Meeting the needs of learners and employers through effective planning, application and admission processes in Scotland's colleges

28 February 2014

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

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1. Background

The Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) require colleges to deliver a blend of courses that meets the skills needs of employers and learners in their region. This supports the Government's post-16 reform objectives relating to jobs and growth, life chances and sustainability. More specifically, under the Scottish Government's *Opportunities for All*[1] policy, all 16-19 year olds who are not already in education, training or work are guaranteed the offer of a place in education or training. Whilst this does not mean the guarantee of a college place, colleges are the progression route of choice for a significant number of young people, particularly school leavers. Application and admissions policies and processes, including, specifically, how they affect the 16-19 year old age group, are an important element of the strategy for improving learner success.

To support this the Scottish Government's *Improving the Learner Journey*[2] report, part of its wider post-16 reform, is developing a 'route map' which aims to support effective transitions through the learning system. Central to this is the need for all partners to work together to enable learners to:

- make informed choices about what, where and when they learn;
- access the support they need to apply to and take up a place at college; and
- move seamlessly through an easily accessible, transparent and responsive application system which allocates places equitably.

The introduction in 2012-13 by SFC of *Outcome Agreements*[3] heralds a new approach to funding based on the achievement of targets agreed by college regions. College Boards of Management have a responsibility to ensure *Outcome Agreements* respond well to the education and skills needs of learners, employers and communities. More recently, the *Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce Interim Report (October 2013)*[4] makes a number of recommendations about the role of colleges in developing young people for employment, partnership-working with schools, and their role in supporting employment outcomes and local economic growth. Specifically, it acknowledges the key role that colleges play in significantly enhancing vocational education in the senior phase through partnership with schools. It also recognises the importance of colleges' higher education (HE) provision, commitment to ongoing quality improvement and contribution to the delivery of Modern Apprenticeship programmes.

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[1] Opportunities for All
http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0040/00408815.pdf

[2] Improving the Learner Journey
http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0040/00408477.pdf

[3] Outcome Agreements
http://www.sfc.ac.uk/funding/OutcomeAgreements/OutcomeAgreementsOverview.aspx

[4] Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce Interim Report
http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/09/7161/3

Colleges play an important role in delivering training programmes for young, unemployed people. The Scottish Government's 2013-14 letter of guidance[5] to Skills Development Scotland (SDS) states: "*Through the new Employability Fund, 17,150 training places, including 2,650 college places will be available in 2013/14 for unemployed young people of all ages.*" It continues: "*Ensuring we understand and can respond to the skills needs of employers and businesses across Scotland is a prerequisite of economic recovery. SDS plays a unique role in developing an evidence based understanding of Scotland's strategic workforce skills requirements. Undertaking your Skills Investment Plans and Regional Skills Assessments, in consultation with stakeholders, and refreshing them where necessary will make an important contribution to the planning and management of our skills and education system. It will provide the basis for a single skills narrative upon which government bodies and educational institutions can plan more effectively.*"

It is important to recognise that colleges are responding to the external drivers and priorities highlighted above at the same time that many are leading very significant structural change as a result of regionalisation, including the integration of policy, systems and practice across a range of services. Whilst this presents challenges, it provides opportunities to consider specifically how colleges might strengthen their application systems as part of regional arrangements.

Previous intelligence

This report builds on Educations Scotland's recent aspect report: *Making effective use of the extensive data sets which underpin evaluative activities in Scotland's colleges in a regional context* (May 2013[6]). The previous report, published only six months ago at the time of writing, highlights good practice and areas for improvement around the nature of the data colleges use and share, and what this means for them in terms of meeting targets and ensuring that programmes are delivered efficiently. In addition, the Scottish Government's report: *College Waiting Lists in Scotland* (March 2013[7]) identifies inconsistent approaches in colleges' arrangements for managing applications, for both those who secure a place at college and those who do not. Given the short timeframe Education Scotland does not expect recommendations for improvement contained therein to have yet been fully implemented.

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[5] Scottish Government's 2013-14 letter of guidance to Skills Development Scotland
http://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/641795/sds_letter_of_guidance_2013-14.pdf

[6] Making effective use of the extensive data sets which underpin evaluative activities in Scotland's colleges in a regional context (May 2013)
http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/EffectiveUseofDataApril13_tcm4-783039.pdf

[7] College Waiting Lists in Scotland (March 2013)
http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2013/03/college22032013

2. Introduction

Scope and methodology

This report is set in the context of the reform of post-16 education and training. It reviews college admission policies, procedures and the criteria used when selecting applicants for a place on a college programme. It assesses how effectively these arrangements meet learners' needs and maximise their chances of success. It describes college processes for meeting employers' needs (demand) and informing colleges' strategic planning of provision (supply). It investigates arrangements for processing late and unsuccessful applications, reviews joint-working practices with other agencies and recommends improvement where appropriate.

