 

**College sector overview report**

His Majesty’s Inspectors of Education engagement in Scotland’s colleges during academic year 2023 to 2024

Introduction

Scotland’s colleges play an important role in equipping Scotland’s current and future workforce with the necessary skills and capabilities to react promptly to the demands of industry and the country's economy. Almost 179,000 learners were enrolled in Scottish Funding Council’s (SFC’s) credit-based college programmes during academic year (AY) 2022-23. Most learners attend college to gain the skills necessary to enter the workforce or progress to higher level education. Some learners, complete their programmes in their local community in preparation for entering further learning. Others are senior phase school learners undertaking college programmes to gain the skills and qualifications that will support them to progress to further study in their chosen career path.

The diversity of the college population illustrates the vital role that colleges play as a bridge between secondary education, university education, and the Scottish workforce. By attracting learners from varied backgrounds, whether due to socioeconomic status, ethnicity, prior academic achievement, or career interests, colleges foster an inclusive environment that mirrors the complexity of broader society. This diversity enriches the learning experience as learners are exposed to a wide range of perspectives, problem-solving approaches, and collaborative opportunities that prepare them well for future challenges.

Colleges serve as a key stage in the educational pipeline, helping students develop the knowledge and skills that prepare them both academically and practically for various industry sector programmes. By supporting transition between traditional academic pathways and professional life, colleges enable learners to make informed decisions about their future, whether they choose to continue with their studies or enter the workforce. Colleges provide clear transition routes from schools and communities to courses in further and higher education, employment and apprenticeships. Almost all colleges have articulation arrangements in place with university partners which allow learners to seamlessly transition from college programmes to degree-level study. These are often through franchised delivery arrangements allowing learners to study within their locality in a more supportive, community-focused college environment. These articulation agreements, or pathways, are designed to ensure that knowledge and skills gained through college programmes are recognised and transferable, providing learners with a clear, efficient route to complete degree studies. These routes can shorten the learner journey and reduce duplication, saving learners time and money. This supports wider accessibility to higher education, particularly for those who may not initially have planned to pursue a degree.

Colleges play a vital role in Scotland's economic growth by supporting the development of a highly skilled, dynamic workforce. Most colleges leverage digital technology as an effective learning and teaching platform, reaching learners far beyond their local area. Each college creates learning environments that mirror industry standards, using advanced technology to equip learners with the skills needed for their chosen careers.

Background

This national overview report summarises the findings from HM Inspectors’ engagement with all Scottish colleges during AY 2023-24. It highlights areas of positive practice and areas requiring improvement and includes analysis of the latest published college performance data (AY 2022-23). The purpose of this report is to provide key stakeholders and national decision makers with the findings that can be used productively to guide future planning and interventions to improve and enhance Scotland’s college provision.

HM Inspectors of Education (HMIE) provide independent evaluation and assurance on the quality of provision and services delivered by Scotland’s colleges. This supports SFC in meeting legislative responsibilities for securing coherent, high-quality, fundable further and higher education provision.

During AY 2023-24, HMIE conducted a range of evaluative activity in each college. Annual engagement visits (AEVs) were planned collaboratively between the college, HM Inspectors, and SFC. During each AEV, the team focussed on aspects for improvement including main points for action previously identified by HM Inspectors. HM Inspectors met with staff, learners, and other stakeholders and explored: learner progress and outcomes; approaches to assuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching including professional updating; and learner engagement.

In addition to AEVs, HMIE also undertook a number of thematic reviews of aspects of college provision and services to support improvement. These were: approaches to improving learner outcomes in the Glasgow region; approaches to meeting the additional needs of all learners; and a review of the delivery of the care curriculum in Scotland’s colleges.

External Influences on college delivery

In recent years, the delivery of skills and qualifications across the college sector has been influenced by a range of external factors. This has impacted negatively on learner success and withdrawal rates.

Recruitment challenges

Colleges face a declining learner population, particularly in full-time enrolments for both further education (FE) and higher education (HE) programmes. An ongoing reduction in the 16 to 24-year-old learner population pool has intensified competition between universities and colleges for enrolments and employers recruiting to fill vacancies. This is part of a broader trend towards an aging population and a growing number of older adults. This has been further compounded by the impact of Brexit and the approximate 10% reduction of people from other European countries taking up employment in Scotland. The overall number of learners studying HE qualifications has reduced over the past few years and colleges have adjusted accordingly. Many college learners leave their programmes before completion to accept a university place.

