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ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of funding cuts to the Further Education colleges in Scotland. The reduction in the number of students in the colleges has been hugely politically controversial. The research utilised the Infact database on the Scottish Funding Council's website and also a literature review. The research found there had been a significant reduction in the number of students aged under 16 and 25 and over. This is related to a decision to focus on full-time courses for school leavers and to stop funding courses which lead to no recognised qualifications or last less than ten hours. The implications of this are that an increased focus on employability and qualification attainment of school leavers is important to increase employability and reduce the likelihood of NEET and/or enter a long-term cycle of low skilled work and unemployment. However, the reduction of other courses may affect part-time and older students. Many people will be prevented from retraining or upskilling as they are only able to study part-time. This would likely hit those with disabilities and caring responsibilities proportionately harder. Furthermore, there is a concern over the loss of staff from the sector, particularly those with skills of assisting students with additional support needs. The focus on employability courses may well come at the expense of basic living skills courses, which some students may have to undertake before progressing to an employability course. The implications may be that these students simply do not attend college at all and there may be additional costs to support them elsewhere.

Introduction

The decrease in student numbers within the Scottish Further Education (FE) college sector is increasingly becoming a controversial political debate. Opposition parties accuse the Scottish Government of starving colleges of funding and the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) accuse the Scottish Government with neglecting the FE sector in favour of universities (Whitaker 2016). In their defence, the Scottish Government point to the reduction in the block grant they receive from Westminster.

Thus, it is important to better understand the implications of the reduction in funding to the Scottish FE sector. This paper examines the impact of the funding cuts on different groups of students and the likely implications of having fewer students in Scottish FE colleges and the educational impact of such changes. This research has utilised the Infact database on the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) website as well as undertaking a literature review.

The Background of Scottish Further Education Colleges

Scotland's FE colleges have their origin in industrial Scotland. Coatbridge College was founded in 1865 by the educationalist David Ross as a science school and mining college and was the first FE College founded in Scotland (Colleges Scotland 2014a; Glasgow Herald 1942). Other FE colleges followed and were founded to meet the training needs of the workforce. The FE colleges became the first providers of training to young apprentices employed by industry and school leavers (Colleges Scotland 2014a).

The majority of Scotland's FE colleges were founded by local authorities in the mid-twentieth century to provide post-school vocational training and education, primarily for young people. The majority of students attended college on a day release basis as part of an apprenticeship in the traditional industries of construction, shipbuilding, mining and engineering (Lowe and Gayle 2014). There was a shift in emphasis in the 1990s towards lifelong learning and more resources were allocated to the Scottish FE colleges to expand beyond their traditional remit of preparing young people for employment. This included adult literacy, improving social inclusion and developing skills relevant for the modern economy (Lowe and Gayle 2014). The number of students increased to nearly 360,000 by 2008 (Lowe and Gayle 2014).

The Scottish education system is different in origin and structure from the rest of the UK. The education system has always been administrated in Scotland and from 1999 has been the responsibility of Scottish ministers who are accountable to the Scottish Parliament (Connelly et al. 2011). Generally, most Scottish FE colleges offer a range of courses in vocational preparation, general education and access courses (Connelly et al. 2011). FE colleges offer courses at Higher Education (HE) level as well, such as Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs).

The FE colleges maintain relationships with a range of organisations – local employers, schools, universities, local authorities, voluntary sector and community groups. The FE colleges are represented by Colleges Scotland, whose role is to provide strategic direction to the sector and to liaise with the Scottish Government, Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and other interested parties. Furthermore, Colleges Scotland contributes to the sector's workforce development (Connelly et al. 2011).

Research commissioned by Colleges Scotland to try and estimate the impact of further education and the expected returns on further investment found that society as a whole invested £3.2 billion in Scotland's colleges through the loss of potential output from learners who spent their time at the colleges rather than working and through direct outlays – in return, society will receive a present value of £19.9 billion over the course of the learners' working lives, from an expanded tax base and a variety of social benefits related to lower unemployment, increased health and reduced crime (Emsi 2015). There may be a bias in overstating the benefit of colleges given that the funder was Colleges Scotland, though it does give an economic illustration of the benefits of colleges.

The Policy Context of the Further Education Sector in Scotland

Prior to 1993, local authorities in Scotland funded their local FE colleges and monitored their progress. However, the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992 incorporated 43 colleges as independent bodies with their own board of management. The number of incorporated colleges fell to 37 by July 2011 due to a series of mergers. The Scottish Government provides guidance to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) on ministers' objectives and priorities for the sector, and funding for onward distribution to colleges. The SFC's main statutory responsibilities for colleges, as set out in the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005, is to secure the coherent provision of high-quality further and higher education (Audit Scotland 2012).

