

Colleges Action Inquiry Research Network (CAIRN) Journal Issue 2 Editorial

Welcome to CAIRN Journal. The value and vitality of CAIRN will be sustained by its commitment and ability to reach out and offer new insights and understanding for teaching practitioners, managers, administrators, educational developers and leaders within the Scottish college sector.

Publishing articles that offer independent, critical evaluations and engaging reflections on the ways in which the sector operates and interfaces with local, regional and national developments, and policy imperatives will be a fundamental part of the journal's overall remit.

In addition to engaging with, informing and where appropriate, challenging, contemporary thinking and practice within the sector, the hope is that CAIRN will evolve to play a critical role in the fostering and supporting of a vibrant Scottish college researcher network and community.

Since the publication of the first CAIRN journal (2021) Scottish FE colleges have been operating in an educational landscape marked by formidable financial challenges and insecurity. Although colleges have been responding to the financial challenges in different ways, the vast majority have been implementing recovery plans to reduce their costs. Consequently, many colleges have undergone staff reductions (at all levels) and curriculum shrinkage.

It is fair to say that as we move forward into a new academic year and into a period of adjustment to emerging economic constraints college leaders will be grappling with balancing the aspiration to continue to deliver high quality education and training provision with less resources. The financial implications for the sector have been voiced by Shona Struthers, (CEO of Colleges Scotland, Sept 2024) who states:

A 17% reduction in real terms funding for colleges is dire, impacting colleges as organisations, students, and the wider economy. The reduction translates to colleges losing almost £1 in every £5 they should have received from the Scottish Government.

Similarly, one of the four key messages from the Audit General Report on Scotland's Colleges (Sept 2024, p 3) noted the challenging times for FE:

The financial pressures and reductions in staff mean that colleges may not be able to do everything that they have done in the past, which will impact on the learning they provide. Colleges are taking steps to identify efficiencies, and they are working with the Scottish Funding Council on actions to help them remain sustainable.

The Audit General Report (p14) also observes:

More immediately, colleges need more clarity from the Scottish Government on the aspects of their role to prioritise, in light of the increasing financial challenges and the breadth and diversity of their role. Colleges are currently making fundamental decisions about their future services without this clarity.

From the above it is clear that colleges are now operating within a new economic resource paradigm which raises fundamental questions about the future status and purpose of Scottish FE.

We can detect mixed messages with the position and status of colleges and how they are financed. Much of the recent commissioned reviews on Scotland's colleges and Scottish Government Policy documents on tertiary education celebrate the success of the college sector, reaffirming its position as a key agent for mobilising positive economic and social change. Contained within these documents is the shared assumptions that college-based education and training will continue to play a crucial role in equipping individual with skills needed for the modern workforce. It is also generally accepted that our colleges play a critical role in tackling

educational inequalities through widening participation to education and providing second chance access routes to higher education. And yet, paradoxically, despite the celebrated successes our colleges are now shrinking their workforce and delivery provision to be sustainable. Indeed, one could easily visualise a near future where the number of Scottish colleges have reduced through what might be viewed a Darwinian survival of the fittest evolutionary approach, where those colleges deemed financially weak and unsustainable are compelled to become either insolvent or consumed by other more successful colleges.

The case for colleges to conduct research and critical enquiry

The argument for Scottish colleges to conduct research and critical enquiry, has always been convincing. However, against of our contemporary and somewhat gloomy FE landscape characterised by unprecedented hardship and uncertainty, the case for Scotland's colleges to exploit research-based findings to inform practice and policy is even more compelling. As colleges move forward navigating the emerging challenges, their capacity to generate, interpret and apply FE research-based findings will be fundamental for fostering innovation and improving educational outcomes. Research-based evidence can inform decision making on a range of levels, from pedagogy and classroom practice, professional development, institutional strategy and national policy. Moreover, research and critical enquiry encourage collaborative networks and knowledge exchange. By engaging in research activities, colleges can build collaborative networks with other colleges and community stakeholders. Such collaborations can lead to the sharing of expertise and best practices.

Fortunately, in very recent years we have witnessed a modest but nevertheless, steady interest in research and scholarly activities unfolding within Scottish Colleges. This has been down to groundbreaking initiatives aimed at fostering and sustaining research within Scotland's colleges. With the launch of the CDN Research and Enhancement Centre (2020), a flagship initiative aiming to encourage and support research and scholarship within the Scottish college sector, we now have a growing community of associate researchers within the college sector. The Research and Enhancement Centre has also introduced 'The Step Forward Researcher Development Programme' which delivers a series of workshops specifically aimed to support college staff to develop the skills required to undertake research projects that will enhance their own practice and improve outcomes for their college and its learners. It is difficult to overstate the progressive character of the CDN Research and Enhancement Centre in encouraging and supporting research with the Scottish colleges.

CAIRN Journal was set up in recognition that the Scottish FE sector is a rich field for exploration and this edition covers a diverse range of interesting and reflective submissions. The themes covered include sustainability, curriculum development, supporting learner journeys, leadership and measuring success, and the dynamics driving institutional restructuring.

References

<https://collegesscotland.ac.uk/news/latest/587-comment-on-the-audit-scotland-report-on-scotlands-colleges>

www.audit.scot/accessibility

The College Action Inquiry Research Network (CAIRN) Journal aims to be an important voice in the scholarship of the Scottish college sector.

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