

Making effective use of the extensive data sets which underpin evaluative activities in Scotland's colleges, in a regional context

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An aspect report on provision in Scotland's Colleges by HM Inspectors on behalf of the Scottish Funding Council

Contents	Page
1. Background	1
2. Introduction	4
3. Summary of key findings	5
4. Main report	7
4.1 Data collection activities	7
4.2 Data return and reporting	13
4.3 SFC published data sets	17
4.4 Other data sets	19
4.5 Learner-derived data	21
4.6 Use of data in UHI colleges	24
5. How prepared are colleges for effective data use in a regional context?	25
6. Recommendations	28
7. Glossary of terms	30

1. Background

The Scottish Government's post-16 reforms aim to create better life chances for young people and support economic growth across the country. As part of this reform agenda, *Putting Learners at the Centre - Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education (2011)* outlines an ambition for all young people to have a place in post-16 education or training. It emphasises the importance of colleges working together more collaboratively, towards a networked approach in support of local and regional growth objectives. It also calls for an increased focus on *outcomes*, asserting that, historically, data collection has been an administrative burden for colleges and that data has not been used to best effect for performance management.

In February 2012, Scottish ministers announced their intention to introduce structural changes to the college sector as part of the wider reform of post-16 education. Financial pressures over an extended period of time and the introduction of fundable college regions are likely to result in larger, merged colleges, or a number of federated colleges. Recently-devised *Regional Outcome Agreements*, drawn up by colleges in negotiation with SFC, identify how they will tailor their provision to meet the needs of young people aged 16-19, those unemployed aged between 20-24 and those in the workplace who require further development and up-skilling.

Colleges currently work with an extensive range of data sets which include:

- data gathered about learners, including applications, enrolments, learner attendance and a number of learner equality-related themes;
- data returns submitted to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), including *Further Education Statistics* (FES) returns, from which SFC can provide statistics on (for example) learner withdrawal, success and progression;
- data set returns for all colleges in Scotland, published by SFC;
- data returns from other stakeholders including Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) and others; and
- quantitative and qualitative satisfaction data gathered through completed questionnaire returns and discussions with learners, employers and community partners.

HM Inspectors of Education (now Education Scotland), reported on colleges' use of data through: *Assessing, Recording and Analysing Learner Progress and Outcomes* (2008)¹. Through annual engagement visits, external reviews and subject reports,

¹ Assessing, Recording and Analysing Learner Progress and Outcomes (2008)
http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/Assessing%2C%20Recording%20and%20Analysing%20Learner%20Progress%20and%20Outcomes_tcm4-529974.pdf

HM Inspectors often comment that self-evaluation is an area for improvement. The Education Scotland report: *Self-evaluation and internal review (2011)*² noted:

- *Too few colleges compare their own performance indicator (PI) outcomes with appropriate external benchmarks.*

During this period of considerable change in the post-16 landscape, it is essential that colleges plan for their effective use of all data to prepare for the challenges and maximise the benefits of regionalisation. As merged and federated colleges form, they must continue to make the most effective use of their resources, including the efficient use of their data. Accurate Management Information System (MIS) information and data sets are essential for college managers and Board members to inform decision-making which will impact positively on the educational experiences of Scotland's learners. Colleges respond to the national objectives and priorities for post-16 education through rigorous and robust data management and planning for improvement. SFC, in discussion with colleges, is in the process of further developing methodologies for assessing the performance of recently-established college regions and take action to ensure effective progress is made against targets identified in *Regional Outcome Agreements*.

Planned structural reforms of the college sector will result in the number of colleges in Scotland reducing from 41 to around 27. These planned reforms have the potential to bring about a more strategic approach to the management of the sector and coherent planning of educational provision in each region.

Recent publications identify a number of important drivers relevant to the college sector. Through *Scotland's Digital Future: Delivery of Public Services*³, the Scottish Government identifies how the public sector will work with industry and users and adopt key principles including improved measures around collaboration and value for money. It outlines the need for efficiency and collaboration to be at the forefront of the public-sector IT investment. The *McClelland Review of ICT infrastructure in the Public Sector in Scotland* (June 2011)⁴ identified:

In the area of business systems every college and university has a modern application for its financial processing and although generally procured and operated separately there is some commonality in the usage of these standard applications. 15 colleges use the same ICT business systems and the next most frequently used application featured in ten further education institutions. In colleges two different student record systems account for a large majority of the usage of this type of ICT capability.

² Self-evaluation and internal review (2011)²

http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inspectionandreview/Images/SEIR020911_tcm4-712953.pdf

³ Scotland's Digital Future: Delivery of Public Services

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0040/00407741.pdf>

⁴ McClelland Review of ICT infrastructure in the Public Sector in Scotland (June 2011)

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/351231/0117794.pdf>

The college sector is reasonably well placed to support the key principles outlined in *Scotland's Digital Future* and bring about greater efficiency through collaboration. The 2012 Audit Scotland report: *Scotland's colleges: current finances, future challenges*⁵ recommends that existing colleges and proposed regional boards should:

ensure that planning for course provision is based on robust financial and other resource plans and that they explore opportunities to reduce their costs through economies of scale, joint working and better partnership working. These ICT and finance-focused reports contain important messages for colleges.

In recognition of the disproportionate impact the weak economic conditions have on young people, particularly those furthest from the labour market, the Scottish Government has introduced *Opportunities for All* (November 2012)⁶. It is an explicit commitment to offer a place in learning or training to every 16-19 year old who is not currently engaged in employment, education or training. Colleges, alongside SDS and other providers, have a key role to play in delivering this policy initiative.

These reports, alongside the need for the Scottish Government to ensure that all parts of the public sector bring about year-on-year savings, present colleges with very different and new challenges. Regionalisation, as well as the need for greater collaboration and shared efficiencies, are key drivers of change.

⁵ Scotland's colleges: current finances, future challenges
http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/central/2012/nr_121018_college_overview.pdf

⁶ Opportunities for All (November 2012)
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0040/00408815.pdf>

2. Introduction

Scope and methodology

This report is set within the context of the reform of post-16 education. It explores how well colleges are prepared for managing and using data to enhance the quality of the learner experience through monitoring, target-setting and planning for improvement in current and regional contexts. It investigates and evaluates the ways in which colleges are preparing to use data sets to enhance quality and the learner experience, and deliver on Regional Outcome Agreements.

The fieldwork for this report has been informed by evidence from Education Scotland's external reviews of Scotland's colleges, carried out between 2008-2012. It also takes account of discussions held and evidence gathered during visits to colleges as part of Annual Engagement and Aspect Tasks. In preparing this report, HM Inspectors, accompanied by associate assessors, visited 13 college regions across Scotland.

During visits to college regions, HM Inspectors held discussions with representatives from partner colleges, including depute principals, quality managers, MIS personnel and teaching and support staff. Inspectors also met with groups of learners to ensure that their first-hand experiences of college data collection processes contributed to the report findings.

Inspectors found examples of illustrative and notable activities and arrangements which contribute to the effectiveness of data-handling processes and these are included within this report.

