

Correspondence from the Chair and Executive Director of the Glasgow Colleges' Regional Board dated 8 November 2023

Dear Education, Children and Young People Committee,

College Regionalisation Inquiry: Regional Boards (Glasgow)

On 17 May 2022 we shared our views on the current regional set-up in the Glasgow college region as part of the college regionalisation inquiry. Given discussion which has taken place at committee since that date, we welcome this opportunity to provide further comment.

An important starting point for the consideration of the Glasgow college system, and the Regional Strategic Body's place within it, is the Scottish Funding Council's *Review of Regional Strategic Bodies – Glasgow Colleges' Regional Board*, published on 20 October 2020. This was a significant, in-depth review of the RSB and the Glasgow college system, and included extensive consultation, both internally and externally, prior to reaching its conclusions and recommendations.

The review tells a clear story of 'success' and 'significant progress', noting that Glasgow Colleges' Regional Board (GCRB) has achieved all milestones and targets set by it, and continues to deliver under the estimated budget set almost a decade ago. The review remains a clear, accurate overview of the journey towards a coherent regional approach, and is an evidence-based journey of success.

GCRB has kept a clear focus on the three recommendations of the SFC's review: maintain effective relationships; further develop and ensure that the region's running/operating costs are appropriate and efficient; explore other organisational options.

There is significant value in safeguarding the unique identities and characteristics of Glasgow's colleges and campuses, while providing greater regional coherence in our strategic, governance, finance, Fair Work, and support approaches. A unified Glasgow college system is best placed to deliver for individuals and communities most in need, to provide unfettered access to life-changing education opportunities, to safeguard our learners' mental health and wellbeing while providing them with routes into employment and further education, supporting Glasgow's 'Just Transition' and Scotland's ambitions for a wellbeing economy.

In this response we seek to highlight some of the key discussion areas for broader consideration, including: funding; flexibilities; duplication and current structure.

Funding

The 2022-2023 cost of GCRB, including executive and governance staff, board cost, audit activity and all other expenses was £452,000. This is a carefully managed budget, which remains under the government's initial estimated costs dating back to 2014. GCRB maintains a small staffing complement, responsible for supporting the board and performing a wide range of functions.

In addition to this core cost, GCRB manages a range of other cross-colleges activity via a Programme of Action. Spend on this has been around £440,000, but for 2022-2023 was £292,000. This fund supports a wide range of region-wide projects which are predominantly student-facing, collaborative, high impact, and which promote further cooperation and efficiency or in some cases, attract significant match funding from partner organisations such as the Robertson Trust. The coordination of the Glasgow-wide ESOL delivery is paid via this fund, as is the Action for Children project which supports care experienced learners, the Young Enterprise Bridge to Business project, and Student Association projects. In the current year, this money has also included £144,000 of additional investment directly to colleges to safeguard student mental health support provision. This is not money which is being taken out of the Glasgow college system, but rather money being invested directly in the Glasgow college system for the benefit of students.

This regional approach delivers effective, value-for-money projects which benefit all the Glasgow colleges, while delivering a core regional executive and governance function for a carefully managed investment which remains below the 2014 estimate.

Flexibility

One of the major benefits of the Glasgow region structure is in creating, maintaining, and delivering an agile, in-region funding system. The allocation of funding and credits from GCRB to the Glasgow colleges provides a tight, coherent, and dedicated level of expertise, which is intimately linked to, and part of, the Glasgow college system. This ensures a depth of knowledge for all funding decisions with careful consideration of delivering for Glasgow in a fair, equitable, coherent, and informed manner.

Under this current arrangement, individual nuanced college needs are met via continual dialogue between GCRB and its assigned colleges, and in-region flexibilities are delivered at pace, allowing increases and decreases in individual requirements to be shifted between the assigned colleges, safeguarding investment, and ensuring that Glasgow's learners benefit. Flexibilities are negotiated in-region and decisions agreed by the regional board are made in an informed, equitable manner which actively seeks to ensure that the best interests of the Glasgow college system are safeguarded.

