FEATURE

Old challenges, new context: Scotland's colleges as pathways from poverty in the post-covid era

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Abstract

A focus on tackling poverty, inequality and social exclusion is not new for Scotland's colleges, but the circumstances they now face are. Together, automation and technological change, the climate emergency, an aging population, and the cost-of-living crisis, represent a uniquely challenging set of circumstances within which Scottish colleges are tasked with delivering opportunity for all learners. Exploring how they approach these old challenges in this new context has been the focus of the College Development Network's recent *Pathways from Poverty* series of reports. This article will discuss some of the key themes highlighted in these reports to build a picture of how, as a vital component of the national skills system, Scotland's colleges continue to provide opportunity for learners from some of the country's most disadvantaged communities, while simultaneously playing an important role in supporting Scotland to achieve its national economic objectives.

Keywords: colleges, poverty, FE, TVET, inequality

Introduction: Scotland's college sector and the demographics of colleges

Colleges are a key part of the post-16 educational landscape in Scotland. Some 236,730 students undertook a course at one of Scotland's 26 publicly funded colleges in the academic year 2021-2022 – around 4% of the total Scottish population (SFC, 2023a).

The range of courses Scotland's colleges offer is vast. Across the country, colleges provide courses in almost every conceivable academic and vocational discipline from civil engineering to furniture craft. They deliver courses at virtually every level of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications framework, meaning their delivery spans both Further and Higher Education. Colleges also offer courses that are full-time, part-time and flexible, delivered online, blended, remote and in-person, not just on their own campuses and in community centres in their locality, but also on the campuses of their partners across the world. They deliver programmes in partnership with schools, apprenticeships in partnership with employers, and bespoke training in partnership with local and national businesses. The extent of their work with schools meant that in 2019-2020 around 1 in 5 Senior Phase school pupils in Scotland (those aged 14 and over) studied some form of college course while still in Secondary School (CDN, 2021). Furthermore, by working to upskill employees of local businesses (through programmes like the Scottish Government's Flexible Workforce Development Fund) colleges deliver learning not just for those about to enter the workforce but also for those in the workplace looking to progress in, or change, their careers.

In short, through this wide-ranging provision, Scotland's colleges deliver courses, training and, ultimately, opportunity for a cohort of learners so diverse that simplifying what they do or making generalisations about the 'typical' college student quickly becomes problematic. The statistics do, however, reveal some important over-arching trends in the demographics of college enrolment in Scotland that are worth reflecting on. In terms of age, while Scotland's colleges cater for a very wide demographic (reflecting their aforementioned role as places to upskill and retrain as well as destinations for those leaving school) a large proportion of college learners *are* young. In 2020-2021, around a fifth of Scottish 18 and 19-year-olds, were enrolled on a college course (SFC, 2023a). In terms of gender, while there remain some stark imbalances at the course level, at the aggregate level, colleges have a fairly even gender split with an enrolment ratio of 48.4%/51.6% (male: female) in 2021-2022 (SFC, 2023a). In terms of ethnicity, Scotland's college population is more diverse than the overall Scottish population. In 2021-22, for example, 8.2% of enrolments to full-time HE courses in colleges were of black and minority ethnicity, compared to 4% of the Scottish population (SFC, 2023b).

A notable trend in college enrolment is the over-representation of those from deprived backgrounds. This links closely to a broader national discourse on poverty and inequality. In 2018/19, 34.7% of full-time further education students and 29.4% of full-time higher education students in colleges came from the 20 per cent most deprived areas of Scotland (SFC, 2020). This over-representation of those from more deprived backgrounds leads us to consider another important aspect of colleges in the Scottish education system. Namely, that Scotland's colleges are an especially (and increasingly) important academic progression pathway for students from deprived backgrounds. In 2021-2022, 33.5% of first-degree entrants to Scotland's universities came via a Scottish college. However, this figure rises to almost half (45.6%) of first-degree entrants from the 20% most deprived areas of Scotland (a considerable increase on the 2020-21 figure of 40.4%) (SFC, 2023).

