Essential skills in Scotland's colleges

21 September 2012

An aspect report by HM Inspectors on behalf of the Scottish Funding Council

Transforming lives through learning

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1. Introduction

Simply defined, essential skills include personal and learning skills; skills in literacy, numeracy and communication; problem solving and working with others; information technology skills, and employability and career management skills.

The Scottish Government has produced two strategies focused on the development of essential skills:

- *Skills for Scotland - A Lifelong Skills Strategy[1],2007* (otherwise known as the *skills strategy*); and

- *Skills for Scotland: Accelerating the Recovery and Increasing Sustainable Economic Growth[2]*, 2010 (*refreshed skills strategy*).

These two strategies place a strong focus on the development of appropriate skills to ensure that Scotland's population is ready to meet the challenges of economic recovery, be more employable and help sustain economic growth.

In the skills strategy, the Scottish Government identifies a cluster of skills which it calls essential skills. These are:

- personal and learning skills that enable individuals to become effective lifelong learners;

- literacy and numeracy;

- the five core skills of *communication*, *numeracy*, *problem solving*, *information and communication technology* and *working with others*;

- employability skills that prepare individuals for employment rather than for a specific occupation;

- essential skills that include all of those above; and

- vocational skills that are specific to a particular occupation or sector.

The skills agenda is a priority for Scotland's economic prosperity as stated in the refreshed skills strategy in 2010:

Skills, when utilised effectively, are one of the key drivers of improvement in productivity.

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[1] *Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy*, Scottish Government, September 2007, http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/09/06091114/3
[2] *Skills for Scotland: Accelerating the Recovery and Increasing Sustainable Economic Growth,* October 2010, http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/10/04125111/0

In the *Scottish Government's Economic Strategy*[3], published in 2011, one of the six strategic priorities is *Learning, Skills and Wellbeing*. This priority refers to the skills strategy and has a focus on jobs and growth. One of the actions identified in the strategy is *Opportunities for All* which plans to offer every 16-19 year old not in work, a modern apprenticeship or education, or a place in education or training. The *16+ Learning Choices* initiative guarantees every young person moving into the senior phase of Curriculum for Excellence the offer of post-16 learning.

Last year, the Scottish Government's consultation paper *Putting Learners at the Centre*[4] set out its ambitions for a high performing education and skills system. The Government's aim is to drive improved coherence with a sharper focus between and across the different partners in post-16 learning and training, exploiting the capacity of the whole system to support sustainable economic growth.

Putting Learners at the Centre recognises that to compete successfully in a rapidly changing global economy, Scotland's employers need a workforce equipped with a broad range of skills, knowledge and attributes. The post-16 system has a central role to play here: in delivering the vocational and core skills, and the qualifications, at all levels necessary for a particular job and for their long-term career; in developing people's ability to think critically; and in building their wider attributes.

These initiatives set out to improve young people's participation in education and training, support the development of their essential skills and advance their opportunities to enter employment.

The *Skills for Learning, Life and Work* agenda set out in Curriculum for Excellence, in particular in *Building the Curriculum 4*[5], establishes the key concept of the development of essential skills in our learners as a priority. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has emphasised that colleges have a significant role to play in implementing the Scottish Government's skills strategy and in the senior phase of Curriculum for Excellence[6]. Colleges have a key role to play in delivering adult literacies, in working with young people within the senior phase of Curriculum for Excellence and in having a positive impact on family life through developing confidence and skills in all learners.

The range of programmes offered by Scotland's colleges aims to meet these agendas, the needs of the economy and businesses, and the aspirations of learners to develop their skills. Scotland's colleges provide learners with opportunities to develop a wide range of essential skills, along with the opportunity to develop those personal attributes which enable successful learners to contribute effectively to society.

As Scotland looks to move forward from the economic recession, this report evaluates the extent to which Scotland's colleges are developing learners' essential skills.

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[3]*Scottish Government's Economic Strategy, 20112, http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Economy/EconomicStrategy.*

[4] *Putting Learners at the Centre, Scottish Government 2011, http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/09/15103949/0*

[5]*Building the Curriculum 4 - skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work, Scottish Government, October 2009, http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/10/16155220/0*

[6]*Main Grant Letter 2010-11, Scottish Funding Council, April 2010, www.sfc.ac.uk/FE_Grant_Letter_2010*

2.   Methodology

HM Inspectors engaged with a representative sample of Scotland's colleges and a wide range of other interested groups to evaluate the effectiveness of colleges in developing learners' essential skills. The team carried out a desk analysis of college documents and reports, and relevant documents relating to the Scottish labour market. They visited twelve colleges, each on two occasions, as well as external stakeholders for discussions with:

- college staff and staff in other learning establishments;

- full-time learners;

- part-time learners also in employment;

- Scottish Qualifications Authority;

- former learners who have progressed to employment or further study; and

- employers and their representative bodies.

The team also observed eight lessons in each college to evaluate learners' experiences directly.

These activities helped to form judgements about how well colleges are responding in relation to:

- Scottish Government strategic priorities;

- the relevance of programmes to learners and employers; and

- the development of the range of essential skills for learners.

The report includes snapshots of notable and effective practice, along with recommendations for colleges and key stakeholders. Education Scotland will disseminate the report's findings and promote the adoption of recommendations and excellence through *Scotland's Colleges* and other agencies and activities.

3.   Summary of key findings

The provision of essential skills in Scotland's colleges is characterised by the following strengths:

- Scotland's colleges take good account of the Scottish Government's skills strategies and Curriculum for Excellence in devising their strategic plans.

- In many colleges, the clarity of a definition of essential skills by senior staff in colleges is an important factor in identifying what essential skills are and how learners will achieve their learning targets.

- Colleges work well with local and national employers to embed and deliver essential skills and work very well with local authorities to offer programmes to school-based learners.

- Continuing professional development activities are planned and structured well and support effectively the essential skills strategy in most colleges.

- For many learners, the use of effective project-based and active learning activities maintains and increases learner engagement and helps learners to acquire a range of essential skills.

- Most staff plan and integrate activities well, which helps learners to focus on and build their essential skills and make connections to other subjects in their programme.

