

Independent Commission on the College of the Future

Progress Report

November 2019

Introduction

At the Independent Commission on the College of the Future, we are asking the central question of what we want and need from our colleges across the four nations of the UK from 2030 onwards. There are seismic shifts happening across the UK - from demographic changes, to technological revolution, from the changing demands of the labour market, to climate change and all of the wide-ranging changes that this will in turn entail. This will mean significant change for the college sector – but these are also challenges that colleges can help us to meet and manage.

Launched in spring 2019, the Commission is committed to an approach which is open and reflective, and which seeks to build a broad consensus as to the key role our colleges have to play for people, communities and employers across the four nations of the UK. So far, we have held over 25 engagement events and spoken with a wide range of experts, college and business leaders, staff, learners, employers, policy-makers and many others from across the UK, and internationally. We have many more sessions planned and are now seeking written feedback.

This progress report marks the half-way point through the Commission process and reflects the thinking and ideas from across those many conversations. Here, we set out a short summary of the key themes we have been exploring, with a set of questions that we are keen to look at in greater detail. Our aim is to stimulate and provoke more ideas and thoughts, as we work towards a report for publication in spring 2020.

We recognise that any vision of the college of the future must reflect national, regional and local contexts. While there are common challenges and opportunities for colleges across the four nations, the recommendations that we will make in our final report next spring will be distinct and particular across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

We look forward to feedback and welcome your views on the questions that we have set out. You can respond online [here](#). What do you agree and disagree with? What issues have we not yet looked at and should be? And how do we best ensure, together, that our colleges across the four nations of the UK are able to play the central role that they can and must – for people, communities and governments?

We will be using this report and the feedback to it as we move to our next stage - working as a Commission and with a broad range of partners to develop specific recommendations for each of the four nations. We look forward to meeting with and working with as many of you as possible as we take that forward.

The Commission is kindly supported by nine organisations, without whom our work would not be possible. Thank you to AoC, City & Guilds, ColegauCymru, Colleges Scotland, FETL, Jisc, NCFE, NOCN and Pearson.

Executive Summary of Progress Report

At the Independent Commission on the College of the Future, we are asking the central question of what we want and need from our colleges across the four nations of the UK from 2030 onwards.

Since our launch in spring 2019, we have been speaking with a wide range of people who have a stake in the future of colleges. Five key themes have emerged, as have a number of key questions for further inquiry. Contexts and challenges differ notably across the four nations, but the principles we see for the college of the future remain common.

1. Role, scope and focus of colleges: an essential service to people and employers in every community

Colleges will increasingly need to act as an essential service to people and employers in every community, combining high-quality education and skills with access to facilities and resources for lifelong learning.

2. Teaching, training, learning and assessment: lifelong, flexible learning for the future world of work

Changes in the world of work will see an increased need for people to study and train throughout their lives. This will come alongside increased demand for flexible provision, systems which facilitate credit transfer and effective use of new technologies to drive greater access and inclusivity.

3. Workforce and leadership: investing in innovative and collaborative people

Recruiting and developing the workforce of the college of the future requires investment, a rigorous system of continuous professional development (CPD), facilitating greater movement between education and industry and new regional and UK-wide networks to facilitate collaboration.

4. Funding, governance and accountability: a sustainable system which engenders trust

Colleges need sustainable funding and a regulatory framework which reflects and reinforces strong levels of trust between colleges, regulators and governments.

5. Relationships: colleges at the centre of coherent skills ecosystems

Colleges are a key part of the national infrastructure and must be properly networked, sitting within coherent systems. This means colleges being at the heart of an education ecosystem, with strategic employer partnerships at a regional level.

Our aim with this report is to facilitate and provoke more ideas and thoughts, as we work towards a report for publication in Spring 2020.

We look forward to feedback on this progress report and welcome your views.

You can respond to our [online survey](#), respond via [email](#), or share your thoughts on Twitter using [@CollegeComm](#) and [#CollegeoftheFuture](#).

Key themes and questions for further reflection

THEME ONE

Role, scope and focus of colleges:

An essential service to people and employers in every community

Colleges are central anchor institutions - at the heart of our communities, supporting people and employers. These roles will become even more vital - as we seek to address regional inequalities, improve poor productivity and respond to a range of key global challenges. Colleges will increasingly need to act as an essential service to people and employers in every community, combining high-quality education and skills with access to facilities and resources for lifelong learning.

Colleges are deeply rooted in their communities – and this point of commonality in turn means that what an individual college does will be highly contextual. A college’s role, scope and focus will itself be determined by local social, employer and economic needs, whilst reflecting national, regional and international priorities too. This demands careful consideration as to how these elements align cohesively.

