

## Higher Education Provision in Scotland's Colleges

### A future shaped by new levels of cross-institutional collaboration?

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#### Abstract

The college sector in Scotland has undergone considerable restructuring over the last decade. In 2012 the policy reform known as regionalisation was unparalleled, ushering in a radical transformation that rapidly overturned previous structural and governance arrangements, reducing the number of colleges, and streamlining the Scottish further education landscape into 13 regions. A decade later, Scotland's colleges – now positioned by various government policy documents and discourses as an integral part of Scotland's tertiary education sector - have been subject to new levels of scrutiny from a range of independent commissioned reviews, government commissioned reports, and subsequent government response publications. Consequently, there has been a recent surge of publications projecting an assortment of future challenges and policy recommendations aimed at Scotland's colleges, including the overarching aspiration to make colleges part of a more interconnected and cohesive entity through enhanced levels of collaboration arrangements between the different stakeholders.

This paper charts and discusses the unfolding policy reform context linked to the Scottish college sector; paying particular attention to how higher education provision in Scotland's colleges will be shaped by emerging policy discourses and recommendations levelled at tertiary education. In doing so, the paper presents an historical overview and comparative analysis, placing the growth of higher education provision in Scotland's colleges against a wider backdrop of changes and restructuring unfolding within the English college sector. Within the context of the recent growth of UK higher education delivery, the paper explores the intersections and disparities between colleges and universities.

It is argued that the very recent endorsement for the concept of 'adaptive leadership' to help drive through necessary structural and cultural change within Scotland's tertiary education recognises the *realpolitik* of the sorts of practical constraints and challenges associated with any endeavours to establish meaningful networks and collaborative ventures within tertiary education. If the concept of adaptive leadership gains traction, then it has the potential to play a decisive role in shaping the future trajectory of higher education delivery in Scotland's colleges.

**Keywords:** adaptive leadership, performativity, neoliberalism, managerialism, regionalisation, collaboration, adaptive leadership, higher education, further education, colleges and tertiary education.

## Introduction

In contemporary times, the English further education (FE) and Scottish college sectors have been following individual evolutionary trajectories that can be seen to both intersect in certain key areas as well as display sharp departures. Although these sectors are shaped and mobilised by broadly similar national imperatives and pressures, they have nevertheless, evolved with different structural configurations and operational and governing characteristics. Scotland's colleges for example, have evolved over the last decade to become a largely nationalised sector while in contrast, English colleges can be characterised as adopting a strict market-led approach which has given rise to what some refer to as a fragmented and diverse sector with no clear-cut common unifying identity and role. (Watson, et al., 2020, Ingleby, 2019 & Keep, et al., 2022).

From the outset it must be stressed that over the last 2 decades the UK FE/college sectors have evolved to have multiple and expanding functions and agendas, which arguably, reflect their perceived resourcefulness, utility, and place within society. Critically, they have also been embroiled (and will continue to be) in fast-flowing currents of change and reform and as such, any explorations of higher education (HE) provision in the college setting will not be a straightforward exercise. English colleges for example, have been increasingly characterised in literature as in a state of constant change. Consequently, they are now exemplified as diverse, and highly complex institutions, subject to an endless cycle of policy reform seeking to manipulate what colleges do and how they do it. The observations of Keep, et al., (2022:7) help to capture the sense of weariness with fast flowing change and accompanying ambiguity in English colleges.

[There] is a tendency on the part of policy makers in recent times to confuse change with reform. Reform implies improvement and progress, change is just change, often for change's sake. There has been much of the latter, and relatively little of the former, especially if we use subsequent longevity as a gauge for the success of the 'reform'. Essentially, what we have is a set of institutions, funding mechanisms and levels, inspection regimes, regulatory arrangements, programmes, qualifications, assessment systems, and policies that are in constant flux. Pity the poor student, employer or college administrator/manager who has to try and keep up with and make sense of this more or less ceaseless process of adjustment and re-organisation [...], some of which has been incremental but other elements of which have had profound implications for colleges.

For these commentators this state of constant flux reflects, to a large part, the inherently transitory nature of the actual period of occupancy of senior policy actors and policy makers involved in the college sector at a national level.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is stated that: 'Both ministers and civil servants move jobs after a relatively short time (18 months to 2 years is about the norm) and the focus of their work before and after superintending FE may be in an entirely different field of policy (Keep, 2006 & 2009; Norris and Adam, 2017). In some areas, such as apprenticeships, the turnover in policy staff is extremely rapid. This means that policy memory and understanding of what has

Although certainly not to the same magnitude as the English colleges, the Scottish college sector has also been subject to certain continuing policy interventions and influences, creating a sense of perpetual change (Watson, et al., 2020).<sup>2</sup>

The intensification of HE activities in colleges have been accompanied by claims that the boundaries between UK universities and colleges are becoming more blurred (Scott, 2010). However, there are certain embedded core activities within universities that make clear that the demarcation lines between the 2 sectors are firmly in place. For example, universities are very much conceptualised as research and teaching orientated businesses operating within a highly competitive global market. As such, they compete to attract both students, high-quality teaching staff and world class researchers from around the world. Such competitive challenges for universities are intensifying, as an increasing number of countries are offering graduate and post-graduate education aimed at attracting international students. As Kromydas (2017:3) observes:

Countries such as China or Singapore that are growing economically very rapidly are investing huge amounts of money to develop their higher education system and make it more friendly to talented people from around the world. The advent of new technologies has changed the traditional model of higher education, where physical presence is not a necessary requirement anymore [...]. Studying while working is much easier and therefore more mature students have now the opportunity to study towards a graduate or postgraduate degree. All these developments have increased the potential for profit; however, it also requires huge amount of money to be invested in new technologies and all kinds of infrastructures and resources.

Similarly, as Hursh & Wall (2011: 563) point out: ‘universities look to how they can partner with foundations, government grant-makers, and corporations to create new knowledge and innovation that has an economic benefit’. These commentators (ibid 563) provide a helpful rendering of the university as a business-like entity:

The university is increasingly conceived as an enterprise, with knowledge as a commodity to be invested in, and bought and sold, and academics are viewed as entrepreneurs, who have been evaluated on the basis of the income they generate. Traditional notions of the purpose of the university, imbued with

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been tried in the past is often absent. (Ref Honourable Histories From the local management of colleges via incorporation to the present day: 30 Years of reform in Further Education 1991-2022, published Jan 2022)

<sup>2</sup> As O’Donnell et al., (2015:60-1) state: ‘Over the last 2 decades Scottish colleges can be seen as continually on the move, re-imaging and rebranding themselves in accordance with emerging socio-economic policies and markets and, in turn, have become increasingly complex, engaging with multiple constituencies. The plethora of prescribed policy directives designed to classify, monitor, inspect and judge educational activities has produced new roles and identities for colleges. The new identities are constituted by an expansive rhetoric, terms and signifiers, [which] have [...] found their way into the normative space of FE and are discursively deployed to describe and legitimise organisational activities and to mobilise new changes.’

ambiguous aims and including knowledge generation and service to society, have been scrutinized and transformed into neoliberal objectives that are more easily articulated for policymakers [...] Universities are increasingly defining themselves through their ability to develop knowledge that can be monetized, and through their role in the development of human capital that fuels economic development.

Accepting the sentiments above, particularly the recognition that universities create new knowledge and associated technologies, we can detect clear-cut distinctions between UK colleges and universities. However, the salient point to concern us here is that over the last two decades the pressures and policy reforms impacting on UK universities can be seen to discursively diffuse outwards to influence the college mission, role, and identity. For example, by the end of the 1990s and start of the 21st century, HE delivery in both the English and Scottish college sectors took on a new level of significance as government appointed educational reformers saw the college sector as playing an important strategic role in the policy drive to increase access to HE. This was against a backdrop of new demands and challenges placed on UK universities. Critically, in England it was a time of massification of higher education which followed paths of both expansions in the growth in student numbers at existing institutions and the emergence of new universities (Barnett, 2000).

The pace of HE growth within colleges accelerated rapidly from the late 1990s - early 2000s onwards (Ingleby, 2019) and this development was against a backdrop where the UK universities (despite absorbing more students and being rapidly expanded in the early 1990s onwards) were judged as too few in number to absorb the anticipated growth in student numbers enrolling on HE courses (Lea & Simmons, 2012). Accordingly, colleges have been seen as increasingly indispensable with respects to delivering of vocational sub-degree qualifications such as Higher National Certificates (HNC) and Higher National Diplomas (HND) as well as offering a range of articulation arrangements with their local universities. As Lea & Simmons (2012:179) observe: 'HE in colleges began to take on a higher status as a political priority in terms of increasing collaboration between the sectors [colleges & universities] within the framework of widening participation.'

Colleges for their part, being exposed to the dictates of neoliberalism and new managerialism,<sup>3</sup> (Ball, 2013,2017, Deem & Behony, 2005) instinctively perceive the

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<sup>3</sup> It is also important to highlight that throughout the literature on UK colleges the term new managerialism has been widely adopted to characterise the structural, organisational and managerial changes that have taken place in the sector (Bathmaker and Avis, 2013, Simmons, 2008, Deem & Brehony, 2005 and Randell and Brady, 2000). New managerialism (perceived here as a tool that supports and advances neoliberalism) is said to have forcefully embraced private sector style practices, demanding from institutions greater accountability both in their use of public funds and quality assessment regimes. Underpinning new managerialism are assumptions that so-called good management will deliver the 3 'E's of economy, efficiency and effectiveness in public services, guaranteeing value for taxpayers' money and eliminating waste (Randle and Brady, 2000). Randle and Brady assert that new managerialism can be understood as a generic package of management techniques which include the following: strict financial management and devolved budgetary controls; efficient use of resources and the emphasis on productivity; extensive use of quantitative performance indicators; development of consumerism and the discipline of the market; creation of a disciplined, flexible workforce.

expansion of the HE agenda as a welcome window of opportunity to capture a bigger chunk of the growing HE market and thereby boost income. In this newly evolving educational landscape, colleges are encouraged to adopt a much more entrepreneurial spirit with respect to capturing the evolving and expanding HE market, and from the early 21st century, HE provision in colleges rapidly expanded. As traditional educational trends started shifting, it was increasingly evident that HE study was no longer considered synonymous with learning gained in a higher education institute (HEI) or a university (Leahy, 2011). Thus, over the last 2 decades both English and Scottish colleges have been perpetually reconfiguring - in their own idiosyncratic ways - to become an important conduit for HE studies, particularly for disadvantaged and non-traditional students.

This study is divided into 2 main sections. The first examines the English FE sector, paying particular attention to the growth of HE activities. This mapping and discussion allow a comparative analysis between English and Scottish colleges to unfold. The second, and main section, seeks to chart and examine the Scottish college context, revealing the evolving character and contours of HE within Scottish colleges. Given that the key focus of the study is on Scotland, the second section will chart and examine how the very recent raft of policy publications - commissioned educational reviews and evaluation reports and Government response publications - offer fresh insights and visions for reconfiguring and reimagining Scotland's colleges. An overview will be presented on how recent educational discourses have been petitioning for a more coherent, and better-connected tertiary system for Scotland. The study concludes through a discussion that will help to inform future debates on the nature and future development trajectory of HE in Scottish colleges. This discussion considers some key dynamics perceived as critical for mobilising change, particularly, the appeal for a new kind of 'adaptive leadership' within tertiary education to drive through necessary key reforms.

### **English Further Education: Mapping Recent Developments**

English FE colleges are independent self-governed organisations (governed by a chair and a board of governors) that create their own strategy, manage their staff, operational resources, and infrastructure. They moved from local authority control under the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* and have a contractual relationship with central government to deliver education and vocational training. Historically, funding for English FE has been highly complex (compared to Scottish colleges) however, in more recent times the funding arrangements have undergone substantial reform in an attempt to reduce confusion, complexity and introduce much needed levels of coherence to the sector. The funding body for 16-18 education and training in FE colleges is (at the time of writing) the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and funding for HE provision in colleges is through the Office for Students (OfS) which replaced the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2018.

What is not in dispute in the literature is the assertion that English FE colleges have evolved to become highly complex and diverse entities. The sector numbers 232 institutes;

comprising of General FE Colleges, Tertiary Colleges, Sixth Form Colleges, Land-Based Colleges, Specialist Colleges, Art and Design and Performing Arts Colleges and Institutes of Adult Learning (formally specialist designated colleges).<sup>4</sup> Recent years have witnessed successive phases of college mergers and closures which has effectively reduced college numbers.<sup>5</sup> Other FE entities such as college networking groups, mostly based on geographical regions have also been formed with a single managing body dealing with several institutes.<sup>6</sup> Although the college sector composition, structures and strategies are clearly multifarious and diverse, they do all have a strong bond with the contemporary labour market and with their local and regional employers. The UK government's *Independent Panel Report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*, commonly known as the *Augar Report* (2019:5) provides an informative overview of the English FE sector:

They [English FE colleges] cater for a diverse student body and cover a very wide age range: in 2016/17, there were 1.4 million adults aged 19 and over studying in England's college network of whom 149,000 were studying for HE qualifications. There is also a substantial number of students in general FECs who are under 19 – around 530,000 in 2017/18.