- Many learners are involved in designing aspects of their learning. They review and discuss the ways they like to learn and influence what they learn.

- Almost all learners perceive their experiences on their programmes positively. Many colleges make extensive use of community projects and work experience to enhance the learning experience and develop learners' essential skills.

- Attainment rates of core skills units for programmes which are sponsored by employers are high.

- Most colleges track and monitor learner progression in essential skills effectively, including personal and learning skills, citizenship skills and employability skills.

- Colleges value the contributions made by learners and have introduced a range of measures to capture their views effectively.

- Colleges have well-structured and systematic annual review processes which evaluate how well the college has met the needs of learners in essential skills.

- Most teaching staff are involved closely in self-evaluation and internal review of essential skills.

However, Education Scotland noted a number of areas for development to improve the experiences of learners

- In a few colleges, there is a lack of focus and clarity relating to the skills that learners are expected to attain, and how they will do so.

- More than a few learners do not make connections to the progression of appropriate essential skills across the curriculum, as these have not been made clear by staff.

- For more than a few learners, insufficient contextualisation and embedding of core skills in their programmes leads to boredom and disengagement from their learning activities.

- Apart from attainment at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 2, communications core skill unit attainment is low overall.

- In more than a few colleges, specific targets to improve attainment in core skills are insufficiently specific and measurable. In some cases, staff are unaware of learners' core skills attainment and how to improve attainment rates.

- The majority of learners do not yet feel sufficiently confident in using the language of essential skills and have to be prompted to discuss their progress in specific essential skills.

- For most school-based learners there is no connection between their progress in skills gained at college and their activities at school, or in their discussions with school guidance staff.

4. Planning of Provision

Leadership and direction

Scotland's colleges take good account of the Scottish Government's skills strategies in devising their own strategic plans. In particular, colleges focus effectively on two of the principles of the vision of the Scottish Government's *Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy*:

- *understanding demands for skills to help learners prepare for the future; and*

- *ensuring that Curriculum for Excellence provides vocational learning and the employability skills needed for the world of work and is the foundation for skills development throughout life.*[7]

There is a wide range of strategies to embed essential skills in the curriculum and other aspects of college life. Almost all senior managers understand well the importance of learner development in essential skills. In most colleges, appropriate essential skills strategies are in place to ensure learners make good progress. Developing learners' essential skills is clearly central to colleges' missions of providing inclusive, lifelong learning for the communities they serve.

Almost all essential skills strategies have strong links to national initiatives, particularly Curriculum for Excellence and the Scottish Government's *Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy*. In many cases, colleges have reflected on previous strategies and introduced a stand-alone essential skills strategy. In other colleges, essential skills sit within wider strategies which are often interrelated and lead to actions to improve learner progression in essential skills.

Most colleges have a clear and well-promoted emphasis on essential skills which is set out in a range of well-considered strategies. These include the following typical examples:

- essential skills strategies;

- learner engagement strategies;

- core and soft skills strategies;

- enterprise in education strategies; and

- learning and teaching strategies.

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[7]*Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy*, Scottish Government, 2007, page 5,

For many colleges, essential skills is a strategic priority. Managers in most colleges demonstrate strong leadership in defining and planning priorities for essential skills. Managers are able to define responsibilities for developing learners' essential skills and how the strategies are to be implemented. Most colleges set out clear strategic aims such as:

- *We will embed across the whole college curriculum opportunities for all learners to build and develop the essential skills and associated knowledge required to be successful and meet the challenges of learning, life and employment in the 21st century.*

- *The college will continue to revise its curricular programmes to take account of Curriculum for Excellence reforms.*

- *The college will adopt a holistic approach to learning and development that enables each individual to reach their potential through development of essential skills.*

In other colleges, essential skills are subsumed within strategies in other significant areas, such as core skills. Almost all colleges align their strategic approach to essential skills with the definition from the Scottish Government's skills strategy[8].

The strength of these approaches supports a focus on essential skills at the strategic level. It ensures that colleges deliver opportunities for learners to develop essential skills in the curriculum and through wider college experiences. However, in a few colleges, although essential skills are mentioned in different strategies, they are not clearly defined. There is a lack of focus and clarity relating to the skills that learners are expected to attain, and how they will do so. Consequently, staff and learner understanding of essential skills is variable and both have an insufficient focus on developing these important skills.

Snapshot of Aberdeen College's *Essential Skills for Learning, Life and Work – core and soft skills strategy*

The college's strategy demonstrates effectively how Curriculum for Excellence and learners' essential skills development is embedded in learning and teaching practice. Staff have identified four broad clusters of *soft skills*. These include citizenship skills, employability skills, study skills and environmental and economic sustainability skills. This focus is centred on a clear definition of each of these skills. There is a commitment to how staff should develop these skills in learning and teaching activities and how staff should record learners' progress. The strategy outlines the roles and responsibilities of all those involved from senior staff to guidance tutors. For example, *teaching staff will plan lessons to take account of learners' core and soft skills levels in the development of skills for life and work*.

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[8] *Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy*, Scottish Government, September 2007, page 8.

For most colleges, such a strategic focus on essential skills helps to develop a positive culture among staff in developing learners' essential skills. This is an important concept as it aims to ensure that there is a parity of esteem between vocational skills and essential skills. In the best colleges, vocational and essential skills are seen to be related and are developed together rather than as separate aspects of the learning experience. This approach becomes second nature to learners and teaching staff. Staff are highly focused on developing both sets of learners' skills and demonstrate clearly the value in preparing learners effectively for finding employment when they leave college.

The clarity of a definition of essential skills by senior staff in colleges is an important factor. It helps to establish the aim of the college in not only defining what essential skills are, but how learners will achieve their learning targets. However, a few colleges focus on the development of core skills as the main vehicle for demonstrating learners' progress in essential skills. This narrow approach to evaluating the achievement of essential skills relies upon learners gaining the core skills components of their college programme rather than an holistic view of skills achievement. Consequently, learners do not have a sufficiently wide framework of essential skills to build upon and use in other contexts.

