

Scottish Executive

A Changing Landscape for Tertiary Education and Research in Scotland

Response by the National Postgraduate Committee Scotland

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On behalf of the National Postgraduate Committee Scotland (NPC) I am pleased to respond to the Scottish Executive consultation, A new Complaints Landscape for Further and Higher Education in Scotland. I am grateful for the input from members who attended the NPC Scotland meeting in Dundee and also others who have fed back responses outside the meeting.

Tim Brown
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Executive Summary

The National Postgraduate Committee Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. Although we recognise the desire from the Scottish Executive to provide parity in the funding of both further and higher education when the former has been largely neglected, we strongly feel that, while trying to solve the problem in this way, postgraduates could be neglected in the process. We are highly concerned over the merger plans of SHEFC and SFEFC and we wish to question how postgraduates could fit into tertiary education as described in the consultation. We have written our response below first of all giving our key concerns about the merger plans but also our concerns over plans for Specified Tertiary Education Providers (STEPs), research funding and collaboration.

Preamble

The National Postgraduate Committee (NPC) Scotland is a charity with the aim to advance, in the public interest, postgraduate education in the UK. Further to this we have a subcommittee, NPC Scotland to deal with matters concerning postgraduates within Scotland. We organise meetings and conferences, publish best practice guidelines and seek to influence public policy on all aspects of postgraduate education. Our membership consists of affiliated student representative bodies from across the UK; we have one full-time officer, the General Secretary, and fourteen voluntary officers. We work closely with the National Union of Students and the lecturers' unions as well as other bodies relevant to postgraduate education.

Supporting Higher Education in Scotland

As an organisation run by postgraduates, we acknowledge Scotland's desire to enhance further education and the role it plays in educating and working as an important bridge in taking students towards higher education, with the hope that the consequences will allow an enhanced supply of postgraduates. However, we will continue to re-iterate our concern over the plans to unite funding policies for both further and higher education. In a previous response to the Scottish Executive on the first phase of the higher education review [1], we stated:

Further education and higher education have essentially different aims and outcomes. Further education is principally concerned with vocational training and access to further study, as important ends in themselves. Higher education, while recognising the crucial role played by vocational training, is in essence a self-transformative activity concerned with the pursuit of knowledge, the acquisition of transferable skills and personal development. There are of course overlaps, such as CPD programmes at HE level, but the core philosophies are distinct. Merging SHEFC and SFEFC would unfairly denigrate the distinct role played by further education in Scotland – it is more than just higher education at a lower attainment level.

The role, infrastructure and operations of higher education institutions are that distinct and since the major role of postgraduates is within higher education, they could be a group that are easily neglected. The approach of the proposals is very much focused on

"tertiarism", and that tertiary education is thought of as any education beyond age 16. We strongly disagree with this and see both undergraduate and especially postgraduate higher education qualifications as distinctively different in their level, and would not come under the banner of "tertiary". Postgraduate education is recognised internationally as advanced higher education, and should so come across this way within Scotland. Any attempts to classify it as tertiary could have detrimental effects on the postgraduate market.

The role of research plays a significantly important part in much of postgraduate education, and this will have significantly different implications in terms of how funding is allocated. Further to this, higher education institutions do have a diverse source of income for both research and teaching at postgraduate level, where the whole role of SHEFC will have a significant difference to that of SFEFC and there would not be a case to have the same panel concentrating on two distinctively different funding methods and types. Two dedicated councils will ensure members are representing on matters relevant to themselves. It is not reasonable for council members in higher education to be dealing with matters in further education and vice versa.

We do recognise the need for building bridges between higher education and further education. Though we will not take specific policy on this as a postgraduate organisation, we consider better alternatives to merging the two funding bodies such as a specific funding stream for joint FE and HE projects where both funding councils are key stakeholders involving appropriately appointed people. It is also possible that a joint standing committee to deal with the aspects of funding that concern both FE and HE could be organised. We would therefore ensure that any specific matters concerning further education or higher education only are dealt with in an environment where conflicting policy or funding methods between further and higher education do not coincide.

We will also take as examples specific projects that we have been involved in such as the joint funding councils initiative on Improving Standards in Research Degree Programmes. This is a specific aspect of funding unique to higher education where decision making and other policy must be formed within the higher education sector. Influence of other policy will create barriers to this and involve a sector where research degrees are irrelevant. We strongly urge to see a funding body that has the dedication and resources to initiatives such as this.

