Education and Culture Committee

Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill

Adam Smith College

Introduction

The Board of Governors of Adam Smith College (the Board) generally supports the reform programme as it applies to Further Education in general and Colleges in particular. It is believed that the overall approach of a closer alignment with the labour market and the needs of employers is the right approach. However, the Board does have reservations about the degree of emphasis on the 16-24 age group without a clear statement of intent regarding support for work with learners in older age groups who may be further from the job market or who require support to improve skill levels to meet the ever changing needs of employers.

The Board is also concerned that whilst the emphasis in legislation is on national priorities and the implementation of national policies and programmes, there must be a balance between national and local priorities. Local connections and local identity must not be lost. Further Education provision must be responsive to local needs amongst learners, communities, employers and partner organisations. It is also important that College and Regional Boards remain active in local communities through partnership working and as such Boards need to retain their local identity and autonomy. This issue is reflected in our comments below.

Terms and Conditions of Higher Education Funding

The Board would not wish to comment in detail on the provisions in the Bill which relate solely to higher education institutions. From a College perspective it is to be hoped that, in promoting wider access, which is a commendable aspiration, full use is made of articulation agreements between Universities and Colleges. In some circumstances improving wider access can be better achieved by colleges and universities working together rather than higher education institutions working alone.

On a more general point, there is a clear- and growing - disparity between the funding of further and higher education. If the reform programme is to deliver the type of system which is more responsive to the needs of learners and employers and is more closely aligned to the job market, there needs to be a better balance of funding across a more integrated further and higher education system.

College Re-organisation and Regional Bodies

The Board is supportive of the general direction of the changes set out in the Draft Bill. The move to regional arrangements is welcomed and the Board is currently actively engaged in the process of merger with Carnegie College to form the basis of a new Fife
Regional College. The timeframe for this process is challenging and there is a danger that the focus on the mechanics of merger will deflect the Boards from the opportunity to create a completely new College which is more than the sum of the two institutions.

Both Boards are aware of this risk however and are committed to creating a new college which will see new opportunities and significant advantages for learners, staff, communities, employers and partners. Nonetheless it has to be recognised that the full merger process and the creation of a truly new educational establishment in Fife will take considerably longer than the initial merger timetable. This lengthier process requires to be factored in when considering potential costs and financial savings projected to come from the merger process. Considerable investment is likely to be needed to bring about significant savings in the longer term and to see the transformation in teaching and learning envisaged in the reform programme. Whilst savings may be achieved in the longer term, the Board believes that these will not be sufficient on their own to fund the levels of investment needed to see the kind of further education we all want to see for our communities and learners.

The Board welcomes the general duty of the new regional colleges as set out in the Draft Bill with its clear focus on high quality educational provision as the core functions of the new colleges. The Board also welcomes the emphasis given to collaborative working in exercising its functions. It is believed that the legislation should make an explicit reference to the role of colleges in the Community Planning Framework. Playing a full part in this framework will ensure that the Outcome Agreements being developed by all colleges will be properly aligned both with national policies and, critically, the Single Outcome Agreements in place at a regional level.

The Board also supports the approach taken in the draft Bill to regional college boards. It believes that the opportunity should be taken to re-title boards as "College Boards" to clearly indicate the function of these bodies in terms of 'governance' rather than 'management' which is properly the function of the principal and staff of the college. The scale and membership of the Board - particularly as regards staff and student membership - is particularly welcome. It is noted that the Draft Bill proposes that Ministers should have transitional powers to appoint chairs and approve the appointment of board members to regional colleges. It is to be hoped that such powers, if included in the final legislation, should be used judiciously recognising that new regional colleges are likely to have put in place new governance arrangements. Imposing additional changes during a transition period would appear to be counter-productive.

One proposal which we would oppose is regarding that of remuneration. The Board believes that all board members - including the chair - should continue to work on a voluntary basis. The proposal to remunerate the chair is potentially divisive in terms of board operation and there is no evidence that suggests that a remunerated chair will provide better leadership - and a better college. Boards depend on full commitment from all members to participate on the board itself, at committees, and in other board duties - to pay one member of the board- albeit one who may require to commit more time than
other board members- would not seem to us to assist the operation of the board - nor make sense in times of financial restriction.

On the same theme of the need for financial probity, the above comment would apply to the chairs of regional strategic boards. There is a danger that additional layers of governance and oversight could become increasingly complex and costly, thereby reducing resources available to learner services. It is to be hoped that resources committed to these bodies are closely monitored and limited to avoid potential duplication of effort and cost.

The Board hopes that the Education and Culture Committee can debate the need for Board Chairs of the Regional Colleges to be appointed by Ministers rather than the Boards themselves (albeit perhaps for subsequent approval by Ministers). As noted, it is believed that it is vital that boards reflect local identity and local economic/social needs. Boards also need to demonstrate coherence and common purpose. Having the Chair of the Board chosen by Board members themselves, operating at a regional level would reinforce these local connections and help maintain the required balance between national and local priorities.

**Review of Fundable Bodies**

The additional powers proposed to be given to the Scottish Funding Council are noted. We would reiterate our point on the need for balance between national policy and local responsiveness. It is noted that whilst colleges are required to provide information in any review carried out by the SFC (reporting to Ministers), there is no provision for these colleges to be consulted in this process. We believe that the Bill should contain such a provision to ensure that local circumstances are taken into account.

**Data Sharing**

We welcome the introduction of this duty to try to minimise the disengagement from education, training or employment amongst young people and that appropriate support can be planned and put in place. However there is a need to ensure that the needs and rights of young people are protected in carrying out this duty. It is therefore suggested that a duty is put on all post-16 education institutions that they ensure that all young people are advised of the existence of data sharing procedures, what information is being shared, and why it is being shared. All young people involved should be able to see their files.