Scottish Parliament Education and Gaelic Committee: Inquiry into Apprenticeships

Written submission from James Withers, Independent Author of the Skills Delivery Landscape Review (2023) (also referred to as The Withers Review or ‘Fit for the Future report)

1. Background and overarching findings

In May 2023, I submitted *Fit for the Future*, my independent review of Scotland’s Skills Delivery Landscape, commissioned by Scottish Ministers. The Review made 15 recommendations, including significant structural reforms designed to create a more coherent, responsive and effective post-school learning system.

My formal appointment by Ministers concluded in June 2023. Since then, I have had no formal role in the implementation of the Review's recommendations, nor have I been a formal consultee on reform progress. I have remained an interested observer, with occasional informal contact with Ministers and some engagement with parts of the system by invitation. My comments should be considered in that context.

The Review was informed by extensive engagement with employers, learners, education providers, public agencies and other stakeholders. Its central finding was that Scotland had considerable strengths in its education and skills system, but that the system as a whole was fragmented, unnecessarily complex and insufficiently aligned with the needs of learners, employers and our future economy.

In particular, I identified:

- **A fragmented institutional landscape**, with overlapping responsibilities, competing priorities and insufficient clarity about accountability.
- **A fragmented funding system**, with different arrangements for colleges, universities and apprenticeships creating barriers to flexible provision.
- **A lack of strategic direction**, with insufficient national prioritisation of future skills needs and limited ability to translate economic priorities into provision.
- **Confusing learning pathways**, compounded by an artificial divide between academic and vocational education and a fundamental lack of parity of esteem.
- **Insufficient flexibility and responsiveness**, particularly at regional level, where providers and employers need greater freedom to respond to local economic opportunities.

My fundamental proposition was that Scotland should not have separate education and skills systems. It needs a single post-school learning system, within which people develop knowledge and skills throughout their lives.

I also concluded that reform could not be achieved through structural change alone. It required a fundamental cultural shift in how Scotland thinks about, values and supports different forms of learning. I remain convinced that this is one of the biggest barriers to national progress.

2. Apprenticeships: findings and recommendations

Apprenticeships were central to my recommendations, not because I considered the existing model fundamentally flawed, but because I believed their potential was being constrained by their separation from the wider learning system.

They offer an enormously valuable means of combining employment, learning and qualifications. Scotland should have ambitions to expand work-integrated learning significantly, with apprenticeships playing a central role.

However, I was reluctant simply to recommend more funding for apprenticeships in isolation. That risked perpetuating competition for resources between public sector agencies, apprenticeships, colleges and universities, rather than encouraging an integrated approach.

My principal recommendations were:

A single funding body (Recommendations 5 and 6). I recommended bringing funding for apprenticeships, colleges, universities and other publicly funded training under one national body. Crucially, this was not simply about transferring existing functions. It required a fundamental redesign of funding arrangements to encourage flexibility, remove unnecessary bureaucracy, align investment with national priorities and support regional responsiveness.

Clearer qualifications and pathways (Recommendations 8 and 9). I recommended a clear remit for the new national qualifications body, encompassing publicly funded post-school qualifications, apprenticeship frameworks and underpinning standards. I also proposed a comprehensive review of qualifications and pathways to improve articulation, simplify terminology and make the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) central to how learning is understood and valued.

Reconsidering Foundation Apprenticeships (Recommendation 9). I questioned whether Foundation Apprenticeships should be classified as apprenticeships at all. They are school qualifications incorporating workplace experience, rather than employment-based apprenticeships. Their design, naming, funding and delivery should be aligned with equivalent senior-phase qualifications.

Unlocking Graduate Apprenticeships (Recommendations 6 and 9). I saw enormous untapped potential in degree-level apprenticeships, particularly as an alternative pathway for school leavers. I recommended removing artificial barriers between conventional university provision and degree-level apprenticeships, with greater funding flexibility to support expansion.

Embedding employer leadership (Recommendation 12). I recommended moving beyond apprenticeship-specific employer advisory structures towards a stronger, regionally grounded employer voice across the whole learning system. Employers should be integral to identifying future skills requirements, shaping qualifications and influencing provision.

3. The fundamental challenge: changing culture, not simply structures

I would particularly encourage the Committee to consider apprenticeships in the context of a much wider cultural problem in Scotland's education system: the persistent failure to achieve genuine parity of esteem between different learning pathways.

We continue to describe academic and vocational learning as though they are fundamentally different and competing pursuits. University remains widely regarded as the pinnacle of educational achievement, with other pathways too often treated as lesser alternatives. This distinction is deeply damaging to individuals and to our economy.