Geographically, it is also worth reflecting on the physical location of Scotland's college campuses and how this shapes their identity and connects them with particular communities. With a population of approximately 5.4 million people, Scotland is the UK's second largest country. The 'Central Belt' region incorporates the most heavily populated cities of Glasgow and the capital Edinburgh, and contrasts sharply with more sparsely populated areas such as those found in Scotland's Highland and Island areas. Between them, Scotland's 26 colleges, have more than seventy campus locations across the length and breadth of the country. Where Scotland's universities are predominantly city-based, and several of the largest have city centre campuses, Scotland's college campuses are generally more geographically dispersed, with many campuses to be found in regional towns as well as in more rural areas. Many towns and urban areas of considerable size, with some areas of high deprivation – such as Glenrothes, Levenmouth, Kilmarnock, and Motherwell, to give but a few examples – are not served by a university campus but are served by a college campus. Even in the nation's cities, there are college campuses with postcodes that locate them in (or close to) areas of high deprivation. Edinburgh College can be used as an example to illustrate this point. The college has four campuses: three in the city of Edinburgh and one in the neighbouring local authority region of Midlothian. Figure 1 below shows a coloured map of Edinburgh, with the colours representing relative deprivation by area, using the

Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (Scottish Government, 2020). On this map, the 3 college campuses within the city are marked with a black dot. As can be seen, the campuses are located in, or close to, some of the city's most deprived areas.
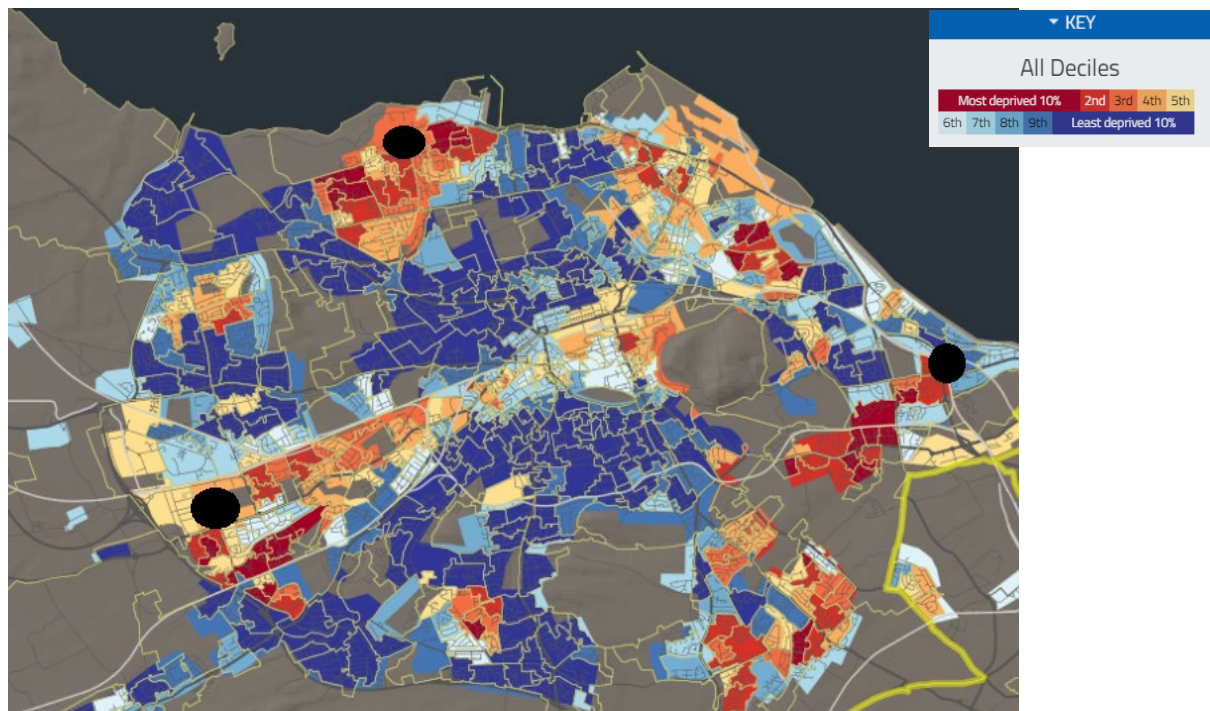

