

10<sup>th</sup> August 2020

Karen Watt  
Chief Executive  
Scottish Funding Council

Dear Karen

**Scottish Funding Council (SFC) Call for Evidence: A review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education**

The Board of West College Scotland welcomes the opportunity to provide input to Phase 1 of the SFC's review and looks forward to ongoing engagement with the Funding Council as the review progresses through future Phases.

This input is provided within a context that recognises that Colleges have a critical role to play in a skills led economic recovery (both economic and social). In considering our input the Board has also been very clear that as a civic anchor in our community we should be prioritising the needs of our learners and the communities and businesses that we support.

**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 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?**

**Students:** In providing quality learning and teaching to our student body, Colleges seek to maximise that experience and to develop interventions that provide a wrap around service to our students, this ensures they are supported to achieve their full potential, gaining the skills, knowledge and experience needed to make sure that they can contribute fully to the economy. Supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged students is a key element of this ensuring that they have equity of opportunity and accessibility at all stages of their learning journey. Colleges are primarily skills-based learning institutions, which when coupled with work placements and apprenticeship schemes, provide a work-ready resource for employers.

**Communities:** The communities that West College Scotland serves are amongst the most disadvantaged in Scotland, currently around 40% of our students come from SIMD 20 reflecting the communities which we serve. We are a fundamental part of the community infrastructure working with our partners to promote economic growth and social inclusion, providing access inclusion and physical interaction for some of the most vulnerable in our society often providing the only viable opportunity for these learners to progress with their learning and education. Uniquely, the FE sector is the nexus of learning and employment, spanning across delivery in schools, community learning, in the college itself, supporting articulation to universities, and connections to employers.

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**Economic growth and Development:** We are fully integrated into our local business communities working with employers of all types providing the skills, learning opportunities and experiences students need to thrive in a modern economy. We work hard at maintaining these links and understanding the specific needs of our local business communities, this is illustrated by our recent publication ‘Our Workforce, Our Future’ which was based on a College led skills survey of our local business community. Our college is fully engaged in the Community Planning Partnerships across our areas, and works closely with the Chambers of Commerce, contributing systematically to economic growth and development with all agencies and the business sectors. An example of our approach to supporting business is our award winning, AC Whyte skills academy which trains students with the specific skills needed by the company.

**Staff Base:** We have a staff base with wide ranging skills sets and strong links to industry. Maintaining flexibility around this will ensure that we continue to be able to respond to the needs of the local business community. Our staff base is complemented by our business connections with businesses providing real life insight for our students through lectures and live project work.

**Flexibility:** Maintaining and growing the ability to deliver a range of interventions to support the upskilling and reskilling of individuals through a variety of delivery modes will be crucial to ensuring that we are agile and responsive to potentially rapidly changing economic pressures. This will also give individuals the opportunity to focus their learning needs in a way which improves the ability to secure employment and employment progression.

We believe that these features and strengths can best be preserved and strengthened by;

- Supporting Colleges to increase the economic, social and human capital of the regions they serve by prioritising greater flexibility within delivery and funding models
- Considering a joined up, strategic approach to funding based on social and economic outputs, rather than multiple funding pots
- Reducing competition between schools, colleges and universities in order to increase efficiency and a more effective use of available funding, seeking to secure best value
- Continuing to invest in estate as appropriate to ensure 21<sup>st</sup> century modern learning environments
- A better alignment of funding with planning, currently we have single year funding and three-year planning. Colleges need the ability to react with agility and flexibility in meeting local economic need. It should also not be assumed that flexible, blended and/or distance learning are less resource intensive – they require development time and infrastructure investment.

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

There needs to be greater cohesion between schools, colleges and universities ensuring consistency of experience. There needs to be better regional strategic planning across education to meet the needs of local and regional economies.

The provision of education needs to be more responsive and flexible. Moving away from traditional on campus delivery and traditional patterns of delivery. Demand occurs throughout the year and we need to be more agile in responding to that demand.

The role of Colleges in innovation and knowledge exchange needs to be more widely recognised. Colleges have strong links in their business communities and have a track record of supporting, not only skills innovation, but also product and process innovation leading to productivity improvements. Innovation needs to be embedded throughout education at all stages.

Consideration of how funding is allocated regionally is important, ensuring that all players have the opportunity to contribute to regional growth. Equally there needs to be flexibility and autonomy within regions to allow local solutions to complement regional and national solutions.

There needs to be a continued focus on digital capacity, with appropriate investment to support this. Colleges need to deliver learning and teaching and skills development throughout the period of the pandemic, and to be able to support the flexibility of provision that is needed.

