UCU Scotland submission to the Education and Culture Committee on the work of the Scottish Funding Council

The University and College Union is the largest trade union in the Post-16 education sector in the UK, representing 120,000 academic and related members across the UK, and is the largest union in the higher education sector in Scotland.

We are happy for this submission to be made publicly available and shared as appropriate.

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the work of the Scottish Funding Council who play a positive and critical role in ensuring there is a dialogue in the sector on issues including research, widening access and gender equality. In particular, we want to comment briefly around outcome agreements and also on widening access.

Role of the Scottish Funding Council

UCU is strongly supportive of the important role of the Scottish Funding Council. Scotland’s colleges and higher education institutions quite rightly receive significant levels of public funding to take forward education, teaching, research, knowledge exchange and learning, and so the SFC has a pivotal role in providing direction and guidance, and to ensure appropriate standards in all activities are being met. We consider it is vital that there is a non departmental public body, separate from the Scottish Government, with its own governance structures, that provides strategic guidance, support and has oversight of the post-16 education sector.

The 2005 Further and Higher Education Act also gave the SFC an important role as an advisor to Scottish Ministers. The SFC is very well placed to take forward this role, and UCU is very supportive of the SFC in undertaking this advisory role.

It is important that the SFC has the authority to take forward this work, and is able to act in the wider interests of education and the people of Scotland.
Outcome Agreements

The Committee asked for views on the extent to which outcome agreements improve the way the SFC allocates funding and secures high quality learning provision.

The Post 16 Education Act 2013 required universities to consult with trade unions, amongst other bodies including students, on widening access agreements. UCU believe that as widening access agreements are part of an institution’s outcome agreement, then it is sensible that consultation include not simply widening access but also other areas that the outcome agreement is considering.

The sector has a mixed record with regard to how well it consults on outcome agreements, including widening access, with trade unions and other partners. While discussion on a governing body is worthwhile UCU’s view is that it is not on its own sufficient for an institution to regard a debate on a governing body as meeting the requirement to consult with the trade union. We do have some good examples of higher education institutions including draft outcome agreements on joint negotiating committees, and providing the opportunity for trade union input at specific outcome agreement consultation meetings. UCU would recommend that all institutions should be placing draft outcome agreements on agendas of joint negotiating committees. At present some institutions do this but by no means all. The SFC should ensure that the consultation carried out by the university with regard to the widening access agreement is meaningful, and, we would argue, the overall outcome agreement has been properly consulted on throughout the institution.

Widening Access

As stated above we would look to the SFC to do more to ensure that institutions consult appropriately with trade unions and other bodies. We strongly support the use of outcome agreements and the linking of funding to them and widening access. We are clear that they are one of the levers that will result in Scotland’s demonstrably poor record to date being improved but feel that the SFC should be in a position to push for more ambitious targets. The current situation, while there is a glacially slow move in a more positive direction, is unacceptable with, according to research¹ carried out by UCU in 2014 Scotland having the lowest percentage of university entrants from the poorest backgrounds (26.2%), and the lowest proportion of entrants from state schools. UCU would be supportive of the funding council being more forceful and robust with regard to widening access and more generally in their part overseeing the sector.

¹ http://www.uco.org.uk/7004#.VfGOQpPNKWA
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