Figure 1: areas of Edinburgh by level of deprivation with Edinburgh College campuses marked.
Source: Adapted from SIMD mapper (Scottish Government, 2020)

What the above demonstrates is that while Scotland's colleges are a hugely significant part of the national education system and, indeed, have strong international connections, they remain fundamentally community institutions. As detailed within CDN's '*Pathways from Poverty- Colleges for Communities'* report (CDN, 2022b), existing understandings of what a college offers are being continually reframed. Colleges are being seen as extending the provision beyond education and qualifications and are increasingly becoming places of social sanctuary and cultural diversity. Colleges are also playing a vital role in driving economic innovation, digital transformation and sustainability. In economic terms, colleges are integral in ensuring skills supply and skills demand align in local labour markets and in promoting economic development in the regions they serve. In doing so, they provide opportunity for individuals and have unique potential as *pathways from poverty*. However, their demographic means that mitigating the impacts of poverty takes on an even greater significance for colleges in terms of their success in delivering positive outcomes for their learners, and contributing to the economies of the regions they serve.

The context: colleges in policy, literature and practice

Despite their unique position and the over-representation of learners from deprived backgrounds on their campuses, much of the recent policy thrust, in terms of efforts to tackle educational inequality in Scotland, has focussed on 'closing the attainment gap' in schools and 'widening access' to universities. In academic literature, too, colleges are undoubtedly "severely under-researched, as against Higher Education Institutions and schools" (Hermannsson et al., 2017).

The above being said, colleges in Scotland have, recently, received a considerable amount of policy focus for their above-mentioned role in the skills system and their valuable contribution to national economic priorities. The recently published Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape, the 'Withers' report, (Scottish Government, 2023a) into the national skills system (while recommending major reform to the way skills are delivered in Scotland) included a key role for colleges within many of the recommendations. Indeed, in his report, the author acknowledged "my eyes have been opened, for example, to the broad and pivotal role that colleges play in their regions and the critical importance of careers education in ensuring learners can make informed choices about their futures" (Scottish Government, 2023a). The Withers report was followed by the publication of the Scottish Government's *Purposes and Principles* for post-school education, research, and skills (Scottish Government, 2023b), which set out the framework for decision making to ensure this system is fit for the future.

The above makes the timing of this themed issue of the Education in the North journal timely in a Scottish context, with the current nature and future potential of the Scottish technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector currently enjoying a moment at the forefront of the national policy discussion.

More broadly, there have been several other recent policy developments relevant to Scotland's college sector. For example, the key pillars of Scotland's recently launched 'National Strategy for Economic Transformation' (*Entrepreneurial People and Culture, New Market Opportunities, Productive Businesses and Regions, Skilled Workforce and A Fairer and More Equal Soc*iety) relate to colleges in a number of ways and colleges have an important role in supporting the Scottish Government to make progress against these pillars. The last of these pillars, *A Fairer more Equal Society*, in particular, is closely linked to the discussion in this article (given that tackling poverty is central to the creation of a *Fairer and more Equal Society)*.

Tackling poverty – and particularly child poverty – is a key national priority. The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 placed a duty on the Scottish Government to ensure that ambitious child poverty targets (including less than 10% of children living in relative poverty) are met by 2031. Despite this, Scotland went into the Covid-19 crisis with significant (and increasing) levels of poverty. Between 2016 and 2019, around 1 million people in Scotland (and around 250,000 children) lived in relative poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2020). The end of the pandemic has done little to reverse this trend and, in fact, "recent data has displayed little progress towards eradicating poverty and Scottish Government modelling now shows…the interim 2023/24 statutory targets [for child poverty] are likely to be missed following a 'deterioration in the macroeconomic situation'" (Fraser of Allander Institute, 2023).