In most colleges, senior managers demonstrate effective leadership so that essential skills become a key part of the curriculum and all staff understand their importance. Strong leadership ensures that the focus on essential skills is at the heart of the learning experience and expectations of staff and learners are set at an appropriately high level. In these colleges, it is evident that good leadership enables staff to use their experiences and professionalism to develop learners' essential skills within an appropriate context.

However, in a few colleges, staff devise their own definitions of essential skills. In these cases, learners develop appropriate essential skills on the basis of which teaching staff they have, rather than as part of a systematic approach to help all learners acquire appropriate outcomes. For example, in a few lesson observations, failure to relate essential skills development to the world of work did not help learners gain a sufficient understanding of the importance of employability and other skills.

Curriculum for Excellence

Almost all colleges use their essential skills strategies to support Curriculum for Excellence effectively. Many colleges use the four capacities of *successful learners*, *effective contributors*, *responsible citizens* and *confident individuals*, and their related attributes, as a framework to demonstrate learner progress in essential skills. In almost all colleges, Curriculum for Excellence reinforces and heavily influences their approach to developing essential skills. For example, in one college the essential skills strategy states that:

The college is committed to embedding the principles of Curriculum for Excellence across the curriculum in ways that develop in learners the essential skills for life and work beyond college.

Another college has devised a Curriculum for Excellence toolkit for programme design. This ensures the design of all programmes follows the principles of Curriculum for Excellence. In another college, in collaboration with university

partners, links have been made through the four capacities to a *graduate attributes* framework for higher education. This framework has been devised to help learners gain the essential skills which will be most appropriate for them when they enter university. A cross-college steering group has been established to enable staff to develop learner confidence and skills to deliver this agenda.

This emphasis on Curriculum for Excellence at strategic and operational levels is significant in helping most colleges to go beyond simply introducing programmes and activities in a superficial way. It helps colleges to develop a culture based upon the principles of Curriculum for Excellence. Consequently, most colleges have moved to a position where learners make connections across their learning experiences to recognise the essential skills they are developing and those which will equip them for their careers and lifestyles after they leave college.

Collaboration with employers

Colleges work well with local and national employers to embed and deliver essential skills. There has clearly been a great deal of discussion with employers to meet their skills requirements. For example, in one college local employers sit on *scrutiny panels* whenever a new programme is being devised or when a new national programme is being introduced. These panels discuss how essential skills will be developed in the programme and how the college is meeting the skill requirements of local employers.

Ayr College's Boeing 737 cockpit simulator used to train apprentices in a realistic working environment.

Colleges have accurate knowledge of what local and national employers are looking for in terms of learners' essential skills. This intelligence informs the delivery of programmes and ensures that provision meets the needs of employers and

aspirations of learners. This has resulted in programmes which are relevant and meet the needs of employers. All employers involved in the fieldwork for this report value colleges and how well they prepare learners for employment opportunities. They speak highly of how colleges shape the curriculum to meet their needs and are satisfied with the learners who progress into employment.

The Confederation of British Industry in Scotland (CBI) is positive about the contribution colleges make in developing the range of appropriate skills for their members. There are good relations between the members of the CBI and their local colleges. The Scottish Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Employers in Scotland believe that building an interface between college and employers is very important. Their members wish to see closer arrangements in shaping the curriculum and adapting the curriculum to extend opportunities for work experience and help learners develop relevant essential skills.

Snapshot of Borders College's *Essential Skills Employer Forum*

Through the forum, the college works successfully with employers to identify essential skills needed for work and then builds these into programmes. The forum has very strong representation and commitment from local employers. The group discusses issues around how best to prepare learners for employment and the types of employability skills they should develop. There are workshops in which representatives discuss specific issues. For example, employers are asked to discuss issues such as: What do you think gives candidates a competitive advantage? What makes a potential employee stand out from the rest? What essential skills do employers rate highly? The outcomes from these discussions are placed within a college booklet, *Essential Skills for Employment*, which provides learners with a very useful set of indicators on the types of skills they should develop and the mindset of employers as they look for potential employees.

The Scottish Chambers of Commerce, in their reply to the Scottish Government's consultation on post-16 education in Scotland, state that future outcome agreements for funding of colleges should include specific demonstrations that colleges are highly responsive to employers' needs, including relevant essential skills. The CBI is clear that in order to help colleges develop young learners' essential skills to the optimum level, pupils in school should have a better understanding of the levels of literacy and numeracy demanded by employers.

Snapshot of the Scottish Funding Council's *Enterprise into Education* initiative

This work placement programme is for learners at Higher National Certificate to degree level. Employers translate a business requirement into a defined project which learners undertake as part of their work experience. The project has management support funded by the initiative via a coordinator. Projects can be of 30 to 90 days' duration, though all projects are assessed on their own merit. Learners undertake a mix of onsite and offsite working. Learners come from Abertay University, Adam Smith College, Dundee College, Elmwood College, Forth Valley College, James Watt College and West Lothian College. Employers have the benefit of having an enthusiastic and motivating participant to solve a real problem in their business. Learners gain employability skills through direct experience in devising appropriate business solutions.

All colleges work very well with local authorities to offer programmes to school-based learners. In almost all cases, these relationships work very well. Learners engage in a wide variety of programmes such as Skills for Work, Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN), City and Guilds and college-designed programmes. For example, one college working with a large number of secondary schools, has been successful in devising a unified timetable for multiple schools, with common start and end times. The college is now working with the schools to self-evaluate the learning experience jointly and better monitor progress for school-based learners by introducing the college's on-line procedures into local schools. This helps learners to monitor their progress in essential skills and ensures they have an appropriate level of skills if they decide to apply for college programmes.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Overall, CPD activities are planned and structured well and support effectively the essential skills strategies of most colleges. Many colleges have well-planned and structured CPD activities in place to deliver the agenda on essential skills and the senior phase of Curriculum for Excellence. Staff also attend external events and return to college ready to cascade information to their colleagues. Many colleges have procedures to help staff reflect on their performance over the academic year and plan for improvements. They help staff establish personal targets and support them to reflect on their goals and activities. Staff can plan for further development or CPD in areas that will help learners develop their essential skills.

