

Unison Scotland

UNISON is Scotland's largest trade union with members across the public, private and voluntary sectors. UNISON members in further education deliver essential services including cleaning, advice, administration, libraries, technical and research support, IT, finance, learning and student support services, security, porter services and management. These employees are often the face of Further Education in Scotland and contribute a great deal to the overall student experience, providing the foundations for high quality learning for all. We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the committee's work.

The experience of regionalisation has been overwhelmingly negative. Many of the issues we raised as potential problems of regionalisation when it was proposed have come to pass. Nor has Regionalisation, which despite the rhetoric, was always more about saving money than delivering better education effected the promised transformation of further education. Instead we have a sector struggling financially, with service levels for students declining and staff morale at rock bottom.

We are concerned with improving the quality of student experience – and the quality of the services our members provides. Regionalisation has not been a driver of improvement for either of these.

We warned that in terms of the curriculum that courses offered would be centralised. This has been the case. Usually this has been justified on the grounds that it prevents duplication. What it means though is that local provision has been undermined. Students either have to accept a more limited local offer, or travel. This has significant equalities implications. Travel is less of an option for some groups. Disabled people or those with caring responsibilities for example. The reduction in nursery provision we are currently seeing will disproportionately effect women returners to learning for example.

Regionalisation has not for example stabilised college finances. Put simply colleges run up against funding difficulties which they try to resolve via voluntary severance – they then examine what impact this will have on service provision later. What this means is there is no consistency of student experience – or level of service that they might get. Students in some colleges will have fully staffed full time bursary offices but others will have at best access to a part time service. Our members have taken to describing this model of provision as “the Swiss Cheese approach”.

The impact of this is not difficult to see. UNISON has at various points since regionalisation surveyed levels of stress experienced by College Staff. We presented these figures to college management in Jun 2019

- 37% of support staff reported having taken sick leave due to stress or partially due to stress (at least a 17% increase since 2016).
- 60% felt that workloads were high or extremely high, 62% were concerned about their own workload and stress & 56% have suffered stress specifically due to workloads.

- Over 60% of respondents were unaware of stress policies at work (almost double figure from 2016).
- 97% said Managers hadn't spoken to them about Group Stress Risk Assessments and 73% said Managers had never discussed work levels and stress with them.
- After returning from stress related sickness 85% of respondents were not advised by Colleges to complete an Individual Risk Assessment form and 90% did not do so (This is consistent with information obtained through Freedom Of Information requests).
- Almost 69% of respondents felt that their stress issues were not dealt with by the Colleges in a satisfactory way.

Here is a picture – over time – of conditions worsening for the staff, who are in many different settings, meant to be supporting students. This is hardly the recipe for an improving educational environment.

Post Covid – there are issues for the provision of direct front facing services - as colleges attempt to replace face to face services with telephone or online provision. There may well be a role for diversity of service provision but these moves put quality of service behind the desire to reduce costs.

Privatisation is still used as a lever for cost savings in further education (catering, cleaning) to the detriment of quality, and the loss of work experience opportunities for students (e.g. hospitality catering). This privatisation of services, often to companies notorious for their poor work practices, has been indicative of a failure on the part of college employers to adopt a fair work approach

Catering in particular was badly hit during the pandemic and the sector has been slow (putting things charitably) to restore services to the level students could expect pre pandemic. There are examples of colleges replacing cooked food with vending machines. This also shows up an inequality of status Why for example are students in some colleges denied access to hot food through the course of the day – while others have access to kitchens? This also points to a lack of status for college students. Is anyone aware of Universities where students have to go all day without access to a hot meal? .

Regionalisation has also in some cases encouraged an unhealthy ambition for growth in some college managements. In recent years chasing of overseas markets by some colleges delivers little financial return for the investment.

One development that has delivered some, which although not part of regionalisation was perhaps helped into being by it has been a national bargaining structure. Far from perfect and still not fully realised this has helped provide a more level playing field and equitable treatment for college staff across Scotland.

In conclusion, many of the predictions that UNISON made at the time of Regionalisation; of centralisation, withdrawal of local services and the prioritisation of cash savings over quality, have materialised. Not all of the

problems in the sector can be put down to regionalisation, but there are few instances where it hasn't been more a part of the problem than the solution.

One of the reasons the Further Education sector struggles because those who use it, and those who provide it are seen as less worthwhile than those in the Higher Education sector. A sharp improvement in the status with which Further Education is held won't undo all of the difficulties caused by regionalisation – by significant progress will be impossible without it.

Tracey Dalling

Scottish Secretary

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