A review of colleges announced in 2005 undertaken by a core group of stakeholders indicated that there was a need for more college places so that more people have the opportunity to improve their lives. The report stated that attendance at college is beneficial for people who are looking to improve their independent living skills and not necessarily seeking a qualification (Reviews 'Core Group' 2007). The review identified three key roles for Scotland's colleges:

- Provide vocational education and training related to employment in response to national, regional and local needs.
- Provide positive and clear routes for learners into employment or into higher education institutions.
- Support learners to develop their knowledge and skills so that they can feel confident in their work and in their lives.

In 2009 the SFC issued guidance to the FE colleges that they must reduce the number of courses not leading to a recognised qualification or lasting for less than 10 hours and that these courses would no longer be funded and priority must be given to courses which were more likely to enhance a student's employment prospects (Scottish Funding Council 2013a). In 2011, the Scottish Government published proposals to reform post-16 education provision. Their view was that colleges have a key role in meeting the skill requirements of employers in key sectors. The Scottish Government also believed that young people should be the priority of FE college provision and that all publicly funded courses must pass the test of improving students' lifelong job prospects. Thus, the Scottish Government proposed a more robust system of outcome funding. Furthermore, there was a concern that having so many colleges duplicating courses was poor value for money and hence there was a case for regionalisation of the college sector through a series of mergers (Scottish Government 2011a).

Therefore, as Table 1 illustrates, Outcome Agreements were draw up in the college sector (there may be some variation between different regions), though all will cover five key areas:

Table 1. Outcome Agreements.

Outcome	Purpose
Efficient regional structures	The outcome agreement should set out plans for agreeing and facilitating structural change, to enable the delivery of future efficiencies
Right learning in the right place	The outcome agreement should set annual targets for learning delivered by the region. These include any national specialisms offered, and the maintenance of access to further learning for pupils who attended, or are still attending, schools where a high proportion of former pupils do not advance to education, training, or employment
High-quality and efficient learning	The outcome agreement should set out how the region will maintain and enhance quality; improve attainment; and deliver efficient progression from national qualifications through to articulation to with degree-level study. The regional grouping of colleges should establish a regional baseline of recent performance in order to access progress
A developed workforce	The outcome agreement should set out how the regional grouping of colleges will improve engagement with local employers, employability and the progression of learning into employment within the region. In the future, regions should set targets for the number of students supported into employment and other positive destinations
Sustainable institutions	The outcome agreement should set out how the college will manage itself in a sustainable manner and comply with good governance practice

Source: Audit Scotland (2012).

Scotland's colleges submit an annual outcome agreement to the SFC to demonstrate the outcomes that each of the 13 college regions aim to deliver in return for the funding they receive. The colleges outline in their agreements how they contribute to delivering key Scottish government priorities and strategies (Scottish Funding Council 2015a), and to:

- Deliver a more efficient and effective college system.
- Meet the needs of the learners and communities in each region.
- Deliver opportunities and outcomes for learners.
- Deliver a better service for employers and industry.
- Make colleges stronger strategic players in their regions.

In 2012, the Scottish Government launched Opportunities for All – with a commitment to offer a place in training or learning to every 16–19-year-old that is not in employment, education or training (NEET). The colleges were asked to prioritise their provision for young people (Scottish Government 2012a). In 2012/13, the colleges were asked by the Scottish Government to deliver the New College

Learning Programme (NCLP), which combines work experience with an employer and employability skills training in college. The target group was the 16–19 NEET group and the programme is managed by Skills Development Scotland (SDS), which received funding from the Scottish Funding Council (Scottish Funding Council 2016a; Skills Development Scotland 2012). The Employability Fund was introduced in 2013/14 to improve the employability and skills of the unemployed. Part of the fund is ring-fenced for activity in colleges, co-commissioned by Local Employability Partners and SDS (Scottish Funding Council 2016a).

Since 2008, the SFC has funded five regional articulation hubs[1] for articulation from local colleges to partner universities on the Additional Funded Articulating Places scheme (Scottish Funding Council 2013b; Scottish Funding Council 2016b). The scheme has received funding from the SFC to fund over 1,000 additional places over the next three years (Scottish Funding Council 2016b). Students spend at least a year studying an HN course and subject to getting a required level of pass, they are guaranteed a place on a named degree at university (Meharg and Fotheringham 2014). The SFC allocates the funding to the universities, whom in turn pass 75% of this funding to the colleges to teach the students on the HN component. The remaining 25% is used by the universities to provide support to the students, aligning curriculum and quality assurance (Scottish Funding Council 2013b).

