

Further education bosses and students reveal how much the sector is worth to industry

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Victoria
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21:27, 15 APR 2020 | UPDATED 21:34, 15 APR 2020



Forth Valley College graduates last year

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When Kirsty Stewart decided to switch careers from accountancy to childcare, Glasgow Kelvin College was her gateway to new skills.

"I thought I would like to work with children, either special needs or other care provision, so I started on a National Certificate in Early Education at the college," says the 45-year-old from Baillieston.

Stewart went on to complete a Higher National Certificate (HNC) in Early Learning & Childcare with **Glasgow Kelvin College** and is now studying for a Professional Development Award (PDA) Level 8 in Childhood Practice.

“There’s a high degree of professionalism involved in the provision of childcare, working with children and their parents – there’s the organisation, administration, paperwork, legislation, research and obviously significant responsibilities,” says Stewart, now a child development officer with Glasgow City Council’s Barlanark Family Learning Centre.

“So consistently updating your skills is important, for me and for my employer.”

From August this year, the Scottish Government has pledged to increase free early learning and childcare provision from 600 hours to 1,140 hours per child, and colleges have responded by increasing their early years training. “The increase in hours of provision... to 1,140 hours per child creates a greater need for management level staff, especially for those with enhanced practice skills,” says Derek Smeall, principal of Glasgow Kelvin College.

“In 2019/20, the college introduced a Childhood Practice Professional Development Award at Level 8 to support upskilling of existing childcare staff. Delivered in Easterhouse, this advanced-level award provides a nearby facility for local childcare employers to train their staff in a fast-changing sector.”

Scotland’s 26 further education colleges are in the front line of meeting future skills needs and have seen a three per cent rise in student numbers over the last year.

“Colleges play a crucial role in Scottish society, providing around 71 million hours of learning to over 242,000 students each year and delivering 26 per cent of all higher education,” says Shona Struthers, chief executive of Colleges Scotland, which represents the sector.

Scottish colleges have dominated the UK’s top 10 for seven years and the sector exceeds its learning activity targets. But financial pressures are increasing. In a report last year, spending watchdog Audit Scotland found that most colleges were forecasting deficits in the next five years, as the gap between income and expenditure widens.

“We are committed to working with the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council to find viable solutions to these issues,” Struthers says. “We recognise that colleges must be sustainable institutions”

Brexit will undoubtedly have a significant impact on the ability to keep and attract staff, Struthers adds.

“There is concern over the UK Government’s response to the loss of significant European Union funding streams which support employability programmes and more,” she says. “Colleges will play a vital role in helping the economy to recover post-Brexit and will work hard to address skills gaps, especially in sectors which will be disproportionately affected.”

Digital skills are a focus for the sector and Colleges Scotland leads a ‘Digital Ambition 2030’ working group to gather feedback on what future learning will be like in 10 years.

“The Fourth Industrial Revolution is a hugely exciting time for the sector,” Struthers adds. “And colleges are working closely with businesses to help them develop the agility and technical skills to respond to these opportunities, including delivering bespoke courses, apprenticeships, and courses in every key sector.”

More than 83,000 employees in Scotland are enrolled in colleges as part of their work and 26 per cent of all students are studying STEM subjects – science, technology, engineering and maths.

In engineering, **Ayrshire College** has seen a 24 per cent rise in uptake over the last three years in Modern Apprenticeships including aerospace, a key sector for the local economy.

“In Ayrshire, we have seen companies move towards advanced manufacturing, which will lead to the need for upskilling of their employees,” says Carol Turnbull, principal of Ayrshire College. “Things like digitalisation, automation and robotics as well as advanced composite manufacture and repair are areas of interest to local employers.”

To meet growing demand for tech professionals in areas such as cyber security, Ayrshire College is developing its digital offering and has delivered digital training to more than 1,500 local employees over the last two years, through the Flexible Workforce Development Fund.

This is a £10m Scottish Government fund, now in its third year, set up to support inclusive economic growth

through upskilling or reskilling of employees. Employers paying the UK Government's Apprenticeship Levy can access up to £15,000 in funding if they pay more than £3m in salaries a year.

Ayrshire College is also helping students start their own businesses.

Bryan Shaw, 25, from New Cumnock in East Ayrshire, graduated from the college last year with Higher National Certificates in both media and photography. He was one of the first students to receive a £5,000 grant from the college's new Enterprising Students Fund, launched in 2019 to help students set up their own venture. Called 1815 Media, Shaw's photography and videography business already has clients including local musicians and a distillery.

"The skills I learned at Ayrshire College progressed not only my skillset in my field, but also my get-up-and-go attitude," Shaw says. "Starting a business is a lot of work and you have to have an active attitude to your work and goals."

Colleges have always been responsive to key issues, for example, by prioritising full-time courses for young people when youth unemployment was unacceptably high, Turnbull continues.

"Colleges are well placed to help Scotland respond to Brexit," she adds. "However, to be able to respond quickly, we need flexibility."

