



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



**Self-evaluation and  
internal review  
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**Scottish Funding Council**  
Promoting further and higher education



**Education  
Scotland**  
Foghlam Alba

Transforming lives through learning

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# 1. Introduction

This report examines the contribution of self-evaluation to internal review processes in Scotland's colleges. It identifies the range of methodologies used by colleges, what makes these effective and what needs to improve further. It explores in particular, the extent to which self-evaluation has a positive impact on learners' experiences. The report addresses these aims through:

- evaluating the extent to which self-evaluation has improved over time, including taking into account equality and diversity issues;
- evaluating the contribution made by external stakeholders and college learners as part of the self-evaluation process;
- identifying and disseminating examples of excellence or sector-leading and innovative practice; and
- making recommendations for improvement to current practice.

Colleges have a relatively long history of self-evaluation since they became independent corporations in 1993. Almost 20 years on, all colleges have developed quality assurance, improvement and enhancement systems for teaching and cross-college support areas based, in almost all cases, on self-evaluation of their provision. They have implemented formal reporting arrangements for service areas and curriculum teams which help them gauge performance and monitor progress.

The HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) report: *Effective self-evaluation reporting in Scotland's colleges (2007)*,<sup>1</sup> identified a number of positive features including that:

- self-evaluation activities and reporting is well embedded in quality processes;
- almost all staff are familiar with and have actively engaged with reporting processes;
- self-evaluation has a positive impact overall on improvement in services to learners. It has encouraged a culture of reflection and questioning amongst college staff and underpins a focus on continuous improvement;
- the quality of self-evaluation reports has generally improved over the last four years;
- staff have a positive attitude towards self-evaluative activities; and
- self-evaluative reporting is most effective when it builds on and reports the findings and impact of professional dialogue and other self-evaluative activities.

However, there were a number of recommendations for improvement:

- colleges should encourage and facilitate self-evaluation activities such as professional dialogue, especially for learning and teaching, retention and attainment;
- reports should record the impact of previous actions;
- reporting should focus on learning and teaching, retention and attainment and involve rigorous analysis of evidence including performance indicators (PIs);
- reports should be evaluative rather than descriptive;
- quality improvement action plans should contain SMART targets; and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/esersc.pdf>

- colleges should provide targeted training and support to staff to improve evaluative skills and self-evaluation report writing.

HMIE has provided other analyses of self-evaluation and internal review arrangements in colleges. The most recent was through the HMIE publication, *Improving Scottish Education 2 (2009)*<sup>2</sup>, it commented:

*“All colleges have a strategic commitment to internal review and most staff are actively involved in self-evaluation processes. Almost all staff demonstrate good levels of knowledge of quality procedures and are committed to improving the quality of the learner experience. The self-evaluation and quality improvement activities generally lead to enhancement of services for learners. Most colleges have well-developed, robust systems for gathering and analysing performance data and the views of learners and other stakeholders. However, not all college staff make sufficient use of this information to devise or implement effective action plans to improve cases of low retention and attainment, especially when weaknesses relate to learning and teaching processes.”*

This report identifies the progress that colleges have made, since the publication of these two reports, in improving their approaches to self-evaluation and internal review.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/ise09.pdf>

## **2. Methodology**

Eight colleges were visited by two HMI or associate assessors during the fieldwork. During the visits a number of interviews were held consisting of:

- professional discussions with key managers, college staff and relevant external stakeholders;
- discussions with learners and their representatives;
- discussions with colleges on internal review procedures; and
- discussions with managers on the arrangements for the evaluation of learner progress and outcomes, learning and teaching, learner engagement and quality culture.

Self-evaluation reports and other quality documentation collected for college reviews and provided by other colleges were analysed. After the visits, HM Inspectors convened a focus group of staff involved in the fieldwork for the report, in order to share their experiences and to discuss the findings. The annual reports submitted by colleges to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) were also analysed. In addition to the evidence obtained from the eight colleges that participated in the fieldwork stage, HM Inspectors also drew on the evaluations contained in the published external review reports of 24 colleges between 2008-11. Additionally, a number of annual engagement reports were analysed, where appropriate, in order to determine emerging practice relating to self-evaluation and internal review. Evidence from these external review activities has helped to identify areas of progress as well as highlight issues that continue to require attention.

### **3. Summary of key findings**

Self-evaluation in Scotland's colleges is characterised by the following strengths:

- Arrangements for self-evaluation have matured and improved. Colleges now have well-established and widely accepted quality assurance and improvement practices.
- Self-evaluation reporting, in most colleges, is a well-developed continuous process, with identified timelines and contributions from staff and learners spread throughout the year.
- Colleges have developed a variety of approaches to self-evaluation, using a range of quality frameworks which suit their individual needs.
- Colleges have developed effective arrangements for curriculum review. Where new programmes of study have been introduced, these often take good account of the needs and interests of learners.
- Support teams have devised a range of approaches in order to evaluate and improve the provision of the services they provide to learners.
- Colleges value the contributions made by learners. They have introduced a range of procedures designed to capture the views of learners.
- Colleges engage effectively with employers.
- Increasingly, colleges identify in their self-evaluation reports the approaches they are adopting to deliver the outcomes of Curriculum for Excellence.

