Fife College

Forth Valley College

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College Development Network

THE CHANGING LEARNER

A CASE STUDY OF SCHOOL-COLLEGE PARTNERSHIPS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context

This report explores the dynamics of School-College Partnerships (SCPs) in Scotland, focusing on their role in senior phase education and their impact on learners. It builds on a 2021 CDN report, which highlighted the significance of SCPs and recommended further evaluation of their effectiveness. This study uses qualitative research to explore SCPs at a local level, particularly in the post-Covid context, and aims to provide insights for enhancing these partnerships.

Methodology

The research employed CDN's Step Forward action research approach, involving focus groups and interviews with key stakeholders from two regional colleges—Forth Valley College (FVC) and Fife College—and their partner schools. The study aimed to understand the changing learner demographics and the practical functioning of SCPs, addressing two main research questions:

1. Who are our learners and how are they changing?

2. How are our SCPs working and what can we do to enhance our provision?

Findings and Analysis Part 1: The Changing Learner

- **Impact of Covid-19**: The pandemic has significantly affected learners, leading to lower academic performance, delayed skills development, and underdeveloped social skills. Increased anxiety and decreased resilience were noted, exacerbated by the pandemic but part of a pre-existing trend.

- **Digital Transformation**: The shift to digital learning during the pandemic has had mixed effects. While it has increased digital literacy, it has also led to challenges in maintaining attention and engagement.

- **Levels of Anxiety and Resilience**: There is a notable increase in anxiety and a decrease in resilience among learners, requiring more support and nurturing approaches from educators.

Findings and Analysis Part 2: SCPs in Practice

- **Recruitment**: Motivations for choosing SCPs include career goals, new social experiences, and a more relaxed learning environment. However, there are concerns about mismatched expectations and the need for better promotion of SCPs.

- **Transition**: Effective transition processes are crucial. Suggestions for improvement include better communication, more pre-course interactions, and addressing logistical challenges related to course availability and funding.

- **Engagement and Attainment**: Engagement levels vary, with some learners thriving in the college environment while others struggle with the transition. Behavioural issues and the need for clearer expectations were highlighted.

- **Retention**: Retention is influenced by external factors such as socio-economic challenges and mental health issues. Closer communication between schools and colleges and better support systems are needed.

- **Progression**: There is a growing awareness of the value of college pathways among learners and parents. However, more consistent communication about progression opportunities throughout the course is necessary.

Conclusions and Moving Forward

The report underscores the importance of SCPs in providing diverse educational pathways and highlights the need for ongoing support and enhancement to address the evolving needs of learners. Suggestions for further development include:

- Enhancing communication and collaboration between schools and colleges.

- Providing more comprehensive support for learners, particularly those with additional needs.

- Continuing to adapt and improve SCP programmes to better align with learner expectations and career goals.

This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of SCPs and support the ongoing enhancement of educational practices in Scotland.

CONTEXT

Programmes delivered in partnership with schools are a vital – and often overlooked – aspect of colleges' work. For schools, these college partnership courses form a key part of their senior phase provision, allowing them to offer greater choice to their students. In 2021, CDN published a detailed report, using available data to analyse the characteristics of School-College Partnerships (SCPs) at a national level, along with recommendations intended to support the continued enhancement of this pathway. The report showed that in 2019-2020, almost 73,000 (more than one fifth of) senior phase school pupils were involved in an SCP programme, and that School-College Partnerships made up, on average, 22% of all activity in Scotland's colleges (CDN, 2021). Among the report's key recommendations was a suggestion that School-College Partnerships be recognised and identified as a key vehicle for the implementation of the OECD's "Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future" recommendations and "the creation of a coherent learning experience for young people aged 3-18" (CDN, 2021). The report also committed CDN "to undertake further work with strategic stakeholders from schools, colleges, Scottish Government, SFC, SDS, ADES and other relevant organisations….to provide a comprehensive evaluation of School-College Partnerships in terms of their impact on progression and positive destinations" (CDN, 2021).

This report speaks to that final recommendation. It follows on and compliments the aforementioned 2021 report and is the next step in CDN's continued commitment to deepening understanding of SCPs. While the 2021 report (discussed above) looked at the national context in terms of SCPs, the current report looks in greater depth at the functioning of SCPs at a local level, using detailed qualitative research as a vehicle through which to more closely examine some key challenges being faced by colleges and their learners in the post-covid context. It does so utilising CDN's Step Forward action research approach. Designed to provide the framework to turn research and insight into enhancement on the ground in colleges, CDN's Step Forward programme provides a bespoke package of support and guidance for colleges that alongside support in conducting primary research may also include mentoring, evaluation, and other relevant training to assist in the implementation and delivery of interventions and projects that aim to improve practice. This cycle of research, enhancement, further research, further enhancement ensures that CDN's research activities are clearly focussed on delivering systemic change, supporting the enhancement of practice, and improving outcomes for learners.

In early 2023, CDN simultaneously began Step Forward projects working with two of Scotland's largest regional colleges – Forth Valley College (hereafter FVC) and Fife College – to support the enhancement of their Schools College Partnership provision. Like most Scottish Colleges, both FVC and Fife College have an extensive and potentially complex SCP provision, with several parallel SCP strands being offered. In both colleges, these SCP programmes are generally well received by stakeholders and are seen as a welcome provision for learners in terms of developing skills, offering new learning opportunities, and supporting employability. However, in initial consultations with CDN, both colleges noted that the SCP programmes were seeing several challenges, particularly post- pandemic, including increased anxiety amongst learners, increased support needs, an increase in adverse behaviour, and an increase in levels of disengagement and non-attendance, as well as related concerns around retention and withdrawals. These issues were consistent with evidence gathered by CDN from other colleges and stakeholders across Scotland.

Following initial consultations held with respective project teams at Fife College and FVC by CDN, it was agreed that qualitative research aimed at developing a clearer understanding of the experiences of those involved within SCPs would be beneficial in informing the design of interventions aimed at enhancement-led change. The methodology for this research is laid out in the following section and the findings (and analysis of those findings) discussed thereafter in the succeeding sections. In both cases, there was a key desire from the college project teams to understand who SCP learners were, and what changes, if any, were being observed in this cohort. Both project teams also wished to look in more detail at the often-individualised approach to partnership working with key stakeholders across the SCP programmes in order to identify key systemic and practical challenges, as well as potential areas for change and enhancement. For the participating colleges, these desired focus areas led to two key research questions emerging:

1. Who are our learners and how, if at all, are they changing?

2. How are our SCPs working and what can we do to enhance our provision?

While the full findings of the research will be used by the participating colleges to underpin enhancement-led change within their organisations, the summary findings within this report also aim to contribute to the wider exploration of two important phenomena which have recently garnered considerable academic and policy attention, and which are closely linked to CDN's ongoing research and enhancement activities: the nature and functioning of SCPs and the nature of the "changing learner".

In academic terms, the first of these phenomena links closely to ongoing curriculum studies research that focuses particularly on variety in the senior phase provision and, in some cases, the role of School-College Partnerships within that. For example, the work of Shapira et al (2023), focussed on the impact of Curriculum for Education (CfE) on the narrowing of the secondary curriculum and the work of Thomson and Maguire (2022) looking how senior phase provision is organised at the regional and local level. The second of these phenomena (the construct of the changing learner) is closely linked to the ongoing study of the impact of the pandemic on learners, and particularly of the (often uneven) 'learning loss' caused by the pandemic.

This research also comes at a critical juncture in terms of the broader educational policy reform landscape in Scotland. In June 2023, James Withers published his report on the skills system in Scotland, which pointed to fragmentation in the skills delivery landscape and "tensions" between different pathways and programmes that could lead to challenges for users trying to navigate the system (Withers, 2023). In the same month, the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment was published, which provided recommendations on reform of qualifications and assessment in the senior phase (Hayward, 2023).

While not intended as a direct response to either of these reports or ongoing policy discussions, the findings within this report, are intended to contribute to a deepening understanding of SCPs, their place in the Scottish education system and the experiences of learners within them. The report presents detailed case studies to enrich our understanding of this crucial part of the Scottish education system and of the challenges institutions and their learners face in a post-covid context. The report also aims to provide insights that will support CDN, in turn, to support Scotland's colleges to review and enhance their practice, as well as providing an evidence base to be used to inform CDN's future research and enhancement activities in these areas.

METHODOLOGY

Following from initial consultations with the respective SCP teams, two key research questions were identified. These were:

1. Who are our learners and how, if at all, are they changing?

2. How are our SCPs working and what can we do to enhance our provision?

To answer these questions, it was proposed to collect data from a range of key SCP stakeholders including college staff, school staff working with the colleges involved on SCP programmes, SDS staff working within schools and learners themselves. This was done through a series of focus groups and interviews. This qualitative approach was deemed most effective in garnering a range of staff and learner perspectives on the research questions, with the ability to explore this complex topic in depth with participants a key strength relative to other potential research methods, such as surveys, where low response rate and variability in responses could lead to patchy data. The information collected from these focus groups was recorded, transcribed, and then analysed using Qualitative Content Analysis to draw out themes for discussion.

Ensuring the research captured a wide range of perspectives was a key consideration when designing focus groups, especially given the aforementioned breadth of SCP activity at both colleges and the potential for diversity in experiences this creates. The potential diversity of experiences was furthered by the large number of individual institutional partnerships involved in the delivery of SCP programmes at both colleges. FVC serves 3 Local Authority areas (Falkirk, Stirling and Clackmannanshire), while Fife College serves a single Local Authority area (Fife). Combined, these four Local Authority areas account for around 12.4% of the Scottish population (NRS, 2022).

As a result, both FVC and Fife College support a large number of diverse and distinct local communities through their School-College Partnership (SCP) programmes. At FVC these programmes are delivered in partnership with 18 Local Authority secondary schools, 2 independent schools, 3 secondary support services and a further 3 schools out with the local authority feeder areas. Fife College, meanwhile, deliver their SCP programmes in partnership with 18 Local Authority secondary schools and 8 secondary support services.

