ways of making additional income without having to solely rely on limited funding".

- Give priority to recruitment of staff from within UHI boundaries wherever possible

- Prioritise the language and culture of Gaelic.

- Prioritise the recruitment of staff from within UHI boundaries wherever possible.

- Promote lifelong learning, including progression from FE to HE to PhD level.

**Additional views from respondents who are both students and staff**:

- Enhance employability and career pathways by embedding work-based learning and industry partnerships in all programs.

- Attract new students to UHI.

- Enhance decision-making, but with accountable decision-makers in roles at every level:

    "I do think 'enhance decision making' is crucial but I'm not sure that single point accountability is the only way to do this – having effective and accountable decision makers in roles at every level is always going to be important".

- Be faster at adapting to local needs:

    "The speed at which the institution can adapt to local needs has to be significantly improved such as perhaps a 6 month turn around for validating of new courses instead of 18 months. This put the institution at a major disadvantage in the fast paced growth following on from the freeport opportunities".

- Host 'centres of excellence" to better focus resources for some subjects:

    "Whilst I understand the need to for dispersed delivery having centres of excellence for some subjects, particularly those with larger infrastructure requirement will allow for focus of resources, economy of scale and bringing in students from outside of the immediate area".

**Additional views from 'other' respondents**

- Ensure operational efficiency, aligning course offerings with the needs of employers:

    "Understand the concept of operational efficiency and being accountable for waste. Ensure that you deliver what employers need rather than what academic staff would like to teach".

- Host 'centres of excellence" to better focus resources for some subjects:

"There is little mention of the scale of ambition. UHI is in a brilliant position to be THE place for learning, post grad studies and research if it focuses on the areas where it has strengths. Yes, fully tertiary education in general subjects for everyone who wants to study within the Highlands and Islands is a must, but without an ambition to be a centre of excellence in a number of distinct areas UHI will be a glorified tech and fall short of the vision opportunity the institution. It will sell the Highlands short if it doesn't maintain the vision".

- Ensure learning and teaching is modelled on current and relevant practices:

"The learning and teaching must be modelled on current and relevant practices. For example, childcare – your learning models and expectation[s] are not [any]where near meet[ing] the need[s] of the current sector. Your current courses including your BA in Childhood Practice are so out of touch with current on the floor practice. These current courses don't meet 1140hr changes and demands on practitioners. Be relevant!".

# Chapter 4. Perceptions of Integration

## 4.1 Priorities for integration

Some additional suggestions from staff and those classified as both students and staff – on **additional key main priorities for the UHI partnership as it moves toward becoming more integrated** – are listed below.

**Additional views from staff:**

- Centralise non-academic areas with local support.

- Ensure that all UHI partners are 'on board' and feel part of the Transformation process:

    "To become more efficient as a partnership, all partners need to get on board and genuinely believe in the change process. Otherwise UHI, as a partnership, will not succeed in the way it hopes to".

- Enhance digital learning and infrastructure.

- Improve networking of staff across the partnership.

- Increase focus on internal progression for students.

- Increase the number of fully face-to-face courses, to enhance the quality of teaching and support to students and provide social opportunities for students:

"Don't remove the local face to face teaching where numbers are enough. Nobody wants online teaching. It destroys the community feel of the colleges. It increases mental health concerns for staff and students if they are stuck at home when they could be out meeting people and making friends, especially for the students".

- Capture and monitor the full student journey to better understand student recruitment, retention and experience:

  "UHI should implement a comprehensive tracking system, supported by a user experience (UX) designer, to monitor the full student journey – from initial exposure to our marketing materials, through developing interest, applying, receiving an offer, enrolling, completing the course, and beyond graduation. This system should also include efforts to stay connected with alumni for postgraduate course promotion. Additionally, establishing focus groups would provide valuable insights into each stage of this journey. By doing so, we can better understand the strengths and weaknesses in student recruitment and retention across UHI, and identify opportunities for improvement".

**Additional views from respondents who are both students and staff**:

- Reconsider the existing 'Enterprise and growth, helping lead to a financially sustainable institution' priority:

  "The priority of "Enterprise and growth, helping lead to a financially sustainable institution" should not be a focus, Big is not always beautiful and best. Big can be clumsy and unmanageable. There will be a tipping point for the minimum size the institution needs to be sustainable plus a factor for error and margin for comfort which should be achieved, but not growth for the sake of growth and to be the biggest".

