PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN SCOTLAND'S COLLEGES

ACTION RESEARCH
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College Development Network

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INTRODUCTION

Following on from the Professional Learning Action Research published in June 2022, this Action Research takes a broad look at the structure and content of professional learning in all of its forms for everyone who works within a college in Scotland.

Three questions have been influential in directing this research and each of these help to create a snapshot of professional learning post-pandemic, during the academic year of 2022-2023:

1. What is professional learning and how is it currently structured within colleges?
2. With regards to whole college professional learning, what is working well?
3. With regards to whole college professional learning, where are there challenges?

Please note that throughout the discussions that took place for this research, the language being used with regards to professional learning appeared to be under scrutiny and was repeatedly reported to be a challenge that can lead to confusion. Many colleges use terms such as Learning and Development, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and Professional Learning interchangeably whereas other colleges have created distinct meanings for each term. For the purposes of this report the term, professional learning, will be used to cover all areas of learning for all college staff and will include areas such as induction, leadership and management, mandatory training and teaching qualifications amongst others.

Additionally, it is important to note that many colleges have differing department names. To avoid confusion this report will refer to Human Resources (HR) for those who have a traditional HR function, Organisational Departments (OD) where the department has a responsibility for professional learning, in all of its forms. Also, where a college has created a team or department that has a remit for delivering teacher qualifications and wider support for curricular staff, they will generically be referred to as Academic Development (AD).

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN SCOTTISH COLLEGES:
STRUCTURE AND CULTURE

In Scottish Colleges, HR departments have historically held the responsibility for coordinating and delivering on all areas of staff learning and development which mirrored the structure within the majority of industries. Human Resources, and therefore professional learning, structurally sat within the remit of a Vice Principal or Assistant Principal whose areas of reporting covered departments such as HR as well as people focused and often cultural related teams.

Until relatively recently this was true for most colleges but following the creation of regional colleges, many have restructured and devolved elements of professional learning. The majority of colleges now have HR and OD roles that either sit within a whole department or two separate teams that work closely with each other to deal with areas such as:

- Mandatory training
- New staff induction
- Applications for professional learning
- Leadership/management training
- Qualifications for staff
- Wellbeing

* Please note the above list is not exhaustive.

Typically, HR and OD teams generally sit within a college's organisational chart in the directorate most closely associated with People and Culture.

Some colleges also have further devolved elements of professional learning that sit within specialised teams who have a specific focus on learning and teaching. Typically, this includes responsibility for coordinating and/or delivering on teaching, assessing and verification qualifications amongst others. In colleges that have adopted this approach, these teams or individuals are also often used to enhance learning and teaching by supporting curricular staff with current pedagogical topics such as digital pedagogy. This is typically approached in an increasing number of colleges by providing one to one/group support to any member of the workforce with a teaching remit. These teams usually hold the remit to conduct some form of internal observation of learning and teaching and subsequent training/coaching.