It is against this backdrop that colleges are tasked with providing opportunity for all. Responsible for developing people and practice within Scotland's colleges, the College Development Network (CDN) provides research and insight on the sector, through CDN's Research and Enhancement Centre, which the author of this paper currently leads. CDN has conducted extensive research culminating in the publication of a series of three *Pathways from Poverty* reports which explore, in detail, the impact of poverty and the strategies being employed by colleges to meet this challenge. As highlighted within

CDN's first *Pathways from Poverty* report: "for the college sector to continue its traditional role in contributing to tackling poverty and inequality in Scotland, it will need to adapt to the potentially changing nature of poverty and inequality over the coming time. The Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and brought new population groups into poverty and insecurity" (CDN, 2022a).

The remaining sections will look at the steps colleges are already taking to tackle poverty and support their learners in this ever-changing context. This discussion will draw heavily on the recent (and aforementioned) *Pathways from Poverty* series of reports published by the College Development Network that, through in-depth qualitative research and case study examples, seek to provide insight on this particular aspect of colleges' work.

Direct action on poverty

Scotland's Colleges undertake a range of direct interventions aimed at tackling the impacts of socio-economic disadvantage on their learners and the broader communities they serve. Through ongoing engagements with an array of partners, targeted support is being made available at a grass-roots level, to allow learners to complete their studies and progress in the future. One area in which this approach is most evident is in direct action to tackle food poverty, an issue that has been increasingly identified as a barrier to learners that impacts their ability to maintain wellbeing and sustain their studies.

The need for this type of direct intervention is articulated, in CDN's second Pathways from Poverty report, by Elaine Hutton of Ayrshire College:

"How do we expect a young person to sit down and be engaged in learning and teaching if they haven't eaten, they don't know when they're going to eat? How often do you sit down and think 'I'll get up and have a cup of coffee and something to eat and give my legs a stretch and that will put me back in a better frame of mind to get on with the work that I'm doing?' – that's the same for a young person. We can't expect them to learn if they haven't got the basic food, warmth, before they even start." (Elaine Hutton, Ayrshire College, quoted in CDN, 2022b).

In response to this, Scotland's colleges have moved quickly to mitigate the impact of food poverty on educational attainment. Examples of interventions aimed at directly addressing food insecurity can be found across Scotland's college sector and include Ayrshire College's Soup and Porridge initiative which provides breakfast and lunch to students at one of their campuses and West Lothian College's partnership with a third sector agency who provide ready meals not only to learners but also to their families where needed.

Many direct interventions by colleges to tackle food poverty have also, however, grown into approaches to tackle the impacts of poverty more holistically. An example of this, explored in a recent CDN case study (CDN, 2023a) is Dundee and Angus College's Thrive project, which has established breakfast clubs, seen the provision of around 900 portions of free soup each week at lunchtime and has provided meal vouchers for those on low incomes. The project has since extended to consider a broader approach to safeguarding learners. The breakfast clubs initiated as part of the programme provide an opportunity for people to socialise and allow the Students' Association the opportunity to discuss any issues with students in a more informal setting. There are also a wide range of other social groups that

act as an important wellbeing touchpoint for students. This informal approach to support aims to reduce stigma and allows students to access support and guidance on a range of wellbeing and financial matters (CDN, 2023a).

The college have also extended social support further to tackle the social isolation that can be a feature of living in poverty. Cinema screenings have been offered for free to learners and their families at their campus theatre and the Student Association have built opportunities which have both a social and practical benefit as outlined below:

> "We do some activities in the evening just to help single parents or students who live alone and can be quite lonely in the evenings. Just having that social touchpoint to do a quiz or sit and have a blether. There's always one of our staff there so that creates a community when you know someone. If someone's not there one week when they usually are then we can reach out to them and check everything is alright. Or they might share something in the group that we can take and push towards Student Services or encourage them to have a chat with their Group Tutor. I think any of these informal points of contact are really good for signposting opportunities because it is often through informal chat or off-the-cuff comments that mean we can broach a subject more gently." (Amy Monks, Student Association Student President, Dundee and Angus College, CDN, 2023a).