3. Summary of key findings

Strengths

- College application processes populate student record systems effectively. These include equality categories which are analysed by programme teams when completing annual programme reviews. Teaching staff analyse withdrawal, further withdrawal and completed successful rates of learner groups and make good use of these categories to identify trends or areas for improvement. Staff analyse college data effectively when conducting internal review, programme remediation or compiling self-evaluation reports.
- College staff interrogate attendance data and make prompt contact with learners whose attendance is not satisfactory. Teaching and support staff discuss learner attendance issues with individuals or groups during guidance sessions and activities. They make innovative and effective use of social media and mobile technology to maintain communication with learners who are at risk of not achieving because of poor attendance.
- Colleges have well-developed arrangements for capturing and reporting on the progression of HE learners. Information exchange with local articulation hub partners work well and in some cases are very effective in providing a range of progression data to inform future articulation arrangements with HE providers.
- Before publication by SFC of their submitted data, colleges provide programme teams with up-to-date PIs, over a three-year period, for use when undertaking self-evaluation. Staff make good use of this data to identify under-performing programmes and set targets for improvement. This data is used well to identify trends over time across subject and programme areas and bring about improvement.
- Colleges make good use of a wide range of data sets from external agencies, including labour market statistics to inform strategic planning and decision-making.
- Almost all learners are satisfied with colleges' methods of gathering their views and providing feedback on actions taken for improvement.
- Most colleges are developing imaginative approaches to capture the views of learners through the use of social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Increasingly, Student Associations are developing their own *Facebook* page to capture topics relevant to learners. These approaches provide learners with opportunities to express their views remotely and to view evaluative commentary from fellow learners on their learning and wider-college experiences.

Areas for development

- Staff understanding of the requirements and impact of regionalisation on data collection, reporting and evaluation arrangements;
- Data-sharing agreements relating to learner applications between colleges and across regions;
- Communication and data-sharing arrangements between colleges and SDS;
- Simplification and harmonisation of categorisation of learner activity by Education Scotland, SFC and SQA;
- Staff understanding of data classification categories used by SFC;
- Tracking and reporting of learner progression into employment by colleges and SDS; and
- Recording and reporting arrangements for learners' wider achievements and employment-related skills.

4. Making effective use of the extensive data sets which underpin evaluative activities in Scotland's colleges, in a regional context

4.1 Data collection activities

Use of data in application and recruitment processes

Colleges have established, over time, well-developed programme application procedures. Traditionally, these were paper-based with learners completing and submitting an application form. Increasingly, colleges have introduced electronic online application procedures which enable learners to apply for college programmes remotely. Paper-based and online applications inform colleges' strategic planning processes. Applications are used to populate colleges' student record systems and enable financial projections and target monitoring to deliver funding allocations. Online application systems are more efficient as they do not require any manual data input by college staff. This promotes accuracy and reduces the chance of error and duplication. Information about learners' self-declared support needs are entered directly onto a college's student record system. This accelerates the process of identifying learners with additional support needs and enables colleges to plan for these needs timeously.

Through effective online application systems, colleges benefit from real-time read-outs of applications received and places offered, against enrolment targets. Weekly reports identify progress in meeting college *Weighted Student Unit of Measurement (WSUM)* targets allocated annually to colleges by SFC. However, the introduction of online applications has resulted in an increase in multiple applications from some learners. It is important to distinguish between **applicants** and **applications**. Often learners apply for more than one programme at the same college as they believe this will increase their chance of securing a college place. Colleges have developed processes to ensure that internal, multiple applications are identified and factored into their calculations for potential recruitment numbers. In order to provide more choice for learners, a few colleges have introduced up to three programme options within their application forms. This process generally works well and helps reduce the incidence of multiple applications. Where an applicant has applied for a programme which does not meet their anticipated academic standing, college support staff invite learners to attend an exploratory meeting to discuss appropriate alternative provision options.

All colleges promptly acknowledge receipt of applications and inform applicants when they will be invited for interview. Almost all colleges interview applicants for full-time programmes before offering them a place. This ensures that learners are fully informed, discussing programme-related or college issues before they enrol. However, occasionally, colleges do not interview learners who are progressing internally.

City of Glasgow College: arrangements for internal applicants who are progressing

Towards the end of December, three weeks before the next academic year's programme is open to external applicants via the college website, existing learners at City of Glasgow College are supported to apply online as progressing learners. This approach ensures teaching and support staff engage in productive discussions with current learners about the most appropriate programme choice which meets their needs. It also ensures the manageable processing of applications, as the college receives around 27, 000 applications for full-time programmes each year. This approach focuses learners on progression options and helps support learner motivation and engagement to succeed.

To encourage early applications, a few colleges guarantee an interview if a learner has applied before a specified date. Often learners can reapply for other programmes if their first application is unsuccessful. Prior to being offered a full-time place at college, almost all learners attend an interview. Staff determine learner interest and enthusiasm for their selected programme, consider references and any other programme-specific entry criteria. Suitable candidates are offered a place dependent upon availability. Colleges often require applicants for part-time programmes to pay their fees before they enrol. This approach ensures that colleges can plan effectively and efficiently for delivery of part-time provision and do not run programmes with low numbers of learners.

Often prospective learners are *kept warm* between recruitment and enrolment through events at the start of term. These include open days and meetings held for learners to meet each other and receive more information about their programme. Colleges adopt this approach to keep prospective learners focused on their programme and to reduce drop-outs and learner *no-shows* at the start of term. In addition, almost all colleges offer more places than are available to compensate for learner *no-shows* at the start of the programme.

The volume of full-time applications received by colleges in some parts of Scotland considerably exceeds supply. Weekly application reports, as identified in curriculum delivery plans, act as trigger points for closing further applications and forming waiting lists. Colleges often assume that learners on waiting lists are available to infill onto college programmes as and when required. Most colleges draw up waiting lists for popular programmes but only make contact with these learners several months later, if there is a shortfall in attendance at the start of term on specific programmes. Often, upon contacting these learners, staff discover that they are no longer actively seeking to take up a college place as they have secured alternative provision. As a result, some college programmes may run with reduced numbers of learners.

Colleges do not routinely share application data with other institutions. As a result, they cannot identify those learners who have applied to more than one college. This is an important issue for the sector as multiple applications by learners to more than one college produces inaccurate application data sets and makes it challenging for colleges to recruit efficiently onto programmes. Routinely, learners who apply for programmes after the waiting list has closed, are not recorded as formal applicants. Colleges generally do not maintain records for these learners and do not share this information proactively with other key partners such as SDS or SFC.

Normally, on a weekly basis, colleges produce application reports which identify the volume of applications received and the target numbers of learners to be offered places. Over time, colleges have developed expertise in anticipating the attrition rate from the application stage to enrolment for full-time programmes.

City of Glasgow College: approach to full-time learner recruitment

Planned recruitment numbers are identified at programme, school and whole-college levels. Programme teams identify the maximum number of learners to be recruited onto individual programmes. A second category, the enhanced maximum number of offers to be made, is also devised. This reflects the attrition rate the college expects to experience from applicants offered places across programme areas. In some programme areas the college expects zero attrition rates so staff offer places which match exactly the number to be recruited onto the programme. In other programme areas, they anticipate significant numbers of applicants will not turn up at the beginning of their programme. On these programmes, up to 25% over maximum capacity offers are made. This approach ensures the efficient and effective use of application data across all programme areas.

