

Board of Management

Date of Meeting	Wednesday 14 June 2023
Paper No.	BoM7-K
Agenda Item	5.2
Subject of Paper	The Withers Report - “Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation”
FOISA Status	Disclosable
Primary Contact	Michael Cross, Director, Corporate Support
Date of production	8 June 2023
Action	For Noting

1. Recommendation

To note the report.

2. Purpose

To alert Board members to the publication on 7 June of the Withers Report, commissioned by Scottish Ministers in August last year to “undertake a review of the skills delivery landscape”. The report sits alongside a suite of related reviews of Scotland’s post-school systems, including the Cumberland-Little report of February 2020, the subsequent (June 2021) Scottish Funding Council Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability, and the Hayward Review of Qualifications and Assessment.

3. Key Insights

3.1 The Withers Review is a frank account of Scotland's post-16 learning infrastructure. It identifies current good practice on which future opportunities might build, but does not shirk from identifying disconnections between agencies (for example, on skills alignment); and a lack of clarity of Government's expectations that together means the system is currently sub-optimal.

3.2 Withers identifies strengths and opportunities in Scotland's college sector (though does not provide a solution to the current funding difficulties), describing how "*...his eyes have been opened to the broad and pivotal role colleges play in their regions ...*"

3.3 There are three recommendations in the report, all for Government:

- that SG take a clearer leadership in role in post-school learning policy;
- that SG's purpose and principles activity establishes a single, coherent narrative for what a successful post-school learning system should look like, and how progress towards it will be measured; and
- that SG should be responsible for national skills planning and oversight of sector and regional needs.

4. Impact and Implications

Taken together with SG's work on "Purpose and Principles" and the various preceding reports identified in para 2, 'Withers' will help define the future shape of p-16 learning in Scotland – and creates the opportunity for addressing a number of the systemic weaknesses previously addressed in Cumberford-Little (e.g., the 'atomisation' of funding streams. The report has been welcomed by SFC, Colleges Scotland, and Universities Scotland, and both the Principal, and the Director of Corporate Support have discussed with Mr Withers the direction of his report during the drafting.

5. Appendix

The Appendix to this paper, is a detailed analysis of the Report prepared by Colleges Scotland which includes a link to the full report.

Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape

Background

The Independent [Review](#) of the Skills Delivery Landscape, undertaken by James Withers, was published on Wednesday 7 June 2023. It is clear that the strong advocacy and input by Colleges Scotland directly to James Withers, and the Review, has resulted in several key messages that are helpful to the college sector being recognised and included.

Scottish Government, in its communication with Colleges Scotland, has stated that the publication of this Review is the first step on the path towards system wide reform across lifelong education and skills and that they look forward to working with the college sector as the Scottish Government reflects on the detail of the Review recommendations.

Scottish Government also said that they are committed to working in partnership with Colleges Scotland and the college sector as we seek to build a system that is fit for the future. We will now work with Scottish Ministers and officials to maximise the opportunities presented by this report and continue to ensure members and learners are best served by the outcomes.

Opportunities

Colleges are mentioned in the very first page of the document, in James's Foreword, and it is clear from the narrative that he recognises and values the role of colleges that will be essential to deliver the ambitions of the Scottish Government, both in terms of the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET) and its priorities around Equity, Opportunity and Community.

The report also highlights that there are too many tensions and complexities in the system, including around funding. The recommendations for a single funding body and a re-designed process for funding also align with the Think the Unthinkable work.

At the Think the Unthinkable Convention 5 held on Tuesday 6 June 2023, the senior sector leaders endorsed the outputs from the 4 Transformational Theme Working Groups. The timing of this work being facilitated by Colleges Scotland will now allow maximum traction with Scottish Government and other key stakeholders, as this aligns with the headlines from this Reviews, and also allows constructive input into the Scottish Government's workstream on Purpose and Principles.

The need for a stronger narrative from Scottish Government in their Purpose and Principles work is highlighted by Withers and the college sector would support that, contributing our outputs from the Think the Unthinkable workstream. Withers also emphasises that decisions need to be made with the learner at the centre and the importance of having regional autonomy and some suggested new regional structures. There is much to explore here in regard to outputs from the Think the Unthinkable workstreams.

Summary of Recommendations in the Withers Review

Structural Recommendations

The five structural recommendations are:

- To move responsibility for national skills planning from Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to the Scottish Government. (Recommendation 3)

- 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). (Recommendation 5)
- To give the new qualifications body a clear remit for overseeing development and accreditation of all publicly funded post-school qualifications and the underpinning skills frameworks and occupational standards. (Recommendation 8)
- 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. (Recommendation 11)
- To give the enterprise agencies a clear remit for supporting businesses with workforce planning as an embedded and integrated part of business development and planning. (Recommendation 13).

Operational Recommendations

These five structural recommendations are supported by a further ten operational recommendations, focused on governance and processes:

- New culture of leadership from Scottish Government (Recommendation 1).
- Define success and end the division in language and philosophy (Recommendation 2).
- Establish areas of strategic workforce opportunity and need and empower regional partners to develop their own solutions (Recommendations 3 and 4).
- Build a new model of funding for post-school learning provision, with simplicity and parity of esteem as core values (Recommendation 6).
- Provide funding options for living costs for those who want to study parttime/flexibly (Recommendation 7).
- 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 (Recommendation 9).
- Develop a new, national, lifelong and digital training record to chart skills development through life, connecting into a revitalised careers service (Recommendation 10).
- 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 (Recommendation 12).
- Explore greater private sector investment in the post-school learning system and, in particular, in the provision of in-work learning opportunities (Recommendation 14).
- A new, clear map should be developed to direct users into the system (Recommendation 15).

Colleges Scotland
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