However, we noted a number of areas for development to improve the outcomes of self-evaluation and internal review:

- More than a few colleges do not have sufficiently rigorous or robust approaches to college-wide self-evaluation which ensures comprehensive and accurate self-evaluation outcomes.
- Too few colleges compare their own PI outcomes with appropriate external benchmarks.
- More than a few programme reports do not identify appropriate actions to address improvements for learners by defined equalities categories. Most self-evaluation reports omit reference to the promotion of equality and diversity through the introduction of refreshed teaching material or adjustments to teaching practices.
- In more than a few colleges, self-evaluation reports contain insufficient reflection by staff on things they can influence, including approaches to learning and teaching.

- In more than a few colleges, learner representative arrangements are insufficiently effective.
- Few colleges have established college-wide review arrangements, with receiving Higher Education (HE) providers, in order to share their approaches and to review curriculum content.
- Few colleges have developed formal arrangements with schools to share, discuss and ensure effective contributions are made by both parties to joint evaluation of school-college programmes.

#### **4. College-led internal review processes – what do we mean?**

Internal review is the collective term for a range of college-wide quality assurance and enhancement activities. It encompasses a number of interrelated processes including:

- self-evaluation;
- curriculum review; and
- internal audit.

Self-evaluation is the main approach used by colleges for the analysis and reporting of their strengths and areas for development and as such, provides the primary subject for this report. Self-evaluation helps to provide quality assurance, but it also helps to identify what needs to improve or be enhanced and indicates what actions can address these. In identifying how well they are doing, colleges usually gather evidence from a number of sources including:

- analysis of the views of learners and other stakeholders;
- observations of learning and teaching;
- findings from external and internal moderation reports;
- analysis of PIs relating to learner retention, achievement, attainment and progression; and
- reflections gathered by individuals and members of teams.

At times, national benchmarking information is also used in self-evaluation.

Over time in all colleges, self-evaluation has become increasingly embedded in everyday practice. Many colleges now view it as a continuous process with contributions from staff and learners spread throughout the year. This complements the formal and cyclical quality reporting processes which also feature in all colleges. Most staff take advantage of a number of opportunities to reflect on what has gone well and what needs to be done to improve further. These are often informal and based around everyday professional dialogue between colleagues, but also include more methodical, formal reflection against a quality framework, carried out at specific times of the year. Through the self-evaluation process, staff identify strengths, areas for improvement and examples of good practice for wider dissemination across the college. This process culminates in plans for improvement, examples include:

- improved learner retention and attainment rates;
- improvements in learning and teaching approaches; and
- better access to information and communications technology (ICT)
- and enhanced services to learners.

Curriculum review is the process of analysing, reviewing and where appropriate refreshing or terminating particular programmes which are delivered within a college. Through these arrangements, colleges ensure that the portfolio of programmes meets the needs, interests and aspirations of learners as well as responding to national initiatives such as learners in need of more choices and more chances. Usually, the criteria for the implementation of curriculum review are low or declining learner recruitment, retention or attainment.



Internal audit includes a range of activities, usually carried out by college managers. Examples include:

- internal verification of qualification standards;
- analysis of quality of learning and teaching materials, including their focus on equality;
- reviews of support services such as admissions, ICT and Human Resources (HR);
- identification of implementation of Curriculum for Excellence; and
- how well liaison with employers is impacting on learning.

On occasions, internal audits are scheduled when colleges determine that there are specific themes which require further investigation or improvement. Many colleges implement internal audits annually selecting one or two departments or service areas.

### **Ayr College: internal review of bursary arrangements**

*As part of the internal review of bursary arrangements, managers carried out an internal audit of the practices being used over a two week period in April and May 2010. From discussions held with staff and learners, they identified that a number of learners submitted incomplete bursary applications and some administrative procedures were burdensome. As a consequence, a number of learners experienced delays in receiving their bursary. Through the college-devised internal review, new improved arrangements for bursary information, processing and allocation were agreed, resulting in a much improved service for learners commencing programmes in 2010-11. Through this internal review, Ayr College has identified the root cause of issues which directly affect learners. They have put in place new improved arrangements which ensure that the learner experience at the college continues to improve.*

## **5. Approaches to self-evaluation in Scotland's colleges**

- **what works well?**
- **what does not work so well?**

### **Self-evaluation practices**

Most college-led internal review activity is based on self-evaluation. Self-evaluation is carried out extensively by managers and teaching or support staff teams who evaluate their evidence against a quality framework. These reports contain actions for improvement.

All colleges now have well-established processes and procedures which enable them to conduct effective self-evaluation and internal reviews for both teaching and cross-college support areas. Significant improvements have been made across the sector overall, in order to ensure that self-evaluation procedures are now less burdensome, focus on the key issues and identify progress being made over time. Self-evaluation arrangements are now, in most colleges, part of a continuous process governed by the needs of the college, rather than by external requirements. They are well embedded and have a positive impact overall on improvement in services to learners.

Since the publication of *Effective self-evaluation reporting in Scotland's colleges* (2007), there has been a noticeable improvement in approaches to self-evaluation within most colleges. In the best colleges, self-evaluation reporting is characterised by:

- comprehensive and detailed reports;
- evaluative reports which contain SMART targets;
- aggregated whole-college reports which draw clearly on those of curriculum and support areas; and
- staff empowered to draw up targets for improvement and held accountable for their actions.

However, in more than a few colleges, self-evaluation is not always carried out or reported so well. In these colleges, self-evaluation reports are sometimes insufficiently evaluative, do not analyse evidence rigorously enough and often fail to set specific actions and targets for improvement. As a result, self-evaluation in more than a few colleges does not have the impact on improvement that it could. These colleges are unable to provide assurance, through their self-evaluation reports, that teams are continuously improving services for learners.