Funding

FE colleges have seen a reduction in funding in the past few years. Grants from the SFC, as shown in Table 2 reduced from £511.7 million in 2011/12 to £346.2 million in 2013/14, a reduction of 32%. There were also reductions in tuition fees and educational contracts, as well as other sources. However, these figures do not include bursaries and other student support funds that were provided to individual students (Audit Scotland 2015a).

Table 2. Colleges Total Income 2011/12 – 2013/14 (millions).

Source	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
SFC grant	£511.7 (74%)	£485.6 (73%)	£346.2 (71%)
Tuition fees and education contracts	£111.2 (16%)	£116.2 (17%)	£86.5 (18%)
Other	£70.5 (10%)	£63.5 (10%)	£55 (11%)
Total	£693.5	£665.3	£487.7

Note: 2011–12 figures have been adjusted for institutions that are no longer part of the sector and all figures are in real terms.
Source: Audit Scotland (2015a).

The Office of National Statistics (ONS) decided to reclassify colleges as public bodies in 2010. This has led to the formation of arm's-length, independent foundations to protect colleges' financial reserves. In 2013/14, Scottish colleges transferred £99 m to these foundations. However, as the foundations are independent, there is no guarantee that colleges will be able to access the transferred funds. Though, under the foundations' Articles of Association, any transferred funds must be spent on supporting further education in Scotland (Audit Scotland 2015a). The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) has expressed concern about the transfer of money to the foundations and considers that the money should have been used directly by colleges to support the training and teaching of students (Further Education Lecturers' Association 2015).

One impact of the reduction in funding is a decrease in the number of staff working at the colleges. The number of Full-time Equivalent (FTE) staff fell from around 11,300 in 2011/12 to around 10,250 in 2013/14, a reduction of 9.3%. Most of the reductions in staff numbers came from colleges which merged and delivered mainly by voluntary severance. However, the SFC has received feedback that staff were concerned about the loss of colleagues with key knowledge and skills and the increased workloads on remaining staff (Audit Scotland 2015a).

Mergers

The four college regions of Borders, Central, Dumfries and Galloway, and West Lothian already contained one college each and have been unaffected by the latest mergers. Six colleges were created through mergers to create six single college regions in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, Ayrshire, Edinburgh, Fife, Tayside, and West. In Lanarkshire, three colleges were merged to form a new college, alongside an existing college. In Glasgow, three new colleges were formed from a series of mergers, accountable to the Glasgow Colleges Regional Board. In the Highlands and Islands, five incorporated colleges along with eight other colleges and research institutes make up the University of Highlands and Islands (UHI) (see Appendix 1) (Audit Scotland 2015a).

Courses offered

Generally, the FE colleges in Scotland offer a variety of courses in line with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) (see Appendix 2). This includes Highers, Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs), HNCs, HNDs, degrees, post-graduate and professional qualifications. They have also traditionally offered leisure courses, generally on a part-time evening basis, such as photography, languages etc. which may not lead to a recognised qualification.

FE colleges train modern apprentices who work towards SVQs. Modern apprenticeships (MA) were launched in Scotland in 1994 with the aim of increasing the number of young people entering inter-mediary-skilled occupations (Canning and Lang 2004). Skills Development Scotland (SDS) has been responsible for administering modern apprenticeships, on behalf of the Scottish Government, since April 2008 (Audit Scotland 2014). Though apprentices may also receive training through a private provider and not an FE college (My World of Work 2016). Of the 25,818 MA starts in 2015/16, only 2,385 (9%) received training in an FE college (Skills Development Scotland 2016).

The content of individual MAs is known as framework. Each framework is determined through employer and industry consultation. MAs consist of: qualifications (usually SVQs), additional learning or qualifications that apprentices must complete for specific jobs within a sector, skills which employers need the apprentice to achieve ('workplace core skills' and 'career skills'), and any additional compo-nents that employers may require apprentices to complete ('optional outcomes') (Audit Scotland 2014).

When MAs were first developed in the 1990s, they just covered traditional industries. In 2012/13, there were 70 types of modern apprenticeships available across a range of occupations (Audit Scotland 2014). The annual number of new apprentices has increased from around 10,600 in 2008/09 to around 25,700 in 2012/13. In 2011/12, the Scottish Government introduced an annual target of 25,000 new modern apprenticeship starts (Audit Scotland 2014).

The FE colleges in Scotland also offer courses which are deemed as higher education. These are qualifications at SCQF level 7 and above, such as HNCs, HNDs, SVQ level 4 and above, degrees and pro-fessional qualifications (Scottish Government 2016a). The FE colleges also provide provision for school pupils, which can take the form of short taster courses, national certificates, City and Guilds, and HNCs (Colleges Scotland 2014b). Furthermore, colleges offer training courses to organisations (Edinburgh College Undated; Scottish Funding Council 2016c).

