EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

AGENDA

31st Meeting, 2000 (Session 1)

Monday 23 October 2000

The Committee will meet at 1.30 pm in Committee Room 1.

1. **Questions for Witnesses (in private):** The Committee will consider lines of questioning to witnesses.

   *at approximately 2.00 pm*

2. **School Exams Inquiry:** The Committee will take evidence from—

   Universities and Colleges Administration Service:
   - Anthony McClaran, Deputy Chief Executive
   - Ross Hayman, Director of Corporate Communications
   - Paul McClure, Head of Applications Services

   Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals:
   - David Caldwell, Director
   - Professor Joan Stringer, Vice-Convener

   Higher Still Development Unit—
   - Mary Pirie, Chief Development Officer
   - Tony Keeley, Depute Chief Development Officer

3. **Update of Committee Business:** The Committee will be updated on business in its current work programme.
The following papers are attached for this meeting—

Submission from UCAS  
ED/00/31/1

Submission from COSHEP  
ED/00/31/2
Dear Mr Cowan,

School Exam Results Inquiry

UCAS has been asked to submit evidence to the above Inquiry in an (undated) letter from Martin Verity.

If I may, I would like to submit evidence in two parts:

1. Observations against each of the paragraphs of the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry.
2. A statement as to how the events affected UCAS in its work.

1. The Terms of Reference of the Inquiry

   a) To gather information on the remit and role of the Scottish Qualifications Authority in relation to the issuing of schools qualifications certificates, to inform the inquiry.

   UCAS has worked constructively for some time now with the SQA on a number of fronts and similarly with the SEB and SCOTVEC before SQA was created. For example, UCAS has now been able to reach what was previously thought to be an unattainable goal, i.e. a Points Tariff for all the main qualifications used for entry to UK universities which can draw comparisons across all the qualifications frameworks throughout the UK. This was considerably assisted by the academic rigour and curriculum expertise offered by colleagues in the SQA. UCAS has two concerns, however, about the SQA's work:

   i) The SQA is both the examining body and also the quality control body. The UCAS Subject Panels, administered from our Scottish Office in St Andrews, make comments on Highers question papers which I believe have
been of assistance to the SQA and its predecessors for many years. UCAS finds it surprising that there is no independent quality control of the examining process. In both England and Wales there are agencies which control the quality of the awarding bodies, and which sit between those bodies, and the Government. In Northern Ireland there is a similar situation as in Scotland and it may be no coincidence that there have been two significant errors perpetrated by the CCEA in Northern Ireland in recent years; first at GCSE level and then at 'A' level, which resulted in the wrong results being published.

ii) UCAS was created in 1993 out of a merger between the former Universities Central Council on Admissions, the Polytechnics Central Admissions System and the Standing Conference on University Entrance. I believe that most observers would say that it has been a successful merger. The philosophy on merger was to avoid the concept of merging three different organisations but rather the creation of a brand new one. What follows is a personal viewpoint only, but I have the sense that the two predecessor organisation of the SQA, i.e. SEB and SCOTVEC have not fully merged. One hears talk of “the East” and “the West”. It may be helpful if the SQA could be housed under one roof.

b) To review the impact on school pupils, and on their future prospects, of the performance of the SQA in issuing qualifications certificates this year.

UCAS' interest relates solely to those pupils who need results for entry to Higher Education. It is a difficult issue on which to comment definitively, since it can only be the pupils who can say whether their future prospects have been blighted by this year's problems or not.

