

Call for Evidence: Just Transition Commission - Colleges Scotland Comments

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.

The colleges sector Statement of Ambition commits the sector to being ‘a key partner in delivering Scotland’s inclusive and environmentally sustainable economic growth’, and colleges have been liaising with the SFC and outlining their plans for further carbon reductions. Since the launch of the Climate Commission for UK Higher and Further Education, Colleges Scotland has represented the college sector in Scotland in discussions and been involved in the development of an action plan by College Development Network in response to the UK government’s stated climate emergency.

As such, we welcome the opportunity to respond to the call for evidence issued by the Just Transition Commission to inform its final recommendations to Scottish Ministers that will maximise the economic and social opportunities that the move to a net-zero economy by 2045 offers as well as building on Scotland’s existing strengths and assets.

Key Points

College Sector Support for Net-Zero Agenda

The college sector is supportive of the Scottish Government’s wider ambitious plan for Scotland becoming a net zero economy by 2045. We welcome the focus of the commission on providing practical, realistic, affordable recommendations for action to Scottish Government Ministers and agree with the intended goals of maximising the economic and social opportunities that the move to a net-zero economy by 2045 offers, and we would strongly endorse the key role of the college sector in supporting this agenda.

College Sector Role in Supporting Economic Recovery and Working with SMEs

Scotland’s economy is forecast to suffer from a very significant contraction because of Covid-19 and colleges will be pivotal in driving economic recovery with their agility and ability to upskill and retrain people, providing them with the employability skills employers need.

Colleges are ideally placed to support organisations across Scotland to rebuild businesses and their confidence and to do this with the net zero targets in mind, whilst creating opportunities to develop resource efficient, inclusive and sustainable economic approaches, which help address inequality and poverty, in line with the goals of the Commission.

Given the college sector’s extensive networks and unique reach to SMEs, colleges have a key role to play in supporting net-zero related innovation activity in these businesses, whilst driving regional economic developments and recoveries focused around moving towards a net zero economy and simultaneously maximising the opportunities for workers to develop their skills as part of these changes.

What do you see as the main economic opportunities and challenges associated with meeting Scotland's climate change targets?

As the national organisation for colleges in Scotland we know that the sector has a vital role to play in supporting both the development and delivery of low and zero-carbon infrastructure in Scotland, as across the sector our members are large users of infrastructure, in terms of the college learning estate and the wider digital infrastructure underpinning wider learning on digital and virtual platforms.

With this in mind, we know that there is a real opportunity for the sector, in contributing to the upscaling of this infrastructure, to play a greater role in helping Scotland achieve its climate change targets.

Of equal importance, colleges are a key delivery partner for the workforce who construct and maintain infrastructure across Scotland, delivering high-quality technical education courses to provide workers with the skills that are required for them to hold successful careers in low and zero-carbon infrastructure related roles.

There is real opportunity for the college sector here to upskill and reskill this workforce, including those who lose their jobs as a result of Covid-19, to ensure that the wider Scottish infrastructure network is futureproofed to support a low carbon economy, whilst also supporting the key Commission aim of making all possible efforts to create decent, fair and high value work, in a way which does not negatively affect the current workforce and overall economy.

The college sector has an important role to play in supporting inclusive growth and the development of a low carbon economy, and colleges are currently heavily involved in both areas, through actively developing projects in collaboration with the Energy Skills Partnership. Therefore, it is important that colleges are a key component of conversations as the commission develops its work going forward.

Are there specific groups or communities that may be, or feel that they may be, adversely affected by a transition to a net-zero carbon economy? What steps can be taken to address their concerns?

We welcome the recognition by the Commission that there should be an assessment of workforces most likely to be affected by the transition (including those indirectly affected through supply chains), and in responding to most immediate and pressing skills requirements needed to support the net-zero transition.

The college sector can play a key role in supporting this agenda, as colleges as a whole have a proven track record in upskilling and reskilling workforces across Scotland, such as through delivering against the Flexible Workforce Development Fund since its inception in 2017, and through working with SMEs.

In order to support a transition to a net-zero carbon economy there should be a sustained focus on creating and maintaining apprenticeship pathways (particularly at this time of economic uncertainty as a result of Covid-19), to provide a skills pipeline to support any increased activity in relevant sectors of the economy, and more importantly to give young people the opportunities to forge successful careers in this context. As traditional apprenticeships in the Oil and Gas sector may be susceptible to the transition to net-zero it is vital that apprentices are not adversely affected.

To this effect the college sector has been engaged in developing a net-zero apprenticeship challenge, to support innovative practice and to maintain learning pathways and opportunities in careers focused around the net-zero carbon economy. We would be happy to share practical examples of this work with the Commission.

As part of this the college sector welcomes the development of a Climate Skills Action Plan being outlined as a key action to be taken forward in the interim report, and similarly we are encouraged by the focus within the interim report on the need to establish strategic planning on skills in order to

deliver a just transition. Given the crucial role of the college sector in providing opportunities for upskilling and reskilling across Scotland we would strongly advise that the sector is involved in those development discussions as they unfold, and not just brought into discussions at the delivery stage.

Conclusion

Going forward colleges across Scotland will continue to help Scottish workers, and Scottish apprentices, to keep pace with technological, environmental and labour market changes and to increase workforce and business resilience to future disruption as the economy both recovers from the impact of Covid-19 and transitions to a net-zero, low-carbon inclusive format in response to the Climate Emergency

As the Commission receives responses with which to inform and shape the delivery of a net-zero economy for Scotland, we would hope that the knowledge and thinking of the college sector, a sector which is increasingly supporting both the development of an inclusive, cohesive and resilient economy across Scotland, is taken into consideration in the next stages of the work of the Commission, especially around planning, investing and implementing a transition to environmentally and socially sustainable jobs, sectors and economies, and in building on Scotland's economic and workforce strengths and potential.

We note that the Commission intends to work openly and transparently, and engage meaningfully with workers, communities, NGOs, business and industry leaders, and other relevant bodies across Scotland. As part of this engagement we would welcome the opportunity to consult with the Commission, given the crucial role that colleges will play in supporting the transition to a net zero economy in communities across Scotland in their role as civic anchors, and in ensuring that this transition to a net-zero carbon economy is a successful one.

Colleges Scotland
June 2020