

## Theme 3: an integrated, connected tertiary education and skills system for learners and employers

### Purpose

1. To seek SEAL's views on theme 3 from the Phase One report of the SFC review Coherence and Sustainability – 'Towards an integrated, connected tertiary education and skills system for learners and employers'.

### Background

2. The [Phase One SFC report](#), published on 20 October, outlined the findings from a series of consultation exercises including a call for evidence and roundtable discussions. The report set out 10 key themes (see below) and suggestions for future areas of focus.
  - Theme 1: Keeping the interests of current and future students, and equalities, at the heart of everything we do.
  - Theme 2: Supporting the digital revolution for learners.
  - **Theme 3: Towards an integrated, connected tertiary education and skills system for learners and employers.**
  - Theme 4: Recognising colleges and universities as national assets and civic anchors.
  - Theme 5: Building long-term relationships with employers and industry.
  - Theme 6: Protecting and leveraging the excellence of our research and science base.
  - Theme 7: Driving the innovation agenda.
  - Theme 8: Enhancing collaboration.
  - Theme 9: Making the most of the sector's global connections.
  - Theme 10: Focusing on the financial sustainability of colleges and universities, and current funding models.
3. This paper focuses on theme 3. An excerpt of this section of the report is provided in Annex A. In addition to the consultation exercise outlined above, the report also drew from a series of published reports. For theme 3 in particular, this included:
  - [The Cumberford-Little Report: One Tertiary System: Agile, Collaborative, Inclusive \(February 2020\)](#)
  - [Commissioner for Fair Access' annual report \(August 2020\)](#)
  - [Accelerating Articulation: Final Report from the National Articulation Forum \(August 2020\)](#)

4. In 2018 Scottish Government published its report of the [15-24 Learner Journey Review](#). The report had 17 recommendations (provided in Annex B) clustered around five themes: Information and Support, Provision, Alignment, Leadership and Performance. SFC has been working closely with Scottish Government and partner agencies to implement the key outcomes of the review, many of which were also priorities for SFC, particularly those linking to Senior Phase (Recommendations 2, 4, 7, 9, 10, 13, 15, 16). This work, and associated reporting, was paused in March as a result of the need to focus on the immediate impact of the pandemic. Earlier feedback was that the work was on track but an increase in pace in the implementation of the recommendations was required. The most recent update from Government confirms that it recognises that many of the Learner Journey issues are being picked up in the SFC Review.

### **Next steps for theme 3 of the review**

5. The Phase One SFC report confirms viewpoints outlined in previous reports that the Learner Journey could and should be more efficient and equitable for students. It points to areas of duplication and a lack of suitable bridges and ladders to enable students' to progress their studies. However, the Phase One report (as do other reports) stresses that these inefficiencies and inequities lie within the structures and connections of the system. It begins to discuss possible regional structures, collaborations and funding changes such as a tertiary funding model based on the SCQF and a demographic model of demand that could begin to address these issues.
6. It defines what a learner should expect from a coherent system:
  - You have learning, skills and qualifications for life, and they provide knowledge and attributes that are transferable and updatable.
  - Wherever you live and wherever you come from, you have regional access to education up to SCQF level 8.
  - You have opportunities for continued learning and training that contribute to Scotland's social and economic prosperity over your lifetime, irrespective of mode or level of study.
  - You take fewer wrong turns, dead ends, and repeats – you have an efficient learner journey, recognising that we are all human and may need help finding the right path at points in our lives.
7. It outlines what the SFC will focus on in relation to theme 3 in the next two phases of this work. It highlights that we have the opportunity to build on areas such as the regionalisation of colleges and achievements in access and articulation to build an integrated tertiary system. It makes suggestions as to how we might achieve that, including the following:

