

Scottish Trades Union Congress

STUC Response

A Changing Landscape for Tertiary Education and Research in Scotland: A Consultation Paper on the Merger of the Scottish Further Education Funding Council and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The STUC is Scotland's Trade Union Centre. Its purpose is to coordinate, develop and articulate the views and policies of the Trade Union Movement in Scotland reflecting the aspirations of trade unionists as workers and citizens.
- 1.2 The STUC represents around 630,000 working people and their families throughout Scotland. It speaks for trade union members in and out of work, in the community and in the workplace. Our affiliated organisations have interests in all sectors of the economy. Through our affiliates in the education sector the STUC represents thousands of workers in tertiary education, including academic and support staff. We also represent workers as lifelong learning participants. Our representative structures are constructed to take account of the specific views of women members, young members, black/minority ethnic members, LGBT members, and members with a disability, as well as retired and unemployed workers.
- 1.3 The STUC welcomes the opportunity to participate in this Scottish Executive consultation process. We were pleased, as a key stakeholder, to present our initial views in the "consultation platforms" section of the document. The STUC appreciated the Executive's recognition of accountability processes within organisations submitting platforms as expressed in paragraph 136.
- 1.4 This submission has been prepared following substantial discussions within the Scottish trade union movement on the proposals to merge the funding councils. In November 2003, STUC affiliates met with Scottish Executive officials to debate key issues surrounding the merger of funding councils. The STUC responded to the 2003 Discussion

Paper on the merger. This collective STUC response is based on the views of our affiliates, and policy as determined at our annual Congress and Equalities Conferences.

- 1.5 It is right that the distinct views of our individual affiliates are expressed through the separate responses of those affiliates.

2 Background

- 2.1 The STUC welcomes the motivations of providing one strategic organisation for tertiary education: to provide a more integrated system of lifelong learning, and a more coherent system for learners. The STUC is committed to the principle of "parity of esteem" between different types of learning and learning providers, which recognises the distinct and complementary aspects of different institutions.
- 2.2 The clarification in paragraph 39 that it is not the purpose of the merger to reduce staffing levels or running costs of the two Councils is most welcome.

3 Changing Landscape

- 3.1 The STUC supports the greater collaboration and increased articulation through the use of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. The STUC supports the work of the SCQF and looks forward to it providing a national system for describing learning opportunities and making the relationship between qualifications more easily understood by employers, learners, parents and the general public.
- 3.2 The STUC notes the proposals to define providers eligible for funding through the new body as "Specified Tertiary Education Providers" - STEPs. In previous submissions and in our platform in this consultation document, the STUC has expressed clearly its concerns at any extension of the range of learning providers eligible to receive public funding. We believe that Scotland is well served by its publicly accountable Further Education colleges (FECs) and Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). Our concerns at any extensions are based on longer term implications of an influx of unaccountable private sector interests in the sector, and our

opposition to education being considered a tradable commodity and we oppose its inclusion in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS).

- 3.3 However, the STUC wishes to qualify this opposition to alternative providers of lifelong learning provision. We believe that it is right that Scottish Ministers, as accountable to Parliament, should retain the power to specify other providers as STEPs. Legislation should set out the detailed conditions with which potential providers must be able to demonstrate compliance and sustainability before becoming eligible as STEPs. The conditions set out in Annex A for achieving and maintaining STEP status are welcome. The STUC would wish to see more specific points in these conditions, in terms of a STEP meeting standards of quality in staff working conditions, equality issues, and recognition of trade unions. Importantly there should be an onus on a STEP to demonstrate it is meeting the needs of a lifelong learning society, rather than merely operating as a commercial, profit making venture.
- 3.4 The STUC notes the review of teacher qualifications in FE colleges, and supports the proposal that Further Education lecturing staff be required to gain an appropriate teaching or professional qualification within a prescribed period of time.

4 Role of the New Body

- 4.1 The STUC believes the new body should have a broad role, one that incorporates planning as well as funding roles. The STUC envisages the planning role of the new body as ensuring quality, consistency and good working practices in both HE and FE sectors within the democratic structures of the Scottish Executive and Parliamentary processes. This means the new body ensures institutions adhere to Best Value, fair employment practices, promote equal opportunities, and conduct equal pay audits. The planning role of the new body should be set within the strategic context of FE and HE policy as determined through the democratic processes of the Parliament and Executive.
- 4.2 The new body should have powers to ensure that learning provision across Scotland is comprehensive in coverage, in

terms of geography, subject and level, to meet the needs of learners, employers and society at large.