Culture of professional learning

The research discovered that the culture associated with professional learning was reported to be highly complex with many variables. There is growing recognition and support around the importance of each member of the workforce to lead much of their own professional learning as they are best placed to know what their individual and professional needs are. However, in practice their professional learning will also be influenced by the needs of their department and of their college and they, in turn, are subject to a variety of external influences, at times diluting the level of autonomy professionals may have to own their professional learning.
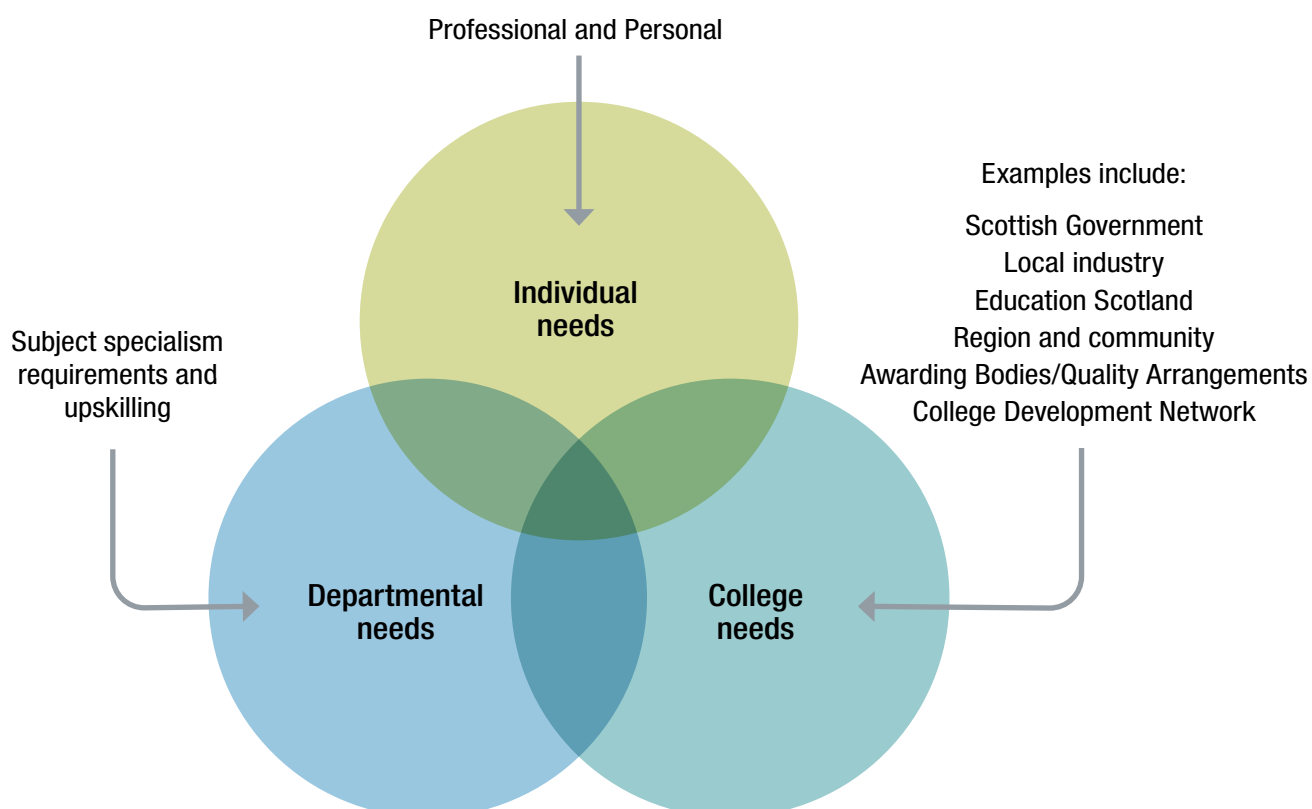
The use of College Development Network's Workforce Survey alongside internal college staff surveys harvest rich information that can be used to help direct all aspects of professional learning within the college. It is here that a positive culture can be expanded on by evidencing that all staff voices are truly heard, listened to, and considered and developing effective professional learning opportunities to support development. **Glasgow Kelvin College** have endeavoured to listen to and use the voice of all staff in the college community to shape all areas of their professional learning. Further information can be found below:

> View Glasgow Kelvin College – A Community of Collaboration Case Study here

Figure 1: Functional model of professional learning in Scottish colleges

Professional and Personal

Individual needs

Subject specialism requirements and upskilling

Departmental needs

College needs

Examples include:

Scottish Government
Local industry
Education Scotland
Region and community
Awarding Bodies/Quality Arrangements
College Development Network

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN SCOTTISH COLLEGES: THE CYCLE OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The rise of digital delivery

Colleges are reporting that following the return to on campus working and delivery, there is a need to retain many online elements of professional learning as part of the college offer and, in some cases, almost all professional learning is being delivered and housed within an online platform. With the education world having been fundamentally altered, there is a desire from most colleges and the workforce, that professional learning should encompass face-to-face sessions in addition to online elements (typically modelling best practice for delivery). This blend of learning opportunities for staff allows for occasions where interdepartmental socialisation, connection and networking can be seen as a priority alongside making learning digitally accessible to all by providing opportunities to access learning at a time that suits each person individually.

