

HMIE engagement in Scotland's colleges

Overview report

Academic year 2021/22



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Introduction

On behalf of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Education Scotland's HM Inspectors of Education (HMIE) have continued to work closely with all colleges in Scotland to provide independent assurance, support and challenge as the sector continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. This national overview report provides a summary of findings from Progress Visits (PV) carried out in all 27 colleges during academic year (AY) 2021/22 and of outcomes for learners in AY 20/21. It highlights aspects of positive practice and ongoing challenges faced by the sector. It is intended that the report be used by stakeholders including colleges, Scottish Government (SG), SFC, and Education Scotland to inform future arrangements to support improvement in the college sector in Scotland.

Background

HM Inspectors, worked collaboratively with colleges and SFC to plan and coordinate a schedule of progress visits (PVs) to colleges during AY 2021/22. Each PV was carried out by a team of HM Inspectors, Associate Assessors (AAs) and Student Team Members (STMs). During the PV, the team engaged in professional dialogue with college managers, staff, learners and other stakeholders to gather evidence on progress made towards achievement of improvement targets, and importantly how each college was dealing with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The team drew on evidence from these activities to evaluate how well a college was performing during this period and whether it had made satisfactory progress or not towards achieving improvement priorities. At the end of the PV, HM Inspectors produced a summary report of findings which was shared with the Principal and the college's Board of Management and/or the Regional Board.

The outcomes of PVs will inform HMI approaches to engagement in individual colleges during AY 2022/23.

During PVs, HM Inspectors explored the following five overarching themes:

- **Curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment;**
- **Services to support learning;**
- **Learner engagement;**
- **Evaluation to facilitate improvement; and**
- **Learner progress and outcomes.**





1. Key findings from Progress Visits AY 2021/22

1.1. Summary of Progress Visit outcomes

HM Inspectors found that twenty-two colleges/institutions have made progress towards achievement of their improvement targets. Five colleges have not yet made sufficient progress towards improving some aspects of provision and/or outcomes for learners and will require further engagement to monitor and assess the effectiveness of actions taken to address these.

1.2. Curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment

ASPECTS OF POSITIVE PRACTICE

- All colleges demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness in adopting new and innovative working practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. They reported a positive impact on learning and teaching using hybrid delivery models and that some online approaches may remain in place beyond the pandemic.
- Overall, colleges delivered online learning effectively. Teaching departments took account of COVID-19 restrictions, including social distancing, to carefully plan and prioritise a return to on-campus learning for practical-based subjects. This was particularly helpful to learners on further education (FE) level programmes who were experiencing frustration at the limited amount of face-to-face delivery.
- In most colleges, managers and teaching staff work well together to plan and adjust the curriculum to ensure that, overall, the needs of learners and stakeholders are met. They take good account of internal and external intelligence and feedback to make well-balanced decisions about the curriculum on offer.
- During periods of COVID-19 restrictions, some curriculum teams incorporated additional activities to help new learners develop a sense of belonging within the college community and overcome anxieties about learning in isolation. These included social events and opportunities to engage with staff and learners informally.
- Most colleges make productive use of local, regional, national and sector specific labour market information to inform their curriculum offer. Teaching departments draw effectively on feedback and intelligence from industry partners and regional stakeholders to respond to identified and projected skills requirements.
- All colleges have adapted their curriculum to accommodate the increasing demand for remote delivery and blended learning. They use a range of online platforms well to enable and support digital delivery of learning and teaching, including Virtual Learning Environments (VLE), online video-conferencing facilities and social media.
- Most teaching staff engage productively in professional learning activities to develop and enhance their digital skills to deliver effective online learning experiences.
- Learners identify the most effective aspect of digital learning is the accessibility of learning and teaching. They particularly value being able to access and revisit video recordings of lessons and practical demonstrations out with class times;

the use of simulation software within vocational specialisms; facilities to submit assessments electronically; and the ability to receive instant feedback on their work from staff.

