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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?

Scotland is a small nation, with a wealth of successful colleges and universities which allow for access to those from urban, remote and rural locations. We already benefit from collaboration across the tertiary system – senior phase in school, college, university, skills and industry. These links should be incentivised to work more meaningfully and to allow personalised and swift learner journeys for all students (cf. quicker improvements in genuine articulation, both from school to post-school provision, and from college to university).

Colleges have a critical role to play in the social justice agenda. We have made good progress in our ambitions for widening access to post-school education – but there is more to do here to ensure no one is left behind. The Developing the Young Workforce programme has had significant success in enabling greater access to vocational opportunities for school pupils, as well as access to academic opportunities in college and to relevant work placements.

The personal contact that college students have with tutors and support staff encourages high retention and attainment rates. Close links between different agencies – Education Scotland, SFC, Colleges, SDS, local authorities help support learners well through various transitions. High attainment rates in many colleges reflect successful targeted strategies to prepare students well for work or other next steps - this is important for widening access, inclusion and closing the attainment gap. There is scope for improved shared learning and narrowing of the performance gap across institutions and different learner groups.

We are shifting perceptions about the value of both vocational and academic qualifications – but again, there is more to be done here in terms of early and appropriate careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) for both school pupils and parents/carers, to ensure that fully informed choices are made at the right time.

We need to enable greater industry engagement in the skills system – in curriculum development; in the provision of meaningful work placements; in incubator programmes; in co-investment in skills provision (cf. Graduate Apprenticeships). If we are to genuinely seek to shift the 'skills gaps', there needs to be greater data sharing across public agencies; improvements in labour market intelligence (LMI) utilisation and of other relevant evidence, to support curriculum shift in colleges.

There is scope to adjust funding for particular levels to incentivise change and performance. This should get people through senior phase and into FE or HE at a pace that suits them and should reduce repeat levels of study. This might entail funding levels 7 & 8 at a different price from levels 9 & 10 in universities to support college provision of levels 7 & 8 for those students who may need additional support. Or, it might require a more tertiary approach – use Outcome Agreements to develop vertical regional collaboration where colleges and universities are offering integrated

degrees – and carving more places out of core provision to maximise cross-system efficiency and improve outcomes.

There is equally scope to consider senior phase funding for those pupils who benefit from both a school and college experience to ensure maximum efficiency of funding allocations.

We face a huge challenge in the post-COVID landscape to enable people and businesses to thrive. Learning, skills *and* employment will all have a central role to play in tackling this challenge and to do so in a way that tackles the inequalities that we came into the crisis with. This will require bold leadership and strong partnership at all levels, to create space for an open, honest and challenging dialogue about what can be done, what needs to be done, and what we will do together, to create a new approach to upskilling, reskilling and creating opportunities for all. It will also require a re-balancing of funding across the wider skills system to ensure scarce public resources are allocated where they can deliver best public value and to ensure that the learning and skills system responds in an agile and resilient way.

Colleges provide a vast national training resource and are social and economic drivers within their communities. Now is the time to make use of this in a much broader way, in the national interest, to support social and economic recovery across all our communities.

B) What do you think colleges, universities and SSIs 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 needs to be an absolute focus on strong and effective governance, of whole system leadership and transparent decision-making, and of future proofing our skills and learning offer to maximise the public value of our significant skills investment. There should be close scrutiny of performance and governance across existing systems to ensure outcome delivery, value for money for the taxpayer and effective and appropriate oversight. Where issues are identified, swift remedial action should be taken in partnership with institutions/agencies.

Colleges should continue to invest in sound business practices in relation to efficiency and effectiveness – there should be greater sharing of good practice and benchmarking across Scotland and the UK. There should be recognition and reward for high performing institutions. The strong inter-college and inter-regional collaborative work sharing best practice in both formal and informal settings should be further developed and encouraged to fast track efficiency, effectiveness and continuing good practice. The successful collaborative initiatives between colleges and also between colleges and universities through organisations such as EAUC, ESP, HEFESTIS, the Glasgow City Regional Colleges group (Lanarkshire, Glasgow and Inverclyde regions) provide excellent examples of what can be achieved within and across regions and across the sector and are part of an existing, developed set of structures that may act as a springboard for colleges to provide effective and efficient outcomes for learners and employers as we re-build the economy.

