

Centre for Bioscience, the Higher Education Academy
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The changing climate of Tertiary Education in Scotland

Recent political developments in Scotland have caused considerable controversy in the further and higher education sectors. The Scottish Executive remains opposed to the introduction of top-up tuition fees in Scotland, which has raised many issues. In the sessions 2003/04 and 2004/05 the numbers of English students studying in Scottish universities increased markedly and progressively, raising fears that this could signal the start of a flood into Scottish Universities of English students seeking degree courses with significantly cheaper tuition fees, even accounting for the proposal by the Executive to increase tuition fees for English students studying at Scottish Universities by the order of 15% when top-up fees are introduced in England. Fears have also been expressed that any such flood of 'fee refugees' could exclude some Scottish students from places in Scottish universities, forcing them to seek places at English universities where they would be faced with paying top-up fees. To counteract this, the Executive has promised to increase the value of loans (repayable by the student after graduation) and bursaries available to Scottish students studying at English universities when top-up fees are introduced. Such promises have done little to assuage criticisms of unfairness from student leaders. There are fears that the drift South might not be limited to students, as the £900M windfall that top-up fees should bring to English Universities could enable them to attract leading Scottish academics with the lure of higher salaries. Heads of Scottish Universities have estimated that an extra £100M will be needed to maintain parity with English Universities, and the response so far from the Executive has been to urge Scottish Universities to raise this revenue from research, consultancy and other sources.

Perhaps even more controversial has been the Scottish Executive's decision to merge the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) and the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC) into the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council (SFHEFC). When proposing the merger this time last year the Scottish Executive expressed the remit of the new joint body in terms of: creating "parity of esteem" between Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) sector institutions (on the one hand regarding institutions in both sectors as "Specified Tertiary Education Providers", or STEPs, while on the other hand subdividing tertiary education institutions into four categories - i) ancient and chartered universities, ii) universities established in or after 1992 along with other HE institutions, iii) non-incorporated colleges, iv) incorporated colleges [post 1992]); ensuring that the "adequate and efficient" provision of further education is extended into higher education; broadening the influence of the new joint funding body on policy in the university sector; "requesting" universities to consider mergers; moving from funding by grant to funding by contract (with consideration being given to providers out with the current FE and HE sectors). Although broadly welcomed by representatives of employers and trades unions in the industrial sector, reaction from representatives of institutions, trades unions and students in the university and college sectors was mainly hostile. This hostility centred on the possibility of: loss of identity of

the two sectors; loss of autonomy of institutions; the formal creation of a two-tier system within the university sector; "untrammelled powers" of the funding body to interfere in university operations; creation of new divisions within the tertiary sector; competition between organisations in the current tertiary sector for funds (currently £800M for HE to £475M for FE); provision of tertiary education by organisations out with the current FE and HE sectors. Although the Scottish Executive appears to have backtracked to a degree on some these proposals, the episode nevertheless gave us an insight, and a rather unsettling one, into the vision of our future held by our political masters. Following a period of consultation, the enabling bill is currently before the Scottish Executive (see www.scotland.gov.uk/about/ETLLD/HESP/00019989/fhescotlandbill.aspx), and we eagerly await the final outcome.

Enhancement themes

The *Enhancement Themes* initiative, supported by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and SHEFC, focuses on two themes each year, with a view to engaging staff in developing and implementing good practices in learning, teaching and assessment. Activities supporting the first two themes, for 2003/04, are drawing to a conclusion. Activities in the *Assessment* theme centred on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of assessment, and involved a series of eight workshops relating to: streamlining assessment; using assessment to motivate learning; aligning outcomes to assessment; developing variety in assessments; online assessment; ensuring validity, reliability and fairness in assessment; improving feedback on assessment; assessing transferable skills. A report was also commissioned on the Honours degree classification system, and the probable replacement of the current system seems likely to concern all of us in the near future. Activities in the *Responding to student needs* theme, set in the context of the distinct system of four-year degrees in Scotland, centred on: student support in the first year of study, particularly induction, personal tutoring and alternatives, improving communication, and models of first year learning; student evaluation and feedback on their learning experience, particularly its value, transparency of use and purpose, and mechanisms of evaluation and feedback. For a summary of these activities see www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk. Reflection on the first year experience of bioscience students was also the topic of a conference *The Bioscience First Year; putting research into practice* sponsored by the LTSN Centre for Bioscience's Professional Development Programme (www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/events/reports/paisley.htm).

The current enhancement themes are *Flexible delivery* and *Employability*, and after seeking opinions from relevant parties the respective working groups have identified key themes for development. In *Flexible delivery* these will be pedagogic issues, support for flexible learners and supporting infrastructure, and in *Employability* integration of employability skills into the curriculum, examples of this, linkage with personal development plans, resources, evidence base, and placement learning. Outcomes from these developments will be considered in my next report.

The School to University Transition

The STEM project (School to University Transition in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths), sponsored by the Scottish Executive Education Department, has critically examined what universities see as lacking in school education for students progressing to study STEM subjects at university level (www.gla.ac.uk/stem/advisorygroup/index.html).

In the course of this review academics from each of the 13 Scottish universities were interviewed. While the sterling efforts of teachers in delivering the current science curriculum was recognised, there was a consensus that a review of the current science curriculum was urgently required. These findings were consistent with a parallel review of the primary-secondary curricula by the Curriculum Review Group for the Scottish Executive (www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/education/cerv-00.asp), and recent HM Institute for Education (HMI) reviews. Problems identified in the STEM report were that the current secondary curriculum seems to focus on subject content and assessment, it does not seem to be relevant to contemporary issues, and it does not seem to engender enthusiasm for further study of STEM subjects. In the current system there does not seem to be a smooth transition in the science curriculum from primary to secondary levels, and from Standard Grade to Higher level. The report proposes a curriculum less focussed on subject content but which engages pupils in scientific principles and practice and examines contemporary issues relating to 'science in society', and which generates an on-going interest in the study of the subjects and careers related to them. In addition, the curriculum should cater for development of what we in universities have come to know as transferable skills or employability skills, particularly self-motivation, numeracy, literacy, the ability to apply knowledge, and ability to problem solve.

The report of the STEM project recognises that we in Scottish universities could play a constructive role in the implementation of such proposed changes to the secondary school curriculum, for example involvement in design of new curricula, and in the development and delivery of the necessary Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for science teachers. There also seems to be a growing awareness in Scottish universities (see above comment on the *Responding to student needs* enhancement theme and *The Bioscience First Year; putting research into practice* conference) that in terms of student support and our approaches to Learning Teaching and Assessment (LTA) that we ourselves could do more to make the transition from school to university more seamless for an increasing number of students. We are, perhaps, in need of becoming more aware of the teaching, learning and assessment styles used at upper secondary level and matching our initial LTA approach for first year students to this.