The fieldwork for this report has been informed by evidence from Education Scotland's External Reviews of Scotland's colleges carried out between 2012-2013. 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 a sample of six colleges located in four college regions across Scotland (details at section 7).

During visits to college regions, HM Inspectors held discussions with representatives from colleges, including depute principals, quality managers, Management Information Systems (MIS) personnel and teaching and support staff. Inspectors also met with groups of learners to ensure that their first-hand experiences of applying to and being interviewed for a place on a college programme contributed to the report findings.

3. Summary of key findings

Strengths

- Generally, across colleges, due to increasing levels of demand for a place on a college programme, colleges are introducing interview assessments. This approach ensures that the threshold for entering onto a programme is clearly defined and programme offer decisions are based on appropriate and relevant criteria and evidence.

- Learners with additional support needs are supported well to enrol onto a college programme. College application forms allow for disclosure in advance of interview of identified additional need. Those learners who disclose on the application form can choose to bring along to interview their own support worker or be accompanied by college support staff.

- Colleges have developed streamlined approaches to recruitment of learners who are progressing internally. College staff inform learners during their programme about progression routes and criteria for selection, normally successful completion of their existing programme. Internal applicants are expected to meet the same entry criteria as external applicants. This ensures that, for those learners who are unlikely to progress, staff can advise them about relevant alternative options.

- College-wide online induction surveys provide very useful feedback which staff use effectively to identify actions for improvement. Early leaver surveys also provide useful information on colleges' application and admission arrangements.

- Colleges have developed effective relationships with schools and local authorities. Through *Skills for Work* (SFW) programmes, school learners are supported well by college staff to experience a range of vocational programmes. A significant number progress onto full-time college provision.

Areas for development

- Balancing identified employer needs with learner demand in the planning of regional curricula;

- Comprehensive college-wide continuous professional development (CPD) in interview techniques for staff;

- A Scotland-wide agreement on best practice in relation to obtaining references for college applicants;

- Development of data-sharing arrangements within and across regions;

- The provision of qualitative feedback to unsuccessful applicants so they can learn and improve;

- Arrangements for quality assurance of learner interviews;

- Proactive approaches to ensure improved application conversion rates for learners from deprived areas applying to college; and

- Application sharing arrangements with SDS.

4. Meeting the needs of employers and learners through effective planning, application and admission processes in Scotland's colleges

4.1 Meeting employers' and learners' needs (demand) and informing planning of provision (supply)

Planning of provision: pre-regionalisation

Prior to regionalisation, colleges had developed a range of approaches to ensure that programmes met employers' needs. They made good use of published Labour Market Intelligence (LMI) reports to inform planning decisions relevant to the locality of the community that the college served. They developed, over time, effective links with key local stakeholders who provided useful feedback on the relevance of college provision and the quality and attributes of learners recruited from college programmes. These stakeholders included large employers such as the NHS, local authorities, universities and local private sector employers.

Planning of provision: post-regionalisation

Within the new regional landscape, colleges recognise not only the importance of continued, effective engagement with employers, but the need to increase the involvement of employers in the planning and evaluation of provision. They are enthusiastic about the recommendations from the *Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce Interim Report* and welcome its findings. They are starting to tackle the geographical challenges of planning for a new regional college curriculum which takes good account of employers' needs and promotes appropriate educational opportunities to learners locally. College Boards are currently agreeing with SFC *Outcome Agreements* for the period 2014-17. These commit regional colleges to achieving agreed targets in relation to:

- Opportunities for All
- Right learning in the right place
- Learner success
- Employer engagement
- Efficiency and structural change

Colleges and their Boards are currently developing *Regional Context Statements* which provide an overview of employers and the community that they serve. Boards take good account of the national and local training needs identified by SDS through early versions of *Regional Skills Investment Plans* and *Regional Skills Assessments*. Boards are also identifying the totality of the current curriculum delivered within their region in order to assess how well it meets employer and learner needs. However, this work is still at an early stage and in most regions has not yet fully informed the planning of future provision. Managers within newly-established regional colleges are aware of the need to ensure effective planning of provision with neighbouring colleges. They aim to ensure that the regional curriculum promotes learner choice and opportunity effectively.

College Boards of Management include industry representatives who contribute to college planning processes including informing labour market intelligence. Most colleges have developed effective links with SDS which ensure their range of employability programmes is current, relevant, contains appropriate admissions criteria and provides useful progression opportunities. At departmental level employers work closely with college staff to ensure that work placements, which are now an increasingly common feature of many programmes, are fit for purpose and provide relevant and worthwhile experiences for learners and employers. In some subject areas such as childcare and social care employers inform programme entry criteria devised by colleges. Through internal portfolio review teaching teams review their programmes to ensure that the units delivered meet the needs of learners and industry.