There needs to be a continued strong emphasis on apprenticeships. An Apprenticeship Pathways programme that enables employers to have a key ongoing role will be a valuable way of developing skills in key sectors.

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

Collaboration across institutions will be key to ensuring that we build on Scotland's strengths and reputation as a place to live, study and work.

Scottish institutions and the Scottish system have a lot to offer internationally and we should continue to work with the national organisations, including SDI to shape the proposition and determine appropriate overseas markets. West College Scotland has a track record of operating internationally with a number of strong partnerships in the Far east, this work has previously been supported by SDI.

It will also be important to continue to develop a global mindset within our student body, this has been a priority for West College Scotland.

Colleges will continue to have a key role in supporting Scotland's competitive position in securing foreign direct investment, ensuring a strong appropriately skilled workforce.

**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?**

**Opportunities:**

The experience of adapting quickly to operating throughout the pandemic has illustrated a flexibility and adaptability within the system which presents a number of real opportunities for the future. These include the following;

- a much improved ability to deliver more flexibly and digitally in the future.
- Engagement with a wider range of students through more flexible delivery.
- An enhanced recognition by individuals of the need to upskill and reskill
- Colleges recognised as anchor institutions in their communities, and critical to a skills based economic recovery.
- The increased understanding of digital poverty through the COVID experience could help enable more critical investment in digital infrastructure
- The opportunity to support green recovery and Scotland's green ambitions.
- Raise the profile of the College sector, and our ability to be agile and adaptive
- Opportunities to fast track the objectives in West College Scotland's own Corporate Strategy.

**Threats**

The greatest threat is the availability of funding to ensure that the college sector can maintain the capacity to meet increased demand. Other challenges include the following;

- Challenges with our physical estate and maintaining critical investment in technology.
- Student digital poverty, connectivity and hardware
- Digital skills of staff and students
- Financial stability of the sector
- Increased external competition

West College Scotland's recently published Corporate Strategy set out our approach to reshaping our College and making us fit for the future so that we could better serve the needs of our students and communities and make a lasting contribution to our regional

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Economy. The strategy identified 4 strategic priorities; Personalisation, Collaboration, Agile and Adaptive and Digital. While the pandemic has changed the economic context, we believe that adhering to the ethos of our strategy will help us to address these opportunities and challenges.

**More specifically we will;**

- Continue to prioritise our curriculum to respond to student the changing levels of demand and needs of students, particularly those who are unemployed and want to start courses outside of the set academic year and have personal objectives for skills development & qualifications – short sharp offerings/roll on roll off/immediate response
- Provide additional support for staff and students in digital skills development and working remotely. Development of materials to support this which also have commercial potential.
- Continue to work closely with our local businesses (Explicit this includes and employers in the statutory and third sector?) to support their needs.

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

Employer collaboration works particularly well because the employer and college both have clear and distinctly different roles. In school and university collaboration this can be more challenging where there are elements of competition – duplication of Senior Phase/FE and HN/1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> year degree.

Consideration should be given to standardising articulation routes by moving to a 2+2 or a 2+1 model of delivery for honours and ordinary degrees respectively. This would ensure that all institutions give the same recognition for the same qualification when the learner is applying to the same or similar course at the same SCQF level.

Closer strategic alignment is needed within the tertiary system to ensure that pathways are student focused and not institution focused.

**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?**

The focus of agencies should be on delivering value for money, aligned to employment, including self-employment.

Consideration should be given to better alignment of different funding sources in terms of approaches, timescales and reporting requirements.

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This would reduce the administrative burden on institutions.

It may be helpful to consider the integration of funding sources.

The academic year model is driven through current approaches to funding and reporting. This may be too linear for students, and the needs of the economy, school then college then university or school then university. Consideration should be given to a more flexible model that allows more overlap – college students undertaking university options while at college; more students gaining equivalent qualifications whilst working; less delivery in set academic years overall. A system that is more agile and flexible, able to respond to the changing needs of students and employers.

The Scottish Government and the SFC should look to create clearer and more flexible planned funding for institutions, moving from annual funding to multiyear funding, this would support better long-term planning, and improve institutions ability to respond to quickly changing terms of demand.

Consideration should be given to having a smaller set of ROA targets, that are more realistic, impact focussed and capture the key priorities to be achieved within the sector.

We trust this submission is valuable and look forward to receiving the outcome of this Phase of the review and engagement with later phases.

Yours sincerely

Liz Connolly

Principal and Chief Executive

Waiyin Hatton

Chair – Board of Management

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