The overall expansion of HE in the English FE colleges at the start of the 21st century was a rapid development. As Feather (2010:189) notes, the *Dearing Report*, (1997):

[...] proposed a dramatic change in regard to the delivery of HE in England, where Further Education Colleges would be catapulted to the forefront of HE delivery in local communities.

The post-Dearing years ushered in (in 2001) what was called the short-cycle foundation degree which was offered by both universities and colleges. These foundation degrees, delivered as 2 years full-time or 3 years part-time programmes, enhanced the college sector's profile and visibility as a vibrant, HE provider. Foundation degrees are generally seen as a midway vocational-based sub-degree qualification that meets the needs of employers as well as widening opportunities across England for those students who prefer to study in their own locality. For some commentators, the foundation degree resonates with the associate degree offered in community colleges in the USA (Robinson, 2012) and technical and further education colleges (TAFE) in Australia (Avis & Orr, 2016). When

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<sup>4</sup> Data taken from the Association of Colleges Key Facts Oct 2021.

<sup>5</sup> The government's FE 'area review' programme from 2015 to 2019 led to rationalisation in the FE sector through mergers and closures, and over 60 mergers have taken place with more planned for 2019 (Augar Review (2019:127)).

<sup>6</sup> Warwickshire College Group (WCG) is one example: WCG is a group of 7 colleges across Warwickshire and Worcestershire. It is one of the largest college groups in the UK, and provides academic, vocational and technical education in a broad range of subjects to students aged 16 and over. The group has foundation degree awarding powers, and partners with several universities across the Midlands to award degrees at Level 6. Member colleges have retained their individual identities, and some have retained long-standing specialisms including land-based subjects and arts and crafts, while others have been positioned to specialise in areas such as power industry engineering, computer games and sports-related studies (Augar Review (2019:135)).

considering the socio-economic benefits of the FE college-based foundation degree, Robinson (2012:454) states:

The assumption is that widening participation strategies will provide a pathway to improved social mobility for students from lower socio-economic groups, resulting in a realignment of access to educational opportunities at HE level with the incorporation of such students into a social framework that expects individuals to comply with the overarching objective of achievement of economic benefits

As well as offering foundation degrees, a number of English colleges offer 3-year bachelor's degrees, which are normally delivered under a form of franchise or validation agreement between the college and their local university. A very small number of (entrepreneur) colleges push the boundaries much further by securing their own degree-awarding powers. However, despite their initial popularity, enrolments on foundation degrees in colleges have been falling steadily in recent times, attributed to emerging market conditions where colleges are now competing for foundation degree students with post-92 universities (Bathmaker et al., 2008, 2009, Bathmaker, 2016, & Bailey & Unwin. 2014). This competitive spirit between FE colleges and universities has intensified in recent times with some universities, recognising the challenges of the ever-growing competitive market, offering a one-year foundation course attached to their 3-year bachelor's degree courses (not to be confused with foundation degrees which are stand-alone 2-year full-time study sub-degrees). The one-year foundation course specifically targets those students who do not have the necessary traditional entry qualifications to study for a degree course of their choice. Students who successfully complete the one-year foundation course automatically progress to the first year of their chosen degree course. These developments have, according to Orr (2020), redirected students away from studying HNC and HND level and foundation degrees-at college. For Orr (ibid:2020) university 3-year bachelor's degrees have found sufficiently widespread recognition and esteem to become a popular aspirational choice of school-leavers.

Under New Labour Third Way politics (1997-2010) there was a renewed drive to increase HE participation with a target of 50% of all young adults (19–30-year-olds) participating in some form of HE by 2010.<sup>7</sup> While neoliberalism rested on a confidence in the benefits of the free market, competition, individual freedom and, significantly, a minimal role for state intervention, the 'Third Way' approach sought to be more all-encompassing; seeking to create the necessary conditions where equity and social justice were re-emphasized and coupled with the now familiar and embedded framing of competition between education delivery and market forces. Significantly, the key emphasis was not just to increase participation in HE studies but to widen participation to under-represented groups and disadvantaged groups (Bathmaker, 2016).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, this drive to widen HE participation to

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<sup>7</sup> The target of 50% going into higher education was set in September 1999 in a conference speech by Tony Blair, 2 years after coming into office. "Today I set a target of 50% of young adults going into higher education in the next century," Mr Blair told Labour Party delegates.

<sup>8</sup> Gamarnikow & Green (1999:6) state: 'For Blair, the Third Way accepts the logic of capitalist globalisation, with free markets for goods and services and flexible markets for labour but recognises that because certain

under-represented groups quickly gathered momentum, becoming a long-term imperative for UK colleges.

And yet, despite being subject to a constant stream of policy reforms and accompanied performativity scripts, the longstanding core activity of English FE colleges - namely focusing on student vocational skills acquisition and preparing students for the world of work - was never at risk of being superseded by increasing HE activities, a point underscored by the *'Foster Report: Future Education in England,'* (2005), a major independent review of the future of FE provision in England, commissioned by the UK government.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, during New Labour (and beyond) the concepts of 'collaborations' and 'partnerships' between educational sectors started to increasingly appear in the educational policy discourse, becoming policy buzz words in the vocabulary of New Labour, viewed as crucial in helping to activate what was viewed as progressive educational change (Ball, 2013). Alongside these developments, English FE colleges increasingly delivered a wide range of HE programmes and collaborated more and more with their local universities on a range of access courses and degree delivery arrangements. Thus, against this commitment to remove structural barriers and the policy drive to open HE provision to more diverse groups of students and widening participation, the boundary between FE and HE has, arguably, become a what might be described as 'porous' on certain levels. Moreover, these fluid and transitory interactions between colleges and universities have contributed to what some claim is the growing diversity and complexity of both the university and college sectors. The subsequent Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government and Conservative Government continued to support this widening participation to HE agenda and continued to see the English college sector as playing a crucial role with delivering HE.

### **The Increasing Heterogeneity of HE Provision**

English FE colleges (like English universities) are uniquely characterised by their own institutional histories, leadership styles as well as the local and regional contexts in which they are located. Variations between individual college missions and their evolving portfolio of activities will be mediated through the intersection of a wide range of dynamics such as partnerships and franchising agreements with local employers, local labour markets, markets for courses, together with the availability of local and national funding streams. Moreover, FE colleges construct their mission and strategy in relation to individual leadership aspirations and the institutional strategic positions taken on policy imperatives such as widening participation, social justice and the economic needs to the community they serve (Avis & Orr 2016).

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individuals and groups have been excluded from the 'success' of Tory Britain the state is required to provide support and opportunities for them to 'help themselves'.

<sup>9</sup> The Foster Report reasserted (2005:3): The FE college of the future must be absolutely clear about its primary purpose: to improve employability and skills in its local area contributing to economic growth and social inclusion.

This heterogeneous character of the English FE sector is also created by the variable and unstable partnership arrangements unfolding with respect to HE delivery. For example, HE activities within colleges can be delivered by various partners that can include local universities, private training agencies, professional associations, and large employers in the case of higher-level apprenticeships and foundation degrees. In some instances, foundation degrees are coordinated by universities and taught in a local college under contractual arrangements.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, many of these partnership arrangements are short-lived and thus, are constantly changing and being reconfigured as they shift around and link with different actors and partners. Ingleby (2019:21) provides a useful rendering of what he perceives as the complexity and ‘patchiness’ of the HE in colleges by highlighting how the quality of teaching on HE programmes in colleges have been shaped by a number of fluctuating factors such as: ‘financial conditions, management structures and the financial arrangements with external partners.’ He also observes considerable variability across the HE curriculum and inconsistencies of access to HE programmes, together with considerable differences in retention and achievement. For Ingleby (Ibid: 21) this considerable variability with the quality of HE delivery in colleges across the sector challenges traditional notions of what is HE: ‘The ‘contestation’ within HE in FE generates an educational context that is complex and this in turn produces new interpretations of the purpose of higher education’.<sup>11</sup>

Ingleby’s (Ibid:2019) analysis resonates with early explorations on HE provision in the FE settings. A comprehensive 280-page *Report ‘Understanding Higher Education in Further Education Institutions (June 2012;18)’* undertaken for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in FE colleges in England; not only highlights the unhealthy rivalry between colleges but also suggests this convoluted FE landscape makes it problematic to chart and comprehend the development of HE provision within the English FE sector:

HE courses in colleges are characterised by greater heterogeneity than courses in higher education institutions. High-level distinctions between prescribed and non-prescribed, validated and franchised, ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ courses

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<sup>10</sup> The Education Act 2011 relaxed the regulatory environment affecting college corporations, making it easier for them to take their own decisions. This process, known as ‘reclassification’ (as it led to the Office for National Statistics reclassifying FE and sixth form college corporations as autonomous bodies) enabled college corporations to borrow money without needing permission from the government. It removed the Secretary of State for Education’s right to modify, revoke or replace the instruments and articles of England’s FE corporations (with this power given to the corporations themselves). The Secretary of State’s right to dissolve an FEC was also removed, as was the power of the Chief Executive of Skills Funding to appoint additional members of the governing body (Augar Review, 2019:130).

<sup>11</sup> Orr and Hanley (2019:110) note that: ‘Funding arrangements for teacher education courses also varied. Those colleges that ran the qualification themselves tended to fund tuition, often with a claw-back if staff left within a certain period after completion of the course. Other recruits were expected to fund themselves through the student loan scheme. There were cases of joint funding. In a handful of cases, support was decided on a case-by-case basis, determined by factors such as how desperate the college was for the person, or how much the department had left in its budget. The main challenge faced by staff trying to complete their teaching qualification was judged to be pressure of time, especially when they were simultaneously coping with a new career.’

only scratch the surface of this heterogeneity. This makes it difficult to make valid generalisations about HE-in-FE.

### **Cultural Dynamics: Cultivating HE-ness in the FE College Setting**

Although it is generally accepted that unit costs for delivering HE in FE colleges are much cheaper than in post-1992 universities, questions and debates surrounding learner experiences and the overall quality of HE provisions in colleges have surfaced. As Lee and Simmons (2012) point out, alongside the expectation that colleges would deliver more HE there was the increasing recognition by governing bodies, such as the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), that English FE colleges must do more to raise the quality of teaching and learning including enhancing their HE learning environments (an aspect that will be explored later).

As touched upon earlier, there are fundamental cultural differences between universities and FE colleges which impact on the quality of HE delivery in FE. The nucleus of these cultural differences relates to the considerable scope of autonomy that universities have that FE colleges lack (Baker 2020). By way of example, FE colleges tend to award other organisations' qualifications (commonly referred to as awarding bodies) and work with external validation bodies to construct their curriculum offer – within this context FE colleges are circumscribed by dictates from external agencies and awarding bodies. In contrast, universities (especially pre-1992 institutions) are constituted by the Privy Council; and therefore, universities can set-up their own validating bodies drawing on peer review. Universities are largely inspected against their own missions, aims and objectives through a system of peer review. English FE colleges on the other hand, are inspected against external-set criteria and through external inspection. Moreover, English FE colleges, due to being subject to much more exogenously determined criteria, are required to follow a wider range of external controls, in terms of validation and accreditation and quality assurance. As pointed out by the *Report Understanding Higher Education in Further Education Institutions* (June 2012;18): FE colleges compared to universities are less 'masters of their own fate'.

Paradoxically, over the last 2 decades university autonomy has been increasingly circumscribed by external requirements (such as Research Assessment Exercise and its replacement, the Research Evaluation Framework, as well as institutional audits on teaching and assessment), introducing administration burdens that guarantee considerable cultural differences between the university and FE college. Denis Feather's (2010) study<sup>12</sup> on academic identity amongst lecturers delivering HE in colleges reveals certain insights that help unpack cultural differences between universities and English FE colleges. Although Feather's study acknowledges that academic identity is complex and does not have an overarching agreed definition, he nevertheless, goes on to assert that 'teaching', 'scholarship' and 'research' have become the '*holy trinity*' underpinning the academics' identity within the university. His examination highlights that the FE lecturer's main preoccupation, in comparison to university lecturers, is on teaching, pastoral care and

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<sup>12</sup> Based on a case study focusing on Higher Education Business Programmes delivered in an FEC.

facilitating learning and therefore they don't easily align to the notion of the 'holy trinity' concept. The argument here is that for most FE college lecturers teaching HE, there is little time outside a busy teaching timetable for meaningful scholarship and research, especially writing papers for publication. A key point to stress here is that the longstanding hegemonic FE performativity scripts converge on various dynamics, values and identities that firmly underscore teaching delivery over and above scholarship and research activities/outputs. Making a fundamental distinction between university lecturers and FE college lecturers, Feather (2010: 199) drawing from the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC:1993) observes:

Academic staff in HEIs are appointed as scholars for whom teaching, scholarship, subject development and research are normally part of their expected roles. FE lecturers have an obligation to keep abreast of developments in their subject but have traditionally been interpreters of subject matter and modifiers of curricula rather than originators. These lecturers' strengths have typically lain in the ability to teach a broad range of cognate subjects to a variety of students at a number of levels

It seems fair to say that although FE college lecturers are embroiled in the design and delivery of HE - and in doing so, undertake scholarship when time allows - the majority of college lecturers identify themselves in teaching roles only, drawing on, and exploiting established subject specific pre-packaged chunks of knowledge - in the form of core-reader textbooks or course packs or digital-based resources. Consequently, FE college lecturers may view themselves principally as facilitators and teachers, explainers, and decoders of existing knowledge/understandings (Young, 2002). College lecturers, due to their heavy teaching commitments and broad portfolio of taught subjects, have little opportunity to conduct meaningful research and scholarship that fosters deeper critical insights into their subject area(s) (Feather, 2010 & 2012). Moreover, college lecturers are unlikely to develop and sustain academic networks through participating in/attending academic conferences and are less disposed to cultivate productive research collaborations with colleagues from other colleges or university academic staff.