- In most colleges, learners appreciate and value the commitment and support of teaching staff. They report that the openness and flexibility of teachers helps them to progress on their programme.
- All colleges work successfully with awarding bodies to implement alternative assessment arrangements. Learners engage well with new formative and summative assessment models and value the introduction of more holistic approaches to assessment, account of project and portfolio-based evidence, and the use of open book assignments.

ASPECTS FOR IMPROVEMENT

A few colleges do not have sufficient arrangements in place to assess the level of digital skills of learners prior to enrolment. As a result, some new learners do not have sufficient digital skills to be able to engage fully in learning activities at the start of their programme.

In a few colleges, curriculum teams use a variety of digital platforms to deliver online learning. This presents complexities and challenges for

learners who require to navigate and use a number of different digital platforms within their programme.

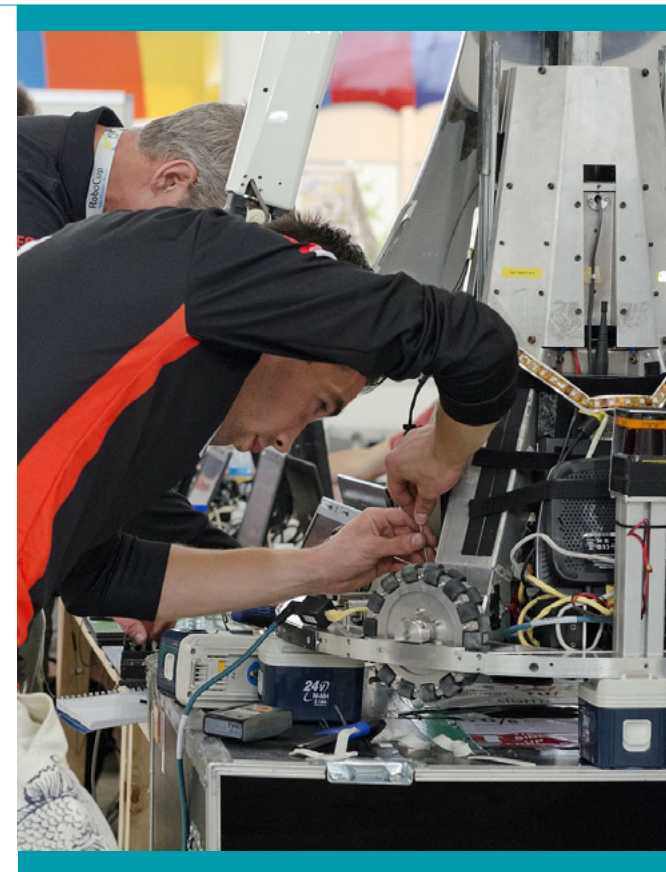
In a few colleges, some learners did not have access to an appropriate device to enable them to participate fully in remote learning, or access online college services.

In most colleges, learners on FE level programmes that are predominantly practical, experience challenges in maintaining motivation and engagement when delivery is not on campus and face-to-face.

Some colleges reported challenges in working with secondary schools to plan and deliver provision for young people in the senior phase. Access to practical programmes was particularly affected by periods of college closure.

In some colleges, the number of school-age learners undertaking college provision has reduced significantly for a number of reasons, including pupils preferring in-school learning to online delivery of college programmes. The breadth of college curriculum accessed by young people has narrowed as a result.

Some colleges are not taking sufficient action to monitor learner progress across programmes where learning and teaching is blended.