Allowing and enabling staff members to access their learning digitally encourages autonomy in addition to familiarity with college systems and software, which in turn, supports the development of digital capabilities for all employees. However, the caveat of having a blend of learning opportunities is that to ensure professional learning is fully inclusive there is additional background work for the deliverer/creator as there is growing demand for synchronous face-to-face, synchronous online, hybrid or asynchronous learning.

To be able to truly offer this range of approaches, with all being delivered at high quality takes a great deal of planning and time as well as the associated digital expertise. The feeling across the sector was unanimous that whilst technology has made it easier to access professional learning opportunities, interdepartmental socialisation, connection and networking is an essential element to be maintained.

Annual themes and events

Annually, most colleges bring staff together in a face-to-face capacity once or twice a year to cover key operational, cultural, department specific topics as well as individual professional areas as per Figure 1. The themes are commonly derived from staff surveys and include topics such as wellbeing and digital capability although senior leadership and OD teams regularly include specific themes that are topical and relevant. The ability to bring the whole workforce together in person was also noted as becoming increasingly difficult due to a variety of contracts and working patterns of the workforce, which at times can be deemed to be somewhat exclusionary.

Any whole college event comes with a wide variety of issues to overcome (logistics, cost, differing needs of the workforce) but they are seen to have

great value in terms of not only disseminating information or providing a place for learning but crucially they are seen positively with regards to the college culture. This is particularly so within large multi-campus colleges where different departments getting time to interact and collaborate is proving to be increasingly tricky.

The overall message from colleges is that nothing will ever replace giving college staff the time and space to connect with each other at in person events however, the reality of professional learning in a modern college is that there is a real need for a blend of options to suit all. Some colleges have experimented with hybrid delivery for large events and others are considering having the majority of events online so all can access the learning live or through recordings. Ultimately, the approach is particular to each college's culture, the accessibility of staff to large scale spaces as well the logistics of bringing people together on one or two days.

Supporting individuals' professional learning

On a day-to-day basis, to manage daily professional learning requirements, all colleges have an application system for professional learning that has various levels of approval. Processes to approve professional learning requests can, at times, be complex and convoluted, however, this is often influenced by a lack of budget. To further compound these complexities there can be tensions with regards to who holds the budget (whether this is a Senior Leader, HR, OD or AD) and the differing priorities of each department.

Funds to support staff financially, or in some cases via remission, to allow members of the workforce to study towards an advanced qualification is a positive offering that many colleges support for any of their staff to access. The level of support varies from college to college and access to this support is usually looked at on a case-by-case basis. It is an offering that colleges are proud of as ultimately it shows their investment in lifelong education for their employees. However, there is a slight apprehension as with recent budget cuts some colleges have already reduced or removed this provision as it is not deemed to be core to their operational requirements. Those that still offer this provision showed a real keenness to keep this support available for as long as possible as they reported seeing the learning coming to fruition within the workplace as well as with each individual on a personal basis.

The power of professional discussion is sometimes overlooked but is appreciated that it is here, that individuals with supportive colleagues, can reflect on their learning whilst considering how to apply the content of the learning in their role. In doing so they are also helping to disseminate and share their knowledge with a peer. There were numerous discussions that considered the real-world value of these conversations prompting everyday learning and the value that these bring within the college environment.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN SCOTTISH COLLEGES: MONITORING AND IMPACT

Monitoring professional learning was mostly reported as being successful but it was reported that there is difficulty gathering information around impact. Where areas such as professional learning workshops have been delivered in college, these are most often automatically logged on internal college software. Immediate post-session evaluation feedback is regularly received and this focusses around the perceived usefulness of the session. However, when it comes to follow up questionnaires or surveys that are based on the impact of this learning, there are numerous challenges in capturing this information. These challenges include:

- Varying use of CPD logs between staff
- Lecturers using GTCS software meaning data is lost to the wider college
- Non-response to follow up conversations or communications
- Access to the data held on CPD logs

Some colleges are having success with individual, short follow up sessions where a member of staff with responsibility for professional learning has a one-to-one conversation to help individuals consider if the professional learning undertaken has been impactful and if so, what does this look like in practice. The challenges in relation to this are the time/resource required to gather such feedback and typically, this was most effective in colleges who have OD or AD teams that have prioritised these conversations and have the capacity to undertake them.

