

The Greater Manchester Colleges Group submission to the RSA City Growth Commission

1. Introduction

The Greater Manchester Colleges Group (GMCG) comprising the ten general further education colleges in the city region, has very much welcomed the City Growth Commission's inquiry into how best to enable England's cities to drive growth and respond to the challenges we will all face in the future.

The GMCG exists because we want to work together to turn strategy into action, words into work opportunities and create life chances for all the people of Greater Manchester.

We endorse and fully support the position outlined within the joint response submitted by the Greater Manchester (GM) Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and Combined Authority. However we would want to emphasise in particular the vital role that further education and skills plays in the delivery of our shared ambition for the people of Greater Manchester.

The creation by the Greater Manchester Authorities of a collective strategy and innovative way of working has been in itself a positive step forward for the Greater Manchester city region and its ability to achieve its potential. But as was educed in their submission, this success has actually masked what remains a failing in the current national system with its rigidly enforced central mantras and approaches.

For our part, we have striven to play a positive part on behalf of the further education (FE) sector in Greater Manchester as a key partner of the GM Authorities and a key enabler of the GM Strategy. But it is fair to say that the role fulfilled by the FE sector overall receives less attention from policy makers and politicians in general than that of schools and universities. Ironically, within GM, with its rich history as a centre of trade and crafts, it is precisely this overlooked role that will once again prove essential if the city region is to achieve its potential.

We hope that the format in which we offer our comments is helpful: it is intended to be positive and forward-looking. Rather than repeat what has already been submitted in response to the original individual questions, and with which we are in agreement, we concentrate on those elements where we believe the further education sector has a unique ability to contribute in the development of a multi-polar growth model.

2. Colleges that know what works

The issue of human skills – their accessibility, acquisition and capacity to develop in step with employer need and technological advance – underpins every discussion around growth and reform, and impacts directly or indirectly on every issue raised as a part of it.

It is therefore fair to conclude that, without the delivery of a coherent skills policy across the city region then overall, GM will underperform.

So, to drive growth within our cities there needs to be a coherent skills policy. In considering the shape, nature and scale of education and training provision as part of that, there are four considerations that have to be balanced in any given situation :-

Learner responsiveness – education and training opportunities should recognise the importance of learner choice, in terms of the curriculum offered, its location, and modes of delivery. For example, this should acknowledge that learners living and growing up in Greater Manchester may have wider ambitions than the local economy provides, but that alignment with local opportunities are also essential to promote growth and employment.

Labour market and employer responsiveness – provision should recognise the growth sectors of the economy and the alignment of skills provision with business growth and employment opportunities now and in the future. This should acknowledge the specific opportunities within Greater Manchester.

Efficient use of public resources – it is important to use resources effectively and in a coordinated manner, in order to maximise their impact. However, they should also be effectively used, to support quality, accessibility, and, on occasion, change.

Educational excellence – the quality of provision should be high, both in terms of the practice of teaching, learning and assessment, and the specialist and generic facilities required to support this. This is increasingly the lesson of educational improvement, and it requires a very strong focus on improving the practice in the workshop and classroom. This is not just a specialist “professional” discussion for those in education, but increasingly occupies a central role in understanding “what works”.

These considerations are not always consistent with each other. It is possible, for example, to pursue a curriculum which is so focused on learner demand, that alignment with the local labour market is insufficient. Recognising this and acting upon it, is an essential step in creating the climate for growth and reform.

3 – Colleges that work together to deliver growth

From this set of principles, we believe some conclusions relating to the overall shape and nature of provision follow. These form the basis for the joint development of responsive strategies which can support economic growth and the distribution of its benefits.

Explicit in these strategies needs to be the current and potential contribution of the region’s further education colleges to up-skilling, to employer engagement, to tackling the issue of NEETs and of acting as a facilitator of economic growth through skills acquisition.

