Education and Culture Committee

Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill

Scottish Social Services Council

The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) is the statutory Non-Departmental Public Body responsible for registering people who work in social services in Scotland, regulating their education, learning and development and generating workforce information for the sector, including the publication of Official Statistics. The SSSC is also one of the partners of Skills for Care and Development, the Sector Skills Council for the social service workforce in the UK.

We have approximately 195,000 workers in the social service workforce in Scotland, over 40 per cent of whom are employed by the private sector. The SSSC’s role is to raise standards of practice in social services, to strengthen and support the workforce and to increase the protection of people who use the services. Our vision is a competent, confident workforce, capable of delivering high quality services that has the confidence of the public, those who use services, and their carers. We welcome the opportunity to provide evidence on the Bill and related issues of post-16 education.

Overview

We have focused our specific comments on the Bill to those areas of most direct relevance to our interests and where we have experience and knowledge.

The Bill’s proposals for reforming post-16 education are welcome, in particular the focus on widening access, on putting the learner at the centre, on taking a more strategic approach and on aligning learning to the needs of employers and the economy. It is fundamentally important to Scotland’s future economic prosperity that employers are closely involved in the skills and vocational education system, in liaison with relevant public sector institutions.

We agree that it is important to equip the next generation with the key competences, experience and skills needed for employment. However, we do not believe this should be limited to young people under the age of 24. There are significant benefits in supporting older adult learners to improve their skills and develop their career – it improves performance, quality of services and creates vacancies at all levels, which provide positive destinations and career progression for young people. The social service workforce has many people who come to work in areas of this sector later in their careers (eg in care homes) having previously worked elsewhere. It is important to recognise that many of these older individuals will also require access to learning and development.

We welcome the proposals for enhanced consultation and collaboration, particularly as set out in the Bill sections on college regionalisation. However, there is no mention in any of the provisions about the role of the Sector Skills Councils. Sector Skills Councils are UK bodies tasked with representing the skills needs of employers in their given
sectors. They also play an important role in developing and maintaining National Occupational Standards, which can form the basis of national qualifications, such as Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). We suggest that for both performance monitoring and for decisions about fundable further and higher education, that their views should be sought. Similarly, we see nothing in the Bill about regulatory bodies and the similar role they might take in informing strategic planning in colleges.

We would like to see greater emphasis on the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) and on real opportunities for students to use formal and informal learning effectively. We believe that there needs to be a better understanding of what constitutes higher education and that there should be a clear recognition of the place of SVQs within that.

Finally, on funding, we believe that this should take account of the SVQ system and if it is to be truly fair, the Scottish Funding Council should consider funding based on SCQF levels rather than necessarily on types of learning and development. We also recommend there should be funding for part-time as well as full-time learning opportunities, particularly for part-time learning, development and qualifications where employers show there is an industry need.

**University Governance** (Section 2)

The SSSC welcomes the provisions to improve governance and continues to endorse the recommendations made by the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils to the Scottish Government’s September 2011 consultation “Putting Learners at the Centre”. In particular that:

- employer interests are properly represented in the governance structures of higher education institutions;
- Sector Skills Councils are closely involved in the preparation of future best practice guidance on higher education governance so that the needs of employers are properly reflected in that guidance; and
- employers are more closely involved in the process of designing, developing and reviewing college and university qualifications.

**Widening Access** (Section 3)

We note the Bill views widening access in terms of under-represented socio-economic groups. We support this but we also support the notion of widening access to higher education more generally, particularly to returning and older workers. The SSSC would be happy to be cited as an example of excellence for the work it has undertaken with the work-based vocational degree in Childhood Practice. This degree builds on previous SVQ learning and articulates directly into university with credit.

It is our view that the SSSC has developed excellent resources and material in our sector to increase use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and we fully support the commitment to the development of excellent practice across the board in RPL. There still appear to be barriers in colleges and universities to the use of RPL and we would support the Scottish Government in removing those barriers.
As mentioned in the overview, the SSSC has considerable experience of the SCQF and of developing resources and materials. We would be happy to share this knowledge with other sectors. The SCQF is effective and contributes to flexible learner journeys in our sector. We believe better use could be made of the SCQF in defining what higher education is and in improving articulation from college to university. That said, before any legislation to introduce a statutory framework guaranteeing articulation from college to university could be finalised, we recommend there should first be a review of the current system to assess the extent to which measures could be introduced to streamline articulation within current existing frameworks.

