

Response to The Education Children and Young People Committee

1. Background

1.1 As part of its reform of post-16 education, the Scottish Government established a regional approach to further education. The aim was to make the sector more efficient and responsive to the needs of students and local economies. Across Scotland, 13 regions were created. Three of these contain more than one college: Glasgow, Highlands and Islands, and Lanarkshire.

1.2 The Auditor General's Colleges Scotland 2018 report sets out a summary background to regionalisation. It found that three multi-college regional strategic bodies (RSBs) are fulfilling their statutory duties by setting targets for individual colleges and distributing funding. But the extent to which they are delivering the anticipated benefits of regionalisation varies.

1.3 In these three multi-college regions, RSBs oversee the assigned colleges. The 2013 Post – 16 Education (Scotland) Act sets out that they are responsible for:

- strategically planning college education across the region
- allocating funding to assigned colleges
- monitoring how their assigned colleges perform
- overseeing the delivery of the regional outcome agreement, which sets out what colleges in a region will deliver in exchange for funding.

1.4 All three RSBs in the three multi-college regions are structured and operate differently:

- The Court of the University of Highlands and Islands (UHI) existed before regionalisation, but was established as the RSB in August 2014. The RSB function within the university requires a small number of dedicated staff and its operating budget in 2017- 18 was around £325,000.
- Glasgow Colleges' Regional Board (GCRB) was established in May 2014. GCRB has three assigned colleges: City of Glasgow, Glasgow Kelvin and Glasgow Clyde Colleges. In 2017-18 it employs three staff and its operating budget for RSB activities was around £430,000.
- The Lanarkshire Board is the board of the New College Lanarkshire (NCL) as well as the RSB. It secured operational fundable body status in August 2016. With no separate regional governance arrangements or additional staff, the RSB incurs relatively little additional cost. This is estimated to be in the region of £50,000 a year and is shared between the two colleges, with NCL funding 60 per cent and South Lanarkshire College 40 per cent.

1.5 To operate fully, RSBs in multi-college regions had to meet the SFC's requirements to be 'fundable bodies'. The creation of multi-college RSBs has led to a change in the financial and accountability relationships between the SFC and the assigned colleges in these regions with the RSB's being responsible for the functions set out at paragraph 1.4 above.

1.6 The arrangements in Lanarkshire pre - 2013 were for 4 Colleges covering the "County" of Lanarkshire, one each in the towns of Coatbridge, Cumbernauld East Kilbride and Motherwell. Discussions on the government proposals led to broad based discussions about a merger to form a single College serving the region. Motherwell and Cumbernauld Colleges quickly embraced the proposal and announced merger plans within a swift timescale however Coatbridge and South Lanarkshire College (East Kilbride) were opposed to the idea and declined to join the merger discussions at that time. Subsequently, some issues in Coatbridge College led to a review of that initial decision and Coatbridge belatedly joined the discussions. The 3 Colleges merged in 2015 and became New College Lanarkshire. The legislation was subsequently approved, identifying NCL as the Regional College for Lanarkshire,

while SLC retained its independence out-with the merger to serve the town of East Kilbride but for administrative purposes was “assigned” to NCL as the Regional College and the RSB.

2. Benefits of Regionalisation

2.1 The Auditor General’s report stated that the benefits of regionalisation in Lanarkshire have come about mainly through the merger of three of the four Lanarkshire colleges (Coatbridge, Cumbernauld and Motherwell colleges) to create New College Lanarkshire. For example, it has been able to review and rationalise the courses provided by its predecessor colleges and harmonise policies and ways of working. New College Lanarkshire provides courses across the Lanarkshire region, including in South Lanarkshire. In overall terms the merger of the 3 Colleges has been successful and provided a basis for regional discussion and planning.

