The development of learner employability in Scotland's colleges

Transforming lives through learning

Contents

Introduction

Scotland's colleges have always prepared people for work. The first college in Scotland was established towards the end of the 19th century to provide technical training in support of the heavy industries in its local area. In the long history of Scotland's college sector, training and education programmes have reflected key employment patterns. Over the past thirty or so years, colleges have extended the curriculum to reflect changing expectations about the broad purpose of education. Currently, the college curriculum includes, as well as vocational further education (FE) and higher education (HE) programmes, degree programmes, programmes for learners who intend to progress to university and both vocational and academic programmes for young people at school. There is also a wide range of programmes for learners with additional support needs and many types of programmes for people who are already in employment and wish to enhance their knowledge and skills.

Over the past few years, there has been extensive change in the college sector. The Scottish Government responded to the 2008 economic downturn by commissioning a report to investigate training and education opportunities for young people. The resulting report, *Education Working for All!* [1] published in 2014, made 32 recommendations for improvement, a number of which suggested that clearer links should be established between colleges and the workplace. As a result of the Scottish Government's response *Developing the Young Workforce – Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy, (DYW)* [2] the structures and communication channels between employers, colleges, schools, training providers and support agencies such as Skills Development Scotland (SDS) [3] are becoming more streamlined and clearer.

During the same period, the Scottish Government was also charged with addressing perceived concerns about the purpose and governance of colleges. This set in motion the process of regionalisation, now prescribed by the *Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act of 2013* [4]. In this new landscape, colleges are required to work more explicitly within 13 geographical regions or sectoral contexts, with a clear remit to provide people with the right skills for economic growth. A number of colleges have merged and become very large regional institutions. SDS has published 13 Regional Skills Assessments (RSA) [5]. These are intended to inform and align with the college Regional Outcome Agreements (ROA) [6] set out by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), which have been in place for four years.

At the present time in Scotland there is a strong and sustained policy that colleges should prioritise full-time programmes which align with economic requirements and prepare learners for employment. An Education Scotland report being published alongside this one [7] provides more detail about how this is affecting curriculum planning in colleges.

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[1] http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2014/06/4089
[2] http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2014/12/7750
[3] https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/
[4] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2013/12/pdfs/asp_20130012_en.pdf
[5] https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/what-we-do/partnerships/regional-skills-assessments/
[6] http://www.sfc.ac.uk/funding/OutcomeAgreements/OutcomeAgreementsOverview.aspx
[7] http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/resources/c/genericresource_tcm4876907.asp

Beyond curriculum planning, there are wider aspects of employability which colleges are increasingly expected to address. These are the broad range of skills, behaviours, capacities and knowledge which develop learners' ability to engage positively with employment options. These skills complement the industry-specific vocational and technical skills delivered in college programmes.

For the purposes of this report this range of skills, behaviours, capacities and knowledge are defined as *employability* and we explore how well colleges are developing or enhancing in their learners.

Context of the report and methodology

Education Scotland's publication, *External quality arrangements for Scotland's colleges, August 2013*[8], specifies that Education Scotland will produce a number of thematic aspect reports each year. This report is one of a suite of reports by Education Scotland commissioned by the SFC to evaluate provision in colleges for supporting learner success. Colleges should act on the recommendations contained in these reports. College inspectors will monitor action towards implementation of these recommendations as part of their normal dialogue with colleges and will wish to discuss issues arising from thematic aspect reports during regular college visits.

This report is based on work carried out over a two-year period from September 2014 to June 2016. This timeframe has helped take account of rapid change within the post-16 sector over that period. It has also enabled us to track the progress and destinations of a sample of learners through their college experience and into their next stage of learning or employment. Their reflections on their college experiences have helped inform this report.

In preparing this publication, inspectors and associate assessors visited a sample of five colleges, detailed in appendix 1 of this report. Each college in the sample was visited twice during year one of the fieldwork and once during year two. Inspectors and associate assessors discussed relevant issues with senior and middle managers, teaching and support staff and learners. The team carried out a small number of lesson observations and looked at relevant documentation. The views of stakeholders were obtained through analysis of documents, face-to-face interviews and telephone discussion.

Reviewers also drew on the findings of other Education Scotland external review reports and aspect task findings. The methodology included a review of key literature covering employability research and policy.

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[8] https://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/ExternalQualityArrangementsColleges2013_tcm4-813723.pdf

Summary of findings

Areas of positive practice

- Overall, college learners acquire and develop a broad range of relevant skills, including personal skills, core skills and aspects of employability skills. Colleges are particularly good at developing learners' understanding of the workplace and helping them to enhance their personal capacities. Almost all learners report increased levels of confidence from undertaking college programmes.

- All colleges have a clear strategic focus on providing education and training which meets the needs of their learners, develops their potential and prepares them well for employment, either directly from college or following a period of further study. Most colleges make clear to learners that their programme of study aims to prepare them for suitable employment. This is promoted further through college prospectuses, during recruitment interviews and within induction experiences.

- Over the past few years, employers and other partnership links in colleges has been raised significantly. This has impacted positively on learner employability. Partnership working, including with employers, is a very positive aspect of college work.

- Almost all colleges carry out detailed environmental scanning and make good use of employer views when designing their curriculum. Curriculum planning is generally carried out well and addresses effectively the needs of learners, communities and employers. An increasing number of programmes provide opportunities for learners to gain industry-accredited qualifications in addition to their main programme of study. This is valued greatly by both learners and employers.

- Colleges have a range of helpful arrangements in place to support the development of learner employability in tandem with the mainstream curriculum. This usually forms part of a programme's on-course guidance processes.

- Staff in all colleges have a high awareness of recent national drivers or initiatives around employability, and implement well a range of activities aimed broadly at making learners 'work ready'. Many curriculum managers and staff also have in-depth knowledge of industry requirements through regular interactions with employers. Most programmes, particularly at more advanced levels, increasingly involve employers in constructive delivery of learning activities. Where this happens, it greatly enhances learning experiences.

- Where work placement is managed well, it has a positive impact on the learner experience and on college relationships with employers. Many colleges successfully replicate work placement experiences within programmes, particularly when these are not readily available through local employers. Many colleges also help learners to gain experience of the workplace through live projects and competitions.

- Almost all colleges develop employability and life skills well in learners with additional support needs.

- The majority of full-time learners in Scotland's colleges complete their programmes of study successfully and move on to their next stages equipped to do well.

Areas for development

- Within mainstream programme delivery, there is less focus on searching or applying for jobs, interview practice and developing future careers than on other aspects of employability. The terminology of career management skills has a low profile amongst teaching staff.

- Very few colleges have specific strategies or policies on developing learner employability, as defined in this report. It is rare for colleges to have an agreed definition of what employability is, or any kind of college-wide approach to monitoring or measuring it.

- There is general recognition, by colleges and their partners, that much more needs to be done to address gender imbalance in certain subject areas.

- In some colleges, arrangements for on-course guidance are not in place, only involve FE programmes or have a primary focus in sustaining college study, rather than on what comes after. There is very little guidance support for part-time learners in colleges. This means that many learners miss out on employability guidance experiences.

- In some of the very large merged establishments, their scale and multi-site nature makes it very difficult to provide much beyond a drop-in SDS career information, advice and guidance service. Many learners are unaware of this service, or are not able to access it easily.