Colleges deliver apprenticeship programmes for employed learners. Employers work closely with college staff to ensure recruited apprentices benefit from relevant vocational training which supports achievement of their apprenticeship qualification. College staff interview individual applicants ensuring they have appropriate academic qualifications to meet the challenge of their selected programme and that their job role will provide appropriate assessment opportunities for completion of their apprenticeship framework. Normally, recruitment onto these programmes is based on a first-come-first-served basis. Some colleges hold apprenticeship recruitment open days. These are well attended and during these events applicants often undertake numeracy and literacy skills assessments to ensure they have the skills to succeed on their selected programme.

Demand v supply

Within the newly-established regional landscape, colleges which have recently merged or colleges within multi-college regions are actively considering their curriculum provision. They are starting to tackle the complexity of inheriting similar vocational programmes from legacy colleges delivered at different campuses. However, there are added complexities. In many instances these programmes are delivered through different awarding bodies, contain a range of programme titles and include different assessment units and programme content. Rationalising and harmonising college provision across vocational pathways is a complex process with significant lead-in-times. Colleges face additional challenges related to the balance between ensuring appropriate local access for learners to their chosen programmes and efficient use of the combined regional college estate. Locating programmes within a single campus to ensure efficiency within a merged college seems an attractive option but may not necessarily meet the needs or wants of learners.

In balancing demand and supply colleges are required to:

- deliver programmes that are in demand by learners;
- deliver programmes that meet the needs of employers;
- provide access to provision locally;
- maximise the physical capacity of the college estate; and
- deliver programmes that enable learners to progress or secure employment locally or nationally.

Colleges receive two, three or more applications for each full-time college place. For some college programmes, such as animal care, a college may receive approximately 150 applications for a programme which offers 20 learner places. Colleges have devised an appropriate range of procedures to ensure learners are recruited onto programmes to meet individual learning needs.

For the colleges who were visited as part of this aspect task, merger has been recent. Internal appointments to senior and middle management posts, who will make decisions on curriculum planning and provision, are still being made. Where a college is experiencing increasing demand for programmes and wishes to increase provision, it is often constrained by the limitation of its estate. Re-purposing teaching areas and environments is costly. For example, the decision to invest in building a joinery or engineering workshop, or converting a hair salon into a general classroom, is a significant financial commitment. Recently-merged colleges have inherited a mixture of specialist and generalist learning environments based on historical demand for programmes and building decisions made many years ago. As colleges re-examine their curriculum offer, they are taking account of any physical restrictions inherent in their estates. Balancing demand from learners through applications received against physical space restrictions is a significant challenge and one which cannot easily or quickly be resolved.

Prior to regionalisation legacy colleges developed effective working relationships with local employers to ensure vocational programmes met the needs of local industry and supported employment locally. Currently, in the new regional landscape, colleges are considering how their curricula support the demand from employers for a skilled and employment ready workforce. They are starting to interrogate LMI through SDS-developed *Skills Investment Plans* and *Regional Skills Assessments.* However, this work is still at an early stage and it will take some time for the emerging regional curriculum to fully align with the needs of employers and learners.

Relationships with universities

Colleges have effective and positive working relationships with universities. They have developed articulation agreements which identify learner numbers to progress from college onto university. Generally these work well and support learners to progress from college to university. College staff liaise closely with university personnel to ensure Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND) programmes contain appropriate units and prepare learners well for the challenges of studying at university.

Relationships with SDS, schools and other partners

Colleges have developed effective communication links with SDS. They submit to SDS regular data set returns which inform SDS of enrolled learners; those who have left college programmes early or on successful completion. Some colleges include the SDS telephone number on rejection letters which they send to unsuccessful applicants. Some colleges are now receiving data set returns from SDS, but at this stage, it is too early to evaluate how helpful these are.

Colleges have also developed effective relationships with schools and local authorities. Through SFW programmes, learners from school are supported well by college staff to experience a range of vocational programmes. A significant number of these learners progress onto full-time college provision. All colleges visited in the fieldwork for this report have an identified member of staff who has responsibility for liaising with schools and local authorities. These relationships have developed well over time and ensure that young people from school are appropriately informed of college provision when making senior phase choices. One college visited during the fieldwork for this report delivers college application workshops to learners at local schools explaining how to construct a personal statement and complete the college application form. College staff have developed a booklet for school pupils on how to apply for a place at college. Through this approach learners are appropriately informed and improve their chances of securing a place on a relevant college programme. In all colleges, teaching and support staff attend school open events and liaise with parents and carers to ensure they have up-to-date information regarding college programmes and entry requirements.