A further point we would note is that provisions for specific courses of benefit to the public sector such as teaching, medical practice and other services do require specific funding, as they are provided now. Any attempts to bring down their emphasis with all other aspects of further and higher education will be a serious detriment to where services are required. We strongly request that these specific allocations are reserved where the supply of such students is necessary.

A final point we would raise on the plans is how the employer will perceive the education provided to them. The expectations of the nature and standard of a graduate's previous education will send differing messages if infrastructure of higher education shows less strength than it has in the past due to funding spreading into the further education

sector. We are extremely concerned over the implications of these plans and what message will be delivered to the employer and whether favour will be shown to graduates from outside of Scotland.

Specified Tertiary Education Providers

Another point we identify is the fact that all higher education institutions will be given the title of Specified Tertiary Education Providers (STEPs). We notice that there is a plan here to place the ancient and chartered higher education institutions into a separate group to that of other higher education institutions (which include the post 92 sector and university colleges). It is of concern to us that institutions in the post 92 sector that have been identified as Universities with the same rights and privileges as older Universities should be classified differently. This potentially has implications that post 92 Universities will be treated differently in terms of research funding and possibly have different forms of teaching funding that will demonstrate disfavour to those institutions. Since the formation of new Universities in 1992, some institutions have attained high quality research excellence and teaching excellence that is comparable to or even of a higher standard than many older higher education institutions such that they do have research that is recognised nationally and internationally. If such institutions have research centres of such nature it is unquestionable that their funding should be considered under the same governance as that of older institutions. This we believe will cause a greater tier in postgraduate education, where newer Universities could be considered less suitable for postgraduate education. A further point we would emphasise is that the inherent divide between the pre 92 and post 92 sector is being encouraged by the higher governing bodies so that new Universities are perceived to be "over glorified colleges" and not comparable with older Universities. We question the approach of the Scottish Executive when it is trying to equalise the status of further education with higher education as to how such a move here could be also justified.

A further point we wish to note is that University Colleges and other small institutions also have an important role to play in the postgraduate sector. As small institutions they do provide avenues for some who find larger and domineering institutions not suitable for their needs. Further to this, many of the arts and other specialist subjects can only be delivered in smaller institutions. Research in these areas is becoming of increased importance, especially in light of the formation of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), where we would want to see parity in funding of such research.

Our final point we will express concern for is the criteria set for eligibility for a STEP set in clause 22 of the bill. We are concerned about the impact this will potentially have an impact to allow the private sector to begin operations. This would be a detriment to the equality of access of higher education and we wish to see that this is also considered in the context of the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) where higher education has specifically not been committed and is more importantly not appropriate to be a liberalised service in an international market.

Research Funding

Due to the unique nature of research funding being specific to higher education, we acknowledge the proposal for a statutory committee to deal with research funding. Referring to schedule 1, part 11 (1), it advises that this is only an advisory committee, which we hold strict reservation against since there will not be clear governance on

research funding comparable to that of a higher education funding council. Such a proposal also implies that research funding is a unique source of funding that has no relevance to teaching, training research students or building other infrastructure. This again could be detrimental to postgraduate education where teaching funding is not suitably allocated to support the dissemination and effective use of research in a higher education institution. The funding of research students is also unique in terms of the support provided to research students but also the training, supervision and other institutional provisions. We unfortunately do not consider this proposal as a sufficient alternative to keep higher education specific matters separate within a merged funding council.

Collaboration

We are supportive of collaboration for the transfer of knowledge and building a stronger research base in Scotland but again we see that in higher education there is still a need for a unique funding stream to support innovation, which could not be achieved by further education. Genuine development of professionals will come from higher education where we will be able to build and develop small to medium enterprises. Further education on the other hand, is playing a significantly different role and interacting with outside enterprise in a different manner due to the level at which workers will be coming out of further education. The needs and aspirations of such students are significantly different and will be dealt with in a different volume. A further point here is also that the diversity of income will be different in the case of postgraduate taught and research students in higher education.

References

1. J. Groves, Scottish Executive Review of Higher Education - First Consultation Paper, Response by the National Postgraduate Committee Scotland, <http://www.npc.org.uk/page/1031858213>.