At the start of term the number of learners who take up their college place is often significantly fewer than the number of offers made and accepted. This is a significant challenge for colleges. Causes of this attrition are multiple and include: learners changing their mind, gaining employment, staying on at school, studying at another college or commencing an apprenticeship. Often applicants to HE programmes apply to university and other colleges simultaneously. They receive late offers from universities and do not turn up for their college programme. As a result, there is no certainty of numbers arriving on day one and this can have a knock-on effect on planning for timetabling of classes and accommodation for learning. Where conditional offers are made (based on Standard Grade results) lower numbers of learners than expected often arrive. This uncertainty of learner numbers makes it challenging for college staff to plan for delivery of learning programmes effectively.

In a regional context, the accuracy of data sets needs to be clarified through a shared application data agreement with other colleges outwith the region. At the moment, colleges are not addressing this issue. A significant number of learners within the central belt of Scotland apply for places to more than one institution, often in more than one region. This provides learners with a degree of security if their preferred college place does not materialise. Colleges remain unclear which

learners have applied to more than one college as they do not yet have robust data-sharing arrangements within and across regions.

Use of data in awarding body registration

Colleges spend significant sums of money on awarding body registration fees. Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is the largest awarding body stakeholder in the college sector. All colleges register Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQ) learners promptly to ensure that external verification arrangements are secured to support learner progression. Most colleges delay registering their new intake of learners till later in the year, normally December or January. As a result they are not spending money on learners who withdraw early from their programmes. Occasionally, colleges experience difficulties in obtaining *Student Candidate Numbers* for learners who are attending school-college programmes. This is due to some schools not registering candidates earlier with SQA. This approach causes extra administration for colleges. Prior to submitting learner registration details to SQA, colleges interrogate their data closely to ensure it is up-to-date, accurate and that all learners listed are active and remain on programme. Overall, arrangements relating to candidate registration are well-understood and ensure that accurate data sets are devised across the sector.

Programme and subject classification data

The ways in which colleges are required to categorise learner activity is perceived to be confusing, cluttered and cumbersome. Currently, colleges receive funding based on agreed activity levels with SFC measured in WSUMs. Different vocational programmes are collated into *Dominant Programme Groupings* (DPG) to reflect the additional costs of delivering some programmes. For example, an engineering programme which requires workshops and specialist equipment has a higher funding weighting than a classroom-based social science programme. However, it is more complicated than this. Each unit studied on a programme is allocated a *superclass* by SQA (if it is an SQA programme). The mix of *superclasses* on a programme determines the programme's DPG. As a result, the allocation of funding to a programme does not always align with the cost of delivery. For example, the inclusion of Computer Aided Design (CAD) unit in an engineering programme results in the programme being reduced in WSUM value as CAD has a lower unit tariff. As a result, the funding allocated for the whole programme is reduced. Discussions between colleges and SFC have, on the whole, not yet led to resolution and this is a continuing issue. In addition, SQA does not always promptly attach *superclass* categories to newly-introduced units. All work-based and non-SQA units need to be manually-linked to a *superclass* causing additional administrative workload for colleges. Issues are further complicated as different key stakeholders with whom colleges work, including SQA, SFC and Education Scotland, all use different classification models which makes benchmarking for colleges challenging and for most college staff confusing and difficult to comprehend. A reduction and simplification of programme and subject categories would support college staff to analyse, interrogate and make sense of these important data categories.

Use of data from attendance recording

Increasingly, colleges record learner attendance online, using computers situated in the learning environment or nearby staffrooms. This approach supports staff using real-time data to monitor closely learner attendance. Support staff, whose role includes supporting those learners who have been identified as at risk of not succeeding, interrogate attendance data. They make prompt contact with learners to improve attendance and discuss learner attendance issues with individuals or groups during guidance sessions. College staff make good use of attendance data in their self-evaluation reports to identify learners at risk and monitor learner attendance trends over time. All colleges across Scotland distribute large sums of money to learners in the form of bursaries to support learners' financial needs and support them to attend a college programme. Bursaries are generally paid out weekly and these payments are conditional upon attending at least 90% of timetabled sessions each week. For *Educational Maintenance Allowance* (EMA) payments, government rules require 100% attendance by learners. Without these well-developed attendance monitoring arrangements, colleges would be unable to monitor learner attendance effectively to ensure compliance with internal and external attendance reporting requirements. Across the sector, colleges manage and use these data sets well.

South Lanarkshire College: attendance recording

South Lanarkshire College has developed an innovative, user-friendly and fully-integrated college information system. This enables learners to have access to key information on their smartphones or computers. Learners "swipe" their proximity cards in classrooms to record attendance, which the member of staff in the room then verifies. This sends a message to the bursary team regarding bursary payment. If a learner is absent, the member of staff can send a text message instantly from the classroom at the touch of a button. The member of staff is not required to compose the message as text messages are pre-composed and personalised. This enables prompt communication with absent learners with minimal associated workload for staff. Learners are invited to text-back with a code in the text, which allows their messages to go to the appropriate curriculum area for follow-up.

The college has developed full integration of attendance, timetabling, curriculum planning and student records systems which supports the development of a web-based tool for learners to view their own data and information. Learners can use any PC, smartphone or other information technology device to view their timetables, attendance records, personal information the college holds on them, results and electronic assessments. This approach has increased learners' ownership of their own learning and progress resulting in reduction in withdrawals and improvement in successful outcomes.

In many colleges, attendance monitoring software flags up for staff when a learner has missed classes for a particular subject. By identifying non-attendance patterns staff can make appropriate interventions timeously. Some colleges benefit from a

traffic light approach to monitor learner attendance. Individual learners are flagged up as being green, amber or red, depending on their attendance record. Where this has been introduced alongside ongoing discussions held with learners, staff note a reduction in learner withdrawal rates and improvement in successful outcome rates.

A common theme from discussions held with colleges is the challenge posed by the late allocation of *Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS)* grants. Most colleges respond to individual learner need by disbursing funds from their own resources, where appropriate. Overall, where colleges have enhanced and improved attendance monitoring arrangements, this has resulted in improvement in successful outcomes for learners.

College-derived equalities data

Colleges analyse applications from learners using a number of enrolment categories used by SFC including;

- gender
- race
- age
- disability
- postcode

Colleges collect learners' details for these categories and these are analysed by programme teams when completing annual programme reviews. Teaching staff analyse withdrawal, further withdrawal and success rates of learner groups. They identify trends or areas for improvement when conducting internal review, programme remediation or compiling self-evaluation reports. However, often at programme level, due to low numbers of learners with particular protected characteristics, it is more appropriate to aggregate data up to the vocational area. Some colleges analyse equality strands from application to enrolment to ensure that recruitment practices do not disadvantage any particular groups of learners. In response to *ROAs*, a number of colleges have developed a regional database to collect together FES files from colleges within the region to monitor regional progress against equality strands. Despite having different student record systems, this is not a challenging issue in terms of sharing data sets. However, too few colleges make effective use of applicants' protected characteristics data. They do not robustly analyse this through to enrolment and onto learner success. As a result, colleges do not have a complete picture of any causal factors which may have a negative impact on this important conversion ratio.

