

**ABERDEEN CITY
COUNCIL**

**ABERDEENSHIRE
COUNCIL**

**MORAY
COUNCIL**

NORTH EAST SCOTLAND AGRICULTURE ADVISORY GROUP

Our Ref: AK/NESAAG
Please ask for: Derek McDonald
Direct Dial: (01224) 664606
E-mail: derek.mcdonald@aberdeenshire.gov.uk

Woodhill House
Westburn Road
Aberdeen
AB16 5GB
Fax 01224 664019

Mr Mark Batho
Chief Executive
Scottish Funding Council
Donaldson House
97 Haymarket House
Edinburgh
EH12 5HD

28 September 2011

Dear Mr Batho

Expansion of land-based further education provision at SAC (Craibstone Campus), Aberdeen

I write as Chair of North East Scotland Agriculture Advisory Group (NESAAG), a cross-sectoral partnership drawn from the public and private sectors comprising three local authorities, Scottish Enterprise and HIE Moray, agriculture, forestry, food safety and environment agencies, private and industry bodies including academic and research institutions and industry and farming sector representatives.

I refer to the current provision for agricultural training and education at SAC Craibstone Campus, Aberdeen. NESAAG acknowledges and welcomes the Scottish Funding Council's exceptional budgetary provision to SAC in academic year 2010/11 by providing resources for further education from the SFC budget which enabled SAC to provide places for 16 Diploma in Agriculture students and a further 15 places in 2011/12.

Whilst this development is extremely welcome, NESAAG members, many of whom represent key land-based businesses and business organisations in NE Scotland, believe there is a very strong case for creating many more college places at the Craibstone Campus to enable the Aberdeenshire rural sector to meet the major challenges which lie ahead. The 2011 Foresight Report on the Future of Food and Farming sets out in stark terms the urgent need for agriculture to meet sharply increasing global demands for food - while at the same time adopting methods of production with fewer adverse environmental impacts.

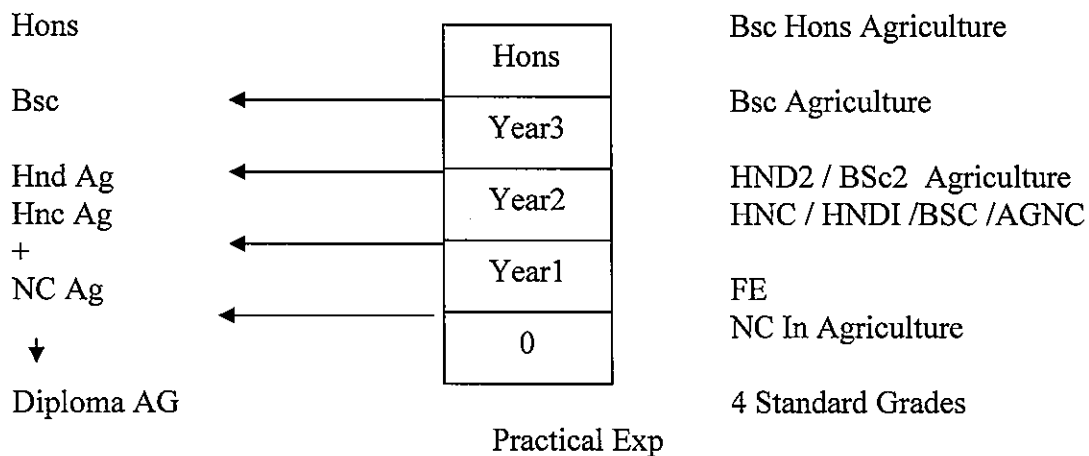
Aberdeenshire is ready to play its part in meeting those needs - indeed it already produces some 22% of Scotland's agricultural output from just 9% of its land - but in

considering possible constraints to future progress, it is clear that, in common with much of Scottish agriculture the demographic profile of its farmers and land managers is under-represented in younger age classes.

NESAAG anticipates that one of the consequences of CAP reform (post-2013) will be a more equitable deal for 'new entrants' which should lead to a welcome injection of new blood and fresh ideas into Scottish agriculture, but there is a real risk that an under provision of local college places to impart vital agricultural skills and knowledge to those young farmers could hamper the sector's ability to fully express its future potential. There is certainly no lack of interest by prospective students, as the remarkable 64% increase in applications to SAC's Craibstone Campus this year attests. NESAAG believes therefore that the current 'cap' on the number of places should be reviewed and that many more students should be allowed to study agriculture at SAC Craibstone.

The case for enhanced training and education provision in Aberdeenshire is greatly reinforced by the Oxford Economics report on Skills Requirement Forecasting in Scotland's Land-based Colleges, a very thorough and comprehensive account of the sector which was published in May 2011. The report notes (Figure 7.1 on page 72) that Aberdeenshire's high share (15%) of Scottish land-based employment is not matched by ready availability of local college places; indeed the report goes on to state in Key Recommendation 2: 'Consider specific further education land-based provision in Aberdeenshire' (p 87).

NESAAG welcomes the remarkable flexibility at the Craibstone Campus system which enables (and encourages) agriculture students to progress through the range of qualification options available to them in accordance with their abilities as follows:



However the skills shortage in the local agricultural sector often results in high-calibre Craibstone students accepting tempting offers of employment instead of progressing with their studies to achieve Higher Education qualifications – particularly to BSc (Hons) level.

Of the 19 students who successfully completed their 3rd year studies to attain a BSc in Agriculture at the Craibstone Campus in session 2010/11 (and therefore eligible to proceed to an Honours Degree), only 6 elected to do so. The remaining 13 found jobs, preferring to graduate with Ordinary Degrees. By comparison 1 graduated and 4 stayed on for Honours at SAC Ayr, while 10 graduated at SAC Edinburgh and 4 stayed on for an Honours year, confirming the relatively high demand for graduates in East and North East Scotland.

Without doubt the most striking feature of the above is the extremely small number of agriculture students in Higher Education in Scotland overall, with total numbers falling seriously short of addressing recurrent core needs for the industry before even considering the requirements for a more diversified and sustainable rural economy.

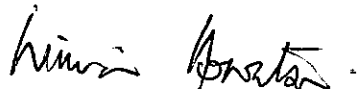
For those lucky enough to find a place, it is perhaps understandable that the more able students leave education somewhat prematurely to take up attractive employment opportunities, but it is a matter of great concern for NESAG members and for the wider land-based sector which has a high recurrent need for (extremely scarce) Honours graduates. Moreover there are excellent examples of BSc (Hons) Agriculture graduates from Craibstone Campus who have utilised their final year in education to develop specialist knowledge which has in turn provided the basis for their own innovative businesses, several of which are now flourishing.

So whilst it is certainly encouraging that SAC Craibstone students are so highly sought after, it is rather disappointing that the current skills shortage is resulting in many of Craibstone's brightest students failing to realise their full academic potential and, in consequence, depriving industry of much-needed Honours graduates in agriculture.

In conclusion therefore, NESAG welcomes the exceptional provision which the Scottish Funding Council has extended to SAC Craibstone over sessions 2010/11 and 2011/12 and would urge SFC to respond positively to

- the strong demand for college places by local students seeking to study agriculture at SAC Craibstone by creating more places in future years; and
- the needs of employers in the land-based sector for skilled and qualified recruits at all levels including Honours graduates

Yours sincerely



Cllr William Howatson
Chair, NESAG