

Commission on the College of the Future: Progress Report

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

A. Introduction

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 19,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary and further education phase. This places the Association in a strong position to consider the work of the Commission on the College of the Future from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.
2. ASCL welcomes the opportunity to respond to the questions in the Commission's progress report. This response represents the views of our members who work in the FE sector, represented by the ASCL FE Committee, which met on 6 February and discussed the work of the Commission.
3. The Further Education sector is crucial to the strong economic wealth and health of the UK, and central to equity, inclusion and social mobility. The Commission is taking place a time when work, society, technology and learning are undergoing major change. We welcome the fact that the report acknowledges the scope of this change, and the vital role of colleges in their communities and with employers and government. It is positive that the Commission supports and clarifies the role of FE in delivering more and higher skills, economic growth, and a society which is both inclusive and diverse. The Commission's focus on the way in which FE can support the changes needed to strengthen the economy and society can only help to reassure government of the central role FE plays in a dynamic economy and diverse society.
4. ASCL has considered the progress report in detail. While we support the central issues raised, we feel that the report could have gone further. It would benefit from being more specific about the key role that colleges play as anchor institutions in their communities, and the way in which they support key educational functions such as careers and business start-up. Our responses below to the specific questions asked in the report provide more detail on this aspect of the role of the college, which we feel needs to be more robust.

B. Responses to specific questions

Theme 1: Role, focus and scope of colleges

a) What should the balance be between a college's local, regional, national and international roles? How can we best achieve effective strategic alignment between these roles?

5. Colleges first and foremost meet local needs. In many cases they are anchor institutions, which not only provide programmes for young people, but also adult education and skills for local communities and local businesses. Each college has its own leadership strengths, employer relationships and specialisms, along with community engagement, developed over many years. In many cases, this means that colleges have a great deal to offer in terms of leadership and delivery of education and training at local level, which is also transferrable to regional, national and international contexts.
6. Each college will have its own strategic priorities. If these priorities are considered individually at local level and collectively at regional, national and international levels, alignment can be sought by appropriate agencies such as Local Authorities, Combined Authorities, LEPs, Skills Panels, ESFA and government departments.
7. The alignment of these roles within an individual college will be the decision of the College Board, but will take account of strategic priorities identified by funding agencies.

b) In what senses are colleges public assets and what should Government's, communities, employers and people be able to expect of colleges?

8. Colleges are public assets in the sense that they draw on public funds. However, in most cases, public funding received does not cover the full cost of running a college. Stakeholders can therefore expect to have access to the programmes on offer along with teaching and core facilities such as learning resources, but not necessarily to the full range of resources or facilities which colleges own, unless the college is willing to make these facilities available. It is for the individual College Board to decide which of the college's assets are available to stakeholders and what charges, if any, they may choose to introduce for those who wish to access their wider facilities.

c) What would it mean for colleges to deliver a lifelong service for people of all ages? What changes would this require?

9. Many colleges already offer a wide range of programmes and services to people of all ages. In order for colleges to deliver a lifelong learning service, they need to be properly funded for all those who would access those services. This means a major rethink about adult education, skills and training, and how these services to business and the community are funded, as well as the benefits of that service to individuals, the community and business as a whole. Most colleges delivering adult services are able to do so only by means of cross-subsidy from other budgets. This includes, for example, careers services which are primarily available to young people being made available to adults, including those who are unemployed or wish to retrain.

Theme 2: Teaching, training, learning and assessment

What will we deliver?

a) Which core skills do we need to embed in all college curricula?

10. The core skills which should be available within all college curricula for young people and adults should include key life and work skills such as reading, writing, speaking, communication, job search and interview skills, within the confines of the subject sector in question. Further Education must be broad and enable the development of skills required in the workplace.

b) How do we develop a coherent system of credit accumulation and transfer? What changes are required for education and other agencies?

11. In the 1980s and 1990s some Higher Education Institutions developed credit accumulation and transfer scheme (CATS) arrangements. But because these arrangements were never properly funded for the schools, colleges and HE institutions concerned, they tended to fall by the wayside. These schemes could be resurrected. However, in order for schools, FE, HE and any other organisations to sign up to a credit accumulation and transfer scheme, the organisations themselves need to be sure that those arrangements will not create situations where funding is adversely impacted.

c) How do we best strike the balance between highly specialist and generalist provision? What role is there for regional collaboration between and across institutions?

12. All colleges have developed, over time, both highly specialist and generic provision. The key to striking a balance is to expect colleges to offer a core of generalist subjects or courses which their local population require. Any specialisms are usually based on employer demand and staff expertise. These are not immediately transferable, but collaboration on a regional basis may help to ensure delivery of specialisms over a wider geographical area.

Who will we teach and train?

a) How should colleges develop outreach in partnership with other parts of the education system and other community provision? What further role can colleges play together with other organisations in supporting diverse range of people e.g. those in in-work poverty, to access education and training?

