

COVID-19 - Submission to the Education and Skills Committee on the Impact on the College Sector

Introduction

Colleges Scotland is the collective voice for the college sector in Scotland, representing its interests and ensuring 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 26% of the provision of all higher education in Scotland.

These are unprecedented times, however, colleges, their students and staff, have responded remarkably well by not only having the flexibility to quickly suspend face-to-face learning and move to remote working and online learning, they are also helping to combat COVID-19 in many different ways.

Colleges the length and breadth of Scotland are manufacturing and donating PPE supplies, donating food to local food banks to help support vulnerable students and families in their communities, some are offering buildings for hub use and social support, while others are providing their fleet of vehicles to frontline services. Many college staff, students, and alumni have stepped up and are volunteering in a multitude of different ways and we are immensely proud of the college sector's significant contribution to Scottish society during this crisis.

Financial forecasts suggest significant contractions to Scotland's economy resulting from COVID-19, but, just as in previous times of recession, the college sector will play a critical role in driving economic revival by assisting individuals who have lost their jobs in upskilling, retraining and providing them with the skills sought by employers and by supporting businesses of all sizes to get back on their feet and increase productivity.

Learning and Teaching

The safety of our students and staff remains our priority. The sector responded agilely and swiftly to guidance from the Scottish and UK governments issued on the week commencing Monday, 16 March 2020 and suspended face-to-face learning by Friday, 20 March 2020. Colleges remain open for business and have successfully moved to remote and online working and learning, where feasible, while significantly contributing to Scottish society's COVID-19 response.

Appropriate safeguards are in place for staff working remotely and those essential staff who are still required to attend college buildings. The sector is maintaining its focus on learning and teaching, while supporting and preparing students for future transitions into higher college courses, university, training, and work.

Significant online learning is taking place right across the country and, although our learning methods have changed, the college sector is still very much continuing to deliver. Most campuses are physically closed and only essential workers, such as people caring for students in halls of residence, or for animals and for important maintenance work are operating in buildings.

We recognise the significant pressures on our students, many of whom have caring responsibilities or work in key services. Amongst other things, we have implemented increased levels of mental health support and wellbeing services and have distributed digital equipment to those most in need.

We believe that college learners should receive the same clarity and assurance as has been offered by other parts of the wider skills system, and that the same degree of flexibility should be offered to ensure progression, where appropriate.

The sector requires flexibility to be maintained beyond the immediate period to allow colleges to contribute fully to the recovery of the Scottish economy, as demonstrated by our approach and successful implementation of the Flexible Workforce Development Fund (FWDF).

The college sector is working closely with Scottish Government and its agencies – especially Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), and Skills Development Scotland (SDS) – to find positive solutions for the challenges presented by COVID-19.

Following the cancellation of the exam diet in Scotland, colleges, universities, NUS Scotland, and the Scottish Government are committed to implementing a fair assessment process for learners which upholds the integrity of assessments.

There are more than 100 awarding bodies operating in colleges across Scotland, and, consequently, much work has been done to find solutions which adhere to those principles of fairness and integrity and, while some challenges remain for some vocational units, significant progress has been made with how assessments are being completed.

The college sector urgently requires guarantees from SDS, and assurances that colleges – and their local authority and school partners – will not be penalised if they are unable to complete their full recruitment or milestone achievement targets for apprentices. We have been advised by SDS that they are in discussions with the Scottish Government on these matters.

The 2020/21 cohort should not be treated differently, as there could be many returners from 2019/20 and so rules around bursary, for example, shall need amending, so that this year's cohort is not negatively impacted. For academic year 2020/21, we are scenario-planning for a flexible approach to learning with a blended return of some students to our colleges – adhering to latest public health and Scottish Government guidance – while others continue learning online.

The application process for next year's cohorts is ongoing and colleges are working together on a national recruitment campaign encouraging people to apply. There are a small number of courses where there are challenges around applications, which institutions are trying to resolve.

College Sector's Pivotal Role in Social and Economic Recovery

At times of economic hardship, colleges' social inclusion agenda is even more essential, and the sector shall continue its vital work in supporting and enabling vulnerable people of all ages to keep connected and progress along their journey into further study, training or employment.

Following the inevitable economic downturn, the college sector will have a critical role in supporting social and economic recovery and renewal across all regions of Scotland as we emerge from the COVID-19 situation. This will include upskilling and reskilling; investing in employability skills, including in the more rural parts of Scotland to ensure inclusivity is at the heart of all our endeavours; and supporting PACE activity in response to redundancy and company closure.

The college sector's network and our flexibility is ideally placed to drive regional economic development priorities across Scotland, and colleges' capacity to quickly deliver short, full-time courses and provide people with desirable skills will be hugely advantageous to Scotland small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and the economy generally.

As with previous recessions, unemployment levels are going to rise sharply with the likelihood that 19-25-year-olds will be hit hardest, leading to more young people needing to learn employability skills at college.

