Education and Culture Committee

Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill

Robert Templeton

The Scottish Agricultural College (SAC) is a practical example of what happens when Colleges merge without a well thought out strategy. The Committee should regard it as a template of all that can go wrong. There has been a preponderance of “bankers and business types” on the SAC Board. Practical farmers were ignored.

There is a bill to create what is a seemingly new concept in Scottish education where colleges are wrapped together for better direction of courses to avoid duplication.

I would encourage members to take a close look at the provision of Higher rural education in Scotland over the last 16 years.

Back in 1996, the Scottish Agricultural College (SAC) was born out of the West, East and North Colleges of Agriculture merging. My understanding this was to provide a way to save the East of Scotland College from closure due to lack of numbers.

In 1999 Mailland Mackie was appointed SAC chairman.

In 2002, SAC proposed to close 550 acre Auchincruive, Ayr which handled 50% of SAC students. 160 acre Craibstone, Aberdeen and King’s Buildings Edinburgh to be retained. This caused a furor in SW Scotland leading to a debate led by Adam Ingram MSP 25/3/02 in the Scottish Parliament. By now the SAC had appointed Professor Bill McKelvey as Chief Executive.

Sent to think again, SAC became even more radical and sought to close both farm campuses at Craibstone, Aberdeen and Auchincruive, Ayr and build a new 1200 student facility at the King’s Buildings in Central Edinburgh. This was mooted as the cheapest cost option. SAC chose to overlook that it would cost 1200 students anywhere between £2500 and £3000 per year in Edinburgh living costs and which would lead to £3m to £4m extra cost to Scottish Agriculture.

This idea united the whole of Scottish farming and led to another debate in the Scottish Parliament on 25/5/03.

Ian Ivory a financier of Ivory and Stewart took over the role of SAC Chairman in 2003.
Deloitte Touche were appointed to come up with answers. At this point, I would give the figures for

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Edinburgh Students</th>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>173</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>156</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>126</td>
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By comparison in 2003, Auchincruive, Ayr had 376 students and Craibstone, Aberdeen had 213 students. The SAC Board should have been able to see a trend.

Agriculture Minister Ross Finnie MSP made a generous offer of £5m if SAC would refurbish at Auchincruive, Ayr. This was rebuffed by SAC.

By 2006 SAC, which is a private company, followed the route favoured by many companies worldwide. Build houses. This policy led to 40 acres out of Craibstone, Aberdeen’s 160 acres designated for housing. SAC aimed to raise £40m at £1m per acre. Auchincruive, Ayr had a lesser number of houses. 20 acres at £800k to raise £16m. The golf course, business park, hotel and equestrian centre were to bring in a further £14m. The Anglian Water Group (AWG) were brought in as facilitators. They were to receive 20% of £30m equal to £6m. AWG got nothing if the deal failed.

At about this time SAC and Barony College agreed that only Barony would approach the Scottish Funding Council for funding for their new Barony dairy unit. This was because SAC would soon be awash in cash.

Lord Lindsay, a merchant banker, was appointed SAC Chairman in October 2007.

2007 saw the SAC at its zenith. SAC/AWG stated in a press release that it was planning a £150m Auchincruive development with 150 expensive £400k to £500k houses, business park, five star hotel, and championship golf course to rival Troon and Turnberry and an equestrian centre. SAC/AWG stated this would create 2000 jobs and be worth £80m annually to the Ayrshire economy.

This SAC plan was very hard for a campaigner like myself to disavow with so much academic (SAC) and business experience (AWG) behind it. However the housing collapse led by the subprime mortgage scandal ruined all the SAC/AWG plans.

In 2009, the SAC produced a Masterplan. Within this document Savills gave an independent asset review which stated land values in 2010 continuing as far as 2016 were only 20% of 2007 values. This meant that by April 2010, SAC/AWG could only expect £160k per acre at Auchincruive, Ayr. On April 8, 2010 SAC stated they now needed 40 acres of houses @ £400k per acre to raise the original sum £16m. This puts the SAC at odds with the figures in its own SAC Masterplan.

