

# All at sea

Richard Johnstone reports on Scotland's plans to create a Northern Maritime University

**A**S the Scottish Parliament holds an inquiry into Scotland's ferry services, a potentially important development in the future of Scotland's maritime industry took place in April.

The Transport Research Institute (TRi) at Napier University has won a grant of €1.6m to lead the development of the Northern Maritime University (NMU).

The three-year project is funded by the European Regional Development Fund – running until 2011 – and aims to create an institutional setting for the NMU, said Gordon Wilmsmeier, the NMU's project manager.

"The aim of the project is really to inaugurate the Northern Maritime University, rather than a specific programme. We will have a lot of preparation, pilot studies, scoping the market, speak to industry and get industry involved. This cannot be done in one day so we need a specific period to set this kind of institution up and to set the project up," he said. "It will be made easily accessible to as many people, and our programmes will be strongly developed on e-learning."

The project involves the participation of ten partners and a variety of industry stakeholders from Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden and the UK. The project includes the objective for the NMU to strengthen the maritime business sector and increase the capacity for innovation within the North Sea region's maritime industries, and to strengthen the competitiveness of European maritime education, and widen participation in tertiary maritime education through the removal of obstacles to labour, academic and student mobility.

Wilmsmeier said: "What we found out last year is that around the North Sea we have a lot of very specialised shipping and maritime port issues, and you can see that when you look at our partner structure. At Napier University we have been able to gather a lot of maritime experience, so we said we could be a centre of maritime research, and we would like to

develop TRi.

"A further reason is that we've known from industry that we have a huge shortage of well educated port business management for the North Sea region, so we thought that could be the initiative to improve that at a European level.

"What we can do is get together the networks and create a knowledge cluster between the institutes and develop some qualifications, probably at bachelor master level, that will reflect the industry's needs and will be very up to date."

A consultancy called Pantrak Transportation is, Wilmsmeier says, "a main mediator for us" to the private sector, through its managing director Gavin Roser.

Roser says that "I have operating experience in all the modes of transport, I'm not an academic, it's very much hands on".

"[This is] probably why I was invited to be the industry partner in the NMU, because I travel very extensively in Europe, which means that I'm up to date with what the reality is, so the academics don't get too academic."

He says that the work that the NMU will do is increasingly important as the industry grows in Scotland, which he is projecting at 5 per cent per annum.

"Britain used to be at the forefront of maritime, and although we have a lot of ships under the British flag now, we're very short of British seafarers, because going to sea is no longer a sexy profession. The big problem now is that we don't have enough crew to man ships. These ships on the order books today are becoming terribly complicated, and the real problem is who's going to man these sophisticated beasts. We've got to have a focus on training.

"I think we want to look at this agenda in the NMU, which will focus on port management, focus on the knowledge that the up-and-coming graduate will need to have, on the aspects of shipping, on the technical aspects of ship construction, and on the compliance of legislation."

He points to the designation of a number of shipping-related projects as



national developments in the draft National Planning Framework – enhanced access to the Grangemouth Freight Hub, the Rosyth International Container Terminal and the Scapa Flow Container Transshipment Facility – as proof of the need for the NMU. "We need to make sure that the people involved in all the ports in Scotland in the future are well qualified to do it," he said.

This was important, says Roser. "I think the NPF document is the right project, it says very strategically that we have to look forward 30 years, what infrastructure do we need to have in place to meet the demands of a competitive economy, because that NPF is all about a competitive Scotland."

The NMU will also co-ordinate qualifications across the partner universities, which is "one of the biggest challenges we are facing," said Wilmsmeier. "If you look at the structure of our partners, they are from various countries, different types of university, and we are all aware that even the extent of modules is very different in each university. But we are determined to overcome these issues and hope we can be an example of how this could be overcome in the European context."

Such a move is important, Roser adds, because "Europe's got to sing with one voice".

"The benefit of the NMU is it will bring all the countries together to help make them sing with one voice, because we have a common standard that's accepted throughout Europe, and that's the great thing. Best practice in Germany, in Denmark, in Holland, in the Baltic states, in Norway, will be brought together. Napier's very strong so there's a drive to have a common NMU standard."

The success of Napier's bid underscores the maritime potential in Scotland, says Wilmsmeier. "Scotland has a very maritime setting in its geography, and yes, it makes sense when you come from the perspective that Scotland has a great need to develop maritime transport and maritime policies. It might be a growing sector for Scotland in the future." ■