

## **A Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education - NESCol Response**

North East Scotland College (NESCol) is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) review of coherent provision and sustainability in Further and Higher Education. Whilst NESCol supports the sector submission made by Colleges Scotland we feel that it is necessary to provide the SFC with a more detailed overview of where NESCol makes a particularly strong and impactful contribution to the region's, and the Scotland's economic, social and cultural development.

NESCol offers a diverse portfolio of qualifications and courses accessible across a broad range of SCQF levels and study modes. All qualification pathways are designed in partnership with key local employers, stakeholders and partner HE Institutions, and seek to provide students with efficient and seamless routes to employment or further study.

Through these close partnerships NESCol has developed specialist expertise in the provision of qualifications and training across a number of industry sectors integral to the economic success of the region including the energy, digital, engineering, fishing, health and social care sectors.

### **Question 1**

**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, research and innovation in Scotland that we most prize, in a very challenging funding environment?**

Colleges such as NESCol play a pivotal role in ensuring that Scotland's population, young and old, are equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to reach their full potential in both their careers and their wider lives.

NESCol contributes effectively to the delivery of both regional and national priorities focused on social inclusion, economic growth and supporting learners from a diverse range of backgrounds and educational levels. This is illustrated via our success improving outcomes for students from areas of multiple deprivation and rural deprivation, and those with care-experienced backgrounds, where the number of CE students successfully completing their course in 18-19 was 9% higher than the national average.

With expertise across both Further and Higher Education, and with vast experience in the delivery of National Qualifications and Apprenticeships to a demographic that includes school pupils, full-time students, employed adults, and those out-of-work looking to retrain, NESCol is uniquely positioned to continue to play a leading role in the coordination, design and delivery of a fully aligned and coherent education and skills system in the North East.

We firmly believe that NESCol is the essential link between pre and post 16 education in the North East. No other educational establishment or institution, either publicly or privately funded, delivers the range of SCQF rated qualifications to as broad a demographic as NESCol does. Our expertise spans both vocational and academic education in traditional full-time, part-time, work-based and more contemporary flexible, fully online and blended contexts. Furthermore, NESCol provides vital alternative routes to skills and qualifications to people whom traditional pathways have not worked for, and training in industry accreditations unique to the North East, for example the qualifications delivered by our Scottish Maritime Academy.

At NESCol our particular strengths include:

**Provision of an industry-relevant, skills-based curriculum that effectively prepares graduates for employment** – one of the USPs of NESCol is that students are able to come to campus to learn and practice skills in authentic environments, working under the direct guidance of expert staff, using industry standard equipment. The vast majority of FE and HE courses comprise an element of work placement or work experience and all qualifications prioritise the development of essential core and meta-skills, in addition to the unique subject specific knowledge and skills integral to each and every subject discipline. As the largest providers of Foundation and Modern Apprenticeships in the region NESCol is highly committed to developing and championing vocational training pathways and promoting the benefits of work-based learning as well as traditional full-time academic programmes. Furthermore NESCol works closely with partners in key regional industries including the energy, engineering, fishing, health and social care sectors, to design and deliver specialist training and qualification that employers need.

