Written Submission from the Education and Culture Committee

Report on draft budget 2012/13

Equalities issues
83. While this report is addressed to the Finance Committee, the Equal Opportunities Committee has also asked committees to set out how equality considerations were built into their budget scrutiny.

84. As this report has made clear, there is a considerable range of new policy developments being proposed throughout this Spending Review period. It is not possible for the Committee to analyse in depth the impact of each of these changes on all equality groups. That said, the Committee has already highlighted Scotland’s Colleges’ concerns about the possible impact on older learners if there is to be a greater emphasis on provision for 16-19 year olds. There are some other issues that the Committee wishes to highlight briefly in this section.

85. The Committee received a communication from the Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability suggesting that around a third of places had been cut in part-time courses for students with learning disabilities. In oral evidence, the three college principals who responded stated that they had not reduced provision for this group. The Cabinet Secretary added—

“I expect that all college principals will want to ensure that those who are most in need will continue to be served and supported and I am quite sure that they will focus on that group in particular.”

86. The Cabinet Secretary also expressed his determination to ensure that part-time students would not be not adversely affected by the budget settlement, an issue that was raised with the Committee by the Open University.

87. The principal of John Wheatley College, which serves some of the most deprived communities in Scotland, considered that—

“resources must be prioritised for the poorest communities in Scotland. A key function of further education is to help to address the Government’s economic agenda of having a fairer, wealthier and healthier Scotland, but resources may not be available for cohorts of learners when they need them the most.”

88. The principal of Borders College said—

“We are concerned about the impact of decisions on provision for the most vulnerable—individuals with disabilities and learning difficulties—and on part-time opportunities, which are largely taken up by women.”
In discussing the general question of access, the Cabinet Secretary restated his intention to find ways of legislating on widening access and said that he wants to “redouble our efforts with regard to certain vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups”. He also rejected a suggestion in questioning that students in areas of economic deprivation were more likely to go to colleges than universities and that cutting college budgets was therefore likely to have a disproportionate effect on the poorest areas.

The Committee recognises that there are obligations on the Scottish Government and relevant public sector bodies to make decisions in accordance with the relevant equality duties. While the Committee acknowledges that the Scottish Government produced an Equality Statement for the budget, given the scale of reform across FE and HE, the Committee would welcome updates from the Scottish Government and the SFC demonstrating that relevant equalities considerations are being taken into account.

As with some other areas of the Spending Review, the impact of the budget and new policy proposals on the hardest to reach students will not become clearer until later. The Committee considers it a priority for the Scottish Government to keep it updated on how this group is performing over the Spending Review period.

Education and Culture Committee
16 November 2011