To capture the potentially wide range of experience within this large number of individual inter-institutional relationships and to provide insight from a diverse range of high school contexts, a broad range of focus groups and interviews were conducted. As well as both colleges, data was gathered from 14 schools (3 from the Fife SCP region and 11 from the FVC SCP regions). This ensured that the research incorporated data from all council areas represented within the project scope and captured experiences from some 39% of mainstream Local Authority high schools from those within the catchment areas outlined in the project scope. A summary of institutions covered by the focus groups and interviews conducted as part of the research is provided in table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of research focus groups

College Staff focus groups	School interviews	Learner focus groups
Curriculum and support staff at: • FVC • Fife College	Depute Heads, Pastoral Care and Guidance staff and SDS School Careers Advisers at: • School A • School B • School C • School D • School E • School F • School G	Learners from • School H • School I • School J • School K • School L • School B • School C • School D • School E • School G • School M • School N

Data was gathered in March 2023 and this report presents the data as a series of themes with the collated responses of those taking part in the research grouped accordingly.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS PART 1: THE *'CHANGING LEARNER'*

1.1 Overview

A key question for the respective project teams at FVC and Fife College was whether (and, if so, to what extent) there were recent changes in the way learners were presenting within the learning environment and in their approaches to, and engagement with, learning on SCP programmes. The focus groups explored whether staff in schools and colleges had observed any changes over time in this respect and compared these against learners' own perceptions of how events, notably the Covid 19 pandemic, and phenomena such as ongoing digital transformation, were impacting their engagement with learning generally, and their SCP programme in particular. From this, several key themes emerged including changes in social and practical skills development, increasing expressions of anxiety and expressions of decreasing resilience, increasing reliance and interaction with digital technology, and changing methods of communication.

Whilst a number of themes relating directly to the impact of the pandemic were identified, such as those of levels of prior learning, learning loss and readiness to learn, it is important to stress that themes, such as increasing learner anxiety or increasing digital interactions, were generally seen as independent, although arguably exacerbated by the pandemic. Identifying such themes or trends as independent and, in some cases, as longstanding, was valuable in extending and exploring any narrative pertaining to 'the changing learner' beyond the narrower confines or discourse limited to 'pandemic related impact'. As such, the findings of the research suggest that colleges today are experiencing a complex and challenging 'changing learner' profile. In such a circumstance, finding effective ways to adapt their approach to the seemingly rapidly evolving needs of their learners is of vital importance to colleges where the future success of their SCP (and potentially other) programmes is concerned.

1.2 Impact of Covid

During and in the aftermath of the pandemic, a number of academic studies have looked to quantify the impact of school closures on learning, for example see Major et al (2021). Many focussed on the socio-economic dimension of the pandemic, such as Andrew et al (2020) who examined the impact of family income on pandemic learning hours and Black (2020) who looked at the impact of the lockdown on the poverty-related attainment gap. As part of a broader exploration of 'changing learner' characteristics, this research was keen to explore the impact of pandemic associated school closures and learning loss within the affected cohort as they progressed into the college system via SCP programmes.

A series of staff focus groups and interview sessions explored whether schools and colleges had seen any changes in the way learners were presenting within the learning environment. Learners were also invited to reflect within their own specific focus groups on how they perceived the pandemic to have affected their learning. From discussions, three key pandemic impacts were subsequently identified: lower learning levels due to learning loss, delayed skills development (including practical skills) and underdeveloped social skills impacting learning and behaviour. Issues such as increasing anxiety and decreasing resilience were also identified, however these were widely attributed by school and college

staff to being part of an existing trend which had been observed pre-Covid with periods of lockdown and social isolation potentially exacerbating rather than causing this trend. It was also noted that these issues continue to manifest post pandemic, despite periods of lockdown and associated restrictions within the learning environment now lifted.

Prior Learning

Where lower prior learning levels and skills development are concerned, both college and school staff expressed a view that the pandemic had impacted the academic abilities of the cohort as a whole and that an increased number of learners were currently struggling at levels which they would have been previously expected to reach at their stage of education. Schools across a range of local authority areas expressed that they had already been making changes to provision to accommodate this change:

> **"We can certainly see that there has been a dip in terms of the learning, and I would say that in the last couple of years we have introduced a lower level. We call these groups 1E and 2E. These are our classes in the BGE (Broad General Education (up to S3)) where these pupils are below the expected level. They're working at, in some cases an earlier level, or a first or a second level, and we've had to adapt our curriculum and increase our amount of support or our support staff for learning and learning assistants into these classes.**
>
> **(School A – DH)**

> **"We see that in our lower sections in maths and it is much bigger than it previously was. It used to be quite a small group. Maybe we'd previously have had a streamed class, but the number is huge this year.**
>
> **(School E -PT)**

> **"There was definitely a significant impact on academic performance in terms of the lower levels for the teachers in getting kids over the line. Some kids need cajoled and encouraged to engage with their learning. There was a big dip, and I think it's going to take us a while to recover.**
>
> **(School C- PT).**

Skills Development

Prior learning experiences and the direct experience of pandemic related learning loss were attributed to a 'changing learner' demographic. Staff at FVC felt that there had been a shift in their typical student profile post-pandemic in terms of basic skills levels with some learners presenting with lower-than-expected levels at this stage in their education. College staff expressed that "students do not appear to have the same foundation knowledge of basic academic skills, for example aspects of writing, including spelling, grammar and punctuation and for more abstract concepts such as problem solving". This was echoed by school staff who detailed similar observations, with study skills and social skills evidently reduced post-pandemic:

> **"The other thing is, and maybe not so much at the 3rd and 4th levels, but for the group that are coming up in the next two to three years...for the S1s…, as a science teacher, I would say their skill levels are way below what they would have been. Their practical skills… simple things like holding and using rulers and stuff that they should have learned years and years ago. They just don't have the level that they should have. There's a twofold side to it. There's the emotional side where the pandemic knocked the stuffing out of them for a chunk of learners, plus their practical skill levels have dropped as well as having gaps in their knowledge. That has had a massive effect.**
>
> **(School F -PT)**

Another teacher noted:

> **I think the literacy skills level is very poor and part of that is our fault because during the pandemic they were all forced onto their Chromebooks and obviously a lot of them have spent a lot of time doing things like gaming because that's how they could communicate. So, I'm finding in the classroom the basic literacy skills level is also very poor, so that might be something that would really impact some of them at college.**
>
> **(School F- PT)**

Compounding this observed skills deficit, both college and school staff expressed a lack of learners 'being ready to learn'. FVC staff cited that the assessment process over the pandemic period had been a contributing factor to these skills deficits. Experiences and terms such as 'disconnect' and disparity are often expressed in narratives surrounding the pandemic and within this research it was found that there was a prevailing 'expectation disconnect' between those providing education and those engaged in learning, related to 'readiness to learn'. Extended periods of lockdown, staff and student illness and a move to online learning during the pandemic meant that the provision of extra notes and more flexibility around deadlines and assessments became commonplace. FVC staff expressed that students were being enabled by processes that potentially inhibited key skills development, particularly with open-book assessments. In staff interviews this was found to be impacting in both the college and in schools:

> **We have kids who are not as engaged and responsible for their own learning, as they perhaps should be. The expectation is that it will be handed to them.**
>
> **(School D – PT)**

For the cohort of learners directly affected by lockdown restrictions, expectations of boundaries and deadlines for completion were found to have shifted post pandemic. School staff highlighted the impact that this was having on those learners making the transition into college full time or onto SCPs:

> **Some or most of them were doing things even more in their own time. So, deadlines aren't always met. You have to be really on them with it. If we're talking about what the learners are like now, I say that I think since Covid you really have to push your deadlines...as a teacher team and remind them of that. They were used to a wee bit more flexible learning over the seniors and 3rd year group. I think those are the ones who have been quite hard to engage. Obviously, you'll see them at college now with the partnership courses and the same with last year's 4th year as well. They've got used to being even more relaxed in their learning.**
>
> **(School A – PT)**

Interestingly and additionally, school staff also noted some challenge in enforcing boundaries as parental support, whilst broadly still in evidence, had been affected by the experience of lockdown and online delivery.

> **We've still got parents to this day phoning in saying issues are due to Covid and stuff like that. It may well be that they (learner) have got Covid, but I think for several months after the restrictions and kids were not used to being back, that was happening. Because they've been off for quite a bit the foot had been kind of taken off the gas by some parents and that it's ok for kids to have another wee day off.**
>
> **(School A – PT)**

Where schools and colleges had moved to create alternative delivery and additional support to mitigate the loss of face-to-face learning during lockdown, challenges were now being faced as restrictions lifted and as pandemic responsive supports began to be removed during the return to face-to-face learning. As noted by college staff:

> **"Extra help/notes/resources available during pandemic have now been taken away – this is not helping.**
>
> **(FVC – Teaching staff)**

Against this backdrop, staff in schools and colleges are noting increasing calls for support from learners following the lifting of covid mitigations. It was clear that there was an emergent post pandemic 'expectation disconnect' around what constitutes a reasonable level of support. Staff felt challenged to provide more than would previously have been deemed as 'reasonable' levels of support to sustain learning as covid mitigations were removed, with staff expressing the view that many learners were seemingly less likely to take ownership or responsibility for their learning post pandemic.

Covid mitigations were not always helpful from a learner perspective with participants discussing a disparity in support provision during and after the pandemic. Within the learner focus groups, one example highlighted was the level of extra support that had been put in place for learners who were sitting exams during the pandemic which had now been taken away. Learners expressed the view that this loss of extra level of support made it difficult and indeed unfair for those learners who are having to re-sit courses post-pandemic. In essence, resitting a Higher post-pandemic was expressed as being more challenging than sitting the same Higher pre-pandemic by learners. When discussing SCP courses specifically, it was also highlighted within learner focus groups that the structure of the SCP courses, wherein learners pre and post pandemic would often have one lesson per week in the college, a shift to distance learning during the pandemic was viewed as negative. The experience of coming onto the physical college environment was seen as an integral part of the learning experience and the pandemic pivot a remote digital learning environment left many learners feeling that they were cheated of valuable real time experience, negating any differential between the SCP and school offer and provision.

Social Skills

From the data gathered, it was found that learners' social skills had been impacted by the pandemic with staff noting an underdevelopment of social skills than would hitherto have been expected. Although changes to social skills presentation were in evidence prior to periods of covid related lockdown, changes were felt to have been accelerated and exacerbated with staff at FVC explaining that wider discussions in class had become difficult to facilitate. This was largely attributed to reduced social exposure during the pandemic and a lack of social mixing, with students not being "pushed from their comfort zone for two years and this was visible".

