

# **Call for Views: Covid-19: Economic Impact on Young People - Colleges Scotland Comments**

## **Introduction**

Colleges Scotland is the collective voice for the college sector in Scotland, representing its interests and ensuring that colleges are at the heart of a world class education sector that is recognised, valued and available to all. Colleges Scotland, as the membership body, represents all 26 colleges in Scotland, which deliver both further education and around 26% of the provision of all higher education in Scotland.

These are unprecedented times, however, colleges, and their staff, have responded remarkably well by not only having the flexibility to quickly suspend face-to-face learning and move to remote working and online learning, they are also helping to combat COVID-19 in many different ways.

Financial forecasts suggest significant contractions to Scotland's economy resulting from COVID-19, but, just as in previous times of recession, the college sector will play a critical role in driving economic revival, in part by assisting young people and those who have lost their jobs in upskilling, retraining and providing them with the skills sought by employers and by supporting businesses of all sizes to get back on their feet and increase productivity.

As such, we welcome the opportunity to respond to the call for views issued by the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee as part of their ongoing inquiry on the impact of COVID-19 on Scotland's economy, including businesses and workers.

## **Key Points**

### **Consequences of Covid-19 for Young People and Apprentices**

Our expectation is that unemployment levels are going to rise sharply with the likelihood that 19-25-year-olds will be hit hardest, leading to more young people needing to learn employability skills at college in order to give them a greater chance of moving into the workplace post Covid-19. Significant numbers of young people will be 'catching-up' on learning after lockdown, and that very much applies to learners at college.

We envisage a significantly reduced demand by employers for apprenticeships as industry and commerce moves to 're-open' for business. There are already concerns within the sector around the situation for existing apprentices and whether they will return to complete their training, either for those who are currently subject to furloughing measures and those who have been subject to redundancy measures.

Colleges have the agility, flexibility, capacity, and expertise to continue the delivery of apprenticeships in a challenging labour market, by creating opportunities to simulate relevant work-based experiences for learners and by developing new pathways to apprenticeships. Such pathways will provide opportunities for young people to learn new and appropriate skills in preparation for when more apprenticeship opportunities arise. In addition to providing training, colleges work closely with

both schools and employers in the delivery of apprenticeships to provide extensive wrap-around support.

As such, and in order to mitigate the COVID-19 impact for apprentices, employers, the future skills pipeline, and colleges, due to the uncertain and probable lower levels of recruitment to Modern Apprenticeship (MA) courses, the college sector has proposed that a Pathway to Apprenticeships programme is established in order to build capacity for economic recovery, and is currently working with the Scottish Government and its agencies to identify suitable solutions.

## **Solutions to Support Young People and Apprentices**

In order to avoid overtly negative consequences for both young people and apprentices', employers, including those in the public sector should be encouraged to employ young people. As such, we strongly welcomed the recommendation from the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery and their recommendation that a Scottish Jobs Guarantee Scheme is established, which would safeguard employment and access to training for 16-25-year-olds for two years, and which we believe could be highly effective would it be in addressing the potential scarring effect of the crisis on the lives of young people.

The college sector would like to see this scheme expanded to be a guarantee not just in regard to jobs but also a guarantee around access to learning. This will assist the longer term picture and help ensure delivery of an engrained recovery.

We would also wish to make the Committee aware of the report's focus on the importance of apprenticeships and the Flexible Workforce Development Fund – which through successful delivery by colleges has added clear value to the fund – as the sector is keen to work with the Scottish Government and its agencies to develop an industry-approved pre-apprenticeship scheme to minimise COVID-19-related disruption to the skills pipeline.

## **What will the impact of the economic crisis be on apprenticeships? What can the Scottish Government and its agencies do to ensure that apprenticeships continue to be available to young people?**

Colleges are working with the Scottish Government and its agencies to ensure the continued availability of a work based curriculum that helps to offset increases in youth unemployment. Many apprenticeships have high value in the labour market. Given the financial impact to firms, and the fact that many have had to suspend their apprenticeships, this is a route that will be badly affected by the crisis. It is imperative that we support firms to restart their training.

Colleges will be working with employers, Managing Agents', and Skills Development Scotland (SDS) to deliver the MA programme in an 'interim' way, to allow businesses time and financial space to get back on their feet for six to 12 months. Colleges will look to offer a range of full-time delivery across various occupational groups and recruit potential MA candidates onto an 'interim industry-endorsed scheme'.

Colleges will then deliver the knowledge and understanding element on a full-time basis, as well as work with employers and industry to add to the programme, where possible, work placement or industry open days, employability and META skills, as well as a recruitment service, which matches students to employers at the end of the full-time delivery.

This approach could have numerous benefits around enhancing youth transitions, helping young people to develop work ready skills and to prepare them for an apprenticeship, whilst simultaneously supporting economic recovery by building capacity and enhancing wider college / industry relationships.

In order to develop such a solution and in terms of developing practical steps and resources for implementation, we would advise that Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council should collaborate with colleges and businesses to prioritise apprenticeship training; and should respond to youth unemployment with a flexible learning response, developed on a co-productive basis as part of a 'Team Scotland' approach.

