

Response to Scottish Parliament Education, Children and Young People inquiry into college regionalisation



Summary

The Royal Society of Edinburgh's (RSE) Education Committee welcomes the Scottish Parliament Education, Children and Young People Committee's inquiry into college regionalisation. Regionalisation marked a significant development in the design and delivery of further education in Scotland, though its impacts are difficult to untangle from the host of other operational and structural changes that were enacted on the sector simultaneously. Ultimately, we conclude that the benefits of regionalisation have not been fully realised due to the limitations introduced by these related developments. However, it remains a promising model for how colleges can wield regional and national influence whilst retaining a local identity, subject to the right conditions.

We hope the below response is useful in setting out our views and recommendations on the current consultation. We would be pleased to meet with the Education, Children and Young People Committee to discuss our response in more detail should they consider this useful.

What has worked well in the college sector in the years following regionalisation?

1. It is difficult to untangle the impacts of regionalisation from those of the myriad other changes that were taking place – and continue to take place – concurrently within the sector. These included:

- The reclassification of colleges from non-profit institutions serving households to general government public sector bodies by the Office for National Statistics
- The introduction of national bargaining
- Changing funding models
- Decreases in funding (with the amount of public money being spent per college student dropping by 9% from 2010 to 2012)
- The wide-ranging impacts of Brexit and Covid-19

2. Further, this question presumes that regionalisation, and its impacts, occurred as a discrete event when in reality, the ensuing operational and importantly cultural shifts that it prompted have manifested over a period of many years. In this sense, the impact of regionalisation has only recently reached its culmination and so it may be premature to gauge its success or otherwise.

3. Regionalisation (which was largely founded on place-based aspirations) also proceeded in tandem with various mergers (which were based on strategic alignment rather than geographic location). This led to tension in cases where these two aims were not in harmony and, in some instances, perpetuated the regional inequalities that regionalisation was intended to address.

4. In theory, regionalisation promised colleges greater freedom to set their own strategic agendas and serve the specific and identified needs of their regions. In practice, this independence was heavily undermined by the governance and funding reforms described above. These changes introduced new constraints on finances and decision-making which limited colleges' autonomy to leverage the benefits that regionalisation had originally offered. In other words, **the policy and funding context in which regionalisation was implemented had significant implications and curtailed the potential for wider success and impact.**

5. In order to assess regionalisation's performance, there must be clarity around not only its original objectives but also those of the sector as a whole. Colleges have often sought to fulfil multiple directives from alleviating inequalities to stimulating the economy by building a skilled and competent workforce and so their objectives have not always been clearly defined. Further, strategic aims and regional needs have sometimes diverged, with the former often taking precedence. This has meant that the intended goal of revitalising local economies and communities through college regionalisation has not always been met. As colleges pursue greater collaboration with universities, industry, and other institutions, it will be important for them to retain an identity distinct from other delivery partners, recognising that - while they are an important element of the tertiary system as a whole - they provide a valuable alternative to university pathways which some students may find more suitable. **Balancing collaboration with an appropriate degree of individualisation, and with clear identification of objectives, will be critical to colleges contributing to a coherent and flexible system without becoming subsumed by it.**

6. Regionalisation did afford colleges with a greater scale of economic and social influence than they had previously held. Many institutions now have a significant presence across several local authorities, which has in turn encouraged more collaborative working between different councils, such as in response to school education. Colleges have historically had strong relationships with local businesses (including Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs)) and these networks have positively contributed to the aims of the City Region and Growth Deals. In this way, colleges have served to increase the appetite for collaboration by forging new connections across previously disparate remits. Similarly, a reduction in the number of colleges has enhanced the ability of universities to engage directly with colleges and ultimately reach more students. It has also enabled colleges to better align their offerings and end points with entry into university degrees, such as the successful dynamic between North East Scotland College and Robert Gordon University.

7. Regionalisation remains a positive concept in terms of its ability to cater to local needs whilst also contributing to national aims and system coherence. The recent *Going further and higher: how collaboration between colleges and universities can transform lives and places*¹ report by the Independent Commission for the College of the Future, the Civic University Network and Sheffield Hallam University endorses **Scotland's regional structure as a model to be emulated by other nations** pursuing a more collaborative tertiary system.

How might the sector further improve in the years ahead?

8. Colleges must be afforded greater flexibility in order to be responsive to differing - and indeed shifting - economic and societal needs and priorities. Colleges can perform different functions depending on their regional context, yet the **existing policy and funding landscape can constrain their ability to diverge according to local needs.**

9. Analogous to its school system, Scotland has arguably witnessed the **over-politicisation of its skills infrastructure**, a fact which has been noted in reports by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In order to drive the sector forward, Scotland should seek to divest political interests from sectoral aims and focus on delivering impactful policy founded on meaningful co-production with key stakeholders and on decentralising system ownership.

10. The governance structure that was introduced to support regionalisation was seen by some observers as being overly complex. There could be scope to further **rationalise the current governance structure** in ways that streamline delivery and enhance self-determination.

