Pillar 1 Evidence Paper - Delivering for learners: the breadth of provision in Scotland's colleges

Background

Scotland's colleges deliver a far broader range of provision than is often recognised. The evidence demonstrates that they play a central role across the entire education, skills, employability, and community learning landscape. Colleges support young people in the senior phase, deliver further and higher education, provide pathways into university and employment, work closely with employers to deliver apprenticeships and workforce development, and contribute significantly to lifelong learning, reskilling, and upskilling for adults. They also work alongside Community Learning and Development partners, local authorities, schools, universities, employers, and third-sector organisations to provide outreach, learner support, ESOL provision, digital inclusion, wellbeing support, and flexible learning opportunities. This breadth of activity is not unique to individual institutions but is reflected consistently across Scotland, with colleges acting as anchor institutions within their local communities and regional economies.

There is renewed societal interest in vocational, skills-based learning and qualifications[1] and there have been calls to give parity of esteem to college-gained qualifications. James Withers (2023) report for the Scottish Government notes:

> *" … all learning that contributes to a positive destination has parity of esteem. This culture must pervade every facet of our post-school learning system. There is no 'golden pathway'; no learning journey that is more worthy than another. For too long, we have fostered a culture in which going to university is seen as the ultimate postschool achievement with all other options being considered varying degrees of second-best. It is possible both to recognise the extraordinary value of our university sector in Scotland whilst at the same time stating that that culture must now end."*[2]

Adaption and Transformation

Over the past decade colleges have adapted significantly in response to changing learner demand, labour market requirements and sustained financial pressures.[3] Evidence from Audit Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) demonstrates that institutions have rationalised curriculum provision, strengthened regional collaboration, restructured workforces, reviewed estate requirements and expanded commercial activity to improve sustainability.[4] [5]

Colleges have also increasingly adopted flexible and digital delivery models, while strengthening employer engagement and aligning provision more closely with regional

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-from-today-britain-will-value-the-hard-hat-as-much-as-the-graduation-cap
[2] Withers, 2023: https://tinyurl.com/mumpytwh
[3] https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/committees/current-and-previous-committees/Session-6/session-6-education-children-and-young-people-committee/business-items/colleges-regionalisation-inquiry
[4] https://audit.scot/publications/scotlands-colleges-2025
[5] https://www.sfc.ac.uk/?news=financial-sustainability-reports-launched

economic priorities. These developments demonstrate a sector that has continually evolved in response to external pressures while maintaining its broad educational, economic and community role.

However, recent reports[6] suggest that many of the more readily achievable efficiencies have now been realised, raising questions about the extent to which further adaptation can be achieved without affecting the breadth, quality or accessibility of provision.

Further education provision to young people

Colleges are central providers of Further Education (FE) for young people, particularly school leavers and those progressing from the senior phase. The Scottish post-school system is characterised as highly complex,[7] with colleges providing a vast range of curriculum and qualification choice and responding to regional economic and learner needs. Colleges deliver provision across SCQF Levels, including technical, vocational, and professional qualifications, and also support transitions into Higher Education.

The learner journey is non-linear, with young people entering FE through multiple routes, with colleges playing a major role in supporting widening participation and progression opportunities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.[8] School-to-college pathways are closely connected to the senior phase, with increasing use of greater partnerships between schools and colleges and Foundation Apprenticeships.[9]

Further education provision to adults

Colleges are major providers of lifelong learning, upskilling, and reskilling. Learner needs are increasingly diverse and do not follow traditional linear education models. Adult learners are balancing work, caring responsibilities, health conditions, and other personal circumstances, requiring more flexible and accessible forms of provision. FE provision for adults includes accredited qualifications, short courses, employer-led learning, Community Learning and Development (CLD), and personal development learning.

Flexibility is a core requirement, including part-time learning, distance learning, modular delivery, a growing desire to offer micro-credentials, and opportunities for learners to move in and out of education throughout life.

Higher education provision

Colleges offer HE mainly at SCQF Levels 7 and 8, although higher SCQF Levels are also provided. Colleges are critical entry points into HE, particularly for widening access learners

[6] https://audit.scot/publications/scotlands-colleges-2025
[7] https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/independent-report/2023/06/fit-future-developing-post-school-learning-system-fuel-economic-transformation/documents/fit-future-developing-post-school-learning-system-fuel-economic-transformation-skills-delivery-landscape-review-final-report/fit-future-developing-post-school-learning-system-fuel-economic-transformation-skills-delivery-landscape-review-final-report/govscot%3Adocument/fit-future-developing-post-school-learning-system-fuel-economic-transformation-skills-delivery-landscape-review-final-report.pdf
[8] https://www.sfc.ac.uk/student-interests/fair-access/
[9] https://www.gov.scot/policies/young-people-training-employment/school-college-employer-partnerships/

and those progressing through HNC/HND routes. Articulation is important, although many learners moving from college to university do not receive full recognition for prior learning and may need to repeat years of study.[10]