Critically, college lecturers are unlikely to be encouraged or supported to be research active by their institutional college setting where the primary preoccupation is linked to teaching productivity and institutional/departmental financial sustainability – which invariably translates into keeping teaching staff on high teaching commitments. In summary, research, and scholarship activities - a normative part of the university lecturer weekly work schedule - have not yet found a foothold in the FE college setting. By comparison, university lecturers, through conducting scholarship and research, can develop important nuanced critical perspectives on knowledge construction within their subject area and draw on such insights when teaching - research informing teaching (RIT). Lea and Simmons (2012:184) refer to these university scholarship and research activities as a normative part of: 'HE-ness in HE' and HE activities in FE colleges need to move in this direction.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Similarly, as Medcalf (2014:11-12) points out in his study on HE in an FE environment: 'Alongside teaching, administration and academic management, research and/or scholarship are commonly considered as factors

## English FE Colleges: Financial Challenges & Policy Fatigue

Under Orr's (2020:508) conceptual lens, the mission of FE colleges in England is far more multifaceted than schools and universities: 'the [FE College] mission is hard to delineate and defend'. When deliberating on the overall status of the English FE, Orr (ibid:508) goes on to highlight: 'The [FE] sector remains chronically underfunded and vulnerable to the caprice of policy'. Adopting a somewhat cynical and pessimistic gaze, he continues: 'This weakness [financial challenges and endless intrusion of policy interventions] reflects the sector's position and perception within society'. The *Augar Review* (2019:5) also picks up on the financial challenges for English colleges and is worth quoting at length:

In 1989, the then Secretary of State for Education Kenneth Baker described further education as the Cinderella sector, but successive governments have failed to deliver the glass slipper. There have been a few reviews, such as the *Leitch Review* on basic and intermediate skills (2006) and the *Foster Review* of the FE college landscape (2005) but despite widespread acknowledgement that this sector is crucial to the country's economic success, nothing much has happened except for a steep, steady decline in funding.

A few pages on, the *Augar Review* (2019:9) discloses a rather gloomy picture:

[...] decline is pervasive with FE lecturers being paid less than their counterparts in schools, capital funding inadequate to maintain college estates and provide advanced and modern equipment and facilities. All of which affect FEC's ability to recruit and retain a high-quality workforce.

In addition, the *Review* (ibid: 123) notes that funding flows and regulation for the sector encourage behaviours that do not necessarily offer benefits to learners nor serve local needs:

Funding rules are complex, inflexible and encourage certain types of provision for financial reasons, rather than those in the interests of students or the local economy. They do not allow colleges to respond to local labour market needs. The regulatory regime is also complex and burdensome.

The consequences of what is perceived as decades of neglect has also been signposted by the *Augar Review* (ibid: 9): '[...] a loss of status and prestige amongst learners, employers and the public at large'. Critically, while acknowledging the valuable function of the sector in terms of economic and social dynamics, the *Augar Review* (2019: 116) determines that the financial drivers shaping FE activities can be a hindrance to the progress and quality of HE in FE:

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which contribute to the academic practice of staff in HEIs [...]. Furthermore, in light of the growing 'publish or perish' culture, Light, Cox and Calkins (2009) highlight their perception that teaching has become "the poor relation to research and scholarship" (p. 26). Active engagement in research activities is what defines the work of the Higher Education sector, and what delineates it from Further Education'.

[...] incentives in the current system encourage colleges to deliver high volumes of learning at low levels to the partial exclusion of the higher-level qualifications wanted by the labour market and offering the best return to individuals.

Perhaps more critically, the *Augar Review* (2019:116) unpacks a sense of policy overload, visited on the English FE sector, highlighting that over the last decade:

There are plenty of steers from government, but often in very specific and changeable ways with a succession of overlapping and at times conflicting reforms to what is taught, and how, and a gradual shift in the level and focus of funding.

Underscoring these perceived contentions, the *Augar Review* (ibid) notes that a recent Annual Report on education spending in England by the Institute for Fiscal Studies describes a: ‘near-permanent state of revolution in the further education sector’. Others such as Orr (2020: 508) lend weight to this assessment of the FE policy context by asserting that: ‘the FE system in England is an exemplar of policy failure’. He attributes this to the endless incursions of policy reforms and interventions impacting on the sector over the last 2 decades.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Norris and Adam (2017) refer to this persistent policy intrusion in English FE as ‘policy churn’.

Policy overload or ‘policy churn’ in the English FE sector appears to be a long-standing spectacle, regularly pointed to in the literature. The *Foster Review* (2005:3) for example, points to the sector suffering from too many policy initiatives leading to FE not reaching its full potential and a lack of a recognised and shared core purpose. Accordingly, English FE has endured what might be conceived as a detrimental sedimentation effect, where new policy has been endlessly placed upon existing policy initiatives and reforms. Government policy makers, so the argument follows, continually encroach, and intervene to realign the FE sector to meet emerging nation-state needs - driving and shaping colleges to enact new policy imperatives. The assertion here is that a residue of previous policy reforms/imperatives interact with the newly introduced policy reforms creating certain upheavals, frictions and conflicts. And yet, as Orr (2020) and others (Ingleby, 2019 and Bathmaker 2016) acknowledge, despite the underfunding and other challenges, FE colleges in England continue to serve their students and communities, successfully for the most part.

The Independent Commission on the College of the Future was established in 2019 and commissioned by the Four Nations College Alliance – comprising of a network of college leaders and government officials from across the 4 nations of the UK and chaired by Sir Ian Diamond. The Commission recently published a UK wide report along with individual reports on each of the four nations. These *Reports* were framed by 2 simple but critical questions: what do we need from colleges from 2030 onwards, and how do we get there? *The Independent Commission Report: The English College of the Future: A Nations-Specific Final Report* (Nov 2020:31) scrutinised what might be described as a complex and cluttered FE

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<sup>14</sup> Drawing on the writing of Norris and Adam 2017, Orr (2020: 508) states: ‘Since the early 1980s, there have been 28 major pieces of legislation that affected the FE sector and there have been over 48 secretaries of state with responsibility for FE’.

landscape and structure with no clear realised mission. The *Report* points to an incoherent character about English FE:

[...] they [FE colleges] are poorly understood and their potential as public and economic assets is greatly under-utilised. In large measure, this is due to the absence of a coherent structure within which individual colleges themselves operate. This, in turn, is compounded by the lack of a clear definition of their role alongside schools, universities and independent training providers within an overall framework for education and skills.

When offering recommendations, the *Report* (2020:30-1) rejects the current diffuse positionalities and operational arrangements, arguing instead for a shift away from competition between providers – the Darwinian survival of the fittest institutional mentality - towards a more connected (and communal) approach in relation to FE provision. The *Report* asserts that there is a need to encourage English FE colleges to establish meaningful networks with each other across appropriate economic geographies which, if operating correctly, will deliver the necessary pathways for developing coordination and collaboration across colleges and other educational providers (schools and universities) and stakeholders such as employers:

A networked approach is critical to colleges delivering in a coherent and connected manner on their core public purpose, particularly if they work with other partners. College networks will also achieve other objectives. They can maximise value from public funds [...]. Crucially, networks, and the process for their establishment, must have ‘teeth’ – ensuring that funding and accountability ultimately sits at the network level rather than individual college level.

Thus, from the literature, the English FE sector can, in contemporary times, be characterised as a heterogeneous entity where the competitive spirit invariably dominates. The sector suffers from endless policy and reform overload - ‘policy churn’ – together with complex funding arrangements. Moreover, the sector functions in an educational landscape which encourages and rewards aggressive competition between educational providers which ultimately inhibits collaborative endeavours and the sharing of good practice between providers. In summary the college sector lacks a collective role, mission and identity; creating many separate and overlapping challenges for its HE provision.

### **Colleges in Scotland: Mapping the Scope and Contours of Recent Reforms**

Scottish colleges offer a wide range education provision for diverse groups – including school leavers, disadvantaged young people, older part-time employed or unemployed and those in mid-career employment seeking to up-grade their competencies or take a different career trajectory through re-skilling. College programmes include full-time National Certificates (NC); Modern Apprenticeships (industry designed programmes which support employees to acquire certificated competencies required to deliver their job role through work-based learning and or off-the-job college-based training); and HNC and HND

programmes which are vocational-related courses offering a mix of practical skills and theoretical knowledge. College based HNC/Ds are also designed to allow progression onto university degree programmes. Other well established (but evolving) initiatives have ensured that many colleges offer one year access courses that allow entry to their local university (SWAP, to be discussed later) and a growing number of colleges have progressed to offer in-house degree level studies which are validated by a university.

The Scottish college sector, in comparison with the English sector, is a much more coherent and structured educational entity – making it easier to coordinate, audit and govern (Watson et al., 2020, Gallacher, & Reeve, 2019 & Keep 2017). As Watson et al., (2020:129) recently stated: ‘Scotland now has a largely nationalised sector while England has adopted a more market-led approach which has been characterised in some quarters as a ‘free for all’.

This unifying positioning of the Scottish college sector has been largely brought about by a major root-and -branch reform that unfolded almost a decade ago.<sup>15</sup> Currently, the sector comprises 27 colleges operating in 13 regions across Scotland (this evolving landscape will be unpacked later). In comparison, the Scottish university sector is made up of 16 institutions - generally referred to as universities - and 3 specialist HE institutions.<sup>16</sup> The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) is the main funding body for both Scottish college and university sectors (annual budget approximately £1.9 billion in 2021-22).<sup>17</sup> Arguably, adopting one main funding body (SFC) helps to ensure a large measure of control, coherence and boundaries between the two sectors (Gallacher, & Reeve, 2019). The introduction of a recent *SFC Review: Financial Sustainability of Colleges and Universities in Scotland* (Oct 2020) provides an appreciation of the SFC’s overarching remit(s):

We ensure our autonomous colleges, universities and specialist institutions form part of a successful, world-leading, coherent and sustainable system of education that responds effectively to the future needs of learners and the skills needs of

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<sup>15</sup> Gallacher, J. & Reeve, F. (2019:239) state: ‘At a macro-level, policy has been shaped by the wider political objectives of the SNP (Scottish National Party) led Scottish Government, in power since 2007. The raison d’être of the SNP is, of course, to establish Scotland as an independent country, and to this end, they have emphasised the importance of developing a strong and vibrant economy. This has then led to a series of macroeconomic policies, which have in turn shaped provision in FE colleges. The framework for skills development was laid out in Skills for Scotland (Scottish Government 2010) in which 2 of the key ideas were simplifying skills systems and strengthening partnerships; ideas which were reflected in later policy initiatives. The need for greater co-operation between national skills agencies has been further developed through the Enterprise and Skills Review (Scottish Government 2017). This resulted in the establishment of a Strategic Board for Enterprise and Skills to oversee the work of all of these organisations and promote a common agenda.’

<sup>16</sup> The 16 Universities are: Abertay University; Edinburgh Napier University; Glasgow Caledonian University; Heriot-Watt University; Open University in Scotland; Queen Margaret University; Robert Gordon University; University of Aberdeen; University of Dundee; University of Edinburgh; University of Glasgow; University of St Andrews; University of Stirling; University of Strathclyde; University of the Highlands and Islands; University of the West of Scotland. Specialist HEIs are: Glasgow School of Art; Royal Conservatoire of Scotland; & Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC).

<sup>17</sup> Figures extracted from the SFC publication: *The Financial Sustainability of Colleges and Universities in Scotland Review*, published Oct 2020.

the economy and society, enhances our rich cultural life, and strengthens Scotland's international connections

There have been important episodes in the reform trajectory of Scotland's post-secondary education systems. *The 1992 Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act* (April 1992) introduced a sweeping structural departure from previous reform developments by transferring overall control of colleges away from local authorities to the then Scottish Office. This radical development, widely known as 'incorporation', ended 5 decades of local authority control allowing individual colleges to become self-governing institutions. Under incorporation, Scottish colleges, like their English counterparts, were now corporate bodies responsible for their own boards of management, strategy, management structures and finance.<sup>18</sup>

According to Morgan-Klein (2003) the complex evolving practicalities of incorporation together with the funding arrangements at that time meant that these new so-called freedoms were both circumscribed and accompanied with new and expanding burdens:

In practice, however, the considerable pressures of increased inter-institutional competition, coupled with government pressure, which was exerted through funding mechanisms, meant that this increase in autonomy was not always experienced positively by college managers and staff.