Few colleges have included the recently-introduced characteristics of religion and belief or sexual orientation on their application forms. SFC does not yet request these categories although it plans to do so from 2013-14. Where colleges have included these categories on their application forms, significant numbers of learners decline to declare their religion or belief, or sexual orientation. As a result, colleges have incomplete data sets for equality and diversity.

4.2 Data return and reporting

FES 1-4 schedules and processes

Colleges are required to complete four separate data returns to SFC:

- FES 1 – programme information
- FES 2 – learner details
- FES 3 – learner outcomes
- FES 4 – bursary information

These are distributed throughout the academic year and colleges are required to make quarterly updates. Colleges generally welcome this approach as it spreads the timescale for completing full-year returns. Colleges value the effective working relationships they have established with SFC. However, feedback to colleges from SFC on their returns has reduced recently compared with previous years. This is part of the targeted approach by SFC to provide more management reports to colleges through FES online on an ongoing basis. This enables colleges to access reports throughout the year. However, too few college staff make effective use of these reports to evaluate programme performance and bring about improvement.

Aberdeen College: early data return

For a number of years, Aberdeen College has submitted the FES return to SFC in August. This results from improved internal procedures and the introduction of an online system for unit resulting and FES 2 outcome reporting. MIS staff complete and submit their data return before the commencement of the next academic year. PI data is populated into bespoke proformas for staff to complete their evaluations when they return from their summer break. This approach supports Aberdeen College staff to identify and implement quality improvement plans before the start of the next academic year. As a result, staff are focused on implementing improvement plans for in-year learners.

Data exchange with SDS

SDS has data-sharing agreements with colleges. SDS also has data-sharing agreements with local authorities, Job Centre Plus, SAAS and some smaller third-sector organisations. There are three strands of data which SDS requires about learners:

- enrolment and withdrawal data
- destination data
- data relating to SDS-funded learners

SDS has developed the *16+ Learning Choices Data Hub*. This enables two-way data sharing for all learners in Scotland up to their 20th birthday. It was started in 2010. Collected data feeds into the SDS client-tracking system known as *Customer Service Support System*. This is the main tracking tool used by SDS to track learners' engagement in employment or training and to deliver Scottish Government's ambitions outlined in *Opportunities for All*.

The Scottish Government's *Post-16 transitions policy and practice framework* (November 2012) identifies a college's responsibilities within a regional context. It outlines SFC's funding arrangements to ensure colleges are better placed to respond to the needs of young people in the delivery of *Opportunities for All*. It acknowledges that a key part of this process relates to maintaining data about a young person's application to, enrolment in and leaving from a college course on the college MIS for uploading into the *16+ Learning Choices Data Hub*.

Currently, colleges upload a separate data file each month to SDS which contains information about learners who have enrolled and withdrawn from their programme. This is a separate reporting process from reports sent by colleges to SFC. However, the quality and frequency of returns are variable. Most colleges make regular returns but some submit reports only once every few months. This means that SDS staff may work with data that is neither robust or timely and they cannot, therefore, always identify and offer support to and source appropriate education or training alternatives for individuals who have failed to secure or maintain a college place. Without robust and timely data, SDS staff are required to assume that these learners are at college unless they know otherwise.

SDS aims to provide colleges with regular reports stating information received from colleges about their own learners and complementing this with data gathered by SDS staff including post-college destinations, where SDS know this. However, SDS has only very recently started to deliver these reports. This has caused difficulties for colleges as they have not benefited from effective communication or challenge from SDS about the data they have been supplying in terms of timelines or accuracy. At this time, as a result of some colleges not providing robust data to SDS timeously, and SDS only recently delivering agreed reports to colleges, the data exchange process between colleges and SDS is not yet fully effective.

Current arrangements also provide a potential workload duplication issue for colleges. They provide data to SFC on learners and also provide similar data sets to SDS, using a different system and on a different timescale. Some exploratory discussions about this issue are currently being held between Scottish Government, SFC, and SDS.

While current data-sharing arrangements go some way to supporting the Scottish Government's ambitions outlined in *Opportunities for All*, partners recognise the need for improvement in this area.

Data on learners who withdraw from college programmes for employment

Given the current economic climate and in some regions of Scotland the scarcity of employment opportunities, learners sometimes choose to leave a programme early

to secure employment. SFC has a code; *moving to sustainable employment* for colleges to record and report on this. Current funding arrangements do not penalise colleges where a learner withdraws from their programme after 1st November in any year. Most colleges comply with this process but are aware that this information is often challenging to collect. They recognise that their early leaver destination analysis processes and procedures are underdeveloped and require improvement. The category *moving to sustainable employment* is challenging for colleges to populate accurately. The learner may simply be moving back to a previous job they held before coming to college. If so, their college experience has not impacted positively on their employment prospects. Some learners, for example those on engineering or dental technician programmes, leave their programmes early to take up employment offers based on the skills they have acquired or demonstrated during work experience placements. This is a positive outcome for the college and the learner. These two examples deserve different recording outcomes. Learners withdraw early from their programmes for a variety of reasons. It could be due to funding issues, dwindling interest in their vocational programme, or for personal reasons. Often it is down to individual members of staff to follow-up and record the destinations of these learners. Most colleges aggregate this data at whole-college level but it is not clear what actions result from this process. A few colleges use external agencies to collect data on early withdrawals, as this process is seen as being labour intensive and time consuming. The lack of effective two-way communication with SDS exacerbates this situation, as colleges remain uncertain about the progress made by learners when they leave a college programme.

Data on learner progression destinations

Colleges have well-developed arrangements for capturing and reporting on the progression of Higher Education (HE) Diplomates. This is often gathered through discussions held with learners before and during graduation events. Staff collate additional information through individuals' Universities and Colleges Admissions System (UCAS) applications, internal progression reports and questionnaires completed by learners. Colleges often use their local articulation hubs to provide additional information on the progression of learners onto HE programmes. These arrangements generally work well and in some cases are very effective in providing a range of progression data information to colleges to inform future articulation arrangements. The UCAS *on-track system* is used well by colleges to populate the HE destination of progressing learners. However, in a number of cases, this is based on what learners hope or aspire to progress onto and does not reflect the actual destinations secured. Formal articulation agreements generally work well and in some instances have recently improved. Colleges submit the *First Destination of Graduate* (FDG) reports to SFC annually. However, SFC does not yet publish this information due to the variable frequency, quality and accuracy of the returns received from colleges. SFC is currently assessing the options for improving on the reporting of college leaver destinations.

Colleges compile progression reports on learners who are not progressing onto HE-level study. For FE learners progressing internally, reporting this is straightforward. However, many colleges acknowledge that it is much harder to capture progression data relating to those learners who leave college and progress into employment. Colleges capture anecdotal evidence through discussions held

with learners although again, in many instances, these relate to intended employment destinations and not those that have been secured. Often, colleges take a considerable part of the academic year to collect this data; the later in the year it is collected the more likely it is to reflect accurately individuals' longer term employment. Programme teams make evaluative commentary on destination data when compiling self-evaluation reports. However, they do not have sufficiently accurate quantitative post-college destination data sets to inform actions for improvement. Collating and reporting accurate progression data remains an important challenge for colleges.

