

MSP Briefing – Scottish Government Debate: Developing Scotland's Young Workforce

Wednesday 17 December 2014

1. Summary

On Monday 15 December 2014, the Scottish Government published its new Youth Employment Strategy. The strategy takes account of the work of the Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce.

Colleges Scotland welcomes the publication and its recognition of the college sector as a valued and valuable element in its implementation plans. Colleges will continue to play a fundamental and pivotal role by building on existing best practice in engaging with local and regional employers, and working in partnerships with local authorities and schools and key bodies such as Skills Development Scotland. Colleges will make a major contribution to the targeted improvements in positive outcomes for young people, including those from minority and ethnic backgrounds.

This expansion of college activity in relation to school-age young people cannot be at the expense of the sector's commitment to developing Scotland's existing workforce and offering highly regarded vocational qualifications. Therefore we welcome and require the funding that the government proposes in support of the implementation of this strategy. This investment will help to ensure that college staff are fully engaged with the changes taking place and continue to deliver high quality learning.

2. Key Themes and Milestones for Colleges

The key themes and milestones for colleges are set out in section 2 of the Youth Employment Strategy. Two of these themes deal with the way in which regional college outcome agreements will be aligned to regional planning and how progress will be measured. These themes are not new to the college sector and so this briefing will focus on the remaining three themes (1, 2 and 4) as follows.

Theme 1: Young people able to access more vocational options during the senior phase of secondary school which deliver routes into good jobs and careers. These are developed through effective partnerships between schools, colleges, local authorities and other partners

Colleges recognise and welcome the opportunities to engage in the development of meaningful and productive vocational pathways for young people. Most colleges have existing partnerships and collaborations with local authorities and schools to provide young people of school age with access to vocational programmes. However, the current practice across Scotland is inconsistent. What is available and for whom depends on local and regional arrangements. While there are excellent examples of well-planned, targeted and successful provision in partnership with colleges it is a fact that not all local authorities and schools engage to the same extent. As an example, in 2012/13 there were only 1,286 S3-S6 school pupils enrolled in college courses for the whole of Edinburgh City, whereas Clydebank College alone had 1,113 S3-S6 school pupils.

The college sector is a partner in the ongoing early adopters pathfinder programme where six regional pilots are currently taking place.

The volume of college activity in this area has been affected by funding policy changes introduced in 2010/11. This has led to a significant reduction in school-college activity (from 45,580 in 2010/11 to 26,330 in 2012/13). It has also led to colleges seeking a contribution to funding from local authorities/schools in order to minimise funding disparities.

Colleges Scotland has always taken the position that in order to address these anomalies and minimise the extent to which colleges are subsidising local authority education there ought to be a **national funding framework for school-college partnership provision**.

In the present funding climate **the college sector cannot increase the scope of school-college provision without additional investment**. Colleges Scotland notes the funding that has been allocated to local authorities in respect of implementing the Youth Employment Strategy and would strongly urge that this should be directed towards investment in school-college partnerships.

Theme 2: Improving opportunities and experiences for all learners, with a focus on reducing gender imbalance on course take-up

Colleges have over recent years made determined efforts to reduce the barriers to entry and widen access to the 'hard to reach' learners. Their success in this has been recognised in the recent Scottish Funding Council (SFC) publication *Measures of Success: Learning for All* (SFC 2014) that gave colleges' high praise for their progress in addressing inequalities and improving the gender balance among college entrants.

In Colleges Scotland's view however, insufficient attention is paid to the consequentials of widening access. There are increasing numbers of students who require additional support. The rising incidence of students with disabilities and health issues (both mental and physical) means that specialist support has to be provided. The college mergers that have taken place and the consequent reductions in staffing levels have made the provision of good quality support much harder to achieve and maintain.

The present gender imbalance that exists on programmes such as engineering, construction, early years child care, hairdressing and beauty therapy are recognised by the Commission report as rooted in social culture and workplace practice. In their promotional materials colleges take good care not to present stereotypes and operate admissions policies that are free from bias in respect of gender and ethnic or minority status.

Colleges Scotland welcomes the opportunity to work with SFC to develop a Gender Action Plan that is meaningful for the college sector and is workable in the present contexts. **We need to be part of that debate and not be merely informed of the outcomes**. Colleges are very well placed to identify role models and ambassadors from all under-represented groups. Colleges should have a key role in the development of relevant communication, marketing, promotional and careers material.

Theme 4: Supporting college leaders and staff to develop the skills required to meet the Commission's ambitions for the sector

Colleges Scotland would underline the importance of leadership skills in taking forward the proposed implementation plans for the college sector. The sector has undergone radical change in moving to regional colleges, governed by regional boards, with many senior staff taking voluntary severance and recent appointees yet to develop into their roles in the new organisation.

The establishment of regional colleges has required college leaders to focus engagement and partnerships at a regional level. We believe that college leaders and board members should be supported through this transitional period to ensure that the complexities of the new organisations and structures are fully understood for efficient and effective operation of the sector.

There are many leadership challenges, from managing multi-campus institutions to planning a regional curriculum portfolio that responds effectively to Regional Skills Assessments and Skills Investment Plans. It is in this latter context that college leaders will require support and training if the Commission's ambitions for the sector are to be met. This should be made available as a matter of some urgency.

Colleges Scotland also welcomes the commitment to supporting college staff to develop the skills that will be vital to the effective delivery of school-college partnerships as well as contributing to the development of Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) and supporting students recruited into courses with a historical gender imbalance.

Colleges Scotland would contend that this support must take account of the requirement for teaching staff to be released to keep their occupational skills up-to-date. It should also ensure that they are updated in relation to current pedagogical practice, including the use of technologies for learning, teaching and assessment.

The training and skills development offered by College Development Network is currently targeted at helping colleges address the Commission's ambitions and we would strongly recommend that they are engaged in planning and delivery of further training.

3. Modern Apprenticeships in Scotland (Access to Work Based Learning)

In 2013/14 there were over 5,700 (and possibly more) young people enrolled in a college as part of a MA. It is difficult to understand why this significant contribution to MAs in Scotland has been overlooked in the implementation plan.

The college sector manages, either directly or indirectly, some 22% of the MA programme in Scotland. Colleges Scotland has stated that the sector has the capacity to do more, with colleges declaring in 2012/13 that they could expand their MA starts by up to 56% of those awarded. We would therefore question the lack of recognition of the role that colleges might play. Colleges should be given this opportunity to do more.

The college sector is a partner in the ongoing pathfinder projects for Foundation Apprenticeships through Fife College and West Lothian College. We would expect that the college sector will play a significant part in the development of these innovative forms of work based learning.

There should be greater opportunity to build increased flexibility into structures of MAs, to ensure they bridge across sectors where possible.

4. Employers

The Youth Employment Strategy states that there should be a focus on employer engagement '*stronger partnerships between employers and education*'. This is to allow employers to influence the curriculum and play a more active part in the delivery of vocational education. The college sector has a strong track record of engaging with employers and there are excellent examples of how such partnerships have benefited young people, employers and college staff.

Colleges Scotland believes that the formation of the industry-led Invest In Youth Groups will be a key element in developing these productive partnerships further. The college sector has the capacity and experience to work with employers to maximise the opportunities for young people to participate in vocational education that has a clear line of sight to work.

Colleges Scotland: This briefing has been provided by Colleges Scotland for MSPs' information. More information can be found on www.collegesscotland.ac.uk.

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