

The Scottish Attainment Challenge – Colleges Scotland Comment – February 2022

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 24% of the provision of all higher education in Scotland.

On behalf of the college sector in Scotland we welcome the opportunity to provide our views regarding the Scottish Attainment Challenge to the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

Key Points

College Sector Alignment with Attainment Challenge

In November 2021 the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills announced the refreshed Scottish Attainment Challenge with a mission to *use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty with a focus on tackling the poverty related attainment gap*.

This is also the aim of colleges, not just schools. The impact of poverty continues to be evident in post-school education, particularly covering SCQF Level 1-6 courses. In terms of future planning, Scottish Government Ministers should give consideration to extending the Attainment Challenge to colleges.

Scottish Government Direction

Going forward we would welcome clear direction from the Scottish Government for inclusion of the college sector in the Scottish Attainment Challenge context. This could be taken forward as part of the Strategic Statement of Intent to be developed by the Scottish Government for the college sector, following on from the publication of the [SFC Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability](#).

Such direction from the Scottish Government would maximise the full capacity and role of the college sector in mitigating the impact of poverty on attainment and would build on the tremendous role colleges play in supporting this agenda in their role as civic anchors in communities across Scotland.

The Committee should be aware that colleges already work to mitigate the impact of poverty on individual learner attainment and in providing individuals with the facilities and technology to access learning and teaching in their local communities. Much of the work undertaken is unfunded; that is, carried out using existing college resources to provide extra services, without additional funding to deliver those services. It is important that this commitment to local communities is recognised.

Role of College Sector in Challenging the Poverty-Related Attainment Gap

College is the most popular destination for those from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds with 38% of school leavers from SIMD20 moving into further education.

The latest evidence collated by the Scottish Funding Council relating to College Statistics 2020/21 evidences that the participation rate for 18–19-year-olds in the Scottish population attending college full-time has risen. In 2020-21, more than one fifth (21.5%) of 18–19-year-olds in the Scottish population attended college full-time. This is up from 20.9% in 2019-20. In addition, the proportion of all school leavers noted as attending a further education establishment also rose from 27.3% to 28.1% showing robust demand for the sector.

On this basis, we would advise that there has been something of a missed opportunity in not allocating elements of the Attainment Challenge Funding towards the college sector and this is certainly an area where improvements, or at least alterations, could be made to enable colleges to take forward and deliver activity which supports the ambitions of the Attainment Challenge.

Conclusion

As outlined in the [Sector Statement of Ambition](#), published in December 2021, when colleges thrive, Scotland thrives. Colleges will continue to be inclusive and offer opportunities to everyone, building community wealth through education and training with a hugely diverse course offering and advancing social inclusion and delivering equality.

Colleges already support the ambitions and central aim of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, and we would strongly advocate for a greater role for the sector in supporting this agenda moving forward.

We would welcome the opportunity for future engagement with the Education, Children and Young People Committee on the views expressed in this submission to inform its response to the Scottish Government's Framework consultation.

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Annex A - Current Context for the College Sector

The draft Budget settlement for 2022/23 translates into a real terms cut to funding for colleges, leaving institutions without the resource they need to deliver some key aspects of provision that relied on COVID consequentials last year. It is important to be clear that the 2022/23 settlement is not an isolated budget outcome for the college sector – this most recent budget adds to the pattern of reducing investment over many years to the funding required to pay for the day-to-day operations of colleges.

The Revenue available to the sector is a flat cash position and therefore represents a real-terms cut to the core budget of £23.9m in AY2022/23 due to inflation, even before rising costs related to increased pay and rising energy costs for Scotland's colleges are taken into account.

Colleges received COVID consequentials in early 2021 to support deferred students, Foundation Apprenticeships, mental health and wellbeing initiatives and the provision of digital equipment for students. This funding has not been continued into 2022/23, leaving colleges with a further reduction of £28m on its baseline budget compared to AY 2021/22. This is in addition to the cost of inflation. Therefore, the total reduction in the college budget for 2022/23 is estimated at £51.9m.

Colleges were already facing a series of cost pressures prior to the impact of COVID-19, including increasing cost pressures from cost of living pay awards, employers' pension contributions, maintaining the college estate and the UK's exit from the European Union.

As highlighted by Audit Scotland in its Scotland's Colleges 2020 report the deficit gap between colleges' total income and expenditure has grown to £54 million. This is forecast to continue because of costs outwith the sector's immediate control, such as pensions and depreciation of assets. Robust long-term financial planning by colleges will be critical to achieving financial sustainability and auditors have highlighted a significant number of colleges that need increased funding, cost cutting - or both – to deliver balanced budgets in the future.

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