College lecturers felt that "students are emotionally and socially 2-3 years behind where they were pre-covid", which brought with it challenges to the learning experience and caused learners to have a less mature attitude to learning independently. The lecturers highlighted that the learners feel "everything is more daunting to them" and that this emotional response was typically disproportionate to the demands being placed upon them. Reasons for this, suggested by the lecturers, pertained to a lack of socialisation during the pandemic. Similar sentiment was echoed by the schools in terms of readiness to learn and the need for increased support across the broad spectrum of learners:

> **There were kids who attended school pre Covid and that we could not get them back through the door at all. You then got the ones who came back, who then couldn't fully engage, who couldn't cope with being back in this environment. So all these things are, as you know, multifactoral and it's all tied together. You couldn't even say that they're all from the one community either, because they're spread across all communities and all the deciles. So, it does tie in with the changes Covid...all of that mixed bag that we have in front of us.**
>
> **(School F- PT)**

> **Where pupils were able to gain the resilience through just being at school every single day and learning to cope with certain situations and whether that be academically or socially content wise, knowledge wise, they were able to kind of build on that through the years and they coped. And I do think that the pandemic has just put a stop in that progression and actually what that's done is they've veered off this path and trying to get them back on it is where we're having real issues.**
>
> **(School BPT)**

The digital transformation factor is a thread which weaves through our findings on the 'changing learner' and will be revisited within the context of a number of themes within this report. It was generally acknowledged that 'immaturity' and 'unpreparedness' in 'real world' social situations had been affected by an increased reliance on digital communications and interactions during the periods of lockdown with staff noting:

> **They're so often at home and on devices so they're not going out and getting any experiences in situations where they have to deal with it. So, I think generally resilience is maybe a tiny bit lower than it was even before Covid and Covid has impacted on that as well.**
>
> **(School D PT)**

The impact of lockdown and associated social isolation was also described as being a factor affecting levels of social maturity with more learners displaying behaviour that was more immature than would be expected at this age and stage. Examples included:

> **In terms of social interactions, we see that our 1st years might be less able to maturely interact with their peers. There's a lot more kind of running around and play that we've just never really experienced in high school before that you might do more akin to see in a in a primary school playground. And I wonder if that has a knock-on effect as they go up. If they're socially a year or two behind where perhaps they would have been before the pandemic. And again, not all of them, but enough that it's a kind of noticeable group. The kind of nasty interactions that some girls can have, or the kind of immature interactions that some boys can have.**
>
> **(School E -PT)**

> **When they were in first year it was like we had a set of primary sevens.**
>
> **(School A- DH)**

> **You're having conversations like 'that's just not how seniors behave. That's not what you do when you're in high school' and that kind of thing. Not a huge amount of malice or anything, just a change in their approach.**
>
> **(School E -PT).**

As in any social study, it would be wrong to assume a homogeneity within any given group, without considering group members' unique and individual nuances. Learner groups across schools and colleges may inhabit a communal learning environment, however they do so whilst bringing their own individual context, experiences and perceptions to bear. It is therefore important to note that several schools taking part in this research commended the behaviour of their young people and would reject any suggestion that all learners present in a generic way post pandemic. Many senior phase pupils were praised for their maturity in the face of a challenging learning experience during Covid.

> **"I would like to stress that I feel like a lot of them have started to turn already back to what we would hope and what we would expect. And a lot of them have just grown up, but it just took them a little bit longer because of the pandemic. But I genuinely believe especially over the last kind of couple of months, maybe because of the SQA exams, that's really given them a focus and given them a purpose.**
>
> **(School B – DH)**

The research found that learners observed changes in their own social interactions with loneliness and social isolation cited as having been difficult during the pandemic. Although restrictions had been lifted during the data collection phase of this research, school staff noted that learners continue to discuss the long-term impact that the pandemic had on them:

> **"A lot of the time they will discuss things like that, especially when they're talking about kind of moving on from school and a lot of them do mention Covid and the impact that had .... definitely. So, I think that is definitely a big thing.**
>
> **(School D – PT)**

1.3 Levels of Anxiety and Resilience

Inherent within discussions around 'lack of readiness to learn' and 'underdeveloped social skills' were the recurring themes of anxiety and resilience. Increasing levels of anxiety and decreasing levels of resilience were noted as being evident within the current learner cohort with school and college staff relaying that a growing number of learners faced significant levels of anxiety related mental health challenges. Often staff directly related this theme to the impact of the pandemic, however, it was also notable that many staff expressed the view that the pandemic may have exacerbated rather than caused any shifts in this area. To address increased levels of anxiety, school and college staff stated that a key focus in supporting students had been on 'nurturing behaviour'. Although helping mitigate anxiety, this 'nurture' approach has a had significant and often detrimental impact on the delivery of learning and teaching due to the time and resource involved as well as placing increasing demand on support services. An increasing level of demand for support within schools and colleges was attributed to an existing trend, evident before although notably exacerbated by the pandemic, and was viewed as representative of a broader 'changing learner' demographic.

Increased Anxiety and Demand for Support

Schools and colleges taking part in the focus group and interview sessions agreed that there had been a significant increase in demand for support post pandemic, with many learners struggling to cope with the demands of what would have been hitherto expected at age and stage of education. It was found that increased calls for support extended beyond any expectational shift in 'readiness to learn'. Learners were found to both articulate and present with complex mental health and learning support needs. In commonplace day-to-day tasks, staff also reported a general increase in the need for support in areas such as form filling or appointment making. Often seemingly straightforward asks were being seen as challenging for an increasing number of young people post pandemic:

> **Yes, there's been massive changes. The young people are far needier. They need so much more support. Their anxiety levels have multiplied 1000%. The idea of going in and tackling something on your own as an individual for a lot of them is a big fear. So yeah, they need a considerable amount of support.**
>
> **(School F PT)**

> **At the moment we're doing quite a number of activity agreements for kids who need that additional support. They can't just be, you know, 'here, help you fill out a form, get you on your way. You'll be fine'. They need a level of support that's much, much greater than that. It's 1-1, or 1-2 level support to nurse them to that next point in their life. They can't really just do it straight off the bat.**
>
> **(School F PT)**

The observation that the increasing need for mental health support predated the Covid pandemic with schools was highlighted by School A, with staff detailing a need to put in place mental health support services for vulnerable learners some years previously, and then extending this service post pandemic.

> **I wouldn't say that it's [anxiety] currently increasing. What I would say is we saw a spike in mental health issues across young people and about late 2017, 2018 actually, before the pandemic was even known about. Since then, we've got 3 workers from Wellbeing Scotland that are in the school. We have MCR pathways in the school as a partner. Since the pandemic we've introduced a Wellbeing Hub. We've reconfigured our school library, which is much smaller now, and we've used that huge space that we had in School A for our Wellbeing hub.**
>
> **(School A – DH)**

Within the learner focus groups, mental health and wellbeing was noted as being very much impacted by learners struggling with the demands of coursework and compounded by feelings of isolation derived from thinking they were the only ones struggling. This School C pupil shared their reflection of how they felt during lockdown and the associated shift to online learning:

> **If you are struggling and you're not with other people, you don't know if they're struggling because you are alone" followed up with "if we continue with this way of learning then those feelings go on longer than they need to.**
>
> **(Learner – focus group)**

Staff at Fife College reported seeing a significant increase in anxiety levels across the learner cohort now coming onto study within the SCP, with those presenting without any additional support needs being very much in the minority.

> **We have had huge issues with kids affected by Covid and they were those 1st and 2nd years during lockdown. They maybe weren't forgotten but they didn't get as much attention as the 4th, 5th and 6th years at the time. Their anxiety levels are through the roof. We were seeing that in their few weeks trial before the summer, we couldn't get them through the door because their anxiety levels were through the roof. The increase in mental health issues and anxieties has skyrocketed and you're lucky if 1 in 10 doesn't have an issue.**
>
> **(Learning and Teaching Support – Fife College)**

Although some learners had expressed a sense of dissatisfaction around a loss of college experience due to the shift to online learning, some learners were also anxious about entering unfamiliar physical spaces post pandemic. College staff noted an increase in anxiety relating to SCP course delivery within colleges with some learners anxious about coming onto campus:

> **"The difference between pre-Covid and now is that we get a lot of questions when they [learners] start, with them asking if their courses were still online because they didn't want to come into the college campus.**
>
> **(Learning and Teaching Support – Fife College)**

Within the focus groups, particularly when discussing the theme of 'transition', learners did express feelings of nervousness and a lack of confidence in coming onto the new learning environment of the college, however did not directly relate this to the impact of the pandemic.

Decreasing Resilience

Linked to the presentation of increasing anxiety levels being in schools and colleges was the theme of decreased levels of resilience within learner cohorts. For one school, increasing levels of learner anxiety were inextricably interlinked with decreasing levels of resilience. Within the staff focus groups and interviews, decreased resilience was seen as driving higher anxiety levels with calls to proactively address resilience capacity building and skills to help mitigate spiralling anxiety:

> **"We've all had this chat and there are issues with mental health. But it should not be an excuse for a lot, because a lot of it is about resilience, and I think it's about using the word resilience more than mental health. Everybody's going to get knock backs and that's ok. You're not always going to get what you want. And it is maybe instead about coping strategies i.e., how to deal with things and move forward.**
>
> **(School D PT)**

Decreasing resilience levels were not always attributed to the pandemic with one PT within a secondary school drawing on the socio-economic dimension elements at play. For him, low levels of resilience had been noted within learner groups most affected by poverty.

> **"The resilience has probably been a concern for some of the young people for a number of years, and very much in terms of my job, which is equity – where we're trying to support the most vulnerable, the kids in poverty who, we get the data on, and we track them.**
>
> **(School E- PT)**

Decreasing levels of resilience were also attributed to a generational shift, with young people both forging and projecting their identity against a backdrop of technological change and rapid changes in digital communication. The role of increased social media interaction, alongside societal changes, such as increasing parental anxiety in early years childhood development, e.g. responses to 'stranger danger', have been notable factors. In a recent book '*The Anxious Generation*' social psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that the decline of free play, diminishing childhood freedom and increased use of smartphones directly links to increased levels of distress in adolescents (Haidt 2024). A generation of parents heavily influenced by reports of child abduction and exposed to Public Safety campaigns in the 70s and 80s has arguably impacted on young people today in relation to their skills and capacity building in areas such as 'risk assessment'

and 'decision making' with parents keen to prevent hazards and provide 'safe' solutions. Practitioners and educators taking part in this research expressed that this generation of young people are so often at home and on devices meaning that they lack in opportunity to gain any experiences in situations where resilience may be required or developed. The pandemic was seen as only one factor in this change with social media usage and engagement also seen as a key factor:

> **"I know a lot of that anxiety does have to do with the pandemic but way above and most of that's going to come from society today and social media. I think that's the main problem with all that.**
>
> **(School A -PT)**

Social media platforms are fraught with the potential for ridicule and bullying just as young people begin to shape their identity and offer an unforgiving 'margin of error' from a digitally extended audience of peers. Avoidance of error or fear of failure was seen by one Principal Teacher as impacting on attempts to take on new challenges.