Incorporation was characterised by what Lowe and Gayle (2010:2) describe as 'a punishing drive towards efficiency, through incentivising individual institutions to compete for Government funding [...]'.<sup>19</sup> Such conditions quickly led to fierce competition between colleges to compete in a market-driven economy, what some commentators (O'Donnell and Murphy 2018:65, drawing on Briggs 2005:26), assert as: 'Darwinian survival of the fittest mentality, exemplifying the core assumptions of neoliberalism - individual and market competition and self-interest fostering 'free enterprise'.' However, by the end of first decade of the 21st century the dominance of the incorporation model was about to be confronted and overturned by a new radical reform agenda. In February 2012, Professor Griggs (Review Chair) submitted his 113-page Report: '*The Report of the Review of Further Education Governance in Scotland*,' to the Scottish Government. The Report, commonly known as the *Griggs Report*, was concerned with the structure, governance and funding arrangements of the Scottish FE sector. Making a case for urgent radical change, the Report (framed by the following questions: *How the sector as a whole should be managed across Scotland?* and following on from that: *How should each college be governed?*) called into question the established habits, values, behaviour patterns and structural arrangements of the governance and management of the college sector, which was set in train under incorporation. Griggs identified certain structural fault-lines, stating: 'the individualisation of

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<sup>18</sup> As O'Donnell and Murphy (2018:76) note: Under the aegis of incorporation, colleges were said to be set free, liberated from the suffocating constraints of local authority control – a relationship that was seen to strangle innovation in the FE sector – and become independent corporate bodies with considerable freedoms to decide their future trajectories.

<sup>19</sup> Lowe and Gayle (2010:2) drawing on Gallagher (2003).

colleges had created inequalities and differences across Scotland' (2012:18). Under Griggs' critical framing, the Scottish college sector had evolved to become too uneven and miscellaneous, lacking the necessary collective responsiveness and agility to engage with the emerging socioeconomic challenges of the future. The Scottish college sector, so the argument runs, lacked the necessary responsiveness to the fast-moving currents of technological change shaping economic progress.

The *Griggs Report*, drawing on earlier publications, particularly *Regionalisation: proposals for implementing 'Putting Learners at the Centre'* (Scottish Government November 2011), pushed for seismic structural change, including the urgent need for more transparency and accountability in order to provide a solid foundation to build from. The *Griggs Report* was a sign of the times, reflecting wider European governance trends for education, and its recommendations resonated strongly with those Scottish policy makers calling for a new paradigm for colleges.<sup>20</sup>

The Government response (*Reinvigorating College Governance: The Scottish Response to The Report of the Review of Further Education Governance in Scotland*, July 2012) was to accept the key messages from the *Griggs Report* and outline a radical new structural paradigm for the Scottish FE sector; one that would quickly overthrow previous arrangements (causing short-term disruptions and anxieties). Between 2013-14 the Scottish college landscape was reformed, resulting in college mergers, reducing individual colleges from 43 to 27 and dividing the country into 13 regions (Gallacher, & Reeve, 2019). The regionalisation model meant that existing incorporated colleges reformed into 2 types: 'regional colleges' representing a merger of existing colleges and located within what is referred to as a 'single-college region', and 'assigned colleges' representing 2 or more colleges co-operating together to provide college provision within what is referred to as a 'multi-college region' (the bulk of the mergers took place 2013-14). Put simply, regionalisation instituted a major departure from the competitive and fragmented educational arrangements that characterised the college sector under incorporation and pressed for a college landscape with more collective and responsive orientations.<sup>21</sup> Naturally, such large-scale change and disturbance(s) meant that leadership and governing arrangements were obliged to abandon the old ways of thinking/acting and move into unfamiliar territory, adopting new processes and a newly evolving performativity script. Unsurprisingly, the early days of regionalisation mobilised certain anxieties. Watson, et al., (2020:133) provide a sense of this discontent by drawing on an article in Times Educational Supplement reporting disillusionment among college principals over the loss of certain privileges:

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<sup>20</sup> The Griggs Report acknowledged a number of key messages articulated in earlier consultation documents '*Putting Learners At The Centre: Delivering our Ambitions For Post-16 Education*, (Scottish Government, September 2011a) and '*Regionalisation: proposals for implementing 'Putting Learners at the Centre'* (Scottish Government, November, 2011b).

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, at the time of writing West Highland, North Highland and Lewes Castle colleges are now in the process of merging, a move which can be seen to support the trend towards regional coherence.

If they [college leaders] are angry, hostile and worried about the future, it's easy to understand why. These people have worked hard since the incorporation of colleges in 1993 to run them as successful businesses catering for local needs and a changing workforce. Then along comes Professor Griggs who would like to see 'a Scottish plan' for things like shared services; 41 individual colleges merged into 12 regional ones; excess profits taken away from them; staff salaries decided nationally, and principals not even allowed to sit on the college board, on the grounds that they are employees. Suddenly, it's as if their businesses are being taken away from them and they are being 'punished', as one put it, for their success.

Of course, it has to be acknowledged that such journalistic reporting above seeks to create polarisation and therefore it is highly selective in crafting a particular reality and representation of events. As others point out (including Watson et al, 2020) the call for radical reform to the Scottish college sector coincided with reports of poor governance and mismanagement within the sector; all of which help to legitimise the reformers' arguments for the need for more centralised control.<sup>22</sup>

Nowadays, in this post regionalisation era there are currently 10 single college regions and 3 multi-college regions. Each of these are overseen by a Regional Strategic Body - Regional College Board - set up to be the focal point of engagement with college regional partners and perform several activities including: planning college provision strategically across the region; entering 'regional outcome agreements' with the SFC. Regional Outcome Agreements (ROAs, seen here as a new performativity script) set out what colleges plan to deliver in return for their funding from SFC. As Gallacher & Reeve (2019:240) observe:

The SFC is then able to use the ROA to agree funding for each college region and to monitor the impact of colleges both regionally and nationally, which will inform future funding decisions. The introduction of ROAs has given the Scottish Government, through the SFC, a powerful tool to shape the agendas of colleges throughout Scotland and substantially increases the extent to which it is a heavily managed system.

Each regional board has a chair, appointed by and reporting to Government as well as negotiating with the SFC. Colleges enter into ROAs, (currently operating under a 3-year cycle) which contain several prescribed commitments that seek to reflect both national priority areas while addressing specific regional needs. This approach – framed across both micro and macro measurable objectives - was intended to remove the multi-

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<sup>22</sup> The unfolding revelations (in 2012-13) surrounding the governance at Adam Smith College, where the SFC was forced to intervene, was the most serious reported case of dysfunctional governance activities. The investigation of Adam Smith College helped to inform a Scottish Government news release: The [Auditor General's] Report draws Parliament's attention to significant failures in corporate governance and financial stewardship at the college [...]. In particular, the college has had to repay £5.5 million of European Union (EU) grants and has provided for up to a further £1.2 million in potential repayments of other grants. (Auditor General's report on Adam Smith College 2011/12 accounts, 17 October 2013, p.2).

faceted character of the sector which developed from the early 1990s (under the 1992 Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act) and help ensure a more responsive and coherent sector.

The regionalisation paradigm sought to remove unnecessary and unproductive duplication and increase efficiency, pooling resources through larger and more focused, collaborative, and networked college entities. Fundamentally, it introduced a novel approach for centralised control. As Watson et al., (2020:133) state: ‘Curiously, in this instance, regionalisation – which normally refers to a process of decentralisation and greater local autonomy – has meant a return of control to the centre.’ The policy rhetoric was unmistakable, college provision would be delivered more effectively at a regional level through new partnership arrangements between other educational providers (schools and universities), local employers and other agencies and stakeholders including the SFC and Government.

In July 2013, *The Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill* was passed which provided the necessary legislative underpinning for the wider reforms to post-16 education currently being pursued. The aspirations projected in the *Bill* reflect a clear social-ethical dimension, one aiming to foster and strengthen the bonds of a more civil and fairer society with closer communities – encapsulated in policy rhetoric on the need for better social cohesion, a ‘better and fairer Scotland’ - informed by social capital theory which relates to the social interactions, values and networks that facilitate a sense of shared core understandings and collective action for mutual benefit. However, along with this we can see an outward looking dynamic focusing on ensuring the Scottish education system is better able to respond effectively to the current and future economic challenges created by globalization. Unsurprisingly, this newly emerging responsive college sector was coupled to producing highly skilled and flexible human capital.<sup>23</sup>

Within the transnational policy field, the notion of educational institutional mergers on a regional basis was viewed with optimism at this time - seen as progressive and the logical way forward in meeting future challenges. A review of Scottish vocational education and training by the non-government body the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (*OECD Review of Vocational Education and Training: skills Beyond School, Commentary on Scotland*, Dec 2013) underscored how reforms advocating regional mergers between institutions delivering vocational education and training were ‘progressive trends’ that enhanced vocational education in terms of governance, skills flexibility and sustainable economic growth.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> O’Donnell & Murphy (2018:68) link regionalisation to this wider context: ‘The Scottish reforms [Regionalisation] are underpinned by the argument that a sustainable economic future for Scotland can only be achieved through collective wisdom, collective effort and shared vision. The need to foster flexible and well-educated citizens to cope with rapid economic and technological development and change has been stressed repeatedly within the policy rhetoric. It’s a trajectory for building economic and social capital.’

<sup>24</sup> The OECD review (2013) discussed a number of EU countries - Ireland, Finland, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands – benefiting from such mergers of individual vocational institutions on a regional basis and recognised the newly emerging Scottish FE reforms (regionalisation agenda) as a positive step towards enhancing the vocational educational sector.

The recent study by Watson, et al., (2020:134) into college governance, not only highlights that Scotland’s educational reforms resonate with the wider transnational educational policy field, creating an important anchor point, but also, offers certain insights on how Scotland’s colleges depart from the English college sector:

In our interviews, the OECD was not the only transnational space within which the college sector was positioned in asserting national identity. The European Union emerged as a key point of identification for several of our interviewees. Thus, one interviewee spoke of Scotland’s colleges as being ‘well connected with Europe, less so with the rest of the UK’ and as having more in common with vocational education systems in Europe than with other parts of the UK. This, Keep (2017) argues, is indicative of a radically different policy approach in Scotland underpinned by a coherent labour market strategy aligning skills, productivity and innovation to create an education and training ‘system’, in contrast to England’s ‘market or quasi-market spaces’.

### **The Growth of HE Activities in Scotland’s Colleges**

Over the last 3 decades, Scotland, like the rest of the UK, witnessed unprecedented expansion in HE provision. This took place through earlier developments that collectively changed the landscape. Firstly, *The 1992 Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act* (April 1992) removed the binary divide between what were then called central institutions (polytechnics in England) and the more traditional universities, thus elevating central institutions to university status, granting them new powers such as ability to award their own degree-level qualifications (these new universities are commonly termed post-1992 universities/institutions). This removal of a binary divide quickly created conditions for a more diverse Scottish university system to emerge and flourish. Secondly, the *Dearing Report (1997)* and the *Garrick Report 1997* (the Scottish sub-report within the *Dearing Report*) encouraged the expansion and widening participation of HE in colleges, as well as recommending closer collaboration between colleges and their local universities. These *Reports* also called for better transition pathways for non-traditional students wishing to progress to study at degree level at university after successfully completing sub-degree HE studies at college – commonly referred to as articulation routes or pathways from colleges to degree study at university. More widely, these *Reports* helped in establishing the acceptance and logic of the broad concepts of the ‘learner society’ and ‘lifelong learning’ which strengthened the policy discourse for expanding HE provision within colleges and universities (Gallacher, 2006 & 2017).

Throughout the first decade of 21st century, HE provision in Scotland’s colleges (similar to England) continued to increase appreciably, attracting many non-traditional students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Sub-degree HNC and HND courses expanded and the number of people eligible for HE studies also increased as more educational pathways to HE studies in colleges were established.

For those groups lacking the necessary traditional qualifications (end of school exams: Higher and Advanced Higher) for entry to Scotland's universities, the college sector offers alternative pathways to HE, since entry requirements for sub-degree HNC and HND qualifications are much lower than entry requirements for degree level study at universities (Innelli, 2018).<sup>25</sup> According to Gallacher (2017:712): 'Constituting around 22% of all higher education provision in Scotland below postgraduate levels, this form of provision is stronger than in many other countries across the world.' Recognising this distinguishing character of the sector, Gallacher (ibid: 713) goes on to state:

Scotland is distinctive in the UK, and more generally by comparison with many countries throughout the world, in having a relatively high percentage of HE level students in the college sector (i.e. that part of the tertiary system which is below the university sector with respect to the qualifications provided). In 2014–2015 this represented 19% of all college students. These college-based students also represent an important part of the whole higher education system in Scotland.

When making comparisons between HE delivery in the English and Scottish college sectors, Gallacher (2017) identifies a combination of structural factors that have helped to sustain and augment HE provision in the Scottish college sector. For example (and not an exhaustive list,) Scottish colleges receive direct funding from one source for HE and FE provision, which provides an element of stability and continuity, enabling more confidence in forward planning. Moreover, college HN programme development and validation arrangements are specified by one national body – the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) – which allows colleges to operate within (and be supported by) one single national system of sub-degree development, validation and certification. This single body helps with establishing coherence within the whole sector. Critically, the establishment (in 2001) of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) has helped establish a Scottish educational landscape where the relationship between qualifications developed and delivered in the different sectors (secondary schools, colleges and universities) is much more transparent and coherent, while at the same time creating an effective framework for transfer and progression routes. As Gallacher, (2017: 715) states:

The framework consisted of 12 levels, ranging from access to doctorate. In this framework HNC and HNDs were on Levels 7 & 8, alongside the first and second years of university degrees. This facilitated the development of articulation agreements between colleges and universities [...].