4.2 Admission, application and recruitment practices

Admissions policies

College admission policies have developed and changed over the last few years. They have improved as a result of thorough consultation with staff, learners and other stakeholders and aim to support Scottish Government policy. College staff review and refresh these arrangements annually and carry out periodic impact-assessments to ensure they do not disadvantage specific groups of learners. Some colleges benefit from support and advice received from specialist agencies such as the Equality Challenge Unit when devising or refreshing procedures. Colleges undergoing structural change as a result of regionalisation currently use legacy policies from previous institutions in anticipation of agreeing and drawing up new admission arrangements.

Application arrangements and timelines

A few years ago college applications were conducted through completion of a paper-based application form and a vast volume of data-entry undertaken by a team of admissions staff. Colleges now process applications by prospective learners through use of bespoke tailored software such as *UnitE* or *Enquirer* as most learners apply for a place on a college programme online. This speeds up the application process and provides colleges with accurate data sets which inform programme planning and facilitate effective communication with applicants. Colleges generally publicise their online prospectus in November, open their online application systems in January and commence interviews in February/March. Interviews often continue through until May due to the volume of applications received. Late applications received after this date are dealt with on an individual basis. These arrangements work well, overall.

Most colleges allow prospective learners to apply for more than one and in some instances up to five programme options through completion of one application form. This arrangement supports learners who are uncertain about their vocational interest or unsure about their future academic standing as they can apply for a National

Certificate (NC) and HNC programme simultaneously. Generally, colleges have developed processes to ensure that multiple applications submitted by learners are taken into account when distinguishing between **applicants** and **applications**. College applications are now processed when received. As a result, generally, the earlier an applicant applies for a college place the greater their chance of securing a place on a college programme. As interviews continue, programmes fill up and available places reduce.

College admissions staff scan and screen applications received to ensure applicants' current programme or prior qualifications are suitable for the programme for which they have applied. They often use the SQA *Navigator Tool* in this process. Inappropriate applications are re-directed to other programmes where possible. This approach helps ensure applicants are supported well to make the most appropriate choice. Where applications are incomplete or information is not provided, admissions staff make contact with applicants. This generally works well in helping to identify and respond to requests for further information and to alleviate delays in processing applications. However, currently, few colleges withhold candidates' personal details when distributing learner applications to college staff who conduct programme placement interviews. As a result, it is more challenging for these colleges to demonstrate that programme places are determined in accordance with best interviewing practice.

Interviewing processes

Colleges have over time devolved decision-making on applications received to teaching teams within individual curricular departments. They afford them flexibility and trust their professional judgement in determining how offers are made, which applicants should be offered a place at college and which should be rejected. This practice has, overall, served colleges and learners well. However, in support of *Opportunities for All*, 16-19 year olds are prioritised for a place in education and training and for many of these younger learners colleges are the progression route of choice. A significant number of these learners have not achieved well at school. Colleges often respond with new vocational programmes, which are delivered at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) levels three and four. Traditional interview arrangements are not always effective when applicants have limited academic standing and do not present positively during interviews. In these circumstances, colleges often put specific interview arrangements in place to enable these applicants to demonstrate their abilities.

There are other drivers bringing about changes in recruitment arrangements. Previous practice in a number of colleges was on a first-come-first-served basis. The significant growth over the last few years in full-time college applications has resulted in programme teams now being more selective about deciding who they should recruit onto a programme. It has changed, in some instances, from being a buyers market, where applicants could pick and choose a college place, to a sellers market, as demand for programmes considerably outstrips supply. There is recognition by colleges that the previous reliance on subjective approaches to recruitment where teaching staff relied on their own professional judgement about a learner's suitability has to change. Colleges recognise the need to introduce more objective, measurable recruitment practices which are fair and robust. These approaches must also stand up to internal and external scrutiny and provide an

appropriate evidence-based audit trail where challenged. It ensures learner recruitment arrangements take good account of equality and diversity themes and promote best practice effectively.

Case study: Borders College

Borders College has developed a clear recruitment policy and robust procedures which support effective professional practice. During interviews learners are asked three general interview questions, two programme-specific questions and are rated on the standard of their application form, the quality of their personal statement, the level of their prior qualification and on completion of the vocational task assigned to them by the teaching team. Individual faculties, to reflect better programme entry criteria, can adjust these ratings. To ensure consistent practice illustrative model answers demonstrating high, medium and low level responses are provided for use by teaching staff.

The approach adopted by Borders College demonstrates well the emerging changes in recruitment practice.

