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Convener
Education and Gaelic Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
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6 October 2026

Dear Convener,

Future of Scotland's College Sector: Progress Update

I am writing to provide the Committee with an update on the College Sector of the Future workstream, following the correspondence of 12 March 2026 from my predecessor to the Education, Children and Young People Committee. In that letter, Mr Macpherson set out the joint programme of work being undertaken by the Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council and Colleges Scotland to develop a sustainable, future-focused vision for Scotland's colleges. I am pleased to report that good progress has been made since the launch of the workstream.

Progress across the workstream

The workstream was established around three pillars: 1. synthesising evidence on learner, employer and community needs; 2. engaging stakeholders on the future role of colleges; and 3. exploring sustainable and flexible models for funding and delivery.

Pillar 1 aims to co-create a synthesis of the evidence of the current and future needs of learners, employers and communities, as well as previous refinements to the college sector, will form the foundation for subsequent pillars ensuring this work builds on past successes and lessons learned. A suite of evidence papers have been published on Colleges Scotland website, setting out the status quo and recent history relating to college governance, leadership, funding flexibilities, future trends and scenarios, the breadth of provision delivered by colleges, and a synthesis of existing national reports and reviews relevant to the future of tertiary education and skills provision in Scotland. The papers bring together evidence on demographic change, labour market demand, economic transformation, technological change, learner expectations and international practice. A map of all college campuses (and universities, for context) is provided that also show regional partnership and local authority boundaries. Further papers summarising key data about the sector, providing

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information about the workforce, and the role of colleges in delivering Senior Phase, will follow.

Pillar 2 is comprehensive series of stakeholder workshops, meetings, and surveys, and these are well underway. The workshops are a mix of national and regional level, collectively engaging with learners, college leaders, staff and trade union representatives, representatives from local and national businesses and industry, and employers in the private and public sectors.

Governance arrangements have been established to support the workstream, including a Delivery Assurance Group and Work Co-ordination Group, and two reference groups: one for Cross-Party MSPs and one for staff and learners, ensuring transparency and challenge throughout the process.

The engagement phase has generated a rich discussion about the future role of colleges as anchor institutions within their communities, their contribution to economic growth and tackling poverty, and how colleges can best support increasingly diverse learner journeys throughout life.

Revised timetable

The original intent was for recommendations to be developed for ministerial consideration during autumn and winter 2026. While strong progress has been made, the scale and complexity of the work, alongside the extensive stakeholder engagement undertaken and the interdependencies with other significant programmes of reform, mean that the workstream is taking longer than originally anticipated. Partners have been keen to ensure that staff and learners have been able to participate fully, which meant organising workshops and meetings of the Staff and Learners Reference group around the summer holidays. For these reasons, partners have agreed that additional time is required to complete Pillar 3 – the co-design of solutions - to sufficient quality. The workstream is therefore now expected to conclude during the early months of **2027**, at which point Ministers will receive the final recommendations for consideration. This revised timetable will ensure that any future decisions are informed by the strongest possible evidence base and the widest possible range of stakeholder perspectives.

Next steps

Over the remainder of 2026 and into early 2027, the workstream will focus on evidence-based options for the future of the sector, based on the outputs from Pillar 1, Pillar 2 and other pertinent information.

I recognise the Committee's continuing interest in this important work and will be happy to provide a further update and copy of the report on the Pillar 2 workshops as soon as it is available.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Public Audit Committee given it will be hearing from Audit Scotland on 12 November, and Audit Scotland's recent report on colleges made reference to the key findings from College sector of the Future being expected by the end of 2026.

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Yours sincerely,



ALYN SMITH MSP
MINISTER FOR INNOVATION, TECHNOLOGY AND TERTIARY EDUCATION

Copied to:
Convener, Public Audit Committee

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