

# **A Digital Strategy for Scotland - 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 college sector has recently launched the Digital Ambition for Scotland's Colleges, which evidences the sector's digital intentions and enables the sector to support the full range of learners accessing college-based learning platforms across Scotland, following consultation with the college sector and key partners in the digital sector. Whilst work on the Digital Ambition commenced at the outset of the 2019/20 academic year, elements of this work were reviewed to assess the impact of COVID-19 upon learning and teaching across the sector, with key messages altered accordingly.

As a forward-thinking document, it will also ensure that colleges can quickly respond to the changing needs of the labour market and deliver skills for the new economy 4.0, having been developed and agreed following consultation with the sector and key partners in the digital industry.

Whilst the Ambition is focused around digital, it is also people centred and has been developed to meet the needs of learners; both those in the workforce today and those aiming to enter the workforce of the future.

The Digital Ambition also makes a number of commitments which colleges across Scotland will take forward, such as ensuring that all curriculum delivery incorporates digital skills development relevant to the curriculum area, level, and depth of study. For example, a college's curriculum review process will explicitly consider the opportunities to raise quality and efficiency through introducing VR content to prepare students ahead of workplace experience.

As such, we welcome the opportunity to respond to the Consultation on the Digital Strategy for Scotland and to offer our views on behalf of the college sector in Scotland with regards to how to build a Digital Scotland in which learners can be prepared for entering the workplace of the future, and wherein training and skills development is available for the existing workforce through colleges across Scotland.

## **Key Points**

### **Opportunities to Realise Collaborative Approach & Priority Opportunities**

We note the willingness of the Scottish Government to build on prior collaboration with COSLA in progressing their partnership approach to digital with other organisations and sectors across Scotland to maximise the impact of the strategy. The college sector is both willing and ready to

engage in such approaches to build on the strategy and develop and sustain a joined-up education system that equips learners with the digital skills and capabilities they need for the future.

As such, we would agree that there are numerous opportunities to realise a collaborative approach with which to enhance the impact of the strategy to ensure this truly benefits learners, employees and communities across Scotland.

We believe pursuing the following priority opportunities can facilitate a collaborative approach in practice. These key digital priorities were identified early on during the COVID-19 emergency by Colleges Scotland. These themes are complementary of the wider ambitions presented within college sector's Digital Ambition, around facilitating digital inclusion, ensuring services work for all and supporting a digital and data economy.

#### *Priority 1 – Access*

The number one priority for the majority of colleges is ensuring that all learners have access to hardware they can use to access the internet and the learning platform being used by the college, as well as access to any future track and trace system. The requirement for all learners to have a reliable broadband connection and/or data package in order to access the internet, sits alongside the requirement for hardware, as does access to an appropriate learning environment.

#### *Priority 2 – Developing Content*

The second priority is the need to develop an effective online learning resource and curriculum content and pedagogy, alongside an appropriate learning platform. There is a requirement for responsive, interactive and engaging content that is easy to use for both learners, lecturers and other staff involved in digital delivery.

#### *Priority 3 – Staff Capabilities*

The third priority is to ensure appropriate and up to date skills and knowledge for college lecturing and other staff involved in digital delivery, to ensure support as the digital offering and learning platform expands (as well as access to hardware). Lecturers and other staff involved in digital delivery will need to be provided with comprehensive training and development to ensure they feel comfortable and are effective at developing and delivering learning online, as well as other relevant capabilities.

**Is the vision that we have set out in the supporting narrative in each of these sections the right one?**

**Do you think that the potential actions set out in each section will deliver the vision set out in the supporting narrative?**

**Are any of the potential actions more important than others?**

#### *No One Left Behind*

We fully agree that that the vision established in this section is the right one, in that geography, background or ability should not be barriers to getting online and benefiting from digital technology. Similarly, we would share the vision that our digital infrastructure is critical national infrastructure and is central to economic and societal resilience, and that of a Digital Scotland wherein we have a more inclusive nation in which the benefits of digital technology can be for everyone.