In a country with a shrinking working-age population, we cannot afford an education system that leaves many young people believing they have failed simply because they have not followed a particular academic route.

These attitudes are particularly entrenched in secondary education, where they influence the choices available to young people, the advice they receive and the perceived value of their achievements.

Foundation Apprenticeships provide a compelling example. A Foundation Apprenticeship at SCQF Level 6 is at the same level of learning complexity as a Higher. Yet they are not consistently afforded the same standing or recognition. Their different names and institutional treatment reinforce the suggestion that one qualification is somehow more valuable than another.

Different forms of learning and assessment are entirely appropriate. But different does not mean inferior.

In my Review, I argued that the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework was one of Scotland's greatest, and most underused, educational assets. I now believe even more strongly that it should become the organising framework for how Scotland describes and values learning.

Imagine a system where a young person talks about achieving Level 6 English, Level 6 Software Development or Level 6 Construction, rather than one being called a Higher, another a Foundation Apprenticeship and another an Award. They represent different kinds of achievement at the same level of learning complexity and yet the names imply a hierarchy of worth.

This is not simply a matter of terminology though. Language shapes perceptions, perceptions shape choices, and choices shape the future workforce.

If we genuinely want to increase apprenticeship participation and ensure that young people can make informed decisions about their futures, these cultural barriers must be challenged from within the school system itself.

Scotland does not need another campaign promoting parity of esteem. We need a system whose design, language, funding and treatment of qualifications actually demonstrate it.

4. Priorities for the next phase of apprenticeship reform

The transfer of apprenticeship responsibilities to the Scottish Funding Council creates an important opportunity. However, the Committee should distinguish between the successful transfer of functions and the achievement of meaningful reform.

I would highlight five priorities:

1. **Move beyond structural change to redesign funding.** A single funding agency must translate into simpler arrangements, greater flexibility and a more consistent approach to investing in different learning pathways.
2. **Make apprenticeships integral to national and regional skills planning.** Investment must respond to credible evidence of current and future economic demand, supported by clear national priorities and meaningful regional autonomy.
3. **Create clearer, more flexible learning pathways.** Apprenticeships should be considered alongside college and university provision, with easier progression between pathways and greater opportunities for work-integrated and lifelong learning.
4. **Strengthen employer leadership without creating new complexity.** New governance arrangements must preserve the strengths of employer-led apprenticeship development while connecting employer insight to wider skills planning.
5. **Make parity of esteem a practical objective of reform.** The Scottish Government, schools, colleges, universities and employers must collectively challenge the hierarchy of qualifications. Careers education, qualifications frameworks, progression arrangements and public messaging should reinforce the equal value of different learning pathways.

5. Progress since the Review

I want to emphasise again that I have had no formal involvement in implementation since my appointment concluded in June 2023. I have not been systematically

consulted on progress, nor have I had access to the detailed work underpinning reform decisions (nor have I requested either). The following is therefore a high-level assessment based on publicly available information and occasional informal engagement, rather than an authoritative evaluation of implementation.

I welcome the significant legislative progress since 2023, particularly the decision to consolidate funding responsibilities for post-school education and training within the SFC. This is an important step towards the more coherent landscape I recommended.

However, I would distinguish between progress on institutional reform and evidence of system-wide transformation.

- **Funding structures:** Significant legislative progress, with the transfer of apprenticeship responsibilities planned for April 2027. The more fundamental redesign of funding arrangements remains a critical next step.
- **Qualifications and standards:** Qualifications Scotland has been established, but responsibility for apprenticeship frameworks will sit with the SFC. This differs from my recommendation for coherent national oversight of qualifications, frameworks and occupational standards within the qualifications body.
- **Apprenticeship pathways:** The extent to which reforms will simplify pathways, improve progression and integrate work-based learning more fully into the wider education system remains to be demonstrated.
- **Strategic planning and employer engagement:** New arrangements offer opportunities for improvement, but their effectiveness will depend on how they operate in practice.
- **Parity of esteem:** I have yet to see evidence of the fundamental cultural shift that I believe is essential, particularly within secondary education. Structural reform will have limited impact if long-established attitudes towards different qualifications and learning pathways remain unchanged.

My overriding message to the Committee is that **changing which public body funds apprenticeships is an important step, but it is not the destination.**

The real test is whether Scotland emerges with a simpler, more coherent learning system that gives individuals clearer choices, gives employers greater confidence in investing in skills and enables public investment to respond effectively to the needs of our economy.

Three years after my Review, I remain convinced that the greatest prize is not simply a better organised system, but a different national culture of learning: one in which every pathway is valued for the opportunities it creates, rather than its position in an artificial educational hierarchy.

We have begun to change structures. The much harder, and ultimately more important, challenge is to change culture.