2.2 Both colleges work together to meet core statutory requirements, such as having and delivering a Regional Outcome Agreement (ROA), there has been collaborative working on specific activities, a regional strategy and a collaboration plan and there has been membership and attendance at the Lanarkshire Board committees and Board. The RSB has recently given key support and advice to the SLC Board and moved to do this in the context of the responsibilities of the RSB. However, significant cooperation or integration between the colleges has been limited and a reluctant partner in the assigned college has played a part in this. The Auditor General’s report states that South Lanarkshire College performs well, has a relatively healthy financial position and its board members see no additional benefit to be gained from any changes across the region.

2.3. There have been ongoing issues with the status of the assigned college and a lingering resentment that the regional administration was the same as the governing body for NCL. This unusual arrangement was, in retrospect, always likely to provoke feelings of dissatisfaction with the smaller institution and has led to occasional problems as SLC was identified as a “reluctant partner” in the regional set up. However, notwithstanding these issues, the operational people at both the regional college and the assigned college, usually eventually found a way around any difficulties and driven by a desire to deliver the best outcomes possible for the students of Lanarkshire, essential cooperation was secured when it was needed. The impact on the administration and management of the occasional friction and conflict did unfortunately present major headaches from time to time. On one hand SLC felt diminished and unreasonable interference from the regional set up, while NCL often felt that an imbalanced arrangement for representation, had meant the “tail was often wagging the dog!”.

2.4 Legal opinion has recently highlighted that where any issues are not related to financial matters the role of the RSB and its Chair is constrained to advice and support as the assigned college is a separate legal entity and charitable body in its own right. The responsibilities and authority are left unclear in the legislation and the subsequent operating arrangements. The SLC Board has sovereign status and sole responsibility for its own governance, while the RSB is expected to scrutinise and oversee without having any real power or rights to impose or instruct solutions.

2.5 In conclusion, therefore, there has been identifiable progress against the ambitions for regional delivery from the Colleges in Lanarkshire being reorganised as described but the present model could be better and in learning from the difficulties experienced over the last 7 years, there would undoubtedly be benefit in giving more thought to the administration arrangements before committing any proposals to legislation. There is a structural problem in the Lanarkshire RSB model and this is subject to current discussion with the SFC and the regional partners. However, there are clear planning, curriculum development and regional partnership advantages to the regional model.

3. Response to the specific consultation questions

3.1 What has worked well in the College sector in the years following regionalisation?

The increased scale of a merged College in Lanarkshire (NCL), has led directly to a number of definable benefits;

- Delivery of high-quality skills education by being able to invest senior staff time and expertise, evidenced by the past four years outstanding performance at the World Skills Championships and other UK Skills Awards
- The establishment of an award-winning business hub which provides a platform for improved employer and stakeholder engagement at NCL
- Improved engagement with the Local Authorities in Lanarkshire, enabling improved focus on addressing community economic development, local deprivation and widening access opportunities to further and Higher education

3.2 How might the sector further improve in the years ahead?

Continued strengthening of the regional model will allow Colleges to take a more meaningful place amongst the other regional stakeholders and make a greater contribution to addressing economic and social imbalances in our communities.

3.3 How might Colleges adapt in light of current challenges such as those resulting from Covid19?

The enforced issues arising from Covid and the resultant lock down and social distancing requirements, forced colleges to respond quickly, imaginatively and effectively to ensure students were supported and that disruption to their education was minimised. The shift from face to face teaching to a distance learning platform was one of the real triumphs arising out of the adversity of the situation. Much of the success of this initiative was down to the increased size at NCL affording the opportunities arising from the benefits of scale from the 3-way merger.

3.4 What should the priorities of the College sector in the years ahead be?

A regional College structure should be aligned as far as possible with other major stakeholder's boundaries (especially Local Authorities and NHS) to ensure that public sector expenditure is focused and coordinated more effectively to address the major issues in our communities relating to inequality, economic activity, poverty and social justice. In the past colleges have often been excluded from those forums involved with regional strategic thinking and it is only in recent years that this has changed as education and training have been more recognised for their wider impact on local economic performance.

In general terms colleges need to strengthen partnerships with universities, the business community and employers and schools.

Having said that, the principal purpose of Colleges is to provide good quality education opportunities and the focus must always remain on the functions that contribute to that purpose.