> **"There's an extreme lack of resilience and lack of determination to try and push through the uncomfortable zones, or if they're being taken out of their comfort zone. They don't really know how to figure things out all the time and try to take themselves out and push forward. Failure being an opportunity to learn is a lot less of an expression that we're going to use nowadays. 'Failure' now means I'm stopping and giving up and turning back the way.**
>
> **(School F – PT)**

College staff delivering on SCP programmes increasingly observed a notable decrease in levels of resilience within recent learner cohorts, and often noted this within the context of increasing levels of reported absence. It was found that mental health was frequently cited as a reason for absence, with absence levels increasing at key points in the year, particularly around exam leave periods for prelims and final exams. Attendance issues were not confined to the colleges with schools continuing to cite ongoing attendance issues in the post pandemic period:

> **"Attendances, honestly, is a relentless job. And it's a job trying to increase the attendance of the children. It's a job trying to support the parents and empower them and get the right supports around. But we're not in the house with them every day.**
>
> **(School E- PT)**

> **"Attendance is probably the biggest issue alongside gaps in learning. Gaps in the learning is probably knock on effect from Covid, but also due to the 1E and 2E class [lower-level classes].**
>
> **(School A -PT)**

School staff reported experience of trauma, increased anxiety and concerns over falling behind as factors in protracted cases of non-attendance.

> **"We've got a kind of small but persistent group who regularly don't attend class and actually when you speak to them, it's because they're lost. They're worried about going in because of how much they've missed, and it becomes a real, an actual struggle for them because they really feel that they are not where their peers are. They've not got the information.**
>
> **(School E – PT)**

> **There are some individuals who are maybe not coping and we're seeing some avoidance of class. You know where kids go to the toilet and some at times behaviour is not acceptable. We know all the kids that are displaying that behaviour, and we know the reason for it. It is either back to some trauma or chaos at home or struggling to access the learning and so we're supporting those pupils.**
>
> **(School D – PT)**

> **If you're getting some work and you're struggling with it, then it's always easier that you just shut down and say I actually can't do this.**
>
> **(School D- PT)**

An interesting finding on resilience related to an alternative and contrasting perspective from learners on how they perceive their own resilience levels. In learner focus groups, some of those taking part expressed the sentiment that the pandemic had made them and fellow students more resilient. They noted that the experience of remote learning and of not having teachers readily and physically available had meant that they had required to work out problems for themselves. Comments included:

> **You had no option but to do it yourself, so you had to do it yourself which has made us more resilient.**
>
> **(Learner – focus group)**

Reflection

The themes emerging in this section are clearly linked to broader societal issues around changes in young people's mental health and, although discussed here within an SCP context are clearly relevant in a wider college and education context. Participants broadly agreed that increased levels of anxiety and demand for mental health support were being seen in schools and colleges, and on SCP programmes that are the intersection point of the two.

The question of resilience elicited a wider array of perspectives. In many cases, perceptions of learners' resilience levels post-pandemic differed markedly depending on who was being asked. Learners themselves tended to characterise their cohort as the most resilient ever, often referring to their having overcome the challenges and interruptions to their learning caused by the covid pandemic as evidence of this. Teachers and lecturers generally suggested the opposite was true. The views expressed by this latter group would suggest that the covid pandemic served to exacerbate an ongoing trend of increasing anxiety and declining resilience among learners.

A question that emerged for colleges from the research concerned the approaches they take to providing support for learners. Particularly, there was considerable discussion of a range of nurturing approaches being used in schools to support learners, and colleges may want to examine how closely the approach they take aligns with that taken in school in this respect.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the digital age was linked by many research participants to increasing levels of anxiety and decreasing resilience. As discussed in the next section, its development was also considered by many to be directly impacting upon learning.

1.4 Digital Transformation

The rapid pace of technological advancement has seen a change in levels and patterns of digital engagement not least with increased mobile phone usage. Studies by Langan et al (2016) and Ravizza et al (2017) have shown that digital technology usage and associated increased interruptions were impacting upon learners' ability to focus pre-pandemic. Interruption, defined as 'new additional action that interferes with ongoing action' is an increasingly inherent feature of life, as mobile applications such as social media, image taking and image sharing apps, gaming and consumer applications provide and demand new and ongoing attention. Reflecting broader narratives in education, both school staff and college staff taking part in this research highlighted mobile phone usage as a key disrupter within the learning environment.

Impact of Mobile Phones and Social Media

School staff across all focus groups found mobile phone usage extremely challenging as lockdown had increased reliance on this type of communication and were therefore exposed to increased interruption. Referring to changes in the learner cohorts, one teacher noted:

> **"The other thing I would say is a lack of attention. Our young people sometimes struggle with a lack of it and can't pay much attention for any longer than a few seconds to take in instructions.**
>
> **(School A PT)**

It was also noted that learners accustomed to long periods of social and physical isolation during lockdown used mobile phones and apps as their main source of connectivity to peers and to the outside world during lockdown. This was seen to be impacting on levels of alertness or engagement and was attributed to the 24-7 nature of digital interruption offered via mobile phones.

> **"I think a lot of young people, since Covid, have been turning night into day, so a lot of their patterns are absolutely reversed and that their addiction to their mobile phone is there.**
>
> **(School D – PT)**

It was, however, stated that extended periods of mobile phone usage were already commonplace pre-pandemic and that social skills were already being impacted by digital transformation. The pandemic was however seen to further erode boundaries around usage and extend opportunities for digital interruption as schedules moved to become more flexible and learning moved to asynchronous delivery. Enforcing a zero-tolerance policy and policing mobile usage was ever more challenging in school post-pandemic as these boundaries and norms shifted during lockdown, with school staff often highlighting the challenges faced at home by parents. Enticing and evolving modes of entertainment and social interaction are driving young people deeper into a digital world. Applications also deliver content in continuous short, sharp bursts with parents also struggling to draw young people away from an onslaught of relentless content and communication.

> **One of the big things that I see just now actually is very much disempowered parents and carers. They are disempowered around what they can and can't ask their child and in the boundaries that they can put in. One of the things I notice is that we have some learners, some as young as S1 who will not put their phone down, but we also have parents who feel they cannot do anything, and they will say that, from a pupil support perspective that they can't take their phone off them and that's even when we might be telling them that it is impacting on their child's learning, their well-being, their attendance, their attainment. So that's a big change that I've seen, and it's not always from some of our more vulnerable parents. It can be from middle class professional parents where they don't feel they have the power to really manage the social interaction and the access to data and the access to phones which does have an impact in school and has an impact on the classroom teacher and their management of not just phones, behaviour as well, but phones.**
>
> **(School E PT)**

This research also highlighted the ways social media interaction negatively impacted on peer dynamics. Within the school, staff interviews and focus groups, conflict resolution was identified as having become more protracted and complex within the last five years in schools, with social media allowing a wider audience to be drawn into conflicts and with social media posts prolonging and feeding disputes. Conflict is often captured as entertainment, with footage of fights shared broadly across both a local and potentially global audiences.

> **For me a big thing is mobile phones as mentioned. Social media bullying that used to happen outside of school coming into school. That kind of Monday morning thing with a young person not being ready to learn because of something that has happened at the weekend and the social media element to that means it's relentless and it's ongoing.**
>
> **(School E – PT)**

Trolling (posting insulting or provoking comments) on social media is also a problem with conflict escalating as comments are posted, or with young people living in fear of being singled out and 'othered'. Communicating digitally has also been seen to impact on real world interactions and friendships with technology-based communication reducing opportunities to develop verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Periods of lockdown were observed as exacerbating this trend, however there were also signs of young people managing interactions more positively as learning returned to classrooms.

> **We did notice there was like, a massive deficit with kind of friendship stuff and they just didn't really know how to relate to each other and the fallouts. Just managing those kinds of social situations. So, I would say that was the kind of biggest thing from last year that was significantly different from the last time I had first year. This year is kind of settled down because they're able to kind of manage that, although they are still falling out with each other, they are already able to kind of process that a little bit better this year.**
>
> **(School B – PT)**

Communication and Engagement in Online Learning

For a number of years, digital transformation has also been changing the ways in which learners receive and respond to communications and information. As apps and social media platforms become the main modes of communication for young people, increasingly, learners are less likely to be accustomed to checking emails for information. Schools and colleges have not adapted to these modes of communication as readily or as easily as young people, and important communications still being delivered by email, were being missed:

> **We've had some emails recently from the college where pupils haven't responded, and we've been able to chase that up. Quite often kids get their information... well when it comes through e-mail, kids are terrible at checking their e-mail. So that is a barrier for them. We're able to communicate...and if the college communicates via email, if the kids don't get a prompt, they wouldn't necessarily do it, and I also know from experience that lots of college emails go directly to spam.**
>
> **(School F PT)**

> **A huge area that could be improved on is parental communication for part time college courses. At the moment the college communicates directly with the pupil and that can be very difficult for us and can pose a huge barrier for the pupil. For example, if the pupil receives an email around a level 4 or an 'access' level course they have applied to, they may not have the necessary literacy skills to access the length of emails they receive from the college and then they might not respond to tasks where necessary. Whereas, if a parent was copied into the original and all future emails, then the engagement would likely be more consistent from the beginning.**
>
> **(School C PT)**

The Covid pandemic further entrenched digital communication as a norm for young people as hitherto face-to-face delivery of learning and the provision of support and administrative services moved online. Students discussed the difficulties faced with online learning during the pandemic such as being self-directed, not having the same contact with peers or with teachers and this being a barrier to their education.

> **We were expected to use different digital packages whilst at college like OneNote, but no instructions were given.**
>
> **(Learner – focus group)**

> **Sometimes you need a person there to teach you instead of being online**
>
> **(Learner – focus group)**

Both during the pandemic and beyond, learners expressed feeling a disconnect to their peers, particularly around areas of online learning and the continued use of platforms such as Microsoft Teams, now commonplace within the learning environment. Subject areas where these perceptions were more prevalent were cited by learners as Maths and Business-related subjects. Learners expressed that the embedding of digital learning platforms such as Teams was leading to an increase in self-directed learning and in them losing focus. College staff taking part in the focus groups reported learners feeling continuing isolation with their learning because:

> **They are continuing to use online resources. They have got into the routine of working independently and they aren't doing group activities. They struggle to see a point in group working.**
>
> **(FVC staff)**

Feelings of isolation increased where group activities have been removed or replaced with digital interactions due to learners indicating they were less likely to take time to talk to peers. Learners felt it was more difficult to work together and talk together as a peer group under self-directed learning, often hosted online, as they felt peers were working to different stages and levels.

College staff and school staff both highlighted that direction and communication of instructions also proved difficult where students working online turn their camera off and can appear not to be listening to information being delivered. The strategy of undertaking smaller groups for discussion was suggested by college lecturers to overcome this potential issue.

Reflection

Young people (and also educators and practitioners) have seen a shift in digital technology usage and, for young people in particular, this reliance only increased during lockdown. Mobile phones are often the epicentre of social interaction for young people and are increasingly becoming an extension of self, through information sharing, identity formation and as a tool for knowledge finding and communication. Learners are increasingly accustomed to information being delivered instantly and in small chunks e.g. TikTok and Instagram, leading to fundamental questions about the way in which information and knowledge is shared within education to account for shortened attention spans, interruptions and student expectation. Questions also emerge from this section around how colleges best shape policy on mobile phones and digital technology to mitigate the adverse effects of the former and to ensure that the latter is used most effectively to enhance learning.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS PART 2: SCPS IN PRACTICE

2.1 Overview

A second key question that project teams at FVC and Fife College hoped to explore centred on the practical functioning of their SCP programmes. In particular, how developing an understanding of how SCPs were experienced by learners and how relationships with key stakeholders could be shaped to enhance provision going forward. The focus groups explored school and college staff perspectives on issues around recruitment, retention and progression, as well as formal and informal structures and processes related to these. Learners, meanwhile, were asked to reflect on their preparation for coming onto an SCP, factors that affected their engagement with their programme, how they viewed progression opportunities, and, finally, how support in each of these areas be improved for next year's learners.