- Overall, work placement is not offered in enough college programmes.

- It is rare for learners' existing employability skills, acquired from previous or current employment experiences to be articulated, highlighted or made use of in college learning activities. Across most colleges, opportunities to capitalise on what full-time learners already know about the world of work are missed. In general, colleges could do more to help learners identify and present their existing employability skills more clearly.

- Generally, learner destination tracking is not sufficiently detailed to understand the impact that college programmes are having on employability. Part-time learners who attend college for upskilling or retraining programmes are rarely tracked into their next steps.

- Programme self-evaluation reports do not routinely include comment on those aspects of employability highlighted in this report, namely knowledge of the workplace, the development of personal capacities and career management skills.

1. Defining employability

The term employability is used widely and often means different things to different people. The definition used in this report originates in the Scottish Government's *Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy*[9] published in 2007, which drew on *Workforce Plus, An Employability Framework for Scotland, Scottish Executive, June 2006*[10].

> *Employability: The combination of factors and processes which enable people to progress towards or get into employment, to stay in employment and move on in the workplace*

In these publications, employability is further defined as:

> *A term that refers to skills, behaviours, attitudes and personal attributes that are necessary for an individual to seek, gain and sustain employment and function effectively in the workplace and are transferable to a variety of contexts. Employability skills prepare individuals for work rather than for a specific occupation.*

Terminology in this area of work may well focus on similar areas but does not use the term employability. For example, one of the most common concepts in the UK is that of *graduate attributes*[11] – a set of skills and personal capacities which support graduates into productive careers. There are also very clear synergies between aspects of employability and creativity skills, as set out in an Education Scotland report *Creativity Across Learning*[12], published in 2013. These focus particularly on the areas such as enterprise, personal advocacy, horizon scanning and resilience. Importantly, the overall purpose of Curriculum for Excellence[13] is to produce learners who are equipped to flourish in their careers and make a positive contribution to society. The four capacities, Successful Learners, Responsible Citizens, Confident Individuals and Effective Contributors encapsulate exactly what employers are looking for when recruiting workers.

The language of skills in Scotland is complex, with phrases such as personal skills, core skills and employability skills all in common use. In *Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy*, the phrase essential skills was developed to encompass all of the above and to make the distinction between these generic skills and vocational or technical skills. In this report, employability is considered mainly as a subset of essential skills, with reference made to the others as appropriate.

Though there are few detailed definitions in place about what specifically constitutes the 'skills, behaviours, attitudes and personal attributes' noted above, there are several common strands within employability initiatives or projects. These focus primarily on:

- clear understanding of the expectations of the workplace, through for example, work placement or links with employers;

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[9] http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2007/09/06091114/0

[10] http://www.gov.scot/resource/doc/129285/0030791.pdf

[11] http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/publications/graduates-for-the-21st-century-integrating-the-enhancementthemes-leaflet.pdf

[12] http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/Creativity3to18_tcm4-814361.pdf

[13] http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence/

- the career management or job search skills developed by an individual to help with finding work or to further their career such as preparation for job applications, research into careers and networking;
- developing the personal skills and capacities needed for successful, sustained employment, such as good communication, punctuality, tenacity, creativity, teamwork and personal advocacy skills; and
- developing appropriate technical skills and sustaining up-to-date knowledge in a specific industry sector.

This report, explores mainly how well colleges deliver the first three of these.

2. Research findings and stakeholder contribution to employability

A wide range of national and international research contributes to the body of knowledge about employability. Much of this has been collated through a UK organisation called Education and Employers[14]. Many research publications focus on specific aspects of employability, such as the impact of work placement and employer engagement with education.

However, there are significant caveats in interpreting messages from research. One is the lack of consistent terminology or a universally accepted definition of employability. Also, there are almost no widely adopted measurement tools for the development of employability. Another issue is the difficulty of attributing the success of individuals in gaining or sustaining employment solely to their education, training or employer engagement experience. This sometimes means that analysis of cause and effect is imprecise. Nevertheless, there are clear and consistent messages about employability in research publications, particularly related to young people in the age range 14 –19. These concern the positive impact on learners in terms of their knowledge, understanding and motivation, of *any* contact with employers and with the workplace while learning. This is entirely consistent with the views expressed in DYW and as detailed later in this report, the views of college learners.

Much of the research from across the UK is focused on schools, sixth-form colleges and universities. There has been very little academic research undertaken into the development of learner employability in Scotland's colleges. One report, *Responding to Youth Unemployment: February 2012*[15], undertaken by the Training and Employment Research Unit at the University of Glasgow on behalf of the organisation Working Links, provides useful insight into how colleges can help young people to become employable. While gaining qualifications is of primary importance, stakeholders consider that:

> *'It is important that all college courses, and particularly courses with fewer positive employment destinations, integrate employability, careers and life skills into courses so that young people are better able to compete in the labour market when they leave college'.*

Employers and employer representatives have been providing strong messages for some time about employability, but they do not always coincide with each other, which makes it hard for colleges to be clear about what exactly employers are looking for. Different industry sectors demand different skillsets – personal as well as technical. Most employer surveys do, however, note that personal skills have at least equal rating with technical skills or qualifications. For example, in the Federation of Small Businesses Scotland publication *Creating a Fairer Scotland-Employability Support: A Discussion Paper, October 2015*[16], several skills are considered to be of primary importance for the workplace. These include attitude to work, good communication, people skills, teamwork and problem solving. In the *Confederation of British Industries Education and Skills Survey : 2015*[17], employers state:

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[14] http://www.educationandemployers.org/

[15] http://www.workinglinks.co.uk/pdf/Responding%20to%20Youth%20Unemployment.pdf

[16] http://www.fsb.org.uk/docs/default-source/Publications/consultation-responses/cr_er_fairer-scotland_oct15d3d732ba4fa86562a286ff0000dc48fe.pdf?sfvrsn=0

[17] http://news.cbi.org.uk/reports/education-and-skills-survey-2015/

*'By far the most important factors employers weigh
up when recruiting school and college leavers are
attitudes (85%) and aptitudes (58%). These rank well
ahead of formal qualifications'*

Skills for Scotland: *A Lifelong Skills Strategy* details several 'soft' skills which employers have cited as being important for work. These include practical aspects such as managing time, planning and organising, undertaking tasks at short notice and also broader personal capacities such as thinking creatively and critically, learning and continuing to learn and taking responsibility for own development. Employer views, therefore, confirm the need for the development of the right personal capacities for employment, and much of the research suggests that work placement or employer contact can help to develop these. In the *UK Commission for Employment and Skills Employer Perspectives Survey of 2014*[18], two-thirds of employers suggested that experience of work was a primary factor in recruiting employees. Employer surveys also generally recognise a need for more concentration on career management skills in educational establishments. These include knowledge of the workplace, understanding of the networking and application process, clear career goals, and skills in showcasing abilities to employers. Learners in our survey sample concur with these findings.

