SCOTTISH FUNDING COUNCIL CALL FOR EVIDENCE: A REVIEW OF COHERENT PROVISION AND SUSTAINABILITY IN FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

RESPONSE FROM WEST LOTHIAN COLLEGE

A). What do you think works well in the current further and higher education arrangements that we should keep in order to secure Scotland's inclusive social and economic recovery from the current pandemic? How can we best preserve and strengthen those features of education and innovation in Scotland that we most prize, in a very challenging funding environment?	College regionalisation has helped simplify the educational landscape for schools, universities, employers and students. West Lothian College has developed a very strong partnership with West Lothian Council's education department that is leading to shared development of the curriculum and clear pathways linked to key economic sectors in the region. Colleges have a critical role to play in supporting a skills-led economic recovery. West Lothian College is working with partners locally to adapt and create opportunities for school leavers, people who have lost jobs because of the pandemic, and people in work who need to develop their skills to adapt to changes in their workplaces. In partnership with West Lothian Council, we have created new courses to support young people at risk of negative destinations. In discussion with local representatives of industry groups like the Federation of Small Businesses, we will ensure that we use the recently announced extension of funding for the Flexible Workforce Development Fund to best effect. West Lothian College is also working in partnership with three other colleges and SDS to identify an East/Central Scotland response to economic recovery. Colleges respond quickly and flexibly in response to the needs of their region. To facilitate this further, funding agencies and qualification bodies also need to respond with speed and flexibility. For example, in conjunction with local company Cameron Drywall, West Lothian College developed a new national qualification and apprenticeship framework to meet the needs of the company and a rapidly developing sub-sector of the construction industry. This could have been introduced more quickly if the SQA's qualification development process was more efficient. Government funding should also follow where there is sustained regional demand to support key economic sectors, evidenced by a college consistently meeting its activity targets. Against the national trend, demand for full time courses at West Lothian College continues to rise, in part driven by a growing population and school roll. In addition, demand for part time work-based qualifications is increasing. However, the college has not received an increase in credits to support that demand (other than in-year allocations that we fulfil readily). Linked to the previous point, SFC estates funding allocations based on the high priority backlog maintenance formula, is seriously impacting West Lothian College's ability to reconfigure our campus to meet the different demands of our growing student population and our regional economy. With significant growth in full time student numbers over the two decades, we have outgrown our physical buildings and desperately need to reconfigure them to meet the needs of today's students and the courses we offer. If public funding cannot support this, colleges should be allowed to access loans to enable us to improve our estates and digital infrastructure to improve the student experience.

This ability to colleges to respond to regional demand would be strengthened by devolving greater control over decision-making in how allocated funding is spent.

To enable colleges to plan more effectively and develop new provision to meet the demands of community, industry groups and individual employers we need a funding model that extends beyond the current twelve-month time horizon.

Review the measure of success that colleges are measured on. For example, students who leaves before completing their course for positive reasons, eg gaining a job or apprenticeship, are treated as negative destinations and have a detrimental impact on KPIs.

B). What do you think colleges should stop doing, or do differently, to contribute effectively to an inclusive social and economic recovery? (SFC suggest that you may wish to comment on teaching and skills development, sectoral and employer needs and employability, research, innovation and knowledge exchange, widening access and equalities issues.)	Colleges are not typically geared up structurally to be able to take forward research and innovation projects and it is difficult to see how this could be the case within increasingly challenging financial constraints. The sector and funders need to develop a better understanding of what innovation and knowledge exchange looks like for colleges. The university model and wider innovation ecosystem does not translate across or connect to the college sector. Colleges should focus on innovation in the delivery of vocational education and training, including hybrid learning models and diverse roles to support that delivery. Covid19 required colleges to completely re-think curriculum delivery almost overnight. This exposed the extent to which colleges had introduced sufficient innovation in curriculum development and investment in staff expertise and capability. It is commendable that colleges were able to shift delivery so quickly without significantly impacting student learning. However, sustained investment in staff and resources is required to affect systemic change in hybrid learning underpinned by digital. There has been limited innovation in different staff roles impacted in part by opposition from the EIS. As the needs of students and employers change, colleges need to re-think which roles best meet these needs. While the re-shaping of the workforce has started in a small number of colleges, the pace of change needs to be accelerated. West Lothian College has started such a change process and introduced new roles, eg instructor. Early evaluation of that role demonstrates real benefits in the quality of students' learning and teaching experience. There is a risk that colleges, partly in response to central government initiatives, allocate already tight resources too widely. Colleges need to identify what they are good at, and how should retain our distinct identity and avoid attempting to emulate or aspire to be another type of institution.
C). How can colleges best support Scotland's international connectedness and competitiveness in the post-pandemic, post-EU membership environment?	Colleges need to focus on regional and national challenges, and most have limited management and resource capacity to undertake market assessment, business development and delivery in international markets. The impact of Covid19 on colleges and universities that have large international cohorts on campus suggests this is not an area of international activity that should be prioritised in the short to medium term. Once travel restrictions are lifted, and subject to a replacement for ERASMUS+ funding being in place, international student and staff exchanges are an excellent way to deliver connectedness and enhance the learning experience. In recent years, West Lothian