We would reiterate that colleges, in their role as civic anchors, will continue to maintain and expand their social reach. They will build on an already significant profile in providing and maximising transformative opportunities for those citizens from deprived communities facing barriers to fulfilling careers.

Through this social reach colleges have a long established and successful track record in social inclusion and widening access to education, supporting individuals of all ages and backgrounds to gain skills and qualifications, helping the most disadvantaged and furthest from the labour market - people who may not otherwise have the opportunity to learn about and engage with the digital and tech sectors. As part of this colleges continue to provide fair and equitable access, as far as resources permit, to allow connectivity so all of our people and businesses can benefit from being on-line.

In terms of the potential actions set out in this section we believe they can deliver the vision but would suggest there should be a greater emphasis on those actions around *an education system that builds digital skills and digital inclusion that tackles inequality and wellbeing*.

Looking more closely at *an education system that builds digital skills* we would wish to make the Scottish Government aware of existing approaches underway, involving the college sector, which are supporting digital inclusion that tackle inequality and promote wellbeing and social inclusion, whilst building digital skills for the future, in line with the proposed action. In particular we would highlight the Skills and Learning Network, a partnership between Borders and Dumfries and Galloway Colleges, funded by the Scottish Government through the South of Scotland Economic Partnership (SOSEP), to improve access to training for students from across the South of Scotland.

The network employs a 'hub and spoke' approach to extend access to quality training and learning opportunities across the region. Hubs focused on Care, Renewable Energy, Construction and Engineering are located at college campuses in Dumfries, Galashiels, Stranraer and Hawick, allowing students to participate in classes online. Spokes are also located in high schools, community facilities and business premises enabling more learners to participate in learning opportunities across the region.

In terms of *digital inclusion that tackles inequality and promotes wellbeing* we would take this opportunity to remind Scottish Government and others that colleges work closely with a wide range of diverse groups, reaching across SIMD areas. Colleges are well placed to provide training and support to ensure that people have the skills, confidence and information literacy required to make the most of being online. For example, the college sector has been working with the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) to support Digital Literacy, building on previous developments in this area wherein sector worked with Community Learning and Development (CLD) partners to increase access and opportunities.

During COVID-19 colleges across Scotland have demonstrated their use of technology to support inclusion and the innovative delivery of services and courses, in part through the repurposing of existing provision and capacity, enabling access and social inclusion through digital inclusion, ensuring that the role of digital is part of a wider package of support for individuals, tackling inequality and promoting wellbeing in doing so through the medium of education.

To give one example West College Scotland, in response to the emergence of COVID-19 and the expansion of online and remote provision to provide their curriculum in an online format, developed a new online course to help alleviate some of the fears and concerns students may have had relating to learning online.

The resultant course was designed to fully engage our students and motivate their self-directed learning. The topics chosen to be included were in response to anecdotal staff and student feedback and were developed in collaboration with cross-sector input. It was designed taking relevant cognisance of the EU accessibility guidelines in addition to college standards and protocols and contributed towards addressing any potential gaps for our more vulnerable students who may not have had the opportunity previously to use certain functions, techniques or resources.

To create the platform for those actions, and initiatives such as those outlined above, there is a primary priority in *delivering broadband coverage for all*, to ensure that no learners are left behind as a consequence of where they happen to reside in Scotland. We would agree that this is an excellent ambition for Scotland, but one that must be planned and delivered effectively against a defined deadline for inclusive fast broadband to support true inclusion and a truly Digital Scotland.

As part of this we would ask that the Scottish Government provides additional investment in the college sector to accelerate progress in delivering broadband for all, as the sector is well placed to maximise opportunities brought about by online delivery of learning through enhanced broadband connectivity – ensuring this is open to all and building on the role of colleges as socially responsible bodies in providing connectivity and devices for learners in deprived and remote locations.

More importantly colleges will facilitate true inclusion for learners, as whilst connectivity is one facet of supporting inclusion, to truly benefit individuals this has to be reinforced with social inclusion, which can be provided by the learning environment of a college. Colleges can also deliver online cyber security training to individuals to ensure broadband coverage for all is safe and secure.

