Colleges

In the period between 2012 and 2016, Education Scotland undertook 36 external reviews of Scotland's colleges. College reviews were underpinned by 100 evaluative Annual Engagement visits across all colleges.

The transformation to a regional configuration through the creation of large multi-campus colleges, along with new regional Outcome Agreements and public sector funding constraints, have together presented a significant set of challenges for the college sector to address. They have also presented important new opportunities. While colleges have made some progress with implementation of Curriculum for Excellence, there is more to be done. The learner population attending college has changed, with a shift towards full-time programmes and an increased number of 15-18 year-old learners.

Inspectors identified a number of strengths which are evident within the college sector. In particular, colleges have well-developed arrangements to gather learner views. Learners are represented well at all levels within colleges and use a range of opportunities to contribute effectively to decision-making and development of college strategy.

Overall, attainment rates on full-time college programmes have improved. The majority of full-time learners successfully complete their college course.

Going forward there is a need for colleges to focus on improving outcomes for learners aged 15-18 on full-time courses, as their success rates are amongst the lowest.

How well are learners progressing and achieving relevant, high-quality outcomes?

Overall, attainment rates on full-time college programmes have improved. The majority of full-time learners successfully complete their college course. Pass rates for Higher Education programmes tend to be higher than Further Education programmes. Across the sector, almost half of learners on full-time college programmes are aged 15-18 years. However, success rates for this group are amongst the lowest. This age group also has the highest number of learners withdrawing from their programme prior to completion, and the highest number completing with partial success. Inspectors identified some colleges who do not yet have in place robust mechanisms to identify learners who are most at risk of withdrawal and some were reactive rather than proactive. As a result, some learners did not receive early enough intervention to help them resolve issues affecting their learning.

Inspectors found that college provision was generally designed well. It meets a diverse range of learner needs, including young people with a range of additional support needs. Almost all colleges offered programmes across a wide range of subject areas. Many achieved external accreditation for the arrangements to support young people. We saw good examples of colleges working closely with social work departments and local schools to share information to support vulnerable learners.

How effective are college learning and teaching processes?

We noted that almost all colleges planned the curriculum well. They worked effectively with a range of external partners and were represented well on key planning groups within their regions. Increasingly, colleges drew on '*Skills Investment Plans'*[15] produced by Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and feedback from industry bodies to influence and inform strategic planning of provision. Through the development of a shared vision and understanding of the needs of learners, we have observed colleges working collaboratively to anticipate and accommodate the needs of both the local and national economy.

Inspectors have judged that, across the college sector, progress with implementation of Curriculum for Excellence varied too much. Colleges are expanding their senior phase offer to meet the needs of young people. As a result, an increasing number of vocational programmes were being delivered across a wide range of subject areas. However, we have identified that most colleges do not identify clearly enough how senior phase entitlements for learners will be developed during programme delivery. There is still more work to be done to ensure programmes provide all young people with meaningful work-related experiences. Consequently, some learners did not benefit from direct experience of the world of work to support them in developing skills for employability.

A few colleges have started to deliver Foundation Apprenticeships, which include the piloting of shared delivery models with local schools and employers. Although at an early stage in the pilot, we have found that these models are leading to better integrated provision and a more rounded vocational experience for young learners, particularly in relation to the requirements of the world of work.

The development of skills for learning, life and work was embedded in the curriculum in almost all colleges. Inspectors observed learners being encouraged by staff to reflect regularly on the development of these skills and track their progress during their programme. In most programmes, staff supported learners well to make connections between their classroom learning and the world of work. In the majority of classes inspectors observed, staff used questioning techniques effectively to check learner understanding. They provided learners with helpful, written and oral feedback on what they have to do to improve or further extend their knowledge. This helped learners to reflect on their progress.

Inspectors highlighted that colleges used digital technologies effectively to support and enhance learning and teaching. Almost all have well-developed Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) that enabled learners to study independently and access resources outwith formal lessons. Teaching staff used VLEs well to support approaches to ongoing assessment, provide access to learning materials, and enable learners to collaborate on learning activities and tasks. Many colleges have well developed arrangements for internet access. As a result, we saw learners who were supported to use their own devices such as tablets and smartphones in their learning.

Evidence from our reviews shows that college staff and SDS career coaches provided comprehensive guidance services to help ensure that learners in the senior phase were kept informed about next steps in their learning or routes to employment. A few colleges made very effective use of My World of Work[16] to raise awareness of a wide range of opportunities with learners. However, the potential of this service has not yet been fully realised across the college sector as a whole.