13. Many colleges have already developed outreach programmes, in partnership with charities, employers, other agencies, ITPs, universities, schools and community groups. Any new provision should meet local or regional needs and be properly funded.

14. Funding to deliver provision for those in work poverty will need to be available, and delivery will need to be flexible. Online learning often meets this need well, and more than half of colleges are already signed up to a national online learning consortium service. This could be rolled out further.

b) What would a funded, holistic lifelong careers and learning and guidance system look like and what is the college's role in delivering it within the community?

15. Impartial careers advice is available for young people, but it not necessarily available for adults and those in work. When it is provided by other agencies or charities, the coverage is sometimes patchy. Funded, holistic, lifelong careers advice, including learning and guidance for work, should be available to all. This should function as a community hub where people go for impartial advice and guidance and can also access learning at the same venue.
16. Colleges could lead these hubs, as it is most likely that all colleges can house advice and guidance professionals. The professionals, with training, could advise on work as well as FE and HE within their learner services teams.

c) How do we deepen the role that colleges play in a person's life? Including in work, training, hubs for micro business and SMEs and for community services?

17. We can deepen the role that colleges play in a person's life by providing services which are funded to support people through the various ages and stages of their lives. This is particularly important for adults in work poverty and those who did not have the chance to gain basic qualifications at school, and who wish to upskill or retrain. Colleges often have the kinds of relationships with micro businesses and SMEs which enable them not only to support people in starting their own businesses, but also to recruit people for business positions.

How will we teach and train?

a) How can we deliver greater flexibility to support those in work, flexibly with a seven day service?

18. Society demands access to a seven-day, 24-hour service. Most colleges operate 12-14 hour, five-day working weeks and throughout the year already. Providing seven-day services cannot be undertaken without appropriate funding. The cost of delivery over a weekend is significant. However, with enough funding, most colleges would be able to provide a consistent service over a seven-day period and fulfil their role as anchor institutions.

b) What role can and should technology developments play in teaching, learning and assessment?

19. Technological developments are critical in teaching, learning and assessment. Colleges are in a central position to innovate in this area and capital funding should be available to support technological development. The Blended Learning Consortium also provides flexible access to technology and flexible learning packages.

c) Must we expect greater flexibility from employers in supporting employees to flexibly and what might we recommend?

20. Yes, we must expect greater flexibility from employers, although some employers are already extremely flexible about their workforce training, and some are operating so close to margins that they are unable to be more flexible. Employers usually

respond to financial incentives. If they recognise the business benefits, they will provide greater flexibilities if they can.

Theme 3: Workforce and leadership

a) How do we ensure the right level of expertise across the college workforce? Should teaching staff require qualified status? What is the requirement for and investment in ongoing CPD?

21. Regular updating and training are vital to the effectiveness of the college workforce. Qualified Teacher Status is important to all teaching staff. General training of staff usually costs about 2-3% of turnover, in addition to the cost of qualifying for teacher status, but colleges would like more funding to spend on staff training. Colleges usually have Investors in People accreditation (or an equivalent) and take the training of their workforce very seriously.

b) How do we develop, recruit and retain future leaders (staff and learners) as the nature of leadership changes?

22. In terms of staff, not all will want to be leaders. However, it is important that those who do have access to leadership training at all levels. This should be part of their annual CPD. ASCL provides access to this type of training for leaders in schools and colleges, as do other organisations.

23. In terms of learners, leadership skills should be included in all qualifications from Level 2 and above, as many individuals will be supervisors in work with Level 2 qualifications now or later in life.

c) What are the best examples of industrial relations inside and outside of the college sector from across the UK and internationally?

24. There are still a few colleges with poor industrial relations and the causes tend to be historic. However, industrial relations tend to be reasonably positive in most colleges, with staff feeling supported, fairly treated, and valued by management and leadership.

25. Good examples tend to be, although are not exclusively, in colleges where there is a diverse workforce and the college leadership is well established and trusted.

Theme 4: Funding, governance and accountability

a) What is the right balance between autonomy and accountability? How should colleges account for their impact?

26. Autonomy and accountability go hand-in-hand. Colleges are autonomous to some degree by nature of their legal status, although that autonomy is somewhat limited by the bureaucratic framework in which they work. Colleges already account for their impact to the ESFA, Ofsted, Local and Combined Authorities, LEPs, and their communities. They feel overly regulated.

27. A suggestion is to limit or consolidate some of the regulation and require colleges to report annually to their local communities via an annual report. This used to be compulsory, but in more recent years became voluntary. Local accountability generally works well.

b) How can we use data more effectively? What needs to change in availability of data?

28. Data should be collected once and used many times. However, the collection of data tends to be one way with ESFA, DfE and OfS collecting data from colleges which appears not to be reported back. Colleges should be able to ask ESFA for data which is anonymised, analysed and reported back to provide Local Management Information for each area. This happened to good effect within the Area Review process and should be regularised.

c) Should colleges be funded for services or courses? Should funding be based on input or outcome?

