Current relationships between local authorities, colleges and schools in Scotland

The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992 changed the statutory relationship between local authorities and further education colleges in Scotland. Recent research by Ian Finlay of the Scottish School of Further Education at Strathclyde University shows that fears that conflictual relationships between further education colleges, schools and local authorities would arise as a result of this and other recent legislation are largely unfounded. He found that:

_f_ Local authority elected members are represented on 24 boards of management of the 41 colleges that responded to the survey. Local authority officials are represented on five of the boards.

_f_ In at least four of the twelve local authorities there are formal committees comprising college principals, members of the education authority directorate, and secondary school head teachers. These committees have been set up to discuss issues of common interest. In all the other education authorities there were forums where college principals, secondary head teachers and local authority officials could exchange ideas.

_f_ The impact of local government reform was seen as having a range of possible outcomes. On the positive side, some respondents felt that there could be a closer link between the college and the authority since their client groups would coincide. On the negative side it was felt that certain initiatives could be lost since they would require an authority of a certain size to be able to carry them out. There was concern over the future of bursary provision and over the provision of specialist advisory services by small authorities.

_f_ The main issue causing friction between further education colleges and local authorities is the administration of bursaries for students undertaking non advanced further education.

_f_ The researcher concludes that the competitive environment created by government legislation has not resulted in conflictual, competitive relationships between local authorities, colleges and schools in Scotland.

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The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992 removed further education colleges from education authority control and placed them under the operational control of individual college Boards of Management. The majority of schools in Scotland remain under the control of education authorities. There is therefore some potential for conflictual competition since there is an overlap in the client groups for the upper secondary school and further education colleges.

Other legislation and government initiatives that potentially may affect the relationship between further education colleges, schools and education authorities are the reorganisation of local government in Scotland and the Higher Still proposals which aim to reform the post-sixteen curriculum in Scotland. The former increases the number of education authorities in Scotland from 12 to 32. The Higher Still proposals require co-operation between schools and colleges if they are to be fully effective.

This project sought to examine the relationships between local authorities, colleges and secondary schools in the context of the legislative changes outlined above.

Representation on college Boards of Management

Before the implementation of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, regional councillors were represented on the college councils of all Scottish further education colleges. This study has shown that just over half of the college boards of management, which took over from college councils, have a regional council representative.

Some college principals were keen to stress that the councillors on their board were there in a personal capacity, rather than representing the regional council. This, of course, in strict legal terms is correct. Most members of the college council act in a personal capacity in that they are not delegates of certain interest groups. Certain specified groups do elect or appoint members to college boards. The students of the college, the teaching staff and the non-teaching staff all elect one member each to the board. The Local Enterprise Company is entitled to have one representative.

Under the 1992 Act members of local authorities, college staff or students may not chair the college board of management. Thus it appears that the members of the board who have some kind of democratic accountability, in that they have to face an electorate, are the very members of the board who may not hold the chair.

The remaining members of the board were initially appointed by The Secretary of State for Scotland but as they retire, their replacements will be appointed by the remaining board members. One of the aims of the legislation was to increase the accountability of further education colleges to their local community. It appears that the local community has been viewed in a very restricted way. This is not to argue that employers are not legitimate stakeholders in the work of their local college. However they are not the only stakeholders. Nor do they have the democratic accountability that local regional or district councillors have.

Currently 22 boards have a secondary school head teacher as a member. This did allow for some appreciation of the need for links across the two sectors. The main links with secondary schools is not through membership of the college board of management.

Forums for maintaining links

In three regions and one division of Strathclyde Region committees comprising members from further education colleges, schools and the regional directorate are operating. These committees have a wide strategic remit. For example, in Tayside Region the committee involves the three college principals, a representative of the regional directorate (the Deputy Director and an Assistant Director), a secondary head teacher representative, and a community education representative. The agenda has included the following:

- Bursaries
- GSVQs
- Link Courses
- Under sixteens attending college
- Youth Training/Skillseekers
- Higher Still
- Special Educational Needs

This committee received good reports from three of the parties involved (community education bodies were not surveyed as part of this research). One college principal reported that links are now better than they were prior to incorporation. Another indicated that the relationship with the Region has remained good and that the Assistant Director maintains links with FE colleges. The Assistant Director gave possible reasons for the continued good links. He suggested that the links are now mainly educational. The operational aspects of the former relationship that caused problems, such as administration, personnnel and finance, are now

gone. Also the Region had a definite strategy of maintaining links with colleges. The secondary head teacher on the committee also felt that links had improved He felt that colleges were now freer and less formal. The tone of the liaison meetings had lightened.

Most respondents also identified problem areas. Both the Assistant Director and the college principals identified bursaries as a source of friction. The colleges are looking for more flexibility and the Regions are cautious about extending the bursary provision to new areas. Two college principals would have liked to be able to communicate directly with the parents of school pupils but found it difficult to get access to address lists. One college principal was concerned about the number of adults in secondary schools and the number of pupils staying on at school particularly after enrolling for college courses. He suggested that the evidence pointed to parental rather than school pressure on this latter issue.