### **How can we ensure that young people have the skills needed to promote economic recovery and to ensure that they gain/remain in employment?**

Colleges play an essential role in providing opportunities for young people and are fundamental to tackling youth unemployment. In partnership with schools and the school curriculum, they colleges offer alternative vocational pathways for Senior Phase pupils, preparing them for employment and helping reduce national skills gaps.

To ensure that young people have the skills needed to promote economic recovery, and to ensure they both gain and remain in employment, we would call for the Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) programme to be both protected and extended, this being the Scottish Government's Youth Employment strategy to better prepare young people for the world of work.

The college sector has significantly contributed significantly to the success of the Scottish Government's Developing Young Workforce (DYW) ambitions which ensured that youth unemployment reached a historic low and it can build on this success to address the current risks.

- Colleges deliver DYW programmes to 99.2.% of Scotland's state secondary schools, supporting 6,406 Senior Phase pupils
- Colleges support work-based learning for a further 27,027 senior phase pupils, bringing the total of Senior Phase pupils engaged in qualifications delivered in partnership to 33,433.

These gains that have made through the Developing our Young Workforce approach, which was at the heart of the response to the global financial crisis in 2008, are now at risk due to the projected increases in youth unemployment as a result of the likely economic downturn induced by Covid-19 and as such there is now a need for a targeted and concerted set of interventions, based on a 'triage' approach rather than 'first-aid for all.

As part of this there is an urgent need to protect the DYW agenda – for many young people, staying in education and training will be the right answer. The DYW agenda offers a national 'prospectus' which already has both national and local visibility and which employs a strength based approach. We should seek to maximise the value of this in terms of reducing some of our national skills gaps. The regional intelligence of colleges and other partners will support this ambition.

These interventions, such as DYW, can be provided by increasing the availability and suitability of education and learning options provided by colleges and other providers, to enable retraining and reskilling, as young people will need to learn more employability skills at college to give them a greater chance of moving into a tough post-crisis job market.

Colleges have been instrumental in delivering workforce upskilling, reskilling and soft skills, and we know that that the college sector has already helped to support organisations across Scotland to rebuild their businesses and rebuild their confidence.

### **Tertiary Education System**

In order for the college sector to be able to support the COVID-19 economic recovery and to increase opportunities for young people there is a clear need for flexibility and adaptation of the tertiary education sector, a message conveyed through the Cumberford-Little report reviewing the economic impact of colleges for the Scottish Government.

The report published by the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery also called for a more aligned tertiary education, skills and research system, and the college sector's response to this is that we are committed to working collectively with the wider tertiary skills system to create sustainable success for individuals, communities and businesses across Scotland.

With this commitment in mind, and if we are to successfully implement this recommendation then in terms of practical action we believe that the well intentioned work of the 15-24 Learner Journey Review now needs to be recalibrated in light of the post-COVID-19 economic realities, with greater emphasis and incentives given to achieving a rationalisation of the existing system and the removal of duplication and inefficiency.

More priority should be given over the next 12-18 months and beyond to establishing a coherent flexible and efficient post-school learner journey as part of a more coherent tertiary system – an agile, deliberate, measured and co-designed change programme that incentivises collaboration, co-location, co-funding and co-investment. We believe that such an approach offers the possibility of encouraging greater sharing and which can reward innovation in the efficient delivery of learning and skills, supporting longer term economic recovery by supporting the wider skills pipeline, and increasing opportunities for young people at the same time.

## **Conclusion**

The college sector has responded swiftly and creatively to the current crisis, as individual colleges and collectively as a sector – we agilely pivoted our entire approach to learning and teaching over a matter of days to remote delivery. We remain civic anchors at the heart of our communities and colleges will be the driving force behind Scotland's economic revival from the COVID-19 crisis, by ensuring this is a skills-led recovery.

As made clear by the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery Report it is clear that the college sector has a vital role to help stimulate economic recovery through upskilling, reskilling the workforce, and providing both young people and the existing workforce with valuable employability skills as well as assisting specific economic sectors which have been badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to having a key role in reviving Scotland's economy, colleges will continue to deliver on the Scottish Government's social inclusion agenda and do everything we can to protect those who are most disadvantaged by the economic downturn.

As part of this colleges across Scotland will continue to help young people, and Scottish apprentices, by helping them to upskill and reskill, in order to keep pace with technological, environmental and labour market changes and to increase workforce and business resilience to future disruption as the economy both recovers from the impact of COVID-19 and transitions to a net-zero, low-carbon inclusive format in response to the Climate Emergency.

As a sector, we are committed to working collectively with the wider tertiary skills ecosystem to create sustainable success for young people in their communities across Scotland, and we will have a crucial role in supporting the Scottish Government and our communities to rebuild, revive and reinvigorate our economy and our society. As in the aftermath of 2008, colleges will be at the heart of the recovery effort, and will continue to act as an agile, collaborative, and inclusive national asset.

Colleges Scotland  
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