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<sup>25</sup> This introduces interesting dilemmas about student identity, those students studying at a traditional university are clear about being an 'undergraduate university student' – it is an embedded category and signifier in education. However, a college student studying on sub-degree HE studies (HNC/D) may be less self-confident in describing themselves as an HE student. Arguably sub-degree HE studies HNC/D students in colleges could be described as positioned within a liminal space – they are beyond FE study but only part through the journey to achieving a the traditional Scottish 4-year degree award. Here liminality is theorized as an anthropological concept which refers to the process in which an individual is passing from one state to another and therefore, liminality refers to experiences that cannot be easily categorized and does not easily fit into an established identity box.

Of course, any exploration of HE in Scottish colleges cannot omit the Scottish Widening Access Programme (SWAP, established in 1987) which has evolved to become an important initiative in sustaining and growing HE in colleges and significantly, offering seamless pathways for students who transition from study in college and journey into and through university. The SWAP initiative is widely available and provides valuable access opportunities to education for those whose personal circumstances would have, under traditional educational access arrangements, presented certain challenges to study at degree-level. SWAP is largely aimed at adult students (referred to as adult returners), a second chance opportunity at studying at university (Gallacher 2006; SWAP 2015) and colleges, signing up to the SWAP initiative, play a critical role in developing and providing access programmes allowing adult returners to prepare for and gain access to a local university. In more recent times, Scotland has also launched more joined-up and targeted initiatives to promote transitions, such as regional articulation hubs which facilitate the transition from schools and colleges to university by building on local partnerships between institutions.

Yet any claims of a convergence in modes of operation and delivery between Scottish colleges and universities sit against a complex shifting contextual backdrop. A significant point to remember is that Scottish universities (and by extension their individual faculties and subject areas) have the discretion to determine their own entry requirements and perhaps, unsurprisingly, the most prestigious universities are highly selective in terms of prior academic attainment - based on applicants achieving high grades in their end of school exams subjects. The post-1992 universities, in comparison, have been much more malleable with their entry requirements. Paradoxically, because many new entrants, especially students from intermediate and lower socio-economic status backgrounds, are channeled to colleges or new post-1992 universities, Scotland's prestigious ancient and old universities are still dominated by students from more advantaged social backgrounds. Gallacher (2006:51) expands on this:

This [entry requirement criteria difference] reflects the extent to which the post-1992 universities have generally made widening access and developing links with the FE colleges a much more central part of their mission. However, it must also be noted that this has been in a context in which the older universities, and particularly the ancients, are for the most part 'selecting' universities, while in many cases the post-1992 universities are 'recruiting' universities [...]. This distinction refers to the situation in which the older universities can, for the most part, select students from a pool of traditionally well-qualified applicants. By contrast, a number of departments within the post-1992 universities need to be more active in recruiting suitable students, and FE colleges can be a valuable source of recruits. In this context there has been greater interest in the post-1992 universities in establishing articulation agreements.

Others such as Iannelli (2018:677) writing on access, progression and retention in Scottish colleges and universities picks up on certain dynamics and undercurrents influencing an individuals' choice to study HE at a local college:

Colleges' regional locations make them easily accessible and a less costly study option; their outreach work in communities, facilitates access to information about their courses; the flexibility of teaching provision (e.g. evening classes and part-time study) allows students from less advantaged social backgrounds and mature students to combine work and study; and flexible routes to HE courses in university (i.e. articulation) facilitate entry into the second and third years of a university degree programme, after having acquired an HNC/HND qualification. [...] overall, the large provision of sub-degree courses in Scotland has allowed access for non-traditional students, that is students from working class origin, mature students and also women, into HE.

Nowadays, although non-advanced post-16 vocational education is the bulk of the college sector delivery portfolio, sub-degree HNC and HNDs have evolved to become a much more widespread and integral feature in Scottish colleges. Indeed, the provision of sub-degree qualifications in colleges has evolved to not only to become an important feature but a decisive progressive dynamic in the widening access to HE agenda (Iannelli, 2018). The significance of HE delivery in Scottish colleges has been recognised in the OECD publication: *Reviews of Vocational Education and Training: Key Messages and Country Summaries (2015:65)*, which covers 40 countries, including Scotland. The *Review* provided a positive picture of both HE activity and the modern apprentice system which can be a natural pathway to HE studies:

The Scottish HNC and HND are strong brands with a long history and are well regarded by employers and students. Students following these programmes represent 15% of all higher education students. The Scottish Modern Apprenticeships (MA) also have strengths: they are highly valued by both participating apprentices and employers; satisfaction levels are high; evaluation data suggests employment outcomes are good 6 months after completing an MA.

It is true to say that modern apprenticeships are well established, internationally recognised, and widely regarded as valuable preconditions for a range of industries with histories of indentured apprentices. According to Husband and Jeffrey (2016) higher-level technical apprenticeships have logical progression links with HNC or HND provision.

According to the study by Watson et al, (2020) the growing significance of HE activity has shaped the national identity and branding of Scotland's colleges:

Positioning of the college sector was affected through the language used to describe further education in Scotland. Thus, all interviewees very deliberately referred not to 'FE colleges' but to 'Scotland's colleges'. This branding of the further education sector reinforces the coherence aimed at through regionalisation. The use of the language of 'Scotland's colleges' was justified by interviewees on the grounds that colleges in Scotland deliver not only further but

also much higher education (though at time of interviewing this is in the main at sub-degree level). This too was drawn on by one of our interviewees to position Scotland in relation to England, giving the sector ‘clout and weight’ when compared with England.

This subtle (re)branding from ‘Scotland’s FE colleges’ to ‘Scotland’s colleges’ is an interesting development, indicative of the changing character and nature of the sector in the post-regionalisation period. Of course, we can see other wider developments emerging with respect to how Scottish colleges and universities are being recognised and bunched together under overarching labels or brands such as ‘tertiary education’ – an approach that recognises the college and university sectors coming-together and having certain mission intersections around national socio-economic imperatives - while at the same time, being sufficiently sensitive not to erode their sector wider individual identities crafted and shaped by their unique longstanding and recent histories.

The concept of tertiary education as an overarching umbrella signifier has gained increasing traction within the recent educational policy discourse. A salient question to pose here is *‘How do we understand and frame the notion of tertiary education?’* Tertiary education generally refers to post-secondary education received after secondary school, sometimes called the ‘third stage’ or third level of education. Interestingly, the concept of tertiary education has been picked-up and much developed by transnational organisations such as the World Bank and the OECD. In an OECD conference paper *‘The Future of the Tertiary Education Sector: Scenarios for a Learning Society, (2003:15)* Riel Miller <sup>26</sup> Stated that:

Tertiary education is about the production and consumption of knowledge. It is a complex of institutions, often configured in quite different ways, with privileged resources and control over knowledge discovery (flow); accumulated knowledge (stock); and knowledge diffusion (distribution).

The tertiary education framing above is closely coupled to preserving/distributing current knowledge stock and constructing and exploiting new knowledge. However, 5 years later the OECD publication *‘Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society (volume 1, 2008:25)* provided useful insights on why the term ‘tertiary education’ has been adopted by the OECD:

The term tertiary education is a relatively recent one. Previously the more common term was higher education, but tertiary education was adopted by the [OECD] Review in order to reflect the growing diversity of institutions and programmes.

The OECD publication (2008:23) goes on to argue that establishing a grand vision - a coherent and comprehensive vision - for the future of tertiary education should be a priority for nation-states. It explicitly provides a framing by highlighting how tertiary

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<sup>26</sup> Riel Miller’s role at this time was Principal Administrator at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation.

education must contribute to social and economic development through 4 major missions:

- The formation of human capital (primarily through teaching)
- The building of knowledge bases (primarily through research and knowledge development)
- The dissemination and use of knowledge (primarily through interactions with knowledge users) and
- The maintenance of knowledge (inter-generational storage and transmission of knowledge).

The recent World Bank publication '*World Development Report on the future of work*', (2019:77), also seeks to frame tertiary education within a human capital performativity script. It asserts that the relevance of tertiary education systems for the future is based on how well it delivers on 3 main fronts:

**First**, technology and integration have increased the demand for higher-order general cognitive skills—such as complex problem-solving, critical thinking, and advanced communication—that are transferable across jobs but cannot be acquired through schooling alone. The rising demand for these skills has enhanced the wage premiums of tertiary graduates, while reducing the demand for less educated workers.

**Second**, tertiary education increases the demand for lifelong learning. Workers are expected to have multiple careers, not just multiple jobs over their lifetime. Tertiary education—with its wide array of course offerings and flexible delivery models such as online learning meets this growing demand.

**Third**, tertiary education—especially universities—becomes more attractive in the changing world of work by serving as a platform for innovation.

This *World Bank Report* also argues that tertiary education systems should guarantee a minimum threshold of transferable cognitive skills and higher-order skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication as well as transferable socio-behavioural skills such as teamwork, resilience, self-confidence, negotiation, and self-expression. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the above framing and imperatives from these transitional organisations can be seen to penetrate and diffuse with the recent policy discourses surrounding the Scottish tertiary educational context; although utilised in different ways, given different inflections and discrete references.

Husband & Jeffrey (2016), drawing on recent policy documents, provide helpful insights into the future HE development in the Scottish college context. Their publication '*Education Working for All Report (Scottish Government 2014)*' contributes to the debate surrounding the nature and value of HE provision in Scottish colleges:

The report [*Education Working for All*] focussed on the requirement to develop and promote higher-level technical vocational training to support the increased requirement for associate professional skills. This training is to be developed and

delivered in partnership with employers, colleges and universities with a focus on the applied, technical and practical skills available within the vocational FE sector. The [...] report states that, with colleges accounting for one in 5 young higher education students, FE institutions play a vital role in delivering meaningful vocational education. With the increasing requirement for higher-level technical and associate professional skills in an ever-changing market, and pathways provided to rewarding employment through higher-level study, government agencies and FE providers need to develop new models to deliver higher-level apprenticeships equivalent to degree-level study.

Thus, accepting the above, there is considerable scope to further develop HE programmes within colleges that can involve closer collaborations between colleges, universities, and industry.

### **The Creation of a Scottish Dual HE and FE University**

Traditionally there were clear distinctions between Scotland's colleges and its universities. However, the creation of new Scottish universities in 1992 (from central institutions) together with the incorporation of the college sector in the same year, disturbed the traditional FE-HE nexus (Morgan-Klein, 2003). A palpable blurring of the boundaries started to unfold when 9 colleges joined forces with some smaller specialist research-based institutions to create Scotland's newest university: University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI). The UHI model, because of its unique dual-sector positioning, will not be a focus for this study. However, it would be inappropriate to ignore its presence within the Scottish tertiary sector and therefore the study will offer a brief glimpse of UHI.

The UHI blueprint was developed by Professor Sir Graham Hills (former Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow) in a document commonly known as the *Hills Report* (1992). The UHI Executive Office was set up in Inverness a year later, however it was not until 2011 that the UHI finally celebrated the accolade of university title, becoming Scotland's newest university, providing a wide-ranging tertiary curriculum to learners across Highlands and Islands and beyond, as well as developing research capacity. Modelled on a federal, collegiate university based on a number of existing and geographically dispersed colleges and research institutions, the UHI, harnessing digital technology for academic advantage, has clearly abandoned the more conventional model of a single campus university in a single location. It is both complex and unique, especially from a governance and management perspective, comprising 14 different organisations - the university Executive Office itself and 13 member colleges and specialist institutions, collectively delivering a range of FE, HE and research. The UHI navigates 9 local authorities, 2 enterprise regions and 7 health boards. Although the UHI comprises a multi-college region, there are ongoing discussions on mergers between partner colleges and closer integration between the UHI Executive Office and colleges.<sup>27</sup> In some recent educational

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<sup>27</sup> The Independent Commission Report *The Scottish College of the Future: A nations-specific final report* (Dec 2020:45) states: The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) represents, in microcosm, the opportunities for a more integrated system. We would not propose that the unique model of a single institution for further

reviews on the Scottish college sector, certain aspects of the UHI model have been spotlighted as a useful model to learn lessons from.

### **Newly Emerging Educational Policy Discourse: An Appeal for Stronger Co-operation**

Recent years have ushered in several official reviews and subsequent reports on Scottish tertiary education.<sup>28</sup> In June 2020, Scottish Government Ministers tasked the SFC to review how Scotland could best fulfil its mission of achieving coherence, quality and sustainability in tertiary education and research in these fast-changing times. Developing tertiary education for future social and economic challenges was a key dynamic to this review. The SFC Review (June 2021:9) described its ethos as an: ‘inclusive, evidence-based and collaborative approach that gathered views through an open call for evidence, and short-life advisory and reference groups’. Given the scope and inherent complexity of the undertaking, the SFC review was conducted over 3 phases and published as such:

- *Coherence and Sustainability: A review of Scotland’s Colleges and Universities, Phase One Report: Insights to Develop Further (Oct 2020).*
- *Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability Progress Update (Mar 2021) and*
- *Phase 3, and final Report: Coherence and Sustainability: A Review of Tertiary Education and Research (June 2021).*

The final *Report Coherence and Sustainability: A Review of Tertiary Education and Research (June 2021)* turned out to be highly comprehensive (comprising nearly 160 pages). The foreword acknowledges certain intricacies within the Scottish tertiary system (colleges & universities) and the wider global uncertain currents impacting on education:

We have, by necessity, a complex and diverse system and no one-off, single solution will provide all the answers. Instead, this Review aims to help design a smart environment that can respond to the partly unknown challenges and uncertainties that will continue to face tertiary education.