These less effective self-evaluation reports often include:

- action plans containing targets which are not specific or measurable;
- few references to teaching practices or approaches;
- insufficiently robust evaluation of identified weaknesses; and
- inconsistent analysis of collated reports with no clear link to college-wide improvement planning processes.

Colleges use a variety of quality frameworks against which they evaluate their provision. Most colleges have drawn up or adapted frameworks which are

appropriate for their own needs, and help staff to focus on essential aspects of services for learners. Most colleges currently base their self-evaluation on the latest HMIE framework for external quality review, *External quality arrangements for Scotland's colleges* (2008)<sup>3</sup>. This framework was introduced after extensive consultation and has been well received by the sector, overall. It reflects the shifting focus of external reviews and the recognition of the evolving importance of the role of learners through four high-level questions:

- how well are learners progressing and achieving relevant, high quality outcomes?
- how effective are the college's learning and teaching processes?
- how well are learners engaged in enhancing their own learning and the work and the life of the college?
- how well is the college led and how well is it enhancing the quality of its services for learners and other stakeholders?

Some colleges have introduced additional criteria for their own purposes. For example, a few colleges incorporate aspects of the previous version of the HMIE framework for external quality review (2004-08), which included grading on a four point scale:

Very good – major strengths  
Good – strengths outweigh weaknesses  
Fair – some important weaknesses  
Unsatisfactory – major weaknesses.

They particularly value the opportunity to construct a grade profile for curriculum and support areas. This helps them to monitor how well they are performing over time and what aspects of their provision requires further improvement.

A number of colleges are investigating or are using the *European Framework for Quality Management* (EFQM)<sup>4</sup> excellence model offered through *Quality Scotland*. This self-evaluation model has recently been developed to meet the needs of educational providers. Some colleges have successfully drawn up their own quality frameworks through consultation with staff.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.hmie.gov.uk>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.qualityscotland.co.uk/efqm.asp>

### **Kilmarnock College: Sector leading practice in developing *The Wheel***

*During session 2009-10 the college revised its learning, teaching and assessment strategy. As part of this revision, a visual representation of the strategy was developed - 'The Wheel'. This wheel is divided into segments representing the six guiding principles of the strategy:*

*Innovative  
Flexible  
Supportive  
Reflective  
Successful  
Engaging*

*Each segment details relevant and specific criteria which are used as a basis for the self-evaluation process. This criteria relates to the external influences from all stakeholders including Curriculum for Excellence, Skills for Scotland and HMIE. Four quality indicator (QI) statements contribute to each outcome. Staff evaluate their progress against each QI and attribute a score out of ten for each, culminating in a score out of 40 for each outcome. This model was so successful that it was adapted and adopted by all curriculum and service areas.*

*Without exception, all teams have felt greater ownership of self-evaluation and have engaged in professional dialogue with colleagues focusing in on the critical detail of their area. Having a model in place, where staff have been engaged in the development of the model, has helped understanding, ownership and commitment.*

*As a visual tool the wheel has enabled all teams to have clear agreed actions for improvement for 2010-11. A model for learners to encourage structured learner feedback has now been developed through a learner focus group and learners are extremely positive about this new approach.*

Colleges receive an external perspective on their self-evaluation, curriculum review and internal audit activities through the review activities of HMIE. The HMIE review framework contains quality indicators which include:

- how well the college sustains continuous enhancement through self-evaluation and internal review activities?
- how well does the quality culture in the college lead to quality improvement and enhancement?

External reviews provide independent validation of the impact and success of particular developments undertaken by colleges, and of their quality assurance and improvement arrangements. They can also provide a prompt for change where issues are identified for improvement. Colleges also receive on-going support from their link HMI on a range of issues which are agreed with each college. These often include support relating to their approaches to self-evaluation.

Support service teams in colleges carry out self-evaluation using a range of frameworks. Most use aspects of the current HMIE review model alongside internally developed criteria. There is recognition by many college managers that a more bespoke process is required by support service areas in order to gather relevant feedback from service users. Almost all colleges have developed appropriate self-evaluation templates for completion by support service personnel. College managers agree that the primary contributor to the success of the self-evaluation activity is not the particular framework used, rather it is the commitment and full involvement of staff at all levels in the organisation. While there are still areas for improvement in more than a few colleges, staff are committed to improvement in services for learners. Self-evaluation is now much more integrated into college quality culture overall, and is rarely seen simply as a paper exercise completed for bureaucratic purposes.

In teaching teams in all colleges, self-evaluation focuses on the performance of programmes which colleges offer to learners. Through the analysis of learner retention and attainment, staff can identify which programmes have high PIs and which ones require improvement. Most colleges have developed sophisticated and detailed analysis of PIs in order to identify how well they are performing.

A number of colleges use a *traffic light* system of green/amber/red in order to identify high/medium/low performing programme PIs. These are often used for the categories of early retention, retention and student outcomes. This approach enables teaching staff and college managers to identify quickly high and low performing programmes when reviewing PI outcomes. Where programmes have a red indicator, programme teams are expected to draw up an improvement plan as a matter of urgency, with SMART targets for improvement relating to learner retention or outcomes. Where staff respond and make significant changes to either programme design or delivery, these actions often produce improved outcomes for learners. However, in more than a few colleges, a number of self-evaluation reports contain insufficient reflection by staff on aspects they can influence. For example, these reports fail to consider approaches to learning and teaching, and often attribute low PI outcomes to vaguely defined learner issues, such as *dropped out* or *personal circumstances*. Where there is little change to programme design, entry criteria or delivery approaches, negative PI patterns are often repeated the following year.