1.3. Services to support learning

ASPECTS OF POSITIVE PRACTICE

- From the start of the pandemic, curriculum and support staff worked collegiately to ensure continuity of service and provide learners and staff with equipment and resources learners to enable them to work off-campus.
- During the pandemic, almost all colleges made arrangements to enable learners requiring additional support to access services quickly and easily. Support teams provide options for learners to contact support services online, by phone or in person. Staff teams work together to tailor coordinated support and this has helped many learners to overcome challenges and engage productively in their learning. Early referral to support services is helping vulnerable learners to progress and remain on their programme.
- Most colleges use a range of approaches and resources to promote and support wellbeing and mental health. A significant number of learners have accessed counselling services and the number of learners seeking counselling is continuing to increase.
- In almost all colleges, support service managers and teams worked quickly to ensure pre-entry, admission and enrolment facilities were

available online and working well. Arrangements were streamlined to enable learners to access application and student funding services more easily. In-person appointments and phone and video calls were used well by staff to engage and communicate with learners. As a result, learners receive prompt responses to queries raised and fewer learners face financial hardship due to reduced waiting times for accessing support funds.

ASPECTS FOR IMPROVEMENT

In a few colleges, a reduction in the level of additional funding available to provide support for mental health is leading to uncertainty regarding continuity of provision and ability to meet demand.

In a few colleges, recruitment and induction arrangements do not provide learners with sufficient information about the range and type of support services available to them.

1.4. Learner engagement

ASPECTS OF POSITIVE PRACTICE

- Almost all colleges work closely with their Students' Association (SA). Productive collaboration between college staff and the SA at operational and strategic levels is stimulating initiatives that improve and enhance the learner experience. These include delivery of short programmes to develop digital skills, roll-out of peer mentoring schemes, and arrangements for improving learner communication and retention.
- Almost all colleges have an effective class representative system in place. SAs host useful training events and meetings to assist class reps. to carry out their role successfully. This includes introducing class reps. to ways of gathering and conveying feedback from their peers to help shape improvements to the learner experience. However, class reps. report they feel less comfortable representing the views of other learners gathered through remote platforms.
- In most colleges, learners report that staff are flexible, enthusiastic and responsive to their needs. Teaching staff make good use of real-time learner feedback to make timeous adjustments. Most learners are confident that their opinions are respected by staff and that they can influence positive change.

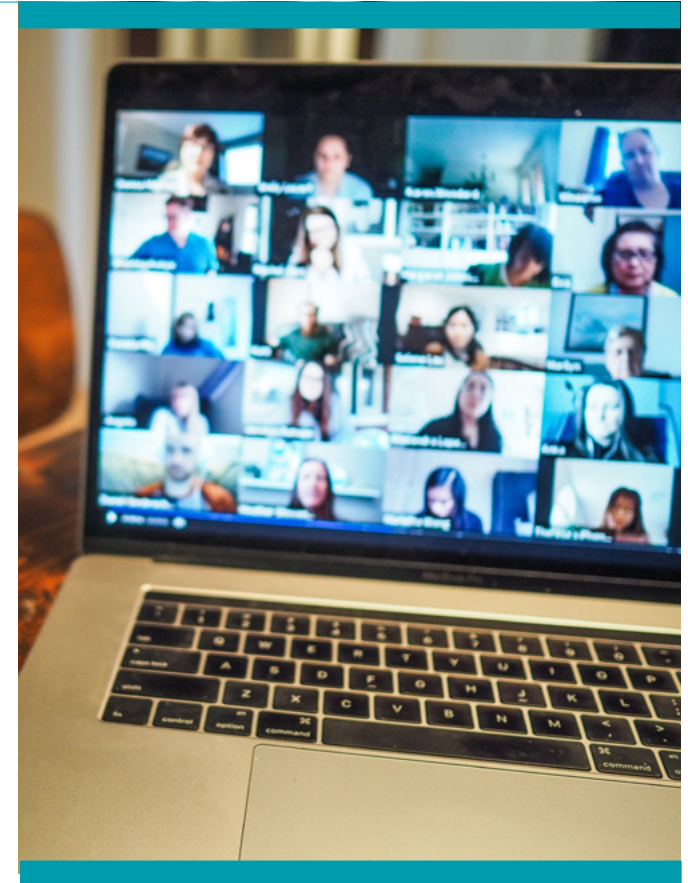
- Most learners can articulate the benefits of hybrid delivery models. Many value and enjoy the flexibility of remote learning to accommodate family and work commitments and avoid travel costs.
- In some colleges, the increased use of online platforms and social media has enhanced engagement between teaching staff and learners.