In almost all colleges, operational planning procedures articulate well with the strategic focus on essential skills. In one college, as part of the assessment of the college's Learning Strategy, teaching staff assess how well embedded essential skills are in their learning and teaching activities. This activity generates a bar graph for each college department showing how extensively staff have developed these activities in their teaching and what remains to be done. Continual professional development activities are planned on the basis of this information.

All colleges have arrangements to support staff to share and discuss good practice examples. One college has a *Confident Practioners Information Group* in which staff are currently working on an audit tool for the senior phase of Curriculum for Excellence in the design of college programmes. There are numerous examples of college good practice forums to help staff to focus on different approaches such as active learning initiatives or paired reading to improve literacy. Colleges which have lesson observation processes focus discussions on developing practice in line with Curriculum for Excellence and essential skills development.

Most college staff network with colleagues in other colleges. They discuss initiatives and projects which can be replicated in their own college. Scotland's Colleges, now the College Development Network, takes the lead in many developments in essential skills, through the *Essential Skills Forum*. However, this forum is small in number and has only recently begun to meet more regularly. Many staff have developed informal networks where they engage with colleagues from different colleges to share good practice on essential skills.

The importance of ensuring that staff delivering the learning experience have an appropriate focus on essential skills is emphasised in the recently-refreshed *Professional Standards for Lecturers in Scotland's Colleges[9]*. This Scottish Government publication outlines the standards expected of college teaching staff and states that staff should *Plan with learners, contextualised learning and teaching, taking account of the needs of learners and their development of essential skills.* The nature of planning the learning experience will be discussed later in this report.

Most colleges have a strong focus on ensuring that staff reflect on how best to plan learning activities to develop learners' essential skills. It is clear that learners are engaged fully in their learning when they are involved in shaping and influencing their own learning experience.

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[9] *Professional Standards for Lecturers in Scotland's Colleges, Scottish Government, ,* ISBN: 978-1-78045-744-4, page 9, http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/03/6519/4

5.   Delivery of essential and core skills

Planning learning and teaching

In all colleges, pedagogy is seen as crucial to the successful implementation of essential skills strategies. For many learners, the use of effective project-based and active learning activities, maintains and increases learner engagement and helps learners acquire a range of essential skills. For example, in one college initiative, following feedback from learners, core skills are offered through a college-wide vocational project. This approach to the delivery of core skills encourages learners to work together and to integrate different aspects of programmes with practical experiences, in this case setting up a college shop. In another college, volunteering activities are promoted well to learners and the college focuses on certificating volunteering activities where possible. Learners develop a strong sense of community and have high levels of satisfaction as a result.

A college's definition of essentials skills has a significant influence on how staff plan to develop learners' essential skills. Staff use the definition to plan for their learning and teaching activities. The most effective teaching is planned well, engages learners and enables them to put into practice quickly what they learn. In almost all of these lessons, staff plan and integrate activities well, which helps learners to focus on and build their essential skills and make connections to other subjects in their programme.

There is great variability in the way that college staff plan learning activities to incorporate progression in essential skills, particularly employability skills. Most staff use prescribed college formats to identify skills and incorporate activities effectively to develop these skills during learning activities. Others have an individual approach to how they implement their lesson plans and a personal format which works well for them and their learners. In almost all of these lessons, staff members reflect effectively with learners on which skills they are developing.

However, a few staff do not use a formal format for lesson planning. They follow a highly personal approach to planning their activities. Consequently, more than a few learners do not make the connections to progression in appropriate skills across the curriculum as they have not been made clear by staff. These learners have little opportunity to plan learning activities and are unclear of the importance of skills such as personal and learning skills, as they go through their programme. This echoes what Her Majesty's Inspectors stated in the Education Scotland report *Preparing learners in Scotland's colleges for employment or further study*[10]*.* This states that *although core and essential skills are included in most programmes, staff do not always make sufficiently clear to learners the importance to employers of personal attributes when recruiting staff.*
In the best lessons, planning identifies the skills on which staff and learners will focus during learning activities. In any class group, there can be a wide range of learner

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[10] *Preparing learners in Scotland's colleges for employment or further study, Education Scotland, 2011, page 11,*
http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/newsandevents/educationnews/2011/educational/august/news_tcm4671660.asp

abilities and they will have different levels of essential skills. Almost all colleges use diagnostic testing to identify learner needs. Such testing tools are used by learners as they progress in their programme to measure the distance travelled in the development of skills and to agree extra support if required. A growing number of colleges use online resources and, increasingly, a number of colleges use web-based resources.

In the best colleges, learners develop a sophisticated vocabulary of skills so that they can speak confidently about the different sets of skills that they are developing. Similarly, staff are confident in discussing the different skills sets that activities will develop. This is important because learners and staff must understand clearly the activities and the skills they are developing. Also, learners are expected to reflect effectively on their progression. Where they have an understanding of the skills they are developing, reflection works well.

One college has introduced an effective approach to planning essential skills into all aspects of the learning experience. Originally devised as an additional tool to help staff consider which of the essential skills learners are gaining, it is very helpful in advising and helping staff to think about how they can approach essential skills and provides a bank of ideas and resources for staff to develop their practice.

However, the poorest lessons do not have sufficient identification of the skills being developed, link with other subject areas or have appropriate differentiation between skills levels and activities. It is insufficient for staff to say they have thought through their lesson plan, but have not yet committed it to appropriate planning procedures. It has to be more apparent and shared easily with the learners.

Coordination of activities to develop essential and core skills

In most colleges, there is close working between specialist core skills staff and programme tutors. This is a very positive arrangement as learners benefit from higher levels of contextualisation of relevant programme information within core skills units. In some cases, this arrangement produces very close working and high levels of contextualisation. In one college, for example, a review of core skills delivery of communication and numeracy units led to staff helping to develop a strong collaboration amongst learners in a variety of cross-college projects. In another college, a *Numeracy for Nurses* unit has been devised with employers in the sector and is very well contextualised.

Small changes to assessment arrangements can have positive impact for learners. In one college, a statement in all core skills assessments, stating why and how assessments are relevant to the learner's specific vocational area, has helped learners to understand the importance of assessing and progressing essential skills in their programme. Another college records plans between staff and learners in a *core skills delivery agreement*. This agreement incorporates resource requirements and plans in the integration of assessments. In another college, core skills and vocational staff deliver appropriate units jointly. Staff carefully plan how to deliver these units with complete integration of learning throughout.
However, for more than a few learners, insufficient contextualisation and embedding of core skills in their programmes leads to boredom and disengagement from their learning activities. These learners view their core skills activities as a chore,

separate from their specialism, rather than as a way to enhance their essential skills in a relevant way.

