Connecting Scotland – how the Scottish Government and its agencies engage internationally

West of Scotland Colleges’ Partnership (WoSCoP)

1. Introduction

1.1 The West of Scotland Colleges’ Partnership (WoSCoP) is a not-for-profit shared services company Limited by Guarantee whose members comprise seven colleges of further and higher education located in the Glasgow, Lanarkshire and Dundee & Angus college regions and Scotland’s (national) Rural College (SRUC). The company was established in 1996 to provide exclusive support to the 17 incorporated colleges that had been managed by Strathclyde Regional Council. Since then it has evolved to extend its membership more widely across the country.

1.2 WoSCoP’s principal function is to provide bespoke sector-focused expertise and support to its member colleges in the intelligent engagement and exploitation of national and European funding to help them meet the Scottish Government's priorities for the sector and to provide high quality learning and skills development opportunities for the populations in their respective regions.

1.3 WoSCoP’s support to its member colleges takes many forms. At a strategic level it includes ensuring all member colleges acquire and retain Erasmus Charters for Higher Education (ECHEs); providing a Scottish sectoral perspective in the European Association of Institutions of (Professional) Higher Education (EURASHE); working with Colleges Northern Ireland, Colleges Wales, the Institutes of Technology in Ireland, The Dutch Alliance and other institutional networks to identify and foster opportunities for collaborative activities amongst institutions in these countries in order to develop bids for European and transnational funding; providing a college sector perspective to the Scottish Advisory Group for the Erasmus+ Programme, the UK Sector Consultative Group for Vocational Education and Training (VET), the UK’s Teams of Experts for European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and the Programme Monitoring Committee of the Interreg programme for Northern Ireland, the Border Region of Ireland and Western Scotland.

1.4 At an operational level, support to individual member colleges extends to working with key staff to develop institutional and departmental European engagement and funding strategies; identifying, accessing and managing grant funding from the European Union and other sources; sourcing and vetting transnational partners for projects; and providing advice, support and – where necessary - representation during verification & compliance and audit visits conducted by the Scottish Government, the European Commission and the European Court of Auditors.

1.5 In recent years, a number of non-member colleges in Scotland and Northern Ireland and other organisations in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have called upon WoSCoP’s expertise in handling specific issues or resolving problems related to European and international programmes.
1.6 Within Scotland, WoSCoP enjoys cooperative working relationships with Colleges Scotland, the Scottish Government, NUS Scotland, Scotland Europa, the Scottish European Educational Trust, the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, the Scottish Trades Union Congress, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership, Scotland’s National Centre for Languages (SCILT), Skills Development Scotland, the West of Scotland European Forum (WoSEF) and the universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde.

1.7 WoSCoP staff are regularly engaged by the European Commission Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC); the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) and the British Council to participate in the assessment of applications for EU funding and the evaluation of progress and final reports from projects in receipt of EU funds.

2. WoSCoP’s perspective on the questions posed in the consultation

2.1 WoSCoP is encouraged by the ongoing efforts of the European and External Relations Committee (EERC) to promote a coherent, consistent and ambitious national approach to European and international engagement. Indeed, since 2006, WoSCoP has made the case for smarter engagement with Europe in its various dealings with Scottish Government staff, in meetings with Scottish MEPs and MSPs and in papers, presentations and consultative responses submitted to the EERC. In responding to this current consultation, WoSCoP would emphasise that the continuing differentiation between European and international engagement is increasingly redundant, particularly in the education sector, as many of the new generation of EU funding programmes for 2014 to 2020 have a global reach and the EU’s representational delegations throughout the world have the capacity to act as informed gateways to support civic, research, educational and commercial engagement across the globe.

Turning to the specific questions posed in the consultation. WoSCoP’s responses are as follows:

3. Is there a clear, coherent and well-resourced strategy for European and international engagement within the Scottish Government and its agencies?

3.1 Before commenting on the wider perspective of the Scottish Government and its agencies, WoSCoP feels that it is appropriate to offer some observations on the college sector’s European and international engagement.

3.2 It is notable that, with the exception of WoSCoP’s support to its member colleges, there is no European engagement strategy for the college sector. This is even more remarkable give the significant degree of alignment between the Scottish Government's aspirations for fairer work, skills and training and those of the European Union for modernising education and training.