Impact of Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted on how colleges deliver their curriculum portfolio, in particular restrictions on face-to-face delivery. This severely reduced their ability to deliver practical skills training, and many learners left their programmes early as a result. Colleges are still recovering and addressing gaps in learning. Since the pandemic, colleges have experienced increases in young people presenting with additional or complex needs, increasing the demand for support services. Additionally, many young people attending college since the pandemic have gaps in the knowledge and skills required to succeed in post-school education. Colleges are providing additional learning hours and enhanced support arrangements to help these learners sustain their studies and achieve. However, many leave their programmes early or achieve only partial success which reduces rates of overall learner attainment for college programmes.

Financial pressures

The cost-of-living crisis has increased the need for learners to find part-time work while studying at college. Learners are often faced with a choice of sustaining an income or leaving college early. This has contributed to an increase in learner withdrawal from college programmes, again leading to an overall reduction in learner attainment. College leaders find overall financial operating conditions challenging due to annual budget constraints against a backdrop of rising operating costs, increased staffing costs and reduced funding. They have been gradually reshaping their curriculum portfolio and staffing levels to manage these challenges. This has resulted in pressure on college managers to maintain appropriate levels of teaching hours while continuing to support essential services for learners.

Industrial action

Ongoing college sector industrial action has impacted on teaching, learner data collection and reporting on institutional performance. Lost teaching time has impacted on learner attendance and outcomes, with many learners choosing to leave college.

Summary of findings

Progress made by colleges on achievement of improvement targets

Twenty-two colleges made satisfactory progress towards addressing aspects for improvement, and three colleges did not make sufficient progress. In nine colleges, HM Inspectors identified main points requiring action to improve the quality of provision and/or outcomes for learners.

Despite efforts to enhance learning experiences and improve learner outcomes in a number of colleges, overall attainment rates in full-time FE and HE programmes, remain lower than pre-pandemic levels.

Alongside the declining full-time learner population, rates of full-time learner successful completion have also declined. Fewer learners are enrolling on full-time programmes, and fewer of those are completing successfully. In addition, there remains significant variability in rates of learner successful completion between individual colleges and subject areas. Some colleges and subject areas have persistently low attainment rates over many years. This is impacting on overall sector learner attainment.

In the three years prior to the pandemic, the completion rates of full-time FE learners were around 66%. In AY 2022/23 this figure declined to 63.6%, which was an improvement on rates of attainment during the pandemic. However, overall, rates of learner successful completion have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Rates of attainment for full-time HE learners show a similar pattern. Prior to the pandemic, overall attainment rates were 69.8%. In AY 2022/23 the overall rate of successful learner completion was 65.5%.

Full-time FE attainment rates vary across the sector, with some colleges maintaining consistently strong outcomes or showing significant improvement, while others face ongoing challenges. A number of colleges have demonstrated progress in exceeding the sector average, reflecting targeted efforts to enhance performance.

Similarly, part-time FE learner attainment shows notable variation across the sector, with some colleges consistently achieving above the sector average and others with below the sector average for a few years. A number of colleges have demonstrated steady performance over the years, while others have seen fluctuations, including recent declines or improvements.

Full-time HE learner attainment also shows considerable variation across colleges. While some have consistently achieved above the sector average, others have faced challenges in improving outcomes over several years. Encouragingly, several colleges have shown recent improvements or maintained steady performance near the sector average over time.

Despite some colleges facing similar external challenges, they show notable disparities in part-time learner attainment, reflecting differences in how these challenges are addressed. While some colleges have achieved strong outcomes, others continue to face barriers to improving attainment.

In colleges with low full-time learner attainment rates, specific subject areas are underperforming, and this significantly lowers overall college attainment rates.

This highlights the ongoing challenge for colleges in supporting full-time FE and HE learners to successfully complete their programmes. Whilst a combination of external factors, such as those previously mentioned, have contributed to declining learner outcomes in many colleges, low rates of successful completion were already evident in a number of colleges. Average rates of full-time learner attainment for FE programmes have not improved significantly over the last ten years. In several colleges, rates of learner attainment remain too low and efforts to secure improvement have not yet brought about the desired impact.

Part-time learners are performing better than their full-time counterparts. In the two years preceding the pandemic, rates of part-time FE successful learner completion were 78%. During the pandemic rates declined slightly. In AY 2022/23 the overall rate of part-time FE learner successful completion was 77.3%, only slightly behind pre-pandemic figures.

During the pandemic the success rates of part-time HE learners, increased, and as for AY 2022-23 these rates are now at pre-pandemic levels reaching 78.60%.

Overall rates of part-time learner successful completion have shown resilience and have not been significantly impacted by external challenges. Nationally, at FE level, there are over double the number of part-time learners than full-time learners, reflecting the composition of the learner population.

