



Scottish Government's draft budget 2013-14

The UNISON Scotland evidence to the Education and Culture Committee

September 2012

Introduction

UNISON is Scotland's largest public sector trade union representing over 165,000 people delivering services across Scotland. UNISON members deliver a wide range of services in post-16 education: essential services including cleaning, advice, administration, libraries, technical and research support, careers advice, IT, finance, learning and student support services, security, porter services and management. These employees are often the face of education 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 member's experience to provide evidence to inform the policy process. We therefore welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to this committee.

Response

Scotland's colleges are facing substantial budget cuts leading to job losses and course closures. The priority in post 16-education appears to be the government's commitment to free higher education for Scottish students. Further education budgets have on the other hand been cut by 13.5% over the next three years: £70million cut. Following campaigns by students and staff unions the government reacted by promising some one-off additional funding this still leaves funding per unit of learning reduces by 10% according to Scotland's Colleges. It is no surprise that when more than a fifth of 16 to 24 year olds are unemployed there is a huge demand for college places. As jobs are lost across Scotland many adults are also looking to retrain or gain additional skills. The Herald reported that at least 10,000 people are now on waiting lists for college places. Colleges need adequate funding to meet these demands.

Colleges are already cutting jobs and closing courses in response to funding cuts. We expect there will be far more as the cuts begin to bite. Colleges will also face the added complications of a new regional structure and the funding cuts also seem to be encouraging many colleges to merge. 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 concern is that many of the roles undertaken by our members will be moved into a "big shed" type delivery model. There seems to be a misapprehension that this type of delivery model will deliver substantial savings without impacting on the delivery of courses.

A Freedom of Information request by UNISON indicated that at least 150 jobs were cut in the last academic 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 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.

Funding pressures have led to colleges merging but the current process is creating difficulties. Regionalisation or merging to create "super colleges" seems more focused on saving money than improving delivery. This will lead to increased job losses. The staffs who remain then have to cope with increased

workloads and a pay freeze. 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 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.

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. For example, Carnegie College is now only open until nine two nights a week and no longer open on Saturdays. Many of the roles undertaken by our members such as those in student welfare are crucial to ensuring that students are able to complete their courses. Yet these jobs are being cut and the opening hours for a range of advice services are being cut.

Cuts in administrative staff have led to large queues at the start of term as students try to get answers to their many questions. The fact that government has now launched a phone line number for Skills Development Scotland to deal with inquiries about college places shows that colleges cannot cope with the demand for information and places. Technicians' posts have been cut so there are increasing concerns about health and safety of students as a key part of their role is to ensure that tools and equipment are maintained and used properly.

Members are also reporting that there are plans to cut back on careers advice for students. Students are being directed to the My World of Work website rather than being offered face to face contact with a professional careers adviser. More than ever students need individual advice.

Shared services

It is clear that a shared service approach 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 and Higher 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 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

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.

The previous increase in public sector funding had only begun to tackle the problems caused by years of underinvestment. Secure long-term funding is crucial if higher education institutions are to plan for the future. The proposed cuts in public spending are the products of ideology not economics. Modernising colleges and universities effectively is not a one-off task but an ongoing process. It will be increasingly difficult to meet the challenges facing the sector. Adequate funding encourages staff to develop innovative solutions to service delivery. We can through a fairer tax system and clamping down on tax avoidance raise enough money for the services we need. A fair system also means that those who gain higher earnings through their qualifications will pay more tax to pay towards all public services.

Staffs are under increased pressure to maintain delivery with less money and people. Morale is low as indicated by the numbers of staff opting for redundancy. Our members in higher education are being balloted for strike action. The offer from employers does not meet the Scottish government's commitment to a living wage. There needs to be increased funding to match the increased demands placed on colleges by Government's commitments.

Without adequate funding our institutions will not be able to attract and keep the best staff, deliver the best teaching or undertake the best research. This will lead to a loss of funding from other sources, including foreign students, further undermining the service. Cuts of the current level will lead to Scottish students moving away to study, again draining money away from Scottish institutions and further harming our economic and social capital.

Scottish education institutions are critical to the success of the Scottish economy through providing key human and technological resources for business. The government could also investigate how large companies in Scotland could contribute more towards the cost of higher education as they are one of the principal beneficiaries. This could be through specific levies in Scotland or through cooperation with the UK government focusing on the Corporation Tax or Employers' National Insurance system.

The EU has a substantial research budget and the forthcoming 8th EU framework presents an enormous opportunity for HE in Scotland. However, there have been problems with funding bureaucracy and in particular, there has not been sufficient funding set aside for administrative and support work or for support staff training. This means that researchers often have to do this work wasting their time and resources. The Scottish government should join us in asking for more targeted funding for support staff within research grants.

Conclusion

UNISON Scotland represents a range of key staff in post 16 education. We therefore welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the committee.

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