ASPECTS FOR IMPROVEMENT

In a number of colleges, the number of class representatives has declined and some colleges do not have sufficient arrangements to ensure all class groups have a class representative in place.

In a few colleges, there is insufficient SA representation on college planning groups.

In some colleges, learner involvement and contribution to curriculum team review is not sufficient to fully support evaluation and planning for improvement.





1.5. Evaluation to facilitate improvement

ASPECTS OF POSITIVE PRACTICE

- Most colleges adjusted evaluation arrangements to help to manage the diverse range of challenges created by the pandemic. In a minority of colleges, evaluation arrangements were paused to enable staff to manage frequent unplanned disruptions and challenges.
- In most colleges, college managers draw on the findings from personal development review and evaluation processes to inform and plan professional learning activities. This has led to improvements to professional practice that has enhanced delivery of the curriculum.
- Within evaluative activities, teaching staff reflect well on the impact of hybrid delivery. They draw constructively on the findings to adjust programme schedules and timetables, and capture best practice.
- In some colleges, curriculum staff and support teams use a range of methods effectively to evaluate and improve the quality of provision and services. This includes arrangements for observing and evaluating learning and teaching, use of learner feedback, and peer mentoring of staff.
- Most colleges are in the process of adapting their approaches to evaluate the quality of learning and

teaching to reflect the emerging prevalence of hybrid and remote learning. Most curriculum managers are engaging teaching teams in discussing approaches and experiences of delivering learning in different ways and are drawing on the findings to shape future arrangements.

ASPECTS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Overall, approaches to the evaluation of learning and teaching are not yet sufficiently systematic. Often college managers and staff rely on informal mechanisms, limiting their ability to evaluate and improve the quality of the learning experience.

In most colleges, some staff do not engage sufficiently in evaluative activities to inform planning for improvement.

In most colleges, some curriculum teams do not have sufficiently detailed improvement action plans to fully enable staff to set appropriate actions, monitor progress and measure improvement.

A minority of colleges do not share best practice approaches effectively across curriculum teams.

In some colleges, low response rates to learner surveys is reducing the ability of managers to identify cross-college issues that require improvement. Generally, learner participation in the national Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey (SSES) is low with insufficient numbers of learners complete the survey to express their views.

1.6. Learner progress and outcomes

ASPECTS OF POSITIVE PRACTICE

- In most colleges, the majority of learners complete their college programme and achieve a successful outcome, leading to a certificated award.
- In AY 2020-21, the majority of colleges achieved better than sector average rates of learner successful completion at FE level.
- Attainment rates for full-time Higher Education (HE) learners have remained stable at around pre-pandemic levels overall.
- In almost all colleges, there are identifiable progression pathways for learners.
- In some colleges, staff make effective use of predictive software to support staff to identify and focus on learners that are at greatest risk of leaving their programme early. This facility helps staff to identify learners who require additional support and assess the effectiveness of any interventions put in place.

ASPECTS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Attainment rates for learners on full-time FE programmes have declined overall. Managers and staff in almost all colleges recognise that FE learners are more likely to find remote learning challenging.

Rates of further withdrawal for learners on full-time FE programmes have increased.

In a number of colleges there are curriculum areas with persistently low rates of learner success, many of which pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of these colleges recognise that further work is required to identify and analyse the factors that contribute to learner withdrawal and low success rates.



