



Audit of Higher Education in Scottish Universities and Scotland's Colleges 2016

**The UNISON Scotland Evidence to the Scottish Parliament Public Audit and Post
Legislative Scrutiny Committee November 2016**

Introduction

UNISON is the largest trade union in Scottish public services. Our members deliver services, pay taxes and also have a wider citizenship interest in how services are provided and paid for. Members have a unique perspective on public service delivery meaning they can make a valuable contribution to the policymaking process. Our members provide essential roles across higher and further education, these roles while often overlooked by policy makers are key to the functioning of education institutions and to the student experience. UNISON Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the call for evidence from the Scottish Parliament Public Audit and Post Legislative Scrutiny Committee November 2016

Evidence

Further Education

The further education sector has undergone substantial change following the Post 16 Education Act 2013. Funding has been cut severely, colleges have merged and new regional boards put in place. UNISON welcomes the call for better reporting on and measurement of the benefits that were claimed would come from mergers and regionalisation. Reforming education is not done by passing an Act of parliament in itself so effective monitoring and reporting on the process is essential to both driving change and to learning lessons for future reforms of both this service and others.

The report recommends, as it did last year that:

- Scottish Government and the SFC to specify how they will measure and report on progress on the promised benefits of mergers
- And to publish information on the costs and savings achieved through the mergers process.

These recommendations were also endorsed by this committee last year and UNISON is concerned to that to see that these recommendations have not been acted upon in the last year.

The failure to respond to these audit recommendations is one of the reasons that UNISON welcome the recommendations in the report that the government to relook at the role of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) in relation to college governance. Currently we are in a position where the government and the SFC claim not to have responsibility/ powers over how colleges are run. Colleges are public bodies and need to be accountable for how they are run, for achieving outcomes agreed with government and funding bodies and to the wider communities which they serve. This requires openness round outcome agreements an round the data that will measure whether these are being met and clarity about where at to which bodies they are reporting to and who is accountable for achieving the outcomes and finally what will happen when objectives are not achieved.

UNISON also supports calls for colleges to develop medium term financial plans particularly round national collective bargaining and a systematic approach to workforce planning. It is only reasonable that any large institution works in this way. This should also involve negotiating with staff and their trade unions not just on wages and terms and conditions but also on how to deliver the service efficiently. Including staff in strategic development is the best way to develop efficient services and also to avoid disputes like the current costly one.

It is not just the structures that have changed in further education. While the number of under-25s in full time education has increased by 14% in the last 8 years overall numbers have

dropped by 41% and part-time students by 48%. As UNISON warned at the time changing the sector to focus in this way has had a disproportionate impact on women and older students who make up the bulk of the reductions in student numbers. UNISON believes that this is not a positive change; if we are to build our economy then it is vital that those in and out of work are able to continually develop new skills in order to find and keep work in as jobs change. Providing opportunities for people to combine work and caring responsibilities with education should be central to any economic strategy. Not everyone can afford to be full-time students and for those with other responsibilities like parents or carers its more than a financial challenge, they just don't have time. Cuts in part-time provision are restricting opportunities for individuals and has serious risks for our economic future.

Despite the budget cuts and job losses the report indicates that the hard work and commitment of staff has minimised the impact on students. The same cannot be said of the impact on the remaining staff. As our report Learning the Hard Way showed staff are under pressure, morale is very low and trust in management is at rock bottom. The current pay dispute where support staff were offered a substantially worse offer than teaching staff has only served to make this worse.

Despite UNISON's many warnings organisations were set up without resolving the complexities of staffing issues. As the report states harmonisation of terms and conditions is still unresolved. These are not minor issues: people cannot be treated as an afterthought and issues kicked into the long grass indefinitely. Further education is all about people; education cannot be delivered by robots. It requires highly motivated staff with excellent people skills. You cannot expect teams to function and deliver a high quality service in the long term where team members have different working hours, leave entitlements, and wages.

Despite going through ACAS the pay dispute remains in place. UNISON was very happy to move to a national joint negotiating body but is now in dispute because our members were not offered the same deal as lecturing staff as had happened the year before. Support staff are crucial to the overall student experience and there is no reason why they should not get the same pay offer as teaching staff. There also still appears to be issues with the relationship between the NJNC and the individual employers, who do not appear to be fully signed up to the national negotiations process. The SFC and the Scottish government have no direct route to take action to resolve the dispute. UNISON is keen to make national bargaining work and would welcome support for the government and SFC to ensure that it does.

While UNISON had issues with college mergers and regionalisation we did support the Scottish government's aim to ensure that colleges were properly governed and accountable. UNISON was positive about setting up new boards that would be able to hold management accountable for the way they run colleges. While we were disappointed that, unlike in higher education, there were no union places on the boards we were positive about the role of staff rep. The report confirms there are still substantial gaps in information about costings and savings from the process and the role of the SFC in monitoring and engagement has not improved. Without the information how are boards, the funding council or the Scottish government able to make judgements about how colleges are delivering on their objectives. UNISON would like to see a wider remit for the SFC in monitoring services currently, like in Higher education, the SFC does not appear to feel it should look at how colleges are spending money other than round issues like gross misconduct and fraud.