Learning and teaching approaches

Many learners are involved with staff in designing their own learning. They plan and review their programme activities with staff and discuss the ways they like to learn so they have an influence on what and how they learn. An important factor is the ability of staff to review learner progress quickly and jointly with learners. This makes the learning immediate and relevant and learners gain from this while they develop their essential skills.

In a growing number of colleges, specialist staff have been appointed to work with subject specialists to deliver essential skills, or have a specific remit to extend and develop learners' essential skills. Learners appreciate the assistance and support these staff members offer. Their role as *Learning Development Assistants* or *Learner Development Tutors* is to support learners in reflecting upon their progress in acquiring a range of skills, help them complete personal learning plans effectively and communicate with other college staff about the needs of learners.

In line with the principles of *Building the Curriculum 4*, almost all subject-specific staff perceive their role as developing both subject specialisms and developing learners' essential skills. In the best cases, there is a parity of esteem between essential skills and subject-specific skills. For example, during a college's diversity week, young learners on an introductory construction programme developed their communication skills by learning sign language to ask basic questions about woodwork. This highly-innovative approach ensures that learners develop sufficient knowledge about woodwork joints, think about how they communicate responses about woodwork in sign language and helps them to understand the difficulties that hearing-impaired learners experience.

A busy restaurant service in the training kitchen at Carnegie College.

In many classes, learners deliver presentations on topics which interest them and in which they are already confident. For example, motor vehicle mechanics give practical demonstrations on replacing spark plugs in cars. Group and individual presentations build learner confidence and help them identify what is required to work with others as part of a team. For community-based learners, most colleges offer programmes designed to develop their literacy and numeracy skills. By delivering these within the community, learners develop confidence and they often progress to further mainstream programmes. For example, one college programme operates across 16 drop-in venues in the local area, engaging with approximately 400 young adult learners every week. The provision is built around the learner and involves support with homework, art projects or the development of specific core skills. The purpose of the provision is to engage young people in learning and to support the development of their essential skills.

Almost all learners perceive their experiences on their programmes positively. In almost all cases, relationships between staff and learners are positive. Staff work with learners from different backgrounds with a wide range of abilities and levels of essential skills. Many learners return to college having had a poor educational experience. In many cases, their personal and learning skills will be at a low level and staff work effectively to foster positive relationships which help learners to progress. Learners see their college programme as the main way to develop their essential skills and prepare them for further study or employment.

All learners have good access to a range of advice and support services. Learners state that staff are very flexible and supportive. Learners appreciate the support that staff offer them, in many cases expressing surprise that the support they receive is more than they had anticipated prior to commencing their programme. These positive relationships lead to almost all learners being highly engaged and motivated in their classes and activities and many learners make good progress in developing their essential skills.

In almost all lessons, staff set appropriate and effective standards and expectations. There are strong standards relating to suitable behaviour, good time-keeping, and a positive attitude. Learners are reminded of these at regular intervals. They are task-focused and listen to staff, taking on instructions and working with other learners and individually. In many cases they are aware that respect for other learners is important and they reflect well on how their behaviour impacts on others. Staff in workshops, in particular, treat learners as employees and set standards appropriately. Learners react well to this approach. However, in a few cases, poor discipline, insufficient pace and challenge and inadequate use of information technology resources by staff lead to some learners becoming distracted and disengaged. This has a negative impact on learners' skills development.

All colleges design programmes and activities to help learners develop confidence and independence in learning. In most cases, learners participate in activities which are stimulating, interesting and challenging. In the best of these activities, staff monitor learner progression well to ensure that learners are developing their personal and learning skills. This is an important part of the learners' experience in understanding their progress and planning next steps. Programmes and activities take good account of developing learners' confidence and independence in learning. Where learners are less confident and independent, teaching staff schedule additional activities and opportunities to build confidence, such as volunteering

activities. However, for more than a few learners this is not the case. For these learners, the development of personal learning skills depends more upon their own efforts, confidence and self-esteem than careful planning of activities by teaching staff.

Most staff use an effective range of activities which suit learners well. Staff have alternatives in place to challenge learners at different levels of ability and maintain the pace of learning. This is made clear throughout the lesson, ensuring that learners understand and engage with the expectations of the activity and the standards expected to achieve and progress well in these skills. This is shared effectively with learners and the best results are achieved when learners have shared ownership of the activity. This approach to planning learning activity in a highly-focused way is effective as it reduces the opportunities for learners to lose their focal point in developing the range of skills. It helps staff to concentrate on specific skills and make links to other areas of the curriculum and the four capacities within Curriculum for Excellence.

Work experience activities

Many colleges make extensive use of community projects and work experience to enhance the learning experience and develop learners' essential skills. A recent Ofsted report, *Apprenticeships for young people[11]*, emphasises that work experience in vocational areas that interest learners is a positive factor in equipping learners with an appropriate work ethic and basic employment skills. In Scotland, many of the activities in which college learners engage are closely related to the world of work. Increasingly, colleges have a growing number of work experience placements as part of learners' programmes. Learners make good use of these placements to develop their essential skills.

Snapshot of *John Wheatley College's approach to 'live' projects*

Computing learners in the Higher National Certificate (HNC) programme work in project teams to design a webpage which illustrates a company's products and helps to market them effectively. One team knew of the Trades House organisation in Glasgow which was attempting to catalogue ancient artefacts for posterity and make them accessible to the general public. The team of learners visited the Trades House, demonstrated their ideas on how to achieve the aims of cataloguing and displaying the items and have now gone live with the project. The learners were developing their vocational skills by establishing the website and reflected upon which skills they developed as a result of their engagement with employers. This demonstrates that these learners were engaged in real-life scenarios and could present the types of business solutions demanded in a real working environment.

