Response to the Inquiry on Attainment and Achievement of School Aged Children Experiencing Poverty

Introduction

Colleges Scotland is the membership body for all Scotland's 26 colleges, sited in our local communities and providing education, skills and training in the right place at the right time to support the needs of individuals, their communities, and the labour market. Colleges Scotland is grateful to the committee for the opportunity to respond to this inquiry on the attainment and achievement of school-aged children experiencing poverty. Our responses to the committee's questions are below.

Response to Questions

1. How has your work supported the educational attainment of children and young people? What has worked well and what barriers have there been to success?

Colleges are a first choice and a second chance for many people. Scotland's college sector extends across the length and breadth of the country, with our estate sited in the communities we serve, whilst also offering distance learning opportunities. Colleges are the destination of choice for school leavers, providing education and skills training across all levels from Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) level 1 to level 12, National 1 to Doctoral Degree.

Whilst acknowledging Scotland's colleges as the first-choice destination for school leavers, it is important to consider the role of the college sector in providing pathways through education and in the context of the committee's inquiry, with particular thought given to senior phase pupils and young people who are not being retained at school. Locally and regionally, colleges are working with schools, training providers, local authorities, employers and other partners to ensure that opportunities exist for individuals to develop skills and competencies which they can use to progress in education, or into employment.

Some live examples of these opportunities include school-college partnerships which give young people in the senior phase of school the opportunity to undertake a variety of vocational learning courses at college, timetabled into their school curriculum. Another example is the relatively new Foundation Apprenticeship, which provides senior phase pupils with a vocational training opportunity spanning two years and qualification delivered in college as part of the school curriculum. Edinburgh College's *College Courses for Senior Phase Pupils (S4-S6)* illustrates some of the offers available to pupils in the senior phase, in the Edinburgh region. With both of these models, the introduction of the college as a delivery vehicle for education and skills training has the added value of demystifying college for young people and introducing the facilities, equipment and opportunities that they may not have been aware of before. In order to make this approach a consistent offer across the country, consideration should be given to including colleges in the senior phase planning and delivery process.

Scotland's colleges have extensive technical and professional education and training provision, and our sector is clear that for young people leaving school (and indeed for adult returners) a college pathway is of equal standing and value to any other post-16 opportunity. However, the college sector remains concerned that this may not be the view of key influencers in a young person's life and would be supportive of further work on this with children, their parents and carers, teachers and other influencers. Our inclusive and supportive delivery model, combined with local provision, means proportionally more of our student population come from socio-economic disadvantage as compared

to the university student population. As the Scottish Funding Council's *Higher Education Students and Qualifiers at Scottish Institutions 2016-17 Report* outlines, 23.2% of all higher education students from the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland are studying at colleges.

An excellent and timely example of work which has worked well to support the educational attainment of children and young people has been the step-change in identifying and supporting care experienced students into college.

Although the college application form will ask if the applicant is care experienced, there is no obligation on the student to declare their background. Through concerted efforts and campaigns to ensure applicants understand that the purpose of the tick box is to provide those eligible with additional support, there are now more declarations of care experience, but there is a risk that some applicants with care experience still choose not to declare.

Scotland's colleges were already providing enhanced support to care experienced applicants and students (underpinned by the Buttle Quality Mark) before the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act was passed in 2014. With this legislation in place, and the responsibility on colleges as Corporate Parents, there has been a notable correlating rise in care experienced individuals declaring their status to the college, which has allowed for support structures to be put into place proactively in time for these students beginning their course in collaboration with other services supporting each individual student.

Although it is still early in this process to evidence the overall impact on outcomes, anecdotally it has been suggested that retention and attainment has seen a marked improvement in the college sector for these students. It is clear that sharing information between corporate parents and supporting services has improved communication, awareness and access to this support to give these students everything they need to learn and succeed.

In providing a range of education and skills training opportunities, at all levels of education, and with a holistic and evidence-based approach to supporting students with a range of needs, the college sector has been crucial to the educational attainment of children and young people regardless of their prior attainment.

2. Are there any services that you / your organisation has not been able to provide that you believe would work?

For children and young people at school living in low income households, their parents or carers can make an application to the local authority for financial help to buy school uniforms, and for the child to receive free school meals (which can in some local authorities include breakfast). However, this local authority provision does not extend to young people who could otherwise be at school but who are undertaking their education or skills training in a college. Ensuring that children and young people are equipped for the day is essential for successful learning, and this must include alleviation of hunger. Good practice in this regard exists within the college sector, for example, at Dumfries and Galloway College, which has provided a breakfast club for students to ensure they have access to food.