The evidence submitted below, under 2, gives a flavour of problems that university and college applicants encountered. The universities in Scotland, assisted by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, were flexible in the way that they dealt with student admissions and it may be that, in the end of the day, few students were disadvantaged. On the other hand, many Scottish pupils did not get their results until after 17 August ('A' level publication day) and they therefore did not know whether their conditional place would be confirmed or whether they would have to go into Clearing before their counterparts in England, Wales and Northern Ireland were both receiving confirmed offers and also negotiating places in Clearing. Currently, UCAS figures show that there are now more Scottish students placed in Higher Education than at the same time last year. That would appear to suggest that the system has now caught up with any students who have been trying to get into university or college this year. On the other hand, there is no way of telling, without asking the students themselves, whether they have got on to the course which they originally hoped for; nor can we tell whether the increased numbers are due, in part, to the increase in applicants from within Scotland this year which became most noticeable as soon as the Cubie Report was published in December 1999.
There is a potentially very difficult issue of disadvantage facing a number of Scottish pupils who would wish to apply for entry to medicine, dentistry, or veterinary medicine or to the universities of Oxford or Cambridge for entry in 2001. The closing date for such applications is 15 October 2000 and the reported number of appeals, noting that the most urgent appeals are those which relate to entry to university in 2000, might mean that those potential applicants might not have the necessary grades to put on paper when they file their application. I have drawn this problem to the attention of the Acting Chief Executive of the SQA and I understand that the SQA are asking schools to draw specific attention, when putting in for appeals, to those pupils who would hope to make applications by 15 October.

c) To identify the causes of difficulties encountered this year, including:
   - aspects of the marking process,
   - problems within the administration of the SQA
   - and the implementation of Higher Still.

UCAS has long been an admirer of the Scottish schooling system and has been helping in the development of syllabuses for the Higher Still programme through its Subject Panels. The new Scottish qualifications framework appears to be rather complicated, or at least the certification of it does. For example, it is not clear to UCAS whether pupils understand that, although they do not enter specifically for qualifications in core skills, they can however be certificated with achieving certain core skills, the assessment of which comes from their being embedded in the Highers programme. Nor is it clear that pupils are fully aware of what qualifies them to receive a Group Award certificate.

Some months ago UCAS was discussing with the SQA application procedures for entry in 2001 and the drafting of the application form. The UCAS form contains two sections for qualifications: the first is for applicants to indicate what qualifications they already have and the second is what qualifications they are aiming for. The SQA encouraged UCAS to ask Scottish applicants not to complete those sections but instead to send to the SQA a file of all those applying from Scotland so that the SQA could then inform UCAS of precisely what qualifications were being aimed for by each applicant. The reasoning behind this was that it was unlikely that individual pupils would fully understand the system under which they were being examined and might complete the form inaccurately. It would appear that pupils are, in certain circumstances, entering for examinations without their knowing what the potential outcomes are.

This is not necessarily to criticise the Higher Still programme but it may underline the point that the examining and certification process is so complicated, that perhaps it was introduced a year too early. There were not dissimilar criticisms of the speed of introduction of the GCSE outside Scotland some years ago, although, in the end of the day, there were no resultant problems with certification.
d) To examine the role of the Executive, and its relationship with SQA, in relation to the events around the school exam results.

It is difficult for UCAS to comment on all aspects of this issue, since it is mostly based in England and had some, but not comprehensive, access to comments made through the media by the Executive, the SQA or others. Two comments can be made however:

i) Had there been in place independent quality control of the SQA, as suggested above, the Executive's role would probably have been very different and there would have been less political pressure on Ministers. Perhaps even greater energy would have been devoted to the plight of the pupils affected.

ii) As the extent of the problems vis-à-vis university entrance became clearer, the Executive was in daily, and sometimes even hourly, touch with UCAS. The officers with whom UCAS dealt within the Executive listened and were helpful, perceptive and decisive.

e) To make recommendations on how such difficulties may be avoided in future, and on how confidence in this year's results and next year's results can be restored.

Human nature is such that, noting that the memory of Highers 2000 will fade only very slowly, confidence in the results is unlikely to be restored. Without sounding too pessimistic, confidence in next year's results, and in the system as a whole, may also be difficult to achieve. There have been too many major very public collapses of computer systems recently, e.g. Air Traffic Controllers, Stock Exchange, London Ambulance Service, the Passport Office and now the SQA. There is no substitute in preparing a major computerisation or re-computerisation for planning, more planning and even more planning at a meticulous level and then testing, testing and more testing. It is possible that this level, or depth of planning and testing, was not possible for the SQA within the timescales of it having to deliver the new Highers. To encourage confidence in the system, perhaps there might be a series of public demonstrations of how the SQA is proceeding in its work in the forthcoming year, through the Scottish Parliament, probably working closely and constructively with the media, so that the general public can understand what is being done, why it is being done and how it is being done.