The overall number of learners in colleges is falling. In AY 2007/08, there were around 380,000 learners in Scotland's colleges on SFC credit rated programmes. By AY 2014/15, post regionalisation, learner numbers had fallen to 239,000. In AY 2022/23, the figure had fallen further to 179,000 learners. The sector faces an ongoing challenge in providing an appropriate curriculum to meet the needs of this changing learner population and of the wider economy. Trends including a reducing 16 to 24-year-old population; the lowest birth rate in Scotland since consistent records began; and competition from employers and universities over recruitment targets are set to continue. This is an important consideration when planning for viable future provision across the sector.

Improving learner progress and outcomes

Strategies for improvement

In almost all colleges, managers have implemented effective arrangements for engaging staff in evaluation to improve rates of learner retention and successful completion. Staff reflect on programmes and units of learning to identify strategies for improvement. Most teaching and support staff use data well to track and monitor low attendance and progression rates of learners. A few colleges use live tracking systems productively to identify learners at risk of withdrawal and initiate early intervention. While these approaches have had a positive impact on improving retention and attainment in some colleges, and for some programmes, they are not yet translating into consistently improved learner outcomes across the sector. In some colleges, attainment rates are declining despite these efforts.

Quality enhancement

Almost all managers lead and support staff effectively through quality enhancement arrangements to identify approaches to improve learner retention and success. Almost all colleges make effective use of data, and most have developed useful tracking tools to monitor attendance and learner outcomes. Most staff are confident in using these systems to record and track learner progress. A few colleges evaluate additional support needs (ASN) data thoroughly to measure the impact of support services on learner outcomes. However, in a few colleges, service teams are not supported sufficiently to engage productively in self-evaluation activities or gather stakeholder feedback, which limits their ability to plan for improvement.

Learner support

Across all colleges, recruitment and induction arrangements provide helpful opportunities for learners to disclose ASN. Staff in support roles and teaching departments work well together to coordinate support before the start of programmes to ease transitions for new learners. Learners whose additional needs require a personal learning support plan (PLSP) are supported well by staff. Teaching staff use PLSPs productively to adapt learning and teaching approaches and develop resources and materials to the needs of learners. Quick response (QR) codes and smartphone apps are used effectively to provide learners with direct access to timetables; learning resources; mental health and wellbeing support facilities; and college communications. Learners experiencing digital poverty have access to laptops to support them in their studies.

Declaring a disability

Since 2018, there has been a 27% increase in the number of learners declaring a disability. A growing number of learners require individual, personalised and extensive support due to multiple and complex needs. As the number of learners declaring complex and multiple needs has increased, the additional demand upon colleges' support services has increased. College staff provide effective support for a wide range of needs, including disabilities such as autism, dyslexia, and other specific learning difficulties.

Colleges are experiencing a considerable rise in the number of learners seeking support for mental health issues. This has led to all colleges developing a range of effective additional support functions. Most colleges have created specific roles such as student support officers and mental health ambassadors to deliver wellbeing support facilities. All colleges make effective use of mental health and wellbeing transition funds. This meets the needs of the high number of learners requiring access to additional academic and support services to engage fully in learning. Increasingly, colleges are providing training to staff on mental health first aid and trauma-informed and response practice. All colleges have established designated quiet spaces to provide respite for learners who need it, for example, those experiencing anxiety. In a few colleges, new learners are invited on campus in the evening to meet staff and familiarise themselves with the facilities. This is completed prior to the start of programmes for learners who need a period of adjustment to adapt to a new environment.

More learners face challenges related to poverty, family instability, and chaotic lifestyles. This is changing the nature of support requirements in colleges post pandemic. College staff collaborate well with external agencies to source specialised support for learners with complex needs. All colleges have taken action to alleviate the financial hardship experienced by many learners. This includes offering free meals; establishing food larders and clothing banks; issuing free toiletries and sanitary products; and providing comfortable, heated spaces for study.

Care experienced learners

While the rate of successful completion for care-experienced learners has risen by 2.9%, a gap remains compared to FE full-time and HE-full time learner success rates - 7.9% and 10.1% respectively. Rates of learner completion with partial success have remained steady and learner retention rates have improved.

Transition information

Almost all colleges face significant challenges in obtaining important information about learner needs from schools. This leads to delays in providing appropriate support and restricts planning for effective transitions. Many learners enter college with limited understanding and unrealistic expectations of the programme that they are starting. There is a need for improved joint evaluation and data sharing with schools, agencies and employers to ensure smooth transitions and better outcomes. Additionally, many learners do not disclose their additional needs at an early stage, making it difficult for college staff to provide timely and appropriate interventions. Where identification happens quickly, learner needs are addressed at an early stage in programme delivery via *fitness to study* arrangements and PLSPs.