4.3 Responsiveness and relevance of learning provision

Whilst recognising the importance of ensuring learning strategies meet the needs of employers and complements economic strategies, it is worth valuing education and learning as of merit in itself. The STUC supports the proposal that the new body will collaborate with partners such as trade unions, enterprise networks and Sector Skills Councils. It is important that the Executive sets out the framework for such collaboration.

4.4 Quality of learning provision and research

The STUC supports the proposals on quality enhancement and assessment for teaching. We would like to see the new body taking a leading role in ensuring FECs are able to benefit from research opportunities, and are provided with opportunities to learn from HEIs how best to incorporate research activities into current work.

4.5 Coherence of provision and collaboration between providers

The new body should encourage co-operation, communication and collaboration between tertiary education providers. The new body should take a supportive role to collaboration where appropriate, encouraging partnership working rather than competition between institutions. Collaboration can assist in ensuring "parity of esteem" is established between both sectors. The new body should also be ensuring coherence of provision and promoting collaboration to assist seamless articulation between the sectors.

4.6 UHIMI and Crichton Campus: new approaches

The STUC supports the development of the UHIMI and the value that such a development brings to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. We share our affiliates' concerns that the "university" should be developed on a par with other universities, with a common approach to quality, conditions of employment and pay. The STUC is alarmed that this is not currently the case.

4.7 Mergers and new institutions

The STUC would wish decisions on institutional closures, start-ups or mergers to reside with Ministers, but is wary of such decisions being prescribed by Ministers. The STUC believes the new body should have the powers to monitor any decisions on mergers, closures or start-ups to ensure the interests of staff and students involved are paramount. The new body should have the authority to report to Ministers and advise them to reverse a decision where it is not in the best interests of staff and students.

4.8 Progression through learning (including articulation)

It is important that the new body promotes progression through learning and the seamless articulation across sectors. Flexibility in funding is required to follow the student to enable appropriate support for students to develop and progress. Consideration should be given to those students that are from socio economic groups not previously involved or attracted to higher education to ensure that they are given the appropriate support to progress.

5 Funding

5.1 The STUC believes Scottish Ministers and the Scottish Parliament should allocate funding for the tertiary sector as is proposed in the Bill. It is essential that there is transparency in terms of funding powers and democratic accountability, so as it is clear that funding allocation reflects the strategic priorities of the Scottish Executive in its wider social, education and economic policies.

5.2 There should be safeguards within the funding structures to ensure the maintenance of academic freedom and the reduction of the risk of political interference.

6 Powers and Duties of the New Body

6.1 The STUC is clear that the new body should have powers of planning and funding, with emphasis on ensuring quality is achieved throughout the sectors. The body should have duties to meet standards of quality, fair employment practice,

equal opportunities, and workforce development, through its Best Value obligations. The STUC would wish to see further clarification of the requirement for “adequate and efficient” to ensure that duplication of provision between FECs and HEIs can be avoided.

- 6.2 As stated in our response to the Merger Discussion Paper in November 2003, the STUC considers that academic freedom should be extended as a statutory right for post 92 universities and FE colleges as well as the ancient universities. All academic staff should benefit from the protection this provides, given the numerous pressures on academics.

7 Research and Knowledge Transfer

- 7.1 The STUC welcomes the requirement that the new body is to establish a Research Committee. It is important that research capabilities are safeguarded and developed appropriately, recognising the distinctive areas and value of research in established subjects and the new and applied areas of research.

8 Governance Organisation and Management

- 8.1 It is welcome that the Chief Executive of the new body will have the right to attend any special meeting of the Board of Governors of any STEP. We would expect that following such an attendance, recommendations would be reported to Ministers for further consideration and appropriate action.
- 8.2 The Bill should take into account the value of including staff and students in the governance of institutions.

9 Tertiary Education (Funding etc.) (Scotland) Bill

- 9.1 The STUC has not commented on direct aspects of the draft Bill, but would expect that our comments above are taken into consideration at the appropriate sections of the Bill.

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