Response from West College Scotland
27th February 2015

Introduction

West College Scotland provides education to some of the most socio-economically challenged young people in Scotland. As such, the College has a keen interest in ensuring education delivers for all young people.

In 2013-14, 25% of our enrolments came from the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland, yet 65% of these students were successful in fully completing their course. This is only a few percentage points below the success rate for students from across all areas, and shows that these challenges can be overcome, if we continue our work.

The College makes this submission to highlight the success of our partnerships with schools. We work with over 40 schools and have over 3000 school pupils studying in the college each week. We believe such work is key to mitigating the effects of socio-economic challenges on educational attainment. Here we highlight some of our successes, and those issues which the College feels are preventing us from achieving greater success.

Session One: Commission for Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce

- What action and resources would be required to deliver the specific recommendations aimed at schools and teachers, for example:
  - closer links should be established between schools, colleges and employers.

West College Scotland welcomed the findings of the Commission for Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce. Indeed, in many ways WCS is already engaging in the activities recommended by the commission. In particular, WCS has been involved in a number of partnerships with schools. Below we highlight a number of examples that have been particularly successful in contributing to improved outcomes for young people, and outline how these could be further developed.

Case Study One: HNC Engineering Partnership with St Peter the Apostle High School

In partnership with St Peter the Apostle High School in Clydebank, the College has offered 14 S6 school pupils the opportunity to study HNC in engineering. The pupils attend our campus at Paisley, twice a week. Successful pupils are guaranteed a place on the HND course after leaving school, and may be able to continue their studies into 3rd year at university.

This has increased the range of opportunities available to pupils. They are provided with a taste of the subject at a higher, more vocationally-specific level, without committing to a longer course; they

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gain experience in the sort of learning environment and learning skills needed to succeed in their future education; and the programme creates a simple and accessible pathway to engineering, encouraging pupils who may not have previously considered the subject.

This could not have been developed without strong partnership working between West Dunbartonshire Council, St. Peter the Apostle High School, and West College Scotland. It is an excellent example of how partnership working can benefit young people to increase their educational opportunities and gain employability skills, in a way that is accessible to a wider range of pupils than before.

Significantly, in just 12 months, the College now has 8 such HNC programmes working with a number of schools across the whole region, with demand continuing to rise. The programmes reflect the key economic sectors of Scotland and support the College focus on STEM.

Work Experience and Employer Links

An additional benefit of such school-college partnerships are the growing the opportunities to immerse our students and school pupils in key industry sectors while they study.

A key priority is to increase the exposure of school pupils to the workplace, including through meaningful work experience. However, targeting schools to provide such work experience may have unintended consequences: employers often describe the educational landscape as ‘cluttered’ and it is possible this will be compounded by large numbers of schools approaching the same local employers for work experience opportunities. Employers do not often see themselves as being defined by either local authority or regional boundaries.

West College Scotland partners with over 40 schools and over 500 employers across the region. For employers, the College can be the one point of contact when engaging in training and work experience. For schools and pupils, our links with employers already engaged in vocational education provision and skills training and employers from a wider geographical spread, can provide structured engagement and a wider choice.

As an example, a senior phase cohort of school pupils from West Dunbartonshire are studying an HNC in Engineering in specialist simulated work environments at the Paisley Campus of the College and benefiting from the links the College has with local employers and employers across the region.

Case Study Two: Consultation of Parents and Pupils on Course Provision

In partnership with Renfrewshire Council, the College has been working to improve the vocational educational opportunities available at school. We sought the views of all learners S3-S5 and their parents/guardians. The aim of the consultation was to generate useful information that will help inform both the Council’s and West College Scotland’s plans for the delivery of courses and targeted programmes from August 2015 onwards.

Survey questions were worded so that learners could respond on their own behalf, and in a way that parents/guardians would respond with their child in mind. We also investigated local market forces data to build a picture of local demand for skills from employers.
Using this research, we have jointly planned the delivery of College courses for S5 and S6 pupils for 2015-16. Where both student and local employer demand for courses has been high, we have targeted new courses that will satisfy pupils’ interest, providing vocationally beneficial education, and serving the needs of the local economy.

