

Staff oppose plan to merge three colleges

More than half the staff of a Glasgow college have signed an open letter opposing the city's proposed £300 million super college.

Andrew Denholm, Education Correspondent

More than 160 academics and support staff from Glasgow College of Nautical Studies (GCNS) said the move – which involves it merging with Central College and Metropolitan College – was no longer in the best interests of staff or students. The letter, to the college's board of management, states: "We are of the opinion that a merger would severely impact on our international reputation, partly by removal of the GCNS brand and partly by a diminution of the specialised maritime and engineering roles within a much larger merged institution. "The resultant identity confusion amongst potential overseas students could well result in a significantly reduced intake and consequent loss of income." The letter goes on to question whether the project, which also involves a new college estate costing up to £300m, is realistic in the current downturn. "One likely outcome in the current economic climate is the withholding of much or even all of the requested funds for the new estate," the letter adds. "If this occurs then we believe that justification for the merger evaporates since a primary objective was always the replacement of the ageing buildings."

Earlier this month, staff from Metropolitan College also expressed concerns over the merger, which would create the City of Glasgow College. Some 50 staff wrote to First Minister Alex Salmond, warning that the long-running consultation was a waste of public money and that the plans had demotivated staff and would result in a drop in educational standards. The letter also attacked plans to pay Paul Little, the principal designate of the proposed super college, £150,000 a year.

Responding to the letter from staff at GCNS, Mr Little said: "We have no plans to downgrade the specialised maritime and engineering roles within the proposed City of Glasgow College. "On the contrary, both will be strengthened through further

curriculum development, with each having its own unique identity preserved as a School of Excellence."

Richard Speight, acting principal of GCNS, said: "We are aware of the concerns of staff and will have a meeting with them next week to discuss these issues. We are still of the opinion that the merger and the building of a brand new college is in the best interests of staff and students."

However, Ronnie Smith, general secretary of the Educational Institute of Scotland, which represents many of the staff involved, said: "There remain significant concerns about the impact on job security, harmonisation of working conditions and terms, the resources available to deliver new buildings and the educational impact in terms of the range and quality of provision on offer to students."

The open letter from staff comes at a critical time for the planned merger, with the Scottish Government set to make a decision on whether to approve it on September 1. The decision has already been delayed for a month by Michael Russell, the Education Secretary, partly to allow proper consideration of opposition from teaching unions.

It is also unclear how much funding is available for the new college buildings. The project was originally earmarked for £300m, but there are now concerns this will be reduced because of the tight financial climate.

Factfile

Glasgow College of Nautical Studies is a further education college of nautical and maritime studies and a provider of marine and offshore training courses.

The college's main building is located on Thistle Street on the south bank of the River Clyde.

GCNS also offers a range of other courses including beauty, business, childcare, computing, electronics, social science, sport and leisure.

It has outreach campuses in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India and caters for more than 9000 learners every year from 35 different countries.