

Colleges Scotland Response to the Report of Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape - August 2023

General Comments

Context

Colleges Scotland is pleased to provide a response to the Report of Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape (the Withers Review). We support this report, particularly where Withers reinforces the key role the college sector plays and how the sector is central to the delivery of a world class skills delivery system supporting both economic and social prosperity.

The Review is incredibly timely given the sector is on an unsustainable trajectory and operating in a wider system which is characterised by a cluttered landscape around education, training, skills delivery, and work-based opportunities in Scotland. There has also been a historically missed opportunity to capitalise on the sector's expertise and capability. All of us want the needs of learners, communities, employers, and the economy to be at the centre of planning and decision-making for how skills are delivered now, and in the future.

The recommendations set out in the report are required to achieve this, therefore we strongly support the direction of the recommendations outlined in the review, many of which build on both those recommendations presented in the Cumberford-Little report in 2020, and the more recent work undertaken by the college sector. Given that any structural changes will take time to implement, it is vital that related work, such as Laying the Foundations and Art of the Possible, produced by Colleges Scotland working with sector leaders, and Purpose and Principles, happen in parallel to ensure a stable platform exists for the college sector to continue to deliver at an operational level.

Change is Required

Withers calls for "a revolution in how we think about learning", and parity of esteem for all types of learning and achievement, which we agree with and have long called for from the college sector. We need to create a culture founded on a core principle: all learning that contributes to a positive destination has parity of esteem. There is no 'golden pathway'; no learning journey that is more worthy than another. It is possible to recognise and value all educational and training opportunities as having equal value.

Leadership is Required

Colleges Scotland would welcome clear leadership and direction from the Scottish Government which recognises the critical contribution of colleges to local and regional economies, communities, and the life-changing opportunities colleges provide for individuals.

Colleges Scotland is committed to working alongside Scottish Ministers to drive and lead system reform for the benefit of learners, communities, employers and the economy. Indeed, Scottish Ministers are already aware of the Think the Unthinkable workstream undertaken by the college sector over the past 12 months and Colleges Scotland would stress that it will be impossible to deliver Ministers' ambitions for a skilled workforce serving a strong economy – as set out in the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET) – without colleges and shared leadership.

Further Detail is Required

Colleges Scotland recognises that what will be critical are both further details around how some of the recommendations will be implemented and the timescales, and is also sensitive to the structural changes suggested by Withers, and that these may impact on the responsibilities of staff in existing organisations.

In this paper we provide some initial views from the college sector, along with a RAG status, in order to allow ongoing dialogue with Scottish Government and other key stakeholders. Key for RAG status is as follows:

Red	Do not support the recommendation
Amber	Support the recommendation in principle, whilst acknowledging further details are required
Green	Support the recommendation

It should be noted that where this paper makes reference to 'regions', we are using this in the context of regional-led skills planning sense.

Specific Comments on Recommendations

Recommendation	Comments	Role of the College Sector	RAG Status
Operational Recommendation - New culture of leadership from Scottish Government	Colleges Scotland welcomes this. There has been discussion at the Education, Children and Young People's Committee around "what are colleges for, and what do they do?". The Scottish Government has completed its Purpose and Principles work which should articulate a vision for colleges. Colleges are a vital and critical provider of education and skills training in Scotland's tertiary sector, act as community anchors, and are the mechanism by which people in Scotland step out of poverty and into qualifications and work. College leaders want to "get back to basics", working closely with employers of all types, as the go-to providers including in green skills and STEM. Mr Dey agrees that "We should all welcome the key role that colleges play in Scotland and agree that their continuing resilience is vital to Scotland's economy and society." If that is made clear to all stakeholders, and put into action, colleges would be in a better place in a timely manner. The Scottish Government should give equal recognition to the value of college education, within the wider educational landscape.	Colleges will: -Share outputs from the Art of the Possible workstream, articulating the sector's own views. -Pursue the 'Think Colleges First' principle -Engage with the Scottish Government on Cross-Portfolio working -Seek Cabinet level discussion on the college sector, in particular Cross-Portfolio opportunities Colleges are a key part of this wider vision. Ministers should, across all portfolios of the Scottish Government, understand what colleges do, what they can deliver now and in the future, how they can support delivery of Government priorities and commit to protecting and investing in them. In achieving its full potential, the sector would benefit from a more focused, priority-driven role. This could be achieved by streamlining funding sources so that colleges can operate more efficiently and effectively, with the savings incurred from the removal of duplication being repurposed to fund the sector.	
Operational Recommendation - Define success and end the	We agree with this recommendation. Decisive, national direction and leadership from the Scottish Government with a single strategic narrative and language on learning	Colleges bring institutional commitment and pursue a national co-ordinated learning approach.	