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[11]*Apprenticeships for young people*, Reference no: 110177, Ofsted, 2012, http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/apprenticeships-for-young-people

Work experience provides a realistic working environment and learners appreciate the opportunity to build their skills in this way. For example one college's long-standing involvement with a local Community Health Partnership (CHP) involves a CHP employee being seconded to the college. The secondee leads a care programme which is specifically designed to prepare learners for employment opportunities within the local National Health Service Scotland board. The 18-week programme attracts learners from ages 16 to 21 and includes two six-week work placements.

6.   Learners' success in core skills units

Attainment

Each college in Scotland submits statistical returns annually to the SFC. From these returns it is possible to illustrate how successful learners have been in the attainment of core skills in their programmes. This can be identified for every college and for the position in Scotland overall.

For this report, Education Scotland used SFC published data on attainment of core skills units in 2008-2011. The data shows attainment for core skills units across appropriate SCQF levels. Core skills units are SQA stand alone units and are identified using their title, and only programme elements of one Student Unit of Measurement (SUM) or more are included[12].

This analysis focuses on the following core skills only:

- Communication

- Information Technology

- Numeracy

It is important to highlight a number of issues which can distort the picture when considering this attainment data. Occasionally, colleges do not input data on learners correctly or in a sufficiently timely manner. More than a few learners who have previously achieved a core skill unit at the level set for their programme are not required to repeat the unit. In most cases, colleges do not enrol these learners on the next level of core skills unit. As a result, learners are not challenged and opportunities to progress to the next core skills level are missed. In some cases, learners will withdraw from their programme and this can be incorrectly entered into the college management information system, distorting the picture on unit attainment.

The average percentage figures for attainment in selected core skills units and non-core skill units overall, across SCQF levels 2 to 6 for Scotland, can be found on the next page:

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[12]Code list B on the FES 3 guidance notes (http://www.sfc.ac.uk/fes_1112.aspx) was used to identify a pass rate for each SQA unit, taking codes 8, 9 and 14 as successful outcomes, and codes 7, 11 and 15 as unsuccessful outcomes.

Table 1:   Communication unit attainment percentage data for all programmes

	SCQF level 2	SCQF level 3	SCQF level 4	SCQF level 5	SCQF level 6
2010-11	87	65	66	70	71
2009-10	82	70	68	69	69
2008-09	59	65	66	68	68

Table 2:   Information Technology unit attainment percentage data for all programmes

	SCQF level 2	SCQF level 3	SCQF level 4	SCQF level 5	SCQF level 6
2010-11	84	75	72	75	77
2009-10	80	81	73	74	71
2008-09	84	77	71	74	80

Table 3:   Numeracy unit attainment percentage data for all programmes

	SCQF level 2	SCQF level 3	SCQF level 4	SCQF level 5	SCQF level 6
2010-11	82	75	72	76	81
2009-10	79	74	70	74	77
2008-09	55	70	66	71	61

Table 4:   Non-core skill units attainment percentage data for all programmes

	SCQF level 2	SCQF level 3	SCQF level 4	SCQF level 5	SCQF level 6
2010-11	85	78	76	74	77
2009-10	82	78	75	74	76
2008-09	81	77	74	73	75

Overall, attainment in core skill units is broadly in line with attainment for non-core skills units. However, for communication core skills units, except for SCQF level 2 units where learner numbers are lower, attainment is below that of non-core skills and other core skills units.

Attainment data is also available for the previous two years and from this data, a three year trend can be identified. Attainment in non-core skill units has risen slightly over the last three years. Attainment in numeracy units over the last three years has improved significantly and is now generally in line with non-core skill units, compared to being well below average in 2008-09. However, in Scotland overall, communication attainment rates are consistently low at the higher SCQF levels.

When national attainment rates of core skills units overall are compared with those of core skills units from programmes which are sponsored by employers, attainment overall is significantly lower. The table below shows 2010-2011 attainment for core skills on employer-funded programmes at SCQF levels 4, 5 and 6. The numbers of enrolments at SCQF levels 2 and 3 are low and have been discounted from this analysis.

Table 5:   Core skills unit attainment percentage in employer-funded programmes, 2010-2011

Core skills unit	SCQF level 4	SCQF level 5	SCQF level 6
Communication	77	93	87
Information and Communication Technology	75	90	100
Numeracy	84	80	95

Learners see more value in attaining core skills units if they are sponsored by an employer. Many of these units are work-based and learners are expected to reach agreed attainment milestones within an agreed timeframe.

Overall, most colleges have strategies in place to ensure that core skills are embedded and contextualised. This is supported in colleges where staff give core skills parity with specialised or vocational units. However, for more than a few learners, non-contextualisation of core skills within relevant subject areas leads to their disengagement and potential lack of success in core skills units. Many learners, particularly younger learners, do not see core skills units as a relevant part of their programme and do not engage in them as fully as their more vocationally-specific units.

Most college teams analyse outcome data related to core skills attainment effectively. However, in more than a few cases, targets to improve attainment in core skills are insufficiently specific and measurable. In some cases, staff are unaware of learners' core skills attainment and how to improve attainment rates. For example, in one college, staff did not apply a systematic approach to analysing

core skills attainment data. This makes it difficult for staff to demonstrate improvements in attainment over time.

Wider achievement: monitoring and tracking

Most colleges have arrangements in place to track and monitor learner progression in essential skills effectively, including personal and learning skills, citizenship skills and employability skills. In almost all cases, these take the form of individual learning plans (ILP), personal learning plans (PLP) or personal development plans (PDP). The overall aim of these procedures is to help learners reflect on their performance and set personal learning goals. For many learners, this is an effective way to help them understand how well they are developing appropriate essential skills. These activities support learners in gaining confidence and preparing a curriculum vitae detailing their achievements as they progress.

Many colleges use online PDPs and a growing number of colleges use e-portfolios to help gauge learner progress. One college created online portfolios for learners and staff to share ideas on communication and information technology course work. Learners can access course work, support materials, share ideas and discuss activities with other learners and staff members. Most PLP activities are comprehensive and help learners to identify progress and targets for improvement. A growing number of colleges employ specialist guidance staff to help learners reflect upon their progress.