Taken together, the findings of this part of the research highlight the complexity of the challenge colleges face in delivering a wide range of SCP programmes, while managing multiple individual relationships with schools and against the context of the changing learner needs and expectations discussed in the previous section. Nonetheless, as well as some areas where practice could potentially be improved, the research also found clear evidence of colleges' ongoing success in efforts to increase SCP participation, enhance transition and support students to maintain their studies and progress to positive destinations.

2.2 Recruitment

As part of the information gathering process, both colleges taking part in the research were keen to understand the recruitment process within schools for learners coming onto courses and to understand why learners opted to study a college course. There was a feeling among college staff that the way schools promoted SCP programme was of vital importance to recruitment, and to ensuring that learners were enrolled on suitable courses. It was important therefore that the research focussed on identifying the extent to which school and college views of SCP programmes aligned with each other, and with the motivations of learners when choosing these courses.

College Perspectives

Within the college staff focus groups, FVC staff highlighted that the typical motivations for learners coming to do an SCP programme were goal-focussed and rarely did they encounter a student who did not know what they wanted to achieve from undertaking an SCP. They identified that typically, learners chose to do a course because they were looking to leave school and use the SCP as a transitional tool into either further education in a full-time capacity, higher education or work. Learners who were keen to leave school at Christmas time in fifth year could use this as a stepping stone to different courses or employment. Additionally, they highlighted learners will seek to undertake an SCP course for a new social experience and to be treated like an adult in a more relaxed educational environment.

More negatively, some staff raised concerns over the recruitment process and felt that in some circumstances there was an expectation disconnect, perhaps due to a lack of understanding of what college can offer, in the partnership relationship. Some perceived that learners were being recommended by schools to apply for higher level than they are capable for and that school targets could, in some circumstances impact upon recruitment.

> **Schools are putting students on college classes as they have missed too much on Highers, but school does not care if they are or are not engaging with College.**
>
> **(FVC teaching staff)**

School Perspectives

A range of SCPs are offered nationally, and provision is broad and varied. One such example is the School-College Opportunities To Succeed (SCOTS) programme, a vocational taster programme aimed at young people in S4 who have as yet no clear direction beyond school. School staff taking part within the focus groups also discussed their increasing promotion of college to the wider learner cohort as a viable and valuable option for all learners:

> **We've rewritten our course choice form, our approach, our booklet, our website and there's parity across everything. So, our school college partnership offer doesn't sit separate to our courses or in-school course choice. It's just got wee asterisks which means you have to do a second application for this. It's not just a case of writing on the form. Our course choice is all done by faculty and where they almost all relate the appropriate school college partnership courses in amongst all the other offers for the faculties.**
>
> **(School E – PT)**

> **Even for young people who want to take a more academic route I encourage them, whenever I'm doing group work, to consider doing some kind of practical based qualification because it's getting them that something, it's giving them that story, it's making them more rounded and it's giving them the practical experience to demonstrate an interest. It's giving them something more than just being straight academic.**
>
> **(School E – PT)**

> **We personally sat down and picked the SCOTS kids. But when it comes to the other qualifications, we have got two strands. We promote college a lot. We market it. We have worked over the years to change the mindset of it and have parental engagement. We champion college. We talk about college and the different routes, and we never mention university without mentioning college.**
>
> **(School B – DH)**

Some did note that although college courses were promoted by schools, more could still be done to encourage greater awareness of what the college has to offer and to reframe the narrative around college as a positive (and often more appropriate progression route) onto a career or university.

> **We always encourage a college application as a backup for those learners going onto university, but having that parity would be a good thing. You can get the message that learners can get as much independence from attending college as they can going to uni. That's not SCP related…it's just an ask for more and better promotion.**
>
> **(Guidance Teacher B – School)**

There were some variations in this viewpoint. For one school it was important that learners see university as an achievable option, and it is promoted as the 'gold standard' within the senior phase:

> **Our demographic has changed considerably. I've been 20 years this year in this school, and we usually have a profile of a Scottish index of multiple deprivation that was like a bell curve. Our SIMD intake has definitely gone up in terms and we now have more pupils in SIMD 1-5, the most deprived, than we do those in SIMD 6-10. And that's with the introduction of the new housing estates that we've got along the Hillfoots. If anything, the aspiration is now even higher for us as a school. We make a huge thing with the young people in assemblies, on the back of the pandemic, about universities and not necessarily colleges but universities having that gold standard being even higher.**
>
> **(School A – PT)**

Despite this, focus group evidence suggested that there was a greater awareness of the benefits of applying for a college course amongst parents. While schools were generally seeing an increasing trend of senior phase learners applying directly to university, there was an increase observed at many schools in the appetite and uptake of college courses and apprenticeship pathways:

> **We don't have as many parents who think it's uni or nothing or 'what's a Modern Apprenticeship?' 'what's the benefit of a Modern Apprenticeship?', 'is it only for trades?'. We're working on getting away from that with a lot of parents as well and they will now encourage their child to take up an FA instead of an extra Higher, or to do a Skills for Work course. So, there's less kind of come back from parents about it. They seem to be more informed about this.**
>
> **(School E – PT)**

> **I would say there's a lot of young people who would actually now know the difference between a Foundation Apprenticeship, a Graduate Apprenticeships and a Modern Apprenticeship and we're ahead on the information that comes through college as well. And that backs all that up, because obviously Foundation Apprenticeships are delivered by college and young people know where that can lead to, and they'll get that in their offers. Year on year, we're getting more young people who are choosing different pathways. [About] 6 years ago employment was our second biggest destination. It is now college.**
>
> **(School D – PT)**

> **Our applicant rate to university is around about 40 to 45% and that's not really changed. What has changed for us over the last two years is, and there's been quite a sharp increase in the number of young people applying for and getting a Modern Apprenticeship. The Further Education route has been the loser in that. So, we've seen a reduction in the number going to college to do Further Education at the expense of a Modern Apprenticeship. Higher Education through college, hasn't changed too much.**
>
> **(School E – PT)**

Learner Motivations

On the motivation for opting to study a college course or SCP, learners expressed that they liked the social element of college: mixing with different people, talking to those who had different experiences of placement and broadening their horizons. Enhancing university applications with relevant work experience gained through placement at college, as well as direction from guidance staff at school, were also found to be motivations for starting SCP courses. Comments included:

> **"It has been beneficial, and I knew it would be, when I applied for uni it has been recognised.**
>
> **(Learner focus group)**

> **"It is a known thing that college and uni aren't as hands on as school. This allows for an understanding of what this less hands-on learning will be like.**
>
> **(Learner focus group)**

Although work experience was a driver to choose certain courses, some learners commented that the experience of the course was different to what was initially expected, although more specific details were not provided. Another motivator for learners was in undertaking a course that they knew has currency in terms of university applications without the pressure of a final exam:

> **"The course I did was worth a 'B' and I need that for uni to do primary teaching. If I failed something at college, I knew that I would get another shot.**
>
> **(Learner – focus group)**

A range of motivations expressed for choosing an SCP at Fife College are summarised in table 2 on the following page.

Reflection

This section of the report explores the different reasons behind learners choosing School-College Partnership (SCP) programmes, looking at the views of colleges, schools, and learners themselves. It finds that college staff generally think that learners have clear goals in mind when choosing SCPs. Learners want to transition to further education, higher education, or employment, or they might be attracted to the social life and freedom offered in a college. However, some college staff worry that schools and colleges don't always see eye-to-eye, meaning some learners are recommended for courses that are too difficult for them. This mismatch could come from a lack of understanding of college courses or the pressure on schools to hit recruitment targets.

Schools, however, emphasise that they try to show learners that college is a worthwhile choice, integrating SCP information into all their course guidance. They work hard to highlight the advantages of practical qualifications and the different paths available through college, like apprenticeships. Some schools believe colleges and universities should be promoted equally, understanding that college can offer independence and many benefits. They know they need to challenge the idea that university is the "gold standard" and point to the fact that parents are increasingly aware of, and accepting of, college routes. Schools are seeing more and more learners in their final years choosing college and apprenticeships, especially Modern Apprenticeships. This shows how attitudes are changing and the value of vocational pathways is becoming more widely recognised.

Table 2: Motivations for choosing an SCP course (Fife College):
Why did you opt to study on an SCP programme?

School M Learners – 3rd and 4th yr pupils
People came into the school and told us about the different stuff we could try at college.
Me and my friend went to the Hair and Beauty one and we really liked it and wanted to do more about it.
I want to do it for my future. I want to get a qualification and have my own salon.
I don't like school and I want to be a builder and I just wanted to do something different.
I like construction and I could do something for a job.
I want to do this when I'm older so I picked it to get some experience.
Yeah, just for the experience and because it's what I want to do in life.
It's a change.
You actually get what you want to do instead of loads of Maths and English and things like that.
School G Learners – 5th and 6 yr pupils
It gave me a chance to see what the college was like and maybe do a college course after school because I know what the environment is like.
It was something I was interested in and I thought it would be helpful for my future.
I thought it would be a fun experience to try.
A good experience and somewhere else to go, something else to try.
I wanted to get out of school for a bit.
I didn't really know what I wanted to do and I just wanted to try something new.
On campus SCP learners– mixed levels
I just wanted to go into joinery and college was the easiest way to do that.
It's a bit different to school. You get to do more stuff and you get a bit more freedom as well.
I want to go into joinery as well.
I just thought it would be something different. I don't really like school.
My dad wanted me there because he has apprenticeships and things lined up for me so he wanted me to do it.
It was just something I was interested in…hair and beauty.

Learners have many different reasons for choosing SCPs. They like the social side of college, the chance to get work experience that will help them apply to university, the opportunity to learn in a new setting, the chance to follow specific career paths, a desire for a break from school, and the fact that college is a less pressured environment. Learners also value the opportunity to develop practical skills in a field they care about.

The research shows a complex relationship between the factors that affect learners' choices and highlights how important it is to have strong partnerships between schools and colleges. Clear communication and a shared understanding of the different paths learners can take are also vital.