For example, Perth College UHI have been delivering a Cyber Security Skills Development Programme, in partnership with Perth Autism Support, to give those neurodivergent learners the opportunity to develop the appropriate technical skills to consider cyber as an area of employment, enhancing their meta-skills and employability and giving them an insight to the cyber sector through strong industry links.

Separate to the points made above we note the intention to align plans with a new National Digital Learning Strategy to ensure a coherent digital learning experience.

We would recommend that the college sector is engaged and involved in the development of the National Digital Learning Strategy, to enable a fully joined up educational landscape and for the principles established in the sectors Digital Ambition to be applied to inform that process.

### *Services Working for All*

We would agree that that the vision of collaborating to deliver end-to-end service journeys to boost people's wellbeing by enabling them to access vital public services in a way in which is convenient and easy to navigate is sensible and deliverable, provided this is done in partnership as part of a collaborative approach with input from relevant stakeholders.

With regards to potential the actions established in this section, we feel the clearest priority in this regard relates to the idea of *a digital service hub* and the development of a common catalogue of services. We would advise that the college sector has a key role to play in this context, in that colleges have the infrastructure and ability as a linking body to support innovation in public sector delivery and transform key services.

The college sector has developed a 'Scale Up' initiative, which will see colleges provide specific training or support around business improvement and will include providing expertise, training, and support around the areas of Business Process Improvement (BPI), Agile methodology, Service Design/Design Principles and Change Management. This will support businesses and public sector bodies to adapt, change and drive efficiency in operations and it will also support the Scottish Government's ambition of ensuring public services work for all.

We would also suggest that the college sector has an important role in supporting the proposed action to *protect and create value from Scotland's data* and in particular in linking in with the proposed Research Data Scotland centre of excellence.

Colleges can provide those shorter, sharper skills interventions to upskill and reskill individuals in data mining and data analytics, to support the growing workforce and future skills pipeline that would emerge with the establishment of the centre of excellence, and in doing so give opportunities to those learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This builds on the work colleges across Scotland have been doing to date in terms of delivering qualifications in data science and raising awareness of data standards and ethics, such as Dundee and Angus College and their HNC Data Science offering with articulation into Abertay University degree level courses.

Similarly, the college sector has had increasingly consistent engagement and partnership working with organisations such as The Data Lab, providing perspectives around how to support the needs of local industries in terms of skills and education requirements, and in supporting data driven innovation.

Colleges are innovative and forward thinking in this context, and on that basis, we would request that the college sector is included in the establishment of Research Data Scotland, to bring its expertise to the table in using high-quality data to improve the lives of people in Scotland and to contribute to public debate on policy issues.

### *Transforming Government*

As per the preceding sections we would agree that the vision that has been established is the right one, and that the potential actions set out have the potential to deliver the vision set out in the supporting narrative.

We note the commitment to establishing a *single, shared digital academy* through the existing Scottish Digital Academy (SDA) as a skills provider of choice for the Scottish public sector, and believe this is a priority action in this context. We believe that this has the potential to support accelerated delivery of digital skills needed both now and, in the future, and to build stronger professional communities in doing so.

To enhance the impact of this academy in delivering digital skills on an accelerated basis to the public sector, we would suggest that colleges should be closely involved with, and aligned to, the activity of the academy. Colleges can complement the work of the Scottish Digital Academy, by offering digital training in methodologies with which to develop and implement agile service design. Doing so would build on the existing relationship public sector employers have with colleges across Scotland, and link in with those initiatives already underway such as Foundation Apprenticeships.

To give an example of this work, Dundee and Angus College has established a centre for service design to support rebuilding better, developing a Professional Development Award in service design as part of this, with a view to establishing co-productive and co-creative approaches to design better digital services.

As an example of this, we would highlight the work of Dundee and Angus College with the SDA. As part of a Digital First agenda under their organisational Digital Strategy, they engaged with SDA around new ways of working, with their Senior Leadership Team completed Agile Training in October 2019. As part of this a range of agile tools were adopted, including stand ups and a Dundee and Angus College version of scrums through a project workstream approach to Senior Leadership Team responsibilities.

