



# **Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 education**

The UNISON Scotland submission to Putting Learners at the Centre:  
Delivering our ambitions for post-16 education

**December 2011**

## **Introduction**

UNISON is Scotland's largest public sector trade union representing over 165,000 members delivering services across Scotland. UNISON members deliver a wide range of services in the public, community and private sector. In education UNISON members deliver essential services including advice, research support, IT, finance, learning and student support services, cleaning, administration, libraries, technical and security, porter services and management. These employees are often the face of Further and Higher Education in Scotland and contribute a great deal on the overall student experience, providing the foundations for high quality learning for all. UNISON also represents the vast majority of Careers Advisors working in Skills Development Scotland. It is essential that the voices of all those involved in post-16 education contribute to the debate on its future. UNISON Scotland is able to collate and analyse member's experience to provide evidence to inform the policy process. We therefore welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on Putting Learners at the Centre Delivering Ambitions for Post-16 Education in Scotland

## **Response**

### **Funding**

While UNISON welcomes the focus on improving post-16 education it will be difficult to make progress while funding for the sector is under such pressure. Scotland's Colleges are facing substantial budget cuts leading to job losses and course closures. Unemployment is rising rapidly creating extra demand for places in colleges and universities as people across all ages seek education and training to improve their chances in a challenging jobs market. The Scottish Government has protected Higher Education spending but Further Education budgets have been cut by 13.5% over the next three years: £70million cut. A Freedom of Information request by UNISON shows that at least 150 jobs have been cut this year and hundreds of courses closed. There is potential for thousands more jobs to be lost in the coming years as the funding cuts begin to take effect. The extra £15million recently announced by the Minister still leaves a cut of at least £55million while the guarantee of a job education or a training place for all those aged 16 to 19 will restrict places available for those out-with this age group unless more places are available. Cutting jobs in the education sector will also increase unemployment which will add costs to the benefit bill and cut spending in the wider economy. These cuts are causing pain now and will make it harder for Scotland to escape recession.

Budget cuts have already pushed colleges into mergers in recent years and this process is accelerating under the new funding pressures. This will impact further on courses and jobs. The process of merging leads to downwards pressure on the terms and conditions of staff. Merging is also time consuming and focuses the institutions inwardly on structures rather than delivering services.

The ad hoc nature of college mergers is creating difficulties we therefore welcome the Government's decision to look at the sector as a whole. We are not convinced that regionalisation offers the best solution. Regionalisation or merging to create "super colleges" seems more focused on saving money than improving delivery. We are concerned this will lead to increased job losses. The crucial

role of colleges in supporting people to get the qualifications they need to find and keep work will suffer.

The commitment to Scotland's young people is of course welcome but in this recession many people are seeking to get new skills to find or keep work. FE colleges need to offer places to people of all ages. Those with work or caring responsibilities rely on local delivery through FE institutions in order to gain training and qualifications. A key value of college courses is that they can be undertaken close to home. This cuts down on travel and childcare costs: key barriers to those on low incomes accessing and completing courses. Travelling long distances also adds to childcare costs as children have to be looked after longer. Budget cuts mean that the Scottish Funding Council received £2.8m less than requested for student bursaries. Some young people also lack the confidence to undertake study out with their own areas. Transport links are often poor which makes it difficult and expensive to travel. There is also the added issue for young men who often face or fear violence when they travel out with their own communities. Local delivery of courses is crucial to people embarking and finishing their further education and training.

It is important that employers in Scotland contribute more to funding post 16 education. We believe that employers should contribute because they benefit from the improved skills of workers. We believe that a compulsory training levy on employers is fairer than a voluntary one. The days of working for one employer for forty years are long gone. If the levy is not compulsory then better employers will subsidise those who are not willing to pay and yet still benefit by employing people that others have paid to train.

Despite the Government's ambitions courses are being cut across Scotland including vocational courses like aeronautical and aircraft engineering, computer animation, digital gaming, green-keeping, and horticulture. Some colleges are also reducing opening hours at a time when the Roe Report called for longer hours to offer more flexible learning opportunities to help learners combine work and study. There needs to be increased funding to match the increased demands placed on colleges by Government's commitments.