The [Cumberford-Little report](#) – published in February 2020 – provides an extremely useful template for how colleges could do even more to help improve businesses' performance and productivity and outlines a roadmap to help revamp the sector.

The sector needs to examine any possible restructuring in the wake of COVID-19, including alternative funding models and greater commercial flexibility.

Financial Sustainability

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis will significantly exacerbate an already very difficult financial and operating environment. Audit Scotland's report, [Scotland's Colleges 2019](#), highlighted the precarious financial challenges already facing the sector prior to COVID-19. Without financial support, colleges will record a significant operational deficit for the year ending 31 July 2020, leading to a material reduction in the level of cash held by colleges. In some colleges, this may lead to insufficient cashflow to meet their financial commitments, including staff costs and external contractual requirements.

We estimate that the reduction in income across the sector will be around £40 million, leading to a deficit of £25 million in this academic year 2019/20, and an estimated loss of income of over £70 million for the next academic year 2020/21.

The SFC has recently offered a welcome assurance on cash flows and some aspects of financial consideration, though there are additional queries which remain outstanding and we are working together to take these forward.

We are seeking similar assurances from the Scottish Government and SDS to provide similar arrangements with apprenticeship milestones to support cashflow management to enable current business continuity and sustain the apprenticeship and employability training infrastructure.

Support for the Economy

Scotland's economy is forecast to suffer a significant downturn because of COVID-19 and colleges will be pivotal in driving economic recovery with their agility and ability to upskill and retrain people and provide them with the employability skills employers need.

Our expectation is that businesses will be pre-occupied with recovery and are likely to cut back on training programmes and apprenticeships. There is the real possibility that there will be increased numbers of business failures and redundancies in the economy. These will likely lead to an increase in the need for PACE-type services. Colleges are ideally placed to support organisations across Scotland to rebuild their businesses and rebuild their confidence.

Given the college sector's extensive networks and unique reach to SMEs, colleges are best placed to provide business engagement, support for innovation, and to drive regional economic developments and recoveries, whilst maximising the opportunities for learners.

We believe that consideration should be given to significantly expanding the scale and reach of the FWDF to encourage employers to invest in work-based learning to increase productivity and to include small businesses. Colleges have been instrumental in delivering workforce upskilling, reskilling and soft skills through full utilisation of the allocated £10million fund and have actively delivered against the requirements of the FWDF since its inception in 2017. It is this capacity of the college sector to provide skills support to employers that will be fundamental to Scotland's economic recovery post-COVID-19.

The sector is seeking to work in tandem with Scottish Government and SDS to develop industry endorsed pre-apprenticeship schemes, as the sector considers this the only viable way to keep the skills pipeline disruption to a minimum and for colleges to meet the needs of potential starts leaving school this summer while keeping our lecturing staff in post and deployed come August 2020. We envisage these schemes to be full-time college programmes on a credit and bursary basis allowing matching to an employer to come later in the programme, which we know would suit many employers.

Colleges are public bodies and national assets which should be treated distinctly, and utilised to maximise the benefits gained from limited public resources, as all resources can be focused towards learners.

Support for Digital Equipment and Improved Connectivity

College leaders have been particularly exposed to the barriers in the current enterprise and skills system which prevent or delay effective operation. This includes the different types of funding arrangements which we have with providers, primarily SFC and SDS; the different relationships with various awarding bodies, which has delayed the offer of clarity and assurance to our student population.

Given that our entire skills system is now operating remotely with significant risk of dislocation for vulnerable and hardship students, we have asked the Scottish Government to consider providing free broadband for students and staff to assist this significant digital expansion and to accelerate the broadband capacities and speeds across the country.

The college sector is imminently launching a significant digital ambition strategy which will lead to considerable improvements in the sector's digitalisation, and these benefits will be even more impactful with the correct support networks in place.

Tertiary Education System

We believe that the well intentioned work of the 15-24 Learner Journey Review now needs to be recalibrated in light of the post-COVID-19 economic realities, with greater emphasis and incentives given to achieving a rationalisation of the existing system and the removal of duplication and waste.

More priority should be given to establishing a coherent flexible and efficient post-school learner journey as part of a more coherent tertiary system – an agile, deliberate, measured and co-designed change programme that incentivises collaboration, co-location, co-funding and co-investment, which encourages greater sharing and rewards innovation in the efficient delivery of learning and skills.

Conclusion

The college sector has responded swiftly and creatively to the current crisis, as individual colleges and collectively as a sector – we agilely pivoted our entire approach to learning and teaching over a matter of days to remote delivery. We remain civic anchors at the heart of our communities and colleges will be the driving force behind Scotland's economic revival from the COVID-19 crisis.

As a sector, we are committed to working collectively with the wider tertiary skills system to create sustainable success for communities across Scotland, and we will have a crucial role in supporting the Scottish Government and our communities to rebuild, revive and reinvigorate our economy and our society.

Colleges Scotland
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