

Colleges Scotland's Submission to the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee Inquiry – Immigration

1. Introduction

Colleges Scotland is the collective voice for the college sector in Scotland, representing its interests with the aim that colleges are at the heart of a world class education sector that is recognised, valued and available to all. Colleges Scotland, as the membership body, represents all 26 colleges in Scotland, which deliver both further education and around 28% of the provision of all higher education in Scotland.

2. Area of Focus

The key area of focus for the college sector is to ensure that the approach to immigration for Scotland supports colleges in their achievement of providing the skilled workforce required by industry, and in widening access to all, both of which contribute significantly to increasing Scotland's productivity and wider economy.

In order to achieve this, there are a number of key issues related to some of the proposals highlighted in the committee's report entitled *Options for Differentiating the UK's Immigration System*, and these are set out in this submission.

3. Colleges Play a Key Role

The college sector plays a key role in providing support to a thriving and growing economy. A sustainable college sector brings positive benefits to learners, society and the economy and allows Scotland's colleges to contribute to government strategies and policy direction. Colleges in Scotland:

- play a vital role in contributing to increased productivity and economic growth through the training of a skilled workforce and delivering skills and process innovation, particularly for SMEs
- are the key deliverer of the skilled workforce needed to work in a modern economy
- are focused on skills and process innovation i.e. delivery and design, industry engagement, networking, bespoke and transitional training, transfer of skills and knowledge exchange
- have a key role to play in encouraging and supporting an innovative economy, facilitating knowledge transfer of skills for innovation within the economy, providing business incubator space and ensuring access to resource to aid start-up of ventures.

4. Key Issues

Promote Internationally

Colleges in Scotland have a history of attracting staff and students from around the world and leading on key overseas projects, and we want to maintain this work and relationships with our European partners at all levels. Three percent of staff currently in the college sector are non-UK EU nationals.

It is important to ensure that opportunity and funds are made available to continue to allow the college sector to promote itself internationally, including the undertaking of outreach projects to attract students and staff.

The college sector is already working in collaboration with other key stakeholders in Scotland to further increase the opportunities presented by seeking to work in an international context. This includes a desire from several colleges to look at ways in which they can work in partnership in relation to gaining further inroads into international markets.

Provision of Training Post-Brexit

Once any particular restrictions post-Brexit are more clearly known, an exercise should be undertaken to identify the additional workforce training requirements. It will be important to ensure that the college sector is adequately funded and able to deliver the necessary skills training to provide the workforce the skilled people required to fill the needs identified in any particular region. This will include employability training for Scottish domiciled students to prepare an individual for the workforce and will be particularly important if there are any restrictions in relation to access to immigrants who have historically undertaken particular roles.

Influence of Scottish Labour Market Needs

Future immigration policy should allow Scotland to address and influence the labour market needs within the country. This must be undertaken in such a way as to ensure that the regional context and differences in skill needs are able to be addressed.

One aspect of this is to ensure that the Scottish Shortage Occupation List has greater links to the skill needs reports which are identifying the skill shortages within Scotland and its regions.

Post-study Work Visas

The abolition of post-study work visas by the UK government in 2012 has been an issue of concern for Scotland's colleges. These visas allowed recent graduates to work or set up businesses in the UK for 24 months, which retained skilled and educated graduates as part of the labour force.

International students from around the world enrich the experience of Scottish learners by providing a more diverse pool of learners, with a broader global perspective. The cultural exchange benefits everyone as well as helping to promote Scotland.

Colleges Scotland would want to see any future approach to immigration policy undertaken in such a way that there can be a re-introduction of a post-study work visas. This could be achieved, for example, by changing the current Tier 4 rules to give students an exemption from the Points Based System or through the introduction of a Scottish study visa. This would attract more overseas students thus enhancing the college experience for all while retaining skilled graduates who contribute to our economy.

In July 2016, a two-year pilot was agreed by the Home Office, easing student visa rules at four English universities. The universities involved in the pilot will be made responsible for eligibility checks, and students within the pilots will be allowed to stay in the UK for six months after the end of their courses to find a graduate job here. Colleges Scotland is disappointed that no Scottish institutions were included in the pilots, and would be supportive of expanding the pilots to Scotland.

5. Summary

Colleges have a significant positive effect on learners, businesses, communities and the economy, and this is enhanced by both inward investment from abroad and the presence of international students and staff. It is vital that there is an approach to immigration for Scotland that supports colleges in their achievement of providing the skilled workforce required by industry and in widening access to all, both of which contribute to a growing economy in Scotland.

In addition, and if required, colleges are in a position to assist in the re-training and upskilling of Scottish domiciled students, to allow them to undertake tasks that are, in part at least, predominately undertaken by immigrants.

Colleges Scotland
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