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and higher education addressing the particular demographic and geographical challenges should be replicated in the rest of Scotland. However, in the context of the SFC review, we believe it could provide a valuable case study in identifying/removing barriers to tertiary integration in the wider system in terms of funding, outcome measures and accountabilities and the unnecessary bureaucracy resulting from these different systems.

<sup>28</sup> These include (and not an exhaustive list): The Independent Commission Report *The Scottish College of the Future: A nations-specific final report* (Dec 2020: The Cumberford-Little Report: One Tertiary System: Agile, Collaborative, Inclusive (Feb 2020); The Muscatelli Report: Driving Innovation in Scotland – A National Mission (Nov 2019); The Report of the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery to the Scottish Government (June 2020); A Sub-Group of the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board Report on measures to mitigate labour market impacts (July 2020); Commissioner for Fair Access’ annual report (Aug 2020); Accelerating Articulation: Final Report from the National Articulation Forum (Aug 2020); The Logan Review: The Scottish Technology Ecosystem Review (Aug 2020) and The Heathwaite review: The Independent Review of the SFC’s Research Pooling Initiative (Sept 2019)

The foreword also highlights that the SFC Review sets out how Scotland can continue to develop a: ‘coherent tertiary education, skill and research system that responds to diverse learners and the economic and cultural needs of Scotland.’ There is also a recognition that the search for a cohesive system will be both sensitive to the autonomy of individual institutions while also ensuring efficiency and effectiveness – educational value for public investment. Interestingly, in most cases the signifiers ‘Scottish tertiary education, and ‘research systems’, sit alongside each other throughout, underscoring that within this report research accomplishments and undertakings are sufficiently applauded and unique that they should not be artlessly branded as part of the tertiary classification. The importance of creating a sense of identity linked to a particular location and community is also picked up in the report and coupled to arguments as to why it is important that colleges and their local universities should work in a more joined-up and collaborative way - seen to be providing better outcomes for all.<sup>29</sup>

Although this final report (June 2021:10) makes a large number of recommendations throughout, indeed a simple word search found 55 ‘*we recommend*’ statements throughout the report, it only sets out 7 ‘*key recommendations*’ for change to the Scottish Government:

1. Develop a clear strategic, longer-term vision and intent for the future of tertiary education and research undertaken by colleges and universities in Scotland, that incorporates multi-year funding assumptions and commitments, and a new National Impact Framework to enable the sector to better plan provision for students and employers, secure excellent research and international reputation, and adapt business models and drive collaborations to remain sustainable and achieve desired outcomes.
2. Protect excellent discovery research and develop mission-orientated research and knowledge exchange activities, in order to create knowledge of immense social, economic and cultural value; and to maintain Scotland’s associated international reputation which acts as a magnet for talent and investment and is fundamental to the resilience and sustainability of the sector.
3. Build capacity and a more systematic approach to the way we collectively plan coherent tertiary education and skills provision and investment, so that it responds better to current and future needs of pupils, students, employers and broader economic and social drivers, while holding in balance the policy imperatives of promoting fair access and equalities, and the journey to a net zero carbon future.

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<sup>29</sup> The idea of creating a more joined up educational system is not all that ground-breaking. When it comes to developing a coherent tertiary education system, Scotland can be seen to be following behind other countries. As Bandias, Fuller & Pfitzner (2011:587), drawing others, note when exploring vocational and higher education collaborations in Australia: ‘As noted in the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008), key characteristics of an effective tertiary education and training system now include equal value given to both vocational education and higher education, reflecting the importance of their different roles in the development of skills and knowledge and their contributions to the economy and society. To achieve this, clearer and stronger pathways are required between the sectors, in both directions. It is no longer beneficial to see sharp differences between higher education and vocational education in the level and types of qualifications provided.’

4. Find better ways to support learning throughout life, to enable people to reskill and upskill, as the labour market and the future world of work shifts, and to get credit for that learning, by reviewing existing targets, the assumptions that underpin existing funding models and student support, and qualification frameworks.
5. Ensure the interests of current and future students are protected and promoted in the development of standards, outcomes, blended and digital learning opportunities, equality and inclusion actions, participation frameworks, investment and approaches to accountability.
6. Recognise more fully the importance of international education connections and global research standing as an intrinsic part of Scotland's social and economic prosperity, the student and staff experience, and the success and sustainability of the higher education sector.
7. Galvanise current and future leaders across tertiary education, skills provision and research to work together to effect system change, building from our existing strengths, to tackle knotty long-term challenges and opportunities, and to develop the system for the future.

Taken together these 7 key recommendations, if pursued and enacted, would involve considerable structural and cultural change. Recognising the scale and scope of transformations, the report goes on to recommend that a new model of outcome agreements (linked to funding) be introduced that will traverse both the college and university sectors within a given locality. These new outcome agreements would reflect shared goals and targets for colleges and universities. To limit the likelihood of early glitches with policy enactment, it was further stated in the report that a set of what is referred to as pilot Tertiary Provision Pathfinders (TPPs) be introduced to work-out the details and contours of these new outcome agreements, and the more general evolution of the funding arrangements that are needed to deliver a more integrated and collaborative whole-system approach to teaching, research and innovation. In other words, these TPPs will explore the necessary conditions for a more integrated tertiary funding model, helping to inform wider policy development. As the report (ibid:39) states

The process of undertaking the pathfinders will enable us to provide better guidance on strategic planning for coherent provision for others, including the use of data sources, collaborative approaches to tertiary education planning, and how to track impacts over time. It should challenge our own approach to funding and engagement, and we will share learnings in real-time so that others can benefit from early findings and respond in an agile and iterative way.

Interestingly, the report (ibid:16) also argues that if Scotland is to develop a coherent and responsive and sustainable tertiary education system then a new kind of 'adaptive collaborative leadership' will be required to make change happen:

We will explore the establishment of a National Leadership Programme that would bring together colleges and universities to invest in adaptive leaders who will become the innovators we need to develop our system for the future.

There is a tacit acknowledgement of the realities on the ground when individual colleges and universities interpret and enact new education policies.<sup>30</sup>

Key recommendation 2 - with the emphasis on protecting 'mission orientated research' and recommendation 6 with its acknowledging of global research standing as an intrinsic part of Scotland's social and economic prosperity, have much less resonance with the Scottish college sector. Although research activities are beginning to emerge in a few colleges, overall it is still very limited and unlikely to expand and build notable momentum and capacity in the next decade unless there are considerable cultural and structural changes – for example a shift from teaching only contracts towards research and teaching contracts in colleges.

When deliberating on the wider dynamics shaping our contemporary and future understanding of the world of work (and by default influencing perceptions on how our tertiary education system should be moulded and steered to meet future challenges) the report (ibid:34) states:

Mega trends such as globalisation, technological progress and a fourth industrial revolution, climate change, and demographic factors, will alter our understanding of what work looks like and how our labour market operates.

The report (ibid:33) also provides a cursory overview of the sorts of skills and attributes that Scotland will need for the future. The concept of meta-skills - 'the timeless, high order skills that create adaptive learners and promote success in whatever context the future brings' – is seen as a critical component of Scotland's future skills mix. Drawing on Skills Development Scotland (SDS), the report (ibid:33) notes that meta-skills are organised under 3 headings: 'self-management' – managing the now; 'social intelligence' – connecting with the world; and 'innovation' – creating our own change. It goes on to argue that the collective challenge (for our universities and colleges) is to ensure that learners recognise the need to develop these skills and are confident to deploy them.

Interestingly the concept of lifelong learning – much promoted by New Labour Government in the late 1990s onwards - has been taken in from the periphery and revitalised by the report (ibid:35). Similarly, cross-disciplinary working has also been promoted:

The importance of learning throughout life will become ever more obvious, as people will need to continue learning, upskilling, and reskilling, to keep up with rapidly changing working environments. This is likely to require different

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<sup>30</sup> We must consider that educational institutes are organic entities with individual historical, financial, and geographical contexts, as well as strengths. As such, educational institutions will, inevitably, display a discursive range of agendas and interests that will shape their motivations to embrace new policy reforms. Thus, the positionality and sensibilities of individual institutions (including biographical histories of their leaders) will be a critical dynamic in both advancing or hindering the educational changes outlined in this report. One solution, so it is argued, is to ensure that 'adaptive leaders' are developed to drive through change. Such adaptive leaders must buy into and be steadfast acolytes of the newly evolving tertiary educational structure.

products and approaches to learning, and a greater emphasis on work-based and work integrated learning pathfinders. In terms of the new high-growth sectors within Scotland and internationally, we are likely to need to invest in higher education and skills that help us in the transition to a net-zero carbon economy, life sciences (including precision medicine and health technology), coding, health and social care, early years, construction, data science and technology, quantum and nanotechnology, engineering, mathematics, design subjects (STEM-D), and the creative industries. Many of these will require cross-disciplinary graduate and postgraduate skills, working together in areas where Scotland can lead the world.

Although the SFC's 3 phased publications have their own remits and advocate particular recommendations, they are nevertheless, informed by other contemporary key publications such as: *The Cumberland-Little Report - One Tertiary System: Agile, Collaborative, Inclusive* (Feb 2020), *The Independent Commission Report: The Scottish College of the Future: A Nation-Specific Final Report* (Dec 2021) and *The Muscatelli Report: Driving Innovation - A National Mission*, (Nov 2019).

The *Cumberland-Little Report* (Feb 2020) for example seeks to identify and delineate the substantial economic impact colleges have had and adopts the biological concept of an "ecosystem" to help conceptualise the Scottish tertiary education system. This conceptualisation helpfully captures the organic nature of what might be described a community of interacting institutions and stakeholders within their educational environment and landscape. The ecosystem borrowing is not particularly new to colleges, it was also adopted by Hodgson and Spours (2009) to conceptualise the English college sector.

The *Cumberland-Little Report* is helpful in advancing the educational debates on the future role of colleges. On the one hand it unpacks and considers the discursive conditions and dynamics that are seen to impede the colleges' full creative energies and educational potential. While on the other hand, the report sets out the potential future evolutionary trajectories which draw on all the available agencies, resources and approaches at hand that can be mobilised and steered in developing appropriate interventions that would enhance the sector's effectiveness. In mapping the recent college landscape, the report recognises and celebrates the significant cultural and structural transformation ushered in by regionalisation; applauding that Scotland's colleges are now exemplified by their coherence and cooperation, rather than functioning as in the past in a somewhat atomised and isolated way (the pre-regionalisation college landscape set up by incorporation). With respects to HE provision in Scottish colleges, the report not only acknowledges the widespread success of HNC/D activities, but also proposes that HE activities in the Scottish college sector should be augmented through the adoption and delivery of a college-based 2-year degree, with additional work placement content (an initiative that clearly resonates with the English foundation degree set up in the early 2000s). Arguably, ushering in a 2-year degree would add a new dimension and status to HE in colleges and, perhaps, off-set some of the perceived challenges linked to the transition from studying HNC/D to degree level at university.

Among the other recommendations is an appeal for better learner-focused articulation routes transitioning from college to university and the idea of introducing networking systems such as utilising ‘college hub models’ whereby a number of colleges pool resources in collaborative ventures to achieve better delivery and quality of educational provision. A key message from the *Cumberford-Little Report* (resonating with other reports on the Scottish tertiary education system in recent times) is a need for better understanding, clarity and conceptual framing with respect to what a 21st century college is for, and a fresh approach in thinking about its social and economic impact. Fundamentally, the report calls for a new narrative for 21st century colleges, which should be framed/informed by the following:

- an unambiguous commitment from across the Scottish Government to a system that provides opportunities for lifetime learning.
- a more coherent, and better-connected tertiary system for Scotland, in which colleges are centre stage partners, celebrated and resourced as such; to protect diversity, avoiding a one size fits all approach. Public investment in our critical tertiary infrastructure – IT renewal, harnessing emerging technologies and optimising our capital estate – will yield higher returns when we promote an approach that optimises the strengths of all partners within that system.
- a diverse range of institutions, with centres of excellence pooling resource and expertise and acting as hubs to enhance the productivity of area-based economic clusters of private and public sector partnerships. (2020:18)

The above will not unfold quickly, rather it will require significant multi-level planning, dialogue, negotiations and subsequent compromise from the various stakeholders. Indeed, the scale of the task and the complexities involved should not be underplayed. It should also be recognised that the future development of ‘college hubs’ and ‘centres of excellence’ could create (intentionally or otherwise) a diverse but stratified Scottish college system.