3.3 One of the most significant benefits of college regionalisation is that the institutions which have emerged are, now, of sufficient scale and capacity to be credible partners in projects exploiting a far wider range of EU programmes than has been the case thus far.
This opens up significant opportunity for the entire sector and supports the Scottish Government's strategic aim of deeper and wider engagement with Europe.

3.4 WoSCoP contends that the intelligent exploitation of this opportunity requires a coherent and adequately resourced strategy that is informed by and serves national and regional aspirations and needs. Whilst the leadership of such a strategy should be vested in the Regional Chairs, it should also take due cognisance of Ministerial guidance and involve support and commitment from relevant staff within the Employability, Skills and Lifelong Learning Directorate. Such a strategy is essential if Scotland's colleges can are to generate the same sort of impact on the EU's ambitions for skills and learning that our universities have in research and innovation.

3.5 In the absence of such a strategy, WoSCoP will continue to direct its sector-specific European expertise and connections to assisting its members build momentum in engaging meaningfully with Europe.

3.6 The initial motivation for deeper and wider European engagement would be to help colleges identify and exploit new funding opportunities that would contribute to (a) ensuring high quality, effective and relevant learning which prepares people well for the world of work and successful long term careers and (b) improving access to education for people from the widest range of backgrounds. However, the longer term and enduring impact would be felt across a wide spectrum of colleges' operations: learning, teaching and the curriculum; staff development and CPD; action research, innovation and knowledge transfer; widening access and student retention; employability, work placements, staff and student (international) mobility; literacy, numeracy, digital, foreign language and other key competences; school-college partnerships; articulation with higher education; developing centres of excellence; and international collaboration.

3.7 Establishing a credible track record in the EU's transnational programmes, will not only create additional funding streams for Scottish colleges, it will also raises their national and international profiles by fostering innovation in how they serve their regions and Scotland and over time by generating opportunities to enter into partnerships to participate in much larger scale projects funded by other international agencies or commercial sponsors.

3.8 Turning to the wider aspect of the question posed. There are a number of European and international engagement strategies with differing levels of resource at their disposal operating across a number of different sectors in Scotland. Whilst each may demonstrate internal coherence in terms of furthering specific agendas for the respective sectors – for example, enterprise, health, textiles, universities, local government, chambers of commerce, etc. - their scope scale and adequacy of resources differ quite significantly. For sure, the existence of such strategies could be considered as concrete evidence that the significance of effective European and international engagement is well appreciated and being adequately addressed. However, WoSCoP believes that there are two significant deficiencies. The first is that there are a number of sectors and strategic bodies that have, yet, to develop strategies for European and international engagement. The second and more significant gap in the field is the absence of a credible and coherent unifying strategy that fosters mutually beneficial cross-sectoral and inter-agency collaboration to harness the expertise, knowledge and experience of the various
sectoral groups to engender a meaningful Team Scotland approach that is more than a strap line. WoSCoP believes that this gap should be filled by the Scottish Government adopting a more pro-active leadership role in developing, implementing, monitoring and reviewing an overarching, long-term, collective, strategic approach to maximising the dividends that can be accrued from deeper and wider European and international engagement.

3.9 The nature of strategic leadership that WoSCoP would expect from the Scottish Government in this context would be characterised by:

- acknowledging and exploiting the value of the knowledge and expertise that currently exists across various sectors and which is a distinct asset in such a relatively small country;
- recognising that there is no single Scottish organisation that has that has the technical sector-specific expertise to credibly serve all sectors and that attempting to create, graft or impose such an entity would be disruptive and wasteful;
- supporting and coordinating inter-agency/cross-sectoral exchanges of expertise, knowledge and effective practice within Scotland;
- developing mutually beneficial bi-lateral, multi-lateral collaboration with a range of countries to strengthen and extend Scotland's existing capacity for effective European and international engagement;
- increasing Scotland's presence and representation in relevant international and European networks;
- identifying synergies between Scottish and EU priorities for transnational engagement and exploiting funding and other resources available from the latter;
- intelligently exploiting existing and emerging national, regional, European and international funding programmes to initiate, facilitate and enhance national strategic priorities for smarter, fairer and more responsible and sustainable economic growth.