Colleges moreover consistently play a key intermediary role, providing strong pathways across different elements of the education system, supporting employers with developing and understanding their future skills needs and in close-to-market innovation. This puts colleges at the very heart of our skills system – playing a central brokerage and interpretive role for people, employers and governments.

This invites us to think what more people might come to expect from colleges as part of a lifelong service, as the need and demand for ongoing education, training and support grows. As important public assets, it is also important to reflect on ways that we can maximise their physical infrastructure and intellectual resources, including through strong local and regional partnerships with businesses and civic organisations.

There are a number of key questions which we are keen to explore in more detail:

- 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?
 - b. In what sense are colleges public assets, and what should governments, communities, employers and people be able to expect from colleges?
 - c. What would it mean for colleges to deliver a lifelong service for people of all ages? What changes would this require?
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THEME TWO

Teaching, training, learning and assessment: Lifelong, flexible learning for the future world of work

Colleges offer a tremendous breadth of provision - a notable strength of the sector which can leave them poorly understood. Across the UK there is a growing employer need for intermediate technical and professional skills, for which colleges are a natural home. At the same time, colleges support people with their 'next step' throughout their lives, providing strong pathways into employment, a new job, training in new work needs or further study.

Ultimately, the future world of work will see people study and train more throughout their lives. This will increase the demand for more flexible provision, systems that facilitate credit transfer and technology to drive greater inclusivity and access.

What will we deliver?

Where previously Level 2/ Scottish L5 was seen as the basic standard which ensured that citizens have agency in the labour market, Level 3/ Scottish L6 must become the new standard. The progressive rise in the demand for higher technical skills as well as skilled jobs in social care, child development and the creative sectors will further reinforce the need for colleges to support more young people to achieve a Level 3/ Scottish L6.

Colleges will need to work collaboratively and in partnership with employers to develop a coherent suite of distinctive higher technical and professional qualifications as the world of work changes. These will need to be aligned with apprenticeships, ensuring seamless progression for learners as they enter employment. These qualifications should also complement and offer progression within more joined-up regional and national structures between colleges, universities, schools and employers.

Vocational qualifications can currently force excessive specialisation at a young age, in a way in which academic pathways do not. Whatever pathway a person takes, they must achieve the 'meta' skills which will be ever more important given changes in the world of work. Business skills – from financial management and problem solving, to communication and leadership – will enable learners to have agency in the jobs market and the capacity and confidence to both be entrepreneurs and work in organisations of all sizes. Furthermore, citizenship skills will ensure people have the ability and confidence to engage with political, civic and financial institutions.

There are a number of key questions which we are keen to explore in more detail:

- a. Which core skills do we need to embed in all college curricula?
 - b. How do we develop a coherent system of credit accumulation and transfer? What changes are required, for education providers and other agencies?
 - c. How do we best strike the right balance between highly specialist and generalist provision? What role is there for regional collaboration between and across institutions here?
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Who will we teach and train?

Technological change will impact on all future aspects of life and work throughout everyone's lifetime. Working practices, job requirements and changing employer expectations will result in people of all ages experiencing more frequent changes of job role, requiring them to learn new skills in order to stay current. Many will make more fundamental career changes as jobs are displaced, and this will hit more vulnerable groups with poorer literacy, numeracy and digital skills hardest.

Technology developments will also increase access to new forms of learning and development, which will mean significant changes in people's expectations. This will require a radical shift for colleges away from course delivery towards a more personalised service, complementing and enhancing individuals' personal use of online information, particularly for adult learners.

Colleges are expert at reaching out to meet the diverse needs of their local population. A personalised service must meet the needs of everyone – from those with poor literacy and numeracy skills and not speaking English, to care-leavers and those with caring responsibilities. This necessitates a representative learner voice at the heart of the college of the future as we advance a co-productive environment. Close partnerships with other organisations and cross-sectoral strategic coordination will also be required. The challenges in supporting learners must of course be reflected when we look at the question of funding levels.

There are a number of key questions which we are keen to explore in more detail:

- a. How should colleges develop outreach activities in partnership with other parts of the education system and other community organisations? What further role can colleges play, together with other organisations and agencies, in supporting a diverse range of people, for example those in in-work poverty, to access education and training opportunities?
- b. What would a funded, holistic lifelong careers and learning advice and guidance system look like, and what would the role of a college be in delivering this within its community?
- c. How do we deepen the role that colleges play throughout a person's life – including in-work training, providing skills hubs for micro-businesses and SMEs and as a hub for other community services?

How will we teach and train?

Changes across technology, work, demography and people's expectations and aspirations will demand significant changes in how colleges operate, as well as for their workforce. In practical terms, the most immediate impact will likely be on the structure of the college week and year. Individuals will expect greater access outside current, normal working hours. It will also see a significant growth in demand for part-time and flexible learning.

