

College sector overview report 2022 to 2023

His Majesty’s Inspectors of Education (HMIE) engagement in colleges for the academic year 2022 to 2023.

This publication is also available on the Education Scotland website at: [HM Chief Inspector reports and guidance](https://education.gov.scot/inspection-and-review/hm-chief-inspector-reports-and-guidance/college-sector/).



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# Foreword

I am pleased to present this summary of findings from our engagement with Scotland’s colleges over the academic year 2022 to 2023, offering a broad view of the educational experiences and achievements within colleges. These insights are particularly important at a time when the education sector is navigating the complexities of a rapidly changing world. They underscore the importance of adaptability, resilience, and innovation in meeting the diverse needs of our student body.

The dedication and adaptability demonstrated across colleges, in revising the curriculum offer, embracing different teaching methodologies, and expanding support services, have laid a robust foundation for enhancing learner attainment and progression. These efforts reflect the commitment to improving educational quality and preparing learners for future challenges and opportunities.

Yet the path to educational excellence is one of continuous evolution and challenge. The changes and challenges that are testing all of us, especially in recent times, underscore the need for continual adaptation and improvement. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, has tested resilience and creativity, particularly in maintaining the quality of practical learning experiences. It has also brought to light the changing needs and demographics of our learner population, highlighting areas where efforts must be intensified.

The landscape of our learner population is evolving. With shifts in enrolment patterns, it’s clear that our educational offerings must be as dynamic and diverse as learners themselves.

Despite the hurdles, a significant number of learners achieve their goals, attesting to their determination and the support they receive. However, we must strive to enhance completion rates and ensure that every learner has the support they need to succeed, particularly in these challenging times.

The variance in learner experiences across different colleges and subject areas highlights the importance of a holistic and tailored approach to education. Recognising and addressing these differences is key to fostering an environment where all students can thrive.

While data and performance insights are valuable, the focus should be on translating this knowledge into actionable strategies that address the specific needs and aspirations of learners.

The changing demographic trends and the lessons learned from the pandemic underscore the need for flexible and responsive educational models. Innovation in curriculum design and delivery is essential to meet the diverse needs of our student body.

By embracing change, focusing on the needs of our learners, and fostering a supportive and dynamic learning environment, we can navigate the challenges ahead and ensure that every learner feels supported and achieves success.

Our common goal is to enhance the education of learners. By sharing these findings, we hope to support the ongoing improvement of high-quality provision in colleges. The path ahead will undoubtedly present challenges. As we move forward, let this report be a catalyst for discussion and positive change to ensure that every student is equipped with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to succeed in an ever-evolving world.

**Janie McManus**

His Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education

# Introduction

HM Inspectors, on behalf of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), provide independent external assurance, support and challenge to Scotland’s colleges on the quality of provision and services. This report highlights positive practice and aspects for improvement across the college sector. The report also includes analysis of the latest available college performance data (for academic year (AY) 2021 to 2022). Importantly, we hope that it will also inform future arrangements to support improvement in college provision.

# Methodology

HM Inspectors evaluated the performance of the college sector through link HM Inspector engagement, thematic external reviews and a programme of external evaluation visits. They worked collaboratively with the college sector and SFC to plan and carry out visits to all of Scotland’s colleges during AY 2022 to 2023. They carried out annual engagement visits (AEVs) in 22 colleges where HM Inspectors had seen satisfactory progress being made against improvement priorities and no aspects of performance required further exploration.

They carried out progress visits (PVs) in five colleges that HM Inspectors had indicated needed further progress against improvement priorities and where aspects of performance required further exploration.

During AEVs and PVs, a team of HM Inspectors, associate assessors (AAs) and student team members (STMs) spoke to college leaders, staff, learners and other stakeholders. They evaluated the progress colleges were making towards their own improvement targets and their impact on learner recruitment, retention, attainment, and progression. They also identified examples of highly effective practice. These will be shared with the sector and key stakeholders, in partnership with the College Development Network (CDN).