Learner retention and attainment is supported positively by college staff. However, there remains inequity in learner outcomes, particularly for learners with disabilities related to physical impairments or mental health conditions. Learners appreciate support staff efforts and overall, arrangements work well. However, in some colleges, learners face long waiting times for support, which can negatively impact their performance.

Although the attainment gap between learners with declared disabilities and those without a disability has narrowed overall, rates of attainment for learners who have a disability have declined. Success rates also vary significantly between learners with different types of disability, highlighting a need for targeted support strategies.

College partnerships

All colleges work productively with community partners and third sector organisations, including the Department of Work and Pensions, the Scottish Prison Service and local and regional support organisations to encourage and promote engagement in learning. Curriculum teams design and deliver inclusive provision to meet the needs of specific learner groups including refugees; neurodiverse learners; and learners with disabilities. Community based learners are supported well by staff helping them to transition from informal locally based provision to full-time college programmes.

Most colleges respond pro-actively to a significant rise in demand from learners for part-time and full-time English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) programmes. Learners in these programmes are guided well by staff to progress through meaningful pathways into further or higher education, or into employment. However, funding arrangements including credit caps, significantly influence what is delivered by each college. As a result, colleges are faced with difficult decisions about resource allocation and programme availability.

Guidance provision

Learners receive comprehensive and inclusive support from guidance tutors, lecturers, and support staff. All colleges take good account of corporate parenting responsibilities. A few colleges have established strategic cross-college working groups that have improved the retention and attainment of learners with additional challenges. These groups have helped extend the range of support services available to learners. This has included increasing the range of adaptive online learning resources, coordinating subject related drop-ins and timetabled individual learning sessions.

Support staff plan and deliver sessions on funding and finance, helping learner awareness of what is available to them and how to access support. Learners experiencing mental health issues have good access to support services both within the college and through external organisations. As demand increases and outstrips supply, long waiting times emerge for support. Most support teams have completed training on trauma-informed and responsive practice to further enhance support for learners.

Overall, colleges are deeply committed to providing a comprehensive, inclusive, and responsive support network for all learners, with particular attention to those facing significant challenges.

Learner health and wellbeing

In the majority of colleges, increased joint working with national support agencies such as Scottish Action for Mental Health (SAMH) and Action for Children is showing signs of improving retention and success rates for key groups of learners. Hairdressing and Beauty learners at one college have partnered with the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (SVRU) and Brothers in Arms (BIA), men’s mental health platform, to support those suffering from mental health challenges. Learners receive training to inform them on the impact of drugs and alcohol on mental health, and what to do to support clients who may make significant disclosures. These learners apply Scottish Government’s ‘[*Time, Space and Compassion*’](https://www.gov.scot/publications/time-space-compassion-supporting-people-experiencing-suicidal-crisis-introductory-guide/pages/2/) principles and approach to suicide prevention and are certificated upon completion.

These initiatives highlight the sector’s commitment to enhancing learner health and wellbeing through targeted partnerships and practical training opportunities.

Adjustment to curriculum design

Colleges proactively adjust their curriculum to provide flexibility and alignment with the needs of learners and the job market. For some colleges, this has contributed to improved learner success rates. However, in many colleges learner attainment has not improved as a result of efforts to adjust the curriculum.

Curriculum managers provide staff with appropriate direction and support to create adaptable and flexible programmes that meet the needs of employers, and eases transition to further study. An increase in the provision of part-time programmes is helping learners overcome financial barriers and supports those who wish to remain in full-time employment while studying. These programmes provide learners with the necessary skills to gain employment quickly and enable employees to upskill or retrain for new jobs.

Programmes such as Foundation Apprenticeships (FAs) and Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) are of particular benefit to learners seeking employment, or for existing employees who want to change career. This is more prevalent in industries such as healthcare, hospitality, IT, finance, business and management, tourism and construction.

Many colleges annually review their arrangements for the recruitment of school-age learners to senior phase programmes and draw on the findings to support improvements and ease the transition to college-based learning.

Approaches to assuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching including professional updating

Leadership for improvement of learning and teaching

All curriculum managers make effective use of labour market information (LMI). They apply effectively, their knowledge of current and emerging, local, regional and national skills priorities to plan a curriculum portfolio that meets the needs of stakeholders. Curriculum teams plan and design programmes well to meet the needs of employers and provide flexible opportunities for learners and employees to combine studies with work and other commitments. For colleges who have significantly improved rates of learner attainment, they can articulate well how they achieved this and link improvement to the strategies and approaches they have implemented. Some colleges, however, cannot demonstrate a link to improved learner attainment as a result of their strategies and interventions and have programmes with consistently lower attainment.