This input and applying agile tools to their work has revolutionised their operations, and given them a platform with which to implement two Business Continuity Teams in 2020 in relation to a cyber-attack and COVID-19. The SDA agile training meant as an organisation they had the right tools to respond quickly and effectively to both the cyber-attack (well documented and complemented by

industry experts) and COVID-19 through the agile workstream approach, the effectiveness of which is seen in staff engagement scores (80-90%+ satisfaction across the board) and levels of student engagement (even higher retention and attendance rates than normal).

Dundee and Angus College has taken the learnings of their engagement with SDA and are applying those learnings for the benefit of their staff and student communities and are now in a position to apply those learnings in partnership with business and industry. On the basis of the success of this engagement, we would advise that SDA engages with more colleges across Scotland to replicate this partnership approach.

### *A Digital and Data Economy*

We would agree with the vision as established that ensuring no left behind applies in an economic context as well as a social context, as we know the economic cost of inaction in adopting digital technologies will be even more critical in terms of impacting of Scotland's recovery from the impact of COVID-19 and supporting the Net-Zero transition.

Looking more closely at the actions outlined in this section, we would firstly highlight the role of colleges in providing *Expert support for SMEs* and in providing expert advice around capacity building. Colleges have strong relationships with SMEs through existing initiatives such as the Flexible Workforce Development Fund, which we believe could strongly compliment the proposed capital fund to incentivise and support SMEs to invest in the necessary software, hardware and skills, by ensuring staff and upskilled and reskilled to use this software and hardware effectively. In this capacity colleges can also be 'critical friends' to SMEs and other industry partners by provision of knowledge and expertise.

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 Digital Strategy.

We would also advise with regards to digital and data 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 and giving that expert support for SMEs as set out in the Strategy.

We would also advise that the college sector has a key role to play to support the ambition to *increase diversity in digital roles* as colleges act as a linking body in creating pathways for women and ethnic minority learners to take up roles in digital, whilst addressing short- and long-term skills shortages. Colleges achieve this through their partnerships with schools, in the form of the Foundation Apprenticeship programme and STEM agenda, and with industry support to maintain the skills pipeline,

This work is especially important considering the challenges in schools with regards to digital teaching and infrastructure. In partnership with schools', colleges are able to mitigate the impact of these challenges, encouraging girls and ethnic minorities in pursuing careers in digital and technology, facilitating engagement in digital technologies and raising awareness of learner pathways available to these groups through Modern Apprenticeships and Graduate Apprenticeships, both of which are offered by colleges.

We would identify the priority action in this context is to *increase the digital skills talent pool* and to ensure we have a skilled workforce available to meet the needs of a growing digital economy and help deliver the vision as established in the narrative. The college sector will have a vital role to play in increasing the digital skills talent pool and we fully agree with the Scottish Government that we must ensure availability of a skilled workforce to meet the needs of a growing digital economy.

To do that we would strongly encourage that the college sector is closely involved in futures initiatives.

We would also advise that the college sector is already involved through the National Transition Training Fund, and the sector would welcome deeper involvement in encouraging more digital skills training opportunities across Scotland. Colleges, in their role as civic anchors, will also continue to have a tremendous role in supporting entry into digital roles by offering digital training to those who are unemployed or on low incomes.

To support such activity, we would advise that bigger picture thinking is required, and to move away from the current system of multiple funding streams, such as the Digital Start Fund, in order to truly support the ambitions of the Digital Strategy. Our recommendation is that these separate streams should be collated in one national digital fund for Scotland, with one main organisation responsible for allocating and distributing this funding. This would bring clarity to the relevant sectors and support a true Team Scotland approach.

### *A Vibrant Tech Sector*

The vision established of a vibrant tech sector being critical to economic recovery from COVID-19 is timely and correct and we would fully agree that growing this sector creates an opportunity to create new jobs in industries with long term growth potential and a positive impact on climate change.

In terms of the actions outlined within this context around *an innovation ecosystem* and *expanding training* we would suggest that these could be strengthened by incorporating a stronger focus on how the college sector can support the development and growth of the tech sector across Scotland, with further recognition of the role of the sector in this context. The work of the Digital Skills Partnership (DSP), to give a clear example, has evidenced the benefits of moving away from silos across the education sector and working collaboratively across Further and Higher Education settings.