1. **An excellent and fully accessible student experience** – frequent opportunity for deliberate practice and access to meaningful feedback from expert teachers are underpinning principles of effective learning and skill acquisition, and are integral, particularly in highly practical and vocational subject areas, to ensuring that students have sufficient time to develop the required level of competence that their qualification demands. Through the delivery of excellent teaching, that maximises the use of digital technologies, practical hands-on learning, and ensures students receive excellent instruction and teaching from qualified and highly experienced staff, students at NESCol are provided with the optimal conditions and support to be successful in their chosen discipline. Through College-wide initiatives such as our Digital Futures project, and the AoC Beacon Award shortlisted BYOD project, NESCol has demonstrated its commitment to investing in the digital skills of our both staff and students, and introduced approaches to removing barriers and reducing digital poverty across the region.
2. **Flexible, seamless and alternative pathways to skills, qualifications and employment** – NESCol has a long history of expanding access to further and higher education, and has in place fully inclusive teaching and student support practices and services that open up education to applicants from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. Our curriculum pathways enable seamless transition from school or introductory level courses, where previous experience or qualifications are not required, all the way through to Higher National Qualifications and ultimately, direct articulation to degree level Study. This is evidenced through our “Degree Link” pathways with the Robert Gordon University (RGU) where c. 400 students progress to a degree programme each academic year, and our “School Links” courses which sees c. 2000 school pupils come to NESCol each year to undertake a College course as part of their school timetable.
3. **Fully integrated and embedded student support arrangements** - NESCol provides more than just “training”, rather it provides a complete educational experience that comprises a whole-college approach to student information, advice and support. All students have access to range of on-demand support services including academic and pastoral support and guidance, counselling and mental health advice, a mental wellbeing Toolkit, comprising resources like togetherall.com (formally Big White Wall) and financial information and support if required. Students can get face-to-face support via our dedicated one-top-shop “Student Advice Centres” and all full time students have formal “Academic Tutoring” sessions embedded in their timetable where they receive group support and opportunities to discuss their progress one-to-one with their teaching team.

4. **A world class student experience** - students are able to come to campus to learn and practice skills in authentic environments, working under the direct guidance of expert staff and use industry standard equipment. On campus students benefit from being able to work collaboratively with their peers and are able to access essential additional learning and pastoral support on-demand and in-person from a range of specialist support staff.
5. **Business and Community Development** – NESCol has had great success working with both community and business groups to support the upskilling and retraining agenda. Via initiatives such as the Flexible Workforce Development Fund NESCol has successfully delivered training and qualifications to over 105 different employers in the North East, helping business to develop and upskill their staff to meet the demands of the modern workplace.

The College has a strong and long-established partnership with Aberdeen Foyer with whom it works to support the development of personal and employability skills among young people of the North East via the delivery of initiatives such as the Princess Trust programme.

The College also works with local community organisations such as the “Men’s Shed” to provide groups with access to facilities and specialist training and support when required.

NESCol also contributes to the delivery and achievement of key objectives within Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council’s Local Outcome Improvement Plans, and is represented across a range of key committees and groups including the Integrated Children’s Services Committee, the Care Experienced Champions Board, the Pan-Grampian Child and Adolescent Mental Health Group, and the Regional Skills Planning Partnership to name just a few.

6. **Regional Partnership and Collaboration** - Partnership is central to the work of colleges and this is evidenced through the way in which NESCol is firmly embedded within key networks across the North East and Nationwide.
  - NESCol works closely with key employers and local business, such as Score Group and Shell to ensure that our curriculum portfolio is informed by local need and enriched via employer involvement in course delivery and assessment. In addition to subject specific symposiums and seminars hosted by the College, Promoted Staff from each subject area attend regular industry events organised by the Chamber of commerce, Federation of Small Businesses, and industry specific groups such as the Aberdeen Hoteliers Association. Furthermore, the College maintains close relationships with organisations such as Opito, SNIPEF, SECTT and CITB to deliver world class industry training to apprentices across a wide range of subject disciplines
  - We work closely with Local Authorities and DYW North East to ensure that all pupils in Aberdeen City and Shire are able to access vocational training via our School Links programme.
  - The College is represented on all key Local Authority committees and group across both councils relating to skills, economic development, PREVENT and Contest and children and young people.
  - NESCol has strong links with a range of third sector agencies including Aberdeen Foyer.

- One of our most well-established partnerships is with RGU with whom we have a particularly close working relationship and effective Degree Link programme (mentioned earlier). NESCol is an Associate College of RGU and this supports effective joint working practices.

Given the pivotal role that the College plays in delivering key government policy pillars such as Getting it Right for Every Child, Curriculum for Excellence, and Developing the Young Workforce, working closely with such partners is essential to ensuring a joined-up, and best-value approach is taken within the region.

