

Post-School Education and Skills Reform: Consultation on Legislation – September 2024

Introduction

Colleges Scotland is the voice of the sector, supporting the delivery of thriving colleges at the heart of a thriving Scotland. When Colleges Thrive, Scotland Thrives. As the membership body, Colleges Scotland represents all 24 colleges in Scotland, which deliver both further education and around 13% of the provision of all higher education in Scotland.

Colleges Scotland welcomes the opportunity to provide views on the post-school education and skills reform consultation on legislation on behalf of the college sector, and in doing so has consulted with sector leads.

Simplifying Responsibilities for Apprenticeships and Student Support

The college sector recognises the need to simplify responsibilities for apprenticeships and student support as part of the overall post-school education and skills reform and is supportive of the creation of a single funding body, as recommended by James Withers in the publication of the Skills Delivery Landscape Review.

Our support is driven by the belief that this would effectively deliver for the people of Scotland and play a significant role in our economic recovery, whilst delivering a system of reduced complexity and enhanced simplicity for learners to navigate.

Background

A key output identified through the Think the Unthinkable workstream taken forward by College Chairs and Principals through Colleges Scotland is the need to streamline college sector core funding, in support of the aspirational principle that colleges are financially and operationally stable and sustainable.

Through Think the Unthinkable, senior sector representatives identified a set of overarching principles, detailed below, essential to what the creation of a single funding body needs to deliver for the college sector. These were submitted to the Scottish Government for consideration, as part of its broader Education Reform Agenda, and were aligned to the Purpose and Principles as published by the Scottish Government in June 2023, with these connections shown by the asterix below.

Agile	Agile and responsive*, adapting quickly, clearly and in a co-ordinated manner by prioritising stakeholder needs and aligning to their planning cycles.
Fair	Supportive and equitable*, impartial, and honest in building strong relationships.
Cooperative	Engaged and working together to the same end.

Effective High quality*, resilient and trusted*, and globally respected*. Successful in achieving the planned outcomes and expected results.

College Sector's Preferred Proposal

In line with the principles that were agreed through Think the Unthinkable, and in particular the college sector's commitment to supporting the most vulnerable learners, our view is that **Proposal 3: Consolidate all provision funding and all student support funding within Scottish Funding Council (SFC)** is best aligned to meet the needs of college learners.

Main Advantages

The college sector, through Colleges Scotland, has identified the main advantages of Proposal 3, as follows:

- A single body managing all funding streams simplifies the system, reducing confusion and duplication.
- Centralising responsibilities enables a more integrated and learner-centred approach.
- Consolidation improves data collection, analysis, and reporting, supporting better decision-making and accountability.
- One body can develop and implement a coherent vision and strategy, aligned with national priorities.
- The aligning of the colleges' main funding streams to better support delivery, remove system barriers, incompatibility and bureaucracy.

Main Challenges

The college sector, through Colleges Scotland, has identified the main challenges relating to Proposal 3:

- The restructuring process could cause temporary disruptions and uncertainties for staff, learners, and institutions.
- Resistance to change from within the affected bodies could impede smooth implementation.
- Over-centralising authority might reduce flexibility and responsiveness to local needs.
- If not fully aligned the creation of a single body could impede delivery, hence creating more system barriers, incompatibility and bureaucracy.

Other Considerations

The college sector, through Colleges Scotland, has identified other factors that should be considered in relation to Proposal 3:

- The need to ensure continuous and effective communication with all stakeholders, including staff, learners, and employers, is crucial.
- Careful consideration of how changes will directly affect learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The needs of the learner must be central, and there must be access to face-to-face support and application processes to enable engagement and support retention with the most vulnerable learners.
- Meticulous planning to ensure compliance with all relevant laws and regulations.
- Establishing robust mechanisms to monitor the implementation and impact of the changes.
- Ensuring that the new system puts the learner at the centre, removing barriers to participation and enhancing the overall learning experience.
- Aligning the system with economic goals to boost the economy and reduce poverty.

- The new system needs to consider the cross portfolio working colleges do and fund accordingly: education, health, poverty, wellbeing, communities, international, children and young people, culture.
- Addressing the needs of diverse learners to promote equity.
- Considering how the post-school system can contribute to tackling climate change.

Key Requirements

The college sector, through Colleges Scotland, has identified the key requirements that would be expected to be delivered by a single funding body:

- A new fit for purpose funding model.
- Consolidation of funding streams achieved.
- Risk facilitated and managed in partnership.
- Ensure the overall financial stability, sustainability, and agility of the college sector.
- Protect colleges' status as charities.
- Have a legal status that enables colleges to plan for the future, by providing the flexibility to carry funds between academic years, build reserves, and borrow money where required.
- Enable colleges to continue to deliver lifelong learning.
- Ensure that other funding streams are not jeopardised.

Governance of the SFC

In addressing the points around governance, the college sector is of the view that the future structure of the Board is very much dependent on the future role and remit of the SFC, some of which is the subject of this consultation.

The college sector is not in favour of the proposal to remove the four-year limit to the term of Board appointments and the restriction on reappointments, as it is felt that this could contravene the principles of good governance. There is an overarching view from the college sector that the governance of the SFC Board should mirror that of colleges, given its oversight of the sector.

Through engagement with the college sector through Colleges Scotland, concerns have expressed regarding the existing Board composition and their current currency of their collective knowledge of the college sector. The importance of representatives having lived experience of colleges and up to date knowledge of the landscape of the sector, representing those it serves has been clearly emphasised in discussions on this topic to date.

In discussions there has also been a consensus that the current Board membership is heavily academic and would benefit from representation from service users, which would also serve to ensure that the needs of the learner are reflected and represented in future decision-making processes.

In particular, it has been advised that the following key stakeholder groupings are currently underrepresented on the SFC Board:

- Business and Industry
- Community
- Students

If the SFC evolves from a solely a funding body to also a commissioning body, it would be important and appropriate to re-evaluate Board membership, to ensure there are representatives

with the suitable skillset to respond to the enhanced functions this would incorporate. Succession planning around Board membership is crucial too.

It must also be recognised that if the Scottish Government becomes more reliant on Regional Economic Partnerships in the future, especially in relation to ongoing reforms relating to the development and implementation of a new Skills Planning approach, there may be a need for Board representation to come from here.

Enhanced Functions for the SFC

In terms of enhanced functions for the SFC, the college sector is of the view that there is an opportunity to review and assess what data is collected and how it is used to inform decision making, whilst also looking at how this data collected.

There is a question regarding the need to introduce new duties on organisations receiving public funding to provide better information to SFC, but the college sector would need further clarity on what this would involve.

If SFC becomes the responsible commissioning body for both colleges and private training providers, we would advise that the data collection requirements are consistent across the board, and that private training providers are subject to the same scrutiny as colleges.

Through consultation with the college sector, discussions have considered whether the SFC should collect data on the wider funding position of the college sector, rather than just the funding it provides, to obtain a more rounded picture of the overall financial health of the sector. This is an ongoing discussion being taken forward through Colleges Scotland, and which could be explored by the Scottish Government and SFC working with the sector going forward.

In this time of reform, there is an opportunity for a culture shift across the Education and Skills system and the current working relationships with the college sector, as part of the wider Tertiary sector, to be more collaborative, so colleges are empowered to become drivers of change rather than merely recipients of funding.

Conclusion

As the Scottish Government receives responses with which to inform and shape post-school education and skills reform legislation, we would expect that the knowledge and thinking of the college sector is taken into consideration in the next stages of this work and would welcome the opportunity to hold further engagement on this agenda.

Colleges Scotland
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