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[15] *'Skills Investment Plans'* give a picture of the economic and labour market situation, trends in skills and qualification supply and employers' perspectives on the big skills issues affecting sector growth
[16] Web service to support effective career planning

How well are learners engaged in enhancing their own learning and the work and life of their college?

Inspectors found that colleges frequently had well-developed arrangements in place to gather learner views. Learners were represented well at all levels within colleges and used a range of opportunities effectively to contribute to decision-making and development of college strategy. Where learner engagement was highly effective, colleges had a culture of engagement, considered learners to be partners, and valued their contribution.

Overall, learners were found to value the support they received from college staff very highly. They welcomed the opportunity to learn theory alongside practical skills and undertook work-based experiences to help them develop skills for employment. They enjoyed the social aspects of college life and the contextualisation of college programmes that focus on a particular vocational area that interests them. Younger learners benefited from the supportive culture of colleges and the opportunity to learn alongside peers of all ages.

How well are the colleges led and how well are they enhancing the quality of their services for learners and stakeholders?
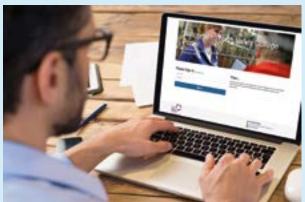
Leadership in colleges has undergone a significant period of change over the last three years. The sector has experienced a very substantial loss of staff expertise and experience, particularly at middle and senior management levels. The scale of the number of staff undertaking new roles at senior and middle management levels is significant. We have identified that the effect of mergers has resulted in staff across multiple campuses needing to adapt to new ways of working, such as applying revised quality arrangements and adhering to new communication and reporting arrangements.

While, overall, inspectors have found that the leadership of colleges is effective in securing improvements for learners, we have noted that a few colleges were experiencing challenges in relation to leadership which may impact negatively on learner progress and outcomes if they are not addressed. Almost all colleges we reviewed engaged well with a wide range of external partners, including local employers and secondary schools. They made good use of these relationships to plan vocational career pathways and support young people to make the transition from school. However, in a few colleges, joint planning of provision between college and partners is not yet sufficiently robust to support fully-developed regional strategic approaches.

We found that colleges generally used self-evaluation well to reflect on all aspects of activity and support action-planning for improvement. This has been particularly evident in colleges which have not experienced a merger as a result of regionalisation. However, where merger has resulted in the formation of new, larger institutions, college staff have experienced challenges in the development and implementation of new college-wide arrangements for self-evaluation. Team-working across and between senior and operational managers has on occasions proved difficult and in some cases has impacted negatively on the overall quality of self-evaluation and action plans for improvement.

Many colleges have identified the need to improve learner success rates for learners on full-time Further Education programmes as a priority. We found that, where course team meetings focused specifically on retention and attainment for learners aged 15-18 years, performance indicators had improved significantly. However, most colleges do not yet analyse the performance of learners in the senior phase as a discrete group. This limits the ability of course teams to identify actions for improvement which are specific to the needs of learners aged 15-18 years on full-time college programmes.

Supporting transition to positive destinations for school leavers through effective data sharing

Partnership working between Forth Valley College and the local authority has made significant improvements to transition planning arrangements for school pupils in the senior phase of Curriculum for Excellence. The schools data sharing portal supports partners to track, manage and support transition to college programmes by providing direct access to real-time information about the application process for each pupil. School staff are enabled to react quickly and provide tailored support for individual pupils in, for example, preparing for interviews, arranging release from school, planning travel to college, attending interviews, or achieving entry conditions. This enables school staff to provide targeted assistance and support pupils to identify an alternative positive destination. Greater analysis of data by both the college and local authority is helping partners to identify trends and support joint planning arrangements for sharing of good practice between schools. The college has also identified those programmes where school pupils are less successful in obtaining a place. This has enabled the college to review recruitment processes for these programmes and remove any unintended barriers to access.

Embedding entrepreneurship and enterprise in the curriculum

Staff in North Highland College recognised the promotion of skills in entrepreneurship and enterprise is particularly important in communities experiencing economic change. The development of these skills is deemed a key priority to encourage young people to create their own employment opportunities and contribute to the economy of the local area. This is achieved by a number of interventions which ensure that every college-based learner has the opportunity to acquire these skills, regardless of their vocational specialism. A calendar of events supports learners to participate in activities such as essential skills development, career management skills workshops and visiting employers. In addition, all full-time programmes incorporate an enterprise project which is tailored to each curricular area. Many of these activities are coordinated and promoted by a '*Scottish Institute for Enterprise'* intern who manages and promotes enterprise opportunities across the college. Staff enterprise champions work with voluntary champions from the learner body to ensure that these activities are supported and promoted effectively to learners.