Introduction

The Board of Edinburgh College welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Bill. Catering for 35,000 students, Edinburgh College is now the largest educational establishment in Edinburgh and the Lothians. It is likely to be among the largest single FE college in Scotland. As a newly merged college which will become a single Regional College once the Bill is enacted we feel our experience is directly relevant to the process. Our Chairman and Principal would be happy to provide further oral evidence to the Committee as required.

Overview

We are supportive of the aims of the Bill. Since the incorporation of the colleges in the 1990’s there has been an increasing atomisation of provision across the sector without sufficient opportunity for strategic work and planning. We believe that the move to a regional approach to the planning and delivery of further education will go some way to correct this position. We believe also that it will help to ensure that provision meets the needs of communities, learners and employers.

Moves to widen access to university education are welcomed. Increasing opportunities for colleges and universities to combine their strengths and jointly deliver courses up to degree level should enable more cost effective access to higher education for both student and public funds.

We have concerns over the increased focus on young people in the 16-24 cohort, and believe this area is more problematic than allowed for in the Bill. Edinburgh College in common with others in the sector continues to provide educational opportunities for all adults within our communities together with building links with employers to support their staffing needs. We do not impose restrictions here, whether in age, experience or area of work. We feel it is important to retain a flexible approach for the good of both commerce and learners.

We are concerned that a move away from this provision would adversely affect the opportunities for economic development particularly in our poorest communities. In addition we think it is vitally important that employees and employers are provided with a range of opportunities for personal and workforce development. We are not convinced that the imposition of this one size fits all age limitation is either welcome or helpful here.
Changes in Funding and Planning

We note the increased involvement of Skills Development Scotland in the sector. We welcome the opportunity to have better data available to all involved in planning provision that this new involvement offers. We look forward to working more closely with SDS in this regard. However, at this stage, it is unclear how advanced the “data hub” development work is and what its relevance is unless it also collects employment information over a reasonable time period post the period of further and higher education. We are concerned that this process may lead in time to colleges needing to develop extra student monitoring information and to interact in detail with a further regulatory body in addition to SFC and OSCR.

We would also have serious concerns over the potential policy and funding disconnect between SDS and those of the Scottish Funding Council. We are concerned that the increasing number of funding bodies and mechanisms may be inefficient and make it difficult for Regional colleges to plan effectively for a financially sustainable future. We would like more clarity on the process of future funding, the monitoring of outcomes and how unused money will be recycled between funders, colleges and other education providers.

In addition the change in the types of funding mechanisms appears to be occurring with little reference to colleges and moves to change the underlying funding mechanism for core grant provision also seem to being “rushed” through with little thought to the potential effect on community and employer requirements.

Governance and Regional Colleges

We have concerns over the proposed structure of a Regional college board of management and in particular the intention to remove the legal requirement for a Principal to be a board member. As good practice, we believe that if the board is to fully exercise its function in “securing coherent provision of high quality fundable education” in an “economical, efficient, effective manner”\(^1\) it should contain at least one member of the executive team. In both the private and third sector it is commonplace that the principal executive officer of a company or organisation is a board member and regarded as good practice. We see no rationale why this should not be the case in the college sector.

In addition, under the current legislation, the Principal \ Chief Executive of a college is the Accountable Officer for the college and as such responsible for its activities. The proposed legislation appears unclear as to which individual or body will be responsible for actions and outcomes at a Regional college.

We recognise that different parts of the country will have different forms of local provision. We also endorse the need for a common approach at regional level and the need for greater central planning and strategic control. However, there is in our view,

\(^1\) Bill P.3 lines 30-35
currently a gap in the governance framework and the intention to provide more central control. What appears to be missing at this stage is reference to a framework for performance measurement, decision making, review and appeal when seeking to identify a “non-performing” college and the reasons for such non-performance.

In our view Outcome agreements with SFC should play a central role in this process, and while we recognise that work on outcome agreements is on-going, we believe it would be useful for the supporting information to the Bill to recognise this process or such successor processes as providing the framework for performance review.

**Dangers in the present approach**

As we said at the outset, Edinburgh College welcomes the direction of the Bill and the move towards increased strategic planning and accountability, particularly within our local communities. We believe it offers a better future for learners, industry and key stakeholders, and those employed in the sector itself. However we are very worried that this potential positive development will be undermined and damaged because of the pace of change relative to changes in funding and provision.

As identified in the Policy Memorandum, college mergers have the potential to save substantial sums of public money. Similarly, changes in the funding criteria and policies could potentially help provide better focus and responsiveness. However, those processes are jeopardised if change is not coordinated and the pace of change achievable.

We commented earlier on the changes in funding mechanisms and the threat of a disjointed approach between the SFC and SDS. This needs to be addressed urgently. As importantly, merger and regionalisation activity is being undertaken against a backdrop of rapidly reducing funding to the further education sector (i.e. the potential savings identified are already being “banked”). Colleges will have to reduce costs rapidly to remain financially sustainable and there is a risk that opportunities for our students and our communities will be compromised.

We believe savings and efficiencies can be achieved but the current pace of financial cuts runs the risk of creating a funding crisis and short term staffing and educational difficulties which actually militate against the successful achievement of those positive changes. We must have a properly applied pace of change and reform, particularly to funding mechanisms, if we are to avoid the risk that will otherwise be placed on the operation of colleges and our shared aim to improve outcomes for our students and the community.