

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee – Colleges Scotland Submission – 30 January 2025

Introduction

Colleges Scotland is the collective voice for the college sector in Scotland, representing its interests and ensuring that colleges are at the heart of a world class education sector that is recognised, valued and available to all. As the membership body, Colleges Scotland represents all 24 colleges, which deliver both further education and 13% of the provision of all higher education in Scotland.

We welcome the opportunity to provide this submission ahead of joining the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee on 30 January 2025.

Colleges in the International Context

As anchor institutions in their communities, Scotland’s colleges play a vital role in providing education and training opportunities with a diverse range of courses and world-class training facilities. Many colleges utilise and offer their courses and training to international students. The amount of international work being done by colleges varies between institutions across Scotland. This variation is due to numerous factors including institutional priorities, staffing capacity and the respective financial positions of institutions against a financially challenging context for the sector.

There are numerous benefits to college students and staff being given opportunities to learn abroad or improve professional practice by learning from other countries. Historically, colleges were able to be competitive within the international market, however due to visa restrictions put in place in January 2021 colleges are now less attractive, with restrictions placed on hours of work allowed for international students enrolling on a two-year course (10 hours per week) and the inability to bring dependents with them.

In advance of the last UK General Election, Colleges Scotland set out our asks for international work as part of our [manifesto asks](#).

Brexit

The end of freedom of movement between the UK and the EU led to a decline in the number of EU students enrolling onto courses at Scotland’s colleges. From 769 in Academic Year 2018/19 to 410 in 2022/23.

Overseas Students

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Europe (including EU)	503	769	267	305	238	410
International (outwith Europe)	616	867	709	1,012	759	1,140
Rest of UK	843	1,376	1,253	1,800	1,794	2,060

Turing, and loss of Erasmus+

For many colleges the biggest loss in the international space has been the inability to access the Erasmus+ scheme. This led to the loss of well-established partnerships and collaborative working, both domestically and with international institutions. There was also the withdrawal of reciprocal student mobilities. Scottish colleges do have the ability to be involved in Erasmus+ projects, but only as receiving institutions, due to post-Brexit arrangements, which has meant that it is not possible to enable matched mobility from the Scottish institution.

The Turing Scheme which is the UK Government's domestic alternative to Erasmus+ has provided positive outcomes for college learners. With that said, there are significant differences between Erasmus+ and Turing. An example of this difference is the inability to continue and/or create collaborate projects using Erasmus+. Turing has allowed for some partnership working, but not to the extent of Erasmus+, and those partnerships which did exist have had to be discontinued. There is very limited staff mobility included when compared to Erasmus+, there is also less focus on youth and adult mobilities.

Colleges have also raised issues relating to the administration involved, with technical problems related to both UK Government and the outsourcing companies used to manage applications. Moreover, the administrative burden that is a consequence of submitting applications is significant for smaller institutions.

Change to Visa Routes

A change to the visa landscape would be welcomed by the college sector as it would allow an increase in international students. An extension in the number of Student Visas (formerly known as 'the tier 4 visa') available would allow colleges to expand the number of international students coming to Scotland for technical and vocational training and education, moving towards parity of esteem with universities.

Reform of the Student Visa would help colleges become a more attractive option for international students. The current situation means that it is more financially viable to apply to a university place. A two-year HND college course only allows for that student to work 10 hours per week, whereas a similar qualification of two years at a university allows the learner to work for 20 hours. A review of these visa conditions could help Scotland's colleges benefit from attracting international students to their specialist courses, especially in the TVET and skills for a green economy space.

In light of the First Minister's recent comments on the development of a Scottish Graduate Visa, it would be valuable to Scotland's college sector if the Scottish Government could work with the UK Government to help create a differentiated immigration policy which takes into account Scotland's needs and ambitions.

Additionally, if a Scottish Graduate Visa is to be developed then expanding the number of visas available regionally to attract international students who in turn would be able to stay for longer in Scotland after their course of study, aiding demographic and labour shortage issues in some parts of the country. Attracting these students not only adds value to the economy but also to the culture of Scotland.

A change to Student Visa applications could also include a reassessment of the paperwork itself, some colleges have now abandoned them as the administrative burden was too much.

Scottish Education Exchange Programme (SEEP)

The SEEP is assisting colleges to make new international partnerships, as well as strengthen existing ties to overseas institutions. The work being done is immensely valuable in building global

relationships but more importantly it helps knowledge exchange and staff development. The amount of work being carried out across the sector through this scheme has demonstrated that there is a willingness within the sector to be outward looking and create benefits for their local communities. From a standing start eight colleges submitted 11 applications, and all were granted. This funding will benefit not only those colleges who are established in undertaking international work but also give confidence to those institutions who are less experienced in this space.

Going forward, Colleges Scotland is working with Scottish Government officials along with colleges to understand the ambitions of the sector. The increased applications for SEEP funding this academic year has demonstrated that there is desire from colleges to do more in this space. The focus has been on knowledge exchange with overseas institutions, as well as some colleges looking to increase their international business reach.

Further nurturing of these ambitions from Scottish Government, UK Government's Department of Business and Trade, British Council and other stakeholders will help to provide encouragement to the sector to pursue and grow their international work.

Colleges Scotland

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