Data on employed learners

For employed learners who attend college programmes as apprentices, colleges have well-developed monitoring and reporting arrangements. They report to employers or Managing Agents on individuals' attendance and progression. Often, they develop bespoke reporting arrangements to suit the needs of employers, including weekly, monthly or block-release reports. Some colleges work closely with local authorities, whose employees attend college programmes, to develop and refresh their skills. Some employers have access to online information relating to the progress their employees are making while studying on a college programme. Often within colleges, this task is devolved to individual programme areas to determine the most appropriate arrangements to engage with employers and communicate the progress being made by learners. This approach works well with high levels of satisfaction expressed by employers relating to the information flow received from colleges.

Wider achievement data

Through *Personal Development Plans* (PDP), or equivalent recording, college staff track learners' wider progression relating to core skills and personal development. During *Annual Course Reviews* (ACR), or equivalent recording, programme teams comment on the development of learners' essential skills, including employability and citizenship skills. Teaching staff comment on the progress learners are making and the skills they are developing. However, these comments are often descriptive and do not always result in changes to programme design, teaching approaches or actions for improvement. All colleges collect good news stories and actively promote and celebrate learners' wider achievements. Often learners take part in national competitions, volunteer or fundraise for charities. Significant sums of money are raised through these activities and many charitable organisations benefit from learners' contribution. However, despite all of these endeavours, learners leave college without any formal record of their wider achievements. Too often these initiatives are recorded by the institution and are not formally recorded or passed onto learners for discussions held with prospective employers or HE providers. Within UK universities, the recent development of the *Higher Education Achievement Report* (HEAR) provides a platform for formal reporting of learners' extra-curricular activity as well as more detail about their academic, employability and voluntary achievements at university. Most colleges have not yet developed appropriate reporting and recording arrangements which recognise individual learners' wider achievement.

4.3 SFC published datasets

Individual college data

Before publication by SFC of their submitted data, colleges provide programme teams with up-to-date PIs, over a three-year period, for use when undertaking self-evaluation. Colleges often compare their original data submission with the published version. This helps identify variations and adjustments made by SFC during the validation process. Staff use college-wide data returns well for internal benchmarking and quality improvement and discuss them in a range of meetings including: senior management team meetings; curriculum and quality sub-groups; academic boards and quality assurance committees.

Colleges use their own data return, published by SFC, to identify under-performing programmes and to set targets for improvement. Often, colleges set minimum targets for learner withdrawal and success rates. This data is used to identify trends over time across subject and programme areas. Programme teams make good use of SFC-published data when completing self-evaluation reports. Most college returns to SFC are accurate overall. However, a few colleges need considerable support from SFC to ensure that their data is submitted accurately and timeously. Colleges return hundreds of thousands of student records to a high degree of accuracy but the standard for a significant number of records occasionally falls below an acceptable level. In such instances, SFC makes adjustments before these records are cleared for final publication.

Almost all colleges now report using the PI values of early withdrawal, further withdrawal, partial success and successful outcomes. A few colleges are still using the previous values of early retention, retention and student outcomes in addition to the previous legacy measures of attainment: SPAR and SARU. Most colleges find the new PIs easier to analyse and evaluate. This supports staff in understanding and interrogating programme PIs, identifying causes for concern and drawing up improvement plans.

Data from comparator institutions

Often colleges use data from comparator institutions, based on similar size and demographics, to benchmark their own performance. For national qualification programmes colleges make use of SQA's website to compare performance. However, the data it contains relates to the previous academic year's outcomes and tends to come quite late in the following academic year. One of the challenges which colleges face when comparing their own PI values against those from other colleges is that it can be difficult to draw meaningful conclusions. Two programmes with identical titles can contain very different curriculum content in terms of the number of units and the topics being studied and assessed. This makes it challenging for college staff to benchmark their own performance accurately. Due to the timing of SFC publishing data from other institutions (normally in March the following academic year), data derived from other colleges cannot meaningfully be used when undertaking evaluative activities (normally in October/November). As a result, comparative data from other colleges when used internally is generally one year out-of-date. To interrogate other colleges' data, programme teams make use of

SFC's PI data tool. Recently, SFC has expanded the data tool and it now contains a large quantity of PI-related data. However, as a result of these changes, college staff find it challenging to use. Additionally, clear and practical guidance from SFC on making effective use of the PI tool is not yet readily available.

National benchmark data

Colleges make extensive use of national benchmark data. Often it is a key component of self-evaluation reports completed by programme teams. They compare their own PIs against sector benchmarks in relation to a number of categories including early withdrawal, withdrawal, partial success and successful outcomes. Often self-evaluation reports, completed by programme teams, make evaluative commentary on progress in relation to national benchmarks. *Traffic light* colour coding is used in a number of colleges to identify progress against national benchmarks. This makes it easier for staff to see at a glance how well programmes are performing. A few colleges compare their own performance against the sector-average using upper quartile values as an aspirational target for programme teams to achieve. However, this is not the norm. Most colleges continue to benchmark their performance against sector-average values. As a result, these colleges and their staff use normative performance outcomes as the target against which to measure programme performance. A few colleges express concern that, due to regionalisation, they will no longer be able to continue to benchmark their own PIs against those of similar sized institutions. This is particularly relevant for smaller colleges in single-college regions.

SFC categorisation by hours of study

Most colleges continue to use the categories of full-time and part-time with a strong focus on full-time provision. This is likely to continue to be the key driver for colleges in the near future. Collating programmes together by hours can contain a confusing mixture of provision. For example, school programmes, Highers and Modern Apprenticeships are grouped together within the 80-160 hours category. This is of limited value as a stand-alone dataset as they are all very different strands of provision with very different learners achieving different levels of provision. It is unclear at this stage how colleges make use of hours of study categories to evaluate performance and bring about improvement.

SFC categories of early withdrawal, further withdrawal, completed partial success and successfully completed

Almost all colleges are now starting to make use of the recently-changed SFC-devised PI categories. However, a few are not yet using these and continue to use the old previous PI measurements. Some colleges run both reporting systems side-by-side. Colleges often value the student outcome PI and use it as a catalyst for discussions held with programme teams. The more recent PI values do not separate out issues relating to retention and attainment as clearly as the old PIs. The category of partial success causes confusion. Within this category, the range can include a learner who attained one unit on a programme and a learner who attained an HNC as they did not achieve their original intended goal of an HND. The spread is very wide making it challenging to interpret this data set meaningfully.

Use of SFC data sets by college Boards

College Boards are well-informed about progress learners are making. Committees such as *Curriculum and Quality Committees* (a sub-committee of the Board of Management), or its equivalent, receive high-level PI reports relating to learner progress and outcomes. They are informed about learner feedback survey findings. They meet with college staff and discuss progress on a range of issues including PI outcome values. College Boards have a role in agreeing key PI improvement targets. They hold the principal and senior managers accountable for attaining these targets and monitor closely their progress throughout the year. Where particular PIs are a cause for concern they are provided with a summary report relating to actions taken to improve outcomes in particular subject areas. All Boards include learner representation. Normally, this is a role undertaken by the student president. Effective, proactive student presidents ensure that learners' views are actively promoted and discussed during Board meetings. Boards closely monitor a range of data sets including learner applications, enrolments, withdrawals, completed successfully and trends over time. These arrangements are well-established and have been developed and enhanced over recent years.

