UCU Scotland evidence to the Education and Skills Committee on the Scottish Funding Council

The University and College Union (UCU) is the largest trade union in the post-16 education sector in the UK, representing over 110,000 academic and related members across the UK, and is the largest union in the higher education sector in Scotland. Our members in Scotland are predominantly in higher education and we have limited our comments on the Scottish Funding Council’s (SFC) work to that sector.

Introduction

UCU welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the work of the committee in scrutinising the work of the SFC. We were specifically asked to give our views on the performance of the SFC set against the outcomes expected of them by the Scottish Government.

Before doing so it is important to state that UCU is supportive of the work of the SFC. We think, with the Enterprise and Skills Review reporting this week, that it is crucial for there to be a body at arms-length from ministers responsible for all post-16 education and focusing solely on education rather than part of a more amorphous structure.

Additionally, it is worth noting that Scottish higher education is often, rightly, lauded by politicians with our universities regularly scoring highly in international comparisons both as institutions and also for the impact and quality of the research carried out and the disproportionate amount of research funding Scottish universities win. While this is ultimately down to the work of staff in universities, the SFC should also take credit for their role and stewardship of the sector.

Scottish Government targets

The most recent ministerial letter of guidance sets out a number of priorities for the SFC. These were wide ranging but we wish to comment on the SFC’s work on a number of them in this submission including:

- Access to education for people form the widest range of backgrounds and the implementation of the Commission on Widening Access;
- Internationally competitive and impactful research;
- High quality learning and teaching; and
- Addressing the underrepresentation of women on governing bodies of universities and the gender imbalance at senior academic levels in institutions.
**Widening access and outcome agreements**

We note that in their submission to the committee the SFC commented on the use of outcome agreements, setting out what universities (and colleges) need to deliver in return for their funding from the SFC. Outcome agreements have a crucial role in the steps taken so far to address Scotland’s record on widening access.

The Post-16 Education Act 2013 required universities to consult with trade unions, amongst other bodies including students, on widening access agreements. Widening access agreements are an integral part of the outcome agreement and we believe that universities should therefore consult not only on widening access but also on other areas that the outcome agreement is considering.

We have examples of universities consulting with joint union negotiating committees on their outcome agreement but this is not sector wide and we would like to see the SFC ensure that all universities consult fully on their outcome agreements. Universities are rightly autonomous bodies but in ensuring that universities fulfil their duties there is scope for the SFC to act, at times, in a more robust manner.

Given the importance of the college sector in articulation and widening access to higher education generally, we see the SFC’s role, having responsibility for all post-16 education as being critical to the implementation of the commission on widening access’s recommendations.

**Addressing the underrepresentation of women on governing bodies of universities and the gender imbalance at senior academic levels in institutions.**

Scottish higher education has made significant steps in the number of women both sitting on and chairing governing bodies since NUS Scotland’s research showed that in 2011/12 only 25% of court members were women and none of the chairs. We welcome the progress, but surmise that, rather than this being as result of the work of the SFC, it was the threat of possible legislation on governance that forced universities’ hands in an attempt to show they could get their house in order. Sadly the Higher Education Governance Bill, which we warmly welcomed, failed to include gender balance for governing bodies, despite amendments which we supported being laid, on the basis that the measure was, at the time, out with the competence of the Parliament. We therefore welcome the Scottish Government’s intention to introduce a bill to ensure gender balance on public boards and are strongly of the view that the bill should include higher education institutions in its provisions.

In March 2016 UCU published a report\(^1\) highlighting the gender pay gap in universities with, across the UK, women academics facing a shortfall of £6103 a

year. The reasons for the gender pay gap are varied and complex with some of the solutions often likely to be found at institutional level. Barriers to promotion and the lack of women at a senior level is a common theme, and we welcome the focus of the letter of guidance on this area. The SFC’s recent Gender Action Plan references, amongst many other measures, the need to encourage and enhance promotion and career progression, and sets a timescale for progress in identifying barriers by summer 2018. This is welcome but we would be keen to see both increased leadership emphasis and robustness on this issue.

**High quality learning**

As they note in their submission the SFC has a statutory responsibility for ensuring the quality of teaching and learning in Scottish higher education which is carried out via the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF). UCU is supportive of this model. We have separately set out for the committee our opposition to the legislative consent motion on the UK Government’s Higher Education and Research Bill’s proposal to allow Scottish universities to opt in voluntarily to the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). In short, we believe that the existing Scottish framework works well and that if, even on a voluntary basis, some Scottish universities opt into the TEF then there will be irresistible pressure for other institutions to do the same, with the result that Scottish higher education will be a further step along the road to marketisation, without proper scrutiny which the sector, Scottish Government and the previous Scottish Executive have otherwise stood against. We commend the work of the SFC on the QEF but worry that its role in this regard and the QEF itself will become redundant if the TEF is allowed into Scotland by the back door.

On research and the Research Excellence Framework (REF), we are currently consulting with branches on our response to the expected consultation ahead of the next REF and after the recent Stern review (the independent review of the REF). For many years we have pointed out that the REF has considerable shortcomings for the sector, particularly on staff by increasing workload pressures, demands to meet unreasonable targets, arbitrary divisions between teaching and research, and increasing inequalities between different groups of staff. All that said, Scottish universities score well on the REF, as a result of the work carried out by their staff, and as stated in the introductory remarks, the SFC should take credit for their role in the sector.

**Statutory role of the SFC**

The 2005 Further and Higher Education Act which created the SFC set out that the underpinning statutory role of the body is to provide coherent provision of post-16 education, but also established the body with an important role as an advisor to the Scottish Government. Over the piece, the SFC has been fulfilling its statutory remit on coherent provision, but it is important that the body has some separation from government to be able to take forward this statutory role effectively. There is surely an onus on the Scottish Government to look to the SFC in its advisory capacity to provide advice to ministers on post-16 education.

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