Education, Children and Young People Committee

College regionalisation inquiry

Informal engagement with senior figures from Developing the Young Workforce (DYW)

Online

Monday 5 September 2022

Purpose of the session

A key aim of the reforms around college regionalisation was to ensure that the college landscape could meet the current education, employment and skills challenges, and to respond rapidly to emerging scenarios.

This session has been arranged to hear directly from those with knowledge and experience of—

- how businesses and colleges work together,
- how colleges meet the current education, employment and skills challenges, and
- how colleges prepare their students for the workplace.

Notes from the meeting

How well businesses currently work with their local colleges?

The relationships between businesses and their local colleges and are generally pretty positive. DYW leads have fed back that the working relationships are strong. Some colleges have stronger relationships than others but generally positive.

It was felt that the pandemic won't have helped those relationships, as people couldn't get around the table together, however, things are improving again.

However, we will discuss later how good the outputs are from those positive relationships.

The relationships between DYW regional boards and their local colleges are strong and have been effective. There is usually a senior college representative on the DYW regional board.

Examples cited included—

Edinburgh College worked with Barclays to deliver a range of courses / credentials, which was then rolled out to other financial services companies including Sainsbury's Bank and Tesco Bank.

Funded by the Young Person's Guarantee, Edinburgh College worked with NHS Lothian to develop a short course which leads students to health care support worker roles. It is also seeking to attract young men into social care work.

Fife College and BAE Systems, who have worked together to increase the number of applicants that BAE were receiving for apprenticeships.

Have these relationships improved over the last ten years, i.e. since regionalisation?

With regard to the DYW perspective, regionalisation has made it easier to engage with colleges, as the board or employers are co-ordinating / collaborating / communicating with one entity rather than four or five.

It also allows colleges to work across a larger area and pull move people / opportunities together.

The Committee heard one example from Ayrshire. Before regionalisation, James Watt College had expanded its campus from its Greenock base to establish a presence in Kilwinning in North Ayrshire. As a result of regionalisation, the Kilwinning campus became part of Ayrshire College and James Watt became part of West College Scotland.

In one instance, when working out the details of a foundation apprenticeship programme, the college was able to work across the whole of Ayrshire, matching up a school in North Ayrshire with an employer in South Ayrshire, meet the needs of both student and employer, to deliver a successful foundation apprenticeship programme.

This wouldn't have been possible without regionalisation, as the campus in Kilwinning would have been linked with James Watt and not had the connection with the business in Troon.

In general, there has been a greater focus on the needs of business. Colleges have sought out their local businesses / engaged with them.

The difference made by regionalisation?

When asked what difference regionalisation has made to the delivery of the examples of good working above, such as Edinburgh College / NHS Lothian; Fife / BAE systems etc. it was suggested that the current system can respond to local business need in a flexible way, however, it was said that the system does needs to be more flexible, more dynamic.

Before regionalisation, there was concern about overlap and, possibly, lack of strategic vision across a region or the country.

It was explained that, shortly after regionalisation, Ayrshire College conducted a complete review within two years. As a result, steps were taken to harmonise work and courses, and duplication was reduced, albeit balanced against accessible delivery. It was stressed that with regionalisation, the delivery continues to be local but now colleges have a further reach compared to before.

It was also suggested that regionalisation brought leverage to colleges. For instance, an engineering academy was developed within a single region college, that could develop business links with the whole region, a far wider area than would have been the case pre-regionalisation.

As larger entities, colleges have greater financial and community leverage. For example, Ayrshire College was able to establish physical capacity within a school, at Irvine Royal Academy. The college was able to build its Skills centre at the school within 10 months. It is arguable that this project wouldn't have been possible, at least not in the same timeframe, when the campus was part of James Watt College.

Impact in rural communities

When asked about the benefits, or otherwise, of regionalisation in rural areas, it was noted that opportunities to partner for rural businesses is trickier.

There were challenges before regionalisation, and challenges remain, however, regionalisation have arguably given colleges more capacity to do something about it, a bit more resource to address it.

Pandemic has also provided challenges but also some opportunities in showing that there are other ways to deliver courses.

Are there particular reforms which could improve things?

A re-focussing of the purposes of colleges, so that they are more focussed on addressing the needs of the economy would be helpful.

Currently two thirds of college students go on to university. It was suggested that this wasn't the correct balance. In Germany, approximately two thirds go into employment. The whole vocational purpose of colleges is really important. That said, the importance of articulation to university was noted, as was the fact that universities could and should do more to work with colleges on this.

It is worth asking to what extent businesses have a good sense of what their business needs are over the next few years. It is critical that businesses articulate what they are looking for, so that colleges are clear on what is required.

To that end there has been a recently published [Skills action plan for financial & professional services](#), which has identified key skills that will be required over the next three years. Armed with that information, colleges (and universities) have to work out how they are going to respond to a challenge of providing skills and education to meet those (in this case) 50,000 prospective jobs. It is a challenge but a positive one, a great opportunity for colleges to be dynamic and align around those needs.

It was suggested that key sectors should be challenged to have a three-year plan – so that a demand is made. Colleges, and universities, can then work out how to respond / meet that need.