In 2012, the Scottish Government published a framework for *Career Management Skills*[19], (CMS) which now underpins much of the work of SDS in schools and to an extent in colleges. The work of SDS Career Information, Advice and Guidance service forms part of the support framework available to college learners. CMS feature prominently in the SDS online self-study resource, *My World of Work (MyWoW)*[20]. The framework is structured around four key concepts:

Self: Understanding your personality, interests and values are key to making
            the right decisions
Strengths: Know how to use your talents, skills and personal qualities
Horizons: Explore the world of work, training and learning
Networks: Identify who can help you in your career journey

In 2015, in response to a recommendation in DYW and working closely with SDS, Education Scotland published two sets of standards, for young people from 3-18, one for *Careers Education*[21] and the other for *Work placement*[22]. It also published *Guidance for School/Employer Partnerships*[23] and plans are in place for Education Scotland to publish guidance on using labour market intelligence and developing career management skills. These publications are aimed primarily at schools, but also have relevance to large numbers of college learners. SFC published *College Standards for Workplacement*[24] in August 2016. All of these documents concur in general about what constitutes employability and what needs to be done to enhance it.

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[18] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/employer-perspectives-survey-2014
[19] https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/news-events/2012/june/careers-management-skills-framework/
[20] https://www.myworldofwork.co.uk/
[21] http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/thecurriculum/dyw/careerseducation/index.asp
[22] https://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/WorkPlacementStandard0915_tcm4-870517.pdf
[23] http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/thecurriculum/dyw/schoolemployerpartnerships/index.asp
[24] http://www.sfc.ac.uk/Priorities/LearningTeaching/Skills/DSYW/WorkplaceExperience.aspx

3. Current practice in Scotland's colleges

3.1 Strategic planning and partnerships

All colleges have a clear strategic focus on providing education and training which meets the needs of their learners, develops their potential and prepares them for employment, either directly from college or following a period of further study. These general aims feature consistently in strategic plans and ROAs. Over the past few years, the two key Scottish Government drivers of DYW and regionalisation have raised significantly the profile of employer and other partnership links in colleges. This has had a beneficial impact on learner employability. Partnership working, including with employers, is a very positive aspect of college work.

The recent establishment of a number of regional DYW groups, led by employer bodies, has the potential to increase and enhance college links not just with employers but also local authorities, schools and community learning and development partners. The establishment of ROAs between SFC and colleges is beginning to have a positive impact on how colleges map their provision against the regional, economic and labour market trends provided by SDS. All colleges are aware of RSA and also the imminent development of *Regional and Sector Skills Investment Plans*[25]*,* though it is too early to evaluate any impact on the effectiveness of the college curriculum. Colleges have traditionally had close involvement with local authority community planning partnerships[26]. These partnerships have been strengthened further by the common purpose of reducing youth unemployment and supporting local economic development. Most colleges also contribute positively to regional economic development forums and to national industry sector groups.

Strategic links between colleges and SDS have also been strengthened considerably over the past few years with the delivery of many SDS Employability Fund [27] programmes in colleges. College delivery of off-the-job training for Modern Apprentices and the development of Foundation Apprenticeship[28] programmes has also extended the flow of intelligence between employers and colleges, with a direct impact on college planning. Following the economic downturn and the rise in youth unemployment, most colleges have tried to maintain their focus on providing training for people furthest from the job market. Most colleges have also experienced a significant increase in their work with schools over the past two years, as a direct response to DYW.

Almost all colleges carry out detailed environmental scanning and make good use of employer views in approval processes for new programmes. Colleges host a range of employer advisory groups of forums, and many also carry out regular surveys with employers and other partners. Many colleges also require programme teams to review regularly the relevance of their existing programmes to local economic need. There are examples of changes within programme structures or the discontinuation of programmes as a result of this process. All colleges make efforts to address gender imbalance in specific subject areas, such as males in childcare or females in engineering, construction or computing. This is having mixed although limited impact

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[25] https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/what-we-do/partnerships/skills-investment-plans/
[26] http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Government/PublicServiceReform/CP
[27] https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/what-we-do/our-products/employability-fund/
[28] https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/what-we-do/our-products/foundation-apprenticeships/

and there is general recognition, by colleges and their partners, that much more needs to be done to address gender imbalance in certain subject areas.

Very few colleges have a specific, agreed strategy or policy on developing learner employability, as defined in this report. In fact, it is rare for colleges to have an agreed definition of what employability is, or any kind of college-wide approach to monitoring or measuring how well learners are developing it. Furthermore, there is little sense in colleges of learner entitlement to training or development in employability, particularly in career management skills. There is now in place a set of standards for career education for young people from 3-18 and clear national guidance from SDS about what constitutes career management skills. However, these standards do not yet have a major presence in college policies, nor do they feature specifically in promotion and induction materials distributed to learners. A Statement of Ambition on Essential Skills[29], including employability, was launched in June 2016 by the College Development Network (CDN) Essential Skills and Voluntary Advisory Group[30]. This sets out clearly and unequivocally what learners should expect in these areas when they attend college, but is at a very early stage of dissemination.

One of the key issues for this report is whether colleges are carrying out sufficiently good work in developing employability in learners even if they do not all have formally articulated strategies, policies or learner entitlements in place.

Case study

Edinburgh College: Creative Industries Employability Day

For the past three years Edinburgh College has held a one-day seminar which aims to provide creative industries, computing and web design learners with first-hand information about careers in their chosen field. The overall topic of the event is employability – how to prepare for employment while studying at college, how to research and apply for jobs, how to behave in the workplace and how to move a career on through self-promotion and networking.

The Employability Day involves four one-hour sessions for learners and staff delivered by panels of employers along with funding and advice agencies. Within each one-hour time slot there are six separate panel sessions, so learners are able to select those most relevant to their career pathways. The event builds on the positive relationships developed by teaching staff and managers with creative industries partners. In 2016, fifty-four guest speakers took part, including employers, community representatives, Creative Scotland[31], e-Placement Scotland[32], performing art and digital media companies. Many of the presentations from employers are in the form of personal career accounts, including a few by former learners who are now building successful careers.

All sessions are very well attended and there are good levels of interaction between learners and speakers. Learners find getting key messages about employability directly from practitioners extremely valuable. The event also provides high quality continuous professional development (CPD) for staff.

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[29] http://www.collegedevelopmentnetwork.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Essential-Skills-Statement-of-Ambition-1.pdf

[30] http://www.collegedevelopmentnetwork.ac.uk/networks-projects/essential-skills-and-volunteering/

[31] http://www.creativescotland.com/

[32] https://www.e-placementscotland.com/

3.2   Promotion and support arrangements for employability

Most colleges make clear to learners that their programme of study aims to prepare them for employment – even a few years later. In most college prospectuses, and websites, subject descriptions indicate the type and level of jobs that a qualification can lead to, as well as learning progression pathways. During recruitment interviews, where these take place, most college staff also discuss with learners, in general terms, the kinds of progression pathways programmes can offer. Despite this, many learners still feel unsure about the employment prospects offered by college programmes. Learners occasionally raise concerns about the quality of guidance received before applying for a college programme. When colleges analyse reasons for high early withdrawal rates, they often focus on the recruitment process and acknowledge that more can be done to match learner intentions and aspirations to college programmes. It is not clear whether providing clearer route maps into employment for learners, at the recruitment stage, might have a positive impact on reducing learner withdrawal rates.

During their induction into college programmes, learners are introduced to college guidance services, which often include a careers advice component. At this early stage though, the primary focus for guidance experiences tends to be on practical matters such as funding issues and settling into college life. During induction and in the first few weeks of college programmes, most teaching staff set out clear expectations to learners about their study commitments, their motivation and their demeanour in college. This is frequently phrased as an introduction to 'professional' behaviours and employer expectations.

