

Higher & Further Education: additional funding and a change of approach are required

Concerns have been raised over the chaos engulfing the education system. The failings have been laid bare in the number of colleges and universities getting into financial difficulty, the number of Further Education (FE) courses which have been shut down and college assets sold off.

Dundee University and Dundee and Angus College

Dundee University, one of the city's biggest employers and which plays a central role in shaping the city's future, was found to be headed towards a £35m black hole but David Clegg, Editor of the Courier asked – are Scotland's colleges being left to fail in silence? The headlines are dominated by the financial turmoil at our universities - the Dundee University situation being just one example. But the same crisis is playing out in our colleges, largely out of sight and out of mind.

Their investigation into Dundee & Angus College lays it bare:

- £4.5m already stripped from the budget.
- Another £2.6m in cuts still to come.
- Facilities closed, jobs at risk and courses under threat.

And yet, this is the institution leading one of Dundee's most ambitious regeneration projects - the takeover of the Wellgate Centre to create a new city-centre campus. It's a vision being pursued in the teeth of a funding storm. "This is not just an education story. It's about the skills pipeline for our economy - the lifeline for thousands of school leavers, apprentices and adult learners. We can't allow a sector that underpins regional growth to wither without the debate it deserves."

Dundee and Angus College delivered over 900 courses from introductory level to degree and post graduate studies. It offered courses for people over the age of sixteen, involving school-level qualifications such as Higher-Grade exams, work-based learning, vocational training as well as Further and Higher Education programmes leading to nationally and internationally recognised qualifications including SQA national and higher national certificates and diplomas.

However, Simon Hewitt, the principal of the college said that the further education sector is now being strangled by funding cuts as the institution faces having to axe jobs to balance the books. He also expressed concern at the lack of parity with crisis hit Dundee University during fiscal turbulence. He felt that their concerns over Dundee and Angus College have been heard during national discussions on the issues, but they have been told there are other pressing priorities.

Mr Hewitt said:

"We have a good structure and good people around us. We have vision and we know what we need to do, but the frustration for us is that we are being strangled by a funding system that won't let us innovate, be different, go forward and actually provide".¹

SRUC Elmwood Campus in Fife

In Fife, early in 2024, following concerns over what had been happening at Elmwood college in Cupar, a sub-group of Elie & Earlsferry Community Council submitted a Participation Request to the SRUC in an attempt to get involved in the decision-making process over Elmwood College.² We wished to preserve the college from further reductive moves. We wanted to talk about the need to create a new vision for Elmwood "Elmwood for the Future" which could reverse what we believe had been a **managed decline** of the College and its offerings and seek to improve FE provision in the East Fife area. We believe that this **managed decline** approach started as early as 2014 with the sale of Auchincruive farm, land and buildings. It is our understanding that between **2015–19** SRUC went on to sell 88 assets consisting of swathes of land and property throughout its campuses in Aberdeen, Ayr, Dumfriesshire, Edinburgh, Fife and Inverness.³

In March 2016, the Educational Institute of Scotland wrote to the SRUC Board outlining a number of concerns. It called on the Board to improve the effectiveness of governance and oversight of management at the institution. It also stated that the land disposal program undermines staff confidence and does not seem strategically aligned with the rural consultancy, education and research needs of the institution. The centralised nature of the SRUC is causing harm to the SRUC as a whole and especially to those parts of the organisation outside King's Buildings. It also warned the land disposal program seems random and not strategically thought out with what appears to be asset stripping of the three former FE land-based colleges, leaving these campuses in a weaker position – and in the case of Elmwood, potentially unsustainable.⁴

However, the SRUC which acquired University status in October 2024, in spite of having an operating deficit of £10.8m, and with questions raised by the Scottish Funding Council over the viability of the new Vet school in the deficit situation, continued to asset strip and sell off land at Elmwood College. The farm was sold, and an attempt had been made to sell off the golf course. The golf course had been developed to provide practical teaching experience for students studying greenkeeping, golf studies, golf course

¹. Courier: Dundee and Angus College chief opens up on cuts crisis and 'frustrating' university factor- October 6 2025