It is noticeable that all of these negative points are about the content rather than the process of the regional committee. These are issues that can be and presumably are discussed in the committee. Thus issues that could cause friction and break down co-operation between colleges, schools and the Region have a forum in which they can be discussed and resolved.

Tayside Region ceases to exist after April 1996 and it is unlikely that the committee will continue in its current state. It is to be hoped that the three successor authorities will institute similar arrangements. Only one of the other three authorities with a similar committee is going to exist with similar boundaries after local government reorganisation.

In other Regions or Divisions, committees with relatively limited and specific remits provide a forum for college staff, school staff and regional officials to discuss educational matters. Many of these committees started with funds made available through the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI). Others focused on attracting funding through the European Union.

Main strategic issues

Forty strategic issues affecting post-compulsory education were identified by those interviewed. Eighteen of these responses were concerned with the curriculum. Currricular coherence when moving from one sector to another, articulation, continuity and change, and clarity and coherence formed one set of responses related to the curriculum. This is an area where some progress has been made in some

locations. Another set of responses relating to the curriculum focused on specific qualifications and on curriculum change. Higher Still, General Scottish Vocational Qualification, Scottish Vocational Qualifications, Skillseekers and Records of Achievement featured in these responses. The final set of responses on the curriculum were to do with the education/training divide, the balance between general and vocational education, the change of emphasis of further education from a stepping stone into higher education to training for employment and the need to do the best for each young person in terms of an appropriate curriculum.

Eleven of the responses were on institutional management. Marketing of courses, survival, links with other institutions, balancing the books, resourcing small units, quality, and auditing links were all mentioned as being strategic issues requiring attention.

Three of the respondents mentioned bursaries or student financial support as a strategic issue (three others mentioned it as a difficulty in response to another question). As a strategic issue bursaries were seen to be a central government problem. It was felt that the squeeze on education authority budgets limited their options. There were some complaints about the manner in which some regions operated the bursary system.

The issue of local authority administered bursaries is one that needs to be addressed by central government. It is the single issue that causes most friction between colleges and education authorities. At a time when education and training are so central in our economic and industrial development strategy, perhaps consideration needs to be given to demand-led rather than cash-limited funding for students.

On many of these strategic issues colleges and schools speak directly to each other. However, there is still a role for local authorities in the strategic planning of post-compulsory education in Scotland since they still control all but two of the public sector, secondary schools.

Impact of local government reorganisation

Both college and authority respondents saw potential benefits from local government reorganisation.

One college principal indicated that local government reorganisation provided it with an opportunity to set up a new relationship with the unitary authority which was based on the previous District Council boundaries. The Regional Council had, in the past, discouraged links. Since incorporation, a number of links with the District

Council had been established. The college was involved in an urban regeneration programme with the District Council. The District Council was helping to provide residences for students in the college undertaking higher level courses and was interested in SVQ courses provided by the college.

Two other college principals indicated that they felt that their colleges may gain a higher profile with the new authorities since they would become the only college within the authority's boundaries. In one college it was felt that no change would take place since the new authority was based on the boundaries of the old regional council. A further college principal reported that his college already has to deal with a number of local authorities and that it is therefore prepared for the situation after April 1996.

The same college principal felt that colleges were a stable element during the changeover to the new authorities and that the authorities may turn to the college for assistance. This was echoed by one respondent from the local authority who felt that the college could have a key role in driving the School Based Access programme during the changeover.

A number of concerns were also expressed about the situation following local government reorganisation. In two regions concerns were expressed about the loss of regional initiatives which rely on the economies of scale which can only be provided in a large authority. For example, support for pupils with special educational needs, targeted planning of staff and curriculum development, specialist, subject-based advisory services, including, in one region, a post compulsory adviser, could all be lost. There was also concern from both colleges and regional council officials that the administration of bursaries would become more complex, particularly if cross-border transfers were required.

Conclusions

The relationships between colleges and the regional councils are free from suspicion and conflict although, in most areas, they are not as strong as the relationship colleges have with schools. This is understandable as, in the early years of their freedom from local authority operational control, colleges are keen to assert their independence. However, evidence from some areas indicates that good working relationships, focusing on the educational needs of the community, can be established with colleges, schools and local authorities working in partnership.

This research has shown that there is still a role for education authorities in the strategic planning of post-compulsory education. By drawing together schools, colleges and, in some cases, community education, education authorities can help to foster good relationships and provide forums where issues of common concern can be addressed.

About the study

The findings are based on a postal survey of all 43 incorporated further education colleges in Scotland and a series of structured interviews with college principals, education authority directorate members, and secondary school senior staff. The project was supported by an advisory group comprising civil service, school, college, local authority and university representatives.

Further information

Related *Findings*

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

For further information on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 654328 (direct line/answerphone for publications queries only).