- Break down the existing 'Operational excellence as a fully integrated, sustainable and people-oriented organisation' principle:

  "'Operational excellence as a fully integrated, sustainable and people-oriented organisation' is too wide a concept and is leading the respondent down a path they are not necessarily fully happy with. Ask this question in parts. Fully integrated and people-orientated are potentially difficult to obtain together without more detail".

- Account for and respect the differences in UHI partnership areas, ensuring partnership-wide opportunities remain:

  "Taking into account how different each area the different partners covers really is – there has to be local, on the ground presence, input and knowledge at every stage. There will be

many similarities and opportunities to connect and work together, but equally the differences and unique nuances that each place has must be nurtured, respected and supported. There must remain opportunities partnership wide, and not focusing on areas where there are, for example, more facilities".

## 4.2 Benefits of integration

Some further suggestions from staff and those classified as both students and staff – on **additional benefits that a more integrated partnership could bring for staff** – are listed below.

**Additional views from staff**:

- More agile and responsive communication and decision-making:

  "A more integrated partnership would hopefully mean enhanced communication and easier decision-making".

- Improvements for research staff and students, in building research connections and maximising research opportunities:

  "For research staff (and students) in particular there could be improvements in the research environment, supporting interdisciplinary research and enabling our research community to maximise opportunities both internally and externally".

- More efficient use of resources

- Greater access to international opportunities:

  "International delivery and its income could be better shared across the partnership.  Our pooled resources would make us more competitive with southern Universities (instead of APs competing with each other, as they currently do)".

- Staff feeling supported to leverage their competencies and experience into new roles that would benefit both UHI and themselves.

- Ability for staff to move more easily between campuses/partners for career development.

- Ensure parity of pay and conditions for staff:

  "Address the different pay scales and grades used across the partnership and better transparency in recruitment and internal progression".

"Parity of conditions of employment, regardless of which college you are at".

- Greater resilience and cover during periods of leave and absence:

    "Merged teams can potentially provide greater resilience and cover during periods of leave and absence".

- Removal of the sense of territoriality between partners:

    "It will hopefully reduce the 'them versus us' attitude that occurs across the partnership, whereby important information isn't always shared and often at the detriment of both staff and students".

**Additional views from respondents who are both students and staff**:

- Improved transparency

- Staff access to vocational-related courses:

    "Being relief staff, access to the occasional vocationally related course would be welcomed".

## 4.3 Challenges of integration

Some further responses from staff and those classified as both students and staff – on **the disadvantages or challenges they could foresee from becoming a more integrated partnership** – are listed below.

**Additional views from staff**:

- The time needed to develop new structures.

- Financial costs of integration:

    "One area that concerns me is financial stability. I understand that numerous partners are in a bad situation financially. Care must be taken to ensure that courses and institutions remain financially viable. And any profit, per se, an institution makes is channelled back into it to enhance student and staff experience. And not used to prop up non target achieving courses and institutions".

- Uneven distribution of resources or roles and responsibilities.

- Unmanaged workload distribution leading to employee dissatisfaction.

- Potential difficulty in aligning different institutional cultures and work practices.

- Closure of smaller centres leading to less opportunity for rural students.

- Complex decision-making and bureaucracy:

    "Increased bureaucracy as more layers of decision-making are added".

- Uncertainty and disruption caused by the Transformation process itself, with reference to previous mergers:

    "More time spent working under an uncertain outcome. I've worked with the UHI for less than two years and am seeing what is effectively the third reorganisation. During each, there has been a disruption to development and progression while the 'decision makers' decide who is going to be making the decisions."

    "Years of reorganisation, upheaval and morale issues (as seen at NWH)"

- Fall in staff morale:

    "My main concern would be staff and job role changes/losses and the effect on morale".

- Diminished reputation among communities.

- Potential for over-rationalisation:

    "For example, integrating or cutting back services where it appears they can be streamlined, but in practice that may harm the effectiveness of the service level".

- Impact on the curriculum and the grouping of subjects:

    "Grouping of subjects that may not be a natural pairing under single point of leadership, again to cut costs".

- Lack of confidence in management to successfully deliver greater integration:

    "We have seen the NWH is a failed model.  We have also seen that EO and APs have failed in any attempt at integration or shared services to date.  This would suggest that there is no will or that the management in place are not capable of moving forward with greater integration".