The Professional Review and Development (PRD) is seen to be a critical area that all colleges should ensure that they have in place. Not only does it satisfy the requirements of partners such as the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), but it guarantees that all staff members are given the time and space to consider their own development in response to the ever altering world of the college sector. It was acknowledged that alongside the positive operational objectives and monitoring of professional learning that conducting PRDs brings, there are real and critical, cultural benefits for all. The connection between very busy managers and colleagues cannot be overlooked and where PRDs worked particularly well was when they were not based solely on one annual conversation, but on regular and honest conversations where the employee was listened to, and their voice valued.

Many colleges are introducing new software to capture information across all aspects of professional learning from attendance to general feedback, but with so many variables affecting areas such as classroom practice, this means it is incredibly difficult to truly measure the impact of much professional learning. A clear theme highlighted was that the priority of a practitioner evaluating professional learning often moves down the list of priorities due to other emerging issues. Additionally, reporting any impact of learning moves even further down the growing list of priorities than undertaking the learning itself. Most colleges who noted and accepted these difficulties showed resilience and determination to keep evolving and utilising new techniques to try and build their capacity to report on impact. They also acknowledged the importance of providing space, time and follow up to ensure the review of professional learning and its subsequent impact is given the emphasis it deserves.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN SCOTTISH COLLEGES: POSITIVE PRACTICE

Wellbeing

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and the more recent cost of living crisis, the wellbeing agenda of staff and students has very much been a key feature of how colleges are supporting their staff and students. At times this has been by increasing the knowledge of the workforce to allow individuals to understand the variations in health and wellbeing that have swept through our communities, to both benefit their learners and themselves. At other times it has purely been the college offering practical sessions in order to aid the self-care or wellbeing of the workforce. Topics have ranged from money matters to anxiety relief, from walking clubs to meditation. Where sessions have focused around the topic of wellbeing, these have been reported as being appreciated by staff throughout Scotland's colleges and part of that appreciation is that the college has listened to the voice and needs of their staff and students.

Induction

Each college has a mandatory and rounded induction for all new staff in college, this induction is often complimented with further role or departmental information throughout a staff member's probationary period. Although there are several different induction models in use throughout Scotland, it is clear there has been much thought around how to deliver a comprehensive package, often spanning several weeks or months and covers the basics of working in a complex sector as well as providing a detailed introduction to each college. The time and effort that goes into these inductions is highly valued.

When a lecturer with no teaching experience starts at a college there is a further suite of initial training to consider. Each college has its own approach to starting the important journey of learning to teach for new lecturers. **Glasgow Clyde College has a 12-Week New Lecturer Programme** to increase lecturers' confidence in teaching, as well as providing them with crucial information around areas such as planning for learning and teaching and pedagogical approaches that can be used within the classroom. Further information on this can be found below:

> **View Glasgow Kelvin College – 12-Week New Lecturer Programme Case Study here**

Learning in Industry

Time spent working, or being involved within industry, is noted to be an incredibly valuable method of professional learning particularly for practitioners, and the department they work in. All lecturers *must* have up to date knowledge of the demands of their subject's industry but in the busy college calendar this is increasingly difficult to ensure without actually spending time in industry. Additionally, by spending time in industry each individual can advance or re-enliven their own meta-skills which they will then bring back into their role within each college. Regularly spending time in a local, subject specific organisation is reported as being a much more preferable and relevant way of learning than growing knowledge by more passive methods.

Advanced qualifications

Colleges are large employers within each region and as such they can offer a vast range of employment and promotional opportunities for staff. Staff often look to the college, as their employer, to offer support in helping them to continually develop and progress their educational qualifications. Often this takes the form of undertaking degrees or post-graduate qualifications which are not always necessary for the role they are currently in. Support from the college may take a variety of forms, from contributing to payment of fees for qualifications or allocating time to study. Benefits are reported for both parties but ultimately by supporting individuals to continue with their own education the college can:

- Retain and inspire talented staff
- Aid succession planning without minimum qualifications being an issue
- Role model the importance of lifelong education for those in employment
- Contribute to a culture where their staff members feel their progression and contribution is invested in