*The Independent Commission Report: The Scottish College of the Future: A Nation-specific Final Report* (Dec 2020:28) provides what is seen here as a thoughtful and insightful appraisal of the contemporary Scottish college sector.<sup>31</sup> The Independent Commission was launched in Spring 2019 as part of a UK-wide, 4 nations activity. As highlighted earlier in the mapping of the English college sector, the national study was informed and framed by 2 interrelated questions: *What do we want and need from colleges from 2030 onwards?* and *How do we get there?* The uniqueness and strength of this review initiative is linked to the way it is informed by national perspectives, drawing on the diversity of the UK college sector - the structure, activities and evolutionary trajectories across the 4 nations of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

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<sup>31</sup> The Independent Commission was commissioned by the Four Nations College Alliance – which brings together college leaders, their representative bodies and senior government officials from across the 4 nations of the UK. The Independent Commission has benefited from learnings across the 4 nations of the UK, drawing lessons and insights from reform trajectories and from exemplary institutional practices.

The *Scottish College of the Future Report* (Dec 2020:28) highlights in the foreword that there is no requirement for major reform to the existing governance arrangements of Scotland's Colleges. The report (2020:2) observes that over the last decade the regionalisation approach has 'laid the foundations for a much more coherent post-school tertiary system with the potential to deliver on the twin objectives of enhancing social mobility and building a high-skill modern economy'. The report goes on to affirm that the regionalisation agenda (and structure of colleges and the operation of regional boards governance arrangements) has allowed for a coherent and structured system to unfold, with colleges playing a much more focused and, therefore, stronger role in the delivery of national social and economic policies. It also pointed out that the regionalisation approach strengthens collaboration and partnership across the Scottish colleges, ensuring they have an enhanced presence and role in local/regional economic development.

The agency and role of college stakeholders such as Colleges Scotland (a membership body acting as the collective voice of the college sector) and the College Development Network (CDN) (a training and development body funded by the SFC) was also viewed by the report (ibid) as instrumental in creating a coherent and a responsive college sector through bringing together college leaders and chairs of regional boards in their governance structures.

The key take-away here is that the regionalisation model is viewed positively, providing a firm platform from which to build. With respects to moving forwards it was recommended by the report that individual multi-college regions should seek to improve their overall coherence (paying attention to their own individual context) and deal effectively with any anomalies and potential undercurrents that may have the potential to introduce levels of confusion in accountability, governance, and funding authority. Arguably, this might be read as a subtle reproach, although no evidence was presented.

With respect to HE provision in Scotland's colleges, the *Independent Commission Report: The Scottish College of the Future: A Nation-Specific Final Report* (Dec 2020:28) calls for the formation of specialised networks engaging with curriculum and workforce development:

We believe the strengths of this system – which includes a breadth of provision from community to higher education, and colleges' major role in extending access to university - could be utilised to further enhance the role of colleges. Scottish colleges deliver a substantial volume of higher technical qualifications primarily in the form of HNCs and HNDs. This presents the opportunity to strengthen the national base of higher-level skills through the development of specialist networks with a collective responsibility for a single coherent plan for curriculum and college workforce development.

In terms of providing comparative insights, the report (2020:18), drawing on and citing Professor Peter Scott, observes that: 'Scotland is in a better position than in any other UK nation to create a flexible tertiary education system.' This is an important observation and contribution to the debates on the linkages and transitions from colleges into and through

university study. Professor Scott, an Emeritus Professor of Higher Education at University College London (UCL), has written extensively on post-compulsory education and is Scotland's Commissioner for Fair Access and as such he is an important authoritative voice here.

Writing in an article published in the Times Educational Supplement (TES): *'Scotland's colleges put the country ahead on access to HE'* (23 April 2019) Scott highlights the evolving positioning of HE in Scotland's colleges under regionalisation and is worth quoting at length:

The colleges' achievement deserves to be more widely recognised and celebrated. Often fair access to higher education is confused with fair access to universities and, in particular, to the ancient universities which have played such a famous role in Scotland's history but still remain dominated by middle-class students despite their best efforts to reach out to disadvantaged communities. The colleges are strong and self-confident institutions, further strengthened in recent years by mergers (whatever short-term pain and disruption these mergers caused). They have their own unassailable place in the mainstream of higher education, currently enrolling a third of all students. South of the border, in contrast, England's further education colleges' share of higher education is less than 10 percent.

Pointing to some wider international struggles, Scott (2019) goes on to point out that there has been frequent criticism in many countries that too much emphasis is placed on academic education at the expense of vocational,<sup>32</sup> 'which is seen as the 'poor relation'. As a result, brighter students - and students from more privileged social backgrounds - are steered towards academic courses. Scott further asserts that within Scotland, some universities do not make it easy for students graduating from colleges with HNC/HND qualifications to transition into university degree studies; with the exception of some post-1992 universities and those universities with a tradition in technological education such as Heriot-Watt, Strathclyde and of course the UHI.

Scott is not an isolated figure in his appraisal of HE in Scottish colleges. Others such as Watson et al., (2020) & Gallacher (2017) also draw attention to what they perceive as certain fault lines with the transition from colleges to universities. Watson et al. proffer some interesting observations and are worth quoting at length (2020:135):

The success story of a college sector preparing [...] students for universities is, however, challenged by some uncomfortable truths. Despite attempts to ensure that articulation between college and university should mean 'no loss of time for the student' (SFC website) more than half of the students who progress to

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<sup>32</sup> Scott states: The contrast is always made with Germany where there is a stronger vocational education sector, training the technicians that are at the heart of that country's powerful manufacturing base (2019 TES 23 April)

university via colleges repeat a level of study [...].<sup>33</sup> The length of time taken to get a degree is thereby extended, increasing opportunity costs for these already disadvantaged students. [...] the universities these students progress to tend to be the newer post-1992 institutions while ‘Scotland’s ancient universities do significantly less articulation’ [...]. This has implications for subject choice and career entry. [...] Thus, the learner journey via college is rather more convoluted than that undertaken by the majority of students entering universities. Moreover, retention and completion rates for these students are lower than for those with direct entry.<sup>34</sup>

College to university degree level articulation is defined by the SFC ‘as a student gaining entry into second year of a degree with a Higher National Certificate (HNC) gained at a college, or into third year with a Higher National Diploma (HND) gained at college’ and yet this is not a clear-cut process, as Scott (2019 TES 23 April) indicates: ‘HNDs are two-year higher education courses, so logically, these students should be admitted to the third year of degree programmes. In practice only a minority are so lucky’. Scott (2019 *ibid*) goes on to point out that although there are a range of arguments justifying this position, such as content misalignment between HNC and HND and university degrees, this means that ‘[HND students are] in effect losing a year, which prolongs their studies and costs them, and taxpayers, more money’. Under Scott’s assessment, despite the establishment of the Scottish National Articulation Forum (set up 2018 with a remit to work out how to improve articulation)<sup>35</sup> more needs to be done to further improve articulation pathways between Scottish colleges and universities.

The following year the Scottish National Articulation Forum published the *National Articulation Forum Final Report* (Aug 2020) which identifies challenges with college to university articulations and makes a number of recommendations. This report underscores that the majority of articulation in Scotland takes place using only the 1+3 and 2+2 models, which represent the current definition (HNC into second year of a degree, HND into third year of a degree). It also acknowledges subject context misalignment existing between HNs

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<sup>33</sup> Scottish Government. 2018a. 15-24 learner journey review. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/15-24-learner-journey-review9781788518741/>

<sup>34</sup> The difficulties some students might encounter when transitioning from a college setting into university is covered extensively in the literature (see Iannelli, 2018, O’Donnell et al., 2018, Gallacher, 2017 & 2006 & Scott, 2010). Universities are generally characterised as having pedagogical approaches that have more of an emphasis on self-directed learning, where students are anticipated to spend a considerable part of their week in the library either in study groups or individually. Also, universities operate with much more fluid notions and concepts of knowledge together with a strong research-based culture. Such practices and activities sit in sharp contrast to the experience found within the FE setting where the timetabling is focused predominantly around students sitting in front of a lecturer who operates within a didactic teaching paradigm, found in secondary schools. Here knowledge is filtered and divided up into easily consumed packs and disseminated. The lecturer takes on the role of the knowledge mediator and gatekeeper.

<sup>35</sup> The Forum was set up to work out how to improve articulation – that is, progression with full academic credit – from college to university in Scotland. This was a joint effort by Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland, supported by the Scottish Funding Council, and with extensive involvement of students.

and certain degree level courses (depending on the subject and university).<sup>36</sup> With respect to identifying potential solutions and a way forward, the report highlights that Scottish colleges and universities are now working creatively to overcome identified challenges by seeking to create new routes based on closer mapping of the curriculum and ensuring that learning and teaching outcomes are better a match to enable better college (HNC/HND) transition into and through degree study at university.

College articulation and transition to degree level study at university was also addressed by the *Independent Commission Report: The Scottish College of the Future: A Nation-Specific Final Report* (Dec 2020). The report suggests that the respective roles and remit of colleges and universities (linked to the types of provision and levels/qualifications they deliver and for which they are funded) all need to be better delineated. The key dynamic here is the assertion that Scottish colleges need to have a more distinctive and exclusive role in the delivery of higher level technical and professional qualifications up to SCQF Level 7 and 8 or HNC and HND.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, it is claimed that enhanced clarity at this juncture, would help the widening access agenda. For the report, the introduction of a funding model based on respective roles and remits between universities and colleges would be the key driver for mobilising such necessary change.<sup>38</sup> Thus, there is a call for even more clarity for the college sector with its HE provisions and relationship to universities. Moreover, the report (echoing the *Cumberford-Little Report*) also suggests there is an urgent need for a national network of specialist ‘hubs’ to address critical skill shortages, especially in relation to higher level technical skills (e.g. STEM/digital) and acting as a focal point for employer partnerships as well as extending access to learning opportunities in areas of population sparsity.

The Scottish Government’s *Response to the Scottish Funding Council’s Review of Tertiary Education and Research in Scotland* (Oct 2021) broadly accepted the findings and recommendations of the phased *SFC Review (2020-21)*. The foreword of this response document offers a favourable depiction of Scotland’s tertiary education:

Our colleges, universities and small specialist institutions are a real national asset that contribute across a range of social, economic, and cultural impacts. They develop people to live fulfilling lives, equipped with the skills and talents Scotland needs; they are brimming with ideas, innovation and research that will

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<sup>36</sup> The Report notes: ‘Students who were studying on creative courses (Music and Drama) noted a lack of articulation opportunities in their regional areas, in terms of related subjects at degree level; there were instances where students could not find a suitable match for their HN - for example, popular music does not have articulation routes into classical music study - or the university did not offer advanced standing. In the case of drama, there was at least one example of an English university offering articulation to students from Scottish colleges, with students having already attended auditions south of the border (*National Articulation Forum Final Report*, Aug 2020: 31).

<sup>37</sup> The contention emerging is that if colleges had better clarity in the role they play in HE development and delivery it would ultimately improve student articulations and transitions from colleges to universities and thus prevent unnecessary competition and duplication across the binary divide (colleges and universities).

<sup>38</sup> The Report calls for the removal of the fundamental anomaly in funding regimes where the inequitable funding between HNC/HND and Year 1 and 2 of degree programmes established solely on institutional status with the lower rates paid to colleges compared with universities.

shape our economic prosperity and recovery, our response to the climate emergency and our global reputation and networks; and they are anchor institutions that matter in local communities and our work in tackling deep-seated social inequalities and disadvantage.

The government response also acknowledged that the Scottish tertiary sector has reached the interim target on widening access set by the Commission for Widening Access, with at least 16% of full-time first-degree entrants coming from Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 20 areas. The foreword of the government response (2021:1-2) also provides a list of imminent imperatives and dynamics that will inform debates on how Scottish tertiary education should be shaped for the future. The list includes shifts in automation; digital technological developments, especially the emerging promise of artificial intelligence (AI) and its impact on the world of work; global competition for talent and resources; responding to the climate emergency and our future demographic; health and social care needs (2021:1-2). The above constellation of dynamics (argued to be part of the changing times we now occupy) will make new demands on tertiary education.

In the early quarter of 2022, the Independent Commission on the College of the Future and Sheffield Hallam University, representing the interests of the Civic University Network, published their joint report *Going Further and Higher: how collaboration between colleges and universities can transform lives and places* (Feb, 2022). This report, informed by the key question: *How can college and university relationships be further developed across the four nations of the UK to better support individuals, employers and communities?* explores how college and university relationships can be further developed across the 4 nations of the UK. It considers and evaluates the opportunities and challenges for building more integrated education and skills systems across FE colleges and universities and makes a number of recommendations. The report (2022:4) opens with the now familiar rhetoric on the growing significance of UK colleges and universities:

Colleges and universities sit at the heart of their communities and share a common purpose: to ensure that all people, no matter their background or past experiences, and no matter where in the UK they live and work, can access high-quality and relevant education and skills, and the opportunities that these bring.

The report also follows a similar pattern to other recent educational publications discussed here in that it features what it perceives as the current fault lines with the current arrangements and challenges ahead, while, at the same time, celebrating contemporary college and university educational successes within the 4 nations - utilising an institutional case-study approach to show-case progressive developments within each nation.<sup>39</sup> From the outset the report (ibid:4) asserts that learners and employers are too often presented with an educational system: 'which is driven by institutional perspectives and interests'. The argument presented is that the collective creative energies of colleges and universities are

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<sup>39</sup> Page 6 of the Report states: 'There is undoubtedly a great deal more to do – at the same time as championing the best of what already exists'.

not fully realised and exploited for the wider good and, at a fundamental level, these sectors need to work much closer together in more meaningful ways:

This paper is a call to action for leaders of colleges and universities, and for the policy makers who can help or hinder them, to step up and to work together to ensure that the transformative power of FE and HE extends to every corner of the UK.