This added flexibility is empowering for the Glasgow colleges, for whom there has been opportunity to access additional funding and Credits at pace. The principals of the Glasgow colleges have direct front-line discussions about this flexibility and direct influence over how funds are allocated, while college board chairs, as members of the regional board, always have direct input to discussions.

The regional structure also provides for flexibility in the allocation of resources across the assigned colleges, the delivery of coherent learning and teaching models, and in broader approaches to delivery. GCRB is also empowered to champion further investment in Glasgow as a dedicated body, and regularly discusses opportunities for further investment with SFC and the Scottish Government as a firm advocate for investing in the region.

Glasgow benefits from having a dedicated regional executive with in-depth expertise of the region, and dedicated regional governance, all of which creates additional flexibilities which are not enjoyed elsewhere in the system alongside a governance system which seeks to reduce competition for resources between Glasgow colleges.

Duplication

The current four-board arrangement (i.e. the boards of the assigned colleges – Kelvin, Clyde and City of Glasgow – alongside the regional board) is, in the words of the SFC 2020 RSB review ‘cumbersome’ and it gives rise to elements of duplication. It is not, however, the natural conclusion that the removal of the RSB is the only option available. What is important is that an empowered regional model should provide opportunity to reduce duplication across other areas and resources, including the curriculum, support services, facilities, and estates.

There are various places in which duplication can be identified across the Glasgow college system, and there is potential to deliver greater efficiency and associated savings particularly in areas of governance, executive and support functions, and services.

Structure

It is important to note the considerable success and dedication of GCRB, its board and staff. The SFC review is clear that GCRB has overcome considerable challenge to deliver against all milestones.

GCRB has consistently delivered against all targets while remaining below budget. GCRB has efficiently and effectively delivered regional strategy, regional Outcome Agreements, regional allocation of funding and credits, internal and external audit, externally reviewed outstanding governance, and a clear and effective framework for regional coherence.

It has also coordinated, funded, and helped deliver a range of student-focused, region-wide projects and initiatives, and worked closely with student executives to deliver for Glasgow’s learners.

GCRB has consistently delivered high levels of governance and assurance in a large and complex system. It has effectively performed a wide range of roles, including first line crisis management, critical friend, supporter, and collaborator, often performing a complex and valuable role between the Glasgow colleges, Scottish Government and SFC.

GCRB has effectively ensured inclusivity across the Glasgow college governance and operational structure. The three assigned college chairs are members of the GCRB board and principals have a right of attendance at board meetings. All are empowered to make valuable contributions to board and committee discussions and are considered equal partners whilst noting that principals do not report directly to GCRB, nor are involved in certain decisions required to be taken by the regional board. The Glasgow Colleges Group (GCG), which includes the GCRB Executive Director and Finance and Resources Director, are a long-standing means of exchanging operational information at an executive level.

For the Glasgow college region, GCRB continues to maintain its focus on delivering an enhanced and effective structure which recognises both local identity and flexibility while delivering greater regional strategic coherence and stability for students, staff, and communities.

In conclusion, GCRB is a cost-effective body that has been successful in ensuring a cohesive regional approach in delivering for students across the Glasgow region, by making key strategic decisions that are within the remit of GCRB. There have been additional regional strategic initiatives that GCRB has endeavoured to take forward, however, due to the complexity of the governance structure, these could not be progressed. There is clearly a role for a regional oversight body within the Glasgow region and as identified in the Scottish Funding Council's *Review of Regional Strategic Bodies – Glasgow Colleges' Regional Board*, published on 20 October 2020, the current governance structure is cumbersome. It is by revisiting the governance structure, that the full potential for the Glasgow college system could be better realised.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the work of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. We are available should the committee require further engagement to discuss in depth the work of the Glasgow Colleges' Regional Board and future potential of the region.

Yours sincerely

Janie McCusker, GCRB Chair and Regional Chair for Glasgow

Martin Boyle, GCRB Executive Director