

Joint Response to Scottish Government Consultation 'Putting learners at the Centre' from Scottish Heads of Sociology Group and British Sociological Association

Introduction

The Scottish Heads of Sociology Group represents the heads of departments of sociology in all degree awarding /University institutions in Scotland. We are committed to improving the quality of teaching and research in Sociology in Scottish higher education and to maintaining and improving on Sociology's excellent record of widening access. We welcome the Scottish Government's consultation on 'Putting learners at the Centre' and its commitment to the principle of free public higher education.

The British Sociological Association is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. It is the national subject association for sociologists in the UK and its primary charitable aim is to promote sociology. It has a membership of over 2,500. It operates a network of over 40 active research interest groups and specialist groups. Research interest groups range in size from 20 people to well over 300. Members of research interest groups do not have to be members of the BSA and this helps to extend the reach of our research networks and encourage cross-disciplinary knowledge transfer. Specialist groups include our postgraduate forum, early career forum and our sociologists outside academia group. We have a busy annual programme of about 70 events each year. Our annual conference is the largest event in our calendar, attracting 1,100 delegates in 2011 (our 60th anniversary). We publish four learned journals and produce a 40 page magazine for our members three times a year. We also run a website, a Blog and have a lively Facebook following. We are actively involved in the work of the Academy of the Social Sciences and have an External Affairs Group which responds to consultations. Teaching and learning is a central part of the Association's activities. For more information see www.britisoc.co.uk.

Sociology has a long and proud history in Scottish life and civic culture from some of its early origins in the work of Scottish Enlightenment figures such as Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith, the pioneering work of Patrick Geddes and Robert Maclver. It has been taught in British universities for more than a century, with hundreds of academics currently teaching more than 20,000 students in the UK. A recent international benchmark report led by Professor Helga Nowotny, now President of the European Research Council, said that British sociology was "at the international forefront" of sociology worldwide. The report said that UK sociology: "compares extremely well in a wider international frame as, perhaps, being second only to the US," and "continues to be intellectually innovative and vibrant, and shows many reassuring signs of a strong and lively engagement with the contemporary world and its manifold problems."

Sociology graduates have made a considerable contribution across a wide range of employers in Scotland and worldwide because their degrees instil a range of valuable and flexible skills, such as how to generate new knowledge and information using a wide range of tools, and how to work effectively both in teams and independently. These skills, and the insight into the workings of society that sociology provides, make a substantial contribution

to developing Scottish economic and public life. People who study sociology go on to a wide variety of jobs, including working in health and education, the criminal justice system, the advocacy and rights sector, marketing and communications, urban regeneration, housing, community organisations, social policy and a range of roles in private sector companies.

Consultation Questions Responses

Section 2

How effective is the SCQF in promoting flexible learner journeys? Are there any barriers and, if so, how could they be overcome? How could the SCQF be used more effectively to deliver our aims?

SCQF has provided a model of which Scotland can be proud. It is effective, particularly in the promotion of articulation between FE and HE, often through partnership arrangements. More publicity and internal promotion of SCQF across all sectors would enhance its use as would incentives to admit students through articulation routes.

What more can the Government and its partners do to encourage more articulation between colleges and universities?

SFC could use the proposed increased powers to require a certain number of places to be guaranteed to those articulating from HNC/D. Alternatively there could be a funding premium on student places that come through the articulation route.

What scope is there to make the transition from school to university more effective for learners, while reducing unnecessary duplication?

Most school students in Scotland have not had the opportunity to study Sociology – or many of the other social sciences. The foundation of level 7 in Scottish Universities is therefore crucial, both in relation to enhancing skills as independent learners but also in getting foundational subject knowledge. We would not wish to see any dilution of the four year honours degree which is the cornerstone of Scotland's higher education system and places it closer to the European model than the system in other parts of the UK.

Good quality information in schools to help students make informed choices about university application is needed. In particular, students in schools in disadvantaged areas with less experience of university application may need to get a wider range of advice and information than currently possible. Local authorities and Universities Scotland might both have a role to play in promoting better information to young people in school. SFC should use its powers to require universities to establish stronger links with schools.

Section 3

What do we need to do to help more people from the most deprived backgrounds get a place at university? How can we frame this in legislation?

Funding mechanisms should reward universities for places given to students from deprived backgrounds. SFC should monitor universities for spending widening access funds on student recruitment, articulation and support measures that help deliver more of such students at Scotland's universities. We welcome the proposal (paragraph 72) to "ask the SFC to develop a Widening Access Outcome Agreement in partnership with lead universities and to introduce financial penalties conditional on achievement". Consultation on these agreements should include the widest range of stakeholders.

Section 5

How best can we maximise the impact of our excellent research?

Sociological research in Scotland is excellent internationally. We welcome the Scottish Government's aim "to maintain Scotland's world leading position in university research" (paragraph 92). Excellence should continue to be the sole criteria for research funding in whichever universities it is found. We are thus concerned about the proposal to increase concentration of research funding and with the statement "This will consolidate the majority of our research funding in a smaller number of universities with a track record of world-leading research that levers the greatest levels of research funding from other sources and maximises economic impact" (paragraph 101).

Sociological research contributes not only to Scotland's economic well being but also to Scotland's social, political and cultural life.

We support the idea of industry and universities working together on 'industrially-led projects' (paragraph 107) but this principle ought also to apply to public and third sector projects.

Research remains vital for all universities although the balance between teaching, pure research and applied research will vary widely between institutions. Sociological research has impact and we are confident that this will be validated by the forthcoming REF exercise. It is important that the impact of research should be seen broadly in the context of Scottish society and any impact internationally and over a long enough timescale and not confined to short term economic impact.