There is also a need to increase awareness of the different ways of accessing university courses/qualifications to school students. The SSSC would want to be involved and could provide examples from our sector.

**Tuition Fees Cap (Section 4)**

The SSSC has no specific comments about the cap on tuition fees. However, we have some comments on funding more generally, which we believe are relevant. In particular, we believe it is important to ensure there is funding support for part-time study, particularly where this addresses the needs of both learners and employers. Learners need clear and simple information on what financial support is available to them at the point they select their learning and development. There are currently too many varied options and streamlining would make sense.

We know many employers in our sector are investing in their workforces. However, this is becoming increasingly difficult in the current economic climate and costs of learning and development can be passed on in charges to the service user. We note the number of part-time students enrolled at UK universities continues to decline and we urge further consideration of ways of reducing barriers to access to part-time education.

**College Regionalisation (Sections 5 - 13)**

Although the Bill mentions a range of potential consultees and partners in the provisions on strategic planning, we note there has been no explicit connection made with the strategic planning role held by Sector Skills Councils and the role they could play in planning provision by colleges across Scotland. We believe Sector Skills Councils can provide useful expertise as well as a national employer perspective, which could be increasingly important in a regionalised further education sector.

It would seem appropriate to build on specialist provision where it currently exists rather than relocate or recreate specialisms in other regions. In addition, the real challenge in addressing the issue of national specialisms relates more to funding than location. While we are supportive of the improved strategic planning implicit in the proposals, we are concerned that in practice it may lead to reduced choice and availability in certain instances.

We also continue to have the concern that the net result of the regionalisation proposals could be a two-tier system in which the cities are resource-rich and provide higher-level programmes, but where regions are left to provide less attractive, lower-level provisions
with fewer resources. Account should be taken of the key role played by further education in offering an alternative route for young people into higher education. For a significant minority of young people, further education provision is a necessary step to enable them to flourish in higher education. Reducing further education capacity may make it harder for employers and employees to access courses and assessors.

We also believe it is important to guard against the new regional colleges and regional strategic bodies becoming overly insular – notwithstanding the emphasis in the Bill on serving the region, there is nevertheless a need for the regional bodies to consider the wider environment and the needs of employers.

**Review of fundable further and higher education (Section 14)**

The SSSC is very supportive of the proposals to give the Scottish Funding Council a key role in reviewing provision, which should deliver consistency and quality. We suggest that Sector Skills Councils should have a role in such reviews.

The social service workforce with approximately 195,000 workers is a significant one in terms of the social and economic benefit it brings to Scotland. It is a sector that has many points of entry and through the SSSC work in ensuring a qualified workforce, it is a sector that continually develops its workforce and is committed to true lifelong learning. We recognise the needs of 16-24 year olds are important, but we emphasise the benefits of also supporting older learners.

The SSSC is now a producer of Official Statistics (namely, the annual Workforce Data Report) and therefore we aim to ensure we provide high quality labour market intelligence. We would welcome the opportunity to extend this expertise into regional labour market intelligence. In addition, we are looking at ways we can work more closely with employers in the use of this intelligence and to ensure that their ‘front-line’ experience informs how we produce and share that intelligence. We also hold data on learning and development (eg the uptake of SVQs), which could usefully inform reviews and we would be happy to offer our input into any future reviews under this legislation. We believe that sectoral labour market intelligence and performance indicators could be used more systematically to measure the extent to which specific courses of study can be linked to eventual employment outcomes.

**Data sharing (Section 15)**

The SSSC supports the proposals for data sharing. We would find it helpful if the Scottish Government would share any relevant information with workforce regulators and professional bodies.

**Conclusion**

We believe that higher and further education should be made progressively more flexible, providing greater opportunity for part-time study, work-based learning and up-skilling and re-skilling of the existing workforce.