There is also scope and opportunity for improved benchmarking groups for colleges of similar scale/scope to promote efficiency and effectiveness and develop broader sector successes through shared learning and good practice. This evidenced-based understanding of success and

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scope for improved shared learning would support a narrowing of the performance gap across institutions and different learner groups to ensure best outcomes for all learners.

It is likely that there will be an uneven social and economic impact across Scotland, which risks deepening pre-existing regional inequalities. Responding to this will require genuine cross-system collaboration to rebuild our economy and society and to create sustainable success for our communities. Colleges sit at the heart of every community across Scotland and are ideally placed to support local and regional regeneration and recovery.

The personal contact that college students have with tutors and support staff encourages high retention and attainment rates. Close links between different agencies – Education Scotland, SFC, Colleges, SDS, local authorities help support learners well through various transitions. All these should be encouraged.

There should be improved alignment across the wider enterprise and skills system, including in relation to funding allocations from public bodies, local authorities and from City Region Deals, which are occasionally multi-faceted, requiring different levels and types of accountability to parts of the same public system. The same applies to bids for public contracts. These could be simplified in order to move resources – nationally and locally - away from administration activities to front line learning and skills development.

There should be an absolute focus on positive outcomes (as opposed to input targets): successful completion; positive destinations; student satisfaction; work placement and work readiness of college leavers; institutional sustainability; efficiency and effectiveness of institutional delivery; equality of opportunity alongside equality of outcomes.

We should ensure there is the right balance between undergraduate degrees and other forms of post-secondary education, including shorter tertiary qualifications, vocational courses, and work-based learning. There needs to be a better evidence-base to support investment in all aspects of post-school provision (including FAs, MAs, GAs, college, university and skills provision). There should be recognition of prior learning in VQs. All this will ensure that our skills investment both responds to and anticipates current and future skills shortages and emerging opportunities.

The current review of Higher National (HN) provision should be re-commenced, accelerated and concluded to ensure the HN remains a relevant and current qualification, leading to either employment or to university. There should be a review of other qualifications across the wider system to ensure their currency and value.

There should be an increased emphasis on enterprise, entrepreneurial and meta skills as part of core curriculum delivery.

There should be increased investment in innovation in Scotland's colleges to support increased innovative activity in our SME base across Scotland and, thereby, encourage scale up of our business base.

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

There is opportunity for colleges to capitalise on existing contacts and explore the opportunities that recent changes in UK-wide rules have provided – this should be encouraged by SFC.

Revitalising cross-sectoral reach and collaboration to support marketing overseas, including with SDI, SCDI, etc.; and to support increased college sector engagement in international activities.

There is opportunity to develop further vertical integration between colleges and universities as part of a strategy to provide clear learner pathways for international learners. Consider scope for colleges to support HE international students (cf. ESOL, digital literacy, etc.).

There is further scope to enable Scotland's international standing as a leading contributor to global grand challenges, such as the 'net-zero by 2045' ambitions. Examples might include the establishment of a Scottish Hydrogen Park in East Kilbride, or the establishment of 're-manufacturing centres' in various regions, supporting a triple-helix approach (partnership of industry, academia and the public sector) – in South Lanarkshire, to re-use, re-sell, re-cycle of wind turbines; and in other regions for aviation and train stock.

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

Opportunities: Colleges can build on their position in terms of skills training / retraining / upskilling/ reskilling for preparation of tomorrow's workforce, today.

There should be a real drive for a review and refresh of the college curriculum offer to ensure it is current, agile and meets the current and future needs of industry. This could include supporting business improvement to help companies survive and thrive. This would include areas such as business process re-engineering, service design, agile methodology and leadership, and would support businesses to adapt, change and drive efficiency in operations and it would also support the Scottish Government's improvement agenda.

Colleges could play a greater role in the CIAG landcape - building on the existing PACE initiative to better enable Colleges to provide bespoke careers, information, advice and guidance to support improved learner choices, leading to job opportunities.