In addition to these courses, FE colleges also offer courses in regard to students with additional sup-port needs (ASNs); these tend to take the form of life skill courses and learning opportunities programmes for students who generally have some form of learning difficulty/disability (Scottish Government 2012b), which may not lead to a recognised qualification. Some of the FE colleges also offer access courses to help students into higher education, including through the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP).

Changes in the Numbers of Students in Scottish Further Education Colleges

The number of students in Scotland's FE colleges has been declining since 2007/08, with over 151,000 fewer students, with a proportionately larger fall in the number of female students as shown in Table 3.

The Infact database available on the SFC website counts a student each time they attend a college, so the figures may count a student more than once if they attend more than one college in a year (Scottish Funding Council 2016a).

Table 3. Total number of Full-time and Part-time Students in Scotland's FE Colleges 2007/08 and 2015/16.

	2007/08	2015/16	Change	Significance
Full-time	67,549	78,220	+10,671 (16%)	
Part-time	311,690	149,608	−162,082 (52%)	
Total	379,239	227,828	−151,411 (40%)	0.199

Source: Infact database (2017), Scottish Funding Council, www.sfc.ac.uk

Within these figures, there has been an increase in full-time students of 16% and a significant fall in part-time students reflecting Scottish Government policy. As Figure 1 illustrates, the number of female part-time students has fallen by a half between 2007/08 and 2015/16. Likewise, the number of full-time female students has not increased as much as the number of male students. The focus towards full-time courses has resulted in the average hours of learning per student increasing from 240 in 2007/08 to 401 in 2014/15 (Scottish Funding Council 2016a).
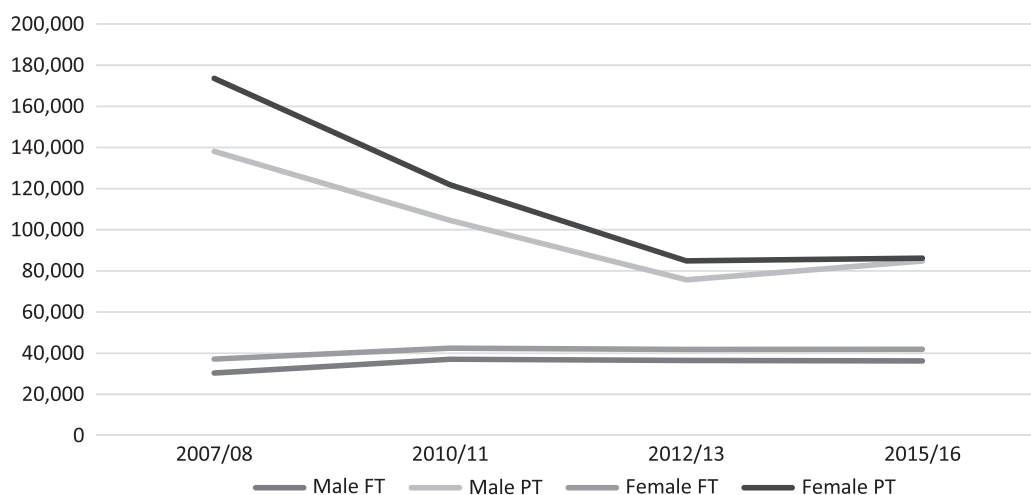

Figure 1. Total number of Male and Female Students in Scotland's FE Colleges 2007/08 - 2015/16.
Note: Part-time consists of a number of options, such as short full-time, block release, distance learning, work based learning etc. Source: Infact database (2017), Scottish Funding Council, www.sfc.ac.uk.

The Scottish FE colleges saw a small increase in the number of HE students between 2007/08 and 2015/16, yet nearly 50% reduction in the number of FE students as illustrated in Table 4. Therefore, there has been a substantial switch in focus towards increasing the number of students undertaking HNDs and HNCs and a significant drop in the number of students undertaking less advanced courses.

Table 4. Total number of Higher Education and Further Education Students in Scotland's FE Colleges 2007/08 and 2015/16.

	2007/08	2015/16	Change	Significance
Total HE	44,664	46,979	**+2,315 (5%)**	
Total FE	349,280	186,088	**−163,192 (47%)**	
Total				0.157

Source: Infact database (2017), Scottish Funding Council, www.sfc.ac.uk

Similarly, the only other student category which has increased in student numbers, other than those on the Scottish Widening Access Programme (SWAP), are those on a full-time college based course, again as a result in change of policy towards full-time courses. There have been significant decreases in the numbers of students who are either at school, retired or employed, as illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5. Total number of Students by Student Category in Scotland's FE Colleges 2007/08 and 2015/16.

