

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

INTRODUCTION

SOSE recognises the key role that Learning & Skills plays in the future competitiveness and sustainability of the South of Scotland's economy. We acknowledge the central role that Scottish Funding Council plays in relation to the Learning & Skills agenda and welcome this chance to input to the review.

We note that as a new Agency the relationship between SOSE and SFC is in its infancy, but we welcome the positive engagement that we have already secured. We look forward to working closely with SFC in future.

RESPONSES TO THE CALL FOR INFORMATION

The first phase of the review is focused on 6 areas; we respond to each of these in turn.

1. What works well and should be kept?

The current arrangement to provide both Further and Higher Education across an extensive rural area in a partnership and collaborative arrangement and hub and spoke model, provides a wide range of access both in courses and locations. This is important for the students and businesses that need to benefit from further and higher education.

SOSE recognises the key roles of Dumfries and Galloway College, sitting alongside UWS and UoG in Dumfries with spoke in Stranraer; and Borders College sitting alongside Heriot Watt University in Galashiels with a spoke in Hawick.

This is further supported with the benefit of Open University and Scotland's Rural University College in its Barony Campus, both of which meet the specific needs of the South of Scotland in flexible access to a wider range of courses and supporting the key focus around sectors such as Agriculture and Land Based Industries.

Specific areas of focus on the region are beneficial including the 'growing your own' approach in retraining individuals for teaching and early learning posts. This tailored aspect to meet the needs of the South of Scotland needs to be continually reinforced. Overall, there is a strong argument that any revised system should enable local decisions on how skills funds are used.

Importance of digital delivery:

- We consider that new models of digital delivery are central to the effective delivery of learning and skills in the rural South of Scotland. The experience with Covid-19 has shifted many individual's and business' perspectives on digital communication – do these changed perceptions allow swifter, more effective adoption of digital delivery models?

- SOSEP invested substantially (c£7m) in the digital skills network building the digital capacity of the Colleges – so that those seeking to access training didn't need to travel but could access the training closer to where they live;
- Can the Colleges (and the Universities) build on this opportunity to deliver more through digital means – increasing the pace of putting courses on-line? This should open up the offer to all – and students in rural areas should be able to access a wider range of courses. We see there has been positive progress and that some things have been happening, but there is an opportunity to speed this up;
- SOSE is keen to work with regional partners to look at how we deliver the offer in a wider range of places – expanding out to business premises as well;
- We see a need for flexibility about how courses are delivered – crucially that delivery suits business need rather than institutional need eg sometimes easier for businesses to release students for a week rather than a day-a-week and plan around that absence. As part of this, the lead partners need to look innovatively at what can be delivered digitally and what really needs hands-on or face-to-face provision.

2. What doesn't work well and should be stopped?

In relation to the approach around specific outcome agreements – there may be merit in expanding this to an agreement for the South of Scotland in order to align it with the forthcoming SoS Regional Economic Strategy.

Appreciating HE are allocated budgets to their base campus and it is under their discretion as to what proportion is allocated to spoke campuses in the South - having a dedicated allocation to the Higher Education activity in the region could encourage focus and certainty of provision and delivery which is an essential part of the SoS economic model.

SOSE's key concern is that there is not yet a strong enough alignment between the provision of courses and skills opportunities and the economic and business needs of the region. This is a strategic challenge that goes beyond the universities and colleges and requires national input from SDS as well as SFC.

In order to truly deliver on our 'Place' agenda and objectives, there should also be a wider focus on different client groups. The intense focus on young people is helpful, but in order to support future economic needs and to contribute to a fairer society, colleges and universities need to be able to support everyone who is economically active. All partners need to work to encourage 'lifelong learning' if we are to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to engage productively in the economy.

We recognise that to be genuinely responsive to the economic needs of areas the key institutions need the ability to plan and deliver in an agile and flexible manner – and that flexibility is closely linked to funding models and decision making. Although complex, we consider that this should form a key part of your review. This would also allow a proper consideration of provision in rural areas, linking back to the 'place' agenda.

3. Contribution to international competitiveness?

Universities have a well-embedded role in international connectedness and economic competitiveness. There is a discussion required around whether Colleges should be in that space as well – or whether their more ‘place-based’ role precludes that.

Recognising that research is a key aspect on economic competitiveness and international connectivity, strengthening the research base in the region – and broadening it - could be helpful. There is an important ‘place’ dimension to this research activity as it is an effective approach for attracting younger, highly skilled individuals into an area, as well as encouraging those already in an area to stay.

One of SOSE’s concerns in relation to R&D and other learning opportunities is the potential gap in provision left by the UK exit from the EU. It will be helpful to plan what provision may replace European Social Fund, R&D funds, and other learning support programmes like Erasmus and Leonardo Da Vinci. We are keen to ensure that rural areas like the South of Scotland are properly considered when replacements for these programmes are being designed and developed.