² Elie & Earlsferry Community Council website

³ College sell-off deprives West Scotland of Rural Education: Jamie Mann April 6th 2021

⁴ Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) -8th March 2016

management, professional golf and golf facility management. Elmwood Golf Course used to have the FE course, NC Greenkeeping and NC Pro-Golf curriculums delivered on site. However, the FE land-based courses including Golf Course Management and Greenkeeping are now provided on-line or involve apprenticeships. The SRUC was also considering closing the Animal Care Unit, which in November 2023 was assessed as being an excellent sector leading facility. Willie Rennie, MSP for North-East Fife, hit out at the “continued piecemeal erosion” of the site in Cupar.⁵

A great deal of water has flowed under the bridge since then, with continuing tensions over the loss of land-based FE provision at Elmwood College. The Participation Request and Outcome Improvement Process which was submitted by Elie & Earlsferry Community Council and was seeking to improve the outcomes for the students at Elmwood College, was shut down by the SRUC in November 2024 following a 2-hour workshop, with no progress made. The Animal Care Unit at Elmwood was shut down at the end of the academic year in 2025. Today the College is now a shadow of its former self with the main building and student accommodation lying empty and closed down. Student numbers have dropped from over 2,000 to just over a hundred.

Students who attended Animal Care courses at Elmwood are now being taken by bus across Scotland to other sites and those who have been unable to do this for family or other reasons, have had to give up on their courses. Whilst this was followed by an Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) staff vote of no confidence in the SRUC, the justification given by the SRUC for its actions were a lack of government funding and its preference for university degree provision. With this move away from local provision, it would seem that the SRUC focus has now shifted to on-line provision and recruitment overseas from countries such as India, Nigeria and Pakistan.

Yet we feel the focus should be on practical provision of education in Scotland rather than overseas. Scotland is predominantly rural with 98% of its land mass being rural. Farming in Scotland contributes significantly to the economy, with the Total Income from Farming (TIFF) being estimated at £2.2 billion in 2024, yet the land-based workforce is now experiencing severe shortages with the average age being over 50.

The Land-based Learning Review report to Scottish Ministers advised in 2023 that:

Across the Sector, businesses are experiencing workforce shortages and struggling to recruit. Given their importance in terms of food and materials production, addressing the nature and climate crises and supporting rural communities and the economy, it is imperative that we find solutions which attract more entrants, widen the pool of applicants, and increase training opportunities.

⁵ Courier: SRUC confirms closure of Fife animal care college courses amid ‘significant financial challenges’: Feb 25th 2025

There is also a clear need to contribute to the 'Skills delivery landscape' to ensure the effective development of the workforce.

Over time there has been a reduction in the delivery of some of the more expensive practical programs and access for learners has significant regional variation as a result.

Any further reductions in the availability of land-based education and training facilities would be a significant concern to the land-based industries affected and would be very difficult if not impossible to replace.⁶

The golfing industry in Scotland is also a significant contributor to the economy, generating £1.71billion. However, it is our understanding that the St Andrews Links Trust is concerned that there are no or few greenkeeping courses in Scotland and the demand for green keepers is rising as there are more golf courses opening. They had spoken to Elmwood about jointly managing such a course, but their offer was refused by Elmwood/SRUC board.

In view of the massively negative impact on the economy of the current financial situation that colleges and universities find themselves in, we call on the government to review and increase funding provision for both colleges and universities and ensure equal status for college vocational skills training and university degree courses.

1. Doing things differently

1.1 FE and HE provision should be given equal weighting

Audit Scotland's findings which have recently been released show that funding for Further Education has dropped by a fifth in real terms between 2021-22 and 2025-26. Mr Sarwar, the Scottish Labour leader pointed out at First Minister's Questions that this has resulted in a 20% real terms cut to colleges over the last 5 years, with 30,000 Scots getting fewer places and a cash crisis putting jobs and institutions at risk.⁷

The issue was also raised by Scottish Conservative party leader Russel Findlay who said "SNP cuts mean fewer people going to college, learning new skills and advancing their career. Reducing funding also directly harms economic growth".