	2007/08	2015/16	Change	Significance
Primary school pupil	20,273	3,914	−16,359 (81%)	
Secondary school based	53,421	29,266	−24,155 (45%)	
School pupil, not on Link programme	7,144	3,085	−4,059 (57%)	
SWAP	250	394	+144 (58%)	
Other access course for HE	560	401	−159 (28%)	
European exchange	1,248	162	−1,083 (87%)	
YT/Skillseeker/New Deal/MA*	14,074	10,380	−3,694 (26%)	
Other government training scheme	1,563	703	−860 (55%)	
Full-time college based	73,195	75,262	+ 2,067 (3%)	
Employed	148,124	69,588	−78,536 (53%)	
Not working	58,728	34,096	−24,632 (42%)	
Retired	10,558	2,646	−7,912 (75%)	
Any other category	47	735	+688	
Missing	−			
Total				0.233

Source: Infact database (2017), Scottish Funding Council, www.sfc.ac.uk
*Some schemes stopped.

Figure 2 illustrates that there have been significant reductions in the number of students attending Scottish FE colleges between 2007/08 and 2015/16 aged 17 and under and aged 25 and above. This is likely a result of Scottish government policy targeting college provision at older school leavers.
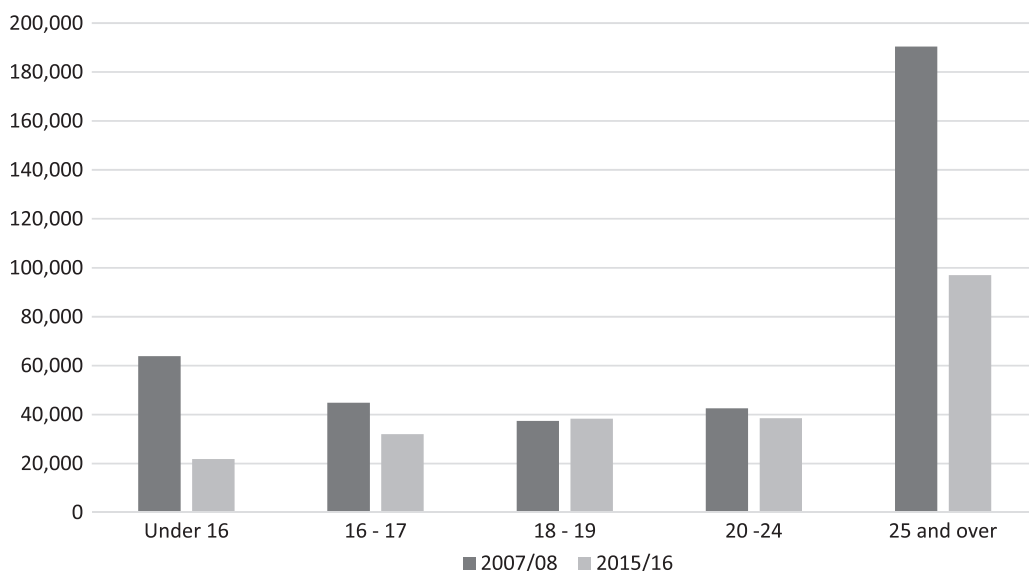

Figure 2. Total number of Students by Age in Scotland's FE Colleges 2007/08 and 2015/16. Source: Infact database (2017), Scottish Funding Council, www.sfc.ac.uk (Age of student in December)

The reduction in the number of students aged under 16 can be explained by the decision to focus school/college courses on senior school pupils. In 2010–11, colleges were asked to deliver 8.3% of their Weighted Student Units of Measurement (WSUMs) to pupils attending college programmes as part of their studies, in 2011–12 this was reduced to 3% of the total WSUMs target[2] (Scottish Funding Council 2016a).

There have been significant reductions in the numbers of students undertaking Information Technology and Information courses. In 2007/08 there were 3,020 primary school pupils undertaking Information Technology and Information courses, there were only five in 2015/16. There were 5,816 retired people undertaking these courses in 2007/08, this fell to 879 in 2015/16. Likewise, for working age people not in employment the figure fell from 17,850 in 2007/08 to 7,406 in 2015/16.

The largest falls in number of students since 2007/08 has come from part-time, further education courses for people aged both under 16 or 25 and over. There have been significant falls in the number of students aged under 16 undertaking courses in Family Care/Personal Development/Care & Appearance, Sport/Game & Recreation, Engineering, and Health Care/Medicine/Health & Safety. Whilst there have been significant falls in the number of students aged 25 and over in IT and Information, Health Care/Medicine/Health & Safety, Family Care/Personal Development/Care & Appearance.