## Angus College: effective approaches to PI evaluation

Academic teams complete detailed Annual Course Reports (ACR), for each of the college's 105 mainstream programmes. These evaluate the learner experience and set targets for improvement. Each ACR is evaluated by the Directors of Learning and Teaching and a feedback sheet is completed and discussed with staff using the following traffic lighting system:

**GREEN** - these figures are set high to reflect the aspirational target of the college strategic plan;

**AMBER** - these figures generally reflect the national standard for successful outcome;

**RED** - these figures show areas of concern but should also be measured against the national benchmark for the given subject area.

Data categories			
<b>SRR1 (retention rate for first 25% of programme)</b>	90-100%	75-89%	74% or lower
<b>SRR2 (retention rate for full programme)</b>	85-100%	75-84%	74% or lower
<b>SARU (unit achievement ratio)</b>	85-100%	75-84%	74% or lower
<b>PSO (positive student outcome)</b>	85-100%	75-84%	74% or lower
<b>SCR (successful completion ratio)</b>	85-100%	75-84%	74% or lower

The use by the college of this comprehensive range of data categories, allied to an easily recognisable colour coding system, provides a detailed and transparent feedback process to programme teams. The traffic light boundaries are higher than those used by most colleges. College managers also provide feedback to staff through the use of confidence statements. These confirm to staff the confidence held in respect of the appropriateness of their evidence base and the quality of evaluation used to inform their reports.

**Confident (C)**- staff demonstrate appropriate evaluative skills, actions and evidence base.

**Confidence with caveats (CC)** – staff are required to improve their evaluations and to improve their evidence base.

**Not confident (NC)** – staff fail to demonstrate confidence through their self-evaluations and action plans.

These comprehensive and detailed reporting arrangements, combined with informative feedback from their line managers, ensure that staff at Angus College produce high quality, accurate, and enhancement focused self-evaluation reports.

In order to improve access by staff to real-time PIs, many colleges have introduced dedicated software such as the *Enquirer* system. This is helpful to college personnel and enables them to closely monitor live attendance and progression data for learners. This ensures that accurate data is being made available for staff to use and to share with their colleagues when discussing progress being made by individuals and groups of learners.

When evaluating programme outcomes, teaching teams take cognisance of their own PI values and their improvement or decline over time. On occasions, teaching teams benchmark their own programme PIs against those of similar programmes. Where external benchmarking occurs, programme teams sometimes use sector average values. This approach can lead programme teams to conclude that their PI outcomes are acceptable as they match the average for the sector. Sector averages are by definition a mixture of high, average and low performing outcomes, and they also represent very simplistic aggregations of very different types of programmes across all colleges. Because they have remained static for full-time Further Education (FE) and HE programmes across Scotland for the last three years, using these benchmarks will not necessarily produce aspirational action plans and targets for improvement.

Sector	outcome <sup>5</sup>		
	07/08	08/09	09/10
FE	82	82	82
HE	82	82	81

The benchmarks used by Angus College, in the previous example, reflects the college's ambition to be *Scotland's best community college*. Few colleges benchmark their own performance using college-devised benchmarks or against high performing colleges with a similar learner profile.

#### **Aberdeen College: self-evaluation guidance notes for programme teams**

*Guidance notes make clear to staff the sources of evidence to be used when compiling self-evaluation reports. PI data is readily available to programme teams. The responses to learner surveys are collated and colour coded. This supports staff to quickly identify which questions have a positive response and which ones need further investigation and potentially should be included in the team's self-evaluation action plan for improvement.*

#### **Role of the Board of Management and senior managers**

Since 2008, Boards of Management (BoM) have been given increased responsibility for monitoring and assuring the quality of provision. Colleges have a responsibility, through their BoM, to produce an annual report which describes the scope, nature and outcomes of college-led quality review activities. These reports are also intended to include commentary on actions taken to bring about improvement. In all colleges, Board members are aware of their responsibilities and are fully committed

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.sfc.ac.uk/statistics/facts\\_figures/0910/0910.aspx](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/statistics/facts_figures/0910/0910.aspx)

to quality enhancement within their own institutions. However, Boards differ in their interpretation of the level of detail which they deem necessary to provide in their annual report to the SFC. Some are very detailed and analyse progress made against previous targets, and often include reference to learner outcomes alongside fresh targets for the coming year. Other reports are less helpful. These often focus on internal processes and procedures and fail to make clear reference to learner progress and outcomes. The guidance from SFC is for annual reports to be no more than three or four pages. Many reports provided by colleges exceed ten pages with the longest, including appendices being 73 pages long. From discussions held with colleges, a number of them question the value of producing this report. They view it as a paper exercise which does not change significantly in content or substance each year.

Outcomes and targets for improvement contained within college self-evaluation reports are discussed with college staff by HM inspectors during external reviews. More than a few published HMIE external review reports contain reference to areas for improvement, either within the body of the report or as main points for action, which had not previously been identified or recognised by these colleges as areas for improvement. This indicates that these colleges do not have sufficiently rigorous or robust approaches to self-evaluation, either in particular teaching or support departments, or in whole-college self-evaluation which ensures comprehensive and accurate self-evaluation outcomes. There is a danger that these colleges and their BoM have an overly optimistic view of their own performance and a belief that they do not have any main areas for development. As a result, targets for improvements are insufficiently challenging and do not ensure improved outcomes for learners.