Link HM Inspectors also worked closely with all colleges to build capacity and provide support and challenge. Intelligence gathered through ongoing engagement helped to inform the focus of external evaluation approaches for each college and identify common themes and aspects for improvement across the wider sector. Similarly, the findings of thematic reviews have contributed to this report.

# Findings

Sixteen colleges have made satisfactory progress towards their targets for improvement. Eleven colleges need to make further improvement to the quality of provision and/or outcomes for learners.

## Strengths

All colleges prioritised the needs of local, national and regional stakeholders in planning and updating their curriculum offer. Overall, curriculum teams worked well with partners to design programmes that meet the various needs of prospective learners.

Most curriculum teams worked well together to plan their curriculum to provide engaging experiences for learners from the start of programmes.

Almost all colleges had invested in their learning facilities to ensure that learners have access to vocationally relevant resources and are therefore well prepared to progress to further study or employment. These significant vocational resources provide learners with hands-on experience in current workplace environments.

Almost all college managers make good use of performance dashboards to analyse performance data and identify what they need to do to improve learner outcomes.

All college and curriculum managers worked well with industry partners to enhance and widen progression pathways to employment. Curriculum teams worked flexibly and swiftly, internally and with educational partners, to adapt provision to ease progression to the next level of study.

Most colleges responded well to the recent decline in learner demand for full-time programmes and worked quickly to adapt programmes to design and provide more short, part-time provision.

All colleges took good account of the effect of the pandemic on new and potential learners. They recognised that many applicants, particularly school leavers, were underconfident about learning in a new environment and took action to alleviate anxieties.

All colleges experienced a significant increase in the number of learners seeking support for mental health and wellbeing, and almost all support teams enabled learners and staff to access support services online or face-to-face.

In most colleges, staff implemented a range of helpful approaches and interventions to support learners at risk of withdrawing early from their programme. However, it is too early to assess their impact on learner retention.

## Recommendations

The following are recommendations to support the college sector to improve rates of learner successful completion, particularly at FE level:

Colleges should:

* take steps to respond to the impact of the changing nature of the college learner population on successful completion rates
* strengthen staff engagement in self-evaluation and the use of learner feedback to support improvement
* work to reduce rates of learner withdrawal from full-time programmes
* address the significant variation in, and in some cases very low rates of, learner attainment across a number of individual colleges and subject areas.

SFC should:

* build on its work in supporting colleges to address the widening gap in attainment for learners from key groups including care-experienced learners, learners from an ethnic minority background, learners with a disability, and younger learners
* work with colleges to help them to address the impact of the significant increase in the number of learners who require additional support, including mental health and wellbeing

Scottish Government, SFC and colleges should ensure clear and accessible information for learners on the financial support available for those who need it to enable them to continue with college education.

# Recruiting learners

## Planning and updating the curriculum

All colleges prioritised the needs of local, national, and regional stakeholders to update and plan the curriculum offer. Curriculum teams worked well with industry and education partners to design programmes that meet the various needs of prospective learners. These included employed learners, carers and those with additional barriers or responsibilities.

Most colleges adapted their curriculum offer to accommodate demand from school-age young people to attend vocational programmes.

The number of learners applying for full-time programmes has decreased while the number applying for part-time study has increased. Most colleges responded well to this shift and worked quickly to adapt programmes to design and provide more short, part-time provision. However, in some colleges, it was still a work in progress. Teaching departments had not yet adapted their programmes sufficiently. As a result, some programmes did not meet learner needs well enough. This contributed to learners withdrawing from their courses.

## Promotion of provision

Colleges have worked hard to ensure that promotion of provision is targeted, accessible and effective in reaching prospective learners. This includes engaging more closely with schools and community partners to highlight and explain the range of learning options and progression pathways.

Most colleges improved and extended their use of social media to better target specific groups including school-age young people and employed adults.

Teaching departments used labour market information (LMI) and regional skills data to identify local career pathways. They communicated these to potential learners, parents and carers.

In the last year, colleges recruited more learners from deprived backgrounds, care-experienced learners, learners with a disability and learners from ethnic minorities. However, retention and attainment for these learner groups declined overall in 2021 to 2022.