- Staff wariness about integrating into what is currently EO:

    "[Staff] also are, for good reason, wary of integrating into and being potentially led by what is currently EO.  If we cannot get better at managing people, staff, outcomes or finances, what would be their incentive to lose what they already prefer?".

**Additional views from respondents who are both students and staff:**

- Integration of systems and processes can cause extra bureaucracy:

    "From experience I have seen that on many occasions attempts to integrate have been more complex and expensive by a phased approach or when diluted to appease local groups".

- A more integrated partnership may lack the subtleties of local delivery.

- Impractical for some departments to merge:

    "It is simply not practical for some departments to be integrated such as learning support and wellbeing, unless UHI Inverness were to take over the running of it from EO. There are far too many managers etc in EO and not enough worker bees".

- Impact of budget restraints and cost-cutting measures on learning and teaching resources.

- Standardisation can lead to inflexibility.

- Challenges arising from a lack of sharing information with other partners:

    "There is a culture within support roles of not sharing information with other partners about how things are done internally that could get in the way of integration".

- Less security for staff and students if sustainability is not achieved as planned.

# Chapter 6. Student experience and the Curriculum

## 6.1 Student Experience

Some further responses from **students** – on **what they think could be improved in relation to their academic or student experience** – are listed below.

- More communication between lecturers, to avoid cross-over and repetition between lecture topics and content:

"I think lecturers should tie in with each others lessons so all lecturers are informed on what we have learned and what we have still to learn. As of right now, I feel a lot of content is repeated across different lectures which limits our learning productivity".

- More live teaching and discussion of course material.

- Larger class sizes:

   "Larger class sizes – my classes have been 3 or 4 people for the last 2 years".

- More collaborative work amongst students on related courses and pathways.

- More class trips to see course elements in practice:

   "For my course (Optometry), I would like to go on trips out as a course to see different aspects of optometry like seeing surgeries and manufacturing of glasses and contact lenses. I think this would be really interesting and useful for our knowledge as we learn about this and it would be nice to see demonstrations".

- More structured practical work.

- Increased opportunities for job shadowing and placements.

- Students having access to academic advisors who know about the subject/s they are studying:

   "Having an actually-academic advisor who could act as a person who provides intellectual/ academic support. PATs are great for admin or pastoral care but mine knows nothing about subjects I'm studying and for a remote student lack of a competent person to just naturally communicate with e.g. in a short chat after a class means lacking a key feature of "collegiate" learning".

- Greater access to financial support:

   "I think there should be more access to financial support for younger students as i know it can be hard".

- Integrate existing online tools (e.g. Brightspace, Teams, MyDay, OneDrive) into a single system:

   "A very minor point: I feel there are quite a few different tools in use, which can make finding relevant information tricky (Brightspace, Teams, MyDay, OneDrive etc.) – this has been a recurring topic in discussions with other students".

- Better timetable information, made available sooner in advance of term:

    "Timetables with months in advance, not days".

- Improvements to buildings and equipment:

    "Building needs renovation"

    "Equipment. Sadly our class kept getting a room with older version of smartboards that lecturers dislike for good reasons".

- Longer campus opening hours, including opening on weekends or with access via a keycard

- More open and collaborative communication regarding the future of the college and key student milestones, such as graduation.

- Less complicated relationships between students and rest of UHI:

    "The relationship between academic partners, faculties, graduate schools and me is too complicated".

    "I think that since I begin with UHI there have been various plans and strategies to change the way the different partners interact and I don't think it's very clear for students why or who this impacts".

- More investment in specific courses and programmes:

    "More investment would be great especially in renewable energy, medical/science departments and health and social care".

    "Expand course variety, especially in emerging fields like digital technologies and health sciences. Update course content regularly to reflect industry trends and employer expectations".

- Opportunities for students to learn Gaelic from beginner level.

- Improved online library resources.

## 6.2 Curriculum and Skills

Some further views from '**other**' respondents – on **ways the UHI partnership could improve in ensuring its curriculum aligns with future regional job opportunities** – are listed below.

- Stop cutting funding to/do not abolish current departments.

- Host business start-up courses.

- Revert to face-to-face teaching.

- Increase emphasis on the teaching and learning of other languages.

- Offer more courses in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths) field:

  "It would be good if the university offered at least 2-3 more STEM degrees".

Diffley
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From many voices to smart choices