

Paper 5 – Strategic Foresight Workshop (23 June 2026)

Purpose

This note provides a **high-level overview** of the outputs from the Strategic Foresight workshop, which took place in-person on 23 June 2026.

The workshop brought together 24 representatives from Scottish colleges, the Scottish Funding Council, the Scottish Government and trade unions. The full list of attendees is in **Annex A**.

Context

The Scottish Government's Strategic Foresight Unit was approached by the Lifelong Learning and Skills Directorate to support a workstream exploring future options for Scotland's college sector. This work is informed by the *Future Trends for Scotland* reports, published in summer 2025, which identified 60 key trends shaping the country's long-term future. The reports were informed by 18 months of comprehensive research and engagement, including in-depth literature reviews, interviews with over 100 stakeholders, multi-agency workshops and direct engagement with young people.

Links to all reports are below:

- [Horizon Sanning Trend Pack](#)
- [Future Trends for Scotland: Findings from the 2024-25 Horizon Scanning Project](#)
- [Young People and the Future of Scotland: A Participatory Horizon Scanning Engagement - Main Report](#)

This College Sector of the Future workstream focuses on examining fundamental questions about the role of colleges and the changes that may be required to enable the sector to respond effectively to future needs. It is structured around three pillars, one of which involves a series of national and regional workshops, taking place in the summer – autumn of 2026. This session formed part of the preparatory phase for those workshops, to generate insights and perspectives to inform subsequent discussions.

Workshop Format

The workshop was structured around two distinct futures activities:

- The first activity, *Driver Mapping*, involved identifying key trends likely to shape the future of the college sector in Scotland. In advance, the College Sector of the Future Working Group team selected 15 priority trends (**Annex B**) from the 60 included in the [Horizon Scanning Trend Pack](#). Participants mapped these trends on an importance–certainty matrix, exploring their potential influence on the future focus, scale, structure and operating model of the sector (**Annex C**).
- This was followed by a second activity, *Exploring Different Futures*, where participants explored learner and employer personas (**Annex D**), each representing a future user of the college system. Using a structured set of questions (**Annex E**), facilitators guided groups to explore these personas' needs, expectations and challenges, and to consider how the college system might evolve to meet them.

Annexes

Annexes have been provided as below:

- **Annex A** shows the list of attendees
- **Annex B** shows the 15 priority trends chosen
- **Annex C** shows the axis used for the Driver Mapping activity

- **Annex D** shows the personas for the activity, *Exploring Different Futures*
- **Annex E** shows the question sets used for the activity, *Exploring Different Futures*

Driver Mapping: High-Level Overview

Prior to the Driver Mapping exercise, participants discussed the selection of trends and noted that some important areas were not fully represented. It was emphasised that the exercise was based on a curated subset of trends, and this should not be interpreted as diminishing the importance of others. Participants were therefore encouraged to incorporate any additional trends they considered significant into their own driver mapping. These included themes such as migration, neurodiversity, AI, automation and robotics and changing industrial structures.

Trends were positioned on the axes across the breakout groups, drawing on written inputs and facilitator reflections (noting that not all groups completed the exercise). This note highlights areas of convergence and divergence in how participants assessed the importance and certainty of key drivers.

Key Points from the Driver Mapping Discussions

Across all workshop groups, there was strong alignment on a number of **highly important and relatively certain drivers** shaping the college sector.

- Financial sustainability and system-wide pressure
Financial sustainability challenges were consistently identified as the most significant and certain driver. Participants noted that colleges face increasing financial pressures due to rising costs, constrained public funding and competing demands across services such as health, social care and climate. This was seen as a fundamental constraint on the sector's capacity to respond to other trends. However, some variation in impact across institutions was noted, introducing uncertainty around its distribution.
- Lifelong learning, skills demand and workforce alignment
There was strong agreement that lifelong learning and skills will grow in importance, reflecting labour market shifts driven by automation, AI and economic transition, alongside colleges' role in reskilling and upskilling. While this direction is clear, uncertainty remains around the definition of "skills" in practice, the level of policy alignment between government, employers and providers and the sector's capacity to respond at scale.
- Decarbonisation and just transition
The transition to net zero and the shift away from fossil fuels were widely seen as high-importance, high-certainty drivers. Participants noted this will reshape Scotland's economy and infrastructure, requiring colleges to adapt curricula, support workforce transition and respond to changing regional demand. Institutions will also face operational pressures, including the costs of decarbonising estates and upgrading existing infrastructure.