Colleges often invite large numbers of learners who have applied for the same college programme into college together. Teaching staff provide an overview about the department and the range of programmes delivered before conducting individual interviews. Generally, across colleges, due to increasing levels of demand for a place, colleges are introducing interview assessments. This approach ensures that the entry threshold is clearly defined and decisions on the offer of a place are based on appropriate and relevant criteria.

This approach often includes the objective measurement of applicants' existing skills, interest in the subject, personal motivation, communication and team-working skills. Increasingly, teaching staff now make use of skills assessments relevant to the programme of study. For example, interviewers include numeracy tasks for science applicants, team-working and fitness activities for sport programmes, and discussions relating to hair-styling techniques for hairdressing applicants. Often these assessments have two purposes: they identify vocational knowledge and interest; and demonstrate important employability skills such as working with others and communication which are important pre-requisite skills for working in industry.

Vocational programme teams determine tasks for learners to complete during skills assessments. Controlled questions relating to the intended subject of study are asked of all learners and responses are noted. This approach ensures a consistent approach to gathering evidence in relation to learner commitment, motivation and enthusiasm for their selected vocational programme. Through these new arrangements applicants receive conditional or unconditional offers once they have met appropriate programme entry criteria thresholds. Normally, over the course of the first few weeks in March/April, offer letters are distributed to successful applicants. However, within some curricular departments, particularly those areas which require learners to either show their work, such as art and design, or demonstrate their skills through a performance, there is a tension between ensuring that firm offers are made, while not allocating all of the places before all applicants are interviewed. As a result a whole-group ranking system emerges. Often these applicants are also applying to get into Art School and hold their college place offer

as a second-choice option. These approaches often result in delays for learners in receiving a definite offer and uncertainty for colleges in ensuring that programmes run efficiently.

Interview training

There are varying approaches to training vocational staff in effective interviewing techniques. Colleges recognise that some staff are particularly well-skilled when interviewing applicants for a college place. As a result, they ensure that staff with most appropriate interviewing technique and empathy skills meet with applicants and conduct interviews. One of the colleges visited during the fieldwork for this report has a bespoke mentor system in place to ensure that new or inexperienced staff are accompanied and supported well during interviews. In other colleges, senior lecturers interview applicants for a place on a college programme. Often student services staff provide helpful support and advice during interviews about the range of financial and support services available. There are different approaches to confirming that applicants have secured a place on a college programme or not. In some colleges they are informed before they leave the college premises following their interview. Often this applies to learners who have been unsuccessful so they can make an appointment with student services to explore alternative educational provision. In other colleges teaching teams discuss interview outcomes before decisions are made, which helps ensure a consistent approach to learner selection. Currently, few colleges have developed comprehensive college-wide CPD interview training for staff. The quality, consistency and effectiveness of approaches to the recruitment of learners remains variable within and across colleges.

References

There are significantly variable practices in relation to asking applicants to supply references to support their application. For programmes where learners have to undertake work experience placements, colleges often request a reference. And where placements involve working with vulnerable adults, for example in a care home, or work with young children in a school or nursery setting, obtaining suitable references is the norm. For these programmes, reference arrangements are generally comprehensive and effective. More generally some colleges do not routinely require external applicants to provide any references at all. They recognise the administrative challenge and indeed question the need to ensure suitable references are obtained for all full-time learners. Other colleges ask learners to bring to college a reference signed by a trusted individual although they recognise that confirming the authenticity of such references can be challenging. Another college requires school leavers to provide one reference from a guidance teacher and requests two references from adult returners who apply for a full-time programme. One college requires all full-time applicants to supply two references, which are followed up before confirmation letters are issued. These variable approaches may act as a barrier and do not support learners to secure a place on a college programme. Through *Opportunities for All* colleges are required to recruit more 16-19 year old learners onto full-time programmes and a significant number of these learners may struggle to provide positive references due to their previous school performance and thus may not secure a college place. Given the current very variable range of practices in relation to obtaining references an agreed

approach or code of practice would help ensure consistent approaches across Scotland's colleges.

Over-subscribed programmes

Colleges have developed effective processes in relation to managing demand for college places. Individual programmes have a target recruitment number and beyond this, a reserve list is created. The target number will, in many cases, be greater than the actual number of learners that can be accommodated. This is because colleges routinely experience attrition from the number of learners who confirm acceptance of a place offer to the actual numbers who turn up at college, several months later on the first day of their programme. Without this built in attrition prediction, many college programmes would not run efficiently. The length of the reserve list varies according to past experience across different curriculum areas. Once reserve lists are full admissions staff close applications to these programmes. Unsuccessful applicants are promptly sent letters informing them that their selected programme is full. They are informed of other college programmes including SDS *Get Ready for Work (*GRFW*)* or *Employability* programmes which have vacancies and are provided with other more general careers information and advice. On occasions, if resources allow, a college may set up a second cohort for a programme which is particularly popular and there is a significant level of unmet learner demand through creation of a long reserve list. Additionally, colleges sometimes offer a twilight or evening provision programme to try to meet demand for over-subscribed programmes. College managers, generally, take good account of unmet demand to inform future planning for next academic year where resources permit. However, the extent to which the increasing of places on a popular programme to meet learner need aligns with the requirements of employers is not clear. This is an important aspect of *Outcome Agreements* and further work is required in this area.

