Connecting Scotland – How the Scottish Government and its agencies engage internationally

University of the Highlands and Islands

The European & External Relations Committee has invited key stakeholders to submit comments and views on the 3 questions below:

1. **Is there a clear, coherent and well-resourced strategy for European and international engagement within the Scottish Government and its agencies?**

2. **What has the Scottish Government’s international strategy achieved since its refresh in October 2012, and what has the EU Action Plan achieved since it was first published in 2009? Has the international strategy enabled “Scotland to flourish on the international stage, thus increasing economic growth for Scotland”?**

3. **What can be learnt from the approaches of other sub-state governments? In particular, how do the EU and international offices of other sub-state governments operate and what tangible outcomes do they achieve?**

The following responses are submitted from the University of the Highlands & Islands:

1. **Is there a clear, coherent and well-resourced strategy for European and international engagement within the Scottish Government and its agencies?**

Scottish Government strategy for European and international engagement is clearly stated in both the EU Action Plan and Scotland’s International Framework. There is coherent alignment across the two, with both relating to Government Economic Strategy.

UHI has been able to access and act upon the aims stated in both of these documents directly as well as through collaboration with Scottish Government agencies and umbrella organisations, particularly Highlands & Islands Enterprise, Universities Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council.

Resources have clearly been allocated towards the implementation of these strategy documents across the relevant departments, particularly Structural Funds, European Office and the European & UK Relations; staff from these departments are knowledgeable, helpful and approachable. However, given the potential for further development in this area and the impact on Scotland’s economic growth, there is perhaps an opportunity for increased dedicated resource to be deployed, with greater coordination across the various departments.
UHI’s two priorities within the EU Action Plan are European Structural & Investment Funds (ESIF) and the new Horizon 2020 Programme. Previous consultations by the European & External Relations Committee have given UHI the opportunity to express views on both of these, leading to further positive engagement with the Scottish Government and its agencies.

The paper “Scotland’s International Framework” covers all international aspects of Scotland’s engagement with targeted opportunities and links. Broadly, from an International point of view we would say there is a “clear, coherent and well-resourced strategy” though at times being a smaller institution we are priced out of participation in some of the International initiatives. The encouragement of Universities Scotland, British Council (Scotland) and SDI has provided a clearer and coherent framework for all to engage. However, we do find at times the butterfly effect means that as we are just about to deliver on an overseas initiative we find that the goalposts are moved. An example would be the interest in Africa as a Scottish partner after we have just concluded the Galloway report which provided some sound guidance for the Sector. Smaller Institutions are not in a position to engage speculatively in markets. There is an argument that larger institutions ought not to be either!

2 What has the Scottish Government's international strategy achieved since its refresh in October 2012, and what has the EU Action Plan achieved since it was first published in 2009? Has the international strategy enabled “Scotland to flourish on the international stage, thus increasing economic growth for Scotland”?

Through the advocacy of its agencies (e.g. SDI) and others a clearer picture of where Institutions can play a role is useful in setting out strategies and tactics at institutional level. SG having representation on the International Committee of Universities Scotland and SUIOG all contributed to the capacity of the smaller institution to contribute to the overall international effort.

In terms of flourishing, it has allowed the research and teaching to gain a higher international profile and brought inward investment associated with the research activities.

Its main achievement is getting us to work in a joined up manner.

The EU Action Plan has provided a valuable starting point for Scottish Government and its agencies – and the wider EU stakeholder group across Scotland – as we negotiated on the best outcome for Scotland in the new EU programmes for 2014-20, particularly ESIF, Horizon 2020 and European Territorial Cooperation. Scottish Government staff have given regular updates on Action Plan activities at Scotland Europa members meeting.
Alignment of the aims of the Action Plan with the new EU 2020 Objectives meant that detailed proposals had a clearly articulated context before moving into the more detailed process on individual programme development. Although still at an early stage, it would appear that the outcome for Scotland has been positive, with significant opportunities and funding emerging for Scottish stakeholders.

The Action Plan called for detailed tracking of key EU legislation and development, as well as a focus on areas of particular strategic interest – both of these have taken place and have been accessible to stakeholders. Furthermore, there has been considerable pro-active engagement in EU policy-making, notably in the development of the new ESIF.

Development of Energy & Climate Change and the Marine Environment, both key areas in the Action Plan, have seen considerable activity since the Action Plan was first published – again there has been advantage in having a high level, strategic starting point on which to base on-the-ground activities.

UHI has worked closely with the Structural Funds Division and Scotland Europa in these areas, participating in relevant consultations, contributing towards the development of new programmes and planning for their implementation. This has facilitated a more strategic approach to future EU engagement and funding, which will ensure that funds are more closely aligned to strategic priorities at national, regional and organisational levels.

The EU Action Plan advocated building closer relations with individual European partners. This has always been an important feature of UHI’s development, working closely with other European HEIs (eg Akademi Norr in Sweden) and networks (eg the University of the Arctic). Encouragement and support from Scottish Government staff and Scotland Europa, under the auspices of the EU Action Plan, has been appreciated.

3 What can be learnt from the approaches of other sub-state governments? In particular, how do the EU and international offices of other sub-state governments operate and what tangible outcomes do they achieve?

As members of Scotland Europa, UHI has come into contact with EU and international officers of other sub-state governments at various seminars and workshops; through our own EU project work we have also had a fair level of contact with the North Sweden and North Norway offices in Brussels, with different structures for operating at sub-state government levels.

UHI is also a member of the Highlands & Islands European Partnership (HIEP), which has 2 staff in Brussels, co-located with Scotland Europa in Brussels. They work closely with EU offices of other sub-state governments, which can be very useful when new policies, projects or initiatives are being developed – eg contact with other Transition regions when the 2014-20 ESIF were being negotiated.
Tangible outcomes are in increasing engagement in policy development, leading onto increased funding leverage in priority areas.

One area worth noting is the approach of some sub-state governments in concentrating attention and resources on key areas of success (as in the Regional Innovation Smart Specialisation Strategy) and avoiding too wide an area of interest.

However, UHI’s experience in this area is that the ‘Scotland House’ approach, with complementing input from the Scottish Government EU Office, Scotland Europa and HIEP, works exceptionally well – we benefit greatly from the services provided by this.

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