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division in language and philosophy.	is vital. This should be underpinned by clarity about the expectations on different actors, clearer remits for national agencies and structures of governance which enable performance management, decision-making, and accountability, to happen at the right level. The outputs of the Art of the Possible workstream complement this recommendation, for example identifying a need for digital transformation to create commonality across the sector, to the benefit of both colleges and the learner.	Art of the Possible lays out the college contribution to this and how the sector can be part of the successful outcomes sought. The college sector will play a key role in digital transformation by driving forward the outputs identified in the Art of the Possible workstream. Colleges will identify and agree how to implement standardised digital systems, and common standards for curriculum development which will help to ensure commonality in language and philosophy across the sector, as well as to support learning journeys across the tertiary landscape.	
Structural Recommendation - To move responsibility for national skills planning from Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to the Scottish Government.	A national needs-based skills planning process which builds upon Scotland's vision for a wellbeing economy and offers clarity about the sectors and occupations where Scotland has national skills requirements would be beneficial. Ideally, this would result in data and information updated frequently and reliably, which is readily available, which identifies trends, risks, and opportunities, and, critically, joint forward planning for skills needs and gaps in particular geographies or industries. This planning should be done by working with industry to understand future needs. Scotland is in an international market for skills, which is complicated because of the Brexit impact, and the planning function should be cognisant of international and emerging trends, competition for students and skilled workers, and international emerging industries which may impact Scotland's skills matrix.	A key output identified through the Art of the Possible workstream is the need for the college sector to be the leading planner and provider of skills and modern apprenticeships, which would support the 'Think Colleges First' principle. A single point of skills planning would bring efficiencies to the current process and should be done to allow colleges greater autonomy around decision making and planning. The college sector must be given a leading role in supporting the transition from the existing to the new for national skills planning. Colleges have the knowledge and expertise of managing this at an operational level, and also the	

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	Colleges Scotland is sensitive to the structural changes suggested by Withers, and that these may impact on the responsibilities of existing staff in existing organisations. National skills planning has to be transparent, as simple as possible, timely and evidence based.	vision required to deliver national skills planning more effectively. Colleges will continue to work with private training providers to deliver apprenticeships where appropriate.	
Linked to Recommendation 3: Establish areas of strategic workforce opportunity and need and empower regional partners to develop their own solutions.	There is significant opportunity to build on the foundations that were created in reforming the sector to deliver regional colleges. The full potential of regional colleges to play a clear leadership role within regions which have greater autonomy and accountability has yet to be achieved. This is particularly notable in creating a system and environment where colleges and industry develop symbiotic relationships, supporting business to be more competitive and to have access to upskilling and reskilling opportunities at the point of need. It is also critical to recognise that stronger collaboration between colleges and businesses must lead to greater investment by business in both the delivery and shape of college education and skills training provision. Colleges add value at a regional level, and in recognition of this, there should be clear regional autonomy for identifying local skills needs based on regional economic strategies, and an established process for planning provision to better meet those needs. Recognition of the role of colleges, local authorities, and businesses (particularly SMEs) in shaping and leading this process with minimal, light touch, involvement from national bodies and government. The Scottish Government should build this up firstly from engagement with employers and colleges. Clear,	The recent evaluation of the impacts of the FWDF, delivered by colleges, clearly shows the value created when colleges are supported to develop strategic partnerships with a wide range of businesses in their regions. The college sector is committed to playing its key role in successfully delivering this recommendation, and to continue to build strong links with employers of all sizes.	