Traditionally, the part-time Further Education (FE) courses have included virtually all the courses that lasted under 10 hours or do not lead to recognised qualifications. The reduction in these very short programmes/non-recognised qualifications accounted for around 147,533 (77%) of the total reduction of 192,599 enrolments between 2007–08 and 2014–15 (Scottish Funding Council 2016a). Indeed, analysis of the Infact database would indicate that there has been a fall in the number of primary school pupils attending FE colleges undertaking courses not leading to recognised qualifications from 18,867 in 2007/08 to 3,853 in 2015/16. Similarly, there has been a reduction in the number of retired people undertaking these courses from 7,809 in 2007/08 to 1,908 in 2015/16. Statistics collected through a Freedom of Information (FoI) request by the Scottish Liberal Democrats, showed that thousands of eligible students were unable to secure a place at the college to which they had applied (Belgutay 2013).

The policy changes implemented by the Scottish Government changed the funding focus for FE more towards successfully completed courses and not simply student numbers. Overall, there has been an increase in the numbers of full-time enrolments (students can be enrolled in more than one course) completing successfully both HE and FE courses between 2008/09 and 2014/15 as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Outcomes for Student Enrolments on Full-Time Recognised Qualifications in Scotland's FE Colleges 2008/09 and 2014/15.

Years	Level of Study	Numbers	Partial Success	Complete Success	Significance
2008/09	HE	27,265	14.8%	63.9%	
2014/15	HE	33,257	11.4%	71.3%	
Change	HE	**+5,992**	**−3.4%**	**+7.4%**	
2008/09	FE	47,552	13.3%	58.8%	
2014/15	FE	50,924	10.6%	64%	
Change	FE	**+3,372**	**−2.7%**	**+5.2%**	
Total					0.157

Source: Scottish Funding Council (2016b).

The picture is more mixed when it comes to part-time enrolments undertaking recognised qualifications in HE and FE courses. Some courses have seen an increase in number of enrolments and success rate, whilst others have seen a decrease in the number of enrolments and success rate. Overall, the number of enrolments in Scottish FE colleges fell from 483,472 in 2008/09 to 297,011 in 2014/15 (39%) (Scottish Funding Council 2016a). Most of the reduction in enrolments can be accounted for in the reduction in enrolments in non-recognised qualifications (85,342) and courses lasting less than 10 hours (57,630) (Scottish Funding Council 2016a).

Trends in Participation in Scottish Further Education Colleges

School Students

There has been a significant fall in the number of school students attending the FE colleges between 2007/08 and 2015/16 (see Table 5). This has come as a result of re-focussing college funding on older secondary school pupils and school leavers. There has been a very significant fall in the number of

primary school pupils attending colleges. There has also been a significant fall in the overall number of secondary school pupils attending college as well between 2007/08 and 2015/16, though some colleges do offer the opportunity for senior school students to study HNCs while still at school (Colleges Scotland 2014b).

Research commissioned by the Scottish Executive into school pupils' attitudes to further education found that school students broadly valued their time in college. School students generally valued having resources available to them which were not available in school, being able to try out different subjects and learning in a more grown-up environment. Furthermore, some teachers considered that the experience of being at college helped school students prepare for progressing into full-time FE or HE courses on leaving school. Likewise, many school students felt that being at college helped clarify their options for the future. There were a number of other benefits recognised by teachers and pupils in relation to attending college in terms of building confidence, increasing motivation, widening options of study, socialising, and give a sense of achievement to pupils who may otherwise not fare well at school (Carole Miller Research 2004).

More focus has been placed on senior school students to attend colleges. However, there are possible implications for fewer school students getting the opportunity to study at college given the benefits outlined above. Indeed, there may be occasions when a young person chooses employment rather than going to college because they haven't had the experience of being at college.

Another possible consequence of the college mergers are that school students and school leavers entering FE may have to travel further distances than previously, thus possibly increasing travelling times and costs as well as the risk of encountering gang-related violence. This could lead to fewer students entering FE in the first place and also more dropping out (Belgutay 2016).

