



The Church of Scotland

Church and Society Council

121 George Street
Edinburgh, EH2 4YN

Tel: 0131 225 5722

Fax: 0131 240 2239

Email: churchandsociety@cofscotland.org.uk

Web: www.churchofscotland.org.uk

Charity Number: SCO11353

SUBJECT: Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education

REQUESTED BY: Scottish Government

AUTHOR: Ewan Aitken

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The Church of Scotland has had a long interest in post 16 education and in particular, the work of the Further Education (FE) college sector. It's participation in the network of ecumenical chaplaincy teams across the sector means it knows first-hand of the many challenges for students and also for those times of celebration.

This response has 7 main messages;

- We welcome the commitment to high quality, varied post 16 educational opportunities
- That the process of change is too quick even if many of the changes are to be welcomed
- The transition is under resourced and that will have unintended consequences
- There is a huge difference between progressing change to achieve savings and cutting budgets based on savings not yet made.
- Public value has to focus on outcomes for the student and not simply on economic outcomes

- The focus on employability and sustainability economic growth keeps a utilitarian view of education that is out of kilter with Scottish educational tradition
- There should be a deliberate bias to the poor in all public policy. The new regional structure is design to increase access amongst poor communities where the largest numbers of those without positive educational outcomes reside. We are not convinced that the system has the capacity to cope with being successful in these areas

1 A Work in Progress!

We recognise that the consultation paper is set against a background of basic policy decisions already made, where funding decisions have already been taken with regard to the overall amounts FE Colleges receive, with last year's reductions of around 10% being followed by some 27% over the next three years. Given the reduction of resources we understand the haste with which the FE Colleges are facing changes to increase efficiency, reduce any unnecessary duplication and propose ways to regroup into a regional framework .

There are advantages in moving swiftly to change the system and save money. However, there are also risks in moving too fast. The original consultation paper *Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education* has been followed up with a joint paper from the Minister and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), - *College Regionalisation: Proposals for Implementing Putting Learners At The Centre*. This will soon be followed by the *Scottish FE College Governance Review* undertaken by Professor Griggs and due before the end of the year. We appreciate that a series of wide ranging meetings and consultations has been taking since the original paper was published and there is feedback to the proposals. *College Regionalisation: Proposals for Implementing Putting Learners At The Centre* does include a timetable for the critical decision making.

This response is particularly concerned about the role of FE Colleges in meeting the policies of the Scottish Government for post-16 education. We have not addressed all the consultation questions set out in the document but we have attempted to offer some constructive suggestions towards making progress towards the headline aim of putting learners at the centre and offering a place in post-16 learning for all 16-19 year olds. We do include observations about the kind of impact colleges have on local communities and how public regard is achieved. We shall submit this response to both current consultations.

2 The commitment to a place in post-16 learning for all 16-19 year olds

The general thrust of the Scottish Government's ideas for post-16 education **is** to be commended. We are happy to note the vision outlined in the Ministers

Foreword of “a post-16 education sector which plays a central role in improving people’s life chances, delivering the best outcomes for learners; which supports a world-class research capability and which maximises its contribution to sustainable economic growth for Scotland.”

The commitment to a place in post-16 learning for all 16-19 year olds is an important undertaking and it is good to see that is linked to a promise to extend this to those aged 20-24 but also to see that these undertakings are seen as part of a process from the early years through to early adulthood. We note that this positive approach is already declared on the Scottish Government’s website: “What post-16 learning opportunities are there for young people? Every young person who is eligible to leave compulsory education and is making a transition to further learning, training or employment within the Senior Phase should receive an offer of post-16 learning.”

It is unclear as to how those with learning difficulties will be dealt with in the process of regionalisation or in terms of what the commitment to all 16-19 year olds will actually mean. It would be helpful to have a deliberately articulated strategy on this issue as it is an area of real concern for those pupils and their families.

3 Choices for College Boards

We further recognise that the governing boards of Scottish Colleges are facing critical choices and are going to be submitting proposals back to THE SFC and the Minister. They will have to decide what they really must keep within their structures and programmes and what they will have to let go. They will have to do this in conjunction with at least one and often several other college boards against a very tight time schedule. For these College boards there will be a huge concern for the College staffing situation where following last year’s funding allocations much of the potential for voluntary redundancies has been met. The changes they decide to make will almost certainly require jobs to go. We note the allocation of some £15m to assist the reorganisation towards the regionalisation of College provision. We wish more money could be found to ensure that the transition to a new pattern of provision could proceed with less pain. We acknowledge the huge gift of time and talent made by those who serve on the governing bodies of FE Colleges. The next few months will involve a great deal of hard work as they seek to do the best for their college and its local community.

4 Taking Account of Public Value

We have found the Scotland’s Colleges publication “The Value of Colleges” to be an interesting reflection on the notion of public value being the value, not just the cost of what the public sector does.