1.7. Summary of key findings

- All colleges responded well to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic by adapting delivery models to facilitate remote and blended learning. This allowed learners to continue their learning. All colleges worked well with respective awarding bodies to create alternative forms of summative and formative assessment.
- Most teaching staff have developed enhanced digital skills. This is leading to innovative and effective ways of working allowing learners to engage in a more flexible way. However, in a minority of colleges, learners enrol without sufficient assessment of their current digital competences. Some learners still experience barriers to engagement through a deficit of digital knowledge and/or a lack of access to digital hardware and software. These factors are likely to lead to increased rates of learner early or further withdrawal.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, self-evaluation arrangements in a minority of colleges were paused as staff managed frequent, unplanned challenges. Staff in most colleges made rapid change to their practice as situations unfolded to identify planned actions and potential improvements.
- Most colleges engaged well with industry and external stakeholders to identify potential barriers to recruitment, employment, and training. This allowed colleges to prioritise planning, address gaps in skills and capitalise on funding opportunities. In this way, colleges are continuing to contribute to wider regional economies.
- In all colleges, learners benefit from streamlined communications and services. Adjusted support services across all colleges are catering to a wide range of learner needs that include additional support needs, funding issues and learner counselling. This helps to promote successful retention and attainment.
- In most colleges, learners appreciate and value the commitment and support of teaching staff and comment that staff are flexible, enthusiastic and responsive to their needs. Learners feel listened to and that their feedback helps to shape curriculum. These approaches are promoting positive outcomes across most colleges. However, the arrangements for class representative recruitment in some colleges is inconsistent.
- In the majority of colleges, most learners complete their college programme and achieve a successful outcome, leading to a certificated award. However, a minority of colleges have seen consistently low rates of learner success within specific curriculum areas which pre-date the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Most colleges recognise that learners on full-time FE programmes are more likely to find remote learning challenging. Learners undertaking programmes with practical content have often been frustrated by the limited amount of face-to-face delivery available. This has influenced learner further withdrawal and attainment rates.
- Almost all colleges report that some blended delivery approaches adopted during the pandemic may remain in place in the future.

2. Analysis of learner outcome data, AY 2020/21

2.1. Background

The SFC produce college performance indicators (PIs) annually for the previous academic year. In addition, SFC produce an accompanying overview report which examines data patterns and trends over a number of years. The most recent documents are [AY 2020-21](#).

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 performance of learners by level of programme and hours of study, both over time and against other similar colleges. The PIs can be used, for example, to monitor and compare performance of groups of specific interest, such as those with protected characteristics or care-experienced learners, thereby supporting the wider college improvement agenda.



Currently SFC reports on three PIs, each expressed as a percentage of total enrolments:

Completed successful – the percentage of learners who successfully complete a programme within a specified timescale during the course year;

Completed with partial success – the percentage of learners completing the course year but not considered to be fully successful; and

Withdrawn – the percentage of learners who withdrew from the course after enrolment. This can also be examined further by **early withdrawal** (withdrawn before completing 25% of the programme) and **further withdrawal** (withdrawn after completing 25% of the programme but before the end of the programme).

2.2. Impact of the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the examination and assessment arrangements for learners during AY 2019-20, 2020-21 and 2021-22. SFC commentary on the impact of the pandemic on college activity is provided in [Appendix 1](#).

In response to the pandemic, measures put in place to protect staff and students in AY 2020-21 were more restrictive and longer lasting than those experienced in AY 2019-20. This severely limited colleges' ability to deliver learning and teaching activities and student support services in person. This culminated in a reduction in overall enrolments and successful student outcomes in AY 2020-21. Those challenges notwithstanding, colleges continued to adapt, taking swift action to protect staff and students' wellbeing and contribute to the national effort to tackle the virus and support vulnerable communities.

Full consideration should be given to these exceptional circumstances when considering data and direct comparisons between AY 2019-20 and AY 2020-21 and earlier years cannot be made without careful consideration of this context.

2.3. Analysis

The current definition of learner attainment is the achievement of a recognised qualification or award, and this underpins the completed successful PI as a measure of learner success.