All senior managers have used their experiences during the pandemic constructively to continue to broaden the number of learning opportunities available to learners. Colleges continue to extend the use of digital resources to enable staff to produce engaging online learning materials. In most colleges, digital skills specialists offer staff helpful workshops and training to create online resources for learners to access through virtual learning environments (VLEs). Some colleges have developed strategies on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to help shape future learning and teaching. An increasing number of teaching staff are making use of AI to develop their approaches to learning and teaching. Staff using AI resources feel motivated to develop and enhance their pedagogical practice. In a few colleges, support service staff are beginning to experiment with the use of AI to identify learners at risk of withdrawing from their programme. Early indications are that this is helping staff to implement timely intervention strategies to help retain learners.

College curriculum managers and support staff work well together to develop digital resources that widen and enhance the learning experience. A few colleges in the Highlands and Islands use specialist software to help learners with reading and writing in Gaelic, addressing their linguistic and cultural needs. However, in some rural and remote areas, access to online facilities is limited which constrains the range of learning options for learners residing in these areas.

Most senior managers have implemented policies and strategies to improve the quality of learning and teaching. Almost all curriculum teams use well-structured meetings to identify employer needs, reflect on learner feedback, and monitor and review key performance indicators (KPIs) to inform improvements. They draw on engagement with employers and industry representatives to enhance the curriculum and ensure learners develop appropriate vocational and employability skills. Colleges are actively engaging with the wider economic and industrial ecosystem to ensure that their curriculum offer remains relevant to current and emerging market demands.

In almost all colleges, quality enhancement arrangements support staff to reflect on their learning and teaching approaches and prepare for their annual professional development and review (PDR). Most managers provide teaching staff with options to evaluate and enhance their pedagogical practice. Some colleges can provide clear examples to how this has improved learner attainment. However, too many colleges cannot demonstrate the impact of strategies to improve learning and teaching practice on learner outcomes. Observations of online lessons, team teaching and informal peer review help some staff to reflect on their pedagogical approaches to improve the learner experience. However, in only a few colleges, teaching staff engage in peer observation of learning and teaching practice mapped to the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) professional standards.

Professional qualifications and registration

Approximately two thirds of teaching staff in colleges hold a teaching qualification that is recognised by the GTCS while a significant minority do not hold a recognised teaching qualification. Currently, only a minority (43%) of all teaching staff hold professional registration with the GTCS. Overall, while there is a commitment to ongoing professional development and quality enhancement in teaching practice across colleges, this is often informal, with notable variability in approach and levels of engagement of staff.

Line managers use PDR arrangements well to engage staff in discussions regarding professional learning and career development, including preparation for future roles or promoted posts. Induction arrangements provide new staff with a useful introduction to professional standards and arrangements for engaging in shadow teaching, online delivery, mentoring, and professional dialogue.

The majority of managers use the GTCS standards as a focus for discussions with staff during their PDR. Almost all staff feel supported to develop their professional practice and participate in self-identified and college-wide professional development activities. These include training on leadership, use of digital technology, mental health first aid, neurodiversity awareness and trauma-informed practice. These align well with the Professional Standards for Lecturers in Scotland's Colleges.

Overall, while almost all staff state that they feel supported in their professional development, the impact of these approaches is not evaluated sufficiently well limiting insight into their effectiveness. Overall, approaches to the evaluation of learning and teaching in colleges are too variable. Across the sector, engagement and participation in the evaluation of learning and teaching is not sufficiently comprehensive or consistent to support improvement in teaching practice. This further restricts the ability of teaching staff and managers to identify aspects of good practice in pedagogical approaches. Addressing these inconsistencies would strengthen the sector’s ability to enhance teaching quality. Strengthening evaluation would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of these approaches and inform future improvements.

Learning, teaching and assessment

Most curriculum staff, understand the purpose of KPIs and use data constructively to improve learning and teaching, and assessment practices. They collaborate effectively with colleagues to analyse data and plan for improvement. However, in too many colleges the impact of this on individual programmes is not evident. Almost all teaching departments use student satisfaction surveys, end-of-semester evaluations, and feedback from student forums to adjust and enhance programmes. Actions to improve the quality of learning and teaching are either implemented quickly or actioned the following academic term. However, the impact these improvement actions on learner outcomes is not measured sufficiently well to determine what is making a difference and why. Staff often rely on anecdotal evidence of how improvement has been supported, rather than robust data.

Almost all managers empower teaching teams to use creative approaches to plan, design and deliver programmes. Most curriculum teams draw on feedback from employers to incorporate the development of meta skills aligned to industry needs. However the majority of colleges have not fully embedded the development and tracking of meta skills within programmes. This limits the opportunity for learners to recognise and articulate their skills to prospective employers. Many employers confirm that learners often struggle to express their skills sufficiently well during recruitment interviews.

