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## Understanding Change: The impact of lifelong learning policy on Scotland's Colleges

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### Background

The UK and Scottish Governments have both described lifelong learning as an important part of their education and economic strategies, particularly highlighting the key role which the college sector can play in providing lifelong learning opportunities. The Scottish Government's Economic Strategy states that the main way to achieve economic growth in Scotland is to invest in lifelong learning as a means to generate human capital (Scottish Government, 2007). Scotland's colleges are viewed as "pivotal to the delivery of lifelong learning in Scotland" with an important role to play in contributing to Scotland's future economic prosperity and helping to tackle poverty and disadvantage (Scottish Executive, 2006, p 1). However, despite the vital role it plays in providing lifelong learning opportunities, the college sector in Scotland is an under-researched area.

Lifelong learning has long been a matter of critical concern to politicians and policy makers and where there have been gradual shifts in thinking regarding lifelong learning, so too has there been shifts in policy. What began many years ago with the mantra of 'learning to be' (Faure et al, 1972), has developed into 'learning to be productive and employable' (CEC, 2000). This paper argues that the focus of lifelong learning policy in Scotland has gradually shifted its priorities from addressing issues of social justice and personal development to an increasing emphasis on human capital development and employability. This is not to say that there have not always been elements of human capital generation in Scottish lifelong learning policy or that the current Scottish Government has completely abandoned social justice, but rather, that there is now an increased focus on skills development and employability, particularly in the current economic climate. This raises questions regarding the synergy or conflict between policy and practice and it is this potential conflict which this paper seeks to address. This paper seeks to explore the views of senior management in colleges. It focuses on the role assigned to Scotland's colleges in meeting the human capital needs of the local economy and the social capital needs of the local community, investigating the extent to which these twin goals can be achieved simultaneously, or whether unresolved tensions remain.

### Research Questions

This paper is based on a larger research project which began from the following main research question:

- In the education on offer in Scotland's Colleges, what priority is placed on economic and social objectives and what are the tensions between these objectives?

Rather than tackling this broad overall question, this paper will specifically focus on the senior managers' understanding of lifelong learning policy and the extent to which policy changes affect the overall strategies of the college, the curriculum provided and the target groups.

Have recent government initiatives regarding increased school-college links and a drive to generate human capital resulted in any difficulties or tensions in Scotland's colleges?

The following research questions will seek to address this:

- Do colleges emphasise or prioritise economic or social objectives in their strategic plan?
- How are government policy documents understood by senior management and what do they believe the main priorities of the Scottish Government to be?

- To what extent have changes to lifelong learning policy affected the college curriculum and has this caused any tension between the college's mission and values and Scottish Government priorities?

## **Methods**

This paper is based on case studies of three colleges in Scotland. These case studies have been used to gain a picture of the role the colleges play in modern Scottish society and their priorities with regards to economic and social objectives. The institutions were selected to reflect key variables such as geographical location, enrolments by age band, percentage of students from deprived areas and student activity by subject area. The case studies included analysis of college documents, interviews with key informants and members of staff at different levels (senior management, middle management, lecturers and support staff) and focus group interviews with students.

This paper will specifically focus on colleges and their relationship with their local community and government policy. Official sources of information such as college and government policy documents, college websites, promotional material, and interviews with senior college management, will be used to examine the extent to which current lifelong learning policy in Scotland impacts on Scotland's colleges.

## **Frame**

The main theoretical concepts and issues which inform this research include a brief examination of the contested concept of lifelong learning and the global learning culture, particularly focusing on the development of the 'learning society' and the privatisation of education (Ball, 2007). Human capital theory, particularly the work of Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker will be utilised in order to understand the dominant perspectives regarding lifelong learning in modern Scotland. Social capital theory will also be utilised, not as an opposition to human capital theory, but as a more complex way of understanding the elements of trust and social relationships which are essential to the operation of a civil society and to the generation and maintenance of human capital. The work of key theorists in the development of social capital theory such as Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam will be used to provide suitable theoretical background.

## **Research findings**

This paper will shed light on the balance being struck in different institutions between adherence to Scottish Government policy regarding human capital and social capital objectives and any tensions which exist in translating policy to practice. The findings of this study have the potential to contribute to the development of future policy on the role of the college sector in lifelong learning in Scotland.

## **References**

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