4.4 Other data sets

Articulation hub partners

Generally colleges value the relationship with and the work done by their articulation hub partners. Targets for articulation are devised and agreed with colleges in terms of learner numbers to progress from college onto university. Articulation hubs also provide helpful longitudinal data sets showing learner progression over an extended period. The hubs provide information relating to learner applications, acceptance, progression and ultimately individual success. Most colleges make use of data sets received from articulation hubs along with individual learner success stories during open evenings, presentations to prospective learners and include them in programme brochures. Programme teams use data hub returns well to inform curriculum planning and programme self-evaluation.

SQA benchmarking data

SQA provides a helpful report, the *Benchmarking Tool* to college MIS staff. *The Benchmarking Tool* identifies how individual colleges perform against the mean average of other colleges across Scotland in terms of accuracy and timeliness of SQA data submissions. Individual college reports are the focus of discussions, held where appropriate, with representatives from SQA. These *Benchmarking Tool* reports help college staff to identify the effectiveness of their current arrangements and they provide useful comparator college information. Feedback from college managers is generally positive about the relationship and communication between colleges and SQA.

SDS-funded programmes

Colleges have delivered SDS-funded Modern Apprenticeship, *Get Ready for Work* and *Training for Work* programmes for a number of years. This year they have been working in partnership with SDS to deliver *New College Learning Programmes (NCLP)* to learners who have been unable to access full-time college provision and other individuals who require employability skills to access employment. Colleges view the administrative requirements for the *NCLP* programme as being bureaucratic and burdensome. As a result, a disproportionate amount of time has been spent devising and delivering these programmes. Little data of value has emerged from this initiative. The recently-introduced *School Leaver Destination Report (SLDR)*, produced by SDS, identifies the destinations of S4, S5 and S6 leavers from colleges' catchment schools. Colleges find this report helpful as it supports discussion and meaningful engagement with school partners and informs planning for provision to meet the needs of learners.

Deprivation postcodes

Overall, colleges make good use of the *Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)* postcodes to determine the penetration of their provision across the communities within the region they serve. A few colleges go further and interrogate the postcodes of applicants, monitor their conversion to live enrolments and track these through to successful outcomes. This approach helps to identify learners who reside in particular communities. Often those with the highest levels of deprivation, are on the whole, less likely to succeed on their programme or are underrepresented at the application stage. However, analysis of learner success by SIMD is not yet widespread across the sector. Colleges make use of deprivation statistics when submitting funding bids for educational provision to charitable bodies, applications for *European Social Fund (ESF)* programmes and Scottish Government initiatives. Increasingly, postcode data tracking and recruitment of learner groups from targeted areas feature in *ROAs*. One of the challenges posed by SIMD data sets is that they are not always accurate as they tend to exclude new housing developments. Also, there are very few deprivation postcodes within rural areas due to the sparse population across Scotland. Overall most colleges make good use of deprivation postcodes but only a minority use this information comprehensively to track learner progress from application through all stages of the learner journey.

Other data sets

Colleges make good use of a range of other data sets to inform strategic planning and decision-making. The official labour market statistics *National Online Manpower Information System (NOMIS)*, provided by the *Office for National Statistics (ONS)*, is used by a number of colleges. It provides a UK-wide labour market profile broken down into individual regions providing data on: population; employment; unemployment; qualifications; earnings; benefit claimants and businesses. It also shows youth unemployment levels and housing information. It is particularly useful where a college works with more than one local authority so has to tailor its provision to meet the needs of the local authorities they serve. Colleges make good use of other external statistical reports including the *Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics (SNS)* and *General Register Office (GRO)* data to

analyse population statistics. Colleges work closely and collaboratively as members of *Community Planning Partnerships* (CPP) and use economic development data to understand where community provision should be delivered to meet the needs of local communities. They also make use of local authority and SDS data to identify *learners in need of more choices and chances* in their local community. Often colleges use census data to benchmark their own learner population in terms of protected characteristics and to evaluate their inclusivity by comparing relevant equality-related PI values. Colleges work collaboratively with and receive helpful data reports from Job Centre Plus and the local Chamber of Commerce. All of these data sets inform college strategic planning processes, outcome agreements, funding bids and inform college-devised marketing and recruitment campaigns. Overall, colleges make good use of a wide range of local and national data sets for planning and to inform improvement.

Data-related network meetings

Almost all colleges benefit from a wide range of data-related support network groups. The College Development Network hosts *Management Information Systems*, *Professional Development* and *Quality Communities of Practice* meetings. College staff value these network meetings where they discuss and share approaches to a range of data-related issues. College staff benefit through attendance at SQA quality conferences and focus group meetings where they are informed about changes in registration and reporting arrangements. SFC hosts a number of relevant meetings, including *Student Support and Advice*, *SAGE* and a *PI Advisory Working Group*. Keen and committed staff from across a number of colleges attend these meetings. However, attendance at SFC-hosted network meetings does not currently include representation from all of the recently-formed college regions. As a result, some college staff are not as well-informed as others and do not make contributions which inform and influence SFC practices.

4.5 Learner-derived data

Learner feedback

Colleges have developed a wide range of approaches to capture the views and experience of learners. They view learner commentary as an important aspect of their quality assurance and improvement arrangements. Most colleges benefit from feedback provided by learners through completion of formal questionnaires, normally distributed twice a year. Generally, there are high levels of completion by full-time learners and lower return rates from part-time learners. High-level messages are collated and fed back to Boards of Management. A number of colleges use focus group meetings, attended by middle and senior managers, to hear directly from learners' their issues of concern or suggestions for improvement. All colleges use feedback provided by learner representatives to inform programme teams. Often colleges devote considerable training and resources to ensure representatives are recruited, trained and supported effectively in their roles. Overall, these approaches work well. However, on occasions, there is insufficient communication to learners on actions taken by the college in response to learner views.

Forth Valley College: learner feedback

The college gathers data about learners' experiences through focus group discussions. Every class has two "Listening to Learners" discussions each year, facilitated by college staff or senior class representatives (returning reps who have had additional training in facilitation skills). The discussions follow a pre-determined format, to ensure the focus remains on learning and teaching-related issues. The process provides valuable qualitative data for self-evaluation and quality enhancement at programme level. At whole-college level, the focus group records are "scored" centrally to provide quantitative data relating to learner satisfaction with each of sixteen aspects of the Forth Valley College learning experience, linked to the college's learning strategy. This supports year-on-year internal comparisons and informs staff Continuous Professional Development. The process works well and the college captures and responds to learner views effectively.

A few colleges collate learner responses in a number of different ways including: by mode of attendance; identifying those who started late and those who missed induction in order to determine how they can make things better next year. Reports are distributed for staff to identify key issues and draw up improvement plans. Reports inform whole-college action plans relating to learner engagement. These processes are generally well understood by staff and learners, are well established and help bring about improvement.

Where colleges have well-developed training arrangements for learner representatives, they benefit from committed learners who attend meetings and provided helpful feedback for improvement. In a number of colleges, sabbatical student presidents, and in some cases members of the Student Association, have the time and resources to communicate with learners, listen to their views and bring these to the attention of college managers.