Colleges need to be better at coming together to respond to the scale of challenges which cut across sectors and / areas and not just focussed on their own areas. For example, in financial services, approximately 40% of the Edinburgh economy is connected to financial services, however, not all of the people who could work in those jobs will live in Edinburgh. They could live in Fife, Lanarkshire, Midlothian, West Lothian, East Lothian and the Borders. The challenge of providing the skills required by this industry could be answered by colleges in all of those areas along with Edinburgh.

Green technologies is another example where colleges could work together to address the scale of the need.

Furthermore, industry is now moving so quickly, that there needs to be mechanisms to respond to that need for upskilling and retraining – for example micro-credentials, fast-tracking.

Improving the mechanisms for engagement and dialogue, improving the flexibility to allow colleges to respond to the stated needs of sectors. By tightening up these connections there can smoother delivery for the skills and business needs.

The way that colleges and the DYW network was highlighted as a good place to start, a good platform to improve further, to engage with business more effectively.

When asked whether there is a limit in the talent in colleges or if it a leadership issue, it was said that there isn't a reluctance to engage – it's generally an issue with capacity and funding.

There also seems to be a missing link when it comes to SMEs. it was recognised that many don't have the capacity to develop relationships with local colleges, or even the capacity to expand / plan for the longer-term so arguably there isn't the same need of it

Are people leaving colleges ready to enter the workplace?

It was felt that employers can sometimes have an unrealistic expectation about how ready young people, or anyone, could be for a workplace. Readiness is never going to be 100% so support is always required.

However, MCR Pathways and Career Ready mentoring were both cited as good examples of support for preparing young people / speaking to them about careers. Employers could engage more with DYW to help ensure that young people could be as well prepared as possible.

More reforms required – what would help?

The consistency of career advice is lacking. There was uncertainty about what young people think about careers, and what that means, at a young age. However, there is a need for information and advice to children at school, and a question about how we provide that most appropriately. MCR pathways.

It was noted that there wasn't much support for young people as they transitioned from school to college at the start of regionalisation. There is a lot of support at school but in a FE situation, it wasn't the same. Significant progress has been made, but recognition it could always be better.

It was also noted that harmonisation of staff terms / conditions is still ongoing after 10 years. Funding issues can often make the process of harmonisation more difficult but it was suggested that a long-term employee relations strategy may help to improve relations / make them more productive.

How could colleges be more agile?

It is a challenging environment but there will be sectors which thrive over the next few years. This will provide opportunities for school leavers, and for those seeking to re-train. Colleges need to be able to address these gaps, to ensure that the needs of potential employees and employers can be met.

Micro-credentials were again highlighted, along with the need for businesses to put money in to support that.

Again, the importance of regional collaboration was highlighted. This can address key areas and help to deliver for national priorities through local delivery, for example with engineering courses.

In terms of the support that is given to workforces when they are being made redundant, or the employer goes out of business, it was said that PACE feels like an old model and is really reactive. It also only kicks in when there is a threshold number of people, so it isn't particularly inclusive.

It would be helpful for young people and people who want to re-train to have information so that they know what the future options are, where are the growth areas, and how / where to access them more proactively. Future opportunities need to be promoted and signposted to those who may be looking to re-train. We need to do more to line up people with emerging opportunities.

It was also highlighted that the current apprenticeship system generally provides opportunities for those aged 25 and under, with a small amount of funding for those who are older. Given that people won't have life-long careers, and that re-training will be important to encourage, it was suggested that the system should change to allow older people to do apprenticeships.

Further information

Following the engagement session, the participants share some examples of best practice between business and colleges.

Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) Edinburgh, Mid Lothian and East Lothian.

- DYW Edinburgh, Mid Lothian and East Lothian and Edinburgh College delivered 'Why Choose College?' virtually in November 2021 with the aim of providing an overview and insight into life at college to young people, parents, carers and educators.

- Young person's testimony: *"I found this session very interesting and it was good to hear from Edinburgh College about the facilities and support available to me when I apply for hairdressing at college."*

- Parent/carer testimony: *"It was great to hear what support is available and I think it's great that I can attend the college for a tour with my young person so he doesn't feel nervous about going alone."*

Colleges

- Glasgow Kelvin College has a well-established partnership with Vokera, the boiler and heating installation manufacturer, where the College is the principal training provider in Scotland for the installation of their 'flagship' combination boiler, one of the UKs most efficient boilers.

- Fife College has developed a collaborative senior phase vocational pathway in Computer Science with Heriot-Watt University and has established a 'Girls into Energy' initiative, in partnership with Shell, which aims to address the gender imbalance in this sector.

- New College Lanarkshire has a Heavy Vehicle/PCV training facility and has created opportunities to meet the industry needs and foster a new generation of heavy vehicle technicians in Scotland. It delivers training opportunities for students as well as individuals employed within the road transport industry.

- Edinburgh College has a Financial Services Academy, delivered in partnership with major financial services employers including Tesco Bank and Standard Life with an accelerated pathway to year two of a degree in Financial Services with Edinburgh Napier University.

- West Highland College UHI, Inverness College UHI, North Highland College UHI have worked in partnership with Highland Council, Balfour Beatie and Sightkit Solutions to establish a Virtual School (VS). Led by the colleges, the partnership delivers 21 qualifications to pupils based anywhere in the Highlands in a range of SCQF levels 5-7 subjects. This includes apprenticeships involving remote work placements and allowing senior phase learners access to a wider curriculum than was on offer locally.