In almost all colleges, informal feedback arrangements help learners to convey their views about their learning experience and support needs to teaching staff on an ongoing basis. These can relate to a wide range of influences on the learner experience such as learning and teaching approaches, class timetabling or assessment scheduling. These arrangements work well, and learners are confident about sharing their views with class lecturers and pastoral guidance staff.

Most colleges arrange college-wide development events that provide good opportunities for staff to identify and share good practice. Staff value these sessions to further develop and extend their teaching skills. However, a few colleges do not have arrangements in place to identify and share good practice internally. This reduces the ability of staff across curriculum areas to learn about and adopt effective practice.

Almost all colleges develop strong relationships with industry that supports economic growth in their region well, particularly in engineering, care, sustainability projects, and hospitality and tourism. Managers provide effective leadership in a range of collaborative transformational projects that include digital transformation and the green economy. Curriculum managers engage well with local authorities to develop and deliver programmes to meet employer and legislative requirements. These include professional development awards (PDAs) in vocational areas including care and hospitality. These arrangements are well-established and provide teaching staff with useful insight to current and emerging industry needs.

Curriculum teams work well with industry partners to further enhance the learning experience. They coordinate appropriate work placements and host informative workshops and presentations from industry representatives that widen learners’ understanding of the vocational area. Staff highlight potential opportunities for employment and the range of career opportunities available to learners. This helps to raise learner aspirations and build connections and routes to future employment.

Learner Engagement

Learners leading learning

The learner voice is strong in the majority of colleges. Students’ Association (SA) representatives contribute positively to college board meetings and strategic committees to influence improvements to the learning experience and college environment.

SA office bearers and college staff work well together to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for learners. SAs organise a wide range of activities to engage learners and promote diversity. These include freshers’ events, cultural celebrations, LGBTQ+ awareness days, learner clubs and social and sporting activities.

SA representatives work well with staff teams to improve and enhance pre-entry and induction arrangements. A few SAs make effective use of ‘*you said, we did’* campaigns to highlight the influence of the learner voice on college decision making. Some learners have undertaken training to become mental health ambassadors. This is appreciated by their peers, who welcome access to support from appropriately trained fellow learners alongside staff. However, many learners in some colleges are not aware of the SA and its role in improving and enhancing the learning experience.

The majority of class and programme representatives meet regularly with curriculum managers and attend programme team meetings to discuss suggestions for improvement. They are comfortable raising issues about the learning experience, making suggestions for improvement, and believe staff take their views seriously. However, in a minority of colleges, learner representation at programme team meetings is low and some learners are not aware of who their representative is or what the role entails. Learners on part-time programmes, in particular, are less aware of the class representation system than full-time learners. This results in the views of some learners’ groups not being captured sufficiently well to support self-evaluation, action planning and curriculum improvement.

Evaluation leading to improvement

Almost all learners believe they are valued and listened to with their views leading to positive change. The SFC Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey (SSES) for AY 2022-23 recorded a 55% response rate from full-time learners, an increase of 12.1% from the previous year. Almost 27% of part-time learners responded which is an increase of 9.0% from the previous year. Almost 95% of full-time FE learners and 89% of HE learners who did respond were satisfied with their college experience. Satisfaction rates for part-time learners were 94% for FE and 92% for HE. However, too many colleges have poor response rates for the SSES, limiting the breadth of learner feedback.

In addition to the SSES, all colleges use various in-house questionnaires and feedback forums to gather learner opinions. Most colleges make effective use of online facilities to increase learner participation and attendance in these activities. Learner representatives meet regularly with managers to share views on learning experience. Learners are satisfied that their requests and needs are met and that their feedback is used constructively by staff to improve services, particularly in relation to access to counselling and financial support.

SAs offer training to class and programme representatives on supporting their peers and conveying feedback to staff and college fora. A few SA teams are making effective use of online platforms to enable class representatives to communicate with each other, share resources and access online meetings. However, class representative training is not completed timeously enough in many colleges in order to support their role in learner engagement and quality improvement.

Learning, teaching and assessment

Most learners value the professional practice that teaching staff bring to class activities to enhance lesson content and delivery. Learners report that the feedback they provide to teaching staff leads to improvements in how lessons are delivered. This includes changes to the sequencing of units, the pace of learning, and the quality of resources.

Teaching staff across colleges engage positively with learners, creating flexible learning opportunities and using online resources to meet individual needs, particularly for those in remote areas. Although remote learning has grown, learners express a preference for on-campus classes commenting on the benefits for their social and mental well-being.