2 A statement as to how the events affected UCAS in its work.

The SQA results for potential university entrants, i.e. Highers and CSYS were due for publication on 10 August. The plan was that all the SQA results would be sent electronically to UCAS over the preceding weekend (5/6 August) to enable UCAS to match candidates' results with those holding conditional offers in universities and colleges. Universities and colleges need to know the results of all those holding conditional offers with them so that they can make decisions on whether to confirm offers or not. Under the UCAS system, if an applicant achieves the grades specified in the conditional offer, then he/she is
contractually entitled to a place. If, on the other hand, the applicant misses the grades asked, usually slightly, then the university and college can nevertheless confirm the place if it so chooses. The theory is that, when the candidate gets his/her results on the due date, (this year planned to be 10 August) the university will be ready with the response when he/she telephones asking whether the university will agree to admit. The provision of results to institutions prior to the publication date also enables UCAS to print letters based upon institution decisions and stockpile them for posting on the publication date. This means that, in the majority of cases, applicants get their results on the publication date and their UCAS letter the following day. This reduces the anxiety for applicants and also limits the number of calls to institutions and UCAS.

Some weeks earlier than the planned release date of 10 August a university raised with UCAS whether there was any truth in a rumour that the SQA would not be in a position to present all the results on time. UCAS checked with the SQA on 29 June who confirmed on 3 July that there would be no problem and we communicated that to colleagues around the country. (SQA also reconfirmed 5/6 August result delivery date). In mid to late July, The Herald carried a story similar to the earlier rumour. I happened to be in the company of a Board member of SQA when this story emerged and he confirmed that there would be no difficulties.

The SQA results failed to materialise over the weekend of 5/6 August and then not on the 7th. UCAS finally managed to make contact with the SQA on Tuesday 8 and, when UCAS informed the SQA that we would be happy to take results which might be incomplete and then receive others at a later date, the SQA agreed to send results to UCAS. In the event, those results arrived at 10.13am on Wednesday 9 August which UCAS then interpreted and passed to the universities and colleges overnight. This meant that without any prior warning of candidates’ achievement, universities and colleges would find it difficult to deal with enquiring applicants on 10 August.

Early on 10 August it appeared that UCAS had sent, in some circumstances, the wrong grades to universities and colleges. It appeared that UCAS was unaware that there were different grade values assigned to the ‘old’ Highers and the ‘Higher Still’ Highers. UCAS obtained a document from the SQA which indicated these different grade values and re-wrote a conversion program so that the correct results were with the universities and colleges by 2pm on 10 August. Following detailed investigation of correspondence between the computing sections of both UCAS and SQA it appears almost certain (say 99.9%) that UCAS had not been made aware by SQA of these differing grade values. Indeed, UCAS inferred, but does not know precisely, from certain press coverage of the affair that possibly the same error had in certain circumstances been made by the SQA.

Universities began to make confirmation decisions on 10 and 11 August, generating letters which would be sent out by UCAS to successful applicants or to unsuccessful applicants who were to be put into Clearing. Noting that there appeared now to have been a major difficulty in putting together the correct results by the SQA, UCAS took the view that it would not send out the letters which had been generated by the universities and colleges confirmation decisions since those decisions in some cases might have been made on the basis of incorrect information. On 13 August, SQA, COSHEP and the Minister, Mr Sam Galbraith, met to discuss the situation. The SQA agreed that it would run a health check on its results and
hoped and promised to deliver a statement on the state of all the results by the end of Thursday 17 August. It recommended that universities and colleges take no decisions to confirm places until that health check had been completed. Reluctantly, COSHEP agreed with that advice and suggested to its member institutions in Scotland that they should hold off making confirmation decisions, at least until all the results were available. UCAS concurred with that advice but one or two universities felt that they were confident in the applicants that they held on file and wished to continue to make offers. That, increasingly, became the pattern over the week and UCAS posted, on 17 August, many thousands of confirmation decisions to candidates holding SQA qualifications.