The DSP's National Student Software Development Competition in March 2020 provided a ground-breaking opportunity for college and university students to gain experience of real-world challenges in the software development process by bringing together learners with different levels of experience and expertise in small teams to respond to an industry-style brief with specific deliverables. The competition, which was successfully piloted in early 2019:

- replicated a real life multi-disciplinary team environment, the diversity of teams within the workplace and the challenges that arise in industry;
- helped students to develop broader skills of project management, communications and how to work industry tools such as GitHub, and with unfamiliar scenarios and
- supported articulation pathways, by creating stronger co-delivery across partner networks, so that college students arrive at university having a greater knowledge and understanding of the university environment.

The competition brought together 60 students from 18 institutions, six colleges and twelve universities to develop a prototype of a secure and dynamic data management system; a brief provided by CGI.

This was the first project of its kind to run on this level of scale and provided a unique soft-skill learning opportunity that would be difficult to realise within the formal framework of conventional programme structures. Anecdotally, participating students in the programme stated their involvement enabled them to secure Graduate Apprenticeship roles within global multinationals.

Another example of active collaboration across the Further and Higher Education sector lies in the DSP's work to upskill college lecturers in the area of cyber security. In the autumn of 2018, the DSP provided a series of bespoke CPD events to support college lecturers with the introduction of the new HNC in Cyber Security. 111 lecturers attended events from 17 different colleges, with 93% (n=76) stating that they could use the content from the sessions to inform their teaching and curriculum provision. All of the CPD sessions were designed in consultation with academia and industry and were co-delivered by academia and industry.

This collaboration across the education sector continues in the form of the Cyber Security Community of Practice. Established by the DSP in June 2020, it provides support to college and university lecturers delivering programmes of study in the area of cyber security. Lecturers from nine colleges and six universities across Scotland work collaboratively to share approaches to teaching and learning to ensure that students develop the skills and knowledge required by industry and can articulate to degree level programmes more seamlessly.

Whilst there was less emphasis within the Logan Report on the role of colleges in improving the provision of computing science, data science, and data analytics, as highlighted by the Royal Society of Edinburgh in their analysis of the report, colleges will play a key role in supporting the fundamental areas upon which the performance of the Technology Ecosystem depends.

For example, according to Scotland's Digital Technologies: Research and Analysis Report, published 2017, it is evidenced that 'In 2014/15, the vast majority (86%) of computing and ICT college leavers went into full-time further study, training or research'. Such evidence demonstrates that a considerable proportion of HNC/D students in digital subjects at college then articulate to undergraduate programmes in technology at University.

As such the college sector would welcome the opportunity to engage in partnership working with public and private sector partners to progress the key report recommendations around education, entrepreneurship and investment, building on its pre-existing links with industry.

In doing so, we would recommend that a mapping of the landscape is completed, by Scottish Government or another relevant body, to evidence the strong role that the college sector and other bodies can play in supporting the development and maintenance of the technology ecosystem in Scotland. This will be of benefit to the tech sector in Scotland, by evidencing the role of the sector, and the benefits for the sector and wider ecosystem of developing relationships with the college sector to support the future sector skills pipeline.

We would contend that *expanding training* represents the priority action in this context, to ensure a skilled workforce is in place to support the ambitions of both the Scottish Government and the tech sector, and to ensure that the proposed innovation ecosystem is sustainable. Colleges can provide the skilled workforce required, and provide the infrastructure that will facilitate this ecosystem, by providing physical co-location for start-ups and providing the required complementary social infrastructure in their role as community hubs.

More importantly this action, and the pursuit of it will enable colleges to provide reskilling opportunities for those people whose employment has been impacted by coronavirus and need support to transition to new careers. Colleges have the ability to be responsive, as evidenced during COVID-19, and can provide short sharp interventions to mitigate and manage economic displacement

As part of this the sector would be willing to work with the Scottish Tech Army, to facilitate routes back into high quality digital jobs.