29. Both. Colleges should be funded for services and courses. The funding per learner does not take account of all the services which colleges would want to do, offer.

30. Both. There should be a substantial element of funding for input and a much smaller element for outcomes. This would ensure quality input can be provided and full funding is available for completion and progression.

Theme 5: Relationships

Education system

a) How well do existing structures serve to support effective regional collaboration across all parts of the education system in each of the four nations?

31. Collaboration between colleges is far more effective than is often thought. Colleges meet together for CPD, as part of consortia arrangements, leadership development, SEND and with agencies like the LEPs and other partnerships and consortia. These examples can be, and often are, extended to other education partners such as schools and universities and in others of the four nations.

b) What changes to systems, funding, mechanisms, performance measures or incentive structures would engender more effective collaboration?

32. More effective collaboration needs to be incentivised. When funding has been available to bring colleges together on a local or regional basis, this has often been successful.

33. We recommend that development funds are made available for more collaboration to bring about change and an improved offer to students.

34. The competitiveness of the marketplace for FE and the way in which funding follows the learner has sometimes worked against collaboration. Area Reviews and the resultant mergers have, in some cases, exacerbated this issue. FE needs a period of stability to move away from the perverse marketplace in which it currently operates.

d) Where should these be local or regional solutions and where national?

35. Local and regional solutions tend to work for specific programmes, whereas national solutions work better for major initiatives. The answer to this question must be driven by the identified needs of an area, whether local, regional or national.

Employers

a) What mechanisms and structures exist to support and coordinate college employer engagement at local, regional and national level? Where they exist, can their roles be developed?

36. LEPs and Skills Panels tend to provide mechanisms and structures which coordinate and achieve this type of engagement at local and regional levels. At national levels, this requires organisations which have a national remit, such as government bodies, national agencies, employer groups and unions / professional associations. Individual initiatives, such as the Blended Learning Consortium, could be developed locally, regionally and nationally.

b) What is the role for colleges in supporting micro business and SMEs? How can this be funded?

37. Colleges have a key role to play in supporting micro business and SMEs, and some already do this very successfully. This work has tended to be funded by LEPs but is often short term. Longer term funding, at least for the start-up life of a micro business, is important.

c) How can we better align strategic coordination across the full innovation cycle with colleges recognised as experts in close to market innovation?

38. Many colleges are already recognised as strategic leaders and expert market innovators. Where this happens, the colleges concerned tend to have specialisms in particular subjects or skills areas developed over some years. Data on those specialisms will have already been collected via Area Reviews. If the data was released to groups of colleges about the expertise in their areas, they would be able to coordinate strategic innovations across those areas.

39. College leaders are keen to innovate. Government should recognise this potential and build on it.

Governments

a) What should Government expect of colleges? How does this compare to other parts of the education system?

40. Government should expect colleges to be central forces for skills development and fund them accordingly. This report recognises the role colleges can and do play as anchor institutions in their areas and more widely. This point should not be understated. Skills and vocational education should be recognised as having high value to business and the economy, and government should expect colleges to be a driving force in their localities.

41. However, colleges can only do this if their offer, for young people, adults and business, is understood and appropriately funded. Successive years of underfunding has stripped away the very essence of what colleges can be expected to provide for

the next generation of students. Unless properly funded, the college sector is largely unsustainable.

b) How do we better embed colleges in cross departmental strategies? How do we align regional and local strategies? How do we avoid projectism and build synergies across divergent policy aims?

42. Regional and local strategies are often aligned through LEPs and Local and Combined Authorities. An amount of initial funding, following departmental strategies, tends to be for standalone projects. Some, but not all of these projects have continued, and 'projectism' does need to be avoided.

43. Cross-departmental strategies should consider how colleges can contribute not just to the skills and education agenda, but to communities, children and families and to wider economic solutions. This is more evident in countries with higher economic growth and skills levels.

c) What freedoms must colleges have to determine local needs with other local and regional partners and what accountabilities must they have?

44. Colleges must be allowed to determine local needs with local agencies such as Local or Combined Authorities and with LEPs as appropriate. They should be accountable to those agencies, as well as their funders.

45. However, college leaders, through their Boards and communities, should be given freedoms to come up with innovative and sustainable ways to meet local needs, and be appropriately held accountable via their funding memoranda for their actions.

C. Conclusion

46. In terms of other questions to ask, there is little in the Commission's progress report about the role of other agencies, such as Local or Combined authorities and LEPs. Most colleges will work with these other organisations to a greater or lesser extent. Their role as strategic partners could be explored further.

47. In terms of other examples to draw on, we would cite the American community college model which has existed for a long time, giving access to FE and HE for the community which lost out from schooling. The Australian education system also has much to commend it.

48. We hope the information set out in this response is helpful. We have included the input of our FE members from a meeting on 6 February, which has led to a delay in responding.

49. We would be more than happy to discuss further any of the points made in this response, or any other issues of interest to the Commission.

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