In most colleges, principals and senior managers play an active and useful role in self-evaluation. Many chair meetings with managers and staff, and discuss regularly the impact on learners of their departmental self-evaluation reports and other internal review activities. Through these arrangements, managers are kept informed of relevant developments across the college. Staff explain the progress they have made in their own departments and the impact of improvement plans against last year's targets. Staff find these meetings useful. They feel that their viewpoint is valued and their contributions are taken seriously. Many principals actively strive to hear the views of learners. They hold focus groups or informal meetings with learners at a range of times and venues, including the college refectory. They hear for themselves the issues concerning learners and often take corrective action or raise issues with colleagues in order to bring about improvement.



### **Coatbridge College: principal's formal review**

*Curriculum and support managers are invited to meet with their respective line manager, quality manager and the principal during the principal's formal review. During these meetings, managers deliver a presentation based on the outcome of their own department or curriculum area self-evaluation and the resulting confidence statement. The quality unit supports this process and provides a bespoke template distributed in advance to managers, using HMIE confidence statements, with a concluding slide identifying plans for improvement. The presentation highlights strengths, areas for improvement and any good practice to be shared across the college. All proposed confidence statements are supported by relevant evidence. During these presentations, the principal and quality manager question the presented evidence base in order to determine the validity and accuracy of the proposed confidence outcome. Through this supportive yet challenging process, curriculum and support managers demonstrate knowledge of their own departments and what they need to do in order to improve. This detailed scrutiny of practices and progress is welcomed by managers. They value the opportunity to share and discuss with the principal and the quality manager the key issues which impact on the day to day running of their own departments.*

### **Collaboration with other colleges**

Teaching staff whose higher education programmes are affiliated to the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), often implement quality assurance, improvement and enhancement processes through collaboration with colleagues from other UHI institutions. Overall, this process works well. Staff often discuss their self-evaluation outcomes with each other and collaborate in order to produce relevant and effective self-evaluation reports. Higher education programmes are often developed and delivered by teaching staff across a number of UHI colleges. Staff value the opportunity to share their thoughts and to seek agreement on what works well and what needs to improve further. These collaborative arrangements do not, however, extend to FE programmes delivered in UHI colleges, as these are the responsibility of individual institutions. More widely across Scotland, few colleges have developed formal arrangements to share their approaches to self-evaluation with their peers in other colleges. Many college managers benefit from the support provided by *Scotland's Colleges* through their well-established *Communities of Practice*. Quality managers meet regularly and discuss a number of quality-related issues, including approaches to self-evaluation.

### **Learner contributions**

All colleges demonstrate a commitment to enable learners to contribute effectively to self-evaluation. The revised HMIE framework of 2008 introduced the criteria of learner engagement as one of the four key principles of external review. This has prompted colleges to re-examine their approaches to learner representation and consultation. The practice of listening to, recording and acting on the views of learners has developed and improved significantly over recent years. All colleges have learner representation systems where learners elect class representatives to

listen to their views, and to present these either at formal programme team meetings or informally throughout the year.

Colleges use a number of surveys, normally distributed electronically, after induction, mid-way through the academic year and towards the end of programme, to gather the views of learners about their experiences. Many programme teams make effective use of these surveys in their self-evaluation reports in order to identify what is going well and what requires further improvement. Staff often distribute end-of-unit evaluations and receive helpful feedback from learners about the subjects they are studying. Through these arrangements, learners play an active role in contributing to programme team self-evaluation reports. However, few programme teams provide opportunities for learners to read and comment on the outcomes of self-evaluation reporting.

### **Ayr College: learner involvement in internal review**

*As part of their learner engagement strategy, Ayr College includes learners as members of their internal review teams. Learners are invited to apply annually for these remunerated posts. Applicants are interviewed and undertake a Disclosure Scotland application. During the week-long internal reviews, learners take a full and active part in the internal review process. All members of the internal review team discuss and agree the final report which is presented to the college's Curriculum and Quality Steering Group.*

### **Employer contributions**

All colleges demonstrate a commitment to seek out the views of employers. They understand the importance of establishing and maintaining effective links with local industries to help college learners progress into employment at the end of their programmes. All colleges take good account of a wide range of external drivers, including Scottish Government initiatives and policies, sector skills council reports and the views of other stakeholders, including local and in some colleges national employers. Often, colleges interrogate local and national labour market statistics in order to identify existing and future demands for their programmes.

Colleges have developed a range of ways of gathering the views of employers. These include:

- discussions held with college staff;
- through work-placements offered to learners;
- input by employers to specific topics or programme content during teaching sessions;
- visits to employer premises by learners; and
- representation by employers as part of formal college meetings.

A number of colleges hold successful employer engagement events where they invite representatives from local industries for business meetings. College managers provide updates on recent developments and discuss with employers potential opportunities for further collaboration. Colleges and most programme teams make effective use of the active support and input they receive from employers. This helps

to keep them informed about a range of new initiatives, including any relevant changes to industrial practices. In their self-evaluation reports, many programme teams identify how employers make effective contributions to their programmes and what has changed as a result. However, few colleges formally share with employers their self-evaluation outcomes.