Colleges have a range of helpful structural arrangements in place to support the development of learner employability in tandem with the mainstream curriculum, mostly as part of on-course guidance processes. These vary in both quantity and quality, with some examples of good practice in place. In many colleges, teaching staff provide this guidance through their programme tutor role, often making use of central college material on a range of themes including employability. In other colleges, on-course guidance is provided by non-teaching staff. However, in some colleges, arrangements for on-course guidance by programme or guidance tutors are not in place, only involve FE programmes or have a primary focus in sustaining college study, rather than on preparation for work or study after college. There is very little guidance support for part-time learners in many colleges, so opportunities to develop employability as an additional part of their programmes are very limited.

Case study

West Highland College UHI (University of the Highlands and Islands): Employment and Development team

Over the past two years, West Highland College UHI has developed in-house expertise in many aspects of learner employability, through the work of the Employment and Development Team (EDT). This is having a positive effect on learner development of employability skills and their capacity to identify and present them. The team comprises four members of staff, based in the Fort William campus, with a presence in Skye and in several outreach areas. The remit of the team includes managing SDS Employability Fund programmes, Highland Council Programmes, but also providing regular, dedicated training in employability to full-time FE learners. Team members also work closely with SDS, JobCentre Plus, Highland Council, and other partner agencies.

Following an evaluation of the first year of the team's work, employability training for full-time learners is now more customised and embedded into curriculum areas. This means that approaches are different for each area, and reflect the types of skills specific industries require. The planning that has taken place with teaching staff to deliver this has also resulted in a stronger focus on employability within programme delivery, including at Higher National level. The profile of career management skills has therefore been raised across the college. MyWoW is used extensively and effectively by the EDT and teaching staff. There are plans in place to embed the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) Certificate of Work Readiness into all FE programmes, and the college is currently piloting a college-devised unit which encompasses both core and employability skills. Learners greatly appreciate the work of the EDT. They find the team approachable, helpful and knowledgeable. The number of positive learner destinations increased.

Most colleges incorporate a career information, advice and guidance service provided by SDS. The format of this varies greatly and is dependent on local arrangements between individual colleges and SDS. In some colleges, SDS careers staff have a high profile and support extensively curriculum delivery or on-course guidance. Increasingly, this involves use of the SDS online resource MyWoW which, when used well, supports useful analysis of personal skills or construction of curriculum vitae (CV). Further information about the use of MyWoW in schools and colleges can be found in an Education Scotland report published in 2015[33].

Case study

Edinburgh College: Developing career management skills through on-course guidance

In Edinburgh College, on-course guidance for full-time learners up to Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 7 is provided by Learning and Development Tutors (LDT). These staff members work alongside teaching staff to help learners reflect on their progress, stay on track and plan their next steps. LDTs also deliver a personal development programme to learner groups, using centrally devised materials. In the past year, there has been an increased focus on developing employability in learners and importantly, supporting learners to identify and communicate their skills. This includes preparation for work placement, CV and cover letter writing, and interview practice. MyWoW has been used extensively to support the CV and job application process. In some curriculum areas, for example creative industries, LDTs also provide information to learners about internships or summer jobs.

Recently, the LDTs have been working closely with the team of SDS careers advisors who work in the college. This has resulted in the development of a learner reflection tool based on the SDS Career Management Framework themes of self, strengths, horizons and networks. This tool is at an early stage of dissemination, but is familiarizing learners with the concepts of career management. This initiative has been supported by training sessions provided by SDS staff to LDTs and teaching staff on key aspects of employability. As a result, learners are becoming increasingly confident about progressing to their next steps.

In some of the very large merged establishments, their scale and multi-site nature makes it very difficult to provide much beyond a drop-in SDS career information, advice and guidance service

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[33] http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/resources/u/genericresource_tcm4868689.asp

to support specific aspects such as CV writing or information about progression. While learners in these colleges welcome this service when they access it, many are unaware of it, or are not able to travel to access it easily and uptake can be low. This contrasts quite strongly with provision for learners who are interested in applying to university, where considerable support is provided for the application process. Learners on SDS funded Employability Fund programmes are given more detailed and focused activity related to finding and keeping work. Success rates are relatively high given the circumstances of those on programmes and the limited time available to give support.

Case study

South Lanarkshire College: Power Poise, creating good first impressions

'Power Poise - First Impressions' is a practical workshop currently delivered within the Faculty of Business as part of the personal development planning process. It is also offered to learners and staff across all faculties during the annual Destination Success Event. The workshop aims to show learners the importance of first impressions in the workplace, as well as in social situations.

The session provides a quick insight into the theory of how body language alters the brain and how high and low-power poses can influence the outcome of job interviews and social interactions. Learners explore how making a good entrance, making eye contact and sitting confidently during interview can help to boost energy, can convey important messages about competence and ambition. The workshop involves practical exercises and role play, and is highly enjoyable for learners.

Workshops have already had a positive impact on some learners, including a group studying horticulture who undertook the session in May 2015. As a result these learners have confidently engaged with local employers by planning and hosting employer events on college premises. A number of learners have since been offered work experience opportunities and the feedback from employers has been very positive. Many learners attribute their successful engagement with employment to the increased confidence gained from undertaking the Power Poise training.

3.3   Programme design

College curricula almost always have a suitable range of entry levels and provide appropriate internal or external progression options for learners, including into employment. There are some very successful programmes which combine college study, extended work placement and progression to degree programmes. Further case studies about such programmes can be seen on the CDN website[34].

Most programmes in Scotland's colleges are based on SQA group awards or clusters of locally-devised units. There are exceptions to this, with some curriculum areas preferring to work with other awarding bodies such as City and Guilds[35]. Within SQA and other awarding body qualification hierarchies, the suites of mandatory and optional units have been mapped to industry sector occupational standards and have involved consultation with employer bodies

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[34] http://www.collegedevelopmentnetwork.ac.uk/projects/employer-engagement-and-enterprise/case-studies/
[35] http://www.cityandguilds.com/

such as the Construction Industry Training Board[36], Hair and Beauty Industry Authority[37] and National Training Organisation for the Land Based Industries[38]. In fast-changing sectors like the digital industries, maintaining the relevance of qualifications can be challenging for awarding bodies. Generally speaking, qualifications and vocational content of college programmes are recognised and accepted by employers.

Some SQA vocational qualifications include employability units which are contextualised within specific industries, such as hairdressing or creative industries. There are also several SQA units aimed at developing generic aspects of employability, and these are sometimes also included within qualification hierarchies. These units have titles such as Developing Skills for Employability, Personal Development Planning, Work Experience and Developing your Essential Skills. However, many of these units are optional for learners and in college programmes at SCQF levels 5, 6 and 7, uptake across colleges varies greatly. Uptake of these generic units is also significantly lower on FE programmes than on HE programmes, though of course, this does not mean that programme teams are not delivering aspects of employability within other units. In some colleges, SQA employability units are offered as part of the FE on-course guidance described earlier, and an increasing number of colleges are incorporating aspects of the SQA Certificate of Workplace Readiness into programmes. The key purpose of Skills for Work programmes, aimed at young people attending college part-time while at school, is to develop employability in a vocational context and these programmes usually include specific employability units. There are a few SQA units which encompass the job search and application process, and these mostly feature within National Progression Award Programmes aimed at learners who need support to re-engage with learning or with employment. There are very few generic employability units offered in colleges as part of programmes at SCQF level 8. This is of concern, because this is frequently the level from which learners seek employment. As a result, many learners in their final year of college have very little structured learning around developing their employability skills.