Here it is our intention in future to focus much more on impact measurement, and our local authorities will be one of the key recipients of such data. We believe that the sharing of data is the first step towards a more organic process of strategy formulation between the GM authorities and the FE sector, in which each party plays a role at strategy formation stage.

4 – Colleges that are community assets

We believe that colleges have a vital role to play in supporting growth within cities. In part this follows from our unique role within the education and training landscape.

In Greater Manchester, we deliver the widest range of provision to 128,000 learners each year, from young people through to adults, from entry level provision to postgraduate qualifications, and across a spectrum for the most disadvantaged and the most able. Some of our provision is delivered in classrooms and workshops “on campus”, but a considerable proportion is in the workplace.

We have wide networks of public and private sector partners and customers. We work with over 10,000 businesses and support over 5,000 of their staff through Apprenticeships and training.

Strategically we are partly accountable to the world of “education” and partly to the world of “business and skills”. We have a mixture of public and private funding, and consequently share the challenges of both sectors.

We work in the heart of our communities, often among the most disadvantaged, often with those who have underachieved at school. In GM this is a considerable group, and the priority in terms of worklessness, welfare reform, public service reform and the rebalancing of the economy. We work to understand the labour market and employment opportunities in the city region and beyond, and establish our curriculum offer so it enables a journey into employment for local residents. We provide a strong oversight of the strengths and weaknesses of the system as a whole; identifying the obstacles to progression, the links to work and higher education and the different pathways that are required for different individuals.

Over 11,000 of Greater Manchester’s college students progress onto university each year. More than 5,000 study higher level qualifications in their local colleges.

We exist within an education and training marketplace. Competition for numbers comes from schools, sixth forms, and other public and private training providers. However, colleges fulfil a unique role within this marketplace. Firstly, the fundamental mission of each and every college is to be rooted in meeting the needs of their local community. This means that although profitability is important, it is not the primary motivation in making decisions about what provision to run, for whom and where. Colleges contribute a significant amount of free time and effort to strategic planning, partnership working and meeting need for the greater good.

Second, colleges provide a broad and balanced curriculum. This is not just measured in terms of profitability – but learner need and accessibility. So we run courses because there is a wider economic or social need, rather than because they are necessarily profitable. In this respect, we are a guarantor that each and every locality has access to the broad curriculum needed to ensure there are pathways to higher level achievement, work and further learning.

Third, we believe we differ from other providers in the education and training marketplace, because we have a permanent accountability back to our locality, and our property, investments and resources (physical and human) are community assets. When surpluses are made through the delivery of provision, colleges reinvest this money back into the communities to which they are accountable, both in terms of physical facilities and human resources.

This position enables us to make a unique contribution to both our local areas and the city region as a whole. We are permanent partners in addressing the education, training and skills challenges of Greater Manchester.

Total added income created by the GMCG member colleges was approximately equal to 5.1% of the total economic output of the Greater Manchester Area in 2011-12 and represented roughly 129,501 average wage jobs. EMSI: March 2014

5 - Economic success to be broadly based

Greater Manchester has world-class assets and world-class potential. It is both true and deserving of widespread recognition that in key aspects of economic, social and cultural life, Greater Manchester is able to compete on the world stage: academically, scientifically, entrepreneurially, culturally and in sport. It is also true that it is within key 21st century growth sectors that the region's future economic success will be largely based: creative and media, financial services, leisure, biosciences, other technological areas. However, we believe that it needs to be acknowledged that none of these sectors will achieve their full potential without the participation of our resident workforce and potential workforce in them – at all levels, not merely at the higher levels.

If growth is only described in terms of top-level jobs, academic excellence, the knowledge economy, cultural capital, graduate headcounts and so on, this could give a false and unintended impression. It is our view that growth will be realised by attending to the skills required for the vast majority of jobs and the vast majority of the workforce.

We hope that these comments are helpful and an aid to your considerations. We would of course be happy to discuss any of the views expressed in this response in more detail with you at any stage.

On behalf of the Greater Manchester Colleges Group

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