Thinking space

Colleges are undoubtedly stretched and much focus is on each employee being as operationally efficient as possible. While this is often a necessary reality it also brings about questions around how individuals and teams can be expected to be innovative and pioneering in order to respond well to the constantly moving tides within the educational world. This highlights the real need to include more opportunities and places for *all* to really stop, think, and explore new ways of being. The creation of thinking spaces is becoming a necessity, whether that is a true space, place or time to horizon scan or consider the possibilities of what might be in the future. Without the ability to look ahead, staff within colleges quickly become stale, uninspiring or left behind in a fast paced world. To give teams space to develop, think and grow, **Moray College** have introduced **Blue Sky Days** in which more information can be found below:

▶ View UHI Moray – Blue Sky Days Case Study here

The growth of specialised roles

There is a growing trend towards creating specialised roles or teams that deal solely with professional learning, recognising specialised expertise rather than it being an added element of a fundamentally different job. Additionally, in some colleges there are Academic Development teams with a remit that brings together professional learning for practitioners which can encompass the induction period, the teaching qualifications as well as general learning and teaching practice, post qualification. Colleges reported that they recognise that these roles require a specialised skillset and at times mindset, which allow for all staff to receive not only appropriate support within their college, but for each member of staff to receive positive professional challenge. In turn this is proving to allow them to continually develop in areas such as learning and teaching, leadership and management as well as growing their soft skills as a professional. Underpinning this model is a strong belief that the relationships built by these staff and their colleagues positively contribute to each colleges working culture.

Coaching

Some colleges have invested in growing the coaching expertise within their college and are reporting the various benefits of doing so. For those who have roles in AD or OD, aiding experienced professionals to reflect or explore elements of their role, the benefits of having coaching skills have been central to their success.

Additionally, highly effective and meaningful conversations within the Professional Review and Development systems in colleges have been attributed to managers having coaching skills to draw on when having one to one developmental conversations.

By investing in training a group of key staff to become qualified coaches, **Fife College** have been able to internally support their staff with **life coaching**. Further information can be found below:

> **View Fife College – Life Coaching Case Study here**

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN SCOTTISH COLLEGES: CHALLENGES

Time

Time was overwhelmingly reported as being the most critical challenge that all individuals and organisations face when organising or undertaking professional learning. This is a Scotland-wide problem and underpins many of the challenges the sector faces. Individuals may face a heavy workload and a variety of competing pressures with each role having various priorities at differing times of the year, therefore, it is often a person's development that is put on hold in favour of completing a priority task. There is some irony as good quality professional learning may aid each staff member in being more efficient within their role thus prioritising an individuals' learning is a critical part of a positive college culture around professional learning.

West Lothian College have recognised that time is a barrier to the growth and development of their professional workforce and have helped to counteract this by introducing **West Lothian Wednesdays**. Further information on this can be found below:

> ▶ View West Lothian College – West Lothian Wednesdays Case Study here

Finance and budgets

A consistent theme was the finance and budgeting for all aspects of professional learning. External courses and training are often costly but necessary, so having healthy professional learning budgets as well as robust procedures and the autonomy to authorise payments for professional learning are key to helping colleges ensure that their funds are spent wisely. All colleges also relayed the importance of staff members disseminating knowledge gained to their peers and other interested parties. Despite all of the above, there was however, a feeling that the budget that covers professional learning is vulnerable, and when there is a requirement across the college to reduce spend, this is often the first to be reduced.

Funding of the Teaching Qualification in Further Education (TQFE)

The funding of the TQFE is proving to be an area of contention within colleges, with many reporting a growing backlog of lecturers waiting to start their qualification. Due to National Bargaining, lecturers are required to obtain the TQFE however, this requires the college to fund both the associated fees for the award and the cost of suitable class cover. It is expected that over the next few years professional learning budgets will reduce and this, coupled with the demand for lecturers to undergo TQFE, leaves uncertainty around how this can be negotiated. Additionally, concerns were raised about how this period of waiting to start the TQFE may have a negative effect on the lecturers and in turn, the learning experience of the students. In most cases, the TQFE also impacts the budget allocated for professional learning. The positive value of undergoing TQFE was however, clearly recognised by all.