2.3 Transition

With a view to enhancing the SCP experience for learners, transition was flagged by both project teams as a key area to review as part of this research. Since focus groups were conducted in spring 2023, both colleges have placed considerable emphasis on improving this area of practice, implementing a range of interventions aimed at delivering an enhanced transition for future SCP cohorts in order to better support learners to engage in and sustain their learning in the college environment.

School Perspectives

The data collected pointed to few areas in which closer alignment between schools and the colleges could be beneficial in terms of transition. Generally, suggestions for enhanced transition from schools focussed on the perceived need for improved communication, more contact visits and opportunities for pre-course interactions to happen in person.

> **"First contact is so important and positive first contact at that. I was wondering if there's a kind of fear or a hesitancy of young people to go out and kind of take that step to college, is there a way that college can come into schools to even touch base, provide some kind of example sessions or some kind of sample work to start the process in a really positive manner and actually fully engage children to want to then take that step from school or from their homes to the college... as opposed to the kind of big, scary 'I don't want to do that' thing, So I think if there was any possibility that some staff members could come in and meet and greet, the kids have a wee bit of a session or a couple of sessions or short test or block within the schools themselves could be an idea perhaps to kind of start that contact in a positive manner.**
>
> **(School F -PT)**

> **"When we select the kids... if I could bring them out for a visit or even 2 visits. It might mean that then once the SCOTS course starts, they're more confident going. I don't know if that's something we could even chat about and get put in place or just something that if we could do in addition, before they start, that that might make it better.**
>
> **(School D- PT)**

It was also mentioned by some schools that the timing of offers for the SCP programmes, as well as limited availability of places, and late cancellation of courses were causing problems in relation to transition. College staff pointed to the fact that confirmation of funding for courses was often being communicated later than desired from the Scottish Funding Council to the College, the knock-on effect of this was still perceived to be leading to anxiety within the learner group. Within schools, this led to additional resource and support required to deal with the impact of changes to provision

on learners. Cuts to funding and resulting cuts to course availability led to further administration and resources within the College as staff work to implement the changes and react to related communications with schools and leaners.

> **I think the College is losing pupils, they definitely are losing pupils, because the College is putting out applications, opening their application process and allowing the kids to apply, and then coming down the line to say that these courses might not be running. That is why colleges are losing young people and I know it's been mentioned by colleagues at other schools. One school last year told me they had been dealing with a boy and his family who had been moved three times within courses at the college. They were told 'it's running now', then 'it's not' and the same on another course and eventually they just said 'you know what… we're not going to do that'.**
>
> **(School A – DH)**

The structure of the funding cycle for colleges also meant that timing any notice of courses being withdrawn often coincided with exam leave. This was seen as deeply unhelpful and impacting on the most vulnerable groups of learners.

> **It really doesn't coincide well with exams and that timeline. There are those with lots of options but also those often with just one option, so it can be really disruptive to have that come out then. It seems that they find out that they might be cut off or are cut off the list…and I'm not sure if there's a difference in being cut off or knowing you might be…but the distress is quite real for a lot of the young people.**
>
> **(Guidance Teacher B – School G)**

> **It's hard and I do support the learners when they've gone through the application and it's an oversubscribed course, and we often don't find out till later that they haven't got in. It's hard when it's round about exam time, and they find that they haven't got in and need to choose something else. Because we do the selection process in March, it feels like it's done and dusted and we have a plan in place which we park till after the exams. But when that falls through it's a tough one. I also know that more and more people know that they are on a waiting list, and that can lead to a period of unsettlement during exams.**
>
> **(Guidance Teacher A – School G)**

> **They're coming to us in the middle of exams to say they they've had a message to say their course might not be an option, and that's not very positive if I'm being honest. That's definitely something that really doesn't help, especially with mental health.**
>
> **(School A – DH)**

The withdrawal of course availability was also seen as negatively impacting where alternative options or offers aren't meeting the appropriate level or needs of learners and thereby also impact on those delivering courses:

> **Lower level of academic abilities impact in a negative way; courses were being removed so learners are then having to jump levels and often the jump is too big.**
>
> **(FVC Teaching staff)**

It was found that a more consistent approach to transition events offered by universities and colleges was called for during the data collection phase of this research. Whilst there were acknowledgements of good practice from within the focus groups taking part, the need for enhanced transition work has broadly called for. Of note were increased calls for parity of experience and gravitas around open days and information sessions to mitigate against college being seen as a 'less valued' or 'less understood' option. Comments included:

> **I know that a lot of our leavers enjoy open days at university, and I know that the college have open days…but I don't hear so much talk around the school about college open days. I hear about it being a day out for the family when it's a uni open day and I wonder if more could be done to welcome learners and their parents onto college open days. Maybe offering different times, or something like the uni.**
>
> **(Guidance Teacher B – School G)**

> **It would be a good thing for families and carers to know more about the college itself, and also about progression. Maybe an open day during the day and one at night. A bigger event than maybe it is now. I think if you make the event on a par with universities then it might make more people consider the college more seriously.**
>
> **(Guidance Teacher B – School G)**

A final point raised by school staff with regard to transition concerned support in place for vulnerable learners taking up courses at college and how a consistency of support could be maintained when making the transition from school-based courses to an SCP programme.

> **There's a number of young people and there's one in particular that I'm thinking of, who is going to be starting college, hopefully in August time. And I just worry. She's very vulnerable and she does have support in place, but everything's very stretched. In terms of support, I think she'll need a lot of help to just maintain it. So that kind of thing. I actually think with the motivation in the young people post Covid, being able to deal with that situation...that transition from school into a more mature learning environment. I think that would be something that I would love to see a little bit more of. Something like Pupil Support but extended, you know, a bigger support mechanism for them to make sure that they're coping and not waiting for them to come too late either.**
>
> **(School E – PT)**

Learner Perspectives

The young people taking part in the research were asked to reflect on their preparation for coming onto an SCP and to consider how this could be improved for next year's learners. As can be seen below, a range of perspectives on transition were expressed by learners at Fife College. A key factor in how positive or negative learners were when they reflected on transition appeared to be the point they were currently at in the process, with those who had started on their programme tending to be more positive than those who were more proximate to the application stage. Responses from School M with S3 and S4 learners who had recently made course choices for the next academic year included:

> **I feel like it would have been useful to know more about what you were doing and what style of learning it would be. Stuff like that.**

> **Just getting to see the place itself would make me less nervous.**

> **Most of us haven't been yet and we don't go till S4.**

> **It all needs explaining a bit more.**

At School G, learners were generally positive about transition but did echo some similar sentiments to learners at School M. When asked if they had been visited by college staff as part of their transition process, all stated 'No' and drilling into this with one learner to find out where improvements could be made it was stated:

> **I feel that I would have liked to have visited the campus before I started or known a little more about the course, what we'd be learning about.**
>
> **(Learner – School G)**

Learners already on an SCP programme expressed a greater level of confidence based on their experiences of transition and pre-entry induction to the SCP:

> **They told you where you were meant to be and when it all started, but that was it. When you get here, the messages all started from the people here and you're expected to just get on with it yourself which is good because you start to get a wee bit more independent in yourself.**

> **We got a 2-week induction so when you come to your normal scheduled class you come here instead for 2 weeks before the summer, so you're comfortable after that when you come back after the summer.**

> **We got taken round the building and shown where everything is…how to find the library and the different zones, find rooms and things like that.**

> **The college set it up. They got our sizes for our PPE and stuff it was all ready and there for us to start.**

> **We just got shown about.**

Learners at FVC also suggested that, as part of the induction process, they would like to get more of an insight into the course itself before starting. It was mentioned that they would like to hear directly from people who have done the course before as well as talking to their teachers about the expectations and content of the course. They also suggested that some kind of prospectus or module descriptor being made available around course choice time or transition would be beneficial. Comments from the learner focus groups included:

> **It didn't put me off it, but I know that it did put people off it**
>
> **(Learner – focus group)**

> **It would be better to have more of an insight into it and how heavy the workload was, juggling Highers and stuff as well.**
>
> **(Learner – focus group)**

> **A clear course outline would be useful in understanding what is in the course to allow for a reasoned judgement on whether or not to pick it.**
>
> **(Learner – focus group)**

Reflection

The findings in this section underline the multi-faceted nature of the transition process and its importance to the success of SCP relationships between schools and colleges. The research showed the transition period to be a critical juncture for communication between colleges and schools, where the level of engagement and shared information required is heightened, and the consequences of communication breakdown are high for learners. When exploring possible areas of enhancement around transition, schools taking part in this research highlighted the nature and delivery of transition events, logistical considerations around the timing of offers and also professional

considerations around learner support. Learners emphasised the importance of detailed pre-course information, opportunities to become familiar with the college surroundings and practical information about their classes as enhancing transition.

Recognising this, both colleges involved in the research have since put in place a range of interventions designed at enhancing their transition process for the benefit of learners, including new systems for offers, expanding opportunities for students and parents to attend induction events and developing their approach to communicating key information to schools, parents and learners.

2.4 Engagement and Attainment

The research moved on to explore learners' level of engagement on SCP courses with related questions posed within interviews and focus groups. School and college staff were asked to consider observations and concerns around a changing learner demographic and asked to reflect on whether these concerns were heightened when considering certain cohorts of learners. Learners taking part in the research were asked to reflect on their own engagement in their SCP and invited to compare this to their engagement in the school context, as well as suggesting any reason for any difference between the two.

College staff Perspectives

For colleges delivering SCP programmes, lecturers were keen not to generalise and did not suggest homogenous levels of engagement or disengagement on SCPs. Maturity levels rather than ability were cited as a possible reason for issues impacting engagement and attainment. The significant break in learning and new patterns of delivery associated with lockdown periods was seen to have affected learners' expectations and perceptions of the learning environment. It was also found that there was a sentiment of apathy among some groups of students. It was felt the students in question expected to be awarded qualifications for little effort, which has driven a sense of entitlement within the student body following the pandemic and the process of grade estimations.

One member of the College staff stated:

> **"It seems that many of them are not taking responsibility for their own learning and by 6th year I would expect that you can tell them that you want to see a piece of work by the following week…but not one of them is coming in with homework. These are pupils planning on going to university and many of them have lost that transition to being a self-starter by 6th year**

> **"For the Level 6s, the level of maturity is huge and sometimes working with Level 4 groups it's either coming to college for an experience or coming for a qualification. We know some schools run Construction in their schools, so when they come onto college it's about the experience and getting that right for the individual. I think the programmes are right, but there's a huge amount of difference between Level 4 and Level 6.**
>
> **(Learning and support staff – Fife College)**

Staff at both colleges did express concerns about behaviour among some particular cohorts of learners. At FVC The SCOTs programme, designed for learners who were disengaged from school or not sure of a future pathway, was highlighted as an issue. Participants in the focus group noted that, at times, this groups' behaviour had been disruptive and physically violent. College staff also raised concerns over learners 'not having the fundamentals to attend at the required level'. At Fife, it was suggested that the delivery model of the SCP was potentially impacting on levels of engagement, with school-based sessions seeing increased low level behavioural issues:

> **It's different where they come into school and are comfortable, but maybe not as comfortable coming into college and they tend to be better behaved here. The behaviour issue is very low level, not overly disruptive… chatting, on phones and things like that. When they come into college you can establish things very quickly with them, but it's not the same when you go into their school. You're always seen as a supply teacher and supply teachers are always treated in a certain way, so you have to lay down the rules with them pretty quickly to deal with that.**
>
> **(Teaching staff member– Fife College)**

To mitigate against this, suggestions were provided by college teaching staff which ranged from more work on expectation setting within schools, to considering the staffing and delivery allocation of SCP programmes to ensure that more experienced staff were given these sessions.