## Supporting prospective learners from enquiry to enrolment

All colleges took into account the effect of the pandemic on new and potential learners. They recognised that many applicants, particularly school leavers, were underconfident about learning in a new environment and took action to alleviate anxieties. This included hosting helpful sessions for applicants to meet staff, learn about the range of support available and find out more about the content of programmes to help them make informed choices.

Many curriculum teams engaged frequently with successful applicants before they started their programmes. This ongoing communication helped to build positive relationships between learners and staff and helped teaching and support teams to address any issues in advance of programmes starting.

Some colleges offered short online courses to help new learners to develop their digital literacy skills. A few used artificial intelligence to provide translation services for learners who first language is not English, which helped them to engage with the digital content of their programmes confidently. However, a number of colleges had not gathered sufficient information about learner digital skill levels to be able to offer them support before they start their programmes.

Staff ensured that application and recruitment processes encouraged learners to disclose any additional support requirements. Departments such as admissions, finance and pastoral support worked well with teaching departments to put support in place at the start of programmes to ease transition. However, some colleges did not receive the information from secondary schools that they needed to identify and implement support for individual young people. This made starting college challenging and stressful for these some school-age learners.

Many colleges did not have arrangements in place to follow up applicants who had not proceeded with their application or who had only partially submitted their application. Staff therefore did not know why these prospective learners had not completed the application process.

## Supporting learners to access the right programmes

Most colleges used selection approaches that helped them place learners on programmes that aligned to their needs and aspirations. From their initial application, colleges gave learners the flexibility to transfer their application to a more appropriate level or type of programme.

Teaching staff expressed concerns that not all learners had the literacy, numeracy or digital skills they needed to effectively access their programmes. This, coupled with the fall in learner success rates, underscores the need for colleges to examine their approaches to recruitment and selection. It is crucial to ensure that learners are supported effectively to access programmes that are aligned to their abilities and skills.

The number of applications to full-time programmes at both FE and higher education (HE) levels have declined across most subject areas. This is partly due to a decrease in the number of young people in the Scottish population and due to an increase in the number of school leavers proceeding directly to university. This decline in numbers has meant that some colleges have stopped some programmes that were no longer financially viable. The range of provision on offer for learners has therefore reduced.

## Arrangements for improving recruitment

Almost all colleges had strengthened collaboration between curriculum and support teams to improve recruitment approaches and support equity of access to provision for all learners. The improvements included adjustments to recruitment materials to barriers for applicants declaring a disability, those experiencing financial hardship or those whose first language is not English.

Some colleges used application analysis and other information such as data from Skills Development Scotland (SDS) on progression from school to post-school provision to examine recruitment patterns and understand the reasons for partial applications. However, a number of colleges did not understand the reasons for the decline in applications enough to inform future planning.

# Learner retention

## Planning and updating the curriculum

All colleges retained many of the positive approaches and processes to teaching the curriculum that they had developed during the periods of campus closure to engage learners and support their retention. College managers encouraged curriculum teams to be creative when developing educational content. Most curriculum teams managed hybrid learning well.

Most curriculum teams worked well together to plan a curriculum that provided engaging experiences for learners from the start of programmes. This included devising induction activities that showed new learners how to make use of resources that were available through teaching departments and centralised college facilities.

Almost all colleges highlighted that many learners, particularly those entering college programmes directly from school, did not have sufficient confidence or learning and study skills to be able to engage fully in college programmes. Some teaching departments supported these new learners, learners who required additional support with learning, and learners who required support with social or behavioural skills well. They engaged curriculum teams in designing activities that supported learners to gain confidence in learning and working with others. However, this was not consistent and a number of colleges had not updated the curriculum sufficently to fully meeet the needs of all learners.

Curriculum staff consulted regularly with employers and industry representatives to align the curriculum to current and emerging industry practice in the local areas. In almost all colleges, staff teams drew on their links with industry to incorporate presentations from external speakers, field visits to industrial workplaces, and work-based activities. These events raised learners’ awareness of industry standards and practices and provided good opportunities for them to make the link between theory and practice.