Adopting a general overview, the report (ibid:6) also notes:

Across all four nations, there remain tensions and an enormous untapped potential for deeper integration of systems and collaborative working between institutions. The fact that these challenges exist across the four nations is a reminder that these are difficult and deep-seated issues and require ongoing strategic attention.

However, what is interesting in this report is the slender appreciation of how educational policies (with associated imperatives and performativity scripts) enter pre-existing institutional infrastructure, socio-economic conditions, policy structures, organisational cultures, and how such pre-existing institutional cultural and structural conditions have the potential to hinder the interpretation and enactment of any new policy goals/interventions. The report (ibid:4) also suggests that the structural and cultural boundaries between colleges and universities are too detached and competition for students and resources between and within these sectors can create obstacles to future collaboration:

Despite a clear shared responsibility, colleges and universities can too often be seen – and see themselves – as sitting within distinct and separate systems, rather than as part of a wider educational landscape. Yet, at the same time, both FE and HE provision are delivered in both colleges and universities to varying degrees across the four nations. Both within and between sectors, institutions can be pitted against each other, locked in unproductive competition, whether as a result of government policy or funding choices, or as a result of institutional cultures and behaviours.

Reflecting more positive aspects the report (ibid:4) goes on to point to what it calls exceptions:

There are exceptions, where local leadership – both political and institutional – is driving more collaborative approaches. This is often driven by “systems leaders”<sup>40</sup> who see the importance of their role beyond the walls of their

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<sup>40</sup> The concept of ‘systems leadership’ – is utilised to help explain the sorts of progressive thinking and activities envisaged. The report (2022:4) defines systems leadership: ‘Systems leadership is a set of skills and capacities that any individual or organization can use to catalyse, enable and support the process of systems-level change. It combines collaborative leadership, coalition building and systems insight to mobilise innovation and action across a large, decentralized network.’

institution and are committed to their civic obligations to the broader skills ecosystem of their region. And there are good examples of both policy development and changing institutional practices across the four nations. However, it is still more common to find local relationships which feel limited, unbalanced, inhibited by a lack of trust and struggling to attract leadership time and resources alongside other pressures and priorities.

With respect to challenges the report (ibid:18) points to limited levels of trust and the lack of long-term commitments to collaboration:

Lack of trust is one of the biggest barriers to effective collaboration between colleges and universities and hinders mutually beneficial relationships. Too often colleges and universities have been pitted against each other in policy debate and within a finite post-compulsory funding envelope. This tension can play out in local and regional relationships. An over-reliance on personal relationships means that partnership agreements can be built on weak foundations. Institutional memories can be long and building back trust is often a challenge.

The lack of experience and understanding of FE by key policy players (and those in a position to shape understandings through writing) was also identified as a challenge in the report (ibid:19):

Only a small proportion of politicians, journalists and opinion formers have personal experience of studying in colleges. This lack of experience and knowledge can result in few advocates and champions for colleges. Policy conversations around college relationships with universities aren't always well understood or scrutinised.

Moreover, with respect to creating collaborative ventures between colleges and universities aspects such as the lack of strategic focus and transient arrangements were seen as obstacles to meaningful and effective partnerships (ibid:20):

In both college and universities, partnership working can receive insufficient strategic focus, commitment and funding, resulting in arrangements which are often temporary or transactional.

In offering a potential way forward the report (ibid:6) stresses that a 'whole system' approach is required: 'universities and colleges should sit within a joined-up, holistic tertiary education and skills system within each of the four nations.' Interestingly, in framing tertiary education the report (ibid:5) adopts a all-inclusive approach: 'We use "tertiary education and skills system" throughout the report to refer to FE and HE, which comprises all levels of study and is generally post-16, although colleges at times work with students younger than 16.'

The report's (ibid:23) recommendations for sector leaders:

- Agree the institutions who are involved in the network and embrace the local geography and specialisms that already exist.
- Develop a cohesive education and skills offer for local people, employers and communities built around lifelong learning, ensuring inefficient duplication and competition is reduced.
- Move beyond personal relationships and agree how the whole institution is involved in collaboration, with clear roles and shared responsibility for partnership.

With respects to governments, the report (ibid:24) recommends:

- Set an ambitious 10-year strategy to ensure lifelong learning for all and to deliver on national ambitions.
- Balance investment in FE and HE to ensure the whole education and skills system is sustainably funded, so that colleges and universities can work in the interests of their local people, employers and communities.
- Equal maintenance support across loans and grants for HE and FE students, regardless of age, personal circumstances, or route into education.
- Tackle the ‘messy middle’ by defining distinct but complementary roles for colleges and universities to avoid a turf war over who delivers various types of education and training.
- Create a single funding and regulatory body for the entire post-16 education and skills system in each nation to deliver more aligned and complementary regulatory approaches that will ensure smoother learner journeys.

When reviewing the Scottish college and university context, it was reported that while Scotland gains from elements of strong collaboration between colleges and universities, this collaboration was, nevertheless, accompanied by certain points of competition between the 2 sectors. Unfortunately, the report did not elaborate on this collaborative competitive nexus.<sup>41</sup> In addition, when identifying strengths to build on, the report (ibid:11) singled out regionalisation of colleges and regional output agreements, the Learner Journey Project (2014), the National Articulation Forum and the *Report of the Commission on Widening Access (2016)*, as being – individually and collectively - important in helping to facilitate effective pathways between Scotland’s colleges and universities.

## Discussion

HE activities within FE colleges in the UK have flourished over the last 2 decades, resulting in claims that there has been an increasing blurring of the boundaries between the college and university sectors, especially as colleges increasingly enter into various agreements with their local universities, such as formal college to university articulation routes and delivering university validated degrees. Inevitably, given that most cities have both universities and colleges, the conflicting priorities of competition for HE students and need for partnership

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<sup>41</sup> It would have been interesting to learn how the UHI arrangement would have been positioned here.

opportunities (articulation) between colleges and universities co-existed in a rather paradoxical way.

And yet, despite claims of the blurring of the boundaries between the 2 sectors, there are discernible differences in core cultural behaviours and activities between colleges and universities (Orr, 2020, Medcalf, 2014, Lea and Simmons 2012, Hursh & Wall, 2011 & Feather, 2010). By way of example, research and scholarship activities are considered as firmly embedded within the working practice and culture of the university setting - seen as critical to enhancing our knowledge and understanding of a particular subject as well as improving the profile and standing of the staff and university. Indeed, the professional standing and career pathways for university academics have long been judged in terms of amount and quality of scholarly activity and research (outputs) in which an academic engages.

However, such activities are not part of the normative working culture of the FE college. College lecturers, due to their heavy teaching commitments and broad portfolio of taught subjects, have little opportunity to conduct meaningful research and scholarship into their subject area(s). College lecturers are also unlikely to get opportunities to develop their academic networks through attending academic conferences on a regular basis. They are even less disposed to cultivate research collaborations with colleagues from other colleges or university academic staff. Consequently, college lecturers, by not getting sufficient opportunities to conduct research and scholarship, miss out on a range of activities that play a fundamental role in enhancing their professional development and professional responsibilities. However, these tensions have been recognized within the Scottish college context. The recent launch of the CDN Research and Enhancement Centre is an important flagship initiative aiming to encourage and support research and scholarship within the college sector.

This study underscores that the Scottish college sector, in comparison with the English sector, is a much more coherent and structured educational entity – making it easier to coordinate, audit and govern (Watson et al, 2020, Gallacher & Reeve, 2019 & Keep 2017). In very recent times the Scottish college sector, now seen by government policy makers as a constituent part of Scotland’s tertiary education system, has undergone wide scale scrutiny by a proliferation of government commissions, reviews, and independent reports (some of which have been mapped here). A dominant theme to emerge from such wide scale exploration and scrutiny has been the aspiration to build on the initial coherence and unity of the foundations set in place by the regionalisation model. These recent educational reviews single out and expound the benefits of a more linked-up tertiary education system in Scotland. A tertiary education system where sharing, institutional collaboration and networking goes well beyond tokenism, becoming a much more visible, effective and embedded feature.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, it is argued here that any meaningful deliberations on the future of HE within Scottish colleges must be foregrounded by this newly emerging

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<sup>42</sup> How successful the current policy discourse(s) will be in mobilising new levels of cooperation, partnerships and networks between colleges from different regions and between colleges and their local universities is impossible to determine at this early juncture. The very recent Tertiary Provision Pathfinders (TPPs) pilot schemes may offer useful insights here.

educational paradigm where the drive towards co-operative practices between educational institutions has intensified.<sup>43</sup>

In a rapidly changing world, where social inequalities ascend within as well as between nation states, arguments for the move towards educational networking and collaborations rather than competition between educational institutions make sense and should be welcome. It is reasonable to envisage that Scotland's colleges, under this new collaborative networking drive, will be steered by new funding mechanisms connected to newly developed performativity scripts. Under such arrangements the regional boundaries between colleges (set up under regionalisation) will likely become more porous, allowing for new possibilities, innovations and, critically, new collaborative spaces to emerge.

And yet, this notion of a collaborative and networking college model is not particularly exceptional in Scotland. The UHI (which secured university status in 2011), comprising several geographically dispersed colleges, has a long track record of collaborating and networking in the development and delivery of HNCs, HNDs and a wide range of degrees and postgraduate qualifications. Therefore, as this tertiary education collaborative imperative gains traction we must entertain the possibility that the Scottish college sector could evolve to take on a more cohesive and stratified character, with subject specific HE centres of excellence and HE hubs emerging within certain geographical locations.

But we must also recognise the *realpolitik* associated with any endeavours to establish networks, partnerships and collaborative ventures within education.<sup>44</sup> The notion of a community of educational actors - each shaped by their unique aspirations, self-interests, biographical histories and representing the distinct interests of their own organisation - all vigorously striding together to achieve shared goals and common purpose without tensions, micro-oppositions and discursive power struggles surfacing to stifle progress might be too one-dimensional. It is important to stress that without clearly articulated and measurable accountability linked to tangible outputs and impacts, notions of institutional partnership and collaboration can be a somewhat imprecise activity. It will be necessary to introduce appropriate inducements to mobilise and steer the various institutional actors to collaborate for common cause.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> The logic is straightforward, Scottish colleges will be encouraged to explore new collaborative enterprises to enhance their HE curriculum. Building capacity in relation to collaborative links and networking enterprises with other educational institutions – the sharing of ideas and the pooling of human capital resources – are all likely to be a primary imperative within the discussions on the sector's effectiveness and impact.

<sup>44</sup> *Realpolitik* (German *real* 'realistic, practical, actual', and *Politik* 'politics'), refers to enacting or engaging in diplomatic or political policies based primarily on considerations of given circumstances and factors, rather than strictly binding itself to explicit ideological notions or moral and ethical premises.

<sup>45</sup> As Cardini (2006:396) reasons, within the political discourse advocating partnerships and collaboration (which is often conflated) there resides a somewhat naïve assumption that individual actors within such arrangements meet as equals in a collaborative democratic decision-making process. The argument is that we are not automatons (Foucault, 1979) but free-thinking agents within our ideological, social and economic frameworks and when we enter such collaborations, our own self-interests may not align with others.

Of course, the challenges ahead have not been erased or downplayed within the policy discourses. As pointed out elsewhere, the SFC's phase 3 report *Coherence and Sustainability: A Review of Tertiary Education and Research (June 2021:16)* understands that if Scotland is to develop a coherent, responsive and sustainable tertiary education system then a new kind of 'adaptive leadership' will be needed to make change happen. But what do we mean by 'adaptive leadership'? And what will it look like within the Scottish tertiary context? Unfortunately, the final report does not address such issues and therefore we need to look elsewhere for some insights.

The concept of adaptive leadership is credited to Ronald Heifetz (1994) and emphasises leading change when organisations must adapt to a fast-changing environment. Put simply, adaptive leadership relates to guiding organisations through complex challenges and embracing transformational change which encompasses modifications in convictions, beliefs and long-established practices and customs. Adaptive leadership is said to be the practice of mobilising people to tackle tough challenges and thrive (Heifetz et al., 2009). According to Wong & Chan (2018:106-7):

The roles of adaptive leaders are different from those of the traditional view, which focuses on providing vision, solutions, and directions to relatively passive followers under the leader's protection. Instead, adaptive leaders work together with the team to bring out tough issues, challenge established practices, and involve people at all levels to learn their ways to solutions. Therefore, in the adaptive model, leadership is a practice rather than a position or a job.

For Wong & Chan (2018) the key identifying features of adaptive leadership include being independent from the organisation(s), diagnosing complex systemic challenges, engaging stakeholders to explore organisational practices and values, and navigating the discursive change processes collectively, while engaging with the inevitable resistance, potential losses, and trade-offs. Perhaps, within this newly emerging college collaborative partnership context, the notion of trade-offs will be the most interesting and challenging development to deal with.

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