

Colleges Scotland Briefing – Education and Skills Committee

Introduction

Ahead of the Education and Skills Committee meeting on Wednesday 7 September 2016 on further and higher education, Colleges Scotland wishes to provide you with some information on the college sector which may be pertinent to your discussions. Scotland's colleges are seeking to maximise their potential to deliver: sustainable and innovative institutions; skilled and successful learners; and a stronger economy and fairer society.

Fair access for young people, regardless of background and circumstances, is at the heart of what colleges stand for. Colleges promote fairness, offering people life chances and equality of opportunity to learn. Enrolling in college helps those with low or no skills to move towards employment and supports those with few or no qualifications to achieve a better education.

Colleges work in partnerships with schools, local authorities, universities and employers to provide opportunities for people to gain skills, improve employability and career prospects or gain a higher education. Approximately 20% of higher education is delivered by colleges. Colleges offer professional and technical qualifications and provide opportunities for people to upskill, reskill and contribute to the economy.

Spending Review

The Scottish Government confirmed its commitment to deliver a flat-cash settlement to the college sector for the academic year 2016/17. We see this as a vote of confidence in the sector and a strong recognition of the valuable work that colleges deliver for the benefit of students, business and communities across Scotland. The recently published Audit Scotland report¹, whilst emphasising the overall stability of the sector's financial health, is clear that the college sector is showing signs that it is facing significant financial pressures. Colleges Scotland is committed to work with the Scottish Government to ensure that colleges, as public bodies, are as financially stable and sustainable as possible.

Apprenticeship Levy

The college sector in Scotland has a strong track record of delivering high quality skills and training, within a robust quality assurance framework, that is sought after and highly regarded by employers.

Colleges Scotland submitted a sector response to the consultation on the Apprenticeship Levy on 26 August 2016. The response focused on the importance of provision been demand led, the benefits of a regional approach, including colleges acting as Regional Skill Hubs, and the uniqueness of the college sector to deliver the high end quality apprenticeships. The response also supported the Levy being used to deliver the family of apprenticeships, whilst continuing to seek changes to aspects of how they are delivered, particularly for Foundation Apprenticeships.

Review of Enterprise and Skills Agencies

Colleges Scotland fully supports the Scottish Government's ambition for Scotland to rank in the top quartile of OECD nations for productivity, equality, sustainability and wellbeing. We believe that in order to achieve this ambition there needs to be a fundamental shift in how the government and its agencies work with colleges, the private sector, universities and other key stakeholders, including the agreement of a shared vision, strong leadership both nationally and regionally, and a better aligned and a simpler policy and funding framework that is focused on delivering results that directly contribute to our shared vision and much improved opportunities for our economy.

¹ <http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/report/scotlands-colleges-2016-0>

Widening Access

Colleges have a role to play in widening access alongside the universities and fully support the findings expressed in the Commission on Widening Access final report. This whole system approach would be beneficial as the college sector has already demonstrated its ability and willingness to tackle inequalities, to reduce the attainment gap, and to deliver education to learners from some of the most deprived postcodes and those furthest from the workforce. This approach would also have subsequent savings to the public purse due to the recognised lower costs of delivering higher education in colleges.

The Sutton Trust report², published in May 2016, also highlights the vital role that the college sector has played in widening access, stating that “The improved access for disadvantaged students in Scotland ... has been met almost entirely by the expansion of sub-degree programmes in Scottish colleges. Since 2006, 90 per cent of all the growth in entry into Scottish higher education by disadvantaged students has been through sub-degree courses in colleges”.

Closing the Attainment Gap

We believe that colleges are uniquely placed to make a real difference to attainment levels in Scotland. Colleges work in partnership with schools, local authorities and other agencies to provide highly effective ‘alternative curriculum’ provision for young people in schools at risk of disengaging and non-attenders. These include programmes designed to develop core and personal skills and a variety of experiences that build relationships with disengaged young people and begin to bring the college environment, and learning itself, within their comfort zone.

Student Support

Colleges Scotland supports the implementation of a standard and fair system for student support funding would provide students with adequate financial support, as well as reasonable certainty on the support they are likely to receive for the duration of their study. Colleges Scotland is of the view that nobody should be financially worse off by attending college than they would be on benefits and we fully support measures to improve student support to ensure that all students can attend college, regardless of their personal circumstances or background.

National Bargaining

National Bargaining has been reintroduced to the sector following an absence of over 20 years. Creating a fit for purpose, cost effective and professional workforce to meet the needs of the college sector in the future is a challenging and extensive project, and will not be delivered without significant new and recurrent investment. This change programme will not be dissimilar to other significant public sector reforms. If the college sector is to be truly transformational it needs a Workforce for the Future. This work programme envisages delivering a new flexible contract, with many key milestones that deliver for both lecturing and support staff, and ensure students are at the heart of what colleges continue to do. We are working with trade unions to develop this Workforce for the Future strategy.

Colleges Scotland
September 2016

² The Sutton Trust, May 2016, *Access in Scotland - Access to higher education for people from less advantaged backgrounds in Scotland* http://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Access-in-Scotland_May2016.pdf