### **Staffing issues**

UNISON submitted comments to the two independent reviews of college and university governance and has asked for meetings with both review groups. These are included as appendices to this response. UNISON members in Higher and Further Education feel that management and governance bodies do not engage adequately with staff both on the day to day running of institutions or on organisational improvement and development.

The current proposals for regionalisation must take into account the views of all staff working in colleges. Members are particularly concerned that this is a money saving plan rather than one to improve delivery and accountability. In particular they are concerned that it will lead to even more job cuts.

Where plans for regionalisation of colleges may have some merit is if they improve college governance. UNISON has argued for some time that there needs to be greater oversight of college management. UNISON believes that colleges would be better run if Ministers had a more direct role. Much more needs to be done to improve the quality of the boards and it may be these proposals could

improve this particularly if board members are directly elected. UNISON expects any new governing body to include representatives from all recognised trades unions.

In order to fully comment on the regionalisation plans we need a great deal more clarity on the staffing issues.

- Who will the new employer be?
- Will this require new legislation?
- How/will staff transfer to a new employer?
- Will there be a national set of terms and conditions for staff?
- How will these be negotiated?

Merging colleges in recent years has been difficult for the staff concerned. Consultation with staff has been minimal and the key staffing issues have been unresolved long after mergers have been pushed through. If changes on this scale are to be made then the staffing issues have to be resolved as part of the change so the new bodies can focus properly on delivery. The people who deliver services cannot be an afterthought it is they not structures that deliver improvement and increased efficiency.

It is clear that the Scottish Government's commitment to a Living Wage for public sector workers doesn't stretch as far as Scotland's colleges. Answers to our FOI request show that at least 372 people are paid less than the living wage in Scotland's colleges. Only three replies indicate that work was underway to move towards a living wage for all staff. One college even claimed not to know what the Living Wage was. At a time when costs are rising low pay is having a devastating effect on people's lives. This impacts on the wider economy as workers have less to spend. Promises without funding are meaningless.

### **Careers Guidance**

Careers officers need to be fully involved in the development of new post-16 support. They are the key professionals trained to ensure that people are able to make the right choices throughout their working lives. Much of the public discussion about post 16 education focuses on 16-19 year-olds but in reality students cover all age ranges. The careers service has seen a 50% increase in adults accessing their services during this recession. Many adults are seeking new skills as they lose jobs or see career prospects cut off by cuts. The Careers Service is facing increasing demands at a time where budgets are very tight indeed.

Our members in the careers service are concerned that there is not adequate funding to meet the commitment of a place on training or work for all 16-19 year-olds. If the young person is to benefit in the long term it needs to be appropriate and lead to a long term future job. It should not just be about the politics of keeping youth unemployment figures low.

New technology has allowed more people to access careers information more easily. The **My World of Work** website is still only a website. School leavers unable to find work, adults seeking retraining and cuts in courses mean there is increasing demand for fewer college places. Young people in particular are finding that increased competition leaves them unable to get places on college courses that similar young people have accessed in the past. Many people face

multiple barriers to employment and need the focused support of careers adviser. This involves in depth work with individuals who have complex needs. In the 14-19 age group many young people have already disengaged from education or are in the process of doing so. Guidance teachers therefore cannot replace the role of careers staff. Unemployment or lack of career prospects means increasing numbers of adults are seeking advice to help them find new jobs or progress in their current workplaces. Careers advice is a specific role and requires a range of skills and knowledge. It is about a lot more than showing clients some college prospectuses and telling them to clean up for job interviews.

Members are particularly concerned about Activity Agreements. The funding of the pilot scheme was much higher than the level available for implementation. Currently the focus appears to be more on having a positive outcome on paper rather than a genuine career path. Members feel they are just being used to mask youth unemployment.

### **Conclusion**

UNISON represents a range of education staff and careers advisers. We have used their experience to inform this submission. The sector is facing enormous challenges and the best route forward is to fully involve both users and staff in designing future development. We therefore welcome the opportunity to participate in this consultation and look forward to further participation in the process.

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