

Post-school education and skills reform: Audit Scotland report

Introduction

UNISON members work in a wide variety of roles within the college and post-school education system, and in roles supporting the tertiary education sector, including in Skills Development Scotland.

The Scottish government has embarked on the Post-schools Education and Skills Reform (PSESR) programme to reform the sector. Audit Scotland has published a report on PSESR so far which highlights several failings. This briefing summarises the findings of the report in the context of the Scottish government's public service reform agenda (established in its recent programme for government (PfG)) and sets out UNISON's position on what is needed to safeguard the future of Scotland's post-school education system.

Context

Audit Scotland's report recognises the significant challenges facing the post-school education and skills sector, including financial sustainability and changing economic and employer demand. To address these challenges, the Scottish government set out a programme of reform to the system. The PSESR programme comes as the Scottish government is embarking on its concerning public service reform strategy, which seeks to reform public services through automation and workforce reduction. Yet as Audit Scotland point out, the lack of a clear plan for PSESR means it is "unclear how the outcomes align with wider government priorities for reform".

The many problems this report highlights with the PSESR programme should be a warning about what happens when reform is done without proper planning, and is done to services and workers rather than with them.

The reform programme

The programme consists of five projects to be delivered by 2032.

- Simplification of the funding body landscape
- Skills planning - introducing a Scottish government-led national approach to skills planning and working with partners to strengthen regional approaches
- Apprenticeships – reforming the apprenticeship model, targeted at priority areas of the economy and public sector
- Reviewing post-school qualifications
- Improving careers support

The report found that meaningful progress can only be seen for the first project, simplifying funding. This is largely due to the Tertiary Education Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Act. The Act set in law that funding for tertiary courses would be delivered by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), which would also be responsible for reporting on the financial sustainability of the sector. The Scottish government also announced that the SFC would be responsible for apprenticeships, previously the remit of Skills Development Scotland. This is a major transfer of responsibility, and the number of staff who will be TUPE



KEY POINTS:

- **Audit Scotland has found several problems with the Scottish government's programme to reform post-school education**
- **Key problems with the programme include a lack of planning, slow progress, and a lack of engagement with the organisations being reformed**
- **The post-school education reform programme comes as the Scottish government begins its broader public service reform strategy**



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transferred to SFC is still not confirmed. The transfer raises wider questions about the future role of SDS. Whilst ministers have confirmed apprenticeships will transfer to SFC, the long-term role and remit of SDS following the transfer remains unclear.

Problems with PSESR

- Planning – the report highlights a failure to plan and measure progress across nearly all parts of the programme.
- Progress – aside from funding simplification, little progress has been made in the programme.
- Governance and risk – the report found weaknesses in governance, and that risk management arrangements were not sufficient
- Understanding – the programme board found there was no shared understanding of what the outcome of the reform should be, creating uncertainty for learners and colleges, and for organisations such as Skills Development Scotland and their staff

Stakeholder engagement and workforce

The report found serious problems with the programme's lack of engagement with important partners, staff, and learners. Until recently, Skills Development Scotland (SDS) were not a part of the reform project board. The report recommends that a more consistent approach to engaging with "learners and industry" is developed, but does not make a robust recommendation to include staff voice in PSESR. Post-school education is the staff who deliver it. Staff are the ones who know best what is, and what isn't, working in the sector. Their voices must be at the heart of any meaningful reform programme.

Funding

The reform programme does not commit to increasing funding for the sector. As the report highlights, there has been a 20% real terms reduction in funding for colleges between 2021/22 and 2025/26. In the year to March 2026, the further education workforce shrank by 3.3% – the biggest reduction across the public sector. Further figures relating to the shrinking workforce were included in the Scottish government's spending review as evidence of "efficiencies" - at April 2025, colleges had a 9% workforce reduction, equating to a cumulative reduction in staff of 1,200 since 2014.

UNISON approach

Colleges both train tomorrow's skilled workers, and employ today's skilled workers, at the heart of communities across Scotland. Reform to the sector is welcome, but must be done with staff, learners, communities, and partner organisations like SDS rather than to them. Any reform must come along with adequate funding, and include proper workforce planning for Scotland's public services and for economic needs including skills for the Just Transition.

The recent PfG confirmed how significant the Scottish government's reform agenda (which is a cuts agenda) is for public services. It set out that all public bodies will be reviewed "for efficiency" and opportunities would be explored for merger. UNISON's position is that public service reform must be in keeping with the values of democracy, partnership, fairness, investment and excellence in public services. This report makes it very clear that this reform programme has fallen far short of this, and is a warning for what could be to come for public services.

Action for branches

- Circulate this briefing to your members working in post-school education
- Encourage your colleagues to join UNISON – there has never been a more important time to join

Additional reading

- [Post-school education and skills reform, Audit Scotland report](#)
- [UNISON Scotland briefing: Scottish Government Public Service Reform Strategy](#)
- [Scottish Government Spending Review 2026](#)
- [UNISON Scotland briefing: Public service reform update](#)
- [UNISON Scotland briefing: Public service reform in local government](#)
- [Scottish government programme for government: 2026](#)



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