Mr Sarwar also questioned why apprenticeships and colleges appeared to be of less value to the government than Universities. Whilst the government advised that it is investing via apprenticeships and colleges in the skills of the future, James Withers wrote an

⁶ Commission for the land-based learning review: report to Scottish Ministers: Published 18 January 2023

⁷ Ministers branded snooty and elitist over college cuts: Courier 3 October 2025

independent report in 2023 for parliament's Education Reform Bill 'Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation', he said:

Fundamental to achieving parity of esteem... shared acknowledgement that different pathways are simply different: not better, not worse, just different.

In other words, and to be blunt, I want to consign to the dustbin the outdated view that studying at university is somehow a "better" kind of success.

National policy should recognise that skills are not an alternative to education, but an essential product of learning and training, and give equal value to the various settings and pathways in and through which skills development can occur.

Though James Withers' proposals were used to inform changes to Scotland's Education Bill this year, it seems his underlying message has effectively been consigned to the dustbin

It would seem that is exactly what is happening across the country. A slash and sell approach to college assets and the shutting down of FE courses has been implemented by the SRUC.

An email to the CEO of the Scottish Funding Council – responsible for 'sustaining provision of higher and further education' – raised concerns about SRUC's move away from FE provision and its drive towards undergraduate and post-graduate degrees, with the majority of courses to be provided on-line, received this reply:

In relation to coherent provision, SRUC has advised us that while most students in Animal Care courses find employment, much of this is in lower-paid, part-time roles, and progression into professional posts, such as veterinary nursing, is low.

These outcomes are part of the context SRUC considers when making decisions about curriculum and estates planning.

This leaves the burning questions:

- **what will result from the loss of this vital Further Education from rural areas**
 - 98% of Scotland is classified rural (70% remote) and 80% is used for some form of agriculture**
- **these skills cannot be taught online; as local post-school learning opportunities are removed, we wonder why there is a mental health crisis?**

It is also of note that according to the research firm Cengage, just 30% of this year's University graduates have found a job in their field. It isn't hard to work out why that is. AI is accelerating at such a rapid pace that it is now replacing much of the work done by new graduates. In effect, the bots have taken out the first rung in the career ladder leaving

many graduates struggling to find their way into employment. The entry level work on which careers were built is being replaced by super smart computer programs that are cheaper to run.⁸

1.2 Additional funding is required

With the current dire financial state of the universities and colleges and the enormous negative impact that this is having on the economy, we believe it is extremely doubtful the government's claim that Scots households would be £10,000 a year better off in the future will come to pass.

In 2023-24 the Scottish government held a financial reserve (Scotland Reserve) of £700million. This reserve allows the government to manage spending and handle unforeseen financial challenges. Any unallocated funding can be moved to the reserve each year and drawn down as required.

The Scottish government's budget is now larger overall than before 2016. Following devolution Scotland has a more progressive income tax system with additional sources of income. It now includes non-domestic rate (NDR) funding plus revenue from the Scottish Crown estate. The Scottish government can also borrow if required.

We feel that it is imperative that some of this reserve funding is utilised to relieve the financial crisis that universities and colleges have found themselves in through a reduction over the years in government funding.

A poorly educated Scotland, compounded by the loss of critically needed land-and-food-based skills. will have a greatly diminished future. Without a good education system geared to the Scottish population and its specific needs it is likely that Scotland, once heralded as having one of the best education systems in the world, will deteriorate into a third world economy and move towards economic decline.

Conclusion

Whilst there have been concerns over the management of both Dundee University and the SRUC, additional funding would enable these institutions to continue to provide education whilst the local management issues are resolved. It would also enable the institutions such as Dundee and Angus college to follow through on their vision to innovate, be different and deliver.

⁸ City View: Matthew Lynn - the Bots take out the career ladder.

In addition, the recommendations from James Withers require to be implemented:

that different pathways are simply different: not better, not worse, just different. In other words, and to be blunt, I want to consign to the dustbin the outdated view that studying at university is somehow a “better” kind of success.

Also, in the future with bots taking over most of the work done by new university graduates, the expectation will be that students with vocational skills training will be highly sought after.

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Ashley Cramb: ex SRUC Animal Care Unit student

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