

Scottish Qualifications Authority

Response to Scottish Executive consultation on the merger of the Scottish Further Education Funding Council and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council

Overview

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) welcomes the proposal to merge the Further and Higher Education Funding Councils. Scotland has been both innovative and forward looking in developing a strategy for lifelong learning, through collaboration between the Scottish Parliament, the Executive, and central agencies such as HMIE, SQA and the funding councils. We believe the creation of a single funding council will be a significant step in the effective implementation of this strategy and a positive development which will allow Scotland to move beyond what it has already achieved.

It will greatly assist steps to enable, enhance and extend articulated arrangements between further and higher education in Scotland. It also matches the wider shift towards stronger links and porous boundaries between the various educational sectors, from school up to university level, and between education and training.

The fundamental principles of such a merger must be:

- The centrality of the learner and their needs
- Coherence for tertiary education and training while maintaining the distinctive contribution of the various sectors
- Developing Scotland's workforce
- Quality and excellence
- Opportunity for all
- Parity of esteem
- Meeting the needs of the Scottish economy

This move will assist Scotland to continue to form the cutting edge of education and training in the UK and European context, moving ahead of our counterparts in England by strengthening a framework that is both coherent and flexible.

SQA feels that the current legislative framework supporting the funding councils is adequate, striking the right balance between sectoral and institutional independence and public accountability. Our response, therefore, outlines our particular hopes for the new body and gives some pointers as to where we believe the development of education and training would benefit from its creation.

Articulation and Coherence

Articulation between school and college, college and university and indeed, between schools, colleges and other education and training providers is an increasingly significant part of education and training in Scotland, fundamental to the lifelong learning agenda. A single body that oversees funding for further and higher education will be of great benefit to the development of a coherent framework of articulation routes and pathways, and provision that matches supply to need and demand.

It should also facilitate clearer and more flexible funding opportunities for learners, address any concerns over funding for 'non-traditional' routes and encourage colleges and universities to work together to offer the best advice and choices to the individual and employers.

Skills and workforce development is as important as academic progression, and the new body will need to drive this agenda across the post-school educational sectors. The new body must be equally attentive in its stewardship of both research *and* skills development. Basic skills (in particular literacy and numeracy) are of vital importance to Scotland, but there are a range of skills needs and issues from the elementary to the sophisticated that make up the skills agenda. To ensure its central importance to the work of the unified funding council, we would recommend that the Executive consider creating, as a counterpart to the existing Research committee, a Skills committee that can oversee the mechanisms for advancing, promoting and developing skills in Scottish education and training.

We would hope that the new body will work with others to strengthen, formalise and clarify progression routes from Higher National provision to degrees. HN is an important link in the lifelong learning system in Scotland, and has an excellent track record with regards to value for money. While maintaining its deserved reputation for quality and meeting the needs of users, the unit cost of Higher national courses is substantially less than that for degrees – therefore there is a clear public interest in making the most of this provision. A further example of enhanced articulation is that of 'advanced standing' for Advanced Higher. 'Advanced standing' describes a situation where relevant Advanced Higher courses give a student credit in whole or in part towards the first year of a degree – a potential saving of both time and money for student, institution and funder. Exploring further this idea and its merits should be a priority for the new body.

Underpinning the issue of clear progression is the importance of identifying and mapping between levels, in which working with Colleges and Universities will be particularly important. SQA hopes that the new body will support and realise the potential of the SCQF as a mechanism for articulation across and between modes, levels and sectors, and work with all providers in education and training to realise its value.

Finally, we are aware that the current arrangements for student finance are split between further and higher education, with SFEFC having responsibility for bursary funds available to college students and the Student Awards Agency having responsibility for funding university students. In the spirit of greater coherence and 'joining-up' of the system we feel it would be worthwhile to explore the possibility of a single agency to oversee student finance in Scotland.

Integrating Further, Higher and Vocational Education and Training

The creation of a single funding body would be a significant step toward a more coherent and integrated system of education and training. In England, the Learning and Skills Council has responsibility for workforce and further education, (devolved to regional level) where the possibility of a coherent, strategic view of development is greatly enhanced.

A national body with this wider scope in Scotland would deal with a population roughly equivalent to one of the larger English regions, yet with the ability to link directly with other national institutions to co-operate in forming a coherent funding framework for post-school education and skills development. In uniting education and training, Scotland would take a step beyond the model being practised in England, where there can be tensions between regional and national priorities that can hinder wider planning and strategic development, and also result in variation between regions.

A nationally constituted body in Scotland could work directly with the Parliament, the Executive and others in bringing skills more fully into the education and training agenda and promoting parity of esteem and opportunity between academic and vocational provision. The Executive should also explore the benefits, efficiencies and synergies implicit in adding the responsibility for funding volume training and New Deal to the duties of a single funding council. This would give the Scottish system of post-school education and training genuine coherence, and policymakers and educational leaders the ability to think laterally across sectors in developing strategies.

Expanding Degree Level Education

Scotland is fortunate in that Higher National and degree provision offer a wide range of choice and of a quality, recognised by individuals, employers and increasingly in international markets (such as China). However, we believe that there may be scope for further development of post-HN vocational degrees completed through part-time study, linked strongly to occupational competencies and standards. As recent discussions held by SACCA and Scottish universities indicate, this area has also been identified by others in Scotland, with the idea of developing a Bachelor's degree to fill the gap. We believe that such degrees should be awarded by SQA and delivered through colleges, where the existing infrastructure developed for Higher National provision gives a firm and cost-effective basis for development.

The Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) degrees that were delivered through polytechnics pre-1992 are a precedent to such provision. CNAA awards were comparable to those of universities and were also awarded beyond honours level. They were recognised by professional associations and employers and CNAA awarded by far the largest number of degrees in the United Kingdom. It is in 'crossover' areas such as this that the new funding body would be well placed to explore the possibilities in this area of education, training and workforce development, and take another step towards a system that unifies academic and vocational learning. Such developments are likely to open up new national and international markets for Scottish education.

Conclusion

This response makes clear SQA's support for the measures proposed by the Scottish Executive, but also seeks to lay out some of the most important developmental priorities for the new body. The support of both the further and higher education funding councils has furthered the lifelong learning agenda in Scotland: the creation of a single body redefines the 'field of play' in Scottish education and presents new opportunities, goals and challenges for us all.