Greater flexibility of provision will require ongoing investment in both digital infrastructure and digital skills, both for learners and the workforce. It will be important that digital systems are well integrated nationally too – which will require significant public investment.

Meeting demand for high-quality specialist provision must also involve strong collaboration between institutions within a regional education system.

There are a number of key questions which we are keen to explore in more detail:

- a. How can we deliver greater flexibility to support those in work? Does this mean more flexible provision - with a move to a seven-day-a-week service?
 - b. What role can and should technological developments play in teaching, learning and assessment?
 - c. Must we expect greater flexibility from employers in supporting employees to study flexibly throughout the week, and what might we recommend here?
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THEME THREE

Workforce and leadership: Investing in innovative and collaborative people

Staff will always be the backbone of our colleges, and so recruiting and developing the high-skilled workforce is central to the success of the college of the future. This will require staff at all levels, including leadership, to be up to date with working practices and have a strong alignment with industry. This needs serious investment, a rigorous system of CPD, facilitating greater movement between education and industry and new regional and UK-wide networks to facilitate peer exchange and collaboration.

Ensuring that colleges can recruit, retain, reward and support both teaching and non-teaching staff is a fundamental strategic priority. The scale of change to demography, technology and the future of work will have a fundamental impact on the role of all college staff and leaders. The demographic profile of the workforce, combined with the growing competition for high-skilled employees in the wider economy, means that radical action has to be taken to ensure that colleges can attract and retain the people they need to teach, train and support the workforce of the future.

The existing college workforce will not be immune to these changes. With the pivotal role colleges will play in delivering a range of national and regional strategic priorities, there will be a need for systematic and continuous updating of staff knowledge and skills combined with regular exposure to up-to-date working practices as well as an increasing use of external experts. We also have to consider the implications of increasing demand for flexible learning opportunities, as we open up our colleges for people outside of conventional working hours.

As colleges change, so the nature of leadership and governance required also changes. College leaders have to be systems leaders, deeply embedded within their communities, and with strong national and international networks too. This could be facilitated by the development of a national leadership network, focussed on staff development and UK-wide collaboration.

Lastly, it is important to explore the role of learner voice at the heart of the college of the future - as we develop a genuinely co-productive environment within our colleges, and supporting leadership at all levels of the organisation.

There are a number of key questions which we are keen to explore in more detail:

- a. How do we ensure we have the right level of expertise right across the college workforce? Should teaching staff across the four nations of the UK require qualified status, and what is the requirement for – and investment in – ongoing CPD?
 - b. How do we develop, recruit and retain the future leaders (staff and learners) required as the nature of leadership changes?
 - c. What are the best examples of industrial relations inside and outside of the college sector from across the UK and internationally that we can draw from?
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THEME FOUR

Funding, governance and accountability: A sustainable system which engenders trust

As colleges play an ever-more critical role across a wide range of public policy areas, funding, governance and accountability must of course reflect this. The contexts and challenges differ notably across the four nations, as they do across all areas, but the principles remain common: a need for sustainable funding, which facilitates strategic coordination at local, regional and national levels, and a framework which reflects and reinforces strong levels of trust between the colleges, regulators and governments.

The level to which colleges are funded is critical – and to play a central role in public policy requires proper investment. But alongside the level of funding, it is also important that funding is set on longer time-frames, facilitates and incentivises collaboration and makes effective use of data.

It is important that accountabilities are clear. To be effective they need to strike the right balance between strategic alignment with governmental priorities and offering freedoms to innovate and respond to local dynamics. There are different governance models across the four nations, which we will be keen to explore closely in the next stage of our work.

There are a number of key questions which we are keen to explore in more detail:

- a. What is the right balance between autonomy and accountability? How should colleges account for their impact?
 - b. How can we use data more effectively? What needs to change in availability of data?
 - c. Should colleges be funded for services or courses? Is it based on inputs or outcomes?
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THEME FIVE

Relationships:

Colleges at the centre of coherent skills ecosystems

Colleges are a key part of the national infrastructure and must be properly networked, sitting within coherent systems. Colleges must also increasingly play an intermediary role, interpreting the needs local people, employers and governments. This means colleges being at the heart of an education ecosystem, with strategic employer partnerships at a regional level, and an embedded relationship with governments that reflect and engender strong levels of trust.

At present, excellent practices exist right across the four nations – from strong articulation between colleges and universities, innovative school partnerships and an incredible range of employer partnerships, across future skills needs, innovation and in-work training. Our challenge is how to create the conditions which facilitate the development of these productive relationships, as well as deeper frameworks within which these individual relationships can sit.