It was noted that the purpose of the College Sector of the Future workstream is to explore how the college sector can adapt to these highly important and relatively certain trends.

Other drivers were generally assessed as being of **medium–high importance and moderate certainty** for the college sector.

- Growing complexity of learner needs

There was broad agreement on a set of social and demographic trends, including rising mental health conditions (particularly among young people), increasing additional support needs, persistent income and wealth inequality, and shifting school-age populations. While the overall direction is clear, uncertainty remains regarding the scale of demand and the extent of colleges' responsibility, particularly where pressures overlap with other public services.

Some trends were viewed as **relatively certain but less transformative at a systemic level**.

- Cyber security was seen as an ongoing operational risk that individual institutions are already managing.
- School-age population decline was considered predictable, though with uneven regional and institutional impacts.
- Urbanisation and rural depopulation were noted as important in some contexts, but not universally transformative.

Across all workshop groups, participants broadly agreed on which trends **are highly important and highly uncertain** for the future of Scotland's college sector.

- Population distribution and regional inequality

Participants highlighted that these shifts could have significant implications for the viability of provision in rural and remote communities, potentially driving new delivery models such as hub-and-spoke approaches or centres of excellence. There was also concern that these dynamics could contribute to deepening geographic inequalities in access to education and services.

Groups **differed in their assessment of technology-related trends and wider systemic instability**.

- Views varied on the certainty of digitisation, with some emphasising its inevitability and others highlighting uncertainty around pace, scale and impact. There was consensus, however, that technology will be transformative, with risks of digital exclusion and outcomes shaped by policy choices.
- Broader systemic uncertainties, such as misinformation, declining institutional trust and geopolitical instability, were also highlighted. While more indirect, these were seen as potentially significant through their influence on migration, public attitudes and policy stability.

Cross-cutting insights

- The sector is operating under sustained structural pressure

Across groups, there is a strong sense that financial constraint is not a short-term issue but a persistent condition. This frames all other challenges and limits the sector's ability to respond, innovate or expand its role in its current format. All groups spoke about the proven ability and experience that individual colleges have in adapting to changing circumstances, with some groups discussing a perception that the flexibility of individual colleges to respond is increasingly limited. There was a broad consensus that system level change is required.

- There is a widening gap between expectations and delivery reality

Colleges are increasingly positioned as central to addressing major economic and social challenges. However, uncertainty around capacity, resources and policy alignment - combined with more fundamental questions about the purpose and role of colleges - points to a growing disconnect between expectations and what can realistically be delivered.

- Change is systemic rather than incremental
The combination of economic transition, demographic change and net zero requirements points to deep structural shifts. These are not marginal adjustments, but changes that affect the core role, shape and functioning of the sector.
- Pressures are compounding and interconnected
Financial, social and demographic trends are reinforcing one another, particularly in relation to learner needs. This creates more complex and layered demand that cannot be understood or addressed in isolation.

Exploring Different Futures: High-Level Overview

These insights draw together common themes emerging across both learner and employer perspectives. While they reflect different starting points - individual aspirations and barriers on one side, and system and workforce needs on the other - there are notable areas of overlap. Taken together, they suggest a set of possible future directions for the college system, highlighting shared priorities as well as important tensions that may need to be navigated.

- Movement towards more collaborative and responsive relationships
Both learners and employers point towards the potential for a more collaborative and responsive system. Employers describe closer partnership working with colleges, while learners emphasise the importance of provision that leads clearly to opportunities. This suggests a possible shift away from a linear “pipeline” model towards more ongoing, two-way relationships, where provision is shaped through dialogue between learners, employers and educators.
- Balancing personalisation with system coherence
Learners highlight the importance of personalised pathways that reflect their circumstances, while employers emphasise the value of a more coordinated and structured system. Together, this points towards a future where systems may need to balance flexibility for individuals with clarity and coherence at system level, enabling tailored journeys within a more organised and navigable framework.
- Strengthening links between learning and work
There appears to be strong alignment on the importance of connecting learning more directly to employment.
 - Learners seek clearer pathways, work experience and confidence that education will lead to meaningful outcomes.
 - Employers emphasise alignment with skills needs and workforce demand.
 This suggests potential for more integrated models, where work-based learning and progression routes are a core part of provision.