- Examine the options with the senior phase of school (at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) levels 6-8) in terms of duplication, connections, transitions and funding overlaps with tertiary education; and working closely with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's review of the Curriculum for Excellence (the national curriculum for children and young people from 3 to 18), which includes the senior phase.
  - Safeguard widening access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and communities and create better ladders, bridges and pathways for learners between qualifications and institutions.
  - Support flexible entry and certificated exit points, along with "stackable" qualifications and micro-credentials with currency across providers and post-graduate offers.
8. An obvious starting point for that examination is the most relevant and potentially impactful recommendations included in the Learner Journey report, which in the initial view of the Council executive are the following:
- 11) *We will support colleges to maximise the vocational routes learners and employers need. From 2018, we will build on the college sector's pivotal role in the education and skills system: in access; in enabling routes to work; in delivering higher technical skills; and in providing routes to university. This will include ensuring we have the right provision, the right modes of study and the right measures of success to support the best learner outcomes and make the biggest impact. This will build on the work already started by colleges and support our wider effort to develop a shared narrative about the purpose of post 15 education.*
  - 13) *We will minimise unnecessary duplication at SCQF level 7. We will make maximum use of the flexibility of the four year degree to enable learners to move, where appropriate, from S5 to year 1 and, through greater recognition of Advanced Highers, from S6 to year 2 of a university degree programme. This will help support delivery of Recommendation 6 of the report of the Commission on Widening Access ("The Scottish Government, working with key stakeholders, should ensure the key transitions phases around SCQF levels 6 to 8 are better used to provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds with the qualifications and experiences required to support fair access.").*
  - 14) *We will support colleges and universities to ensure more learners progress from college to all our universities without unnecessary*

*duplication of SCQF credit. We will more fully align our college and university higher education system to meet learner expectation, to ensure full recognition of prior college learning where appropriate. We expect all universities to actively support this to happen and to commit to substantially increasing the proportion of HN learners they admit with full credit to at least the 75-per-cent benchmark identified by SFC. We will ask universities to set out the reasons why articulation is not possible for any learners transferring within the same broad subject areas, and the steps being taken to enable it. We expect the universities who traditionally have low numbers of articulating students to also commit to substantially increasing the number of HN learners they admit.*

### **Recommendation**

9. The Committee is invited to comment on the Council executive's initial thoughts on the learner journey aspects of Theme 3 within the Phase 1 report.

### **Publication**

10. This paper will be published on the Council website following the meeting.

### **Further information**

11. Contact: Fiona Burns, Review Lead, [fburns@sfc.ac.uk](mailto:fburns@sfc.ac.uk)

## **Annex A: Theme Three: Towards an integrated, connected tertiary education and skills eco-system for learners and employers**

*“Scotland is in a better position to develop a truly flexible tertiary education system than any other UK nation....The case for an integrated tertiary education system, rather than discrete university and college, higher education and further education, education and training sectors, should be vigorously promoted in Scotland.”*

*(Commissioner for Fair Access)*

1. Many responses pointed to the opportunity this review provides to create a more coherent and integrated post-16 offer, that builds on the strength of regionalised colleges, accelerates the collaboration that exists between colleges and universities to recognise prior learning and support students to articulate from college to university, reduces duplication in terms of repeat levels of study and manages better pathways at the senior phase in school, and incentivises more efficient and equitable learner journeys.
2. Alongside more integrated pathways for the learner, and collaborative place-based hubs or clusters, responses highlighted a need for better differentiation and specialisation between institutions – a clearer definition of the roles each plays in order to become a more efficient system and to reduce duplication, and to play to the strengths of each provider while forming part of a coherent whole.

*“It is evident that in the areas of research and innovation there is an obvious requirement for a combination of greater specialisation in the higher education system, and far greater collaboration between institutions. The same should apply to skills. What we need now, at a time of scarce resources, is greater differentiation and specialisation, not less.” (University submission)*

*“Within Scotland’s tertiary ecosystem, working with and alongside schools and universities, and delivering both access and degree provision – and all points in between – colleges are valued for their flexible, adaptive and inclusive approach” (The Cumberland-Little report)*

*“A defining characteristic of a healthy ecosystem is its diversity, so we would urge the Scottish Government and the SFC not to lose sight of the value of the sector’s diversity (range of choice/possibilities) in pursuit of efficiencies and rationalisation.” (Small Specialist Institution submission)*

*“This diversity across further and higher education institutions is one of the key strengths that can inspire businesses of the possibilities – many different specialisms will be required to build back better in line with the key principles of health & wellbeing, net zero, fairness and inclusivity.” (Interface submission)*