Most staff teams planned the curriculum so that learners were continuously engaged and motivated throughout the various stages of their programmes. We also saw many examples of well-considered curriculum planning that incrementally built learners’ confidence and motivation. However, this was not consistent across teaching departments and some curriculum teams did not take sufficient account what learners needed to maintain their motivation.

Most colleges offered a range of alternative options to help learners at risk of withdrawing early from full-time programmes to continue their studies. Flexible options, including part-time or online learning, enabled learners to balance their studies with other commitments. Most also provided additional support services, including tutoring or counselling, that helped many learners to overcome academic and personal challenges.

## Learning and teaching

The majority of colleges had effective arrangements in place to ensure equity of access for all learners to learning materials and resources, including using assistive technologies. Most colleges provided digital devices for learners. However, in a few colleges, learners experienced long waiting times for equipment or support to resolve technical issues. This had an impact on their ability to fully engage in their learning and access digital resources.

Many colleges emphasised the importance of creating an inclusive and motivating environment for learners to staff. Curriculum teams in these colleges worked quickly to establish positive relationships with learners from the start of programmes. In these colleges, most teaching staff worked well together to give learners an enjoyable and supportive learning experience with good relationships with staff and class peers. This was of particular benefit to learners on programmes that had high levels of online delivery and to learners who experienced challenges in balancing and maintaining their studies alongside external pressures.

Most lecturers made good use of a range of learning and teaching approaches to engage and motivate learners from the early stage of programmes. Many lecturers used digital resources well to enhance learning activities and recorded lessons to extend access to learning outside of class times.

Almost all curriculum staff drew constructively on their links with industry to ensure that learning and teaching methods incorporated current and emerging industry standards. In most programmes, teaching staff incorporated work-based activities, including industry projects and skills competitions. This helped to motivate learners and widened their knowledge of the vocational area.

In a few colleges, teaching staff participated well in professional development activities to increase their understanding of the needs of learners. This included awareness-raising of and training in neurodiversity, mental health and wellbeing. Teaching staff drew on the knowledge gained from this professional learning to identify learners at risk of withdrawal from programmes and plan for support to help them to remain on their programme.

## Arrangements for supporting learners

Induction arrangements in all colleges offered a useful introduction to college systems and procedures. In some colleges, students’ associations (SAs) also helped to disseminate information.

Staff in all colleges worked hard to support learners to overcome challenges that impacted negatively on their ability to stay on course. In all colleges, curriculum and support staff worked collaboratively to provide learners with digital devices and access to Wi-Fi, and opportunities outside of timetabled classes to develop digital skills. To ease learners’ financial pressures, almost all colleges offered a range of facilities, including free breakfasts and lunches, along with access to recycled clothing and food banks. Furthermore, many colleges extended their opening hours to provide warm, free Wi-Fi enabled spaces for students.

All colleges experienced a significant increase in the number of learners seeking support for mental health and wellbeing. Almost all support teams enabled learners and staff to access support services online or face-to-face. Professional learning activities for staff increasingly promoted awareness of suicide prevention, particularly among male learners. In most colleges, support departments worked well with curriculum staff to tailor services to meet the needs of specific learner groups, including, for example, care-experienced learners.

All colleges have established links and referral arrangements with external agencies to enable learners to access specialist support when required for issues such as homelessness or debt. These arrangements worked well for learners who experienced challenges with their learning or mental health issues or whose circumstances changed unexpectedly due to financial pressures, redundancy or ill health. However, a number of colleges have faced financial and staffing challenges that have led to interruptions and delays in providing these services to learners.

All colleges had well-developed arrangements in place for providing academic guidance for learners. Learners on FE programmes had good access to guidance staff, including one-to-one meetings, which helped them to review their progress and identify any additional support required. Guidance staff monitored learner progress and motivation and explored potential career pathways to help learners achieve their goals.

Learners who were unable to continue their programmes due to changes to their personal or work circumstances were supported well by teaching staff to find and undertake alternative industry awards and qualifications.

