Scottish Funding Council Call for Evidence: A Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education

Response from Community Learning and Development Standards Council Scotland (CLDSC)

The Community Learning and Development (CLD) Sector recognises that it has a key role to play in support of socio-economic recovery post the pandemic as part of a cohesive tertiary education sector. The CLDSC believes that all three strands of CLD practice (adult learning, youth work and community development) are directly relevant to the aims of the Review.

The CLD Sector has demonstrated its ability to respond swiftly and flexibly to the constantly changing environment whilst remaining focused on delivering positive outcomes for individuals and communities. Key to its operational practice is partnership and collaboration and the CLD Standards Council would contend that such an approach is required in order to maximise the value of public expenditure in support of tertiary education.

There is an opportunity for a paradigm shift to create a cohesive and coherent tertiary sector which provides the inclusive Lifelong Learning system required by a 21st Century society ensuring that no-one or community is left behind.

This will require collective leadership working towards agreed outcomes across all the elements of the tertiary sector ensuring that there is no unnecessary competition that adversely impacts upon learners.

We have focused on three of the six areas identified for comment.

a) *What do you think works well in the current further and higher education arrangements that we should keep in order to secure Scotland's inclusive social and economic recovery from the current pandemic? How can we best preserve and strengthen those features of education, research and innovation in Scotland that we most prize, in a very challenging funding environment?*

The focus on widening access to further and higher education is a very positive feature of current arrangements that needs to be built on further as it provides a strong basis for doing so. The anticipated economic consequences of the pandemic, and in particular a recession with the associated high levels of unemployment mean that it is essential that this focus is maintained and further developed. Where possible further and higher education provision designed to widen access should be available within communities in order to minimise travel costs and to avoid considerable travel time for learners. In addition, mental health and wellbeing is a particular issue for students who are vulnerable and / or who are carers. At present, the CLD sector has a proven track record working together with colleges in terms of community based ESOL provision to raise attainment and work with learners and communities in local spaces.

Furthermore, learning providers will need to work with students to build up confidence that our buildings both in the community and on campus are safe environments in which to learn.

College regional boards in particular should ensure that learners in the most deprived communities have access to relatively local provision as the absence of this form of access is a barrier in both rural and urban areas. Provision needs to take account of the lack of access to digital resources and to physical space that disproportionately affect people in disadvantaged communities.

Particular negative impacts of the pandemic on both people with disabilities and people from BAME communities have been identified and work to widen access needs to ensure that opportunities are opened to these and other groups experiencing the impacts of inequality.

A key feature of further education is the breadth and depth of its curricular offer covering community-based introductory programmes for young people and adult returners to high level vocational qualifications. This breadth of curriculum, planned on the basis of shared labour market intelligence, should be strengthened and expanded in order to enable colleges to develop, in partnership, pathways for those with no or few formal qualifications. There is a particular need to ensure that adults over 25 years have access to programmes which enable them to progress to vocational programmes. It is evident from the approach taken previously in times of recession that the needs of adults with few or no qualifications have not been addressed appropriately therefore this should be a priority in the response to the pandemic.

Among the widening access routes that have been successful are those into employment in social care and early years settings. This needs to be renewed and built on in the new context, with an emphasis on consistently articulated pathways from community settings in which those without previous qualifications are most likely to engage.

> b) *What do you think colleges, universities and specialist institutions should stop doing, or do differently, in order to contribute effectively to an inclusive social and economic recovery? (You may wish to comment on teaching and skills development, sectoral and employer needs and employability, research, innovation and knowledge exchange, widening access and equalities issues.)*

There is a need for a radical review of the nature of Regional Outcome Agreements (ROA) in the college sector. The current format focuses predominantly on outputs rather than outcomes, is overly prescriptive and has limited variance across regions. To support economic recovery effectively, ROAs should be more directedly linked to the socio-economic needs of college regions with greater participation from stakeholders, including employers, local authorities and communities, in the development of outcomes. Progress against these agreed outcomes should be assessed in partnership with stakeholders using existing Community Planning Partnership structures. In this respect, there is a need for the university sector to also

have a formal agreements with Community Planning Partnerships. An inclusive social and economic recovery requires engagement with not only those who experience fundamental change as a consequence of the pandemic but also with those individuals and communities for whom deprivation has been a constant for many years.

Consideration should be given to aligning research priorities with the role of colleges and universities in addressing the social and economic needs of their regions and inequalities experienced by individuals, families and communities within them. The emphasis on international research should be balanced with one on regional and local issues, and should itself be informed by the potential to relate learning from international experience to the issues, needs and opportunities of institutions own regions and localities.