Colleges have developed different practices to capture the views of learners. Some colleges use their own set of questions which they have developed over a number of years. A few colleges use the services of a commercial company which devises a large data set of questions from which the college can select questions to use with their own learners. There are currently six colleges in Scotland which use this approach. These colleges are given access to the responses received from other colleges and use this to benchmark their own performance. The colleges which use this approach value this service. The four colleges within the Lanarkshire region have recently agreed a single learner questionnaire for implementation during 2013-14. This approach will provide a helpful single satisfaction read-out for the college region next year.

Student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs) are currently working with colleges and SFC to draw up an options paper on different types of approaches to gathering responses from learners about their learning experiences. There is an intention to trial a common set of questions in the near future. Overall, most colleges would welcome the opportunity to benchmark learner responses with those from other institutions.

Learner commentary

HM Inspectors met with a number of learners during the fieldwork for this task. Below is a summary of their feedback:

Learners choose to study at a particular college for a variety of reasons, for example:

- it is convenient to where they live;
- it has a good reputation for its educational programmes;
- it provides a suitable range of programmes which are accessible to learners; and/or
- it is recommended as a good place to study by family and friends.

During pre-course interviews held with learners, teaching staff often provide successful anecdotal examples of post-course progression into employment or onto further learning at college or university by previous learners. This practice informs learners and helps them to focus on potential career pathways. However, learners do not benefit from comprehensive data sets relating to previous learner withdrawal or completed successful rates and cohort progression information. Most teaching staff, during pre-course discussions held with applicants, focus on positive examples to influence learner programme selection. As a result of this approach, applicants often make vocational choices without possession of the full facts relating to their selected learning programme and their likely chances of succeeding.

Most colleges have enhanced and improved enrolment procedures to ensure that learners have a positive experience of their first few days at college. From discussions held with learners, induction arrangements for most generally worked well and helped them settle quickly into college life. However, this is not the case for all learners. A minority have an unsatisfactory induction experience caused by:

- late decisions to merge groups;
- changes made to the level of programme;
- long queues during induction for photographs or to complete forms;
- over-recruitment to some programmes so classrooms are unsuitable for the size of group; and
- delays to bursary or SAAS payments.

All of these issues can unsettle newly-enrolled learners who are starting a programme at a new college and are feeling slightly nervous and insecure.

Colleges have developed a range of ways of feeding back to learners the actions they have taken in response to evaluative commentary. Some use large-screen TVs located throughout the college and contain a rolling text page stating actions taken. Others display *You Said We Did* posters displayed across the estate. In many colleges the Student Association plays a useful role in championing the views of learners and communicating back to them actions taken for improvement.

Most colleges are developing imaginative approaches to capture the views of learners through the use of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Increasingly, Student Associations are developing their own Facebook page to

capture topics relevant to learners. These approaches provide learners with opportunities to express their views remotely and to view evaluative commentary from fellow learners on their learning and wider-college experiences. Social networking sites also provide opportunities for promotion by Student Associations on a range of other issues relevant to learners.

4.6 Use of data in UHI colleges

The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) partner colleges within the Highlands and Islands region face a number of different and unique challenges. Learning programmes at SCQF level 7 or above are UHI provision as defined by the Scottish Funding Council (with 58% of undergraduate full-time equivalents (FTEs) coming from HNC/D provision and 37% from degree programmes, the balance being short courses of various descriptions). Further Education (FE) programmes at SCQF level 6 or below are currently the responsibility of individual colleges. Under the arrangements set out in the *Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill*⁷, UHI will become the fundable body for further education in the region. There are nine further education colleges within the Highlands and Islands region which, along with four other institutions, make up UHI. The colleges within the UHI region have significant advantages in terms of data collection processes. UHI and their partner colleges use a single *Student Information System (SITS)* for all HE and FE student data. This collects information relating to learner applications, enrolments, achievements, progression, and awards. They have been operating collectively this way since 2001. Individual partner colleges have responsibility for admissions, timetabling and finance systems and submitting their own returns to SFC, SDS and SQA for their FE activity. UHI applicants can apply online through UCAS (for HE courses) or using a SITS integrated online application, or directly to a local college using a paper application form for both FE and HE.

Due to a diverse HE student population, learner withdrawal has been identified by UHI as an area for improvement. However, the most recent HESA non-continuation statistics show that UHI is performing within national benchmarks. Delivery of some UHI HE programmes is unique, with teaching delivered through video-conferencing with learners widely dispersed across the Highlands and Islands region and beyond and engaging in learning through a remote medium. UHI, in line with university sector practice across Scotland, does not collect learner attendance data, although many of the partner colleges use their own procedures for tracking and recording learner attendance to use as an early indicator of learner withdrawal.

As required by SFC, UHI gathers evaluative and quantitative data from its HE learners through the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) *Destination of Leavers* survey circulated to successful graduates six months after leaving university. This survey has a high response rate (approximately 80%) and through this approach UHI determines that (whilst actual outcomes vary from year to year) over 90% of graduates are in positive destinations or further study.

⁷ Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill
http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_Bills/Post-16%20Education%20Bill/b18s4-introd.pdf

Each UHI partner college submits its own data return for FE learners to SFC. It is the intention of the UHI region to submit a single SFC data return for 2013-14. This is a significant challenge as currently each partner college maintains its own data in SITS for its own FE programmes. A data-sharing group has been established to address the FES return along with other regional data concerns. Some other data sharing agreements and partnership support arrangements are currently in place. For example, Perth College and Inverness College share one member of staff who oversees their FE data. North Highland College and West Highland College work in partnership to devise and record a range of FE data-related issues.

The majority of UHI's HE provision is at HNC/HND level. UHI benchmarks its performance against similar institutions within the UK university sector. Through subject and faculty network meetings teaching staff across the university share their approaches to learning and teaching on an ongoing basis.

UHI is investigating use of the Highlands and Islands Enterprise definition of fragile areas, in addition to SIMD data. They believe this is a more representative measure of deprivation than the SIMD which is often difficult to collate for rural and sparsely populated regions. A small group from partner colleges and UHI is meeting to compare notes and consider ways of measuring the impact of their activities on deprived populations.

Through the *UHI Quality Manager* forum UHI staff discuss and examine PIs. The *HE Partnership Planning Forum* also looks at UHI HE KPIs, as does the University Court. UHI is considered a 'single centre' by SQA, which means in the event that an external validation visit from SQA results in a 'hold', all of the related programmes across UHI have the hold issued against them until it is resolved by the partner college at which it was initially identified.

One of the significant challenges facing the UHI regional board relates to data interpretation. FE Regional Board agendas will be driven to a significant extent by data-related issues. However, collective data returns for the UHI region may be susceptible to misinterpretation as three of the nine partner colleges contribute approximately 70% of the activity. As a result, aggregated data returns have the potential to be misleading. FE data returns submitted by UHI partner colleges are generated using the data held in SITS. It is then possible to drill down at individual partner level to interrogate FE outturns.

