

PE1395/C

Employability, Skills and Lifelong Learning Directorate
Higher Education and Learner Support Division



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Ms Alison Wilson
Assistant Clerk to the Public Petitions Committee
The Scottish Parliament
T3.40
EDINBURGH
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Dear Ms Wilson

PUBLIC PETITION NUMBER PE1395

You asked for the Scottish Government's views on the petition raised by Jan Culik on targeted funding for lesser taught languages and cultures at universities.

The Committee might be interested to note that Dr Culik has written twice to the Scottish Government about this issue.

First, in May he wrote about his concerns about the proposals by the University of Glasgow to cut provision of courses involving East European languages and cultures. Our reply highlighted the autonomous nature of Scottish universities, and made clear that we considered the proposed changes in its provision be a matter for the University, rather than the Scottish Government. Our reply also drew attention to the expectation of Dr Russell, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, that decisions about such matters should only be taken after the views of staff, students and academics had been fully heard.

Subsequently on 3 June, Dr Culik wrote to Dr Alasdair Allan, Minister for Learning and Skills, asking for his support for his petition. Our reply made clear that we did not consider it appropriate for Dr Allen to do so, in his capacity as a Scottish Government Minister. This is because, as we made clear in our initial reply to Dr Culik, we consider its subject provision to be a matter for the University of Glasgow. We are however aware that the University agreed on 22 June that the School of Modern Languages and Culture (SMLC) would continue to teach the full, current range of modern languages and at the levels presently taught, assuming there is sufficient demand. We also understand that the decision not to run honours courses in Polish and Czech has been based on the low numbers choosing to take honours in these languages, with typically there having been no more than four students in junior or senior honours years in the last seven years. Further, we understand that the University reviews its course provision on an ongoing basis in the light of student demand and the availability of resources, and will continue to do so.

More broadly, as the SPICe briefing points out, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has a duty in law to secure coherent provision by the fundable bodies, and it keeps this under review.

In doing so, the SFC has by law to have regard to the economic, social and cultural needs of Scotland. The details of how this duty is fulfilled is however a matter for the SFC rather than the Scottish Government. That said, Scottish Ministers do provide the SFC with the guidance from time to time. The most recent letter guidance to the SFC can be found on the SFC's website at www.sfc.ac.uk.

By way of further context in relation to university funding, the Committee will be aware the Scottish Government's Spending Review proposals are based on increased funding for Scottish universities of some £327 million over the Spending Review period, representing an uplift of more than 5% in real terms each year. This is despite a real terms reduction by the Westminster Government of some £3.3 billion to the Scottish budget.

You also asked if the forthcoming consultation on the post-16 landscape will consider the issues raised in the petition.

On the 14th September 2011 the Scottish Government published a pre-legislative paper entitled 'Putting Learners At the Centre: Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education, which sets out proposals for reforming the university, college and training sectors in Scotland. The proposals encompass the spectrum of post-school activity from vocational education and training to high-level research in Scotland.

There are three fundamental drivers for this reform:

- creating a more **sustainable** approach to funding post-16 education,
- better aligning outcomes with the Scottish Government's Purpose and specifically its ambitions for **jobs and growth** as reflected in the Government's Economic Strategy, and
- creating better **life chances** for all young people.

Within the pre-legislative paper the Scottish Government states that "consistent with our commitment to place learners at the heart of our reforms, our aim is a flexible and fair system that:

- meets the needs of learners and employers,
- results in positive outcomes at all stages of the learner journey, and
- uses public funding to deliver courses, qualifications and degrees as efficiently as possible.

The paper also recognises that some subjects, such as languages, require careful consideration to ensure that they are widely available in universities across Scotland and recognises that provision of such courses needs to be carefully monitored to ensure that this continues to be the case. The paper goes on to explain the following:

"In the case of languages, a distinction needs to be made between learning to speak a second language and cultural and area studies. Maintaining opportunities to learn to speak a second language is important culturally, economically and to ensure a supply of teachers for our schools. We will therefore ask the SFC and the universities to give particular attention to capacity for language learning and to this overall issue".

A copy of the pre-legislative paper can be found at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/09/15103949/0> and the consultation period will close on 23 December 2011. More information about the themes within the paper and the consultation process can be found at <http://www.engageforeducation.org/> We would welcome the views of the Committee and the petitioners as part of the consultation process.

Dr Culik also raised concerns regarding the transparency of the decision making process within the University of Glasgow. As the Committee will know, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning announced in Parliament on 16 June that he has asked Professor Ferdinand von Prondzynski, Principal of Robert Gordon University, to chair a small panel to undertake a review of higher education governance. So as to represent the broad interests within the higher education sector, the Scottish Government was keen that the review panel should also include representatives from unions and students, as well as a chair of court and a rector.

The review's focus is to consider whether there is an appropriate level of democratic accountability and transparency in university governance whilst recognising the benefits of autonomy and the importance of strategic purpose that aligns with national priorities. The review's full remit was published on 29 June on the Scottish Government website at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges/16640/ReviewHEGovernance> alongside a call for evidence. The review is expected report with its findings and recommendations to Ministers by the end of this year.

The deadline for the call for evidence has passed (21 September) but it may be possible to approach the panel to see if they will accept a late response. Further details on the call for evidence are available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges/16640/ReviewHEGovernance/CallforEvidence>.

I hope the Committee finds this reply helpful.

Yours sincerely

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