In a few colleges, arrangements are in place to evaluate progress in named essential skills. For example, one college has identified ten essential skills within each of the four capacities of Curriculum for Excellence. Learners use an online tool to update their progress in each of these skills regularly, which accumulates to provide an overall impression of progress in each capacity. In another college, staff use lesson plans to identify which essential skills will be developed in each class. This data is collected and correlated against learner questionnaires responses which state the essential skills they are developing over time. The correlation between the two sets of data provides very helpful information for staff to identify which skills require further time or work.

However, some PDPs are very descriptive and insufficiently evaluative on how well learners are developing their essential skills. For example, typical statements such as "Elizabeth took part in the Diversity week" do not describe the skills Elizabeth developed as a result of participating in the college's diversity week. In these cases, PDPs are insufficiently evaluative in focusing on specific skills and helping the learner understand the progress they are making in specific skills.

There is good progress being made in most colleges to help learners identify the development of their essential skills. However, the range of procedures used in assessing progress in essential skills relies strongly on the individual learner and how they assess their individual performance.

This aspect is further reflected in discussions with learners where it is clear that the majority does not yet feel sufficiently confident in using the vocabulary of essential skills. During Education Scotland fieldwork visits, HM Inspectors found that too many learners had to be prompted to discuss their progress in specific essential skills. They are self-conscious and do not have sufficient self-confidence when using appropriate language to express their progress in essential skills. Although most learners readily describe their success as learners and developing their confidence levels, it is unusual for learners to be confident in speaking in terms associated with wider achievement or with the essential skills associated with the four capacities in Curriculum for Excellence. In most colleges, learners do not speak of skills related to being an *effective contributor* or a *responsible citizen*.

Assessing learner progress and using it to plan for enhancing essential skills for school-based learners in college is generally weak. These learners are developing essential skills while engaged in learning activities in college. However, overall there is no connection with this progress in their activities in school, or in their discussions with school guidance staff. Senior managers in schools are pleased with the opportunities that colleges offer their learners. They see the young people's engagement in terms of the development of vocational skills rather than essential skills. Overall there are insufficient links between the essential skills these learners develop at college and the rest of their school curriculum.

Overall, learners are highly positive about their learning experiences. College programmes have a significant impact on improving learners' confidence levels and their personal learning skills. Many learners have opportunities to work outwith their college programme. For example, many sports learners engage in voluntary coaching sessions and gain additional professional qualifications. Hospitality learners engage in a range of activities such as *Hot Scotland*, which are effective in developing their independent learning skills. Many construction learners enter trade competitions and appreciate the encouragement and extra support of staff in arranging these activities.

Wider achievement: using online and social media resources

Almost all learners make good use of college online resources, particularly the virtual learning environment (VLE) to develop and monitor their independent learning skills. This gives them a sense of having an online presence where they can work on activities in class or elsewhere in their own time. Not all learners have access to the internet at home, but colleges try to ensure that as many learners as possible have access to the VLE. For example, some colleges lend netbooks and laptops to learners to give them access to the VLE. Online resources include set tasks, tests, quizzes, personal portfolios and personal development plans. One college utilises resources from the *University of Kent's Careers and Employability Service*[13] and uses them effectively in learning and teaching activities. These resources are of a

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[13]University of Kent, http://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/skillsmenu.htm

high standard and learners assess themselves regularly, in groups or as individuals, on a range of highly innovative and challenging reflection exercises.

There is a growing use of social media to have regular contact with employers and community organisations. For example, learners from the hairdressing and engineering departments in one college use *Facebook* to network with staff, other learners, and local employers. This approach enables learners to showcase their course work, inviting employers' comments and feedback to develop their skills further. In another college, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners use blogs to write articles on a variety of issues. Their fellow learners make comment on articles written by classmates and this helps learners to develop self-confidence and bond well as a group.

Many learners develop essential skills through the social experience of learning with their peers. Interacting with other learners is a positive step for many learners, but working with others on group tasks is a major leap for learners whose self-confidence is low. Many state that discussing their aspirations and how they are developing as learners with peers, in structured activities, helps them to form a positive view of themselves.

In almost every college, many learners have the opportunity to engage in a range of stimulating volunteering activities. Many learners take advantage of these opportunities to become involved in citizenship activities which help them to gain self-confidence and self-esteem while demonstrating considerable ability in their vocational specialism their self-confidence and self-esteem. For example, learners in one college, in conjunction with their Student Association, are involved in building a greenhouse made from plastic bottles. They will donate the greenhouse when completed to a local primary school.

7. Enhancing learning and teaching of essential skills

Quality assurance and enhancement activities

Colleges have a range of processes which aim to assure and improve the quality of learning and teaching approaches. These include:

- formal observations of learning and teaching activities;

- programme team self-evaluation activities;

- meeting forums with employers and other external agencies;

- best practice events, where teaching staff share and demonstrate their approaches;

- CPD events, where teaching staff receive updates and development relevant to their role in developing learners' essential skills;

- peer observation where colleagues observe teaching sessions and provide feedback, support and suggestions for improvement; and

- feedback received from learners through focus groups, meetings and questionnaires.

In general, internal arrangements to improve self-evaluation and internal review of essential skills have progressed to the extent that most teaching staff are involved in the enhancement of essential skills. Staff make good use of feedback from learners and employers to plan for improvements. For example, in one college, an innovative learner-led approach to lead discussion on recommendations in learning and teaching issues has enabled learners to be at the heart of improvements in developing their essential skills.

However, in more than a few colleges, there are insufficient arrangements in place to identify which essential skills learners are achieving and which ones will be included in improvement plans. This relates strongly to insufficient leadership and commitment by staff to an essential skills strategy. Consequently, some staff do not have a clear definition of which essential skills learners should be developing.

Almost all colleges have well-structured and systematic annual review processes which evaluate how well the college has met the needs of learners and how the college will respond to issues in the future. Quality managers discuss these reports with teaching staff and plan activities for improvement. In many cases, quality managers and staff report to the college's senior management team (SMT) where there are issues for improvement. Senior staff also receive regular updates and reports from staff teams on what is working well. In most colleges, senior managers work with staff in curriculum areas to identify progress in essential skills and follow up on issues for improvement.

