Education and Culture Committee

Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill

Royal Society of Chemistry

Introduction

The Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) is the largest organisation representing the chemical sciences in Europe. It has over 47000 members internationally, most of whom are based in the UK, several thousand from within Scotland. The membership includes people involved in education at schools, colleges and universities, and a large representation of members in industry.

The RSC engages regularly on policy matters with the Scottish Parliament and the UK Government as well as the devolved administrations in Wales and Northern Ireland. This engagement includes organising the annual Science and the Parliament in Edinburgh and helping to support the work of the Cross Party Group on Science and Technology.

The RSC is a registered charity and also has a Royal Charter that governs its activities “to serve the public interest”. Including predecessor organisations the RSC has a history going back to 1841. In its contact with Government and its agencies the RSC is required to do so in a manner that is consistent with the public interest. It conducts such engagement in an open manner and all submissions to Government or Parliamentary consultations are made publicly available. The RSC seeks to advise policy makers in matters relating to the chemical sciences and how this can aid them in their decision making.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the consideration of the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill that will shortly be undertaken by the Education and Culture Committee.

The RSC would be willing to provide an appropriate witness should the Committee wish to request one to appear before it.

General comments

The RSC recognises that the Bill follows earlier Scottish Government publications, such as the Putting Learners at the Centre – Delivering our ambitions for Post-16 Education and the reviews of further and higher education governance. As such, the RSC is supportive of aspects of the proposals, though some parts of the current Bill give cause for concern. Consequently, we urge the Committee to explore the evidence in support of each of the main provisions before reporting to Parliament on the general principles of the Bill.
Main provisions

University Governance

Whilst the RSC supports the principle of universities adhering to good practice in governance we do not believe that a strong case has been made for there being a significant problem of governance in Scottish universities that requires the Scottish Parliament to legislate on the issue.

Whilst universities receive large parts of their finance through the Scottish Funding Council, they have developed as institutions independent of government. Moreover, individual university funding is obtained from a wider range of sources other than the Scottish Government (via the SFC). To varying levels universities in Scotland raise resources from bodies such as: the UK Research Councils; the European Union; fees from non-Scottish domiciled UK students; fees from international students; charities; bequeaths and endowments; resources generated through commercialisation; and from the private sector. In 2010/11 only 37% of the income of Scotland’s higher education institutions came from core public funding through the SFC.1

It is also the case that all Scottish universities have signed the UK-wide governance code of practice that was developed by the Committee of University Chairs.

The RSC believes that the Scottish Government needs to explain the problem that they perceive needs to be solved before seeking to progress this provision of the Bill.

Widening access

The RSC recognises that there is considerable evidence of inequality in access to higher education across socio-economic groups and we welcome actions taken by the universities in partnership with the SFC to introduce measures to improve on access. However, we are also of the view that the whole issue is not one that will be solved simply by looking at admissions to universities.

Many of the issues that impact upon access to higher education involve earlier stages of the education system, as well as broader societal issues, many of which are responsibilities for the Scottish Government and local government to address. For example, enhancing outreach programmes that target schools with low levels of progression to higher education, and providing summer schools aimed at providing an insight into universities for pupils from non-traditional university backgrounds, are two measures that could be progressed. We encourage the Scottish Government and Parliament to examine these areas further in order to make a real step change in more equal access to higher education.

We also have concerns that for disciplines such as medicine, science and engineering some of the current reforms in the National Examination and Curriculum for Excellence may worsen the situation. For example, they could lead to a reduction in the numbers of school students presenting for science Highers in S5. The

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narrower range of subjects that could be chosen may well restrict the numbers of students studying science in S4, which would consequently reduce the feedthrough to S5. This is an issue that has been raised by the Learned Societies Group on School Science Education, of which the RSC is a member, which has surveyed schools on their preparations for the new National Qualifications.

**Tuition fees cap**

In the context of the differential funding arrangements that currently apply in the four nations of the United Kingdom it would seem to be a reasonable measure for Scottish Ministers to be able to set a maximum tuition fee for undergraduate courses at Scottish universities that would apply to applicants from other parts of the UK.

The Education and Culture Committee may also wish to explore with Ministers what discussions have taken place with the administrations in Wales and Northern Ireland where different funding arrangements apply to students from those countries than those for undergraduates in England.

**College regionalisation**

The RSC can understand the rationale for college merger or regionalisation where it applies to large urban areas such as Glasgow or Edinburgh and, indeed, several mergers have already taken place in these cities.

We do, though have concerns about the possible impact of regionalisation where it applies to colleges that are many miles apart, such as in areas like the Highlands. Further education colleges generally provide a more localised education service than universities, with a larger proportion of their students coming from the locality in which the college is situated. Colleges also need to have a good understanding of the opportunities for employment that exist in their local economic area.

As well as the potential impact upon students, if some courses are no longer available in their area we would also encourage the Committee to explore with the Scottish Government how teaching staff in merged colleges would be affected, particularly in more rural areas. For example, would teaching staff be expected to work from multiple campuses, which could be some distance apart, or have to relocate to other colleges within a merged group? Some multi-campus teaching is already delivered at HE through videoconferencing; however, this approach to learning may be more difficult to achieve within FE.

The RSC also has concerns about the funding settlement that the further education sector received in this financial year and that proposed for next year. The chemical sciences and other scientific sectors require a supply of trained technicians as well as good graduates and we would be concerned if the funding settlement reduced the provision of college places for vocational learning in the sciences. Indeed, the RSC along with other professional bodies offers RSci (QCF Level 5) and RSciTech (QCF Level 3) registration to encourage vocational education and training routes into the profession.
In terms of the Scottish Government’s aspiration to enhance access to higher education for people from under-represented socio-economic backgrounds, we would like to highlight the opportunities for students with insufficient qualifications on leaving school through additional study at further education colleges.

**Review of fundable further and higher education**

It is reasonable for the SFC to work with further and higher education bodies with a view to encouraging coherence in education provision, in particular in developing better student pathways between further and higher education. However, we are concerned about the impact that the section of the Bill may have on the autonomy of further and higher education institutions. In particular, if there are to be further changes in the number of institutions through merger, these should only take place where the bodies themselves agree that this would enhance their ability to deliver better educational outcomes.