A Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education: SQA feedback

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?

It is imperative that we harness the many positives emerging from the way we have all responded to the current crisis — including the tremendous goodwill — as a catalyst for positive change in our recovery. There will be many challenges, but the Scotland that emerges must have the capabilities and resilience to withstand any other future disruption — and to grow from it.

Maintaining and strengthening the collaboration and engagement that COVID-19 has brought about will be the foundation from which we can build progress across the education and training system. The pandemic has seen practitioners and students embracing digital tools and participating in collective learning in digital classrooms, engaging with peers and classmates for support. It has also seen SQA and the college sector work collaboratively to produce guidance that sets out the approach for college delivery and quality assurance for a range of qualifications, allowing for a flexible approach to assessment and evidence gathering. The speed of adaptation and adoption would have been difficult to achieve otherwise, and we must continue to build the momentum to develop and implement multidisciplinary, innovative and collaborative models where possible.

Physical connectedness is still a vital component and key consideration, so we need a balance to ensure effective delivery and successful educational outcomes.

The other aspect of our system that works well is the robust quality assurance of standards. This is ensured by having an independent national awarding and accreditation body. Inconsistent and multiple creators of qualifications and standards risks a lowering of standards and reduced currency of qualifications, which would mean economic and reputational damage to Scotland. Research carried out by SQA shows that the current qualifications system is already seen as being too complex by a significant number of employers. If changes are to be made, they should be to make the system more easily understood and accessible.

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.)

Colleges, universities and specialist institutions should consider exploring effective ways of collaborating that generate efficiencies, share expertise and provide value for money while ensuring that services adapt to change and innovation. For example, lots of proprietary learning content is retained by institutions but is not shared. Using open platforms such as SQA's UShare to make these materials available to all would greatly reduce the overhead burden in this space. Institutions could share their expertise by developing CPD programmes specifically focusing on digital skills and using, for example, video conferencing facilities to share that expertise and build capacity across the teaching profession. The learners who engage in these institutions' programmes will be the ones who ultimately benefit.

Institutions could also tap into the potential funding for unemployment and retraining grants and could focus courses on qualifications that address skills shortages to enable the future workforce. For example, the construction sector has an ageing population and will require younger workers; similarly, there's a skills gap in the care sector; and the pandemic has sharply focused everyone's attention on the need for IT and digital skills for all — in life, work and leisure.

The demand for short, sharp learning experiences is set to increase as a direct result of the pandemic, accelerating existing sectoral change against a backdrop of economic recession. Students mixing and matching their own programmes from short courses will pave the way for micro-credentials, but these need to be recognised widely, so that they remain of value to learners as they move through different jobs and employers. One benefit of having a national awarding body is the hard-won recognition, credibility and value that its qualifications have, and so collaboration and an agile system that is able to respond to rapid or sudden changes will be critical.

The work of colleges, universities and specialist institutions will be profoundly affected by the COVID-19 crisis; models of learning more generally are likely to change substantially over the coming decade, with hybrid face-to-face and online models. SQA will continue to work in partnership with colleges and other educational institutions to make sure that the qualifications we offer are compatible with these blended models of learning.

SQA is already working closely with the college sector to redesign HN qualifications to ensure they meet 21st century needs. This includes the way the qualifications are developed and maintained, and how they are assessed, which will impact on approaches to delivery and quality assurance. Input from colleges and employers when developing and reviewing qualifications is essential if we are to ensure that the output — qualifications — is fit for purpose and meets the needs of candidates, colleges and industry.

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

International collaborations are likely to continue to take place in the digital world for the foreseeable future — as the benefits of this approach are more widely realised and digital solutions make it easier and more accessible, this can only become one of the new norms. Scotland's education and training system should be building a reputation for leading in this arena; hosting events, showcasing our talent and our ambitions, and bringing together experts focused on ensuring that the outputs of education and training – qualifications - are at the forefront in responding to the challenges that global disruptions will continue to bring.