- Lifelong and flexible learning pathways

Both perspectives indicate that learning may increasingly take place across the life course.

- Learners emphasise the need to move in and out of learning and balance it with other responsibilities.
- Employers highlight the importance of continuous professional development and adaptability.

This points towards possible growth in more flexible, modular approaches that support ongoing transitions rather than single learning episodes.

- Improving access, inclusion and participation

Learners consistently identify a wide range of barriers, while employers recognise the need to access a broader, more diverse talent pool. This suggests a shared opportunity to strengthen access and inclusion through more flexible delivery, targeted support and designing systems that are easier to enter and progress through. Colleges may continue to play an important role as community anchors in this context.

- Towards a more joined-up system

Both groups highlight challenges with fragmentation and complexity.

- Learners point to difficulties navigating the system and accessing clear guidance.
- Employers describe duplication and lack of coordination.

Taken together, this suggests potential value in a more joined-up approach, possibly involving stronger coordination across institutions and better alignment with wider public services and economic priorities.

- Blended learning and the role of digital

There is broad recognition of the potential role of digital and AI in shaping future learning.

- Learners value flexibility but also emphasise the importance of human connection and support.
- Employers see opportunities for greater responsiveness and use of data.

This indicates a likely future where digital and physical environments are used in combination, with careful consideration of how to maintain inclusion and wellbeing.

- Evolving approaches to funding and incentives

Both learners and employers raise questions about how learning should be funded.

- Learners suggest models that reduce personal risk and support participation.
- Employers indicate a potential for greater industry investment and shared responsibility.

This points towards possible exploration of more flexible and blended funding approaches, alongside ongoing questions about how costs and benefits are distributed.

- Balancing economic and social outcomes

A shared theme is the need to balance economic priorities with wider social outcomes.

- Learners emphasise confidence, belonging and access.
- Employers focus on skills, productivity and competitiveness.

This highlights the possibility that colleges will continue to operate across both domains, requiring careful consideration of how different objectives are balanced.

- Core risks and trade-offs

Across both perspectives, a number of common tensions emerge. These include:

- Digital access versus potential exclusion
- Greater employer involvement versus public accountability
- Efficiency considerations versus equitable access
- Balancing flexibility and clarity when designing systems

These suggest that future developments are likely to involve trade-offs and choices, rather than straightforward solutions.

- Possible direction of travel for 2040

Taken together, these perspectives suggest a possible shift towards a more flexible, responsive and integrated system, with stronger links between learning, work and wider support services. This could involve clearer pathways for learners, greater collaboration and more adaptable forms of learning and funding between colleges, employers and government.

Annex A – Workshop Attendees

24 people from the following organisations attended the workshop:

Scottish Government

- Directorate for Lifelong Learning and Skills
- Directorate for Tackling Child Poverty and Social Justice
- Directorate for Jobs and Wellbeing Economy
- Directorate for Education
- Directorate for Economic Development

Other organisations

- Borders College
- City of Glasgow College
- Colleges Scotland
- Dumfries and Galloway College
- Education Institute Scotland (EIS)
- Edinburgh College
- Glasgow Kelvin College
- National Union of Students
- North East College Scotland
- Scottish Funding Council
- South Lanarkshire College
- UNISON
- Universities Scotland
- West College Scotland

Annex B – Priority Trends

In summer 2025, the Scottish Government published the *Future Trends for Scotland* reports, identifying 60 key trends shaping Scotland's long-term future. This built on 18 months of comprehensive research and engagement, including in-depth literature reviews, interviews with over 100 stakeholders, multi-agency workshops and direct engagement with young people.

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15 trends selected for Driver Mapping



