



Scottish Executive's Consultation Paper on the Merger of the Funding Councils Kilmarnock College's Response

What's in a name 'Scottish Tertiary Education'?

In some ways this is the 'least' important issue though it seems to have become the 'most' important particularly in HE. KC doesn't see itself as an FE college but as a community college providing both FE and HE. We agree with ASC line 'Funding Body for Further and Higher Education' (FBFHE) should form the basis of the title but please don't spend too much time on this issue.

Three legged stool argument

This is the key issue based on studies on change. The responsibilities of the Scottish Executive; Funding Body and institutions need to be clearly defined. Priorities for institutions must be clearly defined by Scottish Ministers following debate in the Scottish Parliament. There should be a limited number of priorities which do not change significantly over a three-year period; otherwise as at present there are too many initiatives and no real change.

The role of the Funding Body is to adequately fund these priorities within the resources available. There will of course be ongoing debates about how much change can be achieved with the resources that have been made available. The Funding Body then will require to focus on 'key' performance measures which will capture data on whether institutions are delivering these priorities. In addition quality improvement should be in the hands of colleges with a much-reduced HMIE role. The current model has lost its 'performance management' focus and we now spend hours of our time examining 'processes' ie policies and procedures rather than outputs for students. The recent shift to focus on student learning and achievement is welcome, but a major reduction in activity would both focus on what is important ie outputs and significantly reduce central costs (a key Ministerial priority at present) with the sector and inviting institutions to bid for this work eg colleges, universities, SFEU etc. There can only be top slicing with sector agreement. Otherwise 'development funds' should be allocated to the sector without bidding. This would lead to a 'leaner' Funding Council with a more focused role and fewer staff. A major reduction in costs (currently £4m for FE) could be achieved. It is worth remembering both that FE is currently operating on 68% of the resource it received in 1995/6 and that the changes in the funding formula agreed by SFEFC (without reference to the Scottish Parliament) will lead to further hidden efficiency savings of around 3/4%

There are no proposals in the new legislation to make significant savings in the new body. It seems at the very least highly questionable that institutions at the sharp end of delivery have to make significant savings but not those in the centre.

The issues of mergers in the legislation need to be clarified. If Scottish Ministers believe there are too many institutions (either FE or HE) then they need to define how many they think there should be and in what configuration ie should there be one FE college in Ayrshire or two or three as at present? Equally since there is no university in Ayrshire should there be a merger of an FE and HE provider?

Leaving it to colleges to evaluate a merger hasn't worked where one or more partners have been unwilling to merge eg Glasgow colleges. Given how unsettling merger discussion becomes for staff this issue needs to be decided and then 'put to bed'.

Whilst the merger of the Funding Councils is to be welcomed unless it is used as an opportunity to tackle the chronic under funding of FE colleges and build a tri-level model of Scottish Executive, Funding Body and institutions working together it will be a missed opportunity.