5. How prepared are colleges for effective data use in a regional context?

Most college staff are not yet clear about the data requirements of colleges in a regional context, although they fully understand their own college's reporting requirements and arrangements. They know what works well and which programme areas require further enhancement or improvement. However, at this stage, they are unclear about the data gathering, monitoring and reporting arrangements required when they will be operating as a newly-merged college or partner college within a region. Exceptions are those colleges which will continue to operate within their own single-college region.

At the time of writing, the Scottish Funding Council is leading five Thematic Groups, the membership of which is drawn from colleges, stakeholders and the Council. The five Thematic Groups-*Sustainability/Quality/Right Learning in the Right Place/A Developed Workforce/Developing a college leaver destination survey/Alignment with Local Authority Single Outcome Agreements* – are developing indicators for each theme. These indicators, once finalised, will assist colleges in gathering appropriate data to evidence the achievement of their *ROA* targets.

For college regions, the alignment of constituent college quality calendars and reporting timeframes represents an important first step. Regional Boards will require, particularly in the early stages of the newly-formed regions, accurate data sets to evaluate how the region is performing and to identify areas for improvement. Through *ROAs*, colleges are working towards identified targets, agreed with SFC, to meet the needs of learners and employers in the regions they serve.

The challenge for regions in terms of collating, cleansing and submitting to SFC and other stakeholders one single accurate data return, on time, cannot be underestimated. Often colleges within a region have different student record systems. The data stored in these systems must be merged and a decision made on the preferred platform for the region. In at least one region, constituent colleges have formed a *Regional Information System Group* to establish agreed approaches to data handling and reporting. They share their FES returns through a common repository to ensure effective monitoring of the region's progress against *ROA* targets.

Current approaches where colleges devise waiting lists which are not shared meaningfully with key partners such as other colleges and SDS are not sustainable. This approach results in inaccurate application data sets which are unhelpful to colleges in planning provision and result in confusion for staff and learners at the commencement of the academic year. This does not serve late college applicants well as they are often left to source alternative provision without appropriate advice and support. There is a pressing need, particularly within a regional context, for effective application data set sharing agreements, particularly for colleges located within the central belt, where local learners often apply to more than one college. This will help to clarify issues of unmet learner demand and will help support learners to access first-choice provision.

Within a regional context, a number of data gathering practices are likely to continue to develop effectively. SQA will have fewer partner colleges with which to work. This should help to improve communication and reporting arrangements. Expertise, over time, is likely to be established within larger, soon-to-be merged college regions and this will help inform learner registration, interpretation of SQA's *Benchmarking Tool* and data reporting arrangements. Colleges will identify from existing approaches, within their own region, best practice to be incorporated and implemented in relation to attendance monitoring and college-derived equalities data monitoring and reporting.

One important area for improvement, which is outwith the control of colleges, is the cluttered and confusing landscape in relation to categorisation of learner activity through DPG, superclasses and programme classification categories. Moving into a

regional context, clarification and simplification of programme funding-related issues would be a helpful step in supporting colleges to improve their practice, staff understanding, and operate more efficiently.

To make sense of larger, more complex regional data set returns, college staff would benefit from improved communication with and targeted support from SFC. They would value up-to-date exemplar material in relation to FES processes and procedures and targeted support in interpretation of online management reports.

Communication and data sharing arrangements between colleges and SDS are not yet fully effective. Currently, they do not support Scottish Government's commitment to young people outlined in *Opportunities for All*. Within a regional context there is likely to be a sharper focus on meeting the needs of a defined geographical population. Effective data gathering and sharing arrangements are important pre-requisites to deliver targeted support for younger learners and provide them with appropriate learning or training opportunities.

The traditional practice of focusing on the quantity of qualifications achieved is the long-established indicator of college success. However, there has been insufficient attention paid to learner progression to employment and how well qualifications help learners achieve their career and employment goals. Improvements are required in tracking and reporting arrangements which demonstrate that college programmes meet the needs of industry and employers based within the regions that colleges serve. This will become an increasingly important focus given the current economic climate and levels of youth unemployment across Scotland.

For college leavers there is ever-increasing competition to secure a job or place at university. Colleges should develop appropriate reporting and recording arrangements which recognise individuals' wider achievements and demonstrate their employment-related skills. Closer ties can be established with employers and HE providers to determine the attributes they value which learners can demonstrate when applying for employment or higher education.

By 2014 there will be significantly fewer college institutions in Scotland. Current arrangements to capture learners' views and bring about improvement work well. However, there is a risk that through regionalisation, learner choice, preference and evaluative commentary is not maintained at the existing level due to a variety of regionalisation and change-related issues. All college staff have a responsibility to ensure that in the new regional landscape the learner experience remains central to the core of college decision-making and activities.

6. Recommendations

The Scottish Government should:

- work with colleges, SFC and SDS to support the establishment of effective learner application data-sharing arrangements.

The Scottish Funding Council should:

- consider how it could further support and offer guidance to colleges on interpreting PIs in collaboration with other agencies;
- consider the introduction of wider-reaching categorisation of learner destinations, especially for those leaving programmes early for employment; and
- further support colleges in their response to the recommendations in this report.

Skills Development Scotland and colleges should:

- promptly establish and maintain effective communication and data reporting arrangements.

Colleges should:

- ensure that managers and staff have a clear understanding of managing, using and reporting data in a regional context;
- continue to work with learners to seek their feedback in improving application and admissions processes across a region;
- align constituent college quality calendars and reporting timeframes in a regional context;
- establish region-wide approaches to managing and reporting of data, including learners' wider achievements;
- establish learner application data-sharing arrangements outwith and across a region; and
- track and report learner destinations effectively.

Education Scotland, SFC and SQA should:

- work together to simplify categorisation of learner activity.

Education Scotland should:

- continue to monitor the progress made by colleges in taking forward the above recommendations; and
- review the management, use and interpretation of data within the context of regionalisation to provide effective support to colleges.

7. Glossary of terms

ACR	Annual Course Review
CAD	Computer Aided Design
CLD	Community Learning and Development
CPP	Community Planning Partnership
DPG	Dominant Programme Grouping
EMA	Educational Maintenance Allowance
ESF	European Social Fund
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FDG	First Destination of Graduates
FE	Further Education
FES	Further Education Statistics
FTE	Full-Time Equivalent
GRO	General Register Office
HE	Higher Education
HEAR	Higher Education Achievement Report
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Authority
HNC	Higher National Certificate
HND	Higher National Diploma
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
KIS	Key Information Set
MIS	Management Information Systems
NCLP	New College Learning Programme
NOMIS	National Online Manpower Information System
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PDP	Personal Development Plan
PI	Performance Indicator
ROA	Regional Outcome Agreement
SAAS	Student Award Agency Scotland
SDS	Skills Development Scotland
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
SIMD	Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation
SITS	Student Information System
SLDR	School Leaver Destination Report
SNS	Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics
<i>sparqs</i>	student participation in quality Scotland
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
SVQ	Scottish Vocational Qualification
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UHI	University of the Highlands and Islands
WSUM	Weighted Student Unit of Measurement

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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at:

Education Scotland
Denholm House
Almondvale Business Park
Almondvale Way
Livingston
EH54 6GA
Tel: 01506 600 200
e-mail: enquiries@educationscotland.gov.uk

www.educationscotland.gov.uk