

## Seale-Hayne Future - by Ian Goodwin

The University of Plymouth have announced that within a restructuring plan to take the University into world-class standards, they propose to close the Seale-Hayne Faculty at Newton Abbot. This announcement has raised considerable concern with many people. So much concern that a group of previously unacquainted but worried people have come together to examine the University's proposals in detail to see if closure of Seale-Hayne is necessary.

The group, 'Seale-Hayne Future', commends the University for striving to be at the top of the University league both in education and research. We believe that this vision is entirely achievable and that in this position, the University would be a treasured asset to the Southwest region. We believe that the Seale-Hayne Faculty should be a step towards this vision.

SHF has studied the arguments and reasoning put forward by the University for restructure, specifically those relating to the Seale-Hayne faculty. There have been long and exhaustive meetings within the group, and with representatives of many involved bodies, such as: Newton Abbot Town Council, Teignbridge District Council, Devon County Council, Leading Higher Education Academics, previous Governors, solicitors, current and ex-students and staff and others. With this weight of advice and opinion, the group sincerely believe that there are major flaws in the arguments put forward by the University.

### Academic argument - FLAWED

The University uses phrases such as "academic synergies" and "interaction between cognate disciplines" in its argument for moving under-graduate teaching from S-H to the Plymouth campus. Leading academics say that even in large crowded Universities, there is minimal inter-faculty "synergy". In practice the reverse occurs. Departments look after themselves. Because they are under one roof, there is competition for resources (physical and human). The University's Plymouth campus is already crowded. At present there simply is not room for all Seale-Hayne's courses, staff and students at Plymouth, especially combined with the extra courses, staff and students from Exeter and Exmouth. This extra crowding and competition will breed resentment from all sides. Hardly conducive to the type of interaction the University is striving to achieve.

Yet the Seale-Hayne faculty was purpose built for education. It is an enviable site for study. The time at S-H is usually cited amongst leaving students as being one of the friendliest and happiest times of their lives. The site positively instils a good education, especially in land-use and allied subjects. It is set in its own glorious farmland with **immediate** access to practical land-use and research facilities. How can anyone believe that these students would be better served on these rural courses being delivered in Plymouth city centre?

Recruiting into agriculture and other land-based subjects is undoubtedly difficult in the current climate. But despite minimal marketing and investment from the University, the S-H faculty has managed to meet its targets for many years. The S-H site coupled with the name and reputation of S-H within the industry is the prime mover in drawing students to this faculty. The University plans include the merger of the departments of Seale-Hayne into other faculties within the University. SHF believes that this will **seriously damage** the potential for the University to attract students in the land-use subject area. There are many more attractive (and better known) degree providers in these subjects than the University of Plymouth. At this point in time, the country desperately needs graduates in these areas, but without the name, location and reputation of S-H, we believe that many agriculture and land-based subjects will ultimately not survive at degree level within Plymouth University.

This heralds further problems. The Duchy College (Cornwall) uses the Seale-Hayne faculty to take its foundation degree students up to degree level. Many students from Bicton and other colleges go up to Seale-Hayne to progress to degree level. These students will be lost to the region if Seale-Hayne goes.

### Financial argument - FLAWED

The costs of change will inevitably be enormous. The cost of maintaining facilities at S-H to finish current students to degree level, whilst also providing facilities to teach new students in the same subjects at Plymouth will be huge. The cost of staff redundancies and of “mothballing” S-H until a use can be found for the site will be enormous. The expense of dismantling the departments at Seale-Hayne and reassembling them at Plymouth must be added to the tens of millions that will be required to provide facilities for the extra students at Plymouth. Much of this massive expenditure is to provide facilities that already exist at S-H! Has the University really got access to this sort of money? Deputy Vice Chancellor, Peter Evans, answered that question in a recent press statement, saying, “there is nothing the University could do in any shape that would provide funding quick enough to pay for the restructuring activities”. This situation casts serious doubts on the University’s ability to deliver the restructure plans financially.

The S-H site undoubtedly needs investment to bring it up to date in today’s teaching climate. But investment at S-H would actually relieve pressures at the Plymouth site. And funds to invest in S-H could possibly be found by small-scale development of lands attached to the S-H faculty. The planning authorities would most likely view such development, allowing long-term retention of the site, favourably. So retaining and investing in the Seale-Hayne faculty could actually be a cost saver to the University and could help in financing the overall restructure. Closure will be a huge expense.

#### Industrial argument - FLAWED

Seale-Hayne was founded as an educational charity under the will of Sir Charles Seale-Hayne. It has gone through many changes and built up an enviable reputation for education and research within the industry that it serves. In taking over Seale-Hayne, the University has inherited this charity, along with its assets and the reputation. Most industries would seize upon this sort of advantage in their field and use it rather than close it down. SHF believes that the University should invest in, and develop the S-H faculty to recapture and expand upon the leading edge that it once had in education. And that the Seale-Hayne site should become a home for related projects. There are plans afoot for a centre of excellence in the region. The Government department DEFRA (backed up by the ‘Curry’ report) wants ‘model farms’. The Agricultural Economics Unit in Exeter might relish a move to Newton Abbot! The food industry needs centres for research in the region, as does LANTRA - away from Stoneleigh. Funds for these sorts of rural development projects are available through the E.U. and they should all be based at Seale-Hayne, alongside undergraduate teaching and research in the same subject areas. SHF believes that with students and researchers on site, and with a bit of effort, the “Centre of Excellence” that the region desperately needs would soon follow. Rather than closing the site down, the University would then have something to shout about.

#### Conclusion

The restructuring of the University is obviously important. All involved would wish to be associated with a “University of Excellence”. The SHF group believes that if developed and expanded, the faculty at Seale-Hayne has the potential to contribute to that excellence, but that it is **entirely** dependant upon the ‘core business’ of undergraduate education, remaining at the site. The group believes that the academic argument for closure is weak, that degree level education in these subjects will be lost if Seale-Hayne closes, that the financial arguments are flawed (and probably unachievable) and that industrially, closure is the wrong move at this point in time. Added to the enormous inconvenience to the many people involved and the disruption to the region’s economy, closure of the faculty cannot be justified.

With proper funding, opportunist planning and inspired leadership, Seale-Hayne could become a leading centre for education and research in the rural industry. Opportunities like this do not come around very often. The University should grab it whilst it is there.

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