It is important to note that colleges still experience considerable levels of over-demand for available places. A large college with approximately 4,000 full-time places may receive 8,000 or more applications. Currently, colleges do not know how many of these applicants have applied to another college. The introduction of online applications has been a contributory factor in this growth in applications. As previously noted, colleges allow learners to apply for more than one programme at the same college as they believe this will increase learners' chances of securing a college place. Colleges can identify multiple applications from individual learners and can factor these into their potential recruitment numbers. Currently, colleges do not share application data with other colleges, therefore they cannot identify where a learner has submitted applications to other colleges – either in their own region (in the case of a multi-college region) or in another region. While this is generally not problematic, it may make it difficult for colleges to gauge demand effectively in parts of the country where there is a flow of learners crossing the regional boundary to access provision. Within a regional context there is a need for colleges, particularly those located within the central-belt, to develop data-sharing arrangements within and across regions.

Late applicants

Learners who apply late for a college place in August or September, once a programme has started, are accepted providing they meet the entry criteria and places are still available. College staff, often through bespoke induction arrangements, support them well to settle into their programme. College staff make good efforts to fill programmes and provide learning opportunities which meet learners' needs.

Learners with additional support needs

Learners with additional support needs are supported well to enrol onto a college programme. College application forms allow for disclosure in advance of interview of any identified additional need. Those who disclose such needs on their application form can choose to bring along to interview their own support worker or be accompanied by college support staff. For the larger colleges, routinely, several hundred learners disclose that they have additional support needs for which they will require support either during interview or when undertaking their programme. However, a significant number of learners choose not to disclose their additional needs as they view college as an opportunity for a fresh start. College staff have, over time, developed expertise in identifying where an applicant has an additional need but is either unaware of or has failed to disclose this. College staff are often proactive and provide sensitive responses to ensure learners feel comfortable and well-supported during programme interviews and when undertaking learning programmes.

Internally-progressing learners

Colleges have developed more streamlined approaches to recruitment of learners who are progressing internally. During their programme learners are informed about progression routes and criteria for selection, normally successful completion of their existing programme. Internal applicants are expected to meet the same entry criteria as external applicants. This ensures that for those learners who are unlikely to progress, staff can hold discussions about relevant alternative options. Progressing applicants often benefit from early interviews held during guidance sessions and many receive conditional place offers. Teaching staff liaise well with admissions staff to ensure existing learners are informed timeously about application arrangements. In some colleges progressing learners are given priority over external applicants but only if they apply for their intended programme by an agreed deadline after which time they are dealt with in strict application date order alongside external applicants. One college has established a *progression board* to decide which learners should be supported to progress. *Progression boards* involve input from both teaching and support staff in deciding which applicants are to receive a place at college offer. This approach ensures there is no favouritism and programme offers are fair and unbiased. Overall, internal progression arrangements are effective and work well.

Unsuccessful applicants

Given the scale of applications dealt with by colleges it is understandable that their focus is on those learners who receive place offers rather than those learners who are unsuccessful. Learners fail to secure a place at college offer at a number of different stages. Late applicants do not secure their first place choice as it may be full. A small but significant number of learners do not attend their interviews. Colleges maintain contact with these learners and sometimes succeed in getting them to attend. Learners who attend an interview but are not offered a college place are offered alternative provision. In some instances this is at a lower level but in the same vocational area. However, in other instances, the alternative programme offer is outwith their vocational interest so they do not proceed with their application. Few of these unsuccessful learners receive qualitative feedback on why they did not succeed. Often a short letter informs them and for a significant number of these learners this is the first occasion they have in their lives experienced formal rejection. It would be helpful for all unsuccessful applicants to receive qualitative feedback on their interview performance and understand why they failed to secure a college place offer so they can learn and improve. Few colleges track unsuccessful applicants and contact them at a future date in order to explore future intentions and discuss further learning options.

Record keeping

Most colleges have developed appropriate record keeping arrangements. Interview decisions are recorded onto electronic record keeping systems so admissions staff can promptly dispatch offer letters to successful candidates. Application forms often include categories of unconditional offer, conditional offer, unsuccessful and reserve list for staff to make appropriate entries. The paperwork accompanying interviews includes: application form, interview checklist, assessed work completed during interview and interview question responses. These are normally stored by colleges for at least one year. These arrangements provide an appropriate range of evidence to justify the offer of a place at college. Some colleges have drawn up formal appeal arrangements where learners' applications had been unsuccessful. However, learner awareness of these arrangements is variable.

