

# **Colleges Scotland's Response to The AI of the Possible: Developing Scotland's AI Strategy**

## **Introduction**

Colleges Scotland as an organisation welcomes the publication of the Scoping Document that lays out strategic intent and themes going forward in the development of the AI Strategy for Scotland and the key role this strategy will play in establishing what Scotland needs to do over the next five years in order to realise the potential of AI.

On behalf of the college sector in Scotland we wish to express our support in principle for the AI Strategy for Scotland, and the core vision it presents, of a Scotland that is a vibrant, inclusive, open and outward looking digital nation, and using data to improve public services and unlock economic growth.

Given the role that colleges have played in supporting both upskilling and reskilling activity at local, regional and national levels to support inclusive economic growth, the sector is very well placed to support the changing landscape of skills and employment that will emerge as the AI agenda is unpacked. Colleges can have a key role in supporting this activity through their ability to retrain and reskill people for AI jobs and more widely in developing levels of understanding and trust in AI across our members, given the role of colleges as community hubs across Scotland.

## **Key Points**

The ambition of the AI Strategy to be people centred and aligned with the National Performance Framework (NPF) is a sensible and informed way to proceed, in light of the current emphasis the Scottish Government is placing on the NPF in relation to wider societal and educational activity taking place across Scotland and in the college sector, such as regarding successor funding to EU Structural Funds. This ambition is also aligned with the wider goal of the college sector, which has always employed a people-centred approach, and which has always valued the importance of enhancing both the lives and life chances of its learners.

The key message for AI in Scotland of being trusted, responsible and ethical is one that we strongly endorse, in line with the key goals of AI adoption helping the people of Scotland to flourish and Scotland's organisations to thrive and prosper, as well as the vision of the widespread adoption of AI technologies. With this message in mind, we would agree with the definition of AI as established in the Scoping Document.

## **Role of the College Sector in Supporting AI Activity**

Using AI to benefit Scotland's people and organisations and to achieve transformational change is an aim very much supported by the college sector, which has been engaged in exploratory work around using AI and data analytics to support curricular development and to reinforce student wellbeing processes. In practice, this has involved using data to inform and shape the design and delivery of student-centred pastoral and personal support and in turn encouraging and facilitating personal learning and development.

The sector is generally engaged in activity around optimising the data, in order to drive continuous improvement in their administration processes and staff and student support services. In some cases, AI is already in use, and for others, this is the aspiration, and the college sector therefore aims to enhance wider knowledge and understanding of AI in terms of how to effectively support our key stakeholders. In the most advanced example, a college is refining and tailoring their staff and student support services based on data utilising AI, whilst also benefiting their overall financial budgets. Scotland's colleges are also well placed to use existing channels and sector networks to promote the wider adoption of AI and AI best practice by the sector across Scotland.

We welcome the focus on, and development of, an AI ecosystem that will enable everyone in Scotland to reap the benefits of AI technology as a trusted, responsible and ethical tool, and which will enable stakeholders to engage in integrated development activities that maintain a focus on a shared goal. Colleges have long been sources of access for digital learning to those citizens furthest removed from digital access, and in broadening levels of understanding and digital and data related activity to new audiences, so we are encouraged by the emphasis on integrated development and an inclusive approach to ensure the benefits of AI are shared equally across Scottish society.

### **Role of AI in Complementing the Economic Impact of the College Sector**

With regards to opportunities, inclusion and the changing landscape of work and around retraining and reskilling people for AI jobs, areas that are even more important now as part of the post Covid-19 economic recovery, we would note that as specific job roles change in line with technological developments, and as the use of AI increases as part of this, that colleges are well placed to provide this retraining and reskilling. We say this because across the sector colleges are already developing and delivering metaskills, those skills centred around self-management, social intelligence and innovation which will futureproof workforces and ensure that learners are ready for the world of work. These skillsets will be complimentary to those new working environments and practices that will be shaped by increasing use of AI.

We would suggest that AI has an especially crucial role to play in supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), given their role in the wider Scottish economy, and in increasing their productivity by freeing up capacity for employees to focus on wider business activity. Given the close relationships developed by colleges with SMEs across the country, colleges are uniquely placed to advise SMEs on how to incorporate AI into their business processes, and more importantly, to provide employees with the skills and knowledge required to maximise both the adoption and impact of AI in this sector.

Colleges are able to do this in their capacity as both training providers and educational institutes which place a focus on social skills and day to day skills, including those soft skills which ensure that no one is left behind and which maximise the capacity of workforces across Scotland, outcomes which are in alignment with the aims of the AI Strategy. We would also advise with regards to AI development that there is capacity within the college sector to develop technology and products, in addition to the private sector and universities. We look forward to ensuring that the college sector can be involved in supporting this agenda.

### **College Sector Digital Ambition and Sector Engagement**

The timeline around a five-year roadmap in creating Scotland's AI ecosystem is sensible and also incredibly timely for the college sector, as we are in the final stages of drafting our Digital Ambition for the college sector in Scotland, which will be used to direct and inform the development of digital activity in learning up to and including 2030. We would be willing to explain the work undertaken to date within the sector and share key ideas and lessons learned from this work.

In terms of the next phase of stakeholder input, and the planned engagement across urban and rural geography, we would strongly advocate that the college sector needs to be consulted, given the

diversity of location within the sector, ranging from Glasgow to Shetland and Stornoway, in order to maximise the benefits to be derived from the college sector. In developing the Digital Ambition for the college sector in Scotland, a balance of both urban and rural locations was crucial in ensuring that the Ambition was informed by the considerable differences in digital experience and digital working between those locations.

## **Conclusion**

As the Steering Group receives responses with which to inform and shape the delivery of the AI Strategy for Scotland, we would hope that the knowledge and thinking of the college sector, a sector which is increasingly supporting both the maintenance and delivery of AI across Scotland, is taken into consideration in the next stages of the strategy, especially around the development of resources in the form of skills and knowledge.

Given the unique role colleges can play in linking AI activity to inclusive economic growth, we would welcome the opportunity to share this practical experience with the Steering Group, and our experience of developing and disseminating our Digital Ambition, which is due to be published in due course.

At this stage, our specific requests are that as an organisation we continue to be engaged with the consultation and engagement stage of the AI Strategy for Scotland. There are major advantages in the college sector being involved not only in delivery of training, but development of the courses. We would also welcome the opportunity to become involved in Phase 3 of the strategy development process and feed into the working groups as they engage in work around identifying priorities and recommending actions ahead of the finalisation of the strategy over the summer period.

We would make the particular request that Simon Hewitt, Vice Principal, Curriculum and Attainment, Dundee and Angus College, and who will take up post as Principal of the college in June, is given the opportunity to present to the Steering Group and to act as a college sector representative in the working groups as and when they commence.

Colleges Scotland  
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