3. Few stakeholders define that differentiation or the respective roles of colleges and universities in any great detail. The College of the Future Commission discussed the benefit of a more distinctive, even exclusive, role for colleges in the delivery of higher level technical and professional qualifications up to SCQF level 7 and 8 and/or HNCs and HNDs, with universities responsible for full degree, degree-equivalent and post-graduate programmes. Others also commented on the need for a clearer binary divide between the level of qualifications offered by both sectors while building guaranteed articulation pathways through community, vocational, college and university programmes and qualifications. A large metropolitan college may view its role as providing opportunities all the way through to two year degrees (as set out in the Cumberford-Little report). For universities, this discussion involved the distinctiveness of specific research specialisms, or the collaborations along the base and applied research continuum (for example in engineering) or the interdisciplinary connections, and the connectivity between research and teaching; and harder questions about duplicative course provision in universities that are operating cheek by jowl, with departments that have different resources, scale and success; and how best to work with the grain of missions that make some universities more likely to invest, for example, in industry apprenticeships.
4. Responses focused on the importance of regional planning structures. We touch on this further in the report under the theme on colleges and universities as local anchors, and in our consideration of demographic modelling in the final chapter. In essence, many see the ability to plan collaboratively across all relevant partners at a regional level as key not only to the learner journey, but to the delivery of skills and training that unlock our capabilities around decarbonising our economic recovery and leveraging our natural capital, to the way we develop clusters around Scotland that maximise our investment in world leading strengths such as digital and data, precision medicine, quantum, life sciences, and advanced manufacturing.
5. We had a vast and diverse range of responses on coherent provision for learners and how to make the learner journey efficient and equitable. A large body of responses pointed to the need to reimagine the interaction of colleges and universities with the senior phase at school, particularly SCQF level 7 provision. Of course, any development of these options would need to be explored with local and central government, COSLA, the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland and the school sector, and should recognise the existing level of collaboration between schools and local colleges/universities within that senior phase.
6. These suggestions from respondents aimed to keep a focus on widening access and participation, to save public money by reducing duplicative levels of learning, or to enable young people to have prior learning recognised and to become economically active more quickly:

- Build on existing approaches to widening access to strengthen and expand these programmes, to secure the necessary outreach into communities and workplaces, overcome digital poverty and decrease competition between colleges and universities for students from disadvantaged communities. The Commissioner for Fair Access' annual report makes specific recommendations that will provide further focus for government, institutions, SFC and SFC-funded programmes.
- Examine the senior phase of school and SCQF levels 6-8 in terms of duplication, connections, transitions and funding overlaps with further and higher education, working closely with the OECD's review of the Curriculum for Excellence, which includes the senior phase. Respondents suggested encouraging pupils to leave school at S5 for a bridging or foundation year delivered by Scottish universities in collaboration with schools as an alternative to additional Highers in S6. One university suggested introducing a more rounded first year at a Scottish university, with a return to a broad, deeper, general, graduate curriculum aimed at job-readiness and improved meta skills for future study, for example, around team-building, history and culture, statistical methods and digital literacy. People also suggested we promote much greater progression from S6 into year two at a Scottish university, while recognising that many students want to be part of a cohort of entrants in their initial year as an undergraduate. There were also associated suggestions about moving to three year degrees for many subjects, with implications for attainment levels for university entrance that might lead, for example, to a consequential trend towards Advanced Higher admission criteria or a stronger argument for a foundation year instead of S6.
- Recognise the distinctive role of colleges working with schools in the senior phase on systemic change at a regional level, to broker stronger curriculum re-design and skills education and training to provide greater integration between schools and colleges and, where appropriate, universities. We should also recognise the partnership model between colleges and schools established through the Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) programme and the opportunities this provides for alignment and progression between secondary and tertiary systems and with the world of work. This is already happening across parts of Scotland and has been an important strategy for some regional colleges to strengthen specific skills, such as computer science and STEM subjects.
- Create better ladders and bridges for students to use between institutions using a more standardised, national articulation framework, and operationalised through regional articulation agreements, across a

wider range of study areas. This links to other review work, such as the Cumberford-Little suggestions around building more specialist hubs to address specific critical skills shortages or the development of Northern Ireland-style curriculum hubs.