<http://www.scotlandscolleges.ac.uk/scotlandscolleges/publications/publications.html> (June2011)

There are five case studies presented including what is quoted from the case study on Dundee College-Working for Families which offered taster courses that

ran from September 2008 to June 2010. *Course content was chosen to interest learners, and with further education, training and employment opportunities taken into account. Courses included Child Care, Health Care, Social Care, Call Centre Skills, Horticulture, Psychology, Food Hygiene, Hair and Beauty, Cookery and Forensics. In 2008-09 the programme included 13 courses, with 130 participants. In 2009-10, this rose to 26, with 215 learners. Some learners took part in two or more programmes. The college has identified 77 learners who have gone on to further study. (5) In the long term gaining employment and no longer relying on state benefits is a clear positive outcome. However, some positive public value impacts are less tangible and harder to measure – such as improvements in individuals' health and/or non-reliance on drugs and alcohol, reducing both healthcare costs and potentially costs relating to involvement in crime through drug and alcohol abuse. Families can be positively affected by the adult gaining in self-esteem, possibly reducing the chance of children requiring care. In addition, successful learners might go on to participate more fully and positively in society, strengthening and enhancing their communities.*

Sadly, budget cuts have curtailed Dundee College's participation in this programme which was undertaken in partnership with Dundee City Council's Working with Families team. Such partnerships concerned with access to learning **are** an important part of the work of Colleges. Both College and the wider community benefit.

Public value, in its widest sense, must be understood– and valued. It must be given due consideration when funding decisions are made. It must not be ignored because it is not understood – or because it is considered 'too difficult'. Those making key decisions about the allocation of resources have a responsibility to dig deeper and take public value into account, especially at a time of financial challenge.

We think the Government and the SFC should look carefully at the concept of Public Value and take account of this when approving targets and outcomes.

5 Challenges and Priorities.

Education is the first priority – employability & sustainable economic growth follows.

In 2008 the member churches of Action of the Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) adopted a position paper about Scottish Education – A Christian Vision for Scottish Education

<http://www.acts-scotland.org/downloads/publications/2009/ChristianVisionBooklet.pdf>

It included the following statement. *“The purpose of education is to develop the full potential of each person - for our own good and for the good of others.*

Education should develop all our human capacities - moral, spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual. It should help us to make meaning out of life and to acquire a sense of purpose in and for life. It should enable us to choose our priorities for life, to develop values and to grow in virtue, and to develop loving

relationships with God, with self and with other people.” In this Christian vision, the Scottish Churches find that they share many of the aspirations of the Scottish Government for all young people to be provided with opportunities to realise their full potential in life.

However driven we are by economic considerations about post-16 education and its potential to make a young person ready to be employed (and move us all towards growth and better living standards) we must ensure that post-16 education continues to be concerned with the whole person so that each person is valued not only for what s/he can do and produce but also for what s/he contributes to the well-being of the community and Scottish society. Well rounded persons relate well to others.

Person centred learning is a process that ensures that the needs of the learner are a central consideration whether the learner is acquiring a work related skill or pursuing an academic course. The standard of the professional development of teaching staff as teachers as well as their subject knowledge and skills is crucial to meeting the needs of students.

When a young person chooses a course at an FE college s/he should be aware of its relevance to their learning needs and potential and have a realistic understanding of the job prospects that may follow on from the achievement of that learning. However, given that economic and social change is ever with us, many students now at Colleges and Universities will face the need for retraining and new work skills at some points in their working life. Post-16 education at College (or University) should be concerned to ensure that learners leaving this phase of education and moving on to the world of work will have had a good experience of formal learning and have no fears about returning to further education and training when that is required. Good education should always leave the learner with an appetite for more education.

It is also good to appreciate that 22% of students in Scottish Colleges are on Higher Education courses. Some transfer to Universities. Where college students are going on to University it may, in part, be because FE staff have the teaching skills that help their students gain sufficient confidence and self-belief in their potential for further academic achievement. In any changes being made it will be important to minimize the loss of experienced staff.

6 Young people need to be aware of the opportunities that are open to them after school and have positive life chances.

If the analogy is pathways and journeys then we need to consider how young people set off on the road. What encourages and inspires them to train and to learn?

Careful guidance at secondary school on career choices and employment prospects is an obvious priority action. Meaningful work experience placements

at secondary school level can inform and encourage young people to explore opportunities for education and training.

However it has to be recognised that many students get involved in courses at FE Colleges after the age of 19yrs. If there is an issue with 16-19 year olds not in employment, education or training (usually labelled as NEETs) then there has to be a way such young people can be encouraged to put themselves forward for education and training in their 20s or 30s.

The provision of a place for all 16 -19 year olds will not be achieved without adequate resources. This fine aspiration for 16 – 19 year olds must not be realised by reducing the commitment to the over 19 year olds. Ambitious plans for economic growth through improved systems of education and training can only succeed if there are jobs and opportunities for young people. However to secure a better future for young Scots we have to start from where we are.