Some colleges have introduced procedures where senior staff perform reviews of all college programmes within a set timeframe. In one example, these arrangements

ensure that programmes meet the needs of learners and demonstrate that learners are making good progress in a number of areas, two of which are Curriculum for Excellence and Employability. In another example, staff select a programme annually for a detailed review in which the programme is evaluated against the four capacities and Curriculum for Excellence design principles.

Snapshot of *Ayr College's Curriculum for Excellence toolkit*

This toolkit has been designed by managers to assist staff to explore and analyse the seven principles of curriculum design as identified within *Building the Curriculum 3: A Framework for Learning and Teaching*. The toolkit helps staff demonstrate how they relate the principles to their curriculum units, programmes and courses. As part of the analysis staff provide examples of relevant practices across curriculum units and the actions they have introduced. The result of this process informs programme design, self-evaluation and operational planning processes. With the permission of Ayr College, a link to the toolkit has been attached as an appendix at the end of this report.

Most colleges review their strategies on essential and core skills annually and staff participate effectively in annual review processes. In most cases, core and essential skills are reviewed within subject teams to discuss how well skills are embedded and contextualised. These approaches are comprehensive and usually involve staff and learners which helps to enhance the quality of provision and leads to improved learner experiences. In many instances, external agencies comment on the appropriateness of activities. These include employers, local schools, health boards and other community groups.

Most colleges have appropriate arrangements in place to consider and report on how well learners are performing in developing their essential skills. Curriculum teams reflect on prompts and questions as they evaluate the performance of learners. Staff use these reports to set targets jointly with learners for improvement. However, in a few colleges, the commitment from staff to improving essential skills delivery is not clearly defined and staff are unaware where good practice examples can be located within their college.

Overall, where essential skills are defined well within a college, they are articulated effectively in the college quality cycle. However, in a few colleges where this is not the case, essential skills do not have an appropriate focus in discussions on the quality of provision and consequently there is a lack of commitment by staff to improvement.

Learner engagement in enhancement activities

Almost all colleges have formal meetings with learners to discuss approaches to learning and teaching and to plan actions for improvement in essential skills. Colleges value the participation of learners in these discussions as a direct source of

feedback to make effective change. It is clear that all colleges discuss issues related to Curriculum for Excellence during self-evaluation processes.

Most colleges have quality forums in which learners and staff communicate their views on how well learners are making progress on their programmes. In a growing number of colleges there is a shift of emphasis from a *listening to learners* approach, to one of engagement with learners to maximise learner inputs in to their programmes. For example, in one college a forum for curriculum leaders sets out four questions staff must discuss and respond to:

- *How well do you know that our learners are developing their essential skills?*

- *How do our learners know they are developing their essential skills?*

- *How can we make sure that our learners reflect on their essential skills development?*

- *How do you plan actions to help your learners in their essential skills?*

There is a wide range of effective measures which colleges deploy to gain learners' views on their progress and experience in essential skills. Colleges use bespoke questionnaires and surveys to gather learner views and perceptions. There are many examples where staff take action based upon the results.

Regular focus groups in colleges help staff to gather feedback on learner experiences. In all colleges this approach is well embedded. These activities provide important information for college staff which reinforces the positive actions they are taking and helps to identify targets for improving learner essential skills. For example, learners state:

We learned from the placement. This allows us to develop employability skills and put the theory we learned in class into practice.

and

We use the VLE to access lecturer notes but not all lecturers use the VLE to share these.

However, while most college teams analyse outcome data related to core skills attainment, specific targets to improve attainment in core skills are often insufficiently specific and measurable. More than a few teams are unaware of learners' core skills attainment. In a few colleges, inconsistencies in programme evaluation procedures mean that some evaluations are incomplete and action plans are not completed fully.

8.   Recommendations

The Scottish Funding Council should:

- consider how best to integrate targets on essential skills development within regional outcome agreements; and

- work with colleges to ensure core skills attainment data is used effectively to plan for and deliver improvements in learner attainment.

The College Development Network should:

- draw on the findings of this report to support colleges in taking forward the recommendations.

Colleges should:

- improve attainment in communication core skills units;

- ensure that staff have an understanding and clarity of the definition of essential skills;

- continue to engage effectively with employers to ensure essential skills are developed appropriately in programmes to meet the skill requirements of local employers;

- promote essential skills effectively to learners and ensure they understand the relevance of essential skills as they progress in their programmes and into employment;

- support all staff to plan and prepare appropriate learning and teaching activities to help learners make progress in their essential skills;

- ensure that staff use relevant contexts in learning and teaching activities to develop essential skills in a stimulating and relevant way for all learners;

- support learners to be confident in developing and using an appropriate language to discuss their progress in essential skills;

- work with school partners to ensure that there is continuity between young learners' development and use of essential skills;

- continue to improve and consider innovative ways to record and monitor learner progress and wider achievement; and

- focus quality assurance and enhancement processes on essential skills development.

Education Scotland should:

- continue to monitor progress made with the above recommendations through annual engagement with colleges; and

- help to disseminate to colleges key information and good practice on essential skills as they emerge across the sector.

Appendix 1

Colleges participating in the fieldwork

Education Scotland would like to thank the following colleges which participated in the fieldwork for this report:

Aberdeen College

Angus College

Ayr College

Borders College

Carnegie College

Forth Valley College

James Watt College

Jewel and Esk College

John Wheatley College

North Glasgow College

Shetland College

Stevenson College

Appendix 2

Glossary of terms

ASDAN	Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CHP	Community Health Partnership
CPD	Continuing professional Development
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other languages
HNC	Higher National Certificate
ILP	Individual Learning Plan
PDP	Personal Development Plan
PLP	Personal Learning Plan
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
SMT	Senior Management Team
SUM	Student Unit of Measurement
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

Appendix 3

Useful resources

We have a number of resources available from our website which you may find useful.

Ayr College Curriculum for Excellence toolkit

The document can be found on the Education Scotland website:

http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inspectionandreview/reports/othersectors/collegereviews/AyrCollege.asp

Forth Valley College learning activity planning tool

The document can be found on the Education Scotland website:

http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inspectionandreview/reports/othersectors/collegereviews/ForthValleyCollege.asp

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