- There has been no overall significant improvement in attainment on full-time FE programmes in the last ten years. Rates of learner attainment have altered very little since AY 2012-13, when 65.5% of learners who enrolled on full-time Further Education (FE) programmes completed successfully. More recently, this trend has continued, with learner success rates hovering between 65% and 66% over a number of years, until the onset of the pandemic in AY 2019-20.
- The successful completion rate for full-time FE programmes in AY 2020-21 fell by 4.7 percentage points (pp) to 61.3% compared to the previous year. The rate for learners completing their programmes with partial success decreased 2.2 pp to 11.0%. These changes can largely be attributed to the increased rate of learner withdrawal rate for full-time FE programmes over the same period.
- Both SFC data and the findings of HM Inspectors highlight that most withdrawals in AY 2020-21 occurred towards the second half of the academic year. Some of the reasons given for increased student withdrawal rates are: learner fatigue with the blended

learning model, uncertainty around assessment methodologies, lack of time in-person for practical activities, reduction in work placement opportunities, childcare, caring and other commitments and the lack of opportunity to interact in-person with peers and lecturers. This concurs with the findings of HM Inspectors during PVs to colleges in AY 2021-22.

- Over the last ten years, successful outcomes for full-time HE learners shifted marginally from year to year between 70% and 71%. This is a similar pattern to the attainment rates for FE learners described previously. Successful outcomes for AY 2019-20 and AY 2020-21 have fluctuated and are slightly above previous levels, and again, should be interpreted with caution in light of the impact of the pandemic.
- The successful completion rate for full-time HE programmes in AY 2020-21 decreased slightly to 72.1% compared to the previous year. The rate for learners completing their programmes with partial success decreased by 10.2 pp. Again, these changes were due to the increased withdrawal rate for learners on full-time HE programmes over the same period.
- The withdrawal rate for full-time HE learners in AY 2020-21 increased from AY 2019-20, however the increase is not as significant as in FE full-time. This is likely to be as a result of resilience of HE full-time learners in coping with the increased digital and self-directed learning requirements in their courses during the pandemic.

2.4. Variation between colleges

There are significant variances between individual colleges in terms of levels of learner retention and attainment. These differences occur due to a wide range of issues, including the operating context of the college, the level and type of programmes and awarding body criteria, and mode of delivery.

- For AY 2020-21, these differences have been amplified by the impact on colleges of dealing with the pandemic.
- There are many factors influencing these additional variations in PIs, including different approaches by individual colleges to on-campus practical learning, and regional variations in coronavirus restrictions.
- A number of colleges (11 of 27) have persistently low rates of full-time FE learner attainment across multiple subject areas. Five colleges have persistently low rates of full-time HE learner attainment across multiple subject areas. Many of these pre-date the onset of the pandemic.

2.5. Full-time FE learner outcomes

There is widespread interest in the attainment of FE learners due to the volume of delivery this represents, and the demographic of the FE learner population, therefore the remaining analysis will focus on full-time FE programmes. It is important to examine trends for an individual college over time before drawing conclusions about performance, particularly as the majority of results for AY 2020-21 have been estimated. It is important to note that individual college retention and attainment rates will fluctuate, with minor differences from year to year.

- There is significant variance within the key FT FE PIs across the sector. The sector average for learners completing successfully is 61.3%, with a range of 20.9 pp.
- For learners completing with partial success, the sector average is 11.0%, with a range of 18.8 pp.
- Overall sector average for learner withdrawal is 27.7% with a range of 21.7 pp. This can be broken down to show an average early withdrawal rate of

7.5%, with a range of 6.3 pp and an average further withdrawal rate of 20.3%, with a range of 16.2 pp.

- Those colleges with the greatest number of learners completing successfully also have better than sector average performance in learner retention or partial success, or both.
- Small island or specialist colleges all have better than sector average retention rates. However, this ability to retain and encourage learners to complete successfully is not always reflected in attainment, with a number showing higher levels of learners completing with partial success compared with pre-pandemic figures.
- Larger colleges who have lower withdrawal rates or those with low levels of partial success have better than sector average attainment. Those colleges with the lowest rates of successful completion have either poorer than sector average performance for learner retention or partial success, or both.