Figure 3 illustrates that there has been a notable increase in the number of positive destinations of school leavers, primarily due to the increase in proportions of school leavers entering higher education, which includes school leavers who study higher education courses at FE colleges. The fall in the number of school leavers entering employment may in part be explained by the economic climate. Though, the percentage of school leavers entering further education with no passes at SCQF level 3 fell from 25.6% in 2007/08 to 22.8% in 2013/14. There was a rise in the employment destinations for this group from 9.8% to 17.7% (Scottish Government 2011b, 2016b).
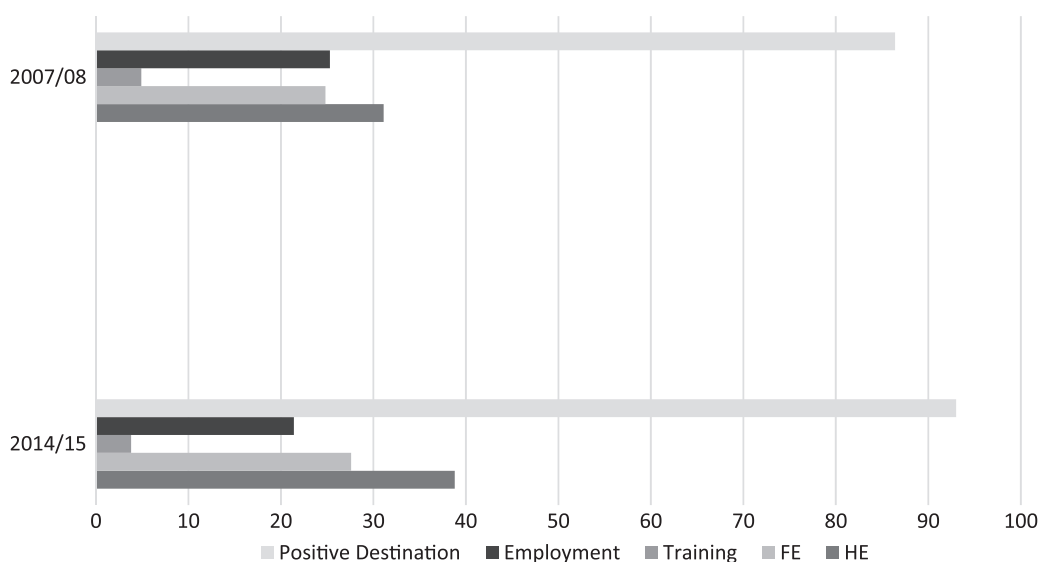

Figure 3. Percentage of school leavers by initial destination category 2007/08 and 2014/15 (%). Source: Scottish Government (2011b), Scottish Government (2016b).

Disabled Students

One positive note from the figures is the reduction in the numbers of students where the disability status is either refused or unknown. There is a likelihood that it would be more difficult for FE Colleges to plan appropriate courses and support services for disabled students if they were unaware of the number of students attending with a disability (McMurray 2008).

There has been an increase in the number of students attending at FE colleges with dyslexia. However, dyslexia is classified as a learning difficulty and not a learning disability as it does not affect intellect (Mencap 2016), though it is covered by the Equalities Act 2010. There have been increases in the number of students recorded as having multiple disabilities, and mental health difficulties. The likelihood is that this is due to better recording and not more students with these conditions. There clearly have been significant falls in the numbers of students with a physical disability, unseen disability and those whose disability is not listed as illustrated in Table 7.

Table 7. Total number of Students by disability in Scotland's FE Colleges 2007/08 and 2015/16.

	2007/08	2015/16	Change	Significance
No Known disability	297,060	197.494	−99,566 (34%)	
Dyslexia	8,087	9,316	+1,229 (15%)	
Blind/partially sighted	1,173	507	−666 (57%)	
Deaf/hearing impaired	2,209	930	−1,279 (58%)	
Wheelchair user/mobility difficulties	2,231	1,010	−1,221 (55%)	
Personal care support	254	135	−119 (47%)	
Mental health difficulties	3,141	5,021	+1,880 (60%)	
Unseen disability	8,789	2,519	−6,270 (71%)	
Multiple disability	2,839	6,308	+3,469 (122%)	
Disability not listed	8,179	5,419	−2,760 (34%)	
Information refused	9,085	–	–	
Information unknown	23,092	–	–	
Total				0.231

Source: Infact database (2017), Scottish Funding Council, www.sfc.ac.uk

Whilst there has been a reduction in the number of disabled students attending FE Colleges, there has been an increase in the overall learning hours (Table 8). Thus, likely reflecting the move towards full-time courses. Furthermore, there has been a move away from the more basic learning needs programmes towards mainstream programmes (Scottish Funding Council 2016a). The SFC Outcome Agreement Guidance states that a priority for each Regional Outcome Agreement is to provide meaningful further education for students with learning disabilities, and help such students get into employment (Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities 2015).

Table 8. Learning Hours for Students with a Disability.

	2007/08	2014/15	Change	Significance
Learning needs programmes	3,067,555	2,545,553	−522,002 (17%)	
Mainstream programmes with learning needs	2,216,680	3,490,194	+1,273,514 (57%)	
Total	5,284,235	6,035,747	+751,512 (14%)	0.157

Source: Scottish Funding Council (2016a).

The learning hours figures suggest that there has been an increase in the overall number of learning hours given to disabled students, reflecting a move away from part-time learning-needs programmes. *The same as you?* Consultation found that many people with learning disabilities were not offered the range or level of courses they were looking for. Many students undertook full-time life skills courses, followed by part-time life opportunities programmes, often repeating the same courses and not gaining a qualification. Indeed, short courses which do not lead to clear outcomes or qualifications have been discontinued (Scottish Government 2012b).