> **Our Foundation Apprenticeships at Level 4 and Level 6…the difference in maturity is huge. When the Level 4 come to us they've just gone into 4th year and getting them into the way takes time. Setting ground rules and making sure that they bring their PPE takes more drilling down for those groups.**
>
> **(Learning and support staff – Fife College)**

> **We need to be clear for those at school coming into the college, and maybe going into the school to make it clear that this is different. It's not like going to class at school. It's a college class and you have to behave differently and you have to be more reliant on yourself.**
>
> **(Teaching staff member– Fife College)**

> **I think quite often what happens is that a new lecturer starts at the college, and quite often it's them that's sent out to a school, or lecturers who maybe aren't deemed as good in certain things are sent out. The school courses are seen by some as the ones that nobody wants, so the new lecturers get them, or certain lecturers get them and that's not doing anyone any favours.**
>
> **(Identifiers redacted at participant's request)**

School staff perspectives

School staff appreciated the challenges that college staff might encounter, with School D noting that it was as important for the learner to be on the right programme as it was for those providing or delivering the programme:

> **The SCOTS programme...I think we're looking at identifying pupils that we think when it comes to transition, they are going to need additional support. Whether it's because of additional support needs to have or maybe they're not going to get the same support at home possibly. And sometimes there's also pupils who are struggling with their attendance. But then the frustration then for us, and I'm sure for college staff as well, is that we have the kids but then often they don't attend, so it's just trying to pick the right kids that absolutely need it, but then, once they've been selected and actually going to have the confidence and the resilience and the school attendance to be able to get the most out of it. We're aware that there's an issue with that. It's something that we're aware of and thinking about... just to take time and select the right kids.**
>
> **(School D PT).**

Lack of concentration, perhaps exacerbated by the digital transformation or pandemic learning loss discussed in the previous section was also acknowledged by school staff as a potential barrier to attainment on SCP programmes. Some staff suggested that some learners struggled to concentrate in school for extended periods, and so it follows that this may impact their ability to engage positively with higher-level college courses.

> **We have a lot of pupils that like that, just can't cope with double periods of learning and they just need a break in the middle of it, whether it's for 5 minutes or whatever, just because I think they're so used to doing bits and pieces or checking their phone or whatever it is and they're not used to just sitting and concentrating and engaging. Even if that lesson has got lots of different tasks in it and it's not just sit down and do one thing for two periods.**
>
> **(School B – PT)**

This led some to consider the balance in offering the opportunity to those not engaging positively with learning in school the opportunity to try a course in a different environment (college) with the potential that that existing disengagement becomes even more problematic in the college environment as some course demands come with a greater requirement for learners to take ownership of their own learning.

> **It's also about that balancing act because we can't play God because although a kid doesn't engage with school, maybe 100%, that's not to say that they won't go to a new place and actually get a fresh breath of life. It's getting that balance. It's about having to know the kids and know their personality. Although you know that they might not be attending school and engaging with their subjects, it could be because they chose the wrong subjects and perhaps with an SCP they're actually getting a course that is going to meet their needs and be a course that they really love.**
>
> **(School D PT)**

Linked to this, some school staff pointed out that in some cases SCP programmes can spark an upturn in engagement among those who showed a lack of motivation, perhaps as the college subjects on offer and college delivery modes are better suited to learner needs.

> **I do think there's a certain group who are disenchanted with certain aspects of mainstream school and the structure of the school day…and that's a nice incentive to go to college, because we and they know they're looking to leave. Things like Construction, Hair and Beauty…these are the courses that tend to attract these learners because they are accessible.**
>
> **(Guidance Teacher A – School G)**

Learner perspectives

Those learners taking part in the focus groups, generally, expressed a good level of interest, engagement and enjoyment in their chosen SCP programme. Responses from School G included:

> **I thought it would be more difficult, but it's not. It maybe depends on what course you do.**

> **You're learning in a different way. They show you how to do things so that you learn, and then you can go and do it.**

> **It's more active learning and you feel like you are participating. It's not like you are there just listening to a teacher. You are actively involved and that's good.**

When asked to compare their enjoyment of, and engagement with the college-based elements of the SCP programme versus learning 'in school' responses highlighted that the change in delivery location and the practical element of many of the programmes on offer was what captured and sustained interest. Responses from those interviewed included:

> **I think it's better here, like was said it's more relaxed than school.**

> **The course that you're going into is something you enjoy doing, so you learn better when it's something you actually enjoy. You're paying more attention to it.**

> **School is just sitting doing Maths and things you don't want to do.**

> **You can only go so far with stuff at school because it's all textbooks, copying stuff and writing. But here it's more hands on stuff and really stuff you'd need to be doing when you start working.**

Reflection

Within the school and college staff data collection sessions, there was an acknowledgement that a generalisation of post-Covid learners as a homogeneous disaffected group was both unfair and unhelpful. SCPs were seen as a positive vehicle for learners unsure of next steps or those more challenged with the school structure. However, there were also clearly challenges expressed, especially by college staff, around ensuring that learners are equipped and supported to succeed on the courses they are put forward for. It is also clear that although colleges encounter challenges around behaviour and engagement within specific cohorts, many of the characteristics of the changing learner identified in part 1 are relevant in any discussion of engagement on SCP programmes and beyond. Reflecting on approaches required to meet the needs of a changing learner demographic and embedding practice around behaviour management and conflict resolution, trauma informed approaches, better understandings of cultures and communities and dedicated approaches to staff wellbeing would be beneficial across the sector. A further and positive takeaway from the research is to note that many learners display heightened engagement in a college setting and that in many cases SCP programmes can lead to an upturn in motivation and engagement, especially where the programme aligns closely with their future career aspirations.

2.5 Retention

Retention and sustaining learning are key priorities for colleges and with this in mind, these issues were discussed in focus groups, with staff asked to discuss what they perceived to be the main factors influencing student retention. Project teams taking part in this study had raised concerns about leavers in both winter and summer junctures and understanding the factors that led to student drop out was therefore an important aspect of the research. Learners were also questioned relating to retention and discussions explored reasons as why they or their peers may opt to drop out of their course.

School staff perspectives

Most school staff interviewed hypothesised that dropout rates were largely driven by factors external to the course itself. As noted by Colleges Scotland (2024), college is the most popular destination for those from the most challenged socio-economic backgrounds with 37% of school leavers enrolled from the lowest quartile within Scotland's Index of Multiple Deprivation. Furthermore 24% of students have a recorded disability, 17% of students have a recorded mental health condition and 14% are care experienced (according to SFC figures for 2022-23). Colleges cited as 'civic anchors within their local communities' (Colleges Scotland 2024) offer provision to a high proportion of learners with complex needs and often chaotic lives. Staff taking part in this research acknowledge this and were keen to find strategies and offer support to aid retention.

> **Often, it's not the academic that is holding a lot of learners back right now. It's other things. And maybe that support in college is not as recognisable or as obvious as it might be. That's a tough one for us to hear when some of them drop out, as we think, that maybe with more sustained support they could have gotten through that.**
>
> **(Guidance Teacher B – School GHigh)**

Most school staff suggested that closer working, and deeper communication, between the school and the College was the most promising way of combatting retention issues. Those taking part in this study were keen to advocate more sharing of policies and procedures as well as building a consistent approach to updating on non-attendance or non-attainment.

> **From an SCP perspective and what would give me clarity in my own Guidance role is working with the College to understand what the tracking and monitoring process looks like. And not just for the SCP kids, but for those who leave us in summer and in winter.**
>
> **(Guidance Teacher A – School GHigh)**

It was also noted that providing learners with greater understanding of what is expected of them, and equipping them to be confident in accessing support at an appropriate juncture and not only at crisis point could also help combat issues of non-attendance or non-attainment.

> **It might help motivation to attend if I could show them the college policy and tell them what to expect. Also, to show them what the college can do to support them. Our kids need to know that they will be transitioning onto an adult learning environment, and many of them are not mature enough for that just yet. So, what does that mean and how can we help them. We maybe see learners manage their SCP but then throw in the towel at exam time…so tightening up on that, us knowing if learners are having a meltdown, then maybe we can help by showing them where to go because they don't have the same level of resilience or those coping strategies that learners had in years gone by.**
>
> **(Guidance Teacher A – School G)**

> **If something goes wrong, if they're ill, or miss a piece of work, they can have those conversations with the support of the school in place.**
>
> **(Guidance Teacher B – School G=)**

Learner perspectives

Within the focus groups, learners echoed comments made by staff, expressing that that the main drivers of drop out lay often outside the course itself with comments including:

> **I also think that there's maybe other things going on in their lives and they're not able to come to school or college.**

However, where staff focussed on the support and resilience aspect of this, learners tended to think their peers who had dropped out had done so not because they weren't coping but rather because they had future plans in place that were not dependent on attainment in their SCP programme:

> **There's a few people going onto do what they'd be doing and they maybe just don't turn up.**

> **I think next year you can just go into your trade and you're doing that for longer. Because this is just the opening part of the course there's a lot of folk who just can't be bothered going. They don't really want to be there.**

> **I think a couple of people on my course dropped out so that they could do college full time instead.**

Other reasons for course withdrawal were related to course choice, with some learners opting for a course which wasn't suitable or as expected. Also discussed was the level of delivery and content of courses, with some learners indicating that SCP coursework was, in some cases, completed ahead of the scheduled course end date. This ultimately left learners with little to do in the allocated course time remaining. Comments included:

> **I think that they picked it in school but then just didn't enjoy it.**

> **There's been times when you've done the work and there's not much else for you to do. You're then just sitting about. You could be doing other stuff, but if you're done then they don't really have other work for you to do. You're just then kind of left. We had a cabinet thing to build, but once you were done there wasn't really anything left for you to do. It's a bit boring. I got told to start fitting battery packs or something boring.**

Reflection

While reasons for learner drop were discussed in some focus groups, the volume of evidence on this question makes conclusions difficult and suggests further research on this topic may be necessary. Perhaps reflecting the complex and multi-faceted nature of such decisions, several reasons for dropout were suggested, with some of these suggesting extrinsic factors are the main driving force behind drop out (and that closer communication between the school and the college might help solve this) and some, limited, evidence from learners suggesting factors relating to enjoyment of the course itself may in some cases also play a part.