Academic freedom is an important principle that must be protected but that is not the same as highly paid senior managers being unaccountable to the government, students or the wider community for the decision that they make or how their institutions meet the outcomes set for them in return for substantial amounts of public money.

Higher Education

Funding

Audit Scotland reports that “Overall the Scottish higher education was in good financial health in 2014.15” but also highlights underlying risks. The Scottish government has made a great deal of its commitment to “free higher education” but university funding is clearly under pressure. Some institutions are less reliant on the Scottish government as they can access substantial research funds from other public, private and charitable sources as well as recruit fee paying students from the rest of the UK or outside the EU. Student fees while raising their overall income is of course used to deliver the courses to those fee paying students. There is very competitive global market for those high paying international students and universities need to invest those fees in the courses and services that attract and retain those students. Those institutions that attract fewer fee paying students are though more at risk from Scottish government budget cuts.

The policy of free higher education is aimed at ensuring that those from less well off backgrounds are able to access higher education. This policy therefore need to be adequately funded both to ensure that there are enough places available for non fee paying students at universities and as is increasingly apparent to look at ways of increasing funding support for the living costs of those without well off parents to support them. The policy has not led to the desired outcome of closing the gap and research indicates that while fees are not a barrier the cost of living and debt is still are substantial issue for people from low income backgrounds.

All universities receive large amounts of public money and the government is right to set outcomes that they expect in return for that funding. But we need to see more than setting outcomes. There needs to be improved monitoring and reporting on those outcomes and follow up where they are not being met. Outcomes need to cover admissions policies and the work universities to encourage applications from less well of backgrounds and the work they do with schools and colleges to support this. It must be about more than agreeing outcomes, there needs to be an improved mechanism for monitoring the achievement of the outcomes.

While universities may not be officially public bodies they provide a public good and receive substantial amounts of public money. Having a wide range of funding sources beyond tax payers does not mean they shouldn't be accountable to the public. The current mechanism of the Scottish government agreeing outcomes with the SFC and then the SFC with institutions does not appear to be more than a tick box exercise. UNISON therefore welcomes the audit report's call for a review of the outcome agreement process. It is our experience that other than gross misconduct or fraud the SFC is reluctant to hold universities to account for their performance. This is not about academic freedom but how institutions are managed and governed. Even private companies have boards of directors and financial regulators to whom they have to report and respond to. There needs to be a much clearer and more stringent system in place to ensure that this is happening.

Universities require adequate funding to meet the outcomes that the Scottish Government sets for the sector. Teaching Grant is a slight misnomer. Adequate teaching funding is about more than the wages of those who stand up in lecture theatres. It also funds the activities that support teaching for example technicians. Austerity is impacting on all public sector budgets but better planning, management and accountability can at least make things “less bad”. Longer term funding decisions would help with planning and support as would ensuring that institutions focus on the appropriate priorities.

Widening access is crucial but it is not currently clear how this will be funded across universities, colleges and schools. Funding cuts mean that students are suffering and it is often

the most vulnerable who do, it's not just about direct funding to students but the numbers of support staff who are available to support students through their academic journey whether its direct support to individuals with a disability or welfare roles, careers guidance etc.

Promised new governance arrangements for individual universities have also been slow to come into place and senior management have been resistant to these changes. UNISON hopes that the new code of practice will be in place soon. The Scottish Government should do more to ensure that individual universities are responding quickly to its policy commitments. For example Angela Constance wrote to the SFC to say that all universities should be paying the Living Wage and be complying with the Fair Work Agenda but when the living wage is updated some universities do not adjust to meet it but want to wait for following years pay claim leaving low paid staff out of pocket.

Conclusion

UNISON is the largest trade union in Scottish public services. Our members provide essential roles across higher and further education, these roles while often overlooked by policy makers are crucial to the functioning of education institutions and to the student experience. The Post-16 Education Act (2013) was intended to bring substantial changes to the organisation and governance of the sector. The reports support UNISON calls for much to be done to resolve outstanding staffing issues from mergers and regionalisation. Staff cannot be an afterthought. We welcome the calls for better measuring and reporting on both the costs and savings of the mergers and reporting on the costs and benefits of the mergers process and the new ways of working. UNISON also supports a review of the role of the SFC in relation to the organisations which it funds and the Scottish government. We believe that there needs to be much clearer and stronger accountability from higher and further education institutions for the public money they receive and the vital role they have in Scottish public and economic life. UNISON Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the call for evidence from the Scottish Parliament Public Audit and Post Legislative Scrutiny Committee November 2016

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