7 The Relationship of Colleges to the Communities they serve.

a) Formal and informal links with young people in schools

It is important to keep local communities engaged and interested in the opportunities for education and training at the local FE College. If the economies of scale and the advantages of regional structures are to be realised this should not be at the expense of a local presence. Currently there are many examples of primary and secondary school pupils visiting and engaging with local FE Colleges. It is important to generate in young minds a positive experience of local colleges, whether it be participating for a day at an event that uses College expertise or College Facilities or being encouraged to go on a short leisure course relevant to their interests e.g. music, dance, art, sports facilities, science projects, exhibitions and demonstrations. Colleges enjoy established relationships with secondary schools as they work together to ensure appropriate opportunities for pupils. Local authorities need to maintain and develop good relationships to ensure that primary and secondary school pupils can build on positive experiences of further education. Local business, in partnership might be encouraged to resource initiatives. All young people need chances and choices to kindle their interests.

We realise that a College welcoming P5 children into their premises for, art, dance drama or a science fair and engaging with them will not have an immediate outcome that can be measured or quantified but if it makes young people more ready to think positively about perhaps undertaking an FE Course 7 or 8 years further on in their lives is that not good? Is there any way to ensure that such a possibility remains a possibility when changes are made to the system?

b) Communities: rich and poor

Access for students coming from fairly well-off backgrounds provides relatively few problems. There are issues of interest and motivation, trying to ensure that the student is making a realistic personal choice in following courses in an FE college environment.

Attracting and encouraging students from poorer backgrounds is more challenging. If the Government's ambition of providing a place in post-16 learning for all 16-19 year olds is to be realised students will need to be attracted from all types of community.

It is good to know that 29% of college teaching is for students from Scotland's most deprived postcode areas.

The Poverty and Truth Commission, an ecumenical body of which the Church of Scotland was a major participant, reported its findings in April 2011.

<http://www.povertytruthcommission.org/index.php?id=7>

It should be required reading for all the planners and providers of educational and training provision including the Scottish Funding Council and College Boards. There have been many well intentioned schemes devised to lift communities out of poverty. Sometimes they do not succeed because they fail take account of the views of the very people the schemes are designed to help. The strapline on the Poverty and Truth Commission's Report is: 'Nothing about us, without us, is for us.' It accords with a strand of existing government policy. When the paper *Skills for Scotland: Accelerating the Recovery and Increasing Sustainable Economic Growth* was issued its first objective was empowering people. (There are three more; supporting employers, simplifying the skills system and strengthening partnerships – all still relevant). Empowering people can never be a top down process. When people are valued, accorded dignity, their stories told, their views heard, they can become empowered and with purpose, self-confidence and self-esteem they will say what they need. Imagine for a moment the price of success. What if half of the unemployed young people from poor communities not in employment, education or training (usually labelled NEETs) sought their place in post-16 education - we are concerned that the reductions in resources would mean that this new structure could not cope.

The Poverty and Truth Commission says 'Poverty is structural, being systemic to the distribution of power, resources and educational opportunities in society.' There are a number of agencies concerned to promote community development particularly in the low income and poor areas in Scotland. Many Colleges work with partners concerned with meeting particular community needs – a good example, cited above, is the Dundee City Council's initiative Working for Families who cooperated with Dundee College to provide taster courses for potential entrants into more formal College based learning.

The Church of Scotland, mainly through the Ministries Council has a Priority Areas Action Plan where developing new models of church life are promoted hand in hand with a commitment to developing new models of community. The

life chances and the choices open to young people in deprived areas are of huge importance in the development of new models of community life. In partnership with other faith groups the Church of Scotland supports the work of Faith in Community Scotland, an anti-poverty organisation founded in 2005. The staff and volunteers come from the Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh communities. They have a huge level of experience within the public, private and voluntary sectors and they share a commitment and passion to reducing poverty in Scotland.

Colleges have teams concerned to promote wider access. It is to be hoped that when Colleges adopt a regional structure local initiatives and local relationships with local authority and voluntary group working with people in poorer communities will not be diminished or lost. If the Government's ambitions for post-16 places for all is to be achieved it will require a lot of 'joined up' thinking and action from a number of players in the field.

8 Supporting learners and others in Colleges

The Church of Scotland works with other churches and religious groups to support and to promote the work of chaplains in FE College situations. There are a number of Chaplains who offer spiritual care to students and staff in a number of Colleges where their voluntary work is appreciated. A few Colleges have 'Spiritual Care Teams'. In a time of rapid change in Colleges we see a potential for this role to be developed to provide confidential support to people coping with change and coming to terms with its consequences. The Scottish Churches Education group on FE Chaplaincy is making a separate submission to the consultation on this specific matter.