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	consistent opportunities for employer engagement and leadership that enable all types of businesses and industries to play a central role in shaping and guiding the provision and services in the system at every step – from standards and qualifications development to careers advice and guidance – would be beneficial. Simple, well-signposted engagement routes for both employers and learners to access support relating to post-school learning and training so every business and individual knows where they need to go for advice and can access the information that they need would be ideal.		
Structural Recommendation – To establish a new single funding body, which brings together responsibility for all post-school learning and training funding functions from SFC, SDS and, potentially, the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS).	We support this recommendation, recognising that consultation on further details is required, as the introduction of a single funding body would reduce confusion in a complex landscape, where multiple funding streams exist, each with their own cultures, rules and reporting mechanisms. It is essential that the implementation of a single funding body cuts down significantly on bureaucracy and provides the opportunity to respond flexibly to regional needs. The Art of the Possible workstream has also identified this as a key ask to Scottish Government. It is important that the funding model review work continues in the meantime, to support the smooth transition towards a single funding body.	Colleges will play a leading role in building what the future looks like. We also have the operational understanding to test the impacts on changes to guidance, policy, or direction. By involving and consulting us from the start of such processes, we can support the shaping and implementation of the changes, both short term and long term.	
Operational Recommendation - Build a new model of funding for post-school learning provision, with simplicity and parity of esteem as core values.	Colleges Scotland supports this in principle, whilst recognising further details are required. There needs to be parity of esteem across the whole educational landscape, alongwith equity of investment in resource.	The college sector will continue to ensure that its provision is learner-centred and supports onward learning pathways and those wishing to return to learning later in life. Provision will also offer value for money.	

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	Equitable, streamlined, flexible public funding which prioritises learners and learning that will best deliver against intended outcomes is essential.	The college sector will work with the Scottish Government and other key stakeholders to establish an equitable funding landscape which facilitates innovation and focusses on impact. Parity of funding is crucial to ensure that colleges can deliver best outcomes for learners and employers.	
Operational Recommendation - Provide funding options for living costs for those who want to study part-time/flexibly.	We agree with this recommendation with the caveat that this must be additional funding and not re-allocation of existing funding to accommodate this change. The ability for any learner to access financial support for living costs up to the living wage equivalent would make part-time or flexible study more accessible and affordable. It is important to ensure that full and part-time learners are treated equitably to make education accessible for all. The future of education and skills training is likely to be characterised by an increase in lifetime access to education and skills training opportunities. Therefore, the funding of institutions and the funding to support learners need to reflect the changing nature of demand for education and skills training.	Colleges are committed to supporting all learners. We will promote any improved support package to those eligible and support them with any application process. This will help attract prospective learners to the college sector and enrich their student experience.	
Structural Recommendation - To give the new qualifications body a clear remit for overseeing development and accreditation of all publicly funded post-school qualifications and the	We agree with this recommendation, which is line with the outputs of the Hayward review. Any new body needs to be more agile and responsive to the needs of learners, communities, employers, and the economy.	The college sector will provide its advice and view in discussions regarding the operational arrangements of transitioning to the new qualifications body. The college sector will use its collective knowledge and expertise to advise how changes should be implemented,	

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underpinning skills frameworks and occupational standards.	It is important to consider that the college sector currently deliver qualifications which are accredited by a range of awarding bodies.	ensuring as little disruption as possible to the learner and operational processes.	
Operational Recommendation - Review post-school qualifications, using SCQF as a foundation, to create clear learning pathways underpinned by a universal skills framework and occupational standards and to drive further modularisation.	SCQF provides an opportunity to map pathways and evidence value of qualifications across, for example, a foundation apprenticeship and a higher. A clear, coherent, and recognisable learning pathway through the SCQF with articulation between awards at different levels and modularised qualifications that build over time would be the ideal. It is important that there is recognition of prior learning at all stages of a learner's journey through the education system.	The college sector will continue to push for recognition of prior learning. This is often not well understood, and it is important that there is clear guidance on how this is applied across the tertiary education sector. The college sector will make greater use, and support others to do the same, of the SCQF framework to map a range of suitable pathways for learners. The college sector will use its collective knowledge and expertise to advise how changes should be implemented, ensuring as little disruption as possible to the learner and operational processes, whilst reducing duplication.	
Operational Recommendation - Develop a new, national, lifelong and digital training record to chart skills development through life, connecting into a revitalised careers service.	This is a sensible approach and supports a modular method of undertaking qualifications. It is important that achievements outside of the formal education system are recognised, i.e., those qualifications and awards that more deeply embed work-integrated learning or employability-related skills development. This is also in line with the Art of the Possible work stream, which recognises the need for standard e-portfolio systems which follow the student, and which are cognisant of, and complimentary to, future developments in qualifications and skills. There should be user research, including on accessibility, before any project is set around this. Adequate and	The college sector input will be necessary to implementing a standardised digital offering, and colleges have the expertise and vision required to drive this forward. Colleges will: -Implement standard e-portfolio systems which follow the learner through the entirety of their educational journey.	