Building ‘family capital’ is a key priority: engaging with parents and teachers in such an exercise ensures they have the awareness, knowledge and understanding of the benefits and choices offered by vocational education and skills training. Experience to date reinforces the lack of awareness amongst teachers and head teachers of vocational education as an alternative or addition to more traditional academic routes that feature prominently in schools provision and careers advice.

This has been a beneficial piece of work, which we would seek to replicate across each of our local areas. We believe it might be of benefit to other regions, too, and would benefit from becoming more formalised, with funding and policy advice used to develop and promote.

**Case Study Three: Taster in vocational college courses at school**

In partnership with Inverclyde Council, West College Scotland delivered a 4-week programme of taster courses for S4 pupils in May 2014. This was in response to feedback from pupils who said they were sometimes unsure of what courses involved, and that courses sometimes did not match their expectations. This would lead to pupils leaving or changing course, disadvantaging the student, and causing disruption for the College.

These taster courses proved very successful and allowed the pupils to make more informed choices. Feedback from the tasters has influenced planned delivery for the senior phase. Evaluation of retention data has shown that the taster programme contributed to improved planning and increased pupil enjoyment and satisfaction. Due to this success the College will be running tasters again this year with more options available.

**Areas for Development and Improvements**

West College Scotland has very good partnerships with all of our local authority and school colleagues. As highlighted by these examples, working with schools has led to a number of successful outcomes. These outcomes will only be improved by increased partnership, as called for by the Commission for Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce. However, there are a number of issues that currently make implementing these challenging:

1) Some regional colleges, including West College Scotland, work with a number of local authorities. Very often adjacent authorities employ different procedures and models which can be challenging when colleges seek to harmonise delivery. For example, some authorities will grant study leave for senior phase pupils studying at National 4 level; the academic year is sometimes different among neighbouring authorities; and some operate “prelims”, while others do not. Occasionally, the same local authority will apply different models and procedures to different schools within its area.

2) School timetables and how subjects are placed across them can, at times, lack the flexibility which allows senior phase pupils to access college courses, either in school or in college. This is especially true of smaller secondary schools.
3) West College Scotland is delighted by the demand from local schools to access teaching in the STEM disciplines. However, staff availability and a lack of available, suitable workshops and laboratories means that we cannot always meet that demand in a way that we would like to.

4) We continue to be concerned by the ‘vocational barrier’ which still exists in some schools.

5) West College Scotland is already delivering some of the teaching models for schools recommended by the Commission into Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce. However, we would welcome clearer and more detailed information from the responsible authorities about the funding of such models. It is unclear, for example, what happens to funding if a school pupil fails units in an HNC programme in S6. We expect this to be an area of growth in the future and would welcome such information and guidelines.

6) We would welcome a more collaborative approach between College lecturers and schoolteachers in the development of courses for senior phase pupils. We feel this would bring about a better understanding of which areas “fit” with the school curriculum and which with the College curriculum. Our view is that this would help bring about a “true” collaboration, as described in the Commission’s report.

7) We would welcome more information to be provided centrally by the SQA on progression pathways in each discipline. It would be helpful for students, parents and employers to know as early as possible what qualifications exist, how they relate to each other and what job or further area of study they would allow the student to progress to.

West College Scotland is regional college for the West, serving five local authority areas, with a campus in three of these. As such, the College is in an excellent position to lead partners in exploring opportunities to contribute to a ‘regional perspective’ within the educational landscape. Such opportunities include the development of a regional school-college STEM strategy which engages all local authorities; regional timetabling across the schools sector; and the development of a regional school-college curriculum, including a regional progression ‘Map’.

Strengthening our partnerships with schools is vital to implementing the findings of the Commission into Developing the Young Workforce. This would be assisted greatly by the allocation of additional resources and we hope that the Government will recognise this when considering future financial settlements.

We believe that the efficiency of our College’s work with our local schools would be improved by the development of some standard procedures. This would require a certain level of investment but we think it is important to offer the same quality of service and equality of opportunity to all pupils at all schools, not least those schools where pupils are less aware of the opportunities available, or where staff are less engaged in partnerships.

Funding has been provided to local authorities to support the recommendations of Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce. Unfortunately, this has the potential to limit developments to within local authority boundaries; to miss opportunities for a step change at a regional level; and to contribute to unnecessary duplication of activity.

A Regional College, particularly in the context of the West Region, has the potential to be the catalyst to drive change across local authority boundaries – to pool resources, practice and expertise.