11. The next decade and beyond are likely to prove difficult in the face of continued Covid recovery, significant constraints on public spending, the impact of much higher inflation than recently experienced and other challenges. If colleges are to remain **adaptable and resilient to these changes, they must regularly prioritise** their aims and objectives. Further collaboration on the delivery of higher education between universities and colleges could also help with curriculum development and strengthen routes of transition to different institutions to improve flexibility and student choice.

12. Encouraging the right type of leadership will be another key element. Regionalisation requires a distinct style of leadership that recognises the benefits of thinking outwith institutional boundaries. This transition could take time but will be crucial to creating an environment in which collaboration is able to flourish. The Royal Society of Edinburgh's Tertiary Education Futures project has explored the role of values such as effective leadership and mutual trust in fostering the conditions needed for effective collaboration.²

How might colleges adapt in light of current challenges such as those resulting from Covid-19?

13. Colleges have already made a commendable contribution to pandemic recovery efforts and a recent Audit Scotland report indicates that finance and governance arrangements continued to operate effectively despite system disruptions.³ **While the recovery agenda will likely continue to dominate government priorities for the next several years, it is important that the sector does not lose sight of more enduring challenges, namely the climate emergency.** Colleges will have a pivotal role to play in reskilling workers in support of a just transition as Scotland works towards its decarbonisation targets. While this is often viewed through the context of workers exiting the oil and gas industry and to the need for higher level skills, it applies to any worker needing to upgrade and adapt their skills to keep up with changing industry expectations. The work of colleges in supporting reskilling of the more traditional trades associated with the built environment will be essential.

¹ Civic University Network, Sheffield Hallam University, Independent Commission on the College of the Future. (2022). *Going further and higher: how collaboration between colleges and universities can transform lives and places*. <https://www.collegecommission.co.uk/going-further-and-higher>

² Royal Society of Edinburgh & Young Academy of Scotland. (undated). Tertiary Education Futures. <https://rse.org.uk/expert-advice/tertiary-education-futures-project/>

³ Audit Scotland. (2020). Scotland's colleges 2020. <https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/publications/scotlands-colleges-2020>

14. Colleges are heavily focused on curriculum delivery and are now also moving to pilot new Higher National qualifications. Coupled with aspiration raising and wider skill development for transition to university and employment, this could be a challenge on already limited resources. Student numbers have fallen in the wake of Brexit and Covid-19 as has the number of full-time higher education places, necessitating difficult decisions about core business needs. Colleges will require support to make these decisions and **partnerships with both universities and industry** will be key to successfully moving forward and preserving front-line services.

15. In terms of teaching and delivery, lessons learned by both individual regions and the system as a whole in response to Covid-19 should be retained and mainstreamed. There is opportunity to **incorporate new teaching and assessment methods developed during the pandemic into permanent practice**, in order to enhance delivery and outcomes and provide for a more flexible learning environment. Sharing of good practice across colleges and also in collaboration with universities is likely to further enhance these approaches. Students have highlighted that in some cases the pandemic has permitted them access to study which their geographical location would have otherwise prevented. Cross-institutional online courses should be considered to allow students a college education regardless of their location; however, current models of funding do not lend themselves to such collaborations. In addition, time and space needs to be made to enable staff to develop and engage with new methodologies. Supported decision making should be considered to improve access to information and support.

16. Partnership with schools and universities to support students who missed vital educational opportunities would be a plus for the whole sector. Students at all stages have faced learning challenges and experienced a reduction in learning hours during the pandemic. Alongside this, there is evidence of an increase in the poverty-related attainment gap. Colleges have a vital role to play in ensuring that students have the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful as they progress through school, college and into university. Recent statistics indicate that rates of de-enrolment have risen during the pandemic, illustrating the need for academic interventions as well as support for mental health, digital poverty and other challenges.

What should be the priorities of the college sector in the years ahead?

17. We would endorse the findings of the **Cumberford-Little report** which outlines a set of priorities for Ministers and the college sector based on extensive stakeholder engagement.⁴ These are:

- Endorsing a compelling narrative setting out the purpose of a 21st century college
- Making business growth a top priority
- A series of recommendations aimed at the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) which encourage:
 - Reforming the funding model to support greater sectoral agility and responsiveness
 - Improving articulation and coherency between colleges and universities, with an emphasis on collaboration, co-location, co-funding and co-investment
 - Preserving the essential diversity of the sector, including through a networked model of anchor 'hubs'
 - Pursuing collaborative solutions in considering future capital investment projects
 - Promoting a cross-silo style of leadership, such as through a 'staff college'

18. It will be important for colleges and the SQA (and/or its successor agency) to work closely with other tertiary providers and businesses to ensure that **next generation of qualifications** (e.g. HNC/HNDs) are fit for purpose and enhance routes and opportunities for articulation. There is potential to achieve this but greater collaboration across the education sector during the development phases is essential to optimise success.

⁴ Cumberford, A. & Little, P. (2020). *The Cumberford-Little Report - One tertiary system: agile, collaborative, inclusive*. <https://doc.edinburghcollege.ac.uk/c-l%20report.pdf>



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