	College has had over 100 students each year undertaking international exchanges. These students typically live in SIMD10/20 areas and their success rates increased as a result of their international experience.
	There are opportunities for the college sector to work more closely with SDI in helping to attract inward investment. The ability to tailor skills training to meet the specific needs of a company would be a valuable addition to SDI's offer. Similarly, colleges could work collaboratively in conjunction with SDI and British Council to put together a knowledge exchange and capacity building offer targeted at international partners looking to develop their vocational education and training provision. An example of this is West Lothian's award-winning programme in conjunction with Mitsubishi and the Malaysian Government.
D). What opportunities and threats does the post-pandemic environment hold for colleges? How are you planning to address these challenges and opportunities?	The greatest threat is not having additional funding to meet imminent demand from those impacted by the economic crisis caused by Covid19. There is an immediate risk that universities will look to replace international students with domestic ones who otherwise would have studied higher education qualifications at college. This might lead to increased competition between institutions at a time when greater collaboration is required. Mitigation of this risk is the development of additional articulation arrangements that reduce the length of the learner journey. Covid19 has put a spotlight on the importance of digital access and capability, particularly the challenges facing current and prospective students. For staff, the challenge lies more with digital capability to ensure they have the necessary skills to use digital technologies to their full potential. The opportunities facing colleges, subject to funding being available, significantly outweigh the threats. These include: • Using technology to reach new students • Reducing the time required to complete qualifications • Increasing the capacity/utilisation of campuses by re-thinking how and when learning takes place • Building on collaborative working across the sector brought about by Covid19 • Strengthening the role of colleges in enabling people needing to reskill or upskill • Enhanced opportunities to leverage existing and new funding streams to enable employers to develop and adapt their workforce.
E). What forms of collaboration within the tertiary education eco-system would best enable a coherent and effective response to these challenges and opportunities?	Deepen collaboration to provide a regionally focussed approach to developing new learner pathways and shorten the learner journey, ie collaboration not competition, driven by student need not market share. STEM Partnership Hubs and Regional Improvement Collaboratives have the potential to play a key role in facilitating this.
F). How can SFC, alongside government and other enterprise, skills and education-focused agencies, best support colleges to make their full contribution to Scotland's inclusive, green and education-led recovery?	Without appropriate capital funding colleges will be unable to deliver on government its zero-carbon ambitions. Ensure any new funding initiatives are introduced with sufficient time to allow their impact to be properly assessed before a decision is taken to continue or not.

SFC suggest that you may wish to draw out: • How scarce public resources should be prioritised to drive recovery • Particular areas of collaboration between agencies that would best support the sectors' contributions • Adaptations to SFC's funding and accountability frameworks to promote agile and collaborative action by the sectors to build Scotland's recovery • How SFC's funding and accountability frameworks should ensure that equality and wide access to educational opportunity are promoted as key elements of the recovery for younger people and adults • What support SFC and government could give institutions to adapt to a changed environment.	The level of reporting and quality assurance required by SG, SFC and especially SDS, needs to be reviewed to reduce excessive bureaucratic burden on colleges. While the economic impact of Covid19 is forecast to impact most on young people, it is important that the educational and skills development needs of other age groups are not overlooked. Once furlough ends, there is likely to be a large number of job losses of people of all ages, and colleges need to be able to support their needs. In addition, there are still long-term unemployed people in communities, and colleges need to continue to offer opportunities to enable them build skills and confidence to connect with education and employment. SFC, SQA and SDS working closer together to ensure qualifications are fit for purpose and able to adapt rapidly to address learner and institutional needs.