What this quote, and these examples, demonstrate is that, in the communities and regions they serve, colleges act not just as economic drivers, but as also as community hubs and important spaces of social sanctuary, a theme which will be explored in more depth in the next section.

Community engagement/ regional anchors

Scotland's colleges have a strong presence in communities the length and breadth of the country, and a range of community outreach programmes are central to the approach they take to reaching learners who may otherwise fail to engage in education beyond school.

An example of this, explored in another recent CDN case study (CDN, 2023b), is the Ferguslie Learning Centre (FLC), run by West College Scotland. The centre was established in 2001, during the regeneration of Ferguslie Park in Paisley, one of the most economically disadvantaged areas in Scotland. Part of West College Scotland, the centre provides community-based education opportunities to a range of learners locally.

As well as giving learners the opportunity to gain qualifications, the centre also aims to help vulnerable individuals and communities with challenges, such as addiction, low self-esteem, stigma and social isolation. Over the last 7 years, FLC has grown in student numbers and in 2021-2022 welcomed 172 learners across 19 classes (CDN, 2023b).

CDN's short report on the work of FLC identified several factors critical to its success. Among these were the strong support of West College Scotland, the value placed by the centre on local knowledge and expertise, the flexibility of its learning provision and the strong culture of support and collaboration at its heart (CDN, 2023b). The value of the centre to the individuals it supports, and the community it

serves, is demonstrated by the testimonies of learners that run through the report, such as the one below:

> "My friend convinced me to come here before COVID. I was very apprehensive about it, but she was persistent. I realised very quickly that it wasn't a typical classroom. I did a few courses and got really interested in learning more. It even gave me the confidence to go to college, and I am currently in the second year in uni studying Psychology, thanks to being here, really. I would not have come anywhere near education otherwise. And now I have a different outlook about the assessments, deadlines, my abilities." (Anonymous learner, Feguslie Learning Centre, quoted in CDN, 2023b)

The above gives an insight into the impact colleges' approach to community engagement has for individuals who are supported to reengage with education and given confidence to pursue further study. The cumulative impact of this engagement, in terms of the national economy, cannot be understated. In delivering educational opportunities to individuals, and in areas, suffering from economic exclusion, colleges make a huge – and often undervalued – contribution to the fight against pervasive economic inequality.

Trauma-informed culture

Trauma-informed approaches and cultures are a growing area of interest, both academically and for those designing services in Scotland. The links between poverty and the trauma now also feature in national discourse. Last year the Scottish Government published a trauma-informed toolkit for Scotland, as part of the National Trauma Training Programme, to support all sectors of the workforce, in developing trauma informed services. The toolkit defines trauma as resulting "from an event, series of events, or set or circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being", and trauma-informed practice as "a model that is grounded in and directed by a complete understanding of how trauma exposure affects service user's neurological, biological, psychological and social development" (Scottish Government, 2021).

While trauma can be experienced by people of all ages, genders, ethnicity, and social classes, the evidence that exists shows a clear and persistent link between poverty and trauma, with 10.8% of those in the bottom quintile in terms of household income in Scotland having experienced four or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), compared with just 1% in the top quintile (Marryat and Frank, 2019). This is why CDN's third Pathways from Poverty report (CDN, 2023c), focussed on investigating the effective embedding of a trauma-informed culture at West Lothian College.

In the report, Jackie Galbraith, Principal of West Lothian College, explains how an appreciation of the linkages between poverty and trauma has helped shape the whole college approach to student support:

> "People with experience of trauma are disproportionately impacted by poverty. For many, poverty has been the catalyst for the trauma in their lives. Aware of the interconnectedness of these and of the further disadvantages facing those who are care experienced or have one or more protected characteristics, we have embedded our whole-college approach to supporting our students." (Jackie Galbraith, Principal, West Lothian College, quoted in CDN,2023c).