Most teaching staff facilitate productive discussions with learners to evaluate the impact of lessons and develop resources that provide a variety of learning options. They contextualise wider skills well within class activities to help learners prepare for the workplace, articulate to further and higher education or progress into university. Whilst most staff actively seek and use learner feedback to enhance teaching, many do not involve learners sufficiently in improving learning experiences.

Key Insights

* Scottish colleges are essential in ensuring Scotland has a skilled and adaptable workforce, offering diverse educational paths, including further and higher education, employment-focused training, and apprenticeships.
* Rates of learner successful completion have improved by 2.9% compared to the previous year. However, significant variability in performance persists across the sector, particularly in full-time FE provision and within a number of individual colleges. These require more focussed efforts to secure the necessary improvements.
* Persistent attainment gaps exist for care experienced learners and other equity groups, requiring targeted interventions to address systemic barriers.
* Colleges provide extensive support for learners, particularly those facing financial hardship, disabilities, or mental health challenges. Despite these efforts, the rising demand for support highlights the need for more sustainable and comprehensive arrangements.
* Colleges use digital technology effectively to widen access to a broader range of learners, including those in remote areas. However, gaps in digital infrastructure in rural areas limits learning opportunities.
* While colleges make efforts to engage staff in evaluation activities and embed meta skills into programmes, inconsistencies in these practices limit their impact.
* Student Associations are active in many colleges, providing a platform for learner feedback and engagement in college decisions. However, there is a need to raise more awareness and increase participation of learners in representation systems.
* Only a minority (43%) of all teaching staff are registered with the GTCS, and only around two thirds hold the Teaching Qualification in Further Education (TQFE) or equivalent. Strengthening professional standards across the sector remains a priority.

Recommendations

To address the findings outlined in the Key Insights, the following are recommendations for colleges and national bodies to improve the quality of provision and services across Scotland’s colleges.

1. **Improving Learner Outcomes**
* Use data-driven approaches and early interventions to improve retention and successful completion rates for:
	+ full-time learners;
	+ care experienced learners and other key groups; and,
	+ individual colleges and subject areas with low performance.
1. **Strengthening Staff Engagement**
* Improve staff participation in evaluative activities, ensuring that:
* staff take account of stakeholder feedback to inform forward planning; and,
* learner outcomes improve.
1. **Enhancing Curriculum Design**
* Evaluate and adjust the curriculum portfolio to:
* address poorly performing programmes; and,
* align more effectively with learner and employer needs.
* Establish consistent arrangements for the development, monitoring and evaluation of meta and wider skills to support learner progression and employability.
1. **Supporting Learner Representation**
* Strengthen arrangements for learner representation by:
* increasing awareness of student association officers and their roles; and,
* ensuring all learners are engaged in supporting college improvement.
1. **Fostering Collaboration and Professional Development**
* Provide staff with more opportunities to share and learn from effective practice.
* Increase the number of teaching staff with a Teaching Qualification in Further Education (TQFE) or equivalent.
* Support the registration of teaching staff with GTCS, in line with national agreements, to enhance professional standards across the sector.

Appendix 1 - Analysis of learner outcome data AY 2022-23

SFC produce college KPIs annually for the previous academic year for credit rated programmes. In addition, SFC produce an accompanying overview report which analyses data patterns and trends over several years – five years for full-time and three years for part-time programmes. The most recent reports can be found on the [Scottish Funding Council website](https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications/college-performance-indicators-2022-23/).

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 KPIs support the evaluation of the performance of learners by level of programme and hours of study. KPIs 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 wider college sector improvement.

Recruitment

During AY 2022-23 Scotland’s colleges recruited approximately 178,000 learners on SFC credit rated programmes. Recruitment to FE full-time and HE full-time programmes have experienced a steady decline over the past six years with reductions of 13.5% and 14% respectively since AY 2017-18.

Part-time FE programmes have experienced increased rates in learner recruitment over the past three years of 10.4% since AY 2020-21. Part-time HE programmes have experienced a slight decrease of 1.6%.

Ten full-time FE programme subject areas experienced a decline in learner recruitment from the previous academic year. Science programmes and performing arts saw a decline of 21% and 27% respectively. Eight programmes experienced an increase, with hospitality and tourism, and engineering increasing by 14% and 9.8% respectively.

Across full-time HE programmes 16 experienced a decline in learner recruitment from the previous academic year. Nautical, hospitality and tourism and business, management and administration programmes experienced significant decline.

Recruitment of care experienced learners has increased by 6% from the previous academic year and has seen a significant rise of 103% from AY 2018-19. This exponential rise coupled with the low success rates for this cohort of learners highlights the need for colleges to further consider this within their monitoring activities for key groups of learners.

Recruitment of learners who declared having a disability increased by 6% from the previous academic year. Recruitment of male learners was 4.8% higher than that of their female counterparts. Recruitment of learners from an ethnic background increased by 1.0% from the previous academic year.

