

Dear James,

The University of Aberdeen welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the work of the Cultural Commission at this early stage.

We share the Commission's view that there is already a considerable amount of exciting activity in the Scottish cultural arena but agree that there is much more that can be done.

In the following submission we have deliberately restricted ourselves to commenting from our own perspective as a university which considers contributing to the cultural life of Scotland to be a central part of our purpose. I also attach an appendix which gives an overview of our current cultural activities.

The University already plays an active and distinctive role in the cultural life of the surrounding community. It might be useful if I put on record some of the ways we do so, although I know you are aware of many of these already. These include our role:

- as custodian of some of Scotland's and the world's most important archival, library and museum collections;
- in the interpretation, research and teaching of culture or cultural subjects;
- in numerous outreach activities in schools and the community;
- as a partner, facilitator and supporter of other arts projects, most notably the annual Word Festival;
- as a source of arts and cultural expertise
- as an international community which fosters understanding and appreciation of the value of other cultures as well as our own.

It might be added that some our best young creative talent is often nurtured during their time at university, whether directly or independently of their degree studies.

Given the extent of our own role and activities, we would argue that this and other universities are amongst Scotland's leading cultural institutions. At present, however, most of that activity - especially our schools and community outreach work - is not core-funded by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council. Instead, it is carried out *pro bono* and as an 'add-on', which requires us either to divert institutional resource to its support or to secure funding from other sources in a piecemeal fashion that makes sustaining such activities year on year highly vulnerable. For example, although the University's holdings were ranked in the Scottish Museums Council's *National Audit* in 2002 as the sixth largest set of collections of international and national significance in the country, only one of our seven registered museums receives any funding support from SHEFC.

**•In the light of the professed wish of the Scottish Executive to put culture at the heart of public policy, we would urge that the relevant accountable bodies give greater recognition and financial support to the substantial contribution that universities do and could make to delivering the Executive's vision.**

In the course of this submission we hope to provide examples of how, with some additional investment, this and other universities could increase and enhance what

they are already doing with little or no core funding.

A good case in point is the **Elphinstone Institute**, which promotes the language and traditional culture of the North and North-East with very limited core support from the University, supplemented by what it can raise from year to year from the Scottish Arts Council and other public and private bodies. In partnership with local organisations and people, the Institute has promoted a range of activities and events that have been successful in breaking down barriers and fostering an appreciation of what might be termed 'low status vernacular culture', helping the local community to value and celebrate its own heritage. We would argue that (with the possible exception of the UHIMI) the work of this Institute is unique among Scottish universities.

Likewise, drawing on its unrivalled collections, the University provides in **Marischal Museum** the only permanent exhibition about the character and history of the North-East, which is located in a unique and iconic building in the heart of Aberdeen. The Museum's service to schools (along with that of the University's **Natural History Centre**) is one of the most important resources for environmental education in the region. These services are provided free to people of all ages and abilities (including 15,000 school students each year) without any local authority funding. They range from nursery school sessions to workshops for retired people, from casual visits to museum displays to credit-bearing distance-delivered courses taken by students throughout Northern Scotland, and from lectures by leading scholars to hands-on art activities for people with learning disabilities.

Arts education at school level is likely to be critical to the future success of the arts in Scotland. Through its involvement in initial and in-service teacher education the University is now well placed to contribute to the development of arts education, drawing on its particular strengths in music, literature and traditional culture.

Given the range and distinctiveness of the cultural portfolio described in our submission, we are prompted to ask how far this level of activity is matched by the rest of the Scottish university sector. Information is already available in relation to university museums [see *University Museums in the United Kingdom: A National Resource for the 21st Century* (University Museums Group UK, 2004) and *Opening doors to learning: University Museums for 21st Century Scotland* (University Museums in Scotland, 2004)], but we know of no comparable research about the sector's contribution to Scottish cultural life as a whole.

**•We would therefore recommend the commissioning of a detailed mapping exercise in the next stage of the cultural review to establish the facts.**

We would also like to suggest that, in view of the facilitating role and partnership links that universities like ours have in the cultural life of their communities, there is a strong case for our being explicitly tasked and funded to contribute to the development and delivery of cultural entitlement. This is not to suggest that local authorities do not have a major role to play in the delivery of cultural services - rather to recommend diversifying the national framework of providers. A university like Aberdeen is particularly well placed, in partnership with our local communities, to promote certain types of cultural activity, of which the work of the Elphinstone

Institute is a good example.

