

Opportunity, Excellence and Enterprise: Our Vision for University and College Education in Scotland

A joint submission by the Association of Scottish Colleges and Universities Scotland to the Scottish Executive consultation on the proposed merger of the funding councils

Introduction

The Association of Scottish Colleges and Universities Scotland will each submit its own individual response to the consultation. However, on the majority of the main issues we have a shared view, and more important still we have a shared vision of the future of university and college education and of what it can deliver for Scotland. The purpose of this paper is to outline our vision, and to highlight the implications of that vision for future funding systems.

Opportunities for learners

The most important purpose of Scotland's universities and colleges is to meet the needs of learners, to help them to aspire to the highest levels of educational attainment of which they are capable, and to develop learning as a core activity throughout their lives.

That requires provision which is both diverse and coherent. Learners have many varied and changing needs, and require learning pathways which are suitable for them. The coherence created by the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) is a cornerstone on which Scotland can build well-articulated lifelong learning for all. It also provides Scotland with an opportunity to play a leading role in the Bologna process work to develop a European Credit and Qualifications Framework, which will open up learning pathways that cross international boundaries.

The quality of provision is also vital to learners. The opportunities available to learners in Scotland in both sectors must match the best international standards of range, choice, learning experience and recognition of awards.

Serving the economic needs of Scotland

Maximising opportunities for learners serves the needs of Scotland, and ties in with the Scottish Executive's current policy priorities. The economic contribution is paramount, and we share the Executive's commitment to its Smart Successful Scotland strategy. Both ASC and Universities Scotland will contribute to the current review and subsequent updating of this strategy.

One crucial element in the delivery of that is the output of well-educated and highly-skilled people from our universities and colleges. That output needs to be increased, not reduced. Our participation rates are good, but they should be still higher. The group which has the greatest difficulty in finding an economic role is the 30 percent or so who do not have the opportunity to experience university or college. Research and knowledge transfer activities are equally critical to building a successful economy and developing an entrepreneurial culture in Scotland.

Societal and cultural benefits

However the gains to society and individuals from post-compulsory education are more than simply economic. Education is the most powerful weapon for tackling social exclusion and individual disadvantage. There are many indicators of its societal benefits ranging from better health to lower criminality. It is also one of the key contributors to the development of the culture which is central to Scotland's very identity.

The international dimension

We strongly support the Executive's aim of making Scotland one of the world's leading small nations. The success of that strategy requires in particular building on those aspects of Scotland that are world-class and have strong international reputation and recognition. Education is either top of the list or very close to the top.

At a time when there is a strong trend towards the internationalisation of education this offers huge opportunities for Scotland, but there are corresponding dangers if we fail to respond. "The learning nation" is a vital component of the Scottish brand. Our aim should be not just to maintain but to enhance our international competitiveness and reputation for excellence in both learning and research.

Roles and relationships

Three key partners each have an essential role to play in the fulfilment of this vision: government; the universities and the colleges; and the funding body. It is vital to ensure that their roles and the relationships between them are strategically well-focussed .

Government

It is the responsibility of government to set the policy direction and priorities, to make adequate public funding available through the funding body to universities and colleges for the learning and teaching and research they supply in response to the needs identified by government, and to ensure appropriate accountability for the funds allocated.

Universities and Colleges

It is the universities and colleges which are the delivery agents. They are the best judges at operational level. Well governed and well managed institutions are capable of responding to the needs of the markets in which they operate more quickly and more effectively than any central planning agency could do. They have already demonstrated the ability to be ever more creative, innovative and enterprising in the way they respond to these demands.

The key to success is to trust and empower the universities and colleges, and to charge their governing bodies and managements with real and meaningful responsibility. That enables them to recruit both outstandingly gifted individuals from other sectors to serve on their governing bodies and talented executives to fill senior management positions. It is these governors and managers who ought to carry the primary accountability for ensuring that public funds are used appropriately and efficiently.

But our vision goes beyond that. Empowered universities and colleges are able to use public funding as leverage to attract funding from other sources delivering substantial added value.

The funding body

The funding body is situated between government and the institutions, and that statement captures one of its most important features. It should aim to position itself approximately equidistantly from the two, facilitating communication in both directions.

One major function is to distribute funding to universities and colleges in a fair, open, transparent and rational way, responding to the policy direction and priorities set by government by using funding to incentivise and support them. Its second main function is to act as an advocate and adviser to government on behalf of university and college education.

Above all, the funding body should act strategically, and should avoid becoming involved in the levels of planning and management which are more efficiently undertaken at institutional level. That focus will be more readily achieved if the machinery is lean. What is needed is a small, smart, strategic funding body, certainly much smaller than the sum of the existing councils and their executive.

Some functions of the funding body are highly specialised and require staff with bureaucratic skills. However, joint working and strategic dialogue with universities and colleges require a depth of understanding of policy and context, and of opportunities for institutions and of the factors which constrain them. Therefore, more of the funding council's leaner staff should be high level secondees from the sectors who have the wider understanding and experience required.

Implications for legislation

The Parliament's guiding principle that it should legislate only when a clear need to do so has been demonstrated is a good one, and it should be applied rigorously in this case. The merger of the funding bodies will be justified only if it achieves greater coherence and strategic focus than could the two previous Funding Councils.

Accountability will be clearer and better if the shared executive reports to a single council rather than to two, and a unified council will be better able to take a coherent view of lifelong learning provision as a whole. However, the legislation should further reduce constraints on governing bodies to allow them to become still more enterprising, and not introduce redundant new regulation however well-intentioned and however innocuous it may appear. Nor should it specify a role for the new council which includes functions which are better carried out in institutions, and in relation to which it is better that universities and colleges should be directly accountable rather than indirectly.

It is not the purpose of this paper to identify the specific sections concerned. Both ASC and Universities Scotland will submit detailed comments on the provisions proposed for the Bill and the policy context in which the new funding body should operate. The main message we want to convey here is that we have a shared view that parts of the draft Bill are misconceived because they increase the role of the funding body at the expense of those of governing bodies.

It is not only the council and its executive which should be leaner. So too should the Bill.

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