There is a need for both the HE and college sectors to focus more effectively on their stated mission in order to ensure the most effective use of public resources and to avoid unproductive competition. Consideration should be given to creating a clear binary divide between the level of qualifications offered by both sectors putting an end to academic drift in the college sector away from vocational and community focussed programmes, while building guaranteed articulation pathways through community, vocational, college and university programmes and qualifications. The development of a National Digital Strategy for Education as proposed by ScotlandIS should be seen as an opportunity to develop a national systemic approach to addressing digital poverty. Digital poverty both in relation to digital assets and access to Wi-Fi is problematic and most colleges and universities are in the default position post-covid of offering on-line learning. Many of our community and college based students do not have access these which means they cannot access on-line learning opportunities.

University-based CLDSC members highlighted their experience of having developed pathways for people from disadvantaged communities and these having been disrupted by reductions in provision within the college sector. The University's CLD degree programme had established well-used articulation routes with neighbouring colleges. However, the number of colleges offering the HNC Working with Communities programme has declined significantly, reducing opportunities for people active in their own communities to progress to a degree (or HNC) qualification in CLD. In addition, people completing a programme targeted by the university on people active in communities experiencing deprivation have less opportunity to progress to an HNC course, which provides a suitable pathway for those not ready to undertake a degree programme.

c) *How can colleges, universities and specialist institutions best support Scotland's international connectedness and competiveness in the post-pandemic, post-EU membership environment?*

Not applicable

d) What opportunities and threats does the post-pandemic environment hold for colleges, universities and specialist institutions? For institutional leaders, how are you planning to address these challenges and opportunities?

Not applicable

e) What forms of collaboration within the tertiary education eco-system would best enable a coherent and effective response to these challenges and opportunities?

The SFC's briefing note on the Review indicates that "Refining a common understanding of "coherent provision" will form an important part of this review. A key starting point for this is a recognition that the "tertiary system" consists not only of institutions but the current and potential students, businesses and communities that they interact with. The goals of this wider system can be identified and progressed within the outcomes of the National Performance Framework, underpinned by the Sustainable Development Goals.

As noted in previous responses, work with and in communities has a critical part to play in widening access and developing learning pathways, while negotiation with communities (as well as employers) is essential in moving from an output based form of planning to one based on outcomes, more clearly focused on the needs of people and the economy and the specific needs and opportunities of particular regions. Responses to the pandemic have in some respects accelerated partnership working at local level and this provides an opportunity for developing an approach more rooted in specific needs and strengths. In relation to disadvantaged communities in particular, the CLD sector is an essential partner in enabling the system to bring about these changes, both through the development and delivery of the types of learning opportunities that are required, and in working with communities to build their capacity to engage as active partners.

A comprehensive, effective and efficient tertiary sector requires to have partnership working that supports seamless articulation and progression pathways for learners, fully utilising the SCQF. This partnership must comprise of HEIs, colleges and CLD providers collaborating within college regions to deliver accredited programmes which enable individuals to progress to either further study or employment.

It is evident from the work conducted by Skills Development Scotland that Lifelong Learning will be central to inclusive economic recovery with a much more flexible eco-system than the current structure. It is recognised that micro-credentials, making use of the SCQF, co-created with learners/employers and delivered in short, focus programmes will be essential. Colleges should seek to work collaboratively with CLD providers to ensure the maximum opportunities for those with few or no skills who are furthest away from the labour market or further study to ensure that no-one or community is left behind. A youth work curriculum delivered by CLD practitioners enables schools to support the progression of young people who they would otherwise not be able to engage with; the same

approach should be adopted by colleges in order to improve retention and completion.

In commenting on the role of colleges and universities as anchor institutions, the SFC's briefing paper refers to the important role they play "in bringing together people, activities, assets, skills, resources and investment for a greater sense of identity and purpose in particular locations and local communities". The CLDSC supports the view that colleges and universities have this important role and believes that it can and should be developed further. In order to ensure that deprived areas and communities benefit from the anchor role of colleges and universities, skilled support is needed to enable them to develop their capacities to engage as active partners. CLD practitioners have a key role in providing this support, and so in ensuring that colleges and universities can develop their anchor role, and do so in ways that support the widening access agenda.

f) *How can SFC, alongside government and other enterprise, skills and education-focused agencies, best support colleges, universities and specialist institutions to make their full contribution to Scotland's inclusive, green and education-led recovery? In particular, you may wish to draw out:*

- *How scarce public resources should be prioritised to drive recovery*
- *Particular areas of collaboration between agencies that would best support the sectors' contributions*
- *Adaptations to SFC's funding and accountability frameworks to promote agile and collaborative action by the sectors to build Scotland's recovery*
- *How SFC's funding and accountability frameworks should ensure that equality and wide access to educational opportunity are promoted as key elements of the recovery for younger people and adults*
- *What support SFC and government could give institutions to adapt to a changed environment*

As argued in previous responses:

- A clear focus on distinctive roles within a coherent system will assist in making most effective use of scarce public resources.
- The development of pathways for people with low skill levels through guaranteed articulation routes and regional planning, based on negotiation with employers and communities, and focused on outcomes, are key areas for collaboration.
- Available finance to offset the costs of digital equipment and support for institutions and learners.