2.6. Differences at programme SCQF level

- Most full-time FE enrolments (80%) are on programmes delivered at SCQF levels 5 and 6. A further 14% of enrolments are on access-level programmes at SCQF level 4.
- Level 6 programmes have higher successful completion rates (63.3%) and lower total withdrawal rates (26.2%) than level 4 and 5 programmes.
- SCQF levels 4 and 5 programmes have higher total withdrawal rates of around 3-4 percentage points greater than the sector average for all full-time FE programmes. This also translates into higher early and further withdrawal rates on these programme levels.
- Successful completion rates on SCQF level 5 programmes (56.3%) are the lowest 5.0 pp below the sector average for all programmes.

2.7. Differences between subject areas

Overall, some subject areas have much lower rates of learner success than others, and for some of these this pattern has continued over time.

- Learner outcomes for full-time FE business, management and administration and social subjects are below 60%.
- Only five of the eighteen subject areas have success rates above 70%.
- In full-time HE, overall attainment rates are higher, however in two subject areas are below 70% (hospitality and tourism, and computing and ICT).
- Some individual colleges have very low rates of attainment in some or all of the following subject areas: computing and ICT, hairdressing, beauty and complementary therapies, hospitality and tourism, media, science, social subjects, and sport and leisure.
- Programmes such as SQA Highers are more likely to be incorporated into the social subjects and science subject areas. These pass rates can be influenced by changing priorities amongst

learners. For example, learners who initially enrol for a number of Highers, but elect not to continue with one or more if they are not a prerequisite for entry to a higher level college or university course.

- In subject areas such as nautical studies and construction, a much higher proportion of learners are employed and have their fees paid by their employer. These subject areas have relatively high success rates.

2.8. Differences between key learner groups

2.8.1. Care experienced learners

It is a key Scottish Government ambition to increase the number of care experienced learners undertaking and successfully completing college programmes.

- In AY 2020-21, the proportion of care experienced learners increased by 1.4 pp from the previous year.
- Overall, care experienced learners are less likely to complete successfully and more likely to withdraw when compared to the other reported key interest groups.
- In AY 2020-21 the success rate for care experienced learners fell by 3.2 pp and the rate of withdrawal increased by 3.7 pp from the previous year.
- These changes in success and withdrawal rates are not dissimilar to those that seen in most of the other reported key groups.

2.8.2. Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds

Learners from more deprived backgrounds are less likely to successfully complete and more likely to withdraw from their programme when compared with other key learner groups.

- In AY 2020-21, learner success rates on programmes lasting 160 hours or more for those from the 10% and 20% most deprived postcodes, were below the overall figure of 68.6% for all enrolments.
- This highlights a gap of around 5 pp in attainment between the most deprived learners and the rest of the learner population.
- The gap between the most and least deprived is wider still and varies between colleges.
- The gap in attainment between the most deprived and the rest of the learner population has widened in AY 2020-21.

- This increase in the attainment gap of around 2.0 pp can be attributed to increased FE learner withdrawal from college programmes during the pandemic.
- There is significant variation in the attainment rates of learners from the 10% and 20% most deprived postcode areas between colleges.
- The differences in learner profile and demographic are considerable across the college sector, and this is likely to be a contributory factor to varying attainment levels.

2.9. Aspects for further exploration

The most significant factor to take account of when interpreting the college sector PIs for AY 2020-21 is the continuing impact of the pandemic and resulting restrictions on learning and teaching and college attendance for different groups of learners.

Analysis of the data confirms that learner retention is the single biggest contributory factor impacting on attainment rates. On full-time FE programmes, prior to the pandemic, withdrawal rates had remained at around 25% for 10 years. Colleges have implemented a range of measures and interventions to try and reduce this withdrawal rate but even the highest performing colleges have withdrawal rates of around 20% for learners on full-time FE programmes.