In most colleges, staff implemented a range of helpful approaches and interventions to support learners at risk of withdrawing early from their programmes. These included:

* involving learners in developing personalised study plans
* setting realistic goals for achieving personal and academic ambitions
* coordinating meetings with relevant staff to provide additional support

Staff reported that these were beginning to impact positively on rates of learner withdrawal. However, it is too early to evaluate the extent of their impact on overall learner retention rates.

Colleges have continued to invest in learners' mental health and wellbeing, offering a variety of services such counselling, wellbeing cafés, neutral spaces, yoga and mindfulness sessions. However, in many colleges, these services are resourced on a short-term basis, which affects how well they can plan for the future and meet the growing demand from learners.

Despite these strategies, too many learners left their programmes early.

## Arrangements for improving retention

Almost all colleges had invested in data visualisation and analytical platforms to help curriculum and support teams monitor and evaluate learner attendance and academic progress. Most staff made effective use of real-time, online systems. Through them, staff were also able to identify learners showing signs of being at risk of withdrawal and put in place interventions and coordinated support to re-engage the learners.

Overall, however, monitoring and analysis of learner retention was not consistent and too many staff did not make sufficient or effective use of data to identify and address the reasons for poor attendance and learner withdrawal. In all colleges, managers and staff identified that learners on FE level programmes were most likely to find hybrid learning challenging and more likely to be adversely affected by financial pressures. However, some colleges had not taken sufficient action to address these issues.

In a few colleges, managers and staff engaged well in self-evaluation approaches to reflect on learner outcomes and the impact of support services on learner retention rates.

They gathered and analysed learner feedback, examined outcome trends and collaborated with external partners to develop strategies aimed at improving retention.

In almost all colleges, teaching and support staff actively sought and collated feedback from learners to inform their improvement planning. However, many colleges did not make sufficient use of learner feedback on the early stages of programmes to inform departmental and college-wide action-planning aimed at improving retention.

In a number of colleges, class representatives had not been offered or completed training that would help them understand fully the responsibilities involved in carrying out their roles. Too many colleges had low response rates to the SFC college student satisfaction survey. Many Student Associations (SAs) experienced staffing and resourcing challenges that impacted on their ability to engage with learners. Most learners were unaware of the positive contributions made by their SA.

Although all colleges have implemented measures to try to improve learner retention, the overall rate of learner withdrawal from full-time FE and HE programmes remains a cause for concern. Ongoing review of the curriculum and future planning by colleges had not resulted in improvements to learner retention rates in a number of colleges.

# Learner attainment

## Planning and updating the curriculum

In almost all colleges, teaching departments adapted programmes to enhance the accessibility of content for learners and improve attainment. Most teaching departments extended the range of online and flexible learning options. Some colleges provided a wider range of entry and progression opportunities by replacing National Qualifications with National Progression Awards.

They also offered alternative industry awards and employer qualifications. Many curriculum teams had condensed full-time programmes to enable learners to complete their programme more quickly. Arrangements made in the early stage of a programmes, including enabling learners to transfer to a more appropriate level or type of programme and offering additional study sessions, helped support learner attainment.

Curriculum teams in almost all colleges adjusted programme design to ensure that learning experiences were taught in a sequence that builds learners’ confidence and motivation.

This included:

* teaching practical activities at the start of programmes
* integrating formal and summative assessments
* extending the use of project-based learning

These arrangements contributed to improving the learning experience and widened opportunities for learners to attain. However, this was not consistent across all teaching departments. Rates of learner success in some programme areas remained low.

## Learning and teaching

Almost all colleges increased their on-campus, face-to-face delivery to enhance the learner experience and improve attainment including using hybrid delivery approaches, recording lessons and extending the use of alternative assessments.

A number of colleges introduced shorter programmes of study and flexible timetables to better meet learner needs. Collaboration within curriculum teams to plan and integrate assessments reduced the burden for learners. In a few colleges, staff made good use of digital resources to encourage learners to be more proactive in preparing for assessments.