**•We would certainly be happy to be challenged to come up with a proposal as to how we could contribute to the development and delivery of cultural entitlement, if we were to be given (say) £500,000 a year for five years to support partnership work in this region.**

As a final point, we should like to remind the Commission that Scotland's universities have an often overlooked role in building a cosmopolitan and tolerant nation that understands and appreciates the wider cultural context of the world. Universities are global institutions that bring together students and staff from all over the world and are places where understanding and teaching others' languages and cultures is an academic activity in its own right. Some of the activities and events that grow out of that role can be of great value to Scotland's minority communities. As a local example of this I would cite the occasion when the University organised a concert of Indonesian music primarily for the benefit of our students, only to find that the audience who came were mainly members of our local Indonesian community.

I hope that these comments are helpful to the work of the Commission and look forward to contributing to later stages of your review.

Yours sincerely,

Graeme

**Dr Graeme Roberts**  
**Vice-Principal (Teaching and Learning)**

## **An Overview of Cultural Activities at the University of Aberdeen**

The purpose of this appendix is not to document every cultural event and activity at the University but to provide a flavour of the range of areas that we cover.

### **General**

In 2003 the University was active in over **500** cultural events, which attracted over **40,000** participants and involved working with over 35 different partner organisations. This is a conservative estimate and the true extent will be much greater than this.

### **Literary Culture**

The **Word Festival** began in 1999, under the direction of the Scottish writer and poet Alan Spence (now our Professor of Creative Writing), with financial support from the Scottish Arts Council and Aberdeen City Council. Now established as a significant and popular annual event, featuring a host of leading writers, it is (arguably) second in Scotland only to the Edinburgh International Book Festival. This year 6,000 adults and children took part in over 50 events. Despite this record of success, each year the University has to organise the festival without recurrent funding being in place.

In addition, the University regularly organises public readings by visiting writers and brings in foreign writers to its School of Language and Literature. The study and teaching of literature is, of course, a core academic activity in its own right.

### **Library Facilities and Collections**

The University's libraries are a major cultural resource, offering the public a range of services beyond those provided by local authority libraries. In addition, our **Special Libraries and Archives** are, in effect, custodians for the nation of a unique and internationally significant collection of printed, photographic and archival material.

### **Material Culture and Exhibitions**

The University's seven museum collections, which embrace art, anthropology, local history, archaeology, natural history, physical sciences and geology, have together been ranked as the sixth most important in Scotland. Our covering letter highlights two of these, Marischal Museum and the Natural History Centre, and their outreach activities. Significant elements of the museums' collections have been digitised and are accessible online: see, for example, [www.abdn.ac.uk/diss/historic/lemur/index.htm](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/diss/historic/lemur/index.htm)

### **Musical Performance**

Every year **University Music** organises a wide variety of public concerts and recitals at venues across the city. These regularly bring together our own musicians and international visiting artists, for whom this is often their only appearance in Scotland. Many visiting soloists also give public master-classes and workshops while here.

Among the groups supported by University Music are the Symphony Orchestra, String Ensemble, Concert Band, Choral Society (the oldest musical organisation in the

city) and the Chapel Choir. The Symphony Orchestra is the largest in Aberdeen and includes students, staff and local musicians (both professional and amateur), while the Chapel Choir's recent broadcasting credits include two appearances on *Songs of Praise* with the BT Scottish Ensemble. A number of students from a variety of academic disciplines hold choral, organ or instrumental scholarships to enable them to pursue their musical interests while at the University.

In 2005 the University is running for the first time **The University of Aberdeen Music Prize**. The winner of this international competition for new composers, run in conjunction with BBC Radio 3 and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, will receive £5,000 and the chance to have their composition premiered by the SSO. A weekend of workshops, performances and talks will be held in April to showcase the work of the short-listed composers.

Music is also an important part of the activities of the **School of Education**, which offers degree education in music, with one honours route leading to a teaching qualification. The School's staff currently includes two composers, who both work regularly with local schools to demystify the seemingly complex world of contemporary classical music.

The University recently installed a **new organ** in King's College Chapel, which was inaugurated with a recital by Dame Gillian Weir. This gives us an outstanding French instrument and a resource to stimulate interest in organ music throughout the region.

### **Theatre and Dance**

While the University is not involved in the teaching of drama or dance at conservatory level, the **School of Education** does offer degree programmes for the professional education of teachers in art, drama and music.

In terms of public performance, University supports a number of amateur student groups, who are funded through the Students' Association. These include the Student Charities Show in His Majesty's Theatre (now in its 83<sup>rd</sup> year), which raises thousands of pounds every year for local charities.

### **Built Environment**

The University, in common with other ancient universities, is the custodian of some of Scotland's most significant built heritage and sponsors displays of public art on its Old Aberdeen campus and in its major buildings.

### **Local Culture**

The activities of **Elphinstone Institute**, which promotes the language and traditional culture of the North and North East, is the subject of a separate submission by its Director, Dr Ian Russell. In addition, the University's Historic Collections include a wide, and in places unrivalled, variety of resources relating to the cultural heritage of Northern Scotland.