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	sustainable investment should be provided for the creation, maintenance, and an improvement schedule for multi years if this product is to be created – this kind of record with permanence, personal data information security, and brand recognition with users and employees at the scale envisaged will need investment.		
Structural Recommendation - To substantively reform SDS to focus on the development of a national careers service, with a mission to embed careers advice and education within communities, educational settings and workplaces across Scotland.	We are supportive of an improved careers service offering, which provides personalised, and lifelong career support to all learners at any stage in their career journey. This also supports the principles of the recent careers review.	Colleges will: -Work with regional partners on provision of careers advice -Undertake gap analysis -Develop professionally trained staff	
Operational Recommendation - Expand the remit of the existing DYW network to establish a national employer board and a series of regional employer boards which put employer views at the heart of skills planning, national strategy and the development of post-school learning system. In doing so the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board (SAAB) should be wound up.	Colleges Scotland needs further detail on how this recommendation will be implemented, however, there is a potential opportunity for regional colleges to further engage with the DYW network to meet employer needs and regional skills demand, supporting the principle of 'Think Colleges First'. The college sector should be involved in discussions regarding the operational arrangements of transitioning to new arrangements. Any arrangement must also fully integrate the views of employers.	Colleges have a strong track record in working with employers. The college sector will ensure that the needs of employers are met through establishing strong working relationships via Regional Economic Partnerships and delivering on skills demand. Colleges will continue to fully engage in their local DYW group.	
Structural Recommendation - To give the enterprise agencies a clear remit for	In whatever structure is decided by Scottish Government, the college sector would like to see the following principles delivered:	Colleges have a strong track record in working with employers.	

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supporting businesses with workforce planning as an embedded and integrated part of business development and planning.	• There is a standardised remit. • This clearly links to the planning process. • This offers regional autonomy. • This takes account of the green agenda and emerging technologies. The college sector should be part of these discussions to ensure the principles outlined are delivered. This would strengthen links between colleges and local businesses and allow skills needs to be better identified. This supports the 'Think Colleges First' principle, as the provider of choice for technical and professional skills.	The college sector will ensure that the needs of employers are met through establishing strong working relationships via Regional Economic Partnerships and delivering on skills demand, for example, via their Community Planning Partnerships. Colleges will work with employers to increase productivity and provide the conditions to secure inward investment.	
Operational Recommendation Explore greater private sector investment in the post-school learning system and, in particular, in the provision of in-work learning opportunities	We support this recommendation. Colleges have established strong relationships with local businesses in their communities and this is an opportunity to work more collaboratively to the benefit of both the public and private sector. Businesses and industry sectors currently invest in colleges e.g., facilities and equipment. There is significant scope to explore how we build on this to create greater opportunities for private investment	This recommendation plays a key part in transitioning to the Wellbeing Economy, and realising the value the college sector brings to this. The college sector will work closely with the employers to identify what in-work learning opportunities are in demand and can be delivered by the sector, to drive forward investment.	
Operational Recommendation A new, clear map should be developed to direct users into the system	This seems like a common-sense approach and should be linked to careers advice and recognition of equity of route. Scottish Government may wish to speak to Colleges Scotland and College Development Network about the research they have on perceptions of colleges and user journey experiences to maximise any move towards this. There should be market research and user research, including on accessibility, before any project is set around this. Adequate and sustainable investment	The college sector can share its expertise about user journey and customer management experiences. This should be brought to any national offering – working with colleges on any changes.	

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	should be provided for any changes – this kind of map at the scale envisaged will need investment.		

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