- Introduce differentiated SFC funding for SCQF levels 7/8 and 9/10 to bring greater parity between college and university funding for some courses, and where students may prefer to take their first one or two years at a local college (e.g. keeps student costs lower, better practical teaching) with a final two years at a more research-orientated university. This is suggested either through articulation routes or building partnership degrees between colleges and universities.
  - Encourage more fully integrated tertiary approaches where there is vertical regional collaboration, with a greater number of colleges and universities offering integrated degrees, working with schools to reduce repeat levels of study.
  - Develop more flexible entry and exit points – largely, by securing the value of Higher National (HN) qualifications below degree level as natural “terminal qualifications” from the outset of a learner’s journey and challenging the prevailing wisdom that everyone should study for an honours degree.
  - Expand post-graduate offers, particularly for the cohort of 2019-20 graduates who may face a particularly difficult labour market.
  - Develop mechanisms that enable students from different institutions to “stack” qualifications and accumulate micro-credentials across providers. Respondents also pointed to the need for greater flexibility and currency within the existing post-16 accredited qualifications portfolio, and a desire to review the process of qualifications development and subsequent commissioning in order to respond more efficiently to the needs of learners and the economy.
  - Focus on the student by creating their own individual “Lifelong Learning Account” to enable them to access relevant education at their point of need and in flexible ways that support them through life.
7. The Commissioner for Fair Access and the National Articulation Forum’s final report both make a number of important recommendations about the recognition of prior learning at college in moving to a degree in a university. More than ever, we need good data and evidence to help us decide on the right interventions. We will publish a more extensive data set towards the end of 2020,



and engage about further interventions that might be most effective. We are already keen to respond positively to many of the recommendations, including:

- Updating the definition of articulation from ‘an HN gained at college moving to a degree in a university’ to recognising all movement between SCQF levels 7 to 8 and 8 to 9, and promoting full credit for all previous higher education study. This will ensure that activity through UHI and SRUC receives recognition and will be included in national figures, as will degree provision that is validated by universities but delivered through and by colleges. In addition, universities should be able to accept students with other qualifications at SCQF levels 7 and 8 that are not HNs onto degree courses as part of an articulation pathway.
  - Working with colleges and universities to make best use of the National Articulation Database to identify subject areas where Advanced Progression (students only receiving partial credit for previous HE study) pathways can be encouraged with some additional curriculum mapping. We recognise that not all subject areas or all HNs can easily map onto an articulation pathway, but more can still be done to promote more efficient learner journeys.
  - Gaining information and advice about articulation and choices to learners, either through existing online resources or the use of existing SFC-funded programmes, to further promote articulation pathways to school and college pupils, and a consistent national message on articulation.
8. This review underscores the need for a system wide view of provision that takes into scope the senior phase. Indeed, many respondents were clear that widening participation, for example, requires an inclusive approach across all levels of education, to support young people and their families, teachers, and communities to help them explore their options from an early stage. An integrated tertiary system also needs an examination of our funding models (perhaps by SCQF level); joined up national funding streams; and whole systems targets and outcomes.

## Annex B: Learner Journey Recommendations

- 1. We will ensure every learner in Scotland has an online learner account to link their skills and attributes to better course choices. This work will start in 2018.**  
We will work with SDS to develop My World of Work to link fully with existing digital services in school to deliver an online learner account that enables learners to record their attributes, skills and qualifications in a way that follows them beyond school and helps them plan their learner journey into work.
- 2. We will support practitioners, parents, carers and learners to have access to an online prospectus setting out the learning choices available in their region, building toward a one-stop shop approach. This work will start in 2018.** We will develop a clear local offer and work with local authorities, colleges, Regional Improvement Collaboratives, universities and SDS to support the development of an online regional prospectus for the senior phase which gives an overview of the courses available to young people in schools in their area – linking to the promotion of DYW.
- 3. We will ensure learners in schools, colleges and universities receive a joined-up approach to careers, information, advice and guidance. This work will start in 2018.** We will work in partnership with colleges to ensure greater consistency in CIAG service delivery to learners. This will include better access to specific career practitioners in the college sector. We will work with QAA (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education) and Universities to ensure their quality processes align with Scottish Government aspirations for learner access to CIAG support.
- 4. We will take account of the outcomes of the PSE (Personal Social Education) Review, due to be published later this year, and consider what further improvement is needed on wider personal support for young people in schools.**
- 5. We will work with the college sector to improve the ease with which learners can apply to college. We will work with colleges, SFC and SDS to further improve the way learners can search and access course applications.** We will move to the use of common information on all college applications to make it easier for learners who make multiple applications. We will move toward a more standardised timetable for college applications and the presentation of offers of places, taking into account UCAS deadlines for offers.
- 6. We will develop a national communication strategy to explain and promote the breadth of choices in the 15-24 learner journey.** This will build on the promotional activity undertaken during Scotland's Year of Young People and be ready by the end of AY19-20.