4. Opportunities and threats?

With the creation of new Agency and new ways of working and focus that will emerge from the pandemic there is a requirement for different way of working. We also need to look to the future needs of the economy and ensure that we have a shared vision of what is required.

There are opportunities with the focussed investment in areas such as Dairy Innovation and Mountain Biking Innovation Centres which provide opportunities to work in different ways with Tertiary Education.

The SOSEP investment in digital capacity/infrastructure has provided opportunities for innovative collaboration between Further and Higher Education to create new products, approaches and skills and employment opportunities and increased engagement with businesses and communities.

A crucial organisational threat – and opportunity - for the institutions to tackle is the sudden jump in online communication. This will enable a major increase in online learning approaches, which in turn offers threats to the current teaching practices. This is likely to be an ‘inflection point’ that the institutions need to embrace if they are to have a sustainable future.

SOSE also recognises the connection between communities at risk of depopulation and the provision of core societal, vocational or technical disciplines such as health social care and teaching – jobs that each and every small ‘place’ in Scotland requires. We continue to see our young people move to cities across Scotland thereby providing these key roles in urban settings – but often making recruitment to these roles in rural areas very challenging. SOSE would support a major review into the way in which HE provision is spread across our 19

institutes with a view to addressing an imbalance of provision that favours city-based institutes.

Regionally, the two FE Colleges provide crucial place-based services and links to local businesses – but as two of the smallest Colleges in Scotland, there may be concern over their ability to survive the forthcoming challenges. There may be merit in the two institutions considering how they can work more closely together to secure economies of scale and offer broader curriculums – whilst retaining their local feel, ‘ownership’ and grounding in the community.

Finally, as noted in 1. above, there is a strong argument that any updated system should enable local decisions on how skills funds are used. In order to make a more local approach work, we recognise that a different approach to funding would be required. That could be some form of new national ‘pot’ or could be more regionalised allocations. Whichever approach is most useful, it is clear that it must allow a greater degree of flexibility if regional and local needs are to be more effectively addressed.

5. Opportunities for collaboration across the tertiary education system

Having access to the wider tertiary network for the region would be beneficial in securing a wider range of access to courses for a rural area and to maximise economic opportunities e.g the input and interest to the Centre of Excellence for Mountain Biking from Napier University, University of Edinburgh and Strathclyde University. This brings a new dimension of working together with sectors and businesses tied into economic regeneration and providing wider opportunities for this region.

The existence of two co-located campus’ in the South of Scotland raises an clear question about whether the colleges and universities could work together in a different way, one that serves the needs of businesses and individuals in the South of Scotland more effectively. The UHI model delivered in the Highlands & Islands has clearly had positive impacts but has also required massive investment. Similar goals exist in the South of Scotland around retaining young people in the area; attracting qualified, skilled people into the region; and enhancing the research and innovation abilities inherent in the regional economy. There would seem to be strong potential for a new, innovative approach for the Tertiary Sector to pilot and test on these two campuses in the South of Scotland. SOSE would be keen to work with SFC and the partner institutions to develop and implement a suitably innovative approach.

We consider there is a need for greater alignment between the two Colleges and other FE/HE provision in the South of Scotland. If we are truly to have a regional skills approach, then we will need to align and point in one direction. A first, readily achievable step in this direction could be for a regional tertiary education outcome agreement to be developed and put in place.

6. Support contribution to green and education-led recovery

Linking in institutions / academics with businesses – we want to highlight the work of Interface and other partners with a very practical focus of making links between businesses and academics that enable the development of relationships that make immediate differences to businesses. Research and development is traditionally low in the South of Scotland and this sort of practical facilitation is important and helpful – eg <http://www.interface-online.org.uk/case-studies>

Articulation – we did a bit of research about a different funding model around articulation – can we look at college’s budget to facilitate students getting places. At the moment it seems to work in favour of those institutions with larger volume of students able to guarantee greater number of places.

Tertiary Education being part of sustainable and energy focussed initiatives and projects to translate and up-scale new technologies e.g UoG research into the Nithsdale thermal basin and exploring opportunities for the Crown Estate release of the coastal beds off the Rhins coastline. The institutions could also become stronger delivery partners in responding to inward investment inquiries and considering skills/education gaps and research opportunities.

Fundamentally, our colleges and universities play a crucial role in helping underpin the South of Scotland economy and in helping to encourage young people to see the opportunities in their local area – rather than leaving for training and not returning. SOSE believes that role can be strengthened and enhanced if some innovation and new approaches are embraced by the institutions.

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