Despite having earlier stated in 2005/6 that SAC and Barony agreed only Barony would apply to the Scottish Funding Council for regeneration, SAC was forced to follow suit.
were successful in receiving £6m from SFC with £3m coming from SAC as a result of their building plans. Not one house has been built yet.

The sum of £9m allows the SAC to have 10 classrooms at the joint SAC University of the West of Scotland campus in Ayr.

If ever a monument to “joined up” academic planning stupidity was to be erected, the Craige Campus, Ayr should be its home. No one but an academic would train nurses and farmers at the same facility. Squeaky clean meets E Coli heaven. This week (7 January 2013) the annual health warning to pregnant women was issued by the Chief Medical Officer, Sir Harry Burns. This warns women not to come into contact with lambing ewes or even the clothes of anyone doing the work for fear of risks to their own unborn child.

Penrith, England is to see the reopening of the 250 cow dairy unit at Newton Rigg leading to the site offering Higher Education courses on a farm site. The cost of refurbishing is put at £2.4m. This will offer direct competition to SAC. There is a suspicion that rural Scotland was short-changed by spending £9m at Craige Campus. The value placed by Ayrshire farmers to upgrading Auchincruive was around £5m to recreate a world beating facility in a rural setting with all the sounds and smells absent from a town location.

2012 saw the SAC which many in Ayrshire deem to be a failure due to its unwillingness to listen to the local Ayrshire farming community, merge with the FE Colleges of Oatridge, Barony and Elmwood. This was aided by £5m from the Scottish Government to what is essentially a private company which can now do as it pleases with the assets generously handed over. SRUC is the new name.

If the Committee is in any doubt as to what this means they have only to look at the conduct of the SAC Board after it became responsible for the combined assets of the North, East and West Colleges in 1996.

What lessons can be learned from the conduct of the SAC. The SAC Board has long been considered a self perpetuating oligarchy
One SAC Board member is a former Chairman of a secretive health Board heavily criticised recently on TV by a former psychiatric nurse.

On 19 January 2011, the then SAC chief executive to told all 30 South Ayrshire Council Planning Committee members at a public planning meeting they were to disregard the testimony of the person nominated by the Ayrshire National Farmers Union to speak in opposition to SAC plans to ruin Auchincruive.

On the day, the Ayrshire NFU farmer representative was not allowed to rebut the unwarranted attack on his integrity. The SAC Chairman later did admit the SAC Chief Executive was in error and apologised publicly to the Ayrshire farmer in the press.

The SAC borne out of the merger of the old North, East and West Colleges started out in 1996 with a utopian ideal. No one College was to dominate the others. The original headquarters was situated in Perth. This was soon sold for £3.5m and the HQ activities centred on Edinburgh. To this day there has been a democratic deficit.

The power to remove staff is an emotive issue. Can it be right for example that the SAC principal in Ayr is a poultry professor instead of a “cow” or “grass” man? I do not doubt his qualities, I do doubt if he is the right man for the job. The food and drink industry is worth in excess of £7b to Scotland. The dairy industry is the financial powerhouse of SW Scotland.

It all points to the inability of the current SAC Board to understand the needs of SW farmers.

Now that the SAC has absorbed the FE colleges of Barony, Oatridge and Elmwood the question has to be asked “Where is their direction of travel” It is not a good omen when the well-respected head of the Barony College has departed since the appointment of another veterinarian as SAC chief executive. (2012)

Finally the Committee should invite the NFU Scotland President Nigel Miller to tell why it was necessary for him to write to the Cabinet Secretary Richard Lochhead in August 2011. “It is a sad fact that our Scottish system, which was once world leading, is
probably no longer the best". He also calls for a need to examine how we make the most of our existing sites.

Conclusions based on my knowledge of SAC and the need to avoid the pitfalls that has led to Scotland falling behind in Higher Rural education provision:

- Merging colleges is going to favour the college with the admin centre.

- Colleges that do not have the principal on the premises need to have a strong responsible character on site that staff and students can relate to.

- Conversely, too many strong personalities may lead to friction and the appointment at the satellites of "Yes men or women" by the top man or woman.