### Recommendations

1. More flexibility in student funding to enable those recently made unemployed, or claiming benefits to access education and training e.g. fund people to retrain in more vocational/regionally relevant disciplines even through they have already been funded for a higher level qualification.
2. Prioritise/ringfence key qualifications for college delivery to streamline provision and ensure vocational education and training is delivered in the most appropriate environment e.g. Skills for Work and Foundation Apprenticeships - these are best delivered by colleges who have the equipment, facilities and industry/staff expertise to deliver the best possible student experience.
3. Ensure Regional Outcome Agreement objectives are sufficiently localised, realistic and meet regional demand – enable colleges and universities to share objectives/targets where appropriate partnership arrangements exist.
4. Increase autonomy of NESCol to design, deliver and accredit (for example in partnership with RGU) qualifications relevant to the local region.
5. Amend student funding guidance to help reduce the digital poverty gap. At NESCol our BYOD scheme, which uses the FE bursary to help ensure that our most at-need FE students have access to a laptop, has been highly effective at ensuring that our students do not experience barrier to digital participation (particularly during lockdown). However under current guidelines this is becoming more difficult to sustain and impossible to expand for FE students.
6. Consider rationalising how college funding is awarded and streamline to reduce administrative burden on colleges e.g. remove need for tendering for activity that is most efficiently delivered in colleges.

### Question 2

**What do you think colleges, universities and specialist institutions should stop doing, or do differently, in order to contribute effectively to an inclusive social and economic recovery? (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.)**

As previously mentioned, one of NESCol's key strengths is the quality of skills-based learning and teaching delivered by expert staff in safe and controlled industry-standard facilities. On campus students benefit from being able to work collaboratively with their peers and are able to access essential additional learning and pastoral support on-demand and in-person from a range of specialist support staff.

Some courses and qualifications, such as NESCol's Learning Opportunities programmes are that are designed to support students with more complex additional support needs develop the skills necessary to progress into employment or mainstream qualification, are currently best delivered on-campus and in-person.

There will therefore always be a place for traditional campus-based programmes, however, colleges must seek to diversify their portfolio offer to enable qualifications and training to be achieved in a greater and more flexible variety of formats and pathways where the traditional model does not meet the needs of learners or employers.

This will include the development of more step-on, step-off learning, micro-credentialing and short courses, in addition to full-time courses that are accessible in a wider variety of formats e.g. fully online, evenings and weekends. Alternative modes of delivery will also likely require greater flexibility in terms of staffing and initial investment to develop, promote and launch new products and courses.

Linked to this is the need for the Government and the SFC to allow greater funding flexibility to open up various study modes to a wider range of people e.g. those made recently unemployed/claiming benefits etc.

Colleges and awarding bodies need to work more closely together to enable more dynamic and flexible industry-relevant qualifications. This may require colleges to consider streamline the number of bodies that they work with and/or work with alternative awarding bodies to develop new qualifications bespoke for their region. Particularly where current partners are unable to demonstrate the necessary level of flexibility or partnership to ensure that college's regional requirements are met.

Colleges should consider taking a more leading role in the development of qualifications and consider working with other partners, e.g. universities, to expedite development of more flexible study pathways.

As a consequence of their pivotal role linking schools to employers and universities, colleges should take a leading role in the redesign and development of a more efficient and streamlined senior phase that removes inefficiency and duplication from the system. Particular focus should be placed on redesigning 6<sup>th</sup> year/SCQF 7 and making more meaningful use of this phase via more integrated school-college offer. To enable this the SFC should consider a joint review of school-college funding to develop a system where funding follows the learners as opposed to the institution. In such a format a pupil could stay at school to sit Highers and engage in school social and extra-curricular activities (which we know are valued by pupils) yet also come to college to begin an HN or other such qualification. As part of this Colleges should work in partnership with COSLA and ADES to agree a suitable approach.

Colleges need to work more closely with Local Authorities, Universities and organisations such as SDS and the SFC to establish clear data insights and business intelligence systems that allow more effective tracking and monitoring of student progress and career development. Ideally this would be done at national level via Colleges Scotland to ensure efficiency and standardisation in approach.

Colleges also need to lobby organisations such as SDS to ensure early involvement in key national developments, for example creation of new Foundation Apprenticeship pathways, and to influence dates and deadlines relating to tenders and other such requests for information. Currently colleges are being disadvantaged through inappropriate timescales, deadlines and submission dates that do not align well with the academic year. Again, this is best achieved if done collectively via Colleges Scotland.