‘A’ level results in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and also for certain students in Scotland, were published on 17 August. Their processing through UCAS and out to universities and colleges the previous weekend had gone without a hitch. It began to become clear that some SQA candidates would not receive their results for some days after the health check had been completed on 17 August. That appeared to UCAS to mean that, whilst English, Welsh and Northern Irish students would go into Clearing with effect from 17 August and would be able to snap up any places available, particularly those in high demand subject areas, some of their counterparts in Scotland, who might not receive their results until the beginning of the following week, might be put at a disadvantage. It appeared that this might not substantially be the case in Scotland as Scottish universities were encouraged to make special efforts even to provide places over and above those originally planned for to enable late entrants to Clearing to get them. There were no such special provisions being made by universities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland although, in fairness, numbers of students from Scotland trying to get a place outside Scotland on the basis of Highers, was likely to be relatively small.

The SQA resubmitted the whole of its file again to UCAS on 18 August with results amendments included. UCAS compared this file with the original results file, identified records where there were differences and then sent revised results records for 1,512 UCAS applicants to universities and colleges during the evening. We also received from SQA a so-called ‘exception file’ which outlined those results which were still under investigation, either because they might be wrong or because they simply were not there. This file was in an unexpected format and required a considerable degree of manipulation and programming. Over the weekend of 19/20 August, UCAS identified which individual students had still not had their offers confirmed and which therefore the SQA might look at first when trying to identify the correct results. It should be said here that, in the absence of a full results package, universities in Scotland began to confirm offers without the full knowledge of applicants’ grades. Part of their tactics was to look at predicted grades and possibly to talk to applicants’ schools and then to ‘take a flyer’ and confirm offers. Of course, in the event that the students’ grades did not match up to their conditions, the sending of the confirmation letter would constitute a contract and there would be no withdrawal of the offer of a place at a later stage.

Following the original results file resubmission on 18 August UCAS has received 8 further results amendment files in the ‘unexpected’ format. These 8 files together contained 8,767
result amendments. Together with the 1,512 amendments derived from the original result resubmission we received a total of 10,279 amendments up to and including 31 August.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

M A Higgins
SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT SCHOOL EXAM RESULTS INQUIRY

COSHEP EVIDENCE

Introduction

The extent to which COSHEP is able to comment on the causes for the problems that the SQA has encountered in the processing of School examinations is limited. Neither COSHEP nor any of Scotland’s higher education institutions have a significant role in the input stage of Standard Grade or Higher processing. It would therefore be inappropriate for COSHEP to speculate. The higher education sector is involved with the SQA primarily at the output stage, and then the contact is seldom direct.

The main issues for COSHEP therefore relate to the transparency of processes, the clarity and promptness of information, the assistance given with planning and, above all, the accuracy and validity of results.

The comments included in this evidence relate to issues where there is a sector-wide relevance, and they limit themselves to school level qualifications. Individual institutions, particularly those with a greater amount of provision at HNC and HND level, may have had a closer working relationship with the SQA and may therefore have more detailed views.

Relationships

Higher education institutions do not receive the majority of the information on qualifications achieved by candidates from the SQA. Rather, the SQA forwards the details of qualifications achieved to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). UCAS then matches this information to candidates who have applied to institutions through UCAS (which accounts for virtually all school applicants). They then forward this information to the institutions which candidates have applied to.

As a general rule, the only direct contact between the SQA and institutions is when institutions are notified of the outcomes of appeals.

Summary of events

Higher education institutions receive, on a confidential basis, the results of candidates who have applied to them before the students do. This enables institutions to make decisions on marginal cases before the candidate contacts the institutions. This should have happened on Monday 7 August but didn’t. On Tuesday 8 August, a meeting was held between the COSHEP and the Chief Executive of the SQA. At this meeting, it was indicated to COSHEP that there had been a problem with the processing of a small percentage of candidates’ results. COSHEP was told that this would affect less than one per cent of all candidates and that the problems related only to missing data. The certificates issued to those candidates affected would have results missing. However, COSHEP was assured that there was absolutely no problems of accuracy of the data where it was provided and that all certificates with missing data would be completed and returned within ten days to two weeks.
On the basis of this information, COSHEP issued advice to all institutions advising them to continue to process all results where a candidate had achieved the required results but to be aware that places would need to be held open for those affected by missing data.