### **Other external stakeholders or influencers**

Almost all of the colleges in Scotland have strong and effective working arrangements with a wide range of external partners. These include local authorities (in some colleges this amounts to more than one), schools, local health boards, HE providers and other community partners. Often they work closely together to ensure that they are meeting the needs of groups of learners such as learners in need of more choices and more chances, migrant workers, adult returners and unemployed or redundant workers. Working arrangements have been well-established over a number of years. Some subject areas have close, informal networks with receiving HE institutions. There are examples where individual members of staff share their curriculum, teaching and assessment practices which helps to ensure that learners are appropriately prepared for progression onto university programmes. However, these are the exceptions. Programme teams often develop and deliver programmes to learners with HE aspirations, without the active support and advice of their university colleagues. Enthusiastic members of staff work diligently to ensure that their learners can progress onto receiving HE institutions. However, few colleges have established college-wide review arrangements, with receiving HE providers, in order to share their approaches and to review curriculum content. Too often this only occurs through the endeavours of committed, individual members of staff. Most colleges have established effective working relations with their local schools through their school-college partnership provision. Some colleges engage with over 1000 school pupils each week studying a wide range of vocational and academic programmes. School pupils normally attend college one morning or afternoon each week, so there are limited opportunities for these learners to actively contribute to programme team meetings. In many colleges, staff have devised a number of effective ways to gather the views of school pupils through the distribution of questionnaires. These often have high completion rates and inform enhancements in approaches to learning, teaching and assessment. While most college staff inform their school colleagues about the progress their learners are making and the qualifications which they achieve, few colleges have developed formal arrangements for joint evaluation of school-college programmes. Communication generally focuses on learner issues such as attendance, behaviour and attainment of units.

### **Equality, diversity and sustainability**

From a slow start in previous years, an increasing number of colleges now produce data on learner retention and attainment by a range of protected characteristics, most commonly gender and disability. Aggregated college-wide data is used to inform the college's annual equality and diversity reports. However, too often, this data is not dis-aggregated in a format which allows programme teams to analyse learner recruitment, retention and attainment for their own programmes. Many teaching staff are therefore unable to analyse in their self-evaluation reports, the progress being made by particular groups of learners. As a result, more than a few of these reports at programme level fail to include action plans which address improvements for learners by defined equalities categories.

Colleges have a responsibility to ensure that their teaching materials promote equality and diversity and are free from bias. Almost all colleges have adopted the *Quality and Equality in Learning and Teaching Materials* (QELTM) toolkit, to ensure teaching materials promote diversity through their content and delivery approaches, as well as being available in accessible formats for learners with additional needs. However, there is a need for staff to embed the promotion of equality and diversity further into their delivery and teaching practices rather than regarding QELTM as the totality of their promotional efforts. In colleges where this works well, self-evaluation reports include an evaluation of promotion across the whole programme as well as teaching methods and approaches. However, few reports include commentary by teaching staff on equality and diversity approaches in their teaching practice.

Overall, Scotland's colleges have responded well to the Scottish Government's *Greener Scotland*<sup>6</sup> strategic objective. Almost all colleges embed sustainability within their strategic plan, aims and objectives and the majority have clear policies and strategies to address sustainability in most aspects of their operation. Increasingly, college staff and learners display good awareness of sustainability issues and their significance to both the college and the wider community. However, few programme team self-evaluation reports contain reference to actions taken in order to support achievement of this aspect of the college's strategic plan. In most colleges, responsibility for reporting on progress being made on sustainability issues remains the responsibility of a nominated senior manager.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.gogreenerscotland.org/>

## **6. Impact of internal review on the learner experience**

### **High quality learning**

#### **Evaluating learning and teaching**

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

- formal observations of learning and teaching activities, by managers or peers;
- meeting forums where practitioners discuss their practice;
- best practice events, where teaching staff share and demonstrate their approaches;
- continuing professional development (CPD) events, where all teaching staff receive updates and development relevant to their roles as teachers;
- peer observation where colleagues observe teaching sessions and provide feedback, support and suggestions for improvement; and
- feedback received from learners through focus groups, meetings and questionnaires.

Colleges which carry out observations of learning and teaching use a wide variety of approaches. Some colleges observe all staff, including part-time staff annually. Other colleges spread this across a two or three-year cycle. One college has an observation cycle to ensure all staff are observed over a four-year period. A number of colleges are aware of the benefits of having a college-wide observation process but are either at the early stages or have not yet made significant progress in this area. Teaching staff in colleges which carry out observation of learning and teaching usually value the process. They particularly benefit from the subsequent discussion and in many cases they respond by introducing new initiatives and approaches in their teaching. In the most recent submissions by colleges on institution-led review to the SFC, around 30% of colleges report that a system of observation of teaching practice is in place, is being implemented or is planned. A significant number of colleges, therefore, have no observation protocols. As a result, teaching staff do not receive direct professional feedback on the quality of their teaching.

A few colleges attribute improvements or enhancements in learning and teaching directly to the observation process. While this may contribute to more accurate evaluation of learning and teaching, many colleges still find it difficult to identify clearly what needs to improve in these areas, whether they operate classroom observation or not. Evaluation of learning and teaching has not significantly improved since it was highlighted in HMIE's report of 2007. As a result, many colleges still find it difficult to identify appropriate and clear action plans to improve learning and teaching.