Feedback to colleges for improvement

Colleges have developed a number of methods of receiving feedback in order to improve their application and admission arrangements. The most important starting point is the establishment of strong and effective working relationships between admission staff, support staff and teaching staff. This supports effective internal communication and promotes positive informal discussions around current practice and actions for improvement. Often admission staff hold regular focus group discussions with applicants and current learners to identify what is going well and what needs to improve further. College-wide online induction surveys provide a very useful feedback mechanism which staff use effectively to identify actions for improvement. Early leaver surveys provide useful information on colleges' application and admission arrangements. Through completed self-evaluation reports college staff reflect on their practice, identify areas of weakness and draw up improvement action plans. Curriculum leaders meet regularly with admission and support staff, discuss ongoing issues and plan for improvement. Senior managers

review application and admission policy regularly to ensure it is current, fit for purpose and takes good account of legislative requirements. Managers examine on a weekly basis applications received and offers made to ensure the college is on target to meet its Weighted Student Unit of Measurement (WSUM) targets allocated to colleges by SFC.

College-wide quality assurance arrangements

Admission staff follow up submitted application forms which have incomplete record fields to ensure the college's learner database is accurate and complete. Data contained within the college's application fields is used to provide reports in relation to a number of equality-related themes including age, disability, gender, ethnicity and religion and belief. Colleges interrogate these data sets to produce departmental and whole-college level reports. They use these to identify over or under-representation trends by particular groups of learners or where there are lower than expected conversion rates from applications received to programme offers made. In some colleges curriculum managers monitor closely and check place at college decisions made by teaching staff. This ensures interview record keeping is accurate and decision-making is transparent and is not based on a *gut-feeling* approach. However, colleges have not yet introduced comprehensive arrangements to quality assure the interviewing skills of teaching staff. Instead they rely almost exclusively on feedback provided by the end user, the learner, who often has very little or no prior interviewing experience.

Postcode analysis

Learner applications can be separated out into residential postcodes which contain unique data relating to *Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation* (SIMD). Currently, most colleges analyse applications received and offers made to determine the conversion rate within defined postcodes which are often indicators of SIMD. One college had analysed this and concluded that learners applying for a college place from areas with high levels of deprivation were 20% less likely to succeed in gaining a place at college. As a result, the college is implementing enhanced arrangements to ensure this conversion figure improves. If this pattern is repeated across Scotland the cycle of low application conversion rate for learners residing within deprived communities will not improve. In this context colleges need to be more proactive and identify causal factors and introduce improvement measures for future applicants.

Learner application data-sharing arrangements

All colleges have established data-sharing arrangements with SDS. Reports are either submitted directly to SDS or via reports submitted to SFC. Most colleges do not receive communication back from SDS about their data returns and are not fully informed about the use made of their data, how it could be improved further and other uses to which it might be put.
Current data sharing arrangements between colleges and SDS includes the sharing of data on enrolments, withdrawals and successful completions. It does not include applications. In line with data protection legislation, colleges cannot share applicants' data with other parties, including SDS, unless they have received consent to do so through, for example, their application form. Currently, not all

college application forms contain such a clause. As a result, SDS staff cannot quickly and proactively offer support to unsuccessful applicants in considering alternative education or training options.

Colleges within the Lanarkshire multi-college region have recently established a common application form and data-sharing agreement. This approach will help improve recruitment practice for 2014-15. However, at this stage, colleges generally have not yet established data-sharing agreements outwith their own regions. As a result they cannot identify those learners who have applied to more than one college and remain uncertain about the numbers of learners who will turn up at the start of the academic year.

4.3 Learners' experiences

From discussions held with learners one of the main reasons cited for studying at college was locality with most learners choosing to study at their nearest college. They study subjects which interest them and provide potential career opportunities either directly into employment, through progression routes onto another college course or onto an HE programme at university. Some learners state that they applied for a different level of provision but after helpful discussions with a member of college staff, commenced on a different programme. They acknowledge that this turned out to be, with hindsight, the appropriate choice. Some learners comment that career guidance received at school was only partially effective as it mainly focused on progression options to university. Learners speak enthusiastically about the range of programmes offered by colleges and the positive college reputation.