Colleges should play a greater role in pathways to apprenticeships, to enable young people in the DYW group who may otherwise become unemployed to engage in vocational learning, develop work-ready skills and prepare themselves for Modern Apprenticeships once industry gets fully back on its feet.

The college sector is operating increasingly as a collective collaborative body, with thought leadership provided via the Colleges Principal Group, and strategic discussions taking place about regional specialisms, federal approaches, the establishment of flexible tertiary learning and skills networks within and across regions, etc. These should be encouraged and incentivized to progress.

Many colleges have been providing leadership in developing sustainable and low-carbon approaches in conjunction with industry and other partners. Colleges are well placed to build on

existing good work through their active cross-sectoral links through EAUC and local and national businesses. South Lanarkshire College has been pioneering and successful in this arena (cf. South Lanarkshire College in partnership with South Lanarkshire Council to support *Smart Sustainable East Kilbride*). However, there are opportunities for all colleges to further share best practice; lead thinking in terms of the SDG Accord; engage with industry and be effective contributors to promoting more sustainable behaviours across society, building on recent lessons learned.

The college sector has six years of post-regionalisation experience from which to draw. The evaluation of success, of lessons to be learned and improvements to be made, including in relation to efficiency and effectiveness, should be published before additional reform is considered.

Threats: Digital/remote/blended learning does not sit well with the cohort group of disadvantaged learners that form a significant proportion of each colleges student population and a potential threat is high withdrawal rates for 2020-2021. This poses a risk to those in Scottish society who are already disadvantaged and is a potential threat to agendas supporting access, inclusion and narrowing of the attainment gap.

Digital poverty and financial hardship more generally is a risk for many of our more disadvantaged students and will be critical to resolve if we are serious about inclusive social and economic growth.

Cross-system competition in relation to *places* risks creating friction in the system and of not providing the best opportunities for our learners. This may be occasioned by a reduction in international or EU students in universities, or by the targeted drive to widen access to university for those from more deprived backgrounds. Supporting students to make the right learning choices and to secure positive outcomes must remain paramount.

Strained industrial relations and a tight financial climate will pose a threat to the need for increased flexibilities in what the college sector is able to offer in terms of a social and economic response. This includes opening hours; term times; our ability to work to accommodate industry needs at times to suit them.

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

Inter-college and inter-agency collaboration to identify and share best practice in relation to:

- achievement and attainment;
- promoting high achievement for learners from the most disadvantaged groups (to address the attainment gap);
- educational quality (in conjunction with Education Scotland);
- effective leadership at all levels;
- institutional sustainability; efficient and effective use of public funds.

There are opportunities to consider more creative approaches to collaboration which benefit learners, industry sectors and remote parts of Scotland. This might include federal models which support the establishment of flexible tertiary learning and skills networks within and across regions; improved benchmarking and quality improvement; focus on key areas of economic potential (green energy, data; renewables; sustainable construction; etc.).

Benchmarking groups of colleges of similar scale/scope to promote efficiency and effectiveness and develop broader sector successes through shared learning and good practice. This evidenced-based understanding of success and scope for improved shared learning would support a narrowing of the performance gap across institutions and different learner groups to ensure best outcomes for all learners.

Establishing stronger and more resilient vertical partnerships with key, major players including local authorities, health boards, universities and industry, identifying where those organisations can work more effectively as discrete partners to lever value for money from the public purse, as well as other sources of funding for the skills system.

Structural change takes time, costs money, creates distractions. There will be greater value in considering improved flexibility in the existing eco-system; and alternative ways to secure improved outcomes. This might include consideration of greater alignment with city-region deal structures to ensure absolute synergy between skills provision and industry investment.

To achieve this will require genuine alignment and systems leadership across all parts of the skills and enterprise landscape, including in relation to funding allocations.

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

There should be improved alignment across the wider enterprise and skills system, including in relation to funding allocations from public bodies, local authorities and from City Region Deals, which are occasionally multi-faceted, requiring different levels and types of accountability to parts of the same public system. The same applies to bids for public contracts. These could be simplified in order to move resources – nationally and locally - away from administration activities to front line learning and skills development.

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