All of the core skills[39] used in most FE programmes in Scotland have relevance to employability. Learners do not always relish undertaking employability-based or core skills units, particularly as a separate part of their programme. As indicated in Education Scotland's report Essential Skills in Scotland's colleges[40] published in 2012, the need for relevant contextualisation in their delivery is very clear. In a few colleges, communication units are contextualised within employability and includes letters of application or CV writing. However, staff delivering core skills do not necessarily make explicit the link between core skills and the broad range of skills employers say they require, therefore learners do not always make the connection. This is particularly prevalent with units in problem-solving and working with others, which are usually embedded fully into vocational projects on FE programmes, but not always signposted clearly enough to learners. Digital skills, a critically important area in today's rapidly changing employment market, are not always emphasised, promoted or developed as well as they could be. In most Higher National (HN) qualification hierarchies, core skills are not undertaken discretely, but are signposted within unit support materials. Again, HN learners are not always fully aware of where they are developing core skills within other units of study. All SQA national qualifications encompass SQA framework Skills for Life, Learning and Work[41] at appropriate

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[36] www.citb.co.uk/
[37] www.habia.org
[38] https://www.lantra.co.uk/scotland
[39] These are: Communication, Numeracy, Information Technology, Problem solving and Working with others
[40] http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/Essential%20Skills%20in%20Scotlands%20Colleges_tcm4-732347.pdf
[41] http://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/skills_for_learning_life_and_work_framework_final.pdf

levels. Over the next two years, SQA intends to carry out a thematic review of core and essential skills across all education sectors in Scotland, including colleges. One of the key factors in this project is the need to streamline the different skills frameworks used in Scottish education. This is to ensure that learners have a much clearer sense of which skills they have developed, how and when they have done this, and how to present them to future employers.

An increasing number of programmes provide opportunities for learners to gain industry-accredited qualifications in addition to their main programme of study. This can be a very important aspect of college provision for learners, because these qualifications usually have high levels of currency with employers and can provide learners with a competitive edge when applying for jobs. In many subject areas, these are embedded into programmes, and gained as part of mainstream college study. However, in other areas, they represent an additional cost to learners, which can be problematic. In computing, as an example, most employers value vendor qualifications highly because they provide a clear indication of a learners' capability in specific industry skills. In other areas, such as construction, almost all learners acquire the Construction Skills Certification Scheme[42] health and safety card to access onsite work or work placement. Hair, beauty and complementary therapies (HBCT) learners frequently acquire certificates in specialist techniques resulting from short courses delivered by product manufacturers. In some colleges, the programmes include additional study areas outwith the main area of study but considered essential for employment in the local area. For example, in response to employer feedback about a skills shortage within the food and drink industry, West Lothian College offers a supplementary National Progression Award in Food Manufacture to full time engineering students, to expand their skills profile and enhance their employment opportunities.

Case study

West Highland College UHI: Embedding of industry qualifications

Employment in the West and North-West Highlands is not always easy to find. West Highland College UHI recognises that providing learners with additional, industry-accredited qualifications gives them a distinct, competitive edge when applying for work. It also enhances the flexibility of their employment choices, which is important in small communities where multi-employment is common practice. For this reason, a high proportion of college programmes include relevant industry-accredited qualifications, many of which are gained directly in the workplace. For example, the Higher National Diploma (HND) Advanced Certificate: Outdoor Adventure Leadership programme, includes awards from the British Canoeing[43], the National Indoor Climbing Achievement Scheme [44] and Scottish Cycling[45]. Marine engineering programmes also provide learners with the additional employment related qualifications necessary to undertake full or part-time employment. These include a number of Royal Yachting Association[46] awards.

Though not always leading directly to certification, the college also ensures that learners acquire skills and experience relevant to employment opportunities in the local area. For example, Higher National Certificate (HNC) Professional Cookery learners undertake a unit in business start-up and fashion technology learners acquire skills needed for sole trading,

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42 https://www.cscs.uk.com/
43 https://www.britishcanoeing.org.uk/
44 http://www.nicas.co.uk/
45 https://www.britishcycling.org.uk/scotland
46 www.rya.org.uk/

reflecting the normal practice of craft workers in the area. Business for tourism programmes are specifically designed to fit the needs of the local tourist industry and are provided off-season so that learners are free to seek employment during the summer. Learners appreciate greatly the support the college offers for employment, and as a result of these approaches increasing numbers of learners are gaining work locally.

3.4   Programmes for learners with additional support needs

Most colleges make effective provision for learners who need additional support to engage with learning or to progress to employment. Programmes vary from those focusing on life skills for learners with a range of profound and complex needs, to those which specifically target learners furthest from the job market. In the latter case, colleges have been working closely with SDS to develop and deliver Employability Fund programmes, which are highly focused on the development of employability skills and all include extensive levels of work placement. Many of these programmes have successfully supported learners into further learning or on to employment and there are clear lessons to be learned from the approaches they have taken.

Most colleges ensure that their curriculum provides stepping stones for learners with additional learning support needs either into further study or into supported employment. These usually involve programmes at SCQF levels 2, 3 and 4. Many colleges also provide helpful articulation opportunities for learners undertaking programmes at neighbouring colleges. Many colleges use the SQA group award Employability and Citizenship at SCQF level 3, to support learners with additional support needs to develop skills for life and work. Other colleges make good use of Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network[47] (ASDAN) qualifications in relation to working with others or customer service. There are several examples of success in these programmes, many of which involve employer or community partnerships. The Prince's' Trust Achieve[48] programmes focus on learner who need a lot of support to develop personal and work skills, and often include successful work experience or live community projects.

3.5   Programme delivery

3.5.1 Industry standards

Staff in all colleges have a high awareness of recent national drivers or initiatives around employability. College staff, in common with almost everyone involved in enhancing employability, do not have an agreed, shared definition of what it is, but rather implement a range of activities aimed broadly at making learners 'work ready'. Most programme teams have regular interaction with local employers or higher education institution representatives, through for example, subject-based advisory groups. This can result in the prioritisation of specific skills within programmes. Many managers and staff also have in-depth knowledge of industry requirements through the provision of training for local workforces, off-the-job training for Modern Apprentices and the discussions which surround work placement. However, in rural areas, engaging enough employers in the work of colleges can sometimes prove challenging. In terms of industry standards and vocational skills, teaching staff know their business thoroughly. Most maintain up-to-date knowledge and skills related to their specialist industries, in some case through still being employed within them. This provides a direct conduit into

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[47] https://www.asdan.org.uk
[48] https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/help-for-young-people/unlock-your-potential/explore-your-potential

current employment standards and expectations, which impacts well on how projects are designed and delivered. Over the past few years, especially in merged colleges, many vocationally experienced staff have left through voluntary severance and some colleges have faced considerable challenges in recruiting the right staff to replace them, or to upskill existing staff to their roles. Up-to-date specialist expertise is held in very high regard by learners. Where it is offered, CPD in colleges often focuses on upskilling in specialist vocational areas and uptake amongst staff is high. In some colleges, however, budgetary constraints have impacted negatively on staff CPD opportunities, especially where staff request to attend external training events.

