

Response to the Call for Evidence: Scotland and the Shared Prosperity Fund

Monday 15 February 2021

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.

Colleges across Scotland work flexibly and inclusively with commercial businesses, local authorities, other government agencies and charities to ensure that no one is educationally disadvantaged. Colleges work within their communities to reach even the furthest from education and provide learners with the knowledge and skills necessary to go onto fulfilling employment. The work of colleges ensures a well qualified pipeline of workers, critical to delivering inclusive, sustainable economic growth, and raising productivity levels in Scotland.

European funding plays an enormous role in the college sector, supporting a wide variety of programmes and projects and offering educational and cultural opportunities to students who may otherwise not have such rich experiences. It is key for the sector that the Shared Prosperity Fund ensures the continuation of previously EU funded programmes and our learners are not disadvantaged by new funding arrangements.

Key Points

Understanding of the importance of EU funding to Scotland's Colleges

The Internal Market Bill and subsequent announcement of the UK Government that the Shared Prosperity Fund will not be devolved raises concerns for the college sector. The importance of EU funding and the variety of programmes it encompasses in Scotland is different to its functioning throughout the rest of the Four Nations. The college sector in Scotland is seeking assurances that in making funding decisions the UK Government will take into account the differences in Scotland and how EU funding is interwoven with the provision of skills and training.

An example is Foundation Apprenticeships. EU funding has been key to the highly successful integration into the education system of the Foundation Apprenticeship programme that has been running in Scotland since 2016. Foundation Apprenticeships offer senior phase school pupils the invaluable experience of simultaneously gaining industry insight and a qualification. It is likely that without a substitute funding stream through the Shared Prosperity Fund, Foundation Apprenticeships will become unaffordable for colleges and a large tranche of learners will be denied a fulfilling opportunity that not only progresses their learning, but also contributes considerably to the Scottish economy in terms of providing well-trained, well-educated and experienced young people into the workforce.

The Foundation Apprenticeship scheme, delivered through EU funding, is unique to Scotland and it is areas such as this where we need to ensure that UK Government, in the administration of the

Shared Prosperity Fund, is fully aware of the differing funding requirements across the Four Nations.

Full Engagement in Creation of the Fund

As previously stated, the importance of EU funding to the college sector cannot be stressed enough. It is therefore essential that the college sector be fully engaged in the discussion around the future of the Shared Prosperity Fund. Colleges Scotland is keen to be included in the development of the fund and is happy to provide any information needed to demonstrate the requirements of the college sector and to evidence the importance of the funding for colleges.

We understand that the interim funding of £220 million will be issued without consultation and communities will be encouraged to develop pilot programmes which will subsequently feed into the development of the Shared Prosperity Fund. Whilst the college has no direct concerns with the pilot schemes forming a part of the development of the fund, we consider it vital that input to the structure and operation of the Shared Prosperity Fund beyond the pilot year is sought from a wide variety of stakeholders to ensure that the key requirements to ensure full benefit of the fund is fully understood and represented at the time of finalisation of the fund.

Delivery of the Fund

Given the importance of the Shared Prosperity Fund, it is vital that whichever delivery method is ultimately chosen by the UK Government, that a stipulation is made to ensure that the college sector is part of the discussions with the other key stakeholders.

In Scotland, all areas are covered either by a City Deal or a Growth Deal, and as such, this regional level mechanism could be considered for delivery of the Shared Prosperity Fund, again with the stipulation that the regional college is represented.

Conclusion

EU funding streams have supported the college sector in providing high level, well respected and affordable education across Scotland. EU funding streams have allowed the sector to run industry leading programmes and provide a pipeline of highly skilled workers to the Scottish workforce. It is essential for both college learners and the wider economy that equivalent funding is provided to the sector through the Shared Prosperity Fund. Key to this is the full understanding of the UK Government, and those who will administer the fund, of the college programmes supported by EU funding. It is vital that there is an understanding of the differences throughout the Four Nations and that the Colleges Scotland is engaged in the development of the new Shared Prosperity Fund.

Colleges Scotland
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