On Thursday 10 August UCAS provided all higher education institutions with the results of candidates, and institutions began processing applications. However, it very quickly became apparent that there was a significant discrepancy between the results that institutions had received and the information candidates had received. UCAS identified a mistake made in their administration and asked institutions to disregard this initial set of results and to await a revised and correct set of results which would be issued within hours. Institutions therefore put the processing of admission on hold. The SQA continued to assure COSHEP that, excepting the missing data which had already been identified, all data was accurate.

In the end it was the morning of Friday 11 before UCAS issued the correct data to institutions. However, by this point the fact that some certificates were incomplete was in the public domain and media comment was highly negative. COSHEP was keen to reassure candidates that no-one was at any risk of being disadvantaged so, following a further conversation with the SQA in which they confirmed that the position had not changed as far as they were concerned, COSHEP circulated further advice to member institutions. This encouraged them to assure worried candidates that their chance of a university or college place was not affected. It also requested that this message should be given to journalists and COSHEP issued a press statement to this effect.

However, by mid afternoon COSHEP received a number of media enquiries, all of which provided strong anecdotal evidence that at least some of the results which the SQA had issued were incorrect and that the problem did not lie only with missing data. COSHEP therefore contacted the SQA again to re-check that they stood by the accuracy of their results. This time the SQA said they could no longer confirm the accuracy of their results and that they would be revising the situation over the weekend.

Higher education institutions in Scotland had by this point restarted the processing of applications on the basis of what were possibly incorrect results. As an offer of a place at university or college is a legally binding contract, there was the potential for some serious problems. COSHEP therefore circulated further advice to member institutions warning them that the results that both they and candidates had been issued with was potentially incorrect and that the exact position would not be known until Monday at the earliest. COSHEP further advised that institutions might therefore wish to suspend their applications process until then. COSHEP also issued a media statement reassuring candidates that at this stage there was no reason to believe that anyone would be disadvantaged in applying to university or college, and that while it would undoubtedly be a worrying time for candidates the best thing they could do would be to remain patient.

An additional problem was caused by the rescheduling of the date of issue of Scottish results. There is usually a two-week delay between the issuing of Higher and A-Level results. As there is a small number of candidates who sit both Highers and A-Levels and as the results are given to institutions on a confidential basis, UCAS imposes a moratorium on sending out letters of offers from Scottish institutions from the date at which A-Level results are given to institutions. UCAS claims that this is to prevent the unintentional notification of candidates of their results before they have been officially issued. Under usual circumstances this leaves almost two weeks from the time institutions are given results, a period which should comfortably enable the vast majority of processing to be completed. However, as the date of issue of Higher results was moved back by a week to enable more time for the SQA to process the results, and as correct results were given to institutions not on 7 August but on 11 August, this was not possible. Any letters of acceptance that arrived with UCAS later than 4 PM on 11 August (the day institutions received correct results) were
held until 17 August when the A-Level results were issued. It is possible that this caused further anxiety to candidates and certainly caused a delay in institutions receiving acceptances. COSHEP believes that there are alternative ways to deal with this solution and that a moratorium on sending letters to applicants with Highers is unnecessary. COSHEP will discuss the options further with UCAS.

By Sunday the SQA issued a statement jointly with COSHEP. This reiterated that the problem was not with the accuracy of data but with missing data but revised upwards the number of affected candidates. The clearing process, through which unfilled places in institutions are made available to candidates applying directly to the institution, was due to begin on Friday 17. The SQA therefore set a deadline of Thursday night for resolving the problem. On this basis, COSHEP restated its opinion that no candidate ought to be disadvantaged.

On Monday further information was circulated to institutions updating them on the situation. As the problem was with missing data, this meant that no results would be revised downwards, and that institutions would therefore be able to issue offers to candidates who had achieved the required results. UCAS announced that it would extend the deadline by which candidates required to accept offers. Therefore, institutions were advised to reassure worried candidates who had not achieved the required results but who may have been victims of missing data that their places would not be in jeopardy and to try to remain patient and to contact the institutions again once they had their revised results.