The report goes on to outline how West Lothian College built its 'whole college' approach to trauma-informed practice as a strategic response to the challenges faced both by learners and staff. Several key interventions such as mental health training for staff, and the use of NHS Scotland trauma training resources, have been used to cultivate greater understanding of adverse childhood experiences and their impact, and underpin this college wide trauma-informed approach. Leadership at the college has sought to empower staff to trial new ideas and builds services around the learner (CDN, 2023c).

A key pillar of West Lothian College's trauma-informed approach is the TRUST (Trauma Responsive Unique Support Tailor-made) Project, which is "a wraparound service established to support students who have, or have had, experience of trauma in their lives" (CDN, 2023c). The TRUST Project's trauma-informed underpinning is based in an understanding that a bespoke and tailored approach is often required to support learners whose lives have been disrupted because of experiencing trauma. The project has three core stands: helping young people back into education, tackling poverty for learners and their families, and working with the justice system as a stepping-stone onto education or employment (West Lothian College, 2023c).

While many of the approaches to tackling poverty for learners and their families resonate with the interventions discussed in the section above, the other two strands of this approach are supported by some more unique interventions.

A key component of helping young people to re-engage with education is flexibility. When challenges arise, learners on the TRUST project are able to suspend their learning and return at a later date, leaving open the potential for them to reengage and sustain their studies. This open-door policy contrasts with a conventional approach (whereby a student would be withdrawn for non-attendance). Building in flexibility for learners in this way is used as a means to mitigate against the risk that withdrawal from a course due to non-attendance could be viewed by the learner as (potentially another) negative educational experience (CDN, 2023c).

The project also provides the opportunity for those convicted of an offence to undertake a part-time college course upon release or as an alternative to prison. The aim is to "break the cycle for young people experiencing poverty, addiction, crime and recidivism" (CDN, 2023c). To support a whole-system approach in this area, the college also offers its campus as a safe and neutral space to allow input from Youth and Criminal Justice Services, Housing Services and homelessness charities where required (CDN, 2023c).

Conclusion: pathways from poverty

Scotland's Colleges provide a vital role for individuals, communities and in meeting Scotland's national priorities. As important economic drivers in the regions they serve, colleges have a key role in ensuring that skills supply and skills demand are aligned regionally and that increased workforce productivity and economic growth are supported nationally. Due to the demographics of their enrolment and the position they occupy in their communities, colleges also have a particularly important role in tackling Scotland's pervasive economic inequality. For the same reason, their ability to mitigate the impacts of poverty is vital in terms of ensuring their success and the success of their learners.

Together automation and technological change, Brexit, the climate and cost-of-living crises, an aging population, and widening economic inequalities, present new circumstantial challenges for colleges when approaching their task. The examples discussed in this article, however, show some of the novel ways Scotland's colleges are responding to these challenges. What is evident is that despite these difficult, and ever-changing circumstances, colleges continue to find innovative ways to support their most vulnerable learners. They continue to act as bastions of opportunity and routes from poverty for individuals, as well as crucial catalysts for economic development for the regions they serve.

In the coming months, CDN plans to leverage all the research in the Pathways from Poverty series (discussed above) as a springboard for action, through the launch of a more structured, nationwide programme of support for colleges focussed on the final one of the areas discussed in this article: developing trauma-informed and trauma-responsive approaches in colleges across the country. This ambitious new programme will be made of several complementary strands, including a bespoke mental wellbeing and health training programme for staff from across Scotland's colleges, the roll-out of online resources focused on trauma-informed practice, and the continuation and development of a range of tailored enhancement projects supporting colleges to develop their practice in this area. Crucially, the programme will also engage with college senior leadership teams, supporting them to consider what a trauma-informed culture may look like in their context, and encouraging them to embed joined-up trauma-informed approaches into their organisation's processes and systems.

The aim is to support colleges to support all of those who pass through their doors, and to ensure they continue to provide Pathways from Poverty for some of Scotland's most disadvantaged learners.

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