Branding the Scottish Education and Training System so it is instantly recognised internationally and associated with quality, equity and ambition, is an essential part of establishing Scotland's place in the world. SQA qualifications enable progression pathways which take learners on to further and higher education and into work, and a reputation for sharing our experience and expertise. So, supported by the Scottish Government and its agencies, education and training institutions and other organisations such as SQA and the British Council could create an integrated platform of support and opportunities for inbound students and in-country initiatives.

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?**

Opportunities

Rising to the challenge of COVID-19 has generated a great deal of goodwill and brought the actors in Scotland's education and training system together to work collaboratively to find new approaches that not only address the current crisis by putting arrangements in place to allow for a flexible approach to assessment and evidence gathering, but will become a more efficient and effective way of delivering education, training and qualifications in the future. SQA continues to work with education and training providers, employers and other government agencies, to understand how our qualifications, systems and processes can best work within that digital world to ensure these efficiencies and benefits are realised.

Threats

Some of the global challenges we will all face in the post-pandemic environment are:

♦ the widespread availability of MOOCs (massive open online courses), short courses and bite-size learning and how these will be quality assured and regulated to ensure credibility
♦ how the speed of change across sectors challenges educational response time
♦ students being able to choose online providers instead of traditional colleges and institutions
♦ decreased international student mobility.

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

Digital solutions could be both liberating and limiting, depending on the skills available in the system. So, to ensure Scotland reaps the benefits of digital solutions, actors in the education and training system could collaborate to deliver focused CPD to build digital capacity amongst the system's developers and deliverers. This could also have the additional benefit of helping to develop a broader understanding of how we can better connect digitally to create a qualification system that delivers in terms of efficiencies in the system, flexible delivery approaches, and valued qualifications and skilled learners as its output.

Better connectivity should drive efficient and joined-up processes and, potentially, data bases. There is an opportunity to build the learner journey and their achievements into the heart of the system — joined up, transparent and accessible at each stage.

An asset of Scotland's education and training system is the established qualification articulation and progression routes. The speed of response required to address the impact of COVID-19 will also require fully engaged consultation to ensure that, whilst institutions and agencies are developing new approaches, these pathways are maintained and improved.

Collaboration across the eco-system when developing and reviewing qualifications is essential to the course development process to ensure that qualifications are fit for purpose and meets the needs of candidates, institutions and industry. It is also incredibly important for colleges and institutions to be able to respond to local economic needs, and that they have the qualifications necessary to do so, while retaining the rigour and the common approach that SQA brings to qualifications.

Using digital conferencing solutions might be an approach to encourage employers to engage when they are likely to be faced with other priorities. Business already finds the qualifications system complex, and there is an opportunity here to reduce that complexity.

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:

- 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 current health crisis reinforces the need for the education and skills system to embrace agility, flexibility and adaptability as foundational principles. It accelerates the adoption of digital operating models in learning, teaching and assessment. Hybrid and flexible models will become essential and common across the country. Building resilience will be critical – through fair, first-class learning opportunities and experiences, supported by collaborative leadership and partnership across agencies. This in turn will require focused investment in connected IT infrastructure, CPD across the developers and deliverers of the system, and collaboration on new approaches to deliver quality and value.

We need to put Lifelong Learning back to the forefront, embracing the various policy objectives of promoting choices through options for progression into further and higher education or work, widening access and enhancing the learner journey with more articulation pathways and improving accessibility to digital solutions. SQA's Diploma to Degree programme, which allows entry to degree programmes across Scotland and around the world, and the work of articulation partners — eg the developments of the apprenticeship family — can play an important role here. The adoption of meta-skills and micro-credentialing as part of a new generation of HN qualifications will be critical too.

There is also an opportunity for a simpler and more unified approach in the area of generic skills frameworks. Scotland currently has Core Skills; Essential skills; and Skills for Learning, Life and Work; and we are now introducing Meta skills. This is cluttered and confusing. Even where there are clear distinctions between the different frameworks, these are not widely understood.

Digital assessment and verification of electronic evidence will become key strands for all deliverers of education and training in Scotland. Cooperation and consistency of approach across the sector will be pivotal in ensuring success in this model and helping to support the recovery.