Annex C – Driver Mapping Axis

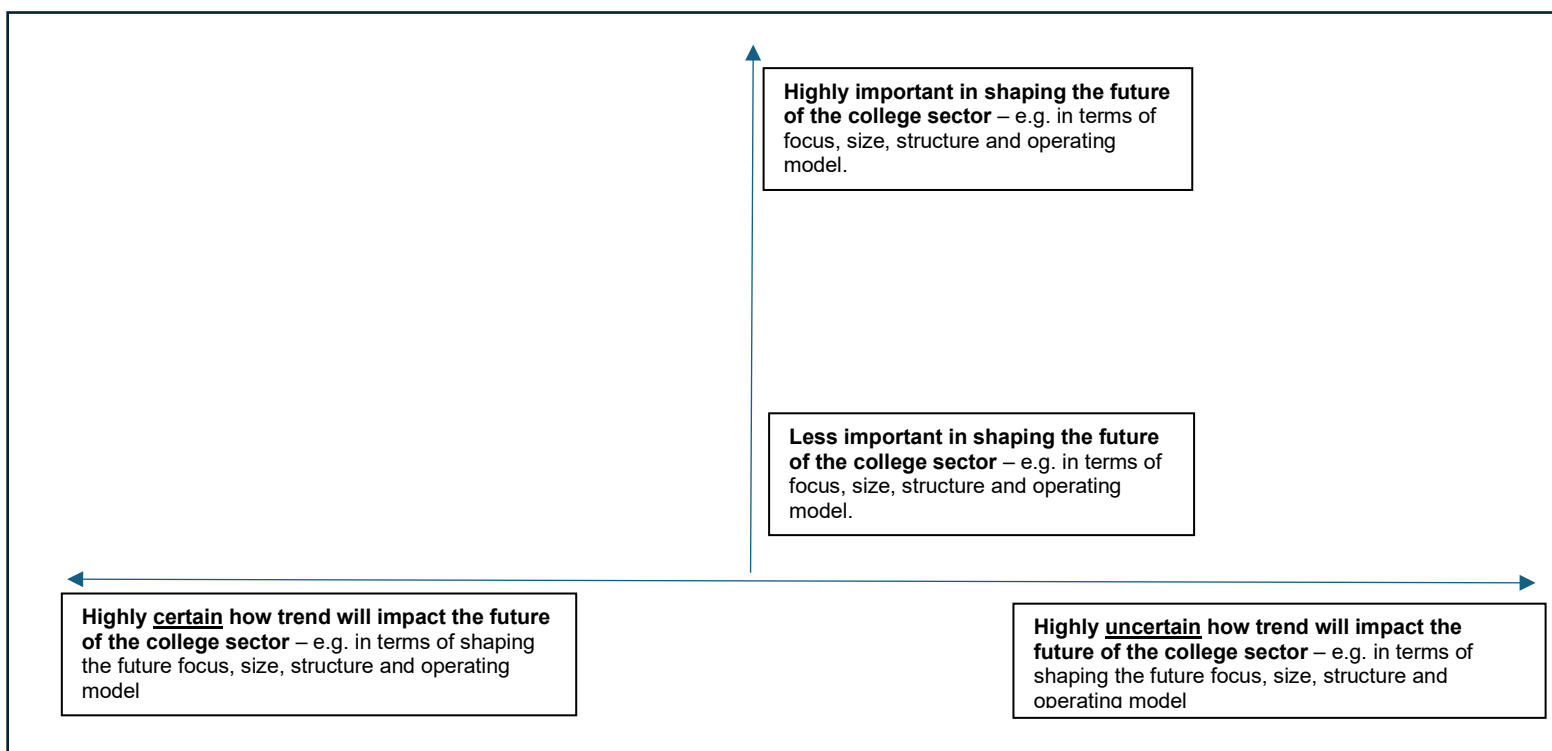
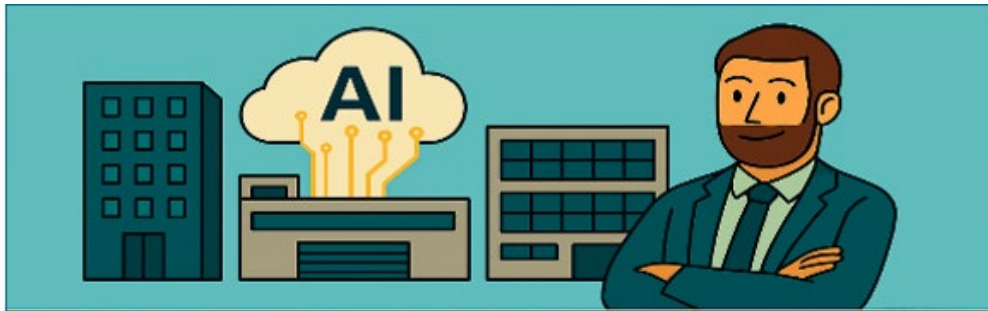


Figure 1: Driver Mapping axis

Annex D – Learner and Employer personas

Employers



A multinational organisation focused on cyber security, data-centre provision and AI solutions for governments and global corporations. It operates across borders with highly specialised workforce needs.



