



College Regionalisation: proposals for putting learners at the centre

The UNISON Scotland submission

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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 colleges 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 colleges in Scotland and contribute a great deal on the overall student experience, providing the foundations for high quality learning for all. UNISON Scotland is able to collate and analyse members' experience to provide evidence to inform the policy process. We therefore welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on College Regionalisation: Proposals for putting learners at the centre.

Response

Funding

UNISON is concerned that proposals for college regionalisation are not based on putting the learner first but are instead driven by the substantial cuts in Further Education budgets. Scotland's Colleges are already cutting jobs and closing courses and the future funding levels set out by the Scottish government will lead to more. We believe that regionalisation could make a difficult situation worse. Aside from concerns about the narrowing of opportunities for students to study in their local areas our key concern is that many of the roles undertaken by our members will be moved into a "big shed" type delivery model. Shared services are still the default option for improved public service delivery despite the lack of evidence that they improve public services or make substantial saving. In fact the experience of most public sector organisations in the UK and internationally is that moving to shared services creates a period of disruption and at best takes five years to make any cost savings.

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 indicated 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 substantial hole in FE funding 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 funding is made available. Cutting jobs in the education sector will also add to 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.

Funding pressures have led to colleges merging but the current process 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. 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.

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.

Local delivery also ensures that colleges are able to build links with local schools, businesses and the wider community. It is the local connections which make them best able to develop in a way that responds to the needs of local people.

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.

Shared services

UNISON is concerned that the regionalisation proposal is about making savings rather than improving delivery. It is clear that a shared service approach to service delivery still has many advocates despite the lack of evidence of them either bringing improvement or making any savings of the type needed to deal with the current spending cuts. In Further Education the non teaching roles (e.g. librarians, finance staff, and welfare staff) risk being pushed into a "big shed" delivery model. These require face-to-face contact with students.

UNISON Scotland recognises that all public sector organisations should take up opportunities to work more efficiently and effectively. We believe that improved cooperation between public service is essential, but this does not require setting up vast call centres or bringing in the private sector. Sadly these are pushed by private consultants as a way to improve services and save money. They are in fact extremely costly and have high upfront costs. The investment ratio is 2:1. Often costs are pushed to another department. The National Audit Office report indicates that so far projects have taken five years to break even.

Learning from Australian experience:

- Initial costs of shared services are underestimated because implicit costs and externalities are often not included.
- Introduction of shared services is complex and costly and requires detailed research.
- While some cost savings can be achieved, targets are rarely met.
- Savings are mainly from job losses.

- There are job losses in regional areas which affect the viability of rural communities

A typical problem has been the underestimation of the costs of this type of project. For example: Bromsgrove District Council and Redditch Borough Council decided to start sharing management functions in June 2008. The promised savings figure that prompted the move was substantially reduced as soon as implementation began and the costs involved began to mount up. So far £250,000 has been saved per council through sharing the management team but this is net of the £1million pounds it cost in redundancy payments and equalising the pay and conditions across the 2 councils. It cost £100,000 upgrade and make compatible the IT systems.

Staffing issues

UNISON is concerned that the process of merging colleges will create pressure for a race to the bottom for the terms and conditions of staff in the new bodies. Merging is also time consuming and focuses the institutions inwardly on structures rather than delivering services. 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 organizational improvement and development. Plans for regionalisation of colleges may have some merit 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 governing body to include representatives from all recognised trades unions.

The current proposals for regionalisation must take into account the views of all staff working in colleges but 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.

Conclusion

UNISON represents a range of staff delivering Further Education. We have used their experience to inform this submission. The cuts in funding leave the sector facing enormous challenges. Fully involving both users and staff in developing programme for change rather than imposing from above is the best way to improve services. We therefore welcome the opportunity to participate in this consultation and look forward to further participation in the process of change.

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