Education and Culture Committee

Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill

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In general I am content with the way the Scottish Government has responded to my review and how that has been enacted through the proposed legislation.

However I will make comment in a number of areas more to make some more general comments and hopefully dispel some myths and misunderstandings that have grown up around what I said in my review.

Firstly I repeat that when myself and those that helped me write the review made our recommendations it was done in respect of what we felt was best for the learner and not in any way to save cost. There will be costs savings from regionalisation as has happened in other parts of the world as more countries and provinces move to a ‘regional’ model of some kind but the other benefits that a more focused system brings are the real benefits and it was those that drove us to recommend the regional model.

Secondly at the heart of a lot of what we recommended was a move to an outcome based system which set clear outcomes for the FE sector but left each to be innovative and creative in terms of how they achieved those. In the report we said we were not convinced that those who set targets or monitor Colleges were equipped to create and manage an outcome system well and I still have concerns in this area.

Outcomes in simple terms are focussing on what you want and less on how it is done. If you want clean water out the end of the pipe then you check the water is clean and not what happens within the pipe to get it that way. There will be standards that have to be achieved within the pipe but there may be many and varied ways of achieving those standards and we should not worry too much about how they are done if we get clean water out the end. From what I have seen to date I think there is still too much inconsistency in how individual staff members at SFC are interpreting this and while for some College outcome statements that are short and focused and cover no more than a couple of side of A4 there are others that are long and still too full of kip data collection that still discusses what goes on in the pipe. While the second year of setting these has been better than the first there is still much to be done to get them to a consistent and sensible level.

In terms of reserves and surpluses the view we took and the recommendations we made had nothing to do with trying to save money but was all about fairness. Even in the restructured sector some Colleges due to their geography or demographics will always find it easier to generate surpluses than others and the calibre of management has little if any effect on that ability. Our view was that it was unfair at least not to ask the question that if there were available surpluses that could be used without harming the individual College they were generated in then somewhere there should be a discussion around where could they best be used across Scotland to help the learner. Currently there is no vehicle for doing this which is why we recommended the formation of the Strategic Forum who would take in that responsibility and examine this and other issues e.g. National staff contracts, pay bargaining, international marketing etc.. That is why in choosing the new chairs for
each region it is critical to ensure that they can take a Scotland wide view as well as a local view in how they work.

In terms of Chairs we believe that they are the key people now within the sector as from them stems all else. One of the key reasons the sector had become dysfunctional was that the relationship between Chairs and Principals had in many places become unclear and that situation needed resolved.

Can I be clear that I never said or wrote that a Principal should not attend or be a key part of the Board. All I said was whether they become a legal member of the Board is up to the Chair and Board of each region to decide in discussion with their Principal. Of course they should attend and be part of each Board but legal status should be a local decision. I sit on the Board of two public bodies and in one the CEO is a legal member on the Board and the other is not. That was a decision each CEO reached in discussion with their chair and Board and works well for each. Does in make any difference to how we work as a Board and with the CEO. Not a jot as each CEO as well as Board decided this is how they wanted to work.

In terms of pace of change I am not one of those who think it is going too fast and indeed would have strived to make it quicker. As mergers come together so the Chair who will be the Chair post legislation should be the one to choose the new Principal as if it is another then the key relationship between the Chair and the Principal will not be established at the right time. I myself resigned as the regional lead for Ayrshire for that specific reason in that I had made it clear that I would not be applying for the regional Chair position post legislation so when the need to recruit the new Principal became necessary I made way for someone who could have wanted to be the Chair post legislation.

Similarly I probably would have been less flexible on regional structures and think that within a few years all will have moved to the merged model. However that is not a criticism as such as I understand that change involves a journey and there are different ways and pace for regions at times.

Where I do think we could have been cleverer, and we are now tighter but too late for many, is in sharing the learning and data amongst merging Colleges rather than in many cases each College collecting and paying for their own. We could have established a national data room for each merging College to use which in the end I think would have saved the substantial amounts of public money that have been spent by individual Colleges doing it themselves. Laterally this has started to happen but not before many had already done it themselves.

However, even given all the above, I think that where we will be post legislation in terms of a fit for purpose FE sector will be a lot better than where we were.