This motivated learners to engage with their studies and reinforced an early sense of achievement. However, in a few colleges, teaching teams did not plan and schedule assessments collectively. This increased learner anxiety and uncertainty around assessment methodologies and made assessments more challenging to complete.

A few colleges have developed programmes for school-age learners that incorporate activities to build confidence and resilience to participate in assessments. These included providing individual coaching or mentoring sessions and offering additional opportunities to practice and apply skills. This helped learners to overcome anxiety about participating in assessments.

Staff in all colleges worked with external partners, including employers, to provide learners with access to work placements and opportunities to participate in industry and community-based projects. These experiences allowed learners to practice, apply and further develop their skills. Many benefited from these activities to attain additional vocational skills and qualifications.

Almost all colleges worked well with partner agencies to give learners access to external specialist support. These include WhoCares? Scotland; the Centre for Excellence for Children’s Care and Protection; Motivation, Commitment and Resilience (MCR) Pathways, Skills Development Scotland; and social work and throughcare. These agencies supported learners well, many of whom faced personal issues, to achieve their qualification.

All colleges improved e-learning platforms and virtual learning environments so that learners had good support and access to learning materials, particularly for theory-based elements of their programme.

However, a few colleges did not provide adequate access to technical support for learners and staff. This had a negative impact on assessment arrangements.

A few colleges have increased learner access to a personal tutor, particularly in subject areas such as mathematics and computing, to support improved attainment in science, technology, engineering and mathematics programmes.

Almost all colleges had invested in their learning facilities to ensure that learners are well prepared to progress to further study or employment. Learners benefited from being able to access hands-on experience in current workplace environments.

## Arrangements for improving attainment

Almost all college managers made good use of performance dashboards to analyse key performance data and identify actions to improve learner outcomes. In a few colleges, teaching and support staff used these systems well to monitor and analyse real-time data on learner performance.

However, some college managers did not make effective use of these facilities to engage staff in discussions to improve attainment. A few colleges did not have effective arrangements in place for monitoring the attendance and engagement of individual learners. In these colleges, staff did not have sufficient access to information to identify learners at risk of not attaining.

Overall, in most colleges, some staff did not participate sufficiently in quality arrangements or action-planning for improvement to support learner progress and attainment. In a few colleges, staff reviewed their school–college partnership provision.

This resulted in several positive developments, including:

* delivering provision on-site in secondary schools
* implementing data-sharing arrangements
* making a wider range of programmes available to senior phase learners

However, most colleges did not systematically evaluate attainment rates across their school–college provision in order to improve attainment where their success rates were low.

The quality of partnership working and commitment to the delivery of Foundation Apprenticeships (FAs) across local secondary schools was variable in almost all colleges. This made it challenging for colleges to support the attainment of school pupils studying FAs.

Despite the efforts made by all colleges to support learners to attain, rates of successful completion for full-time programmes, at both FE and HE levels, remain a cause for concern. Learner attainment rates for part-time programmes remained stable or had returned to pre-pandemic levels.

# Learner progression

## Planning and updating the curriculum

All college and curriculum managers worked well with industry partners to enhance and widen progression pathways to employment. LMI was used well by curriculum teams to address workforce planning and raise learner awareness of future skills and employment opportunities. Staff worked flexibly and swiftly within curriculum teams and with educational partners to adapt provision to ease progression to the next level of study.

Almost all colleges invested in equipment and resources that ensure that teaching facilities were up to date with current and emerging industry practice. This supported priority sector areas such as engineering, software development, construction and care. These facilities and resources provided learners with valuable hands-on experience of the workplace. This was especially valuable where awarding body requirements may not have been updated to reflect current industry standards and practices.

All colleges had well-established arrangements in place with universities to offer a wide range of options for learners to progress from college to degree-level programmes, many with direct entry to second or third year. Almost all colleges offered degree programmes delivered on campus.

This reduced the financial burden of travel or accommodation costs. Scottish Widening Access Programme (SWAP) arrangements between colleges and universities gave adult returners good opportunities to progress to university provision.