The involvement of the college sector will also help to realise the propose action to *ensure equality of opportunity for all* because as highlighted previously colleges have a track record in giving



opportunities to learners from a range of social backgrounds. It is this track record that means colleges are well placed to increase diversity at all levels of the workforce in the digital technologies sector; and in so doing to ensure that the sector harnesses talents from across Scotland.

### *An Ethical Digital Nation*

We would agree that that the vision of Scotland being recognised internationally as an ethical digital nation is a bold and ambitious vision which partners should be working to deliver as part of a Team Scotland approach. As part of this we would welcome the opportunity to input into the development of a framework to support an ethical digital nation.

With regards to potential actions established in this section, we would agree that they can support the delivery of the vision, but that in order for them to be successfully delivered there must be a strong focus on what we believe to be the clear priority action, to *increase community engagement and participation*.

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 are well placed to support this proposed action. By doing so and raising awareness of the role of Digital technology, colleges can facilitate ethical use of data through community engagement and participation.

### **How realistic do you think it will be to deliver these potential actions?**

We believe that it is relatively realistic to deliver these potential actions to oversee the development of a digital Scotland, but for the ambitions set out in the paper to become reality we believe there must be a true emphasis on working collaboratively and co-productively. The Digital Skills Partnership as a project, whilst it has come to an end, represents a prime example of what can be achieved when true collaborative working takes place, facilitating connections between education and digital and tech-based stakeholders.

This ethos has to be applied to ensure truly joined up working and the avoidance of silos for the benefit of all, to truly ensure that ambitions in the form of *No One Left Behind* and *Services Working For All* can be realised.

To take this forward there must be a collective Team Scotland approach, with one designated body or agency acting as the key national lead, so that all stakeholders from across different sectors with an interest in Digital and Tech are truly aware of how the Strategy will be delivered and implemented in practice and are able to contribute and input accordingly. This clarity of purpose and leadership is a vital prerequisite to achieving the vision as established in the strategy.

### **Is there anything else you wish to comment on that has not been covered elsewhere?**

In addition to our specific comments in relation to the questions asked as part of the consultation exercise, we also wish to raise the vital matter of Digital Poverty and Inclusion, which colleges across Scotland are encountering and mitigating to support the digital access and attainment of learners regardless of their social and economic backgrounds; ensuring no learners are left behind.

### **Digital Poverty and Inclusion**

To continue to the move to fully supported and available online learning, actions and resource around the following areas are required:

- Allow digital inclusion for all through provision of equipment and free data access
- Resource for the increased licensing costs associated with the equipment provided
- Resource and time for staff to undertake course development
- Appropriate spaces for learners to have a safe and conducive environment in which to learn
- Additional support for student development to ensure they are able to embrace digital learning
- A digital infrastructure that includes the most rural areas of Scotland

In addition to the above, fast, secure, and consistent connectivity throughout Scotland is required.

As a sector, Scotland's colleges have moved with unprecedented speed from a primarily face to face pedagogy to online delivery during the lockdown of the nation, and have upgrading their digital capacity to counter the impact of digital poverty and the digital divide, through the provision of laptops, tablets and internet access tools. This activity has been vital in providing fair and equitable access to connectivity so all learners can continue their progression online.

## **Equipment**

As a result of COVID-19 and the move to blended learning for college learners there has been a significantly increased emphasis on, and need for, digital equipment in the college sector. On that basis there is a need for further sustained investment in the college sector's digital equipment capacity.

The college sector received £2.3m in additional capital funding from Scottish Funding Council to help towards the provision of equipment to assist in alleviating digital poverty. Colleges also accessed some resource through Connecting Scotland and supplemented with colleges' own money. However, there is unmet demand for the provision of equipment to ensure everyone has access to appropriate kit for online learning, as well as free data.

The additional cost of licensing as the equipment is to be used away from the college estate also needs to be factored in.

Such investment will be crucial to support the work of colleges in meeting targets established by the Scottish Government in order to increase the number of learners accessing courses from SIMD10 and SIMD20 postcodes. Further support of this nature will build on the increased investment already made to mitigate the impact of digital poverty and ensure that colleges can provide those learners from the most disadvantaged background with the digital infrastructure and connectivity required to support their learning, and improve their life chances, ensuring they are not left behind.