Case study

West Highland College UHI: Impact of staff knowledge and experience of industry

West Highland College UHI is dispersed across several remote and sparsely populated areas in which people often undertake multiple jobs. As in other similarly situated colleges, a high proportion of teaching staff combine part-time lecturing with working in their specialist industries. This is particularly prevalent in hospitality, marine engineering and adventure tourism.

A key benefit for learners is that they gain industry-relevant training from teaching staff whose knowledge and experience is absolutely up to date and whose credibility with learners is therefore very high. This level of trust between learners and staff helps learners to understand and adopt industry practices, behaviours and standards. Teaching staff also make good use of their industry contacts, by engaging guest speakers from their workplace, setting up workplace visits, work placements or work shadowing. They also keep learners informed about long term industry developments or about upcoming job opportunities. Because of their standing within their industry sectors, the references these lecturers provide have very high value to employers. This not only provides additional incentives for learners to perform well, but enhances more widely the college's reputation for the quality of its work.

Curriculum managers make good use of the knowledge and expertise of part-time staff by involving them in programme planning and consulting them about likely developments in local industries. This has resulted in a very well-informed teaching workforce, and a clear and positive impact on learning.

Almost all teaching staff emphasise industry standards of practice continuously and effectively in learning activities and increase expectations of these as learners progress through different levels of study. Almost all colleges ensure that employability skills are developed well as an intrinsic element of vocational learning activities. These mainly encompass knowledge and understanding of the workplace and the development of appropriate personal capacities. In areas such as construction or engineering, learners learn to work safely, use tools and equipment properly, carry out work in a logical sequence and work in teams. In HBCT learners acquire customer skills as they carry out practical work with clients. In business, management and administration (BMA) programmes, learners learn how office or business environments function and learn the importance of timelines in administration or accounting processes. In creative industries programmes, learners understand the need to work independently within very tight budgets and deadlines, which reflects creative working environments.

In many programmes, teaching staff also routinely emphasise generic and transferable employability skills, such as reliability and timekeeping, oral communication, personal

presentation and team working. These are often phrased in terms of employer expectations. However, within mainstream programme delivery, there is less focus on searching or applying for jobs, interview practice and developing future careers than on other aspects of employability. The terminology of career management skills has a low profile amongst teaching staff and knowledge of Education Scotland Career Education standards is very low. This aspect of guidance related to employability is generally the responsibility of on-course guidance tutors or careers guidance staff and delivery of this service can at times be variable.

3.5.2 Work placement or experience

Where work placement is offered on college programmes, it is mostly carried out well. It is valued highly by learners and preparation for it covers many employability skills. These often focus on industry standards of performance and behaviour, but can also include application and interview skills. The latter are particularly useful for learners, because it is not uncommon for work placement to lead directly to employment. In curriculum areas such as care, experience of work is an intrinsic part of learning in most colleges. This is sometimes covered by units in volunteering. Programme teams usually build up a 'bank' of work placement opportunities available to learners, over time. In some colleges, learners may opt to undertake work placement units, but are expected to find their own placement. This can work well, and provide practice in applying for jobs or speculative enquiries about employment. On the other hand, learners sometimes find this difficult, or end up on a placement which does not adequately meet their needs.

In the best examples of work placement, thorough preparation for both learners and employers has taken place, there is adequate supervision during the placement period and its impact on the learner is evaluated robustly. However, in general, work placement is not offered enough in college programmes. Occasionally, even when it is available, learners do not always find it relevant or helpful. There are examples of programme teams removing work placement units from programmes because of a dearth of suitable local employers, particularly in rural areas. There are also programme areas such as computing, creative industries and BMA where work placement is much less prevalent than in other areas.

In August 2016, SFC published *Work placement Standards for Colleges*[49], drawn up in partnership with key education support agencies. These emphasise clearly the groundwork that needs to be in place prior to work placement, in order to draw maximum benefit for learners.

Most colleges try, as far as possible, to replicate work experience within programmes, particularly when work placement is unavailable. This is helpful to learners. It can involve real work environments, for example, in professional cookery, HBCT, events management and performing arts programmes. Where real work experience is not available, colleges often use simulated environments successfully, such as office reception areas, early years nurseries and healthcare facilities. Many colleges also help learners to gain experience of the workplace through live projects and competitions, including Worldskills[50]. Competitions can be particularly useful for developing skills in communication and self-presentation. Many programmes support the compilation of e-portfolios or construction of CVs as learning progresses, sometimes using MyWoW. This also helps learners to identify and showcase their skills.

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[49] http://www.sfc.ac.uk/Priorities/LearningTeaching/Skills/DSYW/WorkplaceExperience.aspx
[50] http://worldskillsuk.org/

West Lothian College: positive learner development within a live project

Wiston Lodge is an historic hunting lodge in Biggar, which provides a range of personal development activities. It has a number of outhouses which are in need of refurbishment, repair and decoration, one of which had been designated to provide relaxation and cooking facilities for visitors to the Lodge. This became a live project for young learners on the National Progression Awards programmes in carpentry, joinery, painting and decorating. This enabled learners to apply skills developed in college in a real life working situation, involving redecoration of the building and replacement of a damaged wooden vestibule entrance. The Lodge provided the materials, transport and lunch.

There were very clear benefits to learners in this situation. Learners quickly realised the importance of thorough planning, good team working and positive liaison with clients. For example, they had to turn up with the right equipment, materials and safety clothes, ready to carry out the scheduled work. They had to pay close attention to health and safety matters and identify how to carry out the job efficiently and logically. It was vital for them to be reliable, turn up on time, and behave in an appropriate workplace manner, with good, polite communication skills being a priority. A team development day organised by Lodge staff at the start of the project helped build positive relationships between all parties involved, which was very helpful in taking the project forward. Learners have now completed the work to a very high standard and can see clearly the benefits to themselves and to the community. This has greatly increased their confidence in their practical and personal capacities. They have worked together very well, which has had a positive impact on behaviour and motivation. The project also strongly supported the professional development of teaching staff. Wiston Lodge staff also benefited from the project and are keen to involve West Lothian College learners on future restoration tasks.

3.5.3 Employer involvement

Employer involvement with college programme delivery is increasing, as teaching staff respond to national drivers to enhance employability. However, more could be done to ensure that all learners have regular contact with employers. Activities provided include industry visits or employer fairs, guest speakers, employer mentoring schemes, and live projects. Project-based learning is used well in many programmes, and helps learners to understand the complexity and interconnectivity of the workplace. Where it is managed and supported well, employer engagement has a very beneficial impact on learning. For many learners, positive interaction with employers greatly increases their motivation to succeed. Learners often place great credence on what employers say about the type of skills needed to succeed in the workplace. It is particularly helpful when this highlights the key messages that teaching staff have been signalling to learners within their taught programme.

Case study

South Lanarkshire College: Horticulture Employers' Day

Learners studying horticulture have held a very successful Employers' Day over the past two years. The purpose of the event is to show appreciation to the employers who have supported the horticulture team throughout the year, and also to encourage others to become involved with design and delivery of the programmes. In particular, the showcasing of the learners' high-quality work aims to encourage employers to offer more work placements or jobs. The informal discussions between learners and employers which take place during the event, include advice about the job market, not always covered fully within the college programmes. Feedback from employers has been very positive, and work placements and site visits have increased.