One thing that colleges should not do is get into direct competition with one another. As publicly funded bodies it does not make sense if we all commit time and resource developing products and services that directly compete or duplicate work. As things currently stand, with regional delivery this is generally (with

the exception of some central belt regions) not a problem. However, if we all begin developing distance learning bite-sized micro-credential courses designed to be completed fully online, the regional location of the delivering college becomes irrelevant. We should work together as a sector on such activities and co-design/deliver based on our areas of expertise, leaving resource available to develop essential training for our own local demographics. A good example of such a tactic is the one taken in Northern Ireland, where institutions adopt a “lead” college approach on the development of key qualifications and training, with delivery then shared consistently across all other colleges.

At NESCol we strongly believe that regardless of digital revolution, or the changes that occur to our society and education as a consequence of COVID-19, people will always value face-to-face education and training. Community, social engagement and personal growth is an essential element of effective education, and a core component of what we do. Many of the most in-demand core and meta skills that employers are looking for relate to working with, and managing people, and this is something that must be practiced and is not easily replicated online. So, whilst acknowledging that further development of distance learning, step-on, step-off bite-sized training/upskilling and micro-credentialing are all essential to the future of the Scottish college sector, so too is face-to-face learning and teaching, delivered on-campus in cohorts of learners, albeit in a more blended, flexible and efficient format.

NESCol is therefore committed to developing a portfolio of courses that is in demand from our local demographic, efficient in delivery, resilient to shock and change, and accessible by all in a range of formats.

### Question 3

**How can colleges, universities and specialist institutions best support Scotland’s international connectedness and competitiveness in the postpandemic, post-EU membership environment?**

It is vital that Scotland continues to develop and maintain a workforce that has the knowledge and skills to compete on the international stage and attract inward international investment.

Through initiatives such as WorldSkills Colleges can showcase the world class education and skills training that is available in Scotland, and through links with partners like RGU the College intends to identify opportunities for international engagement across key sectors and demographics.

The Colleges Scotland submission has addressed this section well. Other than an alternative ERASMUS+ type programme the sector should consider how digital networks and social productivity tools such as TEAMS/ZOOM could be used to establish global partnerships.

A National “Twin” college programme with a range of institutions in key partner nations could be an exciting way to build business and community links.

### Question 4

**What opportunities and threats does the post-pandemic environment hold for colleges, universities and specialist institutions? For institutional leaders, how are you planning to address these challenges and opportunities?**

There are a number of opportunities arising from the current situation:

1. Has necessitated review of existing qualification structures and awarding body capability - will hopefully result in permanent change e.g. streamlining of qualification structures, rationalisation awarding body oversight, and improvement in awarding body responsiveness.



1. Re-engagement with individuals who have not participated in formal learning for many years – new demographics enable new products and services to be developed.
2. Rapid development in the digital capabilities and confidence of staff and students has occurred as people have realised the power and opportunity offered by blended/online working.
3. A clear driver for developing more flexible modes of delivery and efficient timetabling arrangements.
4. Incentive to develop short/bite size learning packages and more flexible asynchronous delivery models.
5. A driver to review existing structures and ways of working to enable greater efficiency in service delivery.
6. Potential to collaborate with partners e.g. employers and universities, to co-design courses prioritising critical skills demand from employers.
7. Incentive to review and redesign curriculum portfolio ensuring greater emphasis on retraining/upskilling as well as delivery of more traditional FE/HE pathways for school leavers.
8. Incentive to build on improved regional engagement, partnership working and sharing of regional data and LMI.
9. Priorities to further develop the “workforce of the future” present the college with exciting opportunities for new and innovative provision and partnership with key regional employers. This is however reliant on employers still being able to have capacity to offer meaningful work placements and work-based-learning opportunities despite the downturn and currently limitation on workplace access.