Where learning and teaching is reported as a main point for action in external reviews, this often relates to the evaluation of learning and teaching by programme teams. Overall, learning and teaching practice is effective. In these colleges, individual members of staff identify for themselves teaching approaches which meet the needs of learners. However, there is often no collective analysis of these practices to inform wider improvement in approaches to learning and teaching by programme teams.

Colleges use other means to evaluate learning and teaching. For example, many colleges find it helpful to take into account the views of learners as the primary source of evidence in order to make judgements on the overall quality of their approaches to learning and teaching. This can provide very clear and helpful indicators of what needs to improve, from the customer perspective. Almost all teaching staff also discuss their approaches to learning and teaching through informal interactions with colleagues and in the professional dialogue that supports more formal meetings. However, despite the assertion by many teaching staff that learning and teaching is discussed fully when colleagues meet, most teaching team meeting notes reflect discussions focused primarily on operational issues and only rarely focus on learning and teaching. Increasingly, however, self-evaluation reports do contain reference to Curriculum for Excellence. Staff comment on the approaches they have taken in order to develop for their learners the four capacities of successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. These comments often focus on how learning and teaching are helping learners develop the four capacities. Through this approach, and increasing levels of awareness, programme teams demonstrate confidence and understanding of how Curriculum for Excellence can enhance the learner experience.

#### **Angus College: lesson observation arrangements**

*The formal observation process has a developmental focus. Observations are not part of individual's annual performance review. As a result, staff feel that this supports them to be innovative during their planned observations. Prior to an observation, staff are encouraged to consider and try new teaching initiatives which they have not tried before. They use observation experiences in order to further develop their own teaching skills and techniques. The professional discussion held with their observer is helpful and supportive. Staff feel that the lesson observation arrangements at Angus College help them to become better teachers.*

#### **Ayr College: lesson observation arrangements**

*A revised lesson observation process was introduced in 2010-11. Curriculum Leaders (CLs) form a team of ten reviewers who observe lessons across the college. Each undertakes 20 observations and all 200 teaching staff are reviewed annually. Observation outcomes are passed onto the CL of the staff member observed with identified strengths and areas for development. Where innovative practice has been observed, this is identified for cascading more widely across the college. A Learning and Teaching Forum has recently been convened to consider key messages from the observation process and take forward college-wide actions for improvement.*

### **Aberdeen College: lesson observation arrangements**

*The college has developed wide ranging and comprehensive arrangements to ensure all teaching staff benefit from lesson observations. Teaching staff can receive an unannounced observation at any time during the year. These observations are normally conducted by an individual's line manager and this is part of the annual performance review process. Teaching staff feel that their practice benefits from these arrangements. Additional support for teaching staff is provided through the use of peer observations. Large numbers of staff benefit from this service. Newly appointed teachers are assigned a mentor who supports them through the early stages of their teaching career. They are provided with opportunities to observe teaching sessions outside of their own curriculum areas. For example, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) staff conducted an observation on Sport and Leisure programmes in order to identify different teaching approaches. Staff value and benefit from these experiences.*

### **Learner engagement**

Almost all learners consider that they have positive relationships with teaching staff and that teaching staff take good account of their views informally during classes, outwith the learner representative system. Learner representatives generally carry out their duties effectively. Those who have benefited from training, either by *student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs)*<sup>7</sup>, or college-devised training, are usually well prepared for their roles. They are more confident about their responsibilities and often have high attendance rates at programme team meetings or provide insightful comments gathered from their classmates before meetings. Where learner representatives contribute constructively to programme team meetings, self-evaluation reports often include reference to changes and enhancements made as a result of feedback received from learners. However, this good practice is less well established in more than a few colleges. In these instances, large numbers of representatives remain untrained and unprepared for their role. More than a few self-evaluation reports make reference to poor attendance or ineffective contribution by learners at programme team meetings. These reports frequently fail to identify the causes of this low attendance and in some cases this is a repeating pattern from year to year.

Despite variable contributions by learners to programme team meetings, learners' views are often influential in bringing about change for the better. For example, in a number of colleges, learners express concern over the scheduling of their assessments or the nature and running order of specific subject units. In response, programme teams make adjustments in order to improve the experiences of next year's cohort. Colleges are also becoming increasingly effective at providing feedback to learners who have raised concerns. This is particularly evident in public and social areas of colleges, for example through *You Said We Did* messages on posters or plasma screens. In these ways, college staff demonstrate to learners that their views are taken seriously and are acted upon.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/>

### **Ayr College: arrangements to ensure attendance by learners at programme review meetings**

*For learner views to have an influence on learning, teaching and assessment approaches, there has to be high levels of attendance by representatives at these meetings. Ayr College has developed a protocol that programme team meetings can only be held if the learner representative is present at the meeting. Through this arrangement, the college ensures that there are consistently high levels of learner representation at programme team meetings.*

## **Quality culture**

A culture of improvement and open, self-critical evaluation is a prerequisite to effective internal review. In most colleges, progress has accelerated over the last three years. Staff in teaching and support areas play an active role in determining how well they are doing and what needs to improve further. In these colleges, there has been a shift from quality assurance to quality improvement. In the best colleges, staff are empowered to make decisions, often relating to key aspects of their programmes or service areas, and they are accountable for these outcomes. Their capacity has been developed and enhanced over time, and this has had a significant impact on the experiences of learners. The processes used to support accurate self-evaluation have been refined and improved and in many colleges these work well. Increasingly, colleges are seeking to align their self-evaluation reports against college-wide corporate aims and objectives. They recognise that actions derived from self-evaluation reporting can also be used as improvement targets for operational plans across other areas of provision. A number of colleges acknowledge that this is an area which they are targeting for improvement.