Most curriculum teams embedded vocational and other skills effectively into the curriculum to prepare learners to enter employment or further study. However, a number of colleges had not yet consistently embedded opportunities for learners to develop meta skills across all curriculum areas, nor were meta skills evidenced or signposted sufficiently to learners. This limited learner awareness of these skills. It also meant that they missed the opportunity tole to demonstrate them to prospective employers.

## Learning and teaching

In almost all colleges, staff collaborated with employers, schools and universities to provide learners with opportunities to explore industry and academic pathways open to them beyond their college programme.

Almost all college curriculum teams involved learners in activities that supported them well to further develop their meta skills and build resilience in preparation for the next phase of their learning or employment.

## Arrangements for supporting learners

College staff promoted progression pathways well. They worked collaboratively internally and with partners to support learners to enter a positive destination on leaving college. Most learners who completed their college programme progressed to further study or employment.

Almost all colleges worked well with external stakeholders to provide opportunities for learners to explore and work towards achieving their career aspirations. Activities included hosting career events and providing workshops on making applications for employment or further learning, including CV writing and interview techniques. In most colleges, centralised services provided learners with good access to advice and support to plan their next steps, to employment or further learning. Colleges offered timetabled guidance and support sessions to complete job or university applications for all learners.

Learner feedback was positive about the help and support they received from the college to progress. A few colleges experienced an increase in the number of learners choosing to work freelance or become self-employed. In these colleges, curriculum teams worked collaboratively with partner agencies, including Young Enterprise Scotland and The Prince’s Trust, to help learners establish their own business.

## Arrangements for improving progression

The majority of colleges worked collaboratively with local schools to evaluate the quality of provision for school-based learners and plan for improvement. However, most colleges did not gather feedback from universities on the performance of learners who had progressed to degree-level study to inform actions to improve and ease learner progression.

A number of colleges did not analyse learner feedback and destination data systematically in order to enhance progression rates.

# Appendix: Analysis of learner outcome data for academic year 2021 to 2022

SFC produces college performance indicators (PIs) annually for the previous academic year. In addition, SFC produces an accompanying overview report which analyses data patterns and trends over a number of years. The most recent reports can be found on the [Scottish Funding Council website](Scottish%20Funding%20Council%20(sfc.ac.uk)).

The purpose of this data and associated indicators is to inform stakeholders about the performance of the sector in relation to learner outcomes. The reported PIs support the evaluation of the performance of learners by level of programme and hours of study, both over time and against other similar colleges. The PIs can be monitored and analysed to compare the performance of groups of learners of specific interest, for example those with protected characteristics or care-experienced learners, thereby supporting the wider college sector improvement.

In response to the Omicron variant of COVID-19, measures put in place to protect staff and students were less restrictive than previous years but still had an impact on colleges’ ability to deliver practical learning and teaching in some curriculum areas at the beginning of 2021 to 2022. Some learners who had opted to defer programme completion returned to their college programmes.

Colleges also faced challenges in supporting cohorts of learners who had experienced two years of disrupted schooling. Full consideration should be given to these exceptional circumstances and context when looking at the data and making direct comparisons with pre-pandemic statistics.

## Recruitment

The overall profile of the college learner population has changed over time. There has been a significant decline in full-time FE and HE recruitment over the past six years. Recruitment to full-time programmes at FE level increased marginally in 2021 to 2022, but recruitment to full-time HE provision declined.

These figures do not include learners who deferred enrolment to the following academic year. Fewer female learners enrolled on HE programmes in 2021 to 2022. Many subject areas experienced a decline in full-time FE enrolments.

However, recruitment to languages and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) programmes increased compared with the previous year. Construction has also experienced a rise in recruitment on the previous year.

Recruitment to part-time programmes at HE level declined slightly. However, recruitment increased to part-time FE. Over 4,000 young people started a Foundation Apprenticeship, an increase from the previous year.

The numbers of care-experienced learners, learners with a disability and learners under 18 years of age enrolling on college programmes have increased significantly since 2018. There has been a marginal rise in enrolments for the 21 to 24 year-old age group, and for those aged over 40. However, there has been an overall decline in enrolments of learners aged 18 to 40.