Lecturing qualifications pre-TQFE

Some colleges reported that although there is fundamentally nothing wrong with the pre-TQFE qualifications that are in place, the constrained way that colleges have to deliver it means that it can be considered to be a bare minimum model rather than an aspirational and comprehensive one. Feedback is that this, at times, can be overly operational and assessment driven (fast track approach) rather than having the time to appropriately explore and learn about all areas of a complex profession and provide a full and rounded experience to these new lecturers.

Focus on TQFE

There has been a continual focus on the TQFE for many years which some feel is detracting from qualifications and learning prior to undertaking TQFE (College Development Network, 2022). In addition to this, there are some staff who must gain higher level subject-based qualifications before gaining entry to the TQFE. With the TQFE being the focal point, these individuals are often left feeling marginalised, or somewhat lesser, as their path to gaining entry to the TQFE is longer and sometimes only partially financially supported by their employer. Furthermore, there is a feeling amongst some that the subject-based qualifications, that these individuals are required to undertake before the TQFE are, at times taking away from their own professional learning as a practitioner.

Data

One challenge regularly faced is the ability for the OD team to gain *accurate* data around the trends and needs for professional learning within their college. There are several elements which could contribute to this, such as, the quality of conversations had, and whether they are by mentors, coaches or by line mangers. If there is not a considered and robust framework for professional reviews of development, or sufficient time given to each staff member to explore their needs with skilled conversationists, the information a college gains will always be somewhat limited.

The reliance of colleges on the PRD system is reported to be increasing as it is one method that allows for the gathering of information. This data allows for forecasting and planning for supporting the development needs of the practitioners within the college. Some college lecturers have begun using the GTCS's online system for recording their professional learning and colleges are beginning to report lost data, in that they either cannot access this information through their own systems or are asking their staff to record their professional learning in two different systems.

One further area to note is that when staff surveys are utilised, the college can only use the data that is fed back. Therefore, if some staff choose not to take the opportunity to feed their thoughts and considerations back, the data set is essentially incomplete and their needs may not be considered and therefore, may not be met.

Imbalance of professional learning within departments

Professional services staff were reported to access professional learning less than their curricular based colleagues. The reasons behind this were unknown but without professional bodies such as the General Teaching Council for Scotland or similar requiring a minimum amount of recorded hours of learning, it was felt that professional services staff might feel that there were other areas to prioritise.

The image or perception of CPD/Professional Learning

Most individuals begin their career in a college with a perception of what CPD is, gained during their previous employment. Not all of this is positive and leaves the college with a challenge around the use of, and need for, professional learning. CPD has often earned a feeling, in many cases, of being brought in as a reaction to try and smooth over change. The Scottish College sector has been through tumultuous times and with more change forecast in the future there is the worry that any training and development associated with change becomes even more negatively association with professional learning in general. This negative association is seen to be damaging to the image of engaging in professional learning and can be particularly challenging for the team that have to publicise and organise it.

It is also worth being mindful that there may be a temptation to stop listening to colleagues when repetitively hearing that time is tight for staff throughout colleges. When individuals' difficulties around workload become normalised rhetoric, it can be easy to lose sight of the bigger issues and dilute some of the depth of high-quality professional learning to make it fit in to a busy academic year. In doing so, colleges and their staff inadvertently run the risk of misunderstanding or misinterpreting what could and should be in depth, meaningful learning and this, in turn, can affect the image of professional learning within colleges.

THOUGHTS FOR THE FUTURE

Many conclusions could and should be drawn from this piece of action research.

As the chapter on the positive practice demonstrates, there are pioneering and sometimes brave approaches currently being implemented to help combat some of the challenges that the college sector faces. However, when considering the political focus on education, the financial forecast and increased discourse around the tertiary sector, Scottish Colleges are likely to have a somewhat undulating path ahead of them. It is therefore imperative that professional learning is acknowledged as being an integral part of the success of Scottish Colleges. In order to continue to best support modern learners and the local community, colleges' workforces must be able to regularly access the highest quality learning to allow them to stay not only current in their role but thrive as professionals in the college sector.

Thank you to all colleges who contributed their time and shared their expertise and insights during the interviews and extended thanks to those who provided case studies.

College Development Network