Such investment will go a long way to supporting a digitally inclusive Scotland in which the benefits of digital technology can be for everyone, where no one is unable to participate because of the digital divide and digital poverty, given the significant role colleges play in supporting those learners from the most deprived communities across Scotland

## **Free Access to Data**

It is vital that as well as providing equipment that affordable access to appropriate websites and online learning is available for those in digital poverty. Colleges Scotland is supportive of the Scottish Government's plans around pursuing opportunities through both the private mobile providers and Jisc to find affordable and sustainable solutions.

## **Safe Learning Environment**

It is vital that colleges are allowed to continue to provide safe learning environments (in any Tier) for those learners identified as most vulnerable or requiring support, in order to ensure that individuals continue to be engaged with their course work.

## **Staff Time to Undertake Online Course Development and Training**

Further investment is required from Scottish Government in order to ensure colleges can resource course development and also provide training for staff and students.

## **Digital Infrastructure**

Typically, the college sector has employed both capital and revenue funding for the maintenance and improvement of buildings and estates, however it is becoming increasingly important for investing in and developing cohesive and sustainable digital infrastructure.

Continued and sustained investment in this digital infrastructure will enable the college sector to support the Scottish Government's agenda around developing the technology ecosystem in Scotland and building on the publication of the Logan Report and the themes contained within around developing a world class tech sector.

Colleges have already proven in the form of industry-based partnerships, working with the Digital and Tech sectors, that they can be agile and responsive to the needs of employers through the use of digital infrastructure. The sector is capable and ready to continue this activity, and this additional investment would advance the progress that has already been made, and which has seen those non-traditional areas of delivery move onto Digital platforms, such as construction and plumbing, to support upskilling and reskilling activity.

## **Conclusion**

The college sector must play an active role in building a Digital Scotland in which learners can be prepared for entering the workplace of the future, and wherein training and skills development is available for the existing workforce through colleges across Scotland.

We want our learners to be well prepared to participate in a globally competitive, entrepreneurial, inclusive, and sustainable economy and to be able to become a part of thriving and innovative businesses and take up quality jobs. Similarly, we want our learners to be able to overcome disadvantage and the impact of poverty through access to digital technology, ensuring that no one is left behind.

As part of this the sector is open to working in collaboration with the Scottish Government and COSLA in the delivery and implementation of a refreshed Digital Strategy for Scotland, one that is designed around the needs of the learners of today and tomorrow. The involvement of the college sector can ensure that learners, employers and employees and other community stakeholders have the skills, connectivity and devices required to fully participate in the digital nation of the future and will serve to build on the work completed in developing the sector's Digital Ambition.

We know colleges will ensure that as the pace and scale of digital transformation continues in the coming months and years that this growth is inclusive and increases equity of opportunity for those learners from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and ensuring the benefits of digital transformation are seen by communities across Scotland. On this basis the sector will more than willing and able to support the ambitions set out within the Digital Strategy, as part of a truly joined up, co-ordinated approach.

At this stage, our specific requests would be:

- An assurance that the Digital Strategy for Scotland is responsive to local and regional needs and allows for partnership working that can meet those needs, including bringing in colleges and building on existing economic-education partnerships.
- Recognition that if the college sector received a proportionate share of future infrastructure investment, this could have a transformative impact in ensuring no learners are left behind, and supporting inclusive economic growth as outlined in the Infrastructure Investment Plan.
- Recognition that the college sector, and college graduates have a key role to play in supporting the growth of the Tech Sector, and a commitment to work with the college sector and the tech sector to increase and improve learner journeys and pathways for these learner cohorts, building Tech Sector understanding of the work of colleges in doing so.
- A commitment to work collaboratively with the college sector to develop the new National Digital Learning Strategy, building on the work to date around the Digital Ambition.
- Recognition of the college sector as a lead partner for Scotland in developing and implementing the Digital Strategy moving forward.

Colleges Scotland  
December 2020