The following are key aspects for consideration when seeking to address rates of learner withdrawal and improve outcomes for learners on full-time FE programmes:

- the need for a national, strategic conversation to consider why rates of learner withdrawal are so stubbornly high for full-time FE programmes. Learner drop out from college programmes and its impact on the Annual Participation Measure both locally and nationally, requires further exploration to support improvement in both pathway planning and successful outcomes for learners.
- The gap in attainment for learners from the most deprived backgrounds has widened and varies between individual colleges. This attainment gap requires further exploration to ensure equity and equality of outcome for all learners.
- The gap in attainment for care-experienced learners has widened and requires continued focus to secure improvement in outcomes for this key group.
- Rates of attainment across a number of individual colleges and in individual subjects areas vary and in some cases are very low. This requires focused attention to secure improvement in learner outcomes for key industry sectors or in individual colleges.
- The current measures of learner retention and attainment are important indicators of success. However, this provides only a partial view of the success of Scotland's FE learner population as a whole. These learners will also have made important gains in terms of skills and progress from previous learning.
- For many learners, particularly younger learners and those from the most deprived backgrounds, their success is often skills achievement and progress, even if they fail to complete or fully attain their intended qualification. Often for these learners the educational journey will take longer.



- There is a need to acknowledge the potential benefits gained by learners who remain on a programme but do not complete successfully as an indication of the impact of college study on their development.



3. Analysis and next steps

The following aspects require further consideration and exploration to support improvement in outcomes for learners in Scotland's colleges:

- The variability in learner outcomes across establishments, subjects, SCQF levels and for key learner groups including; care-experienced learners, learners from the most deprived backgrounds, learners on full-time FE programmes.
- Equity, equality and support for colleges to meet the needs of all learner groups, including the most vulnerable.
- The impact of digital poverty on the learning experience.
- The quality of learning and teaching across the sector, and the emergence and impact of digital learning as a key characteristic of a post-compulsory learning.
- The learner journey and pathway planning, and the impact of college drop out on the Annual Participation Measure, both locally and nationally.
- The impact of poverty and deprivation on college attainment and the linkages between the Scottish Attainment Challenge and the senior phase.

Appendix 1 - SFC commentary on the impact of the pandemic

1. The ongoing COVID pandemic and the requirement for public health control measures continued throughout 2020-21. The measures put in place to protect staff and students in 2020-21 were more strict and long-lasting than was experienced in 2019-20 and severely limited colleges' ability to deliver learning and teaching activities and student support services on campus.
2. Students faced significant disruption as a consequence of the pandemic; for example, the academic year started with a mix of in-person and remote learning for most, then between the end of December to February 2021 college campuses were mostly closed and learning, teaching and support services were moved completely online. From February to April colleges operated under temporary lockdown restrictions with only 5% of students permitted on campus. It was only from April and for the last few months of term that
3. Students could be back in-person in greater numbers. Even then, the majority of learning remained hybrid/blended. For many students this high level of disruption to learning throughout the academic year limited their ability to complete their course and qualification as planned.
 - Furthermore, numerous issues impacted students' ability to complete their qualification:
 - Students may have been medically affected by the pandemic either directly or via their families and/or dependants.
 - Students with childcare or caring responsibilities may have found it more difficult to complete their course as originally intended.
 - Some students on courses containing a practical element or a work placement in subjects such as engineering, construction, hair, beauty, social care and childcare, were unable to complete their course as intended and therefore had to 'defer' completing their course and qualification to the following academic year.
- The entire student population was also affected by the 'softer' impacts of the pandemic on their education, such as losing access to peer support and in-person lecturer support. While institutions continued to take steps to address digital poverty, supported by additional funding, not all students had readily-available access to the necessary broadband and/or equipment to facilitate effective digital learning and assessment.
4. The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses external exams did not take place for the second year running and lecturer estimated grades were used as the core element for certification.
5. Throughout 2020-21 colleges continued to be responsive to developing digital platforms for learning and for innovative ways to engage with learners, together with the ongoing adaptation of assessment through the SQA and other awarding body alternative assessment arrangements.

Education Scotland
Denholm House
Almondvale Business Park
Almondvale Way
Livingston EH54 6GA

T: +44 (0)131 244 4330

E: enquiries@educationscotland.gov.scot

www.education.gov.scot

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