A Scotland-wide care provider specialising in the care of older people. It is a major employer across the country but struggles to fill vacancies.



A small green energy enterprise that specialises in the production of wind turbine components. It is rooted in a regional economy while operating in fast-paced global markets.

Learners



A 45-year-old single parent of three with previous experience in the oil and gas sector. They are seeking to transition into a new field and remain in the workforce for the next 20-25 years. They are feeling quite nervous about re-entering the education system.



A 30-year-old who recently lost their job, has low digital skills and limited English proficiency. They live in a rural area without access to their own transport. They are a hard worker, and hope college can give them new opportunities.



A 17-year-old Scottish school-leaver entering college for the first time. They didn't enjoy school and suffered from anxiety but are excited to start college and are looking towards a brighter future.

Annex E – Question sets for *Exploring Different Futures* activity

The Employer in 2040

1. Economic Changes:

How should the college sector evolve to support employer's changing workforce and skills needs in a rapidly shifting economy?

- What would make colleges a responsive, real-time partner rather than a pipeline?
- How can they support both short-term demands and long-term workforce resilience?
- How should they adapt to different workforce models (local, global, or on-demand)?

2. Financial Challenges

What funding and investment approaches would enable effective and sustainable partnerships with colleges?

- How should costs, risks and benefits be shared between employers, learners and the public sector?
- What barriers limit engagement today?
- How can models work for different employer types and sizes?

3. Digital and AI

How should colleges use digital and AI to keep pace with evolving skills needs?

- What role should employers play in shaping or co-designing learning?
- How can data and technology improve responsiveness and relevance?
- What risks (e.g. bias, trust, access) need to be addressed?

4. Physical Estates

What role should physical college spaces play in supporting workforce development?

- How could spaces support local access, collaboration or innovation?
- What balance is needed between physical, digital and workplace-based learning?

5. Demographic Changes (Migration & Ageing)

How can colleges help employers access and develop a diverse and inclusive workforce?

- What systems are needed to recognise and transfer skills across contexts?
- How can they reduce barriers to participation and progression?

6. Learner Expectations

How should colleges prepare learners to meet evolving employer expectations?

- What skills and attributes matter most (e.g. technical, adaptable, collaborative)?
- How important is real-world experience and work-readiness?
- How should learning align with different career paths and ways of working?

7. Cross-cutting

What needs to fundamentally change for the college system to meet future employer needs by 2040?

- What key insights from your discussion feel most important to share?
- What ideas feel bold or transformative, and why?
- What feels challenging or uncomfortable, and what does that reveal?

- What fundamental changes about how the college sector could operate in the future feels really important
- If designing from scratch for 2040, what would you stop, start and scale-up?

The Learner in 2040

1. Learner Expectations & Needs

What should learners expect from education and training in the future?:

- What outcomes matter most (e.g. employment, stability, confidence, purpose)?
- How will learning fit around real-life responsibilities and constraints?
- What would an ideal learning experience look and feel like?

2. Diversity of needs

How should colleges respond to increasingly diverse and changing populations?

- What support is needed to ensure people from all backgrounds and life stages can access and succeed in learning?
- What is the role for colleges to play in supporting inclusive communities and integration?
- How can colleges best delivery as community anchors in a changing context?

3. Economy and Finance

How should the college sector evolve to support learner's economic realities and life circumstances over time?

- What financial models would remove risk or barriers to participation?
- How could learning, earning and living be better integrated?
- When funding is limited, what/who should be prioritised?

4. Digital and AI

How should digital and AI transform learner's access to and experience of learning?

- What role could AI play in personalising and supporting learner's journeys?
- What does the learner need to benefit fully?
- What risks need to be addressed?

5. Physical Estates

What should the physical footprint of the college sector look like for this learner by 2040?

- What alternative models (hubs, community spaces, workplaces, home learning) would work best?
- How should physical and digital environments connect?

6. Cross-cutting

What needs to fundamentally change to create a better future college system for learners by 2040?

- What key insights from your discussion feel most important to share?
- What ideas feel bold or transformative, and why?
- What feels challenging or uncomfortable, and what does that reveal?
- What fundamental changes about how the college sector could operate in the future feels really important
- If designing from scratch for 2040, what would you stop, start and scale-up?