7. **We will raise our aspiration and improve the offer and support for statutory leavers and looked after young people. We will want improvements to be in place from AY19-20.** We will support schools to have in place an expanded offer from the start of S4 – involving early identification, a planned curriculum with the necessary support in place - devised in partnership with either the third sector, colleges or an employer, for all young people at risk of disengagement.
8. **We will better align financial incentives to encourage continued participation in school for young people at risk of disengagement and we will ask Young Scot to assist us with this. This work will start in 2018.** We will review how our entitlements align to maximise their impact irrespective of whether learning takes place in the third sector or college whilst a learner is still at school. We will align this effort as part of taking forward the recommendations of the Student Support Review(2017) and will ensure this work has maximum impact on care experienced young people.
9. **We will embed DYW in the school curriculum by 2021, having achieved the headline target for DYW four years early.** We will work with the new Regional Improvement Collaboratives, schools, local authorities, colleges, third sector, CLD, employers and national bodies to embed DYW as the expected approach to curriculum, planning design and delivery.
10. **We will support and enable the Foundation Apprenticeship and other vocational qualifications to be embedded, providing a range of options for all learners in the senior phase by 2021.** As a starting point we will continue with our commitment to 5,000 FAs by 2019.
11. **We will support colleges to maximise the vocational routes learners and employers need.** From 2018, we will build on the college sector's pivotal role in the education and skills system: in access; in enabling routes to work; in delivering higher technical skills; and in providing routes to university. This will include ensuring we have the right provision, the right modes of study and the right measures of success to support the best learner outcomes and make the biggest impact. This will build on the work already started by colleges and support our wider effort to develop a shared narrative about the purpose of post 15 education.
12. **We will improve choice through the expansion of Graduate Apprenticeships to provide new higher level technical skills as part of a better balanced education and skills system. This work will start with impetus in 2018.**
13. **We will minimise unnecessary duplication at SCQF level 7. We will make maximum use of the flexibility of the four year degree to enable learners to move, where appropriate, from S5 to year 1 and, through greater recognition of Advanced Highers, from S6 to year 2 of a university degree programme.**

This will help support delivery of Recommendation 6 of the report of the Commission on Widening Access (“The Scottish Government, working with key stakeholders, should ensure the key transitions phases around SCQF levels 6 to 8 are better used to provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds with the qualifications and experiences required to support fair access.”).

14. **We will support colleges and universities to ensure more learners progress from college to all our universities without unnecessary duplication of SCQF credit.** We will more fully align our college and university higher education system to meet learner expectation, to ensure full recognition of prior college learning where appropriate. We expect all universities to actively support this to happen and to commit to substantially increasing the proportion of HN learners they admit with full credit to at least the 75-per-cent benchmark identified by SFC. We will ask universities to set out the reasons why articulation is not possible for any learners transferring within the same broad subject areas, and the steps being taken to enable it. We expect the universities who traditionally have low numbers of articulating students to also commit to substantially increasing the number of HN learners they admit.
15. **We will provide system leadership to ensure there is a shared vision about the purposes of post 15 education.**
16. **We will support greater alignment and collaboration across the education and skills system making best use of the Scottish Candidate Number to help support effective transitions.**
17. **We will develop better data and improve how existing data is used to support learners make the right choices for them. We will also develop a performance framework to drive improvements across the system as a whole.**