By Wednesday SQA had revised their position again. The position they now took was that by midnight on Thursday all candidates who had been affected by missing data would be identified but that it could take up to two weeks to correct their results. As this meant that some students would therefore not have their correct results until well into the clearing process, there was now the real potential that some candidates could be disadvantaged, possibly significantly so. However, candidates who applied though UCAS (the vast majority) would not be affected – the provisional offer of a place is a binding contract which is held open until results are confirmed. The clearing system is different, and places are allocated on a first-come first-served basis. A candidate who did not have confirmed qualifications would therefore not be able to apply through clearing. In practice, while a first choice place might therefore be lost, a candidate who was willing to be flexible in the course and institution of study would be unlikely to be excluded from higher education completely. It should be remembered that there are never any guarantees of a place in the clearing process.

When institutions are deciding whether to offer a student a provisional place, they are supplied with predictions of results. Early in the week some institutions indicated that, where a student had a missing result but the rest of their results looked good, they would be willing to accept the predicted result in place of the missing result.

Higher education institutions are allocated a set number of students. If an institution overshoots this number by more than three per cent or undershoots by more than one per cent it is liable to financial penalties. Aware that institutions would find it more difficult this year to control student numbers and to enable a bit of flexibility to create new places for any candidate who was significantly disadvantaged, COSHEP raised the possibility with Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) of relaxing the overshoot figure. Having consulted with the Scottish Executive, SHEFC informed the sector that the overshoot figure would be relaxed to four per cent.

An assurance was given that all urgent appeals would be settled by a date not significantly different than the date by which appeals would usually be settled. As the level of successful appeals was only announced the day before this submission was written, the implications of this outcome are not
yet known. As there appears to be something like a ten-fold increase in the number of successful appeals, problems could be caused or institutions. COSHEP would therefore wish to reserve the right to submit further written evidence or to clarify the implications of this issue during oral evidence.

Implications

Some concerns have been raised that the 'class of 2000' would always have a doubt over their academic ability and that there were potentially students which have been accepted into the higher education sector who have not met the entry requirements. COSHEP would like to stress that it is the standard achieved at the exit stage which defines the academic qualifications achieved by a student. COSHEP would therefore wish to stress that a degree achieved by a student who entered the Scottish higher education sector in 2000 will be of identical value to any other graduate. COSHEP does not envisage any implications for academic standards resulting from these events.

Equally, any student who applied to study a higher education degree through UCAS, which is the vast majority, will not have been disadvantaged because of these events. This is not to underestimate the anxiety which will have been caused to some. An unconditional offer did not rely on this year's results and a provisional offer is a binding contract which will have been honoured. Those who have received a rejection will either accept their second choice or go into clearing.

While the potential creation of additional places has gone some way to giving institutions the means to resolve potential disadvantage, it is important to note that this will not apply in all subjects. For example, Professions Allied to Medicine (PAM) are largely funded through sources other than SHEFC and therefore the extra leeway in student numbers will not enable an increase in the number of places in these subjects.

The implications for those who entered clearing are more complex. It is possible that places which were available on day one of clearing would no longer be available for a candidate by the time their results were confirmed, even though they had achieved the entry requirements. Following the provision of up to another one per cent of places, COSHEP encouraged students to discuss the possibilities with admissions officers, so it is to be hoped that most people were able to be accommodated. However, as clearing is a first-come first-served system which is based on unfilled places which are by nature unpredictable, it is difficult to know in a usual year whether someone will get a place or not. It is therefore very difficult to say with any degree of certainty whether an individual candidate has been disadvantaged this year.

There are potentially financial implications for institutions. The potential for extra places offered by SHEFC to help deal with the problems are not fully funded places. A fully funded place refers to the SHEFC teaching grant which it distributes on the basis of predicted students in each institution and course. While the per capita funding varies depending on the course (medicine is much more expensive to teach than arts and social sciences), the average fully funded place represents £4,240 per student. A further £1,050 per student for every student actually enrolled is paid directly to institutions by the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS). This sum paid by SAAS was previously paid by the student in Tuition Fees before they were abolished. The potential to create additional places enabled by SHEFC to assist with the problems of the summer are not fully funded so only attract the £1,050 and not the £4,240. This may have some financial implications for 2000-01, and COSHEP intends to gather evidence on this when it is available.
However, there may also be implications from under-recruitment. It is reasonable to expect that the potential increase in student numbers will impact on the sector unevenly. If some institutions take in more students, these may be lost to other institutions. Clearly, under-recruiting can have significant financial implications for institutions, and this must also be borne in mind. There is also some evidence that the reputation of Scottish education may have been harmed by these events. Applications from candidates based in England to Scottish institutions are currently down by almost 15 per cent. Again, there are financial implications from this, and if there is any question of a loss of confidence, it is essential that this is addressed.