**In addition, NESCol has identified the following threats/limitations:**

1. NESCol has experienced significant impact on commercial income which puts the College at serious financial risk, and will limit our capacity to develop new products and services meet the increased demand within the region.
2. The threat of a COVID-19 resurgence during the year, and associated further lockdown will render the delivery of many of our regulated and practical qualifications impossible.
3. Awarding bodies/regulators have not been effective at making practical decisions to assist colleges deliver essential vocational qualification. We are still lacking clear, useful guidance on what to do in the event of further lockdown and the SQA will not commit to colleges maintaining existing holistic assessment methods.
4. The global Oil and Gas downturn has impacted severely on the North East and will likely lead to very high levels of unemployment in the region. Whist the industry has already commenced work on transitioning to green energy production which will support new jobs in the future, in the short term people’s ability to afford to retraining may be limited which will require a revised approach to course funding.
5. The North East of Scotland is also predicted to be one the UK regions most significantly impacted on by Brexit.
6. A lack of funding to support procurement of resources to support education in current technologies.
7. A lack of capacity to undertake all the necessary development and redesign of the curriculum – staff at capacity teaching and servicing “live” enrolments.
8. A lack of flexibility in our workforce would limit the Colleges ability to provide more flexible modes of provision.

9. National Bargaining arrangements restrict colleges' ability to develop local terms and conditions for staff so that there is insufficient flexibility to adapt to needs e.g. for working outside "standard" hours and holiday periods.
10. Lack of funding to widen learning opportunities/development/innovation.
11. Access and inclusion issues related to digital poverty – widening of the inequality gap.
12. Lack of funding to develop and maintain workforce levels will result in experienced staff leaving the sector.

### Question 5

**What forms of collaboration within the tertiary education eco-system would best enable a coherent and effective response to these challenges and opportunities?**

1. Better co-ordination of senior phase to avoid duplication, in particular for level 7 courses. Colleges should lead on the complete redesign and Local Authorities should be required to align timetables across a region to enable a more integrated delivery model.
2. Schools should focus on the delivery of a broad general core curriculum, comprising national qualifications that emphasises the value of vocational and academic learning. Specialist and technical vocational education including FAs and Skills for Work qualifications should be ringfenced for delivery in colleges. Schools should focus on development of broad domain knowledge and skills, and the delivery of National and Higher qualifications.
3. Alternatively 6<sup>th</sup> year should be removed from school and all pupils required to attend college for at least one year instead to undertake HN or other SCQF relevant course – would expedite entry to university. In this model Universities could dramatically reduce their year 1 cohorts and teaching requirement e.g. 2+1 and 2+2 (as per degree link).
4. Promotion of articulation arrangements so that degrees can be delivered more efficiently and with a broader range e.g. co-design/delivery by colleges/unis and validation of Cert/Dip HE rather than HN.
5. Coordinating investment to support joint delivery and development of SFC funded and commercial provision.
6. Commissioning the development of new and innovative regionally-relevant provision supported via enhanced data sharing to inform decision making - NESCol is already in dialogue with SDS to develop a more joined up approach to data sharing between SDS, the College and other key agencies such as Job Centre + so as to be able to respond more quickly to local need. By more quickly pooling data and providing more contextual data insights the college will be able to ensure the delivery of the right training, at the right level in the best format for those who need it.
7. Co-ordinating the promotion of learning opportunities and pathways - more use of national campaigns and better joined up planning and qualification design between Colleges, SDS and the SFC.

### Question 6

**How can SFC, alongside government and other enterprise, skills and education-focused agencies, best support colleges, universities and specialist institutions to make their full contribution to Scotland's inclusive, green and education-led recovery? In particular, you may wish to draw out:**

- a. **How scarce public resources should be prioritised to drive recovery**



- b. Particular areas of collaboration between agencies that would best support the sectors' contributions**
- c. Adaptations to SFC's funding and accountability frameworks to promote agile and collaborative action by the sectors to build Scotland's recovery**
- d. 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**
- e. What support SFC and government could give institutions to adapt to a changed environment**

NESCol is in complete agreement with Colleges Scotland that scarce publicly-funded resources should be awarded to publicly-funded bodies rather than private or commercial training organisations whose primary objective is to make a profit.

Rather than directing funding via subsidiary organisation that require colleges to competitively tender for the delivery of a public services, such initiatives should be co-designed with the college sector for delivery by the sector in partnership with regional schools, third-sector charities and universities. There is no value to be gained putting schools, colleges and universities in competition with each other (within regions) to deliver products, for example Foundation Apprenticeships, when they are clearly best delivered by colleges.