This could include a suspension of some rules on how funding is allocated, a relaxation of targets relating to student numbers and taught hours – and a temporary release from Regional Outcome Agreements. These contain detailed measures relating to groups such as care-experienced learners, learners from poorer areas, and subjects such as STEM and Early Years Education.

"Allowing students to retain benefits while undertaking short, full-time courses would also increase access to education and training," Turnbull adds. "Dialogue with the Scottish Funding Council and Scottish Government around these issues is ongoing and we believe by working together we will be able to ensure colleges continue to be at the heart of inclusive economic growth."

Dundee and Angus College currently has 33 European partners across 28 countries through a range of European-funded projects – and hopes to continue these partnerships.

"These European funding streams have played a major part in contributing to our real estate and facilities, our learning and teaching curriculum and the sharing of best practice – and have funded hundreds of European work and study abroad placements for our students," says Anne Cant, international and marketing manager at Dundee and Angus College.

For students, the opportunities have been life-changing, she adds – raising aspirations and confidence.

"These strong partnerships have also opened up opportunities for reciprocal and commercial projects. Without these programmes, or an equivalent or better-than replacement, it will be difficult for colleges to be financially viable and compete with the ever-changing landscape and provide learning and employability opportunities for those who would benefit most."

Applications from European students are already declining because of uncertainty around residency and fees. Brexit has also stalled a number of large projects locally in the construction industry. This is an important sector for Dundee and Angus College, which delivers construction across its campuses in Arbroath and Kingsway.

In 2015, the college launched a pioneering apprentice programme with Angus Council and local employers to tackle the skills shortage in construction crafts and offer training in geographical areas with low wage rates and high youth unemployment. Dundee City Council joined the initiative in 2017 and there is interest from local authorities including Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Orkney, Fife and Edinburgh.

Called Shared Apprentice Ltd (SAL), the programme helps small and medium-sized businesses to take on apprentices without long-term commitment. It covers the cost of apprentices while at the college, with employers covering the apprentice's wages when they are on site.

"SAL offers Modern Apprenticeships in joinery, painting and decorating, roofing, brickwork, civil engineering and we are looking to expand the provision," explains Gary Gordon, head of curriculum & quality for construction at

Dundee and Angus College.

One of the college's SAL students is be Scotland's first 'EuroApprentice' in 2020 by Erasmus+ – an EU student exchange programme.

"The student will attend his first training session in March in Manchester and travel to Poland in April to meet with other EuroApprentices from other countries, as well as attending a two to three-week placement with one of our partners in summer 2020," Gordon explains.

Colleges are also helping to tackle the climate emergency, according to Colleges Scotland. It says the sector's carbon footprint has dropped 18 per cent in the last two years, and **Forth Valley College's** new £78m Falkirk campus, which opened in January, is designed to be carbon neutral. The college, which also has campuses in Alloa and Stirling, offers more than 750 courses, including through the Scottish Government's Flexible Workforce Development Fund.

United Closures and Plastics (UCP), which makes metal and plastic closures and non-refillable valves for the spirits industry, is one of more than 700 companies in Forth Valley eligible to access up to £15,000 for training through the fund.

Around 200 of UCP's 350 staff have already completed an Institution of Occupational Safety & Health Working Safely one-day training course through Forth Valley College.

"It will allow us to upskill our employees," says Alison Wood, UCP's HR director.

Forth Valley College has a long relationship with UCP through the delivery of Modern Apprenticeships in disciplines including mechanical manufacturing engineering, engineering maintenance and engineering technical support.

Miles Lagan, commercial growth manager for Forth Valley College, says: "By the end of 2020, we will have supported eligible employers to access over £1.5m worth of training through the Flexible Workforce Development Fund for over 6,000 instances of training in areas including first aid, health and safety, health and wellbeing, management and training skills and electrical safety. The fund is an excellent opportunity for local businesses to upskill their workforce in key areas."

Health and social care skills are increasingly in demand and Borders College is growing its training support to NHS Borders, Stirling, Lanarkshire and Dumfries.

"In particular, there has been increased demand for apprenticeships in healthcare support, clinical and non-clinical awards," says Deirdre McKendry, director of business development at **Borders College**. "Our move to provide appropriate upskilling and training is helping to alleviate the NHS recruitment crisis as well as giving current staff the opportunity to upgrade their qualifications."

The college recently launched the Borders College Technology Enhanced Care Hub (BTECH), training facilities featuring mock-home and acute ward classrooms with state-of-the-art equipment. The facility helps current and future health care workers to develop key skills and is part of a collaboration with Dumfries and Galloway College, the NHS and the care sector.

Borders College has also provided training to care organisations including Streets Ahead, a Hawick-based home care provider, and Teen Challenge, a support charity working in 15 locations across the UK.

"Teen Challenge is a registered charity and operates nationally to help young people who have developed life-controlling problems, especially drug and alcohol addictions – and to offer preventative help to those who may be in danger of doing so," McKendry says. "Borders College has supported its manager to complete a Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) in Social Services and Healthcare at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 9, as well as recently completing his SVQ in Management at level 4.

"Members of the staff team at Teen Challenge have also successfully completed Social Services and Healthcare qualifications at SCQF level 7." ■