Most internally-progressing learners found college application arrangements informative and helpful. However, across subject areas in colleges there are variable interviewing practices for existing learners applying to progress internally onto the next level of provision. As a result, some progressing applicants have different application and interview experiences which do not routinely support fairness and consistency. Learners state that online application arrangements are straightforward to complete and generally work well. Paper-based application forms are also available and are completed by a small number of learners. Learners receive prompt acknowledgement of their application followed by a helpful email or letter advising them of interviewing timelines.

During interviews learners took part in group and individual interviews and some learners completed practical activities. These involved written assessments with scenarios and case studies, literacy and numeracy tests and problem-solving exercises. From discussions held with learners interview arrangements and experiences are positive, support programme choice and work well. Learners are aware that there is competition to secure a place at college and understand why assessment activities have been introduced as part of the interviewing process.

5. Conclusion

Across Scotland, as a result of very recent mergers and regionalisation, colleges are addressing unprecedented change-related scenarios of a significant scale. The timescales required for these changes have been challenging. As a result, the introduction of college regions has not yet influenced, to any significant extent, colleges' own vocational provision. Colleges are staring to consider, with assistance of early draft versions of SDS *Regional Skills Investment Plans* and *Regional Skills Assessments,* the programmes required by employers to meet national and local skills requirements. However, given the pace and scale of change currently being experienced by colleges, progress on shaping an employer-influenced curriculum and agreeing an appropriate range of programmes which align with employers' needs has to date been slow.

In terms of recruitment practice, most colleges are responding positively to external changes ensuring approaches improve, take good account of learner needs and ensure learners are placed onto programmes which support their abilities, interests, needs and aspirations. Previous recruitment approaches, relying exclusively on staff professional judgement based on a largely subjective perspective is changing. New, more objective, measurable approaches are being introduced which support fairer judgements, clarity of decision-making and reflect best practice approaches adopted when recruiting staff for employment. However, these approaches require increased levels of resourcing in terms of staff training, quality assurance of implementation and staff will spend more time involved in learner recruitment activities. These new approaches, which not all colleges have yet adopted, will help support appropriate recruitment onto programmes. They also help college staff determine the attributes and potential of those applicants who have not achieved well at school and wish to continue in education. For a number of colleges the recent introduction of lower level SCQF level 3 and level 4 provision has been challenging, often characterised by low levels of achievement. With the Scottish Government's continuing focus on improving youth employment these programmes are set to continue and will remain high priority in *Outcome Agreements*. New recruitment practices, as outlined in this report, will support learners to progress onto appropriate college programmes helping improve outcomes for both individual learners and institutions.

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:

- monitor through the *Outcome Agreements* process learner application conversion rates for learners applying for a college programme from deprived areas; and

- monitor colleges' approaches to balancing learner demand and employers' requirements when planning regional curricula.

Colleges should:

- continue to develop *Regional Context Statements* which inform the planning of curriculum provision;

- align strategies for employer engagement with the requirements of all aspects of post-16 reform;

- develop data-sharing arrangements within and outwith college regions where appropriate;

- introduce practices to balance learner demand and employers' requirements when planning regional curricula;

- implement interview training for staff and introduce quality assurance arrangements for learner interviews;

- work together to introduce a Scotland-wide code-of-practice in relation to obtaining applicant references;

- ensure unsuccessful applicants benefit from timely qualitative feedback for improvement;

- develop application data sharing arrangements with SDS to support unsuccessful applicants to participate in learning, training or move into work; and

- introduce practices to improve application conversion rates to college programmes for learners from deprived areas.

Education Scotland should:

- continue to monitor the progress made by colleges in taking forward the recommendations contained in this report.

7. Glossary of terms

CPD   Continuous Professional Development
GRFW   Get Ready for Work
HE   Higher Education
HNC   Higher National Certificate
HND   Higher National Diploma
LMI   Labour Market Intelligence
MIS   Management Information Systems
NC   National Certificate
SCQF   Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SDS   Skills Development Scotland
SFC   Scottish Funding Council
SFW   Skills for Work
SIMD   Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation
WSUM Weighted Student Unit of Measurement

8. Colleges which contributed to the fieldwork for this report

The college sample represents an appropriate geographical spread and mix of colleges who are either not involved in merger activity, have merged very recently, some time ago or are aiming to merge soon.

- Borders College

- Forth Valley College

- New College Lanarkshire (NCL), including Coatbridge College – operating within the Lanarkshire multi-college region as part of the Federation of Lanarkshire Colleges. NCL was established in November 2013 through the merger of Cumbernauld and Motherwell colleges. Coatbridge College plans to merge with NCL in April 2014.

- South Lanarkshire College (SLC) – operating within the Lanarkshire multi-college region as part of the Federation of Lanarkshire Colleges. SLC is currently not pursuing merger.

- West College Scotland – established through the merger of Clydebank and Reid Kerr colleges and the Inverclyde campuses of James Watt College in August 2013.