Education system

The college of the future must sit at the centre of a coherent education ecosystem, with clear pathways between and across all elements of the system. This will involve strong collaboration at local and regional levels between colleges and between colleges and other education organisation. This will avoid unproductive levels of competition and facilitate strategic coordination. Funding mechanisms should incentivise – and even require – this.

There are a number of key questions which we are keen to explore in more detail:

- 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?
 - b. What changes to systems, funding mechanisms, performance measures or incentive structures would engender more effective collaboration?
 - c. Where should these be local or regional solutions, and where must they be led at a national level?
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Employers

There are numerous exemplary examples of college-employer partnerships right across the four nations of the UK. These include partnerships on apprenticeship programmes, qualifications development, work experience, delivery of in-work training, strategic support with innovation, shared use of infrastructure and resources, supporting employers with understanding, anticipating and interpreting their future skills needs, and much else besides. And yet there is very considerable untapped potential.

Engagement is too often transactional rather than strategic, many employers do not see colleges as potential partners at all, and government strategies do not always fully recognise or reflect the potential role colleges can play in driving productivity and innovation. With changes in technology and the need to move to a greener economy and increase productivity across the UK, employers – particularly SMEs and micro-businesses – face key challenges, which colleges are best placed to support.

Colleges have a key role to play in building pathways and synergies across the skills system and world of work - including playing an interpretive role for people, employers and governments to understand their skills needs and opportunities available to them. We are clear that with further strategic support, incentivisation and investment, current exemplary practices can be significantly developed, playing a critical role in driving local, regional and national economies.

There are a number of key questions which we are keen to explore in more detail:

- a. What mechanisms and structures exist to support and coordinate college-employer engagement at local, regional and national levels? Where they exist, how can their role be developed? Are any new institutions required?
 - b. What is the particular role for colleges in supporting micro-businesses and SMEs? How can this be funded and coordinated at a local and national level?
 - c. How can we better align strategic coordination across the full innovation cycle – with colleges particularly recognised as experts in close to market innovation?
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Governments

The relationship between colleges and governments differs considerably across the four nations. Across this variance, we are clear that colleges remain important public assets and a central element of our national infrastructures.

It is therefore important that we have a culture of trust and genuine partnership between governments and the college sectors across the four nations. A framework as to what governments can expect from colleges is an important element of this. This must ensure that governments can be confident that investment in colleges will deliver on agreed priorities, whilst allowing colleges to determine – alongside key partners – the way in which this is achieved.

There are a number of key questions which we are keen to explore in more detail:

- a. What should governments be able to expect of colleges? How does this compare to what they can expect of other parts of the education system?
- b. How do we better embed colleges in cross-departmental strategies, and how do we ensure this aligns with regional and local strategies? How do we avoid ‘projectisation’, and build synergies across divergent policy aims?
- c. What freedoms must colleges have to determine local needs, with other local and regional partners, and what accountabilities must they have?

Questions

We look forward to hearing your feedback on this progress report and welcome your views on the questions that we have set out.

We want to hear from you

1. What do you agree and disagree with in this report?
2. What issues and questions have we not yet looked at and should be?
3. What examples are there that we can draw on from across the UK, internationally and other sectors?

Let us know your feedback through our [online survey](#). Alternatively, you can share your thoughts with us via [email](#).

We want to amplify the public conversation. Share your thoughts and videos telling us what you want and need from the college of the future using [@CollegeComm](#) and [#CollegeoftheFuture](#).

Where next?

In this progress report we have offered a short summary of the key themes that have been raised so far from a wide range of events and conversations across the four nations of the UK. We hope that this facilitates and provokes more ideas and thoughts that you will share with us, as we work towards a report for publication in spring 2020.

We now want to continue to hear from as many voices as possible throughout the whole Commission process as we discuss the central role colleges can play across a wide range of public policy challenges. Over the coming months we are going to be holding many more events, attending conferences and visiting colleges and businesses. If you would like to propose a session with your organisation, please get in touch with us.

While there are common challenges and opportunities for colleges across the four nations, the recommendations that we will make in our final report next spring will be distinct and particular across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Our final report won't just make recommendations, it will present co-produced implementation plans, and we look forward to involving as broad a range of people as possible in this process.

Thank you for your engagement as we enter the next phase of this important work.

Contact Us

Get in touch with Lewis Cooper, Commission Director at director@collegecommission.co.uk to discuss your engagement further.

Find out more and sign up for updates at www.collegecommission.co.uk.

Share your thoughts on Twitter using [@CollegeComm](https://twitter.com/CollegeComm) and [#CollegeoftheFuture](https://twitter.com/CollegeoftheFuture).