Successful learner completion rates

Overall rates of learner successful completion have increased, particularly for full-time programmes. Around 68.1% of learners on all full-time programmes left college having achieved their qualification. The remaining 31.9% of learners left college with no or only partial attainment. Success rates for part-time FE and HE have also increased from the previous year, however the increments are marginal.

FE attainment

The overall rate of successful learner completion for full-time FE programmes has increased by 4.6% from the previous year to 63.6% and is 1.6 % lower than pre-pandemic levels.

Overall rates of learner withdrawal were 4% lower than the previous year and 0.6% higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Overall rates of completion with partial success for full-time FE learners were 0.6% lower than the previous year and 1% higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Overall rates of successful completion for part-time FE learners were 1% higher than the previous year but 2.4% lower than pre-pandemic levels.

Male learners have a higher rate of successful completion for FE programmes when compared to their female counterparts with 71.6% for males and 64.9% for females.

HE attainment

The overall rate of successful completion for learners on full-time HE programmes has increased to 65.5% This is 3% higher than the previous year, however 4.3% lower than pre-pandemic levels.

The success rate for part-time HE learners remained steady at 78.6%.

The overall rate of full-time HE learner withdrawal decreased 3% from the previous year, from 23.6% to 20.6%.

The rate for full-time HE learners completing their programmes with partial success increased by 0.1% to 14%. For part-time HE learners, the rate of partial success was 0.3% higher than the previous year.

Key learner groups

The gap in attainment between key learner groups and the rest of the learner population reported in 2021-22 has decreased in 2022-23.

* **Care experienced learners**

While the rate of successful completion for care-experienced learners has risen by 2.9%, the gap to overall FE full-time and HE-full time learner success rates is 7.9% 10.1% respectively. Rates of learner completion with partial success have remained steady. The number of care-experienced learners who withdrew from their programme has decreased by 2% from the previous year.

* **Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds**

The rate of successful completion for learners from the 10% most deprived postcode areas has increased by 2.5% from the previous year and the gap from the rest of the learner population has decreased by 1%. The rate of learner withdrawal has decreased by 3.6% from the previous year. The gap in attainment between the most deprived and the rest of the learner population varies between colleges.

* **Ethnic minorities**

The successful completion rate for learners from ethnic minorities has fallen by 1.5% from the previous year, the lowest success rate over the reporting period. The rate of completion with partial success for this group has increased by 1.2% and the rate of learner withdrawal increased slightly from the previous year.

* **Learners with a disability**

Successful completion rates for learners declaring a disability have fallen by 0.5%. Learner partial success and withdrawal rates have decreased respectively by 0.2% and 2.3 % on the previous year.

Learners by age group

Successful completion rates for learners in all age groups have increased over the past year. The biggest increase in successful outcomes was for learners aged 18-20, having increased by 4.5 % to 62.4% which is 1.2 % below the national average. Successful outcomes for learners aged 18-20 have improved by 3.4 % and is 4.7 % lower than those aged 21-24 and over. Younger learners are more likely to withdraw from their programme or complete with partial success. Rates of partial success and withdrawal have both decreased on the previous year for all age groups except for those aged 41 and over.

Variation between colleges

There remains significant variation in learner retention and attainment rates between colleges. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath has continued to impact these differences for AY 2022-23.

18 colleges have overall FE full-time learner attainment rates that are higher or significantly higher than the sector average. Nine colleges have overall full-time learner attainment rates that are higher or significantly higher than the sector average for HE. Eight colleges are below the sector average full-time FE and seven colleges are below the sector average for full-time HE learner attainment.

Factors influencing learner outcomes include social, economic and cultural factors. The recent industrial action in colleges has further impacted learners and has contributed to declining outcomes in some colleges. This is typically demonstrated through falling rates of learner retention.

Differences between subject areas

Some subject areas have lower overall rates of learner successful completion than others, and this trend has persisted over time. In full-time FE, science; social sciences; computing and ICT; hospitality and tourism; business, management and administration; performing arts; hairdressing, beauty and complementary therapies; care; education and training; and sport and leisure all have low rates of learner success. Social subjects; science; and hairdressing, beauty and complementary therapies saw the highest levels of learner withdrawal. Rates of attainment for construction; engineering, languages and ESOL were higher.

Overall, successful completion rates for full-time HE programmes in performing arts; art and design; media; hairdressing, beauty and complementary therapies; and engineering is high. Business, management and administration; social subjects; sport and leisure; computing and ICT; and hospitality and tourism have low learner success rates. Hospitality and tourism; social subjects; and care programmes saw the highest rates of learner withdrawal.