

## Scotland's Colleges are the Linchpin in Tackling Scotland's Socio-Economic Inequality

By Shona Struthers, Chief Executive, Colleges Scotland

When it comes to improving the life chances of young people in Scotland, our publicly funded colleges – sited in our local communities – are rightly recognised as vital in this work. 26 colleges stretching from Shetland to Dumfries, Greenock to Fraserburgh, provide a wide range of opportunities for over 227,000 learners annually helping to develop their own confidence, self-esteem and sense of purpose whilst learning new skills, honing interests and earning valued, industry-recognised qualifications. Our courses are delivered and supported by around 11,000 dedicated staff members who work tirelessly not only on the education of our learners, but also on their pastoral care.

Naomi Eisenstadt's report, published last week, highlighted the potential for the college sector to reduce socio-economic inequality. Scotland's colleges would reply that this has been their core mission for generations. In every measure of inequality, it is the college sector which champions societal progress. From tackling gendered segregation, to widening access, to supporting community cohesion, our colleges are delivering innovative projects making a positive difference to people's lives.

To provide a mere snapshot: the Community Achievement Awards scheme run by Glasgow Kelvin College in partnership with over 40 community organisations has 250 volunteers who are supported to work in some of Glasgow's most vulnerable communities, and who then gain recognised qualifications. Many of these volunteers had no previous qualifications, but upon completing their award are empowered to continue with their journey into further education, or employment. The campaign #ThisAyrshireGirlCan, launched by the First Minister on International Women's Day, was created by students at Ayrshire College who wanted to encourage more female students to consider careers in areas like sport, engineering or manufacturing where traditionally, participation by women is low.

Eisenstadt's report interchanges further education and higher education, college and university, but today's college sector delivers 28% of all higher provision in Scotland, with 19% of all college students studying at a level equivalent to 1st and 2nd year at university. As a sector average, 13.5% of college higher education students came from the 10% most deprived communities in 2014/15, and 47.4% from the 40% most deprived communities – far outperforming the equivalent figures at universities. These statistics clearly demonstrate the crucial role that Scottish colleges have consistently played in realising the Scottish Government's ambitions on widening access to higher education for all.

Colleges are the linchpin upon which the government's ambitions will be realised. Their roots extend into schools. And working in partnership, they deliver skills and education to young people, and in local areas reach mature learners who may have been generationally distanced from the labour market. They also work in partnership with the public and private sector to develop and deliver vocational and academic courses which meet the labour market needs whilst giving our students the skills, confidence and opportunities to improve their own life chances by accessing employment which works for them. All of this also provides learners with a solid grounding to progress into university should that be the path which is right for them. We are proud to be recognised as the sector which will reduce socio-economic inequality.

We welcome Eisenstadt's observation on exploring what more the college sector can do to tackle socio-economic inequality, and we remain committed to working in partnership with the Scottish Government to ensure that we have a sustainable college sector not only to deliver world-class learning and skills, but to play a part in ending intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality.

Colleges Scotland  
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