Thank you for your letter regarding the present speculation surrounding a possible merger between Abertay University and Dundee University. In that letter you have asked what the Government's position is, and if I would talk with the two Universities.

Before responding directly to your requests, it might be helpful if I gave you some of the background to this issue.

Let me start by stating categorically that there is no, and will be no, proposal to close any University or College by this Government. The unacceptable political scaremongering on this issue undertaken by the likes of Iain Gray at FMQs last Thursday should be condemned in the strongest possible terms. It is designed to exploit students, whose security on their current courses of study is absolutely guaranteed, and mislead staff, whose rights are enshrined in law.

Merger is quite a different process and one which has been a feature of Further and Higher Education delivery in Scotland for generations. To state otherwise is not only to deny history, it is to assert that delivery mechanisms once established must always remain the same, a point of view that is clearly ludicrous, particularly in these harsh economic times.

In Dundee, as in Scotland, this Government values and understands the importance of Higher and Further Education. Despite the real terms decline in the Scottish budget of £3.3 billion over the next three years, we have managed to protect and indeed enhance Higher Education funding, securing access for all based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. We have also laid out a new route for Further Education that puts learners at the centre and guarantees a place in learning or training for every 16-19 year old. Our ‘Opportunity for All’ guarantee has never before been made in Scotland.
As you know Abertay has gone through a very difficult period recently, during which there has been a considerable expenditure of public money by the Court on resolving unfortunate personnel disputes. That process also led to the resignation from the Court of some key individuals. Clearly, therefore there is a need for Abertay to consider its future actions and plans very carefully. The decision by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to suggest that a review was undertaken before the appointment of a new principal was a sensible one. It was also appropriate to seek the views of Dundee University on the matter, fully recognising that Universities are autonomous institutions, albeit ones that receive significant Government funding. However, for the record can I say that I do not believe that merger is the only possible outcome of the review process. Through the review process the Court of Abertay has the opportunity to bring forward any other productive suggestions, after discussion with other academic partners, which serve to chart a well thought-out, collaborative and focussed way forward and which convince the SFC of their position. These proposals need to be seen in the context of the regionalisation of educational delivery, which is strongly presaged in the pre-legislative paper I published two weeks ago, so I would hope that the Court would ensure that articulation from colleges as well as the development of shared services featured strongly in their suggested plans. A focus on serving the surrounding region in a joined up and co-ordinated way, and better use of the duplication in estates provision which exists within the city would be valuable platforms for any future changes.

Post 16 education and training in Scotland receives an annual investment of around £2 billion of taxpayers' money. We must get the maximum value for that investment, and that means constant evaluation of our means of delivery. I am always happy to enter into discussion with all interests involved in Universities and Colleges at every level in order that such an agenda is pursued energetically and therefore I am happy to confirm that I have today spoken to the respective Principals about these matters and I will shortly be meeting with you and Joe Fitzpatrick in your role as Constituency MSPs. I would also be happy to visit the city for a meeting with key stakeholders about these issues.

I hope this letter clarifies both the Government's position and the potential for constructive action by the Court of Abertay and that they will now undertake such action without delay.

Finally, you asked me about timescales and I am happy to confirm that if there is need for more time to consider the issues involved, I would be prepared to request that SFC takes that request into account. Nonetheless, the potential benefits and the current absence of a permanent Principal at Abertay suggest that work should proceed quickly.

MICHAEL RUSSELL
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Taigh Naomh Anndrais, Rathad Regent, Dùn Èideann EH1 3DG
St Andrew’s House, Regent Road, Edinburgh EH1 3DG
www.scotland.gov.uk