How can the quality and coherence of PhD training be improved?

We welcome the support given to the ESRC Scottish DTC and we would argue for further financial support from the Scottish Government to provide enhanced research skills training available across the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science.

Section 7

What are the pros and cons of our proposals for the regionalisation of colleges? Are there other criteria we should consider in determining the optimal regional structure?

We are concerned at any move that might reduce the diversity of provision in the College sector or lead to additional barriers to adult learners returning to education. Long travel

times in urban areas might well constitute such a barrier. Keeping local provision is important to the widening access agenda highlighted elsewhere in the consultation. There is a strong history of articulation into Sociology from access courses and particularly from HNC and HND Social Sciences that we believe should continue.

We think the concept of 'regional universities' is an unhelpful one. The university sector in Scotland is diverse in terms of the mix of disciplines taught, the balance between teaching and research, the nature of the research, and the geographical and social origins of the student populations. But a simple division into regional universities and the rest does not adequately capture this diversity. Every university that might be termed 'regional' will have areas of excellence or specialism that draws students from wide geographical locations both within and outside Scotland.

We are opposed to rationalisation that would reduce the amount and diversity of Sociology provision in Scotland. The diversity of degrees currently available with Sociology components are a fundamental strength of the current system and maximises Sociology's ability to contribute to Scotland's economic, social political and cultural life. This diversity of provision is complementary rather than overlapping. It is important that Sociology is available at all SCQF levels across every region. There is not a good case for consolidation of the provision of Sociology across Scotland (paragraphs 141, 144, 145).

Indeed, even where Universities seek to focus on a niche role (paragraph 142), there is a strong case for the importance of Sociology alongside other social sciences contributing to the understanding of science, technology or business.

What are the pros and cons of the new leadership and support role envisaged for the SFC? What lessons can we learn from successful change management elsewhere?

We support a proactive role for SFC in managing resources for the sector. The call for SFC to 'simplify its processes and streamline its bureaucracy' (paragraph 150) is one we welcome. But just as important is transparency and accountability, not only of the SFC, but the universities it funds. We would welcome a debate on the composition and constitution of SFC to ensure it is fully representative of relevant stakeholders and Scottish society. Requiring SFC to "justify its recommendations and publish the evidence base on which it was founded" (paragraph 145) is a welcome, but insufficient step towards greater transparency; it needs to be supplemented by more thorough changes to governance arrangements which we discuss below.

Section 8

What are the pros and cons of the proposed needs-based regional commissioning model for colleges?

It is stated that "overlap exists in provision and communities served between some universities who are strongly regional in character and the college sector" (paragraph 72). There is then a suggestion that a regional funding model could be considered for these

'regional' universities. As we have already argued, we do not find the concept of regional university to be a useful one. But seeing the relationship between universities which do have a significant local student base and colleges as an overlap misses out the importance of the links that have been built up around articulation and access between these institutions. This will put at jeopardy some of the aspirations of paragraphs 43-45 for improving the flexibility of the learner journey through FE and HE making optimum use of the SCQF framework, a goal we strongly support. Enhanced partnerships between Universities and Colleges will be an important feature of the aims (paragraph 63) of the Regional Coherence project being extended this year by SFC. If the 20% most deprived areas of Scotland are to see improved progression through the further and higher education systems then there should be nothing put into the funding model that sees FE and HE competing for resources rather than co-operating to provide the greatest opportunities for those from deprived areas. Thus we would also oppose any move to transfer level 7 and 8 teaching into FE colleges and away from 'regional' or other universities. A model where there is improved facilitation for articulation is the way forward.

Is there a market for co-investment with employers? If so, how do we select the employers with whom we might co-invest in order to maximise the leverage of Government funding? On what basis should Government funding be made available?

We support the proposals for seeking philanthropic and legacy contributions to Scottish higher education (paragraphs 164, 165). It is also important to seek sources of funding from the wide spectrum of public, private, and third sector business. However, such a contribution must always be balanced by proper provision to prevent any undue influence over the curriculum. The added value of universities depends crucially on their autonomy to look beyond immediate policy or commercial pressures. Paradoxically it is this very autonomy that enables them to make a distinctive contribution to economic, social and political innovation.

In what circumstances would it be appropriate and fair to expect people to pay for their learning?

Higher Education is a fundamental public good that is vital for the future of a vibrant Scottish society, culture and economy. But Scotland also needs to be open to students from elsewhere in the world, including the rest of the United Kingdom. The experience of a Scottish education and its values, help make Scotland an attractive place in which to live and invest. We welcome the government's opposition to fees for Scottish students. We see no case for charging up to £9k per annum for RUK and OVS students, with the inevitable disincentive effect this must have.

Section 9

Given the proposed changes to post-16 provision (non-advanced learning and skills) and delivery set out in this document, what are the key considerations for governance?

We welcome the Review of Higher Education Governance chaired by Professor Ferdinand von Prondzynski and look forward to a public debate on its findings. Such a debate is urgent.

The traditional structures of academic accountability of university decision making, through Faculties and Senates has disappeared over the last thirty years. It is no longer clear how Principals are accountable to their key stakeholders for their decisions. Scotland's long and proud history of democratic higher education is thus threatened.

As argued earlier, there should be a debate about the governance arrangements for SFC as well as universities and colleges. SFC membership should be broadened to ensure that FE and HE policy reflects the views of all stakeholders and of wider interests in Scottish society. Courts and Governing Bodies of Scottish universities should operate transparently, and in accordance with the Nolan principles of public life; with clear recruitment mechanisms, representing relevant stakeholders, including staff, and with the power to hold principals and senior managers to account.