Particular benefits accrue from the fact that the learners organise the event themselves, in addition to the development of obvious skills such as good project management, time management and personal presentation. The fact that learners have to think about the needs of employers as they design the event provides insight into what employers might be looking for in a future workforce. Also, direct contact with employers, as learners issue invitations or persuade new employers to attend, greatly enhances their confidence in applying for jobs or approaching employers directly for work.

Case Study

Dumfries and Galloway College: direct employer engagement with learners

The hairdressing team in Dumfries and Galloway College use social media well to promote employability and to involve employers directly in their programmes. Learners sign up for a closed group and invite employers to become friends. The group is used in a number of imaginative ways. Learners use it as a discussion forum, and upload photographs and descriptions of their work. This helps them to share experiences, provide each other with feedback and encourage each other to be creative and experimental in their work.

Several local employers are also involved in the group. Many of them join discussion groups which involves providing comments on learner work or responding to questions. This approach supports the regular flow of intelligence between employers and learners, and allows learners to have direct, but informal interaction with employers. It also means that employers can comment on learner work or engage in discussion outwith normal working hours, which enables them to be involved in college work without taking time away from their businesses. As a result of this initiative, employers are becoming much more closely involved with the day-to-day work of the college and have an increasingly clear picture of what learners are capable of. Employers are increasingly offering salon visits and work placements, influencing the maintenance of high standards of learner work and providing information about latest techniques and products. Social media is providing a showcase for learners to highlight their work, and enables them to have a much clearer sense of employer expectations. This is helpful particularly for those learners preparing for employment.

3.5.4 Barriers and issues

Where these various employability activities take place, learners find them very helpful indeed. Organising additional activities, however, can be very time consuming for staff. Where timetabled contact with learners has been reduced, as it has in many programmes over the past few years, it can be difficult for teaching staff to do much outwith delivery of timetabled lessons. Most helpful partnerships with employers tend to be local, long term, and built on a foundation of mutual respect and trust. However, they often rely on key individual contacts, which creates challenges should these contacts change, as many have done in some recently merged colleges.

There are other barriers to the provision of additional employability activities. Learners undertaking work placement are not always funded to attend and this can cause problems for some learners. Funding for competitions has also reduced significantly in many colleges, and this becomes a challenge when learners and staff have to travel in order to take part. Furthermore, skills in enterprise, self-employment or freelance working are not developed routinely to any great extent within college programmes, the main exceptions being within creative industries or HBCT programmes. A few colleges have separate teams which promote enterprise through business competitions or college events, like the CREATE team in Inverness College UHI.

Many college learners are already in part-time work to support full-time study, or may have enhanced their life skills through previous employment or being a carer or parent. This means that a majority of full-time learners have transferable skills potentially useful to employers. However, it is rare for these skills to be identified, articulated or made use of in college learning activities. Indeed, many learners do not regard their part-time work, which might be fairly unskilled, or their previous life experience as relevant to their future career aspirations. Across most colleges, therefore, opportunities to capitalise on what full-time learners already know about the world of work are missed. For part-time learners, especially those on apprenticeship programmes, there is a much stronger connection between their employment experience and college learning experiences.

4. The learner perspective on employability

4.1 Context and methodology

As part of the year one fieldwork for this report, 470 full-time learners from the five colleges visited were invited to provide their views about employability through completion of a questionnaire. As far as possible, this involved learners in their final year at college, who would either be in employment or studying in other institutions the following year. In the second year of this study, the same learners were contacted again to find out what they were doing now, and to ask them about the impact of their college experience.

The year one questions were focused on what learners considered was most important in the development of employability, both in seeking work and subsequently in the workplace. Learners were also asked how well they felt colleges were doing to support these elements. In year two learners now in employment were asked which aspects of their college programmes had been particularly helpful in securing or sustaining employment. In both questionnaires, learners were asked to focus only on those aspects of their programmes outwith gaining the qualification.

4.2 Learner views

The questionnaire responses provided a useful picture of the learner perspective on preparation for their next steps. They also indicated that learners are knowledgeable about what they need to do to succeed and are highly committed to their careers.

There were three clear messages from the year one responses. Firstly, the majority of learners consider that the skills needed to succeed in the workplace are primarily developed through good prior knowledge of the job market and the expectations of the workplace. Most learners consider that applying skills acquired in college in a real work setting through work placement or work experience is a very important aspect of training. While these skills can be gained to an extent through volunteering or on college charity projects, most learners consider that real, extended, properly set-up arrangements with employers are the best way to develop them. Many learners feel that undertaking a work placement had a major impact on their sense that they were qualified to do the job, which had greatly increased motivation and confidence. Some learners also recognise that work placement provides a useful reality check about pace, deadlines, hard work, challenging relationships and so on - mainly motivating but also a little daunting.

In the second key message, which explores the job seeking process, most responses focus very strongly on the area of personal capacities. While the importance of having the right qualification and vocation skills is seen as important, being able to talk to people, to learn new things and to present oneself well are considered equally important attributes. Effective core skills, particularly oral or written communication skills are considered key to succeeding in the job application process. These generic aspects can be summarised as a 'positive attitude'. As we have seen earlier, this concurs with what employers say they are looking for during the recruitment stage and it is clear that learners have picked up these key messages.

Thirdly, while many learners consider that colleges do well in preparing them for post-college life, approximately one third of respondents think that colleges could do more in terms of providing appropriate careers advice. This ranges from explaining generally what jobs are

available in a chosen field, to coaching learners how to look for a job or even to providing and brokering employment opportunities. From the responses received, most of this group consider teaching staff are the people best suited to help with this, rather than careers or guidance staff. Another large group of respondents indicate that colleges should provide more work placement opportunities.

Sixty-two learners responded to the second survey, of which roughly 65% were in full or part-time work or self-employment. (This proportion of employed learners is not replicated in the national cohort of post-college learners, as explained later). The small number provides no more than a snapshot of the learner journey from college into employment. Some learners gain relevant employment more than a few months after leaving college and may take some time to settle into their careers. Nevertheless, some interesting themes have emerged.

Two thirds of the learners in employment were in jobs directly related to their college qualification. Learners had employed a range of self-directed strategies to find a job, including using the internet, social media and networks of family and friends. Approximately a third of employed respondents had received help with job search approaches from college teaching staff, but none cited central guidance or careers staff as providing this service. In tandem with the responses from the year one questionnaire, good communication and interview skills, plus a good CV and relevant work experience had helped learners succeed at the recruitment stage. The value of additional qualifications was also mentioned. Once in work, between almost 90% of respondents suggest that the broad range of personal attributes are overwhelmingly important, such as verbal communication, timekeeping, working with others, ability to learn and problem solving.

The findings from both years of this work reflect previously published research findings about the importance for learners of experience of the workplace, the value of contact with employers and the necessity for good personal skills. Learners would also welcome more understanding of the job market and more help with how to access this while studying at college. This confirms the current low profile, perceived by learners of promotion of career management skills in colleges.

5. Learner progress and outcomes

Overall, college learners gain a broad range of relevant skills, including personal skills, core skills and aspects of employability skills. Colleges are particularly good at developing learners' understanding of the workplace and helping them to enhance their personal capacities. Almost all learners report increased levels of confidence from undertaking college programmes and make good progress from prior learning. However, learners are not all good at identifying or articulating their employability skills and presenting them in terms of what is attractive to employers. Many employers have noted the contrast between the capabilities of university and college graduates in this respect, even though college graduates may have more relevant vocational skills.