All colleges successfully include support services in their self-evaluation activities. There is recognition by service departments that their function is to provide a high quality service for learners. In a number of colleges, these services have been significantly enhanced and improved through college self-evaluation arrangements. Service departments are, by definition, specialists in a particular role. Through discussions held with learners, learner surveys and through feedback received from staff, support service departments often quickly identify what is working well and what is required to continue to improve. Once identified, relevant action points are often quickly implemented resulting in improved services for both staff and learners.

### **John Wheatley College: publicising self-evaluation**

*At the time of writing, John Wheatley College is the only college in Scotland to publish its self-evaluation report annually on its website. The college believes that through this action the college demonstrates its commitment to openness and accountability and allows potential learners and other stakeholders to view for themselves the improvements being made at the college.*



## 7. Conclusions

The purpose of self-evaluation is to improve outcomes for learners. Most colleges carry out self-evaluation conscientiously and well. However, despite this, across Scotland, overall attainment for full-time FE and HE learners, has not improved for the last three years. Clearly, there is still work to be done to identify why this is so and self-evaluation must have a key role to play in this. It is difficult to attribute improvements in performance specifically to robust self-evaluation. Nevertheless, there appears to be a correlation. In compiling this report, it was clear that, in general, those colleges which carry out robust self-evaluation benefit from PI outcomes, learning and teaching provision and support services which are not only good but improving. In these colleges, staff are talking openly and honestly with each other, are listening to their learners, and rigorously identifying patterns in learner performance which require changes in the approaches staff are taking. Managers in these colleges are supporting self-evaluation properly by monitoring outcomes and progress on actions, and providing useful benchmarking information, PI analysis and reporting pro forma. They are also using the outcomes of self-evaluation well to inform whole-college planning. Boards of Management know how well the college is doing and ensure that appropriate actions are in place to address areas of concern.

Since the publication of *Effective self-evaluation reporting in Scotland's colleges* (2007), self-evaluation has matured and improved. Colleges now have well-established and widely accepted quality assurance and improvement practices. Most of the recommendations for improvement contained in the 2007 report have been implemented. However, in more than a few colleges, self-evaluation is not consistently as effective as it could be and outcomes for learners in many areas are not improving. In these colleges, self-evaluation reporting continues to be insufficiently evaluative, does not analyse evidence rigorously enough and often fails to set specific actions and targets for improvement, particularly for learner progress and outcomes. Approaches to college-wide self-evaluation are insufficiently rigorous or robust resulting in managers having an overly optimistic view of their own performance and a belief that they do not have any main areas for development. As a result, targets for improvement are insufficiently challenging and do not ensure improved outcomes for learners.

In general, colleges, including those whose self-evaluation is most effective, have not yet become fully proficient in evaluating learning and teaching, their core business. This vitally important area has direct impact on learners and colleges need to place the highest possible emphasis on it. In more than a few colleges, improvements are still required in approaches to equality and diversity. Often programme team action plans fail to address improvements for learners by defined equalities categories. In many colleges, self-evaluation reports omit reference to the promotion of equality and diversity through the introduction of refreshed teaching material or adjustments to teaching practices. In more than a few colleges, learner representative arrangements continue to be insufficiently effective. Overall, few colleges have established formal arrangements with schools and HE providers in order to review curriculum content and joint internal evaluation of programmes.

Across Scotland, most colleges know their strengths and their areas for development well. They have well-developed practices in most areas and are aware of the aspects of their provision which they are striving to develop further and improve. However, improvements are still required by all colleges in some aspects of their

approaches to self-evaluation. In more than a few colleges, self-evaluation remains insufficiently robust and is not delivering improved outcomes for learners.

## **8. Recommendations**

The Scottish Funding Council should:

- provide clearer guidance to colleges on the detail required in their annual reports; and
- work with colleges to gain greater value from these reports.

Scotland's Colleges should:

- continue to support colleges to improve their self-evaluation reporting.

Colleges should:

- ensure accurate and comprehensive approaches to college-wide self-evaluation;
- compare PI outcomes with relevant external benchmarks;
- ensure programme team action plans address improvements for learners by defined equalities categories and report on the promotion of equality and diversity;
- ensure programme teams draw up appropriate targets for improvement, including approaches to learning and teaching;
- ensure learner representation arrangements are effective; and
- ensure internal review activities include contributions from representatives from local schools and receiving HE providers.

Education Scotland should:

- continue to monitor the progress made by colleges in taking forward the above recommendations.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Colleges visited in the fieldwork for this report**

- Aberdeen College
- Angus College
- Ayr College
- Coatbridge College
- Inverness College
- John Wheatley College
- Kilmarnock College
- Newbattle College

## Appendix 2

### Glossary of terms

ACR	Annual Course Report
BoM	Board of Management
CL	Curriculum Leader
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
HR	Human Resources
HMIE	HM Inspectorate of Education
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
PI	Performance Indicator
QELTM	Quality and Equality in Learning and Teaching Materials
QI	Quality Indicator
SARU	Student Unit Achievement Ratio
SCR	Successful Completion Ratio
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
sparqs	student participation in quality Scotland
UHI	University of the Highlands and Islands

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