## Successful completion rates

Around 60% of learners on full-time programmes left college having achieved their qualification. The remaining 40% of learners left college with no or only partial attainment. Overall rates of successful completion have declined over time, particularly for full-time programmes. For 2021 to 2022, full-time learner attainment rates are at the lowest level since 2017-18 for both FE and HE and have declined since the pandemic.

## Further education (FE) attainment

The overall rate of successful completion for full-time FE programmes declined to 59% and was lower than pre-pandemic levels. Overall rates of learner withdrawal were higher than the previous year and higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Rates of learner withdrawal from full-time FE programmes were higher than pre-pandemic levels and were higher compared with the previous year.

Overall rates of completion with partial success for full-time FE learners were in line with the previous year but higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Overall rates of successful completion for part-time FE learners were in line with the previous year but lower than pre-pandemic levels.

Male learners have a higher rate of successful completion for FE programmes compared with female learners.

## Higher education (HE) attainment

The overall rate of successful completion for learners on full-time HE programmes declined and was lower than pre-pandemic levels. However, the success rate for part-time HE learners increased.

The overall rate of full-time HE learner withdrawal increased significantly from the previous year and was the highest withdrawal rate for full-time HE learners to date. The rate of HE learners completing their programmes with partial success increased.

## Learner groups

The gap in attainment between key learner groups and the rest of the learner population widened in 2021 to 2022.

## Care-experienced

The overall rate of successful completion for care-experienced learners fell, although rates of completion with partial success remained steady. The number of care-experienced learners who withdrew from their programme increased from the previous year.

## Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds

The gap in attainment between learners from the most deprived backgrounds and the rest of the learner population remained constant, but the rate of learner withdrawal for this group increased. The gap in attainment between the most deprived learners and the rest of the learner population varied between colleges.

## Ethnic minorities

The rate of successful completion for learners from ethnic minorities fell compared with the previous year. The rate of completion with partial success increased. However, the rate of learner withdrawal decreased slightly from the previous year.

## Learners with a disability

The rate of successful completion for learners declaring a disability fell. Rates of partial success and withdrawal increased on the previous year.

## Learners by age group

Rates for successful completion for learners in all age groups declined over the past year. Rates of partial success and withdrawal both increased. The biggest decline in successful outcomes was for learners aged 18 to 20. Successful outcomes for learners aged 20 and under was lower than for those aged 21 and over. Youngerlearners were more likely to withdraw from their programme or complete with partial success.

## Variation between colleges

Variation in learner retention and attainment rates between colleges remained significant. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified these differences for AY 2021 to 2022.

For FE programmes, nine colleges had overall full-time learner attainment rates programmes that were either below or well below the sector average.

For HE programmes, eight colleges had overall full-time learner attainment rates that were either below or well below the sector average.

Five colleges were below the sector average for both full-time FE and HE learner attainment.

Colleges with higher-than-average performance in retention or partial success had higher rates of learner successful completion. Smaller colleges had better-than-average learner retention rates.

## Differences between subject areas

Some subject areas had lower national rates of learner successful completion than others. This has been a trend for some time. Several colleges had persistently low learner attainment rates across multiple subjects. It is important to note that these issues pre-date the pandemic in these colleges.

In full-time FE low overall rates of learner success were in social sciences; science; sport and leisure; hospitality and tourism; business, management and administration; hairdressing, beauty and complementary therapies; and computing and ICT.

The lowest levels of recruitment and highest levels of learner withdrawal were in hospitality and tourism, education and training, science, business, management and administration, and care programmes.

Rates of attainment for construction; art and design; engineering; and ESOL were higher.

In full-time HE low national successful completion rates were in business, management and administration; social sciences; sports and leisure; computing and ICT; and hospitality and tourism; higher success rates were seen in performing arts, media, and hairdressing, beauty and complimentary therapies.

The highest rates of learner withdrawal were in hospitality and tourism, land-based industries, education and training, social subjects, care, business, management and administration, and science programmes.

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