3.10 WoSCoP is conscious that some of the sectors which enjoy the benefit of being better endowed with relevant expertise, capacity and resources to engage effectively with Europe and internationally may see no immediate advantage in working collaboratively with others. However, we would argue that it would serve the national economic interest if effective European and international engagement in Scotland is expanded intelligently and rapidly beyond the existing acknowledged "champions". For this reason, WoSCoP envisages the Scottish Government playing the role of the conductor of a national orchestra of talented players with specific skills and expertise drawn from different sectors, working harmoniously to progress their respective sector's aspirations whilst serving the greater national good.

4. What has the Scottish Government’s international strategy achieved since its refresh in October 2012, and what has the EU Action Plan achieved since it was first published in 2009? Has the international strategy enabled “Scotland to flourish on the international stage, thus increasing economic growth for Scotland”?
4.1 The principal achievement of the Scottish Government's international strategy and EU Action Plan has been in framing a strategic national focus on the work undertaken by the Scottish Government and its agencies. This, in turn, has stimulated an energetic and pro-active approach by those who have realised the relevance and benefits of European and international engagement in their respective fields of policy and operation: this has frequently manifested itself in the form of sector specific engagement plans.

4.2 However, despite these indicators of success, the Government's aspirations for effective European and international engagement have not, yet, percolated down to or across all of the policy and operational departments that would benefit from such a perspective. This patchy pattern of European and international engagement is also reflected across the various sectors of the Scottish economy, public services and civic society.

4.3 WoSCoP would expect a revised or refreshed Action Plan to (i) penetrate more deeply and widely across Government departments and agencies; (ii) connect better with key national and sectoral actors; and (iii) generate added value by identifying the full range of relevant expertise that is available within the country and creating the context and framework for mutually beneficial and synergistic collaboration to ensure that far more sectors and organisations develop the confidence and competences to engage at European and international levels and, as a consequence, secure even greater benefits for themselves and the nation than are currently being realised. WoSCoP believes that for this to happen, it would be incumbent upon the Scottish Government to play a demanding and leading role and for it to set and monitor ambitious national targets for Scottish, representation, participation and impact.

4.4 WoSCoP would also suggest that national targets should not be confined to simple quantitative data on the number of funding applications submitted or grants awarded but should draw deeper qualitative, quantitative and policy conclusions on the quality and sustainability of outputs generated, their contribution to achieving national policy priorities and the reputational gain for Scotland at European and international levels.

5. What can be learnt from the approaches of other sub-state governments? In particular, how do the EU and international offices of other sub-state governments operate and what tangible outcomes do they achieve?

5.1 There are a number of EU Member States and regions which WoSCoP would cite as examples of interesting practice in European and international engagement that offer insights from which Scotland might learn. Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia and Sweden offer national level examples of the benefits of creating strategic (national) hubs of expertise to raise awareness of, promote opportunities in and support organisations embarking upon European and international engagement. The hubs in these countries are, typically, staffed by individuals with knowledge and competence in specific areas – for example, Nordic-Russian collaboration, research and innovation, academic and vocational mobility, developing international qualifications and joint/double degrees – and many of the staff have competence in at least one language in addition to their mother tongue.
5.2 These hubs, often, also promote inward international engagement by, for example, promoting their respective countries' higher and education and research opportunities to potential international students and offering relevant advice and support to those who are interested in coming to their countries.

5.3 Through its collaboration with various institutions in Northern Ireland, WoSCoP has had the opportunity to study that region's European engagement strategy. In it, the Northern Ireland Executive determines the strategic imperatives and translates these into an annual implementation plan with clearly defined activities and anticipated impacts. This is supported by a work programme focused on ensuring that all of the relevant members of the Northern Ireland Assembly develop an awareness of the EU and its priorities and their capacity to impact on the region.

5.4 Common features of the single regional and five national models that WoSCoP would recommend as worthy of investigation and translation to the Scottish context, are (i) the unequivocal commitment of the regional or national Parliaments and governments to meaningful, effective and enduring European and international engagement; (ii) the allocation of specific funding and resources to serve this purpose and to build the relevant capacity; (iii) governance arrangements that seek to identify and exploit regional/national/sectoral complementarities and synergies for national benefit; (iv) a recognition that these units must be staffed by credible and competent individuals with a proven combination of sector-specific and European/international knowledge and expertise; and (v) ensuring that the work of any associated international or regional offices – for example, in Brussels – is informed by and serves and complements the regional/national strategy and does not compete or complicate it. WoSCoP would see all of these features as important in extending the reach of Scotland's European and international engagement.