Colleges play a significant role widening access by supporting learners from deprived backgrounds into HE routes, helping overcome inequalities linked to deprivation, disability, gender and ethnicity.[11]

Senior phase

The senior phase (S4–S6) is a critical bridge between school and the post-school education and skills system. The senior phase increasingly involves partnership delivery between schools, colleges, employers, and training providers, including Foundation Apprenticeships and college-based learning.[12]

Subject choices and attainment during the senior phase strongly influence later post-school opportunities. The traditional pathway of National Qualifications, Highers, and Advanced Highers continues to dominate, but alternative vocational and technical routes are expanding.[13]

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are a major component of the Scottish post-school system, combining employer-led learning with accredited education and training. There are Foundation Apprenticeships for school pupils, Modern Apprenticeships for learners aged 16 and over, and Graduate Apprenticeships linked to degree-level study.[14]

Apprenticeships are important pathways for widening participation, workforce development, and supporting economic priorities. Apprenticeships are linked to addressing skills shortages, supporting progression, and enabling learners to gain qualifications while in employment.

Community Learning and Development

Community Learning and Development (CLD) is a key component of the wider post-school learning system. Local authorities have statutory responsibilities to plan and provide CLD, often working alongside colleges, third-sector organisations, and independent training providers.[15]

CLD supports improved life chances, active citizenship, community resilience, and social inclusion. Provision includes literacy, numeracy, ESOL, employability support, youth work,

[10] https://collegesscotland.ac.uk/news/latest/544-joint-articulation-group-media-piece-november-2023
[11] https://www.sfc.ac.uk/student-interests/fair-access/
[12] https://www.sfc.ac.uk/skills-lifelong-learning/pathfinders/regional-tertiary-pathfinders-pilot-projects/enhancing-the-senior-phase/
[13] https://www.qualifications.gov.scot/results-day-2026
[14] https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/publications-statistics/statistics/modern-apprenticeships
[15] https://www.gov.scot/publications/learning-life-report-independent-review-community-learning-development-cld/

essential skills, and personal development learning.[16] CLD also supports learners who may not engage successfully with traditional education pathways.

Outreach

Colleges engage in a wide range of outreach-type activity, which is less a discrete service and more as a cross-cutting approach embedded within widening participation, CLD, school-college partnerships, employer engagement, learner support, and partnership working.

Outreach activity is reflected in efforts to engage learners who face barriers linked to deprivation, disability, geography, caring responsibilities, or prior disengagement from education.

Holistic support provided for learners

College learners can access a vibrant, fun, interesting and cohesive range of services, clubs, support and opportunities to network which gives them a rounded learner experience alongside their course. Colleges support learners to form networks and build friendships.

There are formal routes for learners to have their voice heard at college, by being a class representative, or by being elected to student office as part of a Student Association.[17] College Boards also include learner representation. There is support available for student engagement with governance - sparqs (student partnerships in quality Scotland) supports putting students at the heart of decisions being made about the quality and governance of the learning experience.[18] sparqs trains around 4,000 course reps each year across colleges and universities, and supports faculty reps, senior student officers, student reviewers, and many others. This increases confidence and helps student representatives to build knowledge, expertise and transferable skills. College learners are represented by the National Union of Students in Scotland.

Learners frequently have opportunities to showcase their achievements through exhibitions, competitions (including regional, national and international World Skills competitions[19]), performances, and workshops in the community, with employers, and to expert communities of interest and alumni. College learners are celebrated at graduation ceremonies at the end of each academic year with friends and family. There are also national, annual award ceremonies which recognise outstanding learner achievement - The College Awards[20] (hosted by CDN) and The Scottish Apprenticeship Awards[21] (hosted by SDS).

The Active Campus Network programme helps college students across Scotland become healthier, happier, and more active. A growing network of campus based co-ordinators

[16] https://cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/A-Guide-to-Community-Learning-and-Development-in-Scotland.pdf
[17] https://www.nus.org.uk/members
[18] https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/
[19] https://www.sfc.ac.uk/?news=showcasing-scottish-skills-talent
[20] https://www.cdn.ac.uk/showcasing-colleges/college-awards/college-awards-2025/
[21] https://www.apprenticeships.scot/events/scottish-apprenticeship-awards/

create opportunities for students to take part in sport, as well as volunteer, develop skills, and feel part of their college community. In 2024/25, students took part in more than 65,000 activities across more than 7,000 sessions - more than double from the previous year. Students enjoyed 45 different sports and activities including badminton, basketball, football and fitness classes. Active Campus is funded until 2027 in a partnership with sportscotland supported by National Lottery funding. The programme has supported students who are new to physical activity and worked with[22] under-represented groups to make participation more inclusive and welcoming.