2.6 Progression

In June 2021, the Scottish Funding Council published the final report of its review of tertiary education and research. Related to SCPs, the review recognised the importance of multiple pathways for learners and the key role of joint provision with schools. It also highlighted the need to focus on delivering good support and guidance to enable students to understand the different pathways (SFC, 2021). Project teams were keen that that the research explore progression in the context of their SCP provision.

College Perspectives

Staff were asked about how well progression is explained across SCP and college courses, with staff views often reflecting that there is work being done, and in some cases very good work being done, however there is more work to do and consistency of approach is important. Further probing on how things could be improved saw two particular points emerge. Firstly, it was felt by some that, while there is a focus on detailing progression prior to the course starting and at the beginning of the course, this conversation potentially tailed off as the academic year or course progressed:

> **From the start of their course, from when they've applied for the course, all the progression routes are there online for them to see. I would say that it's mentioned at induction, and when they come in to meet their lecturer for the first time. I would say that's done in most classes at the beginning, but I don't think there's maybe enough done at the middle or the end of the course.**
>
> **(Learning and Teaching Support – Fife College)**

A second point drawn from college staff focus groups was the need for consistency and clarity for, often vulnerable, learners who perhaps did not complete their course in full. In short, it was suggested there was work to be done in this regard to ensure that clear progression pathways are identified and outlined for all:

> **We're talking about progression for that person who will be successful and complete all their units, but what about that person who might not get their units. Sometimes it might be a sidestep rather than a progression, so I think there's more work to be done.**
>
> **(Learning and Teaching Support – Fife College)**

School Perspectives

An interesting observation emerged from the school focus groups and interviews with comments often relating to increased awareness of pathways and progressions from both learners and in some cases amongst parents. This suggests some movement in learner thinking and consideration of options around post school destinations. One member of Guidance staff at School G, who noted an increase in pupils who are thinking about flexible and alternative routes:

> **One thing I would say but I wouldn't pinpoint it to Covid is that when I'm having my destination or course choice conversations, is that the kids have taken the time to look at entry requirements and they're exploring their pathway choices appropriate to where they want to go.**
>
> **(Guidance Teacher A – School G)**

While the general consensus was that more could always be done at both school and college level to inform learners about SCP Pathways, some schools, for example School G, were particularly positive about their promotion of college options and pathways:

> **I focus on the individual. I am much more focused on college as being a great option. I really like the articulation routes offered by college, and the links to Foundation Apprenticeships, real life skills which can then link onto university if necessary. The flexibility that college allows is something that I would regularly pitch to learners.**
>
> **(Guidance Teacher A – School G)**

> **We very much promote the progressions and pathways to colleges and show it as just another route, as another main pathway. We are trying to shift that perception and to say to our parents that articulation is much more of a route now. I think we're seeing some shift.**
>
> **(Depute Head- School G)**

> **I always pitch college as a more nurturing space for all my learners, whether that's for those furthest from attainment or those who maybe can't see past uni but who need a sensible Plan B. For me it's about getting rid of that aim for 5 Highers and go straight into uni. That's my personal opinion as well as my professional opinion.**
>
> **(Guidance Teacher A – School G)**

Learner Perspectives

Of those learners who took part in the research a few indicated that their understanding of progression and pathways was clearer following time in college. Here, SCPs were seen as an effective way of promoting different options for those preparing to leave school:

> **I like how the college encouraged us to take our course this year further past the one year. I feel like we got told about specific pathways at college and about where we could go with childcare, whereas at school we were just told that we could go to university or to college. We're not really taught in specific subjects about the pathways that we could go. I think knowing this has made me more interested in Childcare as a career.**

> **Yeah. We were told here that we could stay on and do the Construction Futures course rather than stay on at school. I'm leaving to come here.**

With learners indicating that they had an awareness of progression and pathway options, further probing explored the ways in which they had engaged with the pathway and progression information available to them as part of their decision-making process. Responses suggested that college websites were a helpful source of information and included comments such as:

> **I had a look on the Fife College page and you just had to have a look, so I knew what I'd be doing.**

> **I just had a look and what I wanted to try and what I wanted to look into. It showed me what was there and what looked interesting.**

> **I just looked on the website when we had to do our course choices. I knew I wanted to be a mechanic, so I had a look and I seen that course and I thought I'd give it a try and see what it was like.**

> **My main plan is to go into costume design or textiles. It was that choice before I took the college course, but I'd say that before I took the college course, I didn't really consider Childcare as a career option in general, but now I think it's more like a plan B option if my first plan doesn't really work out. So, I consider it more of a career option than I did before I took it. It's still not my main plan but I'm more encouraged to do it than I was before I started.**

It was also found from the data collected that progression pathways are seen as particularly important to parents when supporting and advising learners on course choice, with parents in some instances actively encouraging the college pathway as the most valuable route:

> **My mum said it would better for me to pick something else other than what I'd be doing because it could take me down a different route, so that's what I did.**
>
> **(Joinery applicant who did SCP Engineering)**

> **It was my mum who convinced me to do the course. When I come home from school she always asks me 'how was college' more than she asks about school. She's more interested in that.**

> **My mum was also persuading me to take the course because I wasn't really sure. It was between two courses and one of them wasn't a college course, but she was telling me to. I might not have taken it (college) if she hadn't told me to. She was quite enthusiastic about it.**

This interest from parents in progression and pathways was also reflected by college staff working in this area, with the observation being made that this interest, and the interest in college courses more generally, could be capitalized upon through further engagement and information sharing.

> **I think in particular parents like to see us and to know what the progression routes are. They like the articulation guide and they like the prospectus. I think the kids are beginning to understand the progression routes, but there's more work that could be done throughout the college.**
>
> **(Learning and Teaching Support – Fife College)**

Reflection

There was evidence of an increasing awareness of, and value placed upon, college-based programmes in relation to leaner pathways and post school progression. Information was available and accessible on college platforms, with those learners taking part in this research engaging with college websites and resources to enhance their decision-making following time spent in college on an SCP. Schools also noted an increase in the positive promotion of college as a viable and valuable progression route for a broad range of learners and this could form the basis of further enhancement work and future research on learner outcomes.

MOVING FORWARD

Based on the research and reflections in this report, CDN is developing a wide-ranging programme to support our colleges in delivering their SCPs and enabling success for learners in the context of their changing needs.

The following findings can be derived from the two parts of our research:

Findings and Analysis Part 1: The Changing Learner

- **Impact of Covid**: The pandemic has significantly affected learners, leading to lower academic performance, delayed skills development, and underdeveloped social skills. Increased anxiety and decreased resilience were noted, exacerbated by the pandemic but part of a pre-existing trend.

- **Digital Transformation**: The shift to digital learning during the pandemic has had mixed effects. While it has increased digital literacy, it has also led to challenges in maintaining attention and engagement.

- **Levels of Anxiety and Resilience**: There is a notable increase in anxiety and a decrease in resilience among learners, requiring more support and nurturing approaches from educators.

Findings and Analysis Part 2: SCPs in Practice

- **Recruitment**: Motivations for choosing SCPs include career goals, new social experiences, and a more relaxed learning environment. However, there are concerns about mismatched expectations and the need for better promotion of SCPs.

- **Transition**: Effective transition processes are crucial. Suggestions for improvement include better communication, more pre-course interactions, and addressing logistical challenges related to course availability and funding.

- **Engagement and Attainment**: Engagement levels vary, with some learners thriving in the college environment while others struggle with the transition. Behavioural issues and the need for clearer expectations were highlighted.

- **Retention**: Retention is influenced by external factors such as socio-economic challenges and mental health issues. Closer communication between schools and colleges and better support systems are needed.

- **Progression**: There is a growing awareness of the value of college pathways among learners and parents. However, more consistent communication about progression opportunities throughout the course is necessary.

Following on from the above findings and analysis, the suggestions below have been developed as the starting point for a diagnostic approach to developing the work of SCPs and will be used by CDN as part of the basis for the development of our Changing Learner Programme.

1. Enhanced Communication and Collaboration

- **Regular Meetings**: Establish regular meetings between school and college staff to discuss SCP programmes, share best practices, and address any emerging issues.
- **Joint Training Sessions**: Organise joint training sessions for school and college staff to ensure a unified approach to supporting learners.
- **Clear Communication Channels**: Develop clear communication channels for sharing information about SCP programmes, including course details, expectations, and support services.

2. Improved Transition Processes

- **Pre-Course Visits**: Arrange pre-course visits for learners to familiarize them with the college environment and reduce anxiety.
- **Detailed Induction Programs**: Implement comprehensive induction programs that include campus tours, introductions to key staff, and information on available support services.
- **Early Engagement**: Engage with learners and their parents early in the application process to provide detailed information about SCP programmes and address any concerns.

3. Support for Mental Health and Wellbeing

- **Nurturing Approaches**: Adopt nurturing approaches similar to those used in schools to support learners' mental health and wellbeing.
- **Mental Health Services**: Increase the availability of mental health services and support within colleges to address the rising levels of anxiety and mental health issues among learners.
- **Resilience Building**: Implement programmes aimed at building resilience and coping strategies among learners to help them manage stress and challenges.

4. Addressing Digital Transformation Challenges

- **Digital Literacy Training**: Provide training for both learners and staff on effective digital literacy and managing digital distractions.
- **Balanced Use of Technology**: Develop policies that balance the use of digital technology with traditional learning methods to enhance engagement and focus.
- **Parental Guidance**: Offer guidance to parents on managing their children's use of digital devices and social media to support their learning and wellbeing.

5. Enhanced Recruitment and Promotion of SCPs

- **Awareness Campaigns**: Conduct awareness campaigns to promote the benefits of SCPs to learners, parents, and the wider community.
- **Clear Pathways**: Clearly outline the pathways and progression opportunities available through SCPs to help learners make informed decisions.
- **Inclusive Recruitment**: Ensure that recruitment processes are inclusive and consider the diverse needs and backgrounds of learners.

6. Retention Strategies

- **Early Intervention**: Implement early intervention strategies to identify and support learners at risk of dropping out.
- **Flexible Learning Options**: Offer flexible learning options to accommodate learners' varying needs and circumstances.
- **Continuous Monitoring**: Continuously monitor learners' progress and provide timely support to address any issues that arise.

7. Progression and Pathways

- **Consistent Communication**: Maintain consistent communication about progression opportunities throughout the course, not just at the beginning.
- **Support for All Learners**: Ensure that clear progression pathways are identified and communicated for all learners, including those who may not complete their course in full.
- **Parental Involvement**: Engage parents in discussions about progression and pathways to ensure they are well-informed and can support their children's decisions.

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