Good practice exists across the education sector for supporting children and young people into, and through, education. There is an opportunity for closer alignment between schools, colleges, universities and third sector organisations to ensure cohesive support is applied consistently and collaboratively.

It should be considered by the committee that in times of challenging financial constraints, often the impact felt by efficiency savings on support systems is particularly acute. In order to underpin inclusion, and support retaining students in education and attaining qualifications, support services are essential and require to be funded. These support systems might include (but are not limited to) direct staff support, assistance with transport provision to and from college, and investment into expanding digital capacities to underpin distance learning.

3. **If you work with schools/local authorities/others to address school attainment and wider achievement, what makes collaboration on this issue easy/difficult?**

Infrastructure supporting partnership working between schools, local authorities and colleges is not consistent between regions and nationally, meaning that the offer to the learner is not consistent from school to school. This can make collaboration more challenging as examples of good practice in some partnership arrangements may be difficult to implement in other contexts. Colleges Scotland recognises that the new Regional Improvement Collaboratives may provide a platform for more strategic alignment and collaboration.

An example of good collaboration is the school-college partnership arrangements where education and training opportunities are made available in college for pupils in the senior phase to explore a range of subjects which are not available in the school setting. Not only does this provide other areas of interest for school-age students, but this provision gives learners responsibility for getting to the college, being on time, and directing their learning.

Finally, opportunities and pathways available to today's school learners are markedly more advanced than a generation ago. It is critical that the influencers in children and young people's lives are up-to-date with these changes, and that they are empowered to help their charges while they are assessing which opportunity may be best for them. A challenge to collaboration, particularly in encouraging children and young people to consider newer pathways (for example the newer apprenticeship pathways, or college qualifications which articulate into university with full recognition of prior learning), is that key influencers may reflect on the opportunities which were available during their own school experience and which are not reflective of the opportunities available today.

4. **What else could be done to support the attainment /achievement of children and young people from families affected by poverty?**

At present, the totality of an applicant's previous history available to the college is contained on the application form. This will give the college insight as to the SIMD ranking of the applicant's home address at the time of application, but SIMD does not indicate household income and although it is a helpful indicator of deprivation, it is not a specific tool which can be individualised to each learner.

With this in mind, it should be noted that colleges do not have access to any information about a college student's history until they have enrolled and, although at that point the college will have access to Skills Development Scotland's Data Hub, it is likely the college will have gleaned that information from the student already and the data hub serves mainly to confirm that information, rather than as a tool to allow colleges to plan support effectively in advance of the course commencing.

Colleges Scotland understands that this decision was made by the Information Commissioner reflecting concerns that an individual could apply to multiple colleges before securing a place and, by waiting until the student has enrolled, this protects the student's data being held by institutions that they will not attend. It should be noted that in consulting with Colleges Scotland members, they noted that gathering effective and up-to-date information is the 'easy' part. Having the time, staff capacity and resource to get the right intervention in place is where the value would happen.

Colleges Scotland is supportive of the introduction of the Pupil Equity Fund, and the clear guidance to target the poverty-related attainment gap. Currently, allocation is calculated on students up to and including S3 who are eligible and registered for free school meals using the latest available data. Colleges Scotland believes that expanding the Pupil Equity Fund into the senior phase of school would provide resource and funding which could underpin innovative partnership projects to support attainment of young people at a key decision-making phase of school.

Thoughtful consideration must be given to the financial needs of children and young people. Colleges Scotland recognises that the Student Support Review recommendations are under consideration and would advocate for any changes to the student support system, and the guidance underpinning delivery, to prioritise the needs of the most financially vulnerable students.

Additional Information

The committee may wish to reflect on two particular pieces of research conducted recently on behalf of the Scottish Funding Council in considering this issue:

1. *Croll, N et al (2016)* *The University of Glasgow and West of Scotland Local Authority Partners: how to engage with MD40 pupils in higher progression schools – SFC Impact for Access Project report*
   This report evaluated that although the residential postcode of the pupil was a factor in attainment regardless of school attended, students from SIMD40 backgrounds attending schools with high levels of progression to university were progressing onto higher education study and attaining qualifications at a *lower* rate in comparison to their peers from wealthier backgrounds, and that this gap was larger than for students from SIMD40 backgrounds in schools with lower levels of progression to university.

2. Gorard, S. and Siddiqui, N. and Boliver, V. (2017) *An analysis of school-based contextual indicators for possible use in widening participation.*
   This research found that although eligibility and receipt of free school meals was the best indicator of deprivation, cognisance must be taken of the length of time an individual has been entitled to free school meals as the longer a student has been entitled to free school meals has a negative impact on their attainment.

Colleges Scotland
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