There is significant variation in how effectively colleges track learners after they leave. Generally, learner destination tracking is not sufficiently detailed to understand the impact that college programmes are having on employability. Most curriculum teams have good informal knowledge about where their learners go, but this is not recorded or kept in a way that allows comparisons over time or subjects, or allows a clear enough understanding of trends. Part-time learners who attend college for upskilling or retraining are rarely tracked into their next steps.

Colleges sometimes report anecdotally, instances of learners leaving college programmes early to gain employment, often in relevant areas. These learners sometimes return to college on a part-time basis, to complete certification or as part of employment training programmes. Because of programme coding conventions, these learners appear as unsuccessful in college performance indicator data.

Over the past two years, SFC has worked closely with colleges, local employability partners including local authorirites, SDS and Department of Work and Pensions to improve the tracking of learner destinations three to six months after successfully completing college programmes.

From academic year 2016/17, all destination data collected directly by colleges will be integrated within an annual national report. More information about the pilot, the outcomes for the College Leaver Destinations (CLD) for Scotland's colleges 2013-14 and the guidance for colleges for this current year of implementation can be found on the SFC website.[51]

In the SFC published CLD data for 2013-14, 85.9% of learners were identified as having a known destination comprising 81.5% positive and 4.2% negative, with the remaining 14.3% unknown. The actual percentage of learners who were known to have entered employment directly from college in 2013-14 was 17%, disaggregated as 14% from FE programmes and 23% from HE programmes. Categories recorded included part-time and full-time employment apprenticeships, alongside those in self-employment and others carrying out voluntary work and developing their creative practice. There are no published statistics as yet of the breakdown of these employment sectors, nor of whether employment secured is permanent, temporary or relevant to the qualifications learners have achieved. In the future, there will be processes in place which will help with this level of detail.

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[51]http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Statistical_publications_SFCST072015_CollegeLeaverDestinations201314experime /SFCST072015_College_Leaver_Destinations_2013-14.pdf

The majority of college learners progress into further study, 64.5% in total, disaggregated into 68.9% FE and 55.3% HE. The adoption of a unique learning number for each learner should make tracking into further learning much more robust in the future. It is generally recognised that tracking learners into employment, and especially employment a few years after leaving college remains challenging to carry out robustly.

Even though a fairly small percentage of college learners enter employment directly, many full-time learners are also holding down part-time jobs, gaining employability skills through volunteering or work placement experiences and are thinking ahead to their future careers. This means that the training colleges provide in employability is highly relevant to large numbers of learners, either in their current situations or in the future.

6. Quality enhancement

Almost all college programme teams carry out self-evaluation using quality indicators agreed by their college senior management. In most colleges these are based on Education Scotland's current quality framework[52]. Programme self-evaluation reports sometimes evaluate how well learners are developing skills in general. However, they rarely focus specifically on those aspects of employability highlighted in this report, namely knowledge of the workplace, the development of personal capacities and career management skills. This does not mean that colleges are not helping learners in these areas, but there is little evidence that these aspects feature to any degree in college quality processes. In particular, while work placement is often formally assessed, and learners may themselves evaluate how well it went for them, it is rare for it to feature specifically in improvement strategies. The new college quality arrangements being brought in over 2016/17 provide a helpful opportunity for colleges to reflect on this and to ensure there is a clear focus on the evaluation of employability.

Almost all colleges use employer feedback well at different levels. Overall there is a great deal of very useful, internalised intelligence amongst programme teams about employer requirements. However, most programme teams do not routinely evaluate whether their programmes are addressing these priorities. Where learners have successfully entered relevant employment directly from college, it is unusual to see case study analysis of the circumstances which brought this about and to draw lessons from it. There are also insufficient mechanisms in place to ascertain the impact of part-time programmes on the development of employability.

In general, actions for improvement in programme self-evaluation reports tend to focus on increasing successful outcome rates, rather than on improving employability. Given the current clear demand placed on colleges in relation to employability, programme teams and on-course guidance tutors would welcome clearer expectations and guidelines about how to evaluate and improve their approaches to this matter. Where on-course guidance is provided by separate college guidance teams, self-evaluation activities carried out by these teams is more likely to encompass the development of employability skills and there are some good examples of improvements being brought about as a result. However, it is rare for programme and guidance teams to evaluate their work jointly, and as a result, opportunities to improve ways of embedding or tailoring employability in vocational work can be missed.

Though colleges often share good practice about employer involvement with programmes, there is also relatively little sharing across colleges about how employability is developed in learners. For example, within most colleges, effective work is taking place in SDS Employability Fund programmes and in many programmes for learners with additional support needs. The projects being carried out in many of these programmes are generating useful material on job applications, the interview process and on how to function in the workplace. A number of these projects make good use of the SQA unit Certificate for Work Readiness. What is not clear, however, is how well this rich source of knowledge and understanding is being disseminated in colleges in a form which can be used by other programmes. In other colleges, employer events and interventions take place within specific curriculum areas, but again, generic messages from these are not necessarily collated or shared. With an increased focus on employability currently colleges could make better use of the intelligence already within their establishments to improve provision for all learners.

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[52] http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inspectionandreview/about/collegereviews/index.asp

7. Recommendations

Colleges should:

- develop strategies and policies specifically aimed at developing employability in learners, particularly in the area of career management skills

- develop clearly understood college-wide measures of success in employability and evaluate progress against these

- ensure that all learners receive support for employability, either within programmes or through guidance arrangements

- ensure that learners are able to identify and articulate their employability skills, including those gained outwith college

- share good practice in the development of employability

- ensure that careers information, advice and guidance is available to all learners

Colleges and employers should:

- increase and enhance work placement arrangements in colleges

Colleges, schools and employers should:

- continue to address gender imbalance in specific subject areas

Colleges and SFC should:

- continue to refine learner destination tracking processes, in order to ascertain the impact of college programmes on career development

Colleges, schools, employers and support agencies should:

- continue to work together to capitalise on current initiatives aimed at preparing learners for the world of work

- adopt a clear, common definition of employability across all relevant sectors

Education Scotland and SFC should:

- ensure that there is a clear focus on employability within new review arrangements

- continue to monitor progress in the development of employability

College Development Network should:

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

Appendix 1

Colleges visited during the report fieldwork

Dumfries and Galloway College
Edinburgh College
South Lanarkshire College
West Lothian College
West Highland College UHI

Appendix 2

Glossary of terms

ASDAN	Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network
BMA	Business, management and administration
CDN	College Development Network
CLD	College leaver destinations
CMS	Career management skills
CPD	Continuous professional development
CV	Curriculum vitae
DYW	Developing the young workforce
EDT	Employability development team (West Highland College UHI)
FE	Further education
HBCT	Hair, beauty and complementary therapies
HE	Higher education
HNC	Higher National Certificate
HND	Higher National Diploma
HN	Higher national
LDT	Learning development tutor (Edinburgh College)
MyWoW	My World of Work
ROA	Regional outcome agreement
RSA	Regional skills assessment
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SDS	Skills Development Scotland
SFC	Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
UHI	University of the Highlands and Islands

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