The Apprenticeship Family should be reviewed and redesigned to enable more seamless flow between stages from Foundation, through Modern and ultimately into Graduate apprenticeships.

Perhaps the biggest opportunity that the post-pandemic environment hold for NESCol relates to the intensification work that we are currently undertaking with schools and universities. Members of the College's Executive Team are currently working closely with RGU to further develop our relationship to enable the co-design and delivery of core elements of our curriculum provision, and the better joining-up of our widening access and school-engagement approaches. Developing this partnership now will enable NESCol and RGU to engage ambitiously and effectively to support Scotland's education-led economic recovery, bringing expertise in advanced partnering with employers alongside substantial experience of work-based learning and commitment to learners of all ages.

Furthermore NESCol is working with Aberdeen City Council on a pilot to redesign the senior phase for three schools in the city. This work will enable us to prototype a new approach to curriculum design and skills education and training, hopefully enabling us to make recommendations about how to modify funding models and qualification offer for senior phase pupils across the region.

Additional capital funding from the Government would allow NESCol to maximise the use of its campuses/estate to support the delivery of outdoor learning, which has been shown to be highly effective in supporting sustainability and promoting the health and wellbeing of people of all ages. With the restrictions and social distancing requirements that have become normal as a consequence of COVID-19 the importance and value of effective outdoor teaching spaces has become stark but the creation of such spaces would require considerable investment that NESCol is currently not able to commit to. Additional support from the SFC would allow colleges to focus efforts on building on existing outdoor learning opportunities.

Enhanced capital funding would also allow colleges to invest further in key technologies essential to the future workplace. NESCol has already committed to investing in facilities and equipment that will enable students to develop first hand experience of working in fields such as robotics, internet of things,

automation and artificial intelligence. If Scotland's colleges are to remain at the forefront of global skills then we must invest in the learning infrastructure and environments that are required to support this.

NESCol also suggests that the Government should review funding arrangements to support people who wish to undertake part-time study (e.g. if they wish also to work or if they have caring responsibilities) so they do not have to self-fund their courses and are able to access appropriate financial support whilst studying

**We also recommend the following.**

1. Work with partners to enable representatives from under-represented groups to access College provision whilst at school and/or within communities.
2. Work with employers to improve recruitment to apprenticeships – in particular for under-represented groups (consider employer incentives).
3. Work with SDS to streamline MAs so that they can be completed more efficiently and mature entrants have prior learning recognised/credit-transferred.
4. Review funding frameworks to support colleges to recruit additional staff in key subject areas where indicated following curriculum review
5. Review funding models to enable industry-led training programmes to be supported e.g. remove credit limits per head per year to enable knowledge and skills programmes to be delivered in a timely manner to feed into essential industries.
6. Protect colleges from the financial impact to meet business and employer need.
7. Review and refocus ROA targets enabling regional institutions to share objectives where it makes sense to do so e.g. MD20 etc.
8. Consider expanding the Flexible Workforce Development Fund beyond levy payers and focus delivery to colleges.
9. Improved coordination between SFC / SDS and remove duplication (particularly around quality/compliance).
10. Revisit the ITA model to make it more predictable, flexible and accessible.
11. Earlier engagement/stakeholder management when introducing new initiatives or changes to existing to improve adoption.

The most significant support that could be provided to colleges would be a more collaborative and joined up approach by all the Enterprise and Skills agencies in their dealings with, and approaches to, institutions. It is essential that the strategies and initiatives that are devised to support social and economic recovery are common across all these agencies, with the SFC having a lead responsibility.

It is equally important that key agencies maximise and promote the college sector's contribution to social and economic recovery. Colleges are elevator institutions that play a pivotal role in upskilling and educating the nation, yet too often colleges are overlooked by media and government when it comes to championing the role that we play.

National strategy and policy must be bold in reinforcing the value and role of colleges, all the more so at this time to avoid duplication of effort and inefficient allocation of resource. Funding streams, therefore, ought to support these principles and enable colleges to play to their respective strengths and maximise their impact within their regions.