

A Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education

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 and innovation in Scotland that we most prize, in a very challenging funding environment?

- Based on the demand for student places and the high levels of performance and student satisfaction, there is much in our current offering to be proud of. The Government and SFC should prioritise greater flexibility within delivery and funding models to give Colleges the freedom to better serve their regions, through maximising regional opportunities while addressing regional challenges.
- SFC should design and implement a coherent, evidence based and fairer approach to funding across the tertiary sector to replace the current disparate and anomalous funding arrangements.
- There should be a much greater focus on measuring outputs and social and economic impacts, and much less emphasis on volume targets. The needs of the economy and business should be the key and explicit drivers in determining provision and the levels of funding to be made available to individual colleges and universities.
- Scotland's policy and funding framework should remove rather than encourage duplication between schools/colleges/universities. Tackling this issue would not only save huge sums of money, it would enable young people to become economically active more quickly.
- The current education landscape is far too cluttered for such a small country. The Scottish Government needs to be bold and ambitious and learner centred. All parts of the Scottish Education system must work more closely together and provide a cohesive and affordable Scottish system that is focussed on front line delivery. This means schools, colleges, and universities but also the government agencies – SQA, SFC, and SDS, amongst others, co-ordinating closely too with local authorities.
- Create equity for learners by taking a national approach to articulation, for example, exploring a standard '2+2' model for appropriate subjects. Also, we should view the 5th and 6th year of school as early tertiary education and strongly link and easily articulate into Colleges and Universities. This could significantly improve value for money and bring significant gains for students and the economy. Fife College is proud of what it has achieved in this area but the present system does nothing to encourage best practice and the removal of duplication.
- We need a clearer line of sight between SG's priorities and what Colleges are delivering – the drive into the green economy; regional economic growth; the growth of Fair Work; widening access and closing the attainment gap; supporting social inclusion.

B) What do you think colleges should stop doing, or do differently, in order to contribute effectively to an inclusive social and economic recovery?

- Colleges should be given more flexibility in the delivery of their courses, moving away from the traditional on-campus delivery model where this does not meet the needs of the learners or employers. Streamlined, on-line learning offers a fabulous opportunity to widen access and availability to a whole new range of learners and settings, as does more workplace-based learning. This will also support learning for life for a wider range of people with seamless entry and exit of education at stages that meet learner needs, as well as providing clear progression pathways.
- Colleges are keen to see stronger collaboration and integration of curriculum with schools and universities and undertake regional strategic planning across the educational sector that meets regional needs, with Colleges playing a leading role with business to develop and deliver these plans.
- SFC and Government should recognise the contribution Colleges make to innovation and knowledge exchange and reinforce this via specific funding to create an innovative, creative, and dynamic environment for learning, skills, and training.
- There is a potential growth market, with increasing social inclusion by providing for learners who have previously been time or travel disadvantaged e.g. with caring responsibilities
- There must be a way to decrease the excessive amount of reporting and control that is imposed on Colleges.
- Colleges have undertaken a detailed review of their curriculum over recent years – this needs to be continued with SFC support and focused on regional economic recovery
- Colleges also need to reconsider their collective working and how that might be improved, including their input to Colleges Scotland

C) How can colleges best support Scotland's international connectedness and competitiveness in the post-pandemic, post-EU membership environment?

- Collaboration between universities and colleges on the international stage should be encouraged and supported by Government to ensure that Scotland is exploiting fully its tertiary sector assets. Both should work collaboratively with business to deliver a Team Scotland approach both regionally and nationally.

D) What opportunities and threats does the post-pandemic environment hold for colleges? How are you planning to address these challenges and opportunities?

Opportunities include:

- The creation of a more responsive and digitally skilled workforce, that is driven by the needs of business and the economy
- A wider range of online/blended provision and enhanced learning platforms
- A wider range of ways in which learners and employers can engage with the college
- A review of services and systems to make them user-centred, efficient, more effective, and less bureaucratic

- Opportunities for closer working with other colleges, universities and other partners
- Opportunities to drive much needed streamlining of qualifications and awarding bodies process
- A co-ordinated approach to mobilisation of Colleges' alumni network to promote and support the sector

Threats include:

- Generating sufficient capacity to meet demand.
- Managing the ongoing pandemic has the potential to limit the ability of the sector to focus on longer term projects
- Financial instability due to reduced income/funding
- Digital Poverty – connectivity; hardware; environment
- Digital capability of staff.

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

- Fundamental rationalisation of the Scottish Government and Agency landscape, with less central control, streamlined funding and reduced bureaucracy, proportional to a country the size of Scotland.
- Colleges and Universities must establish closer strategic alignment to ensure the provision and pathways are student focused and not institution focused, with a more holistic regional approach aimed at serving the needs of business and the economy.
- There should be a rationalisation of the existing cluttered examinations and assessment landscape.

F) How can SFC, alongside government and other enterprise, skills and education-focused agencies, best support colleges to make their full contribution to Scotland's inclusive, green and education-led recovery?

How scarce public resources should be prioritised to drive recovery?

- SFC and other agencies should recognise that less central control will actually improve productivity as Colleges and Universities are empowered to make decisions that are right for their regions and are then held accountable for those decisions.
- Government should lead by example by decluttering and streamlining the existing agency, all of which can be done without affecting front line delivery. It is disheartening that recent changes to the credit guidance, deprioritising school/college partnership activity and certain aspects of FE provision, will have a disproportionately negative impact on individual students, while the Government does little to address the significant bureaucracy and duplication that exists at a national level.

Particular areas of collaboration between agencies that would best support the sectors' contributions?

- There needs to be a significant rationalisation and modernisation of the existing overly bureaucratic and inefficient Government/Agency landscape that oversees the university and college sector. The degree of control exercised over Colleges is stifling and very costly to the country. We believe that innovation and productivity will be improved through a more strategic and dynamic control environment.
- A focus on regional economic clusters of employers would help develop regional specialisms for the economy. Matching support for business start-up, skills development and FE/HE provision could foster the sense of regional economic specialisms.

Adaptations to SFC's funding and accountability frameworks to promote agile and collaborative action by the sectors to build Scotland's recovery?

- Huge scope for improvement as a matter of urgency. Present arrangements do little to promote agility and collaboration. There needs to be a fundamental change in the culture and behaviours that underpin how the Government and Agencies do their business.
- Freedom for colleges to generate and use surpluses would create a more creative and agile sector, There is no justification for the existing ONS public sector classification of Colleges which so severely constrains their ability to exercise effective stewardship and manage their resources to best effect. This challenge is compounded by the absence of an SFC capital investment plan which sets out a medium/longer term investment plan for Colleges' physical and digital infrastructure needs.

How should SFC's funding and accountability frameworks ensure that equality and wide access to educational opportunity are promoted as key elements of the recovery for younger people and adults?

- Promotion of equality and widening access will continue to be a key priority for all organisations involved in the tertiary sector. The outcome agreement model has enshrined targets for institutions but no need to be told in great detail what needs to be delivered. A more dynamic model that places responsibility and accountability on individual organisations would be preferred.

What support SFC and government could give institutions to adapt to a changed environment?

- The SFC and Scottish Government should recognise the wealth of experience within the college sector and allow the flexibility for individual institutions to respond and be proactive in response to the particular needs of their regions.
- The SFC and other agencies (SDS, SQA, Scottish Enterprise etc.) must work together better and look at a more holistic, joined up approach to ensure systems are designed around the user, to be more flexible, agile, and effective.
- Continue to work with the sector to rationalise significantly the policy environment and credit guidance rules to support increased innovation and productivity.

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