However, it is important to remember that there are long-term implications resulting from changes in student numbers. These students will be in the system not only for this year but until they have completed their degree. It is therefore important that this is borne in mind during the future planning of student numbers.

A further financial implication is caused by disruption to the marketing initiatives run by institutions. Almost all institutions run marketing campaigns at the time of clearing. There range from television and billboard advertising campaigns to staffed hotlines. Many institutions have reported needing to extend advertising campaigns from one week to three weeks and to keep phonelines open longer than they otherwise would have. Clearly, this is an expensive business.

For students, it is possible that late enrolment caused by a delay in receiving results may result in a delay in applying for student loans. In some cases this will require some form of bridging loan which can prove expensive. It also puts additional strain on institutions’ hardship funds.

A further issue which should be flagged up is the processing of HNDs and HNCs. These qualifications are increasingly important as entry qualifications for degree programmes. Indeed, some institutions have as many as 30 per cent of acceptances from candidates with these qualifications. The processing of these has also been delayed and, while COSHEP has not yet been able to gather any information on the implications of this, it should be borne in mind.

Conclusions

As was stated in the introduction, COSHEP is not in a position to offer a view on what caused the problems, nor for that reason on what might be done to prevent these problems in the future.

However, COSHEP feels strongly that the SQA is a public agency which has a responsibility to provide the maximum available information and that this information should be provided as quickly, clearly and frankly as possible.

The main issues for higher education throughout these events have been related to planning. If there are problems or are likely to be delays in issuing certificates, this has very substantial implications for the admissions process. This is a complex, time consuming and intensive process in the best of circumstances and if it has to be carried out without the full information available it causes very real problems. A clear statement of the real potential extent of the problems should have been made known to the sector as soon as any suspicions were raised. Following that, realistic and achievable target deadlines should have been set and clearly announced.

Another information role which has impacted on the sector was public information. It was inevitable that these events would cause anxiety for candidates and that could not be avoided. However, if clear public information had been available it would have been easier for candidates to know what to do. Equally, this has been a difficult period of admissions officers in institutions who
have had to invest a lot of time and effort into resolving these difficulties. They often had to deal with distraught and angry candidates and parents, and it would have helped them to advise candidates if they had had the fullest information available.

In future, the public information role in a situation such as this should be emphasised and both institutions and candidates should have had access to the most complete information available from the earliest point at which it was known.

COSHEP has not yet had an opportunity to discuss in detail the events of the summer, and so no clear policy decisions in this area have been made. However, a brief consultation has indicated a number of areas of consensus. It is universally felt that, from the higher education sector’s point of view, accurate and prompt availability of exam results is essential, and any governance arrangements should be designed to facilitate this outcome. There is no desire in the sector for the functions of the SQA to be incorporated into the civil service. The function of the SQA is essentially a professional assessment body and not simply an administrative agency for carrying out directions from government. Its staff must not only be part of the community that understands assessment and the statistical and technical requirements for reliable and valid judgements about examinations and coursework, but also must be in touch with the latest ideas on, for example, authentic assessment and like matters. COSHEP members who expressed a view felt that this is best achieved at arm’s length from government in a similar manner to the current situation.

However, there was also unanimity on the need to ensure proper public accountability. There was therefore general support for the ability of Ministers to intervene directly in the running of the SQA. It was hoped, however, that this would never again be necessary.

Above all, COSHEP believes that all of Scotland will be harmed if the reputation of the Scottish education system was damaged. It is too early at this stage to make an assessment of whether that has happened. However, some indicators – such as the 15 per cent drop in applicants from England to Scottish institutions – are not promising. The processing of applicants to and the public confidence in higher education relies on validity and accuracy of assessments, and this is paramount. This must be assured to ensure confidence. It is also important that we continue to monitor any indicators that the Scottish education brand has been damaged domestically and internationally.

ENDS