In tackling poverty respectfully and in meeting learners where they are at in their journey, many colleges work with third sector partners to provide access to food and clothing banks, with free laundry facilities in place at one college[23]. Colleges provide free breakfast or lunch to c3,100 students each day[24]. Colleges often partner with advice charities and third sector partners who offer access to advice and advocacy services on campus and through referral. Colleges are not funded to provide services which alleviate food poverty.

Anyone in Scotland aged 22 and under can also gain free bus travel, discounted train, free and discounted ferry travel, and a large number of retailer discounts with a Young Scot National Entitlement Card.[25]

In 2025 the Scottish Government carried out a consultation, Support for part-time study and disabled students.[26] Responses from this show how colleges deliver a range of non-financial support and improvements for disabled students:[27]

- The experience of participants shows that non-financial support can make a real difference for students, both in terms of studying and their wider wellbeing and quality of life.
- They described examples of good practice in providing tailored support to enable individuals to study, to help students identify and access available financial support, and ongoing work by students and institutions to advocate for disabled students and those with additional support needs.

Profile of Learners

Disabled students and students with an ASN

One in four college students has a reported disability.[28] Disabled students can need individualised additional support to learn, thrive and achieve at college. Learners with a

[22] https://sportscotland.org.uk/schools-colleges/active-campus-network
[23] https://www.west-lothian.ac.uk/news-events/latest-news/west-lothian-college-our-facilities/
[24] https://collegesscotland.ac.uk/news/latest/716-scotlands-colleges-providing-over-15-500-free-meals-to-students-every-week-to-combat-food-poverty
[25] https://young.scot/the-young-scot-card/
[26] https://www.gov.scot/publications/analysis-consultation-support-part-time-study-disabled-students/
[27] https://www.gov.scot/publications/analysis-consultation-support-part-time-study-disabled-students/pages/8/
[28] https://www.gov.scot/publications/tertiary-education-training-funding-governance-scotland-bill-equality-impact-assessment-eqia-record/pages/5/

disability can apply for support from the Disabled Students Allowance, and the Independent Living Fund, while at college.[29]

More learners are also declaring a neurodiversity, and / or seeking support because of an Additional Support Need. Some 43% of Scotland's school pupils have an ASN,[30] however there is no equivalent statistic for college students. Dedicated provision for students with an ASN is available to further education students in all of Scotland's colleges.[31] Students are highly individualised and college staff work hard to meet the additional needs of learners and provide them with the right support.

Poverty

College students are typically less well-off financially than university students, and colleges deliver a wide range of services to reduce poverty and inequality.[32] Parents and students with caring responsibilities are a core part of the college student demographic. There is no annual collection of data on college student finances.

The demographic profile of learners is increasingly shaped by poverty and structural inequality. The Pathways from Poverty report by CDN highlight that many learners face financial insecurity and multiple barriers to participation, which can impact attendance, attainment and progression (College Development Network, 2022a; 2022b; 2023).[33]

In the 2023/2024 Student Finance and Wellbeing Study Scotland,[34] 61% of FE students reported experiencing financial difficulties - the highest rate among all student groups surveyed. The study also found that many FE students were facing severe hardship, with 47% skipping meals, 36% reducing heating/electricity use and 15% using foodbanks. Some students reported being unable to afford travel to college or heating during winter. The report notes that FE students experience higher levels of hardship than the general population and are particularly vulnerable during the cost-of-living crisis.

FE students work long and sometimes excessive hours - 46% of FE students were in paid work, with FE students working a median of 22 hours per week, significantly above the recommended 10-15 hours. Students said paid work was essential "just to survive".

Financial pressure affects study decisions including whether students attended college locally, whether they continued studying, and whether they considered dropping out. 30% of FE students had considered leaving their course because of financial pressure.

[29] https://www.studentinformation.gov.scot/students/additional-support-needs
[30] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c20gn6w1ke2o

[31] https://www.sfc.ac.uk/blog-79311/
[32] https://www.gov.scot/publications/student-finance-wellbeing-study-sfws-scotland-2023-2024-research-findings-summary/pages/3/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
[33] https://www.cdn.ac.uk/research/pathways-from-poverty/
[34] https://www.gov.scot/publications/student-finance-wellbeing-study-sfws-scotland-2023-2024-main-report/pages/18/

Mental Health

The 2022 Mental Health Foundation study found that more than half of students surveyed (54%) reported having moderate, moderately severe, or severe symptoms of depression, and despite the prevalence of mental health problems among the college student population, more than half (55%) said they have concealed a mental health problem due to fear of stigmatisation.[35]

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

ESOL is part of the essential skills offer delivered through colleges, amongst other providers.

ESOL provision plays a crucial role in supporting inclusion, integration, and opportunity for people settling in Scotland. It enables learners to communicate effectively in English, access essential services, progress into education and employment, and participate fully in community life.

[35] https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/thriving-learners