According to the 2010 eSAY statistics, there were 2,524 students with learning disabilities attending Scottish colleges, with 768 attending three or more days a week; 1,422 attended less than three days per week, and 334 attended an unspecified time (Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities 2010). This fell to 2,009 students in 2014, with 888 attending three or more days a week, 826 attending 2.5 days a week or less, and 295 attending an unspecified time (Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities 2015). Therefore, there appears there has been a significant decline in the number of part-time students with learning disabilities.

Survey research undertaken by the Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities (SCLD) indicated that there had been an overall decline in part-time places for students with learning disabilities, with some colleges cutting their entire part-time places. The research also indicated that around a third of students had applied for a place, but had not been offered one (Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities 2011).

The SFC focus on funding employability courses has led to the risk of other courses being cut. This is likely to impact more on students with more complex needs who are more likely to apply for part-time courses which do not have an employability focus. The consequences of these students not being in college may mean that they lose out on opportunities to progress to other courses and also receiving careers advice (Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities 2011).

People with learning disabilities haven't traditionally attended further education colleges simply to improve their employability, but also to develop life skills, independent travel, meet new friends and increase social inclusion. Not having a place at college may mean that there are greater pressures put on local authorities to provide alternative provision, which is particularly challenging given the current financial constraints (Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities 2011). Furthermore, social workers are reporting an increase in demand for day services and nearly 80% of social workers surveyed considered that the reduction in provision in FE for this group was a factor in this rise (Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities 2015).

Research has indicated that colleges have cut back on basic courses, such as Independent Living Skills because it was not employment focused. This may be an unintended consequence of the shift towards funding employability outcomes. There has also been a concern that changes to courses are not being communicated to students and parents. Furthermore, the research found that over a third of colleges do not offer courses to people with learning disabilities on every campus, which may be problematic for some students (Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities 2015).

However, when surveyed, seven out of 12 colleges reported an increase in the number of accredited courses and better progression routes over the past two years for students with learning disabilities. Indeed, 76% of enrolments of students with additional support needs are now onto recognised courses, a 17% increase over six years. This has been matched by a decrease of 64% in enrolments of students with additional support needs on non-recognised qualifications (Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities 2015).

An FoI request by the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) and Further Education Lecturers' Association (FELA) found that there has been a 27% reduction in the Scottish FE sector in the number of additional support needs (ASN) students between 2009/10 and 2012/13. Furthermore, there appears to be a wide variation in the number of students with ASN students in different colleges, with some colleges having the same number of ASN students despite having a far larger overall student population. The FoI also found that there had been a reduction in ASN staff (EIS-FELA 2014).

The figures for the numbers of disabled students within the FE sector appear to be on a downward trend (though not all students with a disability will have ASN and vice versa). There also appears to be a wide variation in the changes in numbers of disabled students between different colleges (though the figures will likely be skewed by the number of students whose disability status is either unknown or the information has been refused in 2007/08. Stevenson College reported a significant increase in the number of students with disabilities studying with them between 2007/08 and 2012/13. However, they also reported a significant fall in the number of students whose disability status was unknown. Both Carnegie and Dundee Colleges reported a significant rise in the number of disabled students

in the same time period. This is primarily students who are reporting having either dyslexia, mental health difficulties or their disability is not listed. There may also be an element of better recording at play here as well

There are some changes within the FE sector that are to be welcomed, such as better progression routes, thus fewer students are repeating courses or doing similar courses at the same level. A better focus on employability and courses which lead to recognised qualifications is also positive given the low level of people with learning disabilities in paid employment.

However, there do appear to be fewer disabled students within the FE sector, with some students not managing to secure a place, which is a concern given that resources elsewhere are stretched and the very low employment rate of disabled people without qualifications. There is a need to recognise that many students may need a very basic part-time course before progressing to a more employability focused course. It is also concerning that there has been a reduction in ASN staff.

Traditionally, colleges haven't simply been about qualification attainment for disabled people, but also a place to increase social inclusion. If colleges are not going to fill that role, there needs to be alternative provision elsewhere. Evidently, it is beneficial if colleges are able to collect the disability status of all their students to better understand the provision required, the changes in the numbers of such students and progression routes.

Part-time Students

There has been a significant fall in the number of part-time students in colleges since 2007/08. This has disproportionately impacted on female students and students over 25. Many students are enrolled on HNCs and HNDs – traditionally many of these qualifications were offered on a part-time basis and students gained them whilst at work (Gallacher 2014).

There are implications from having fewer part-time places in colleges. Some students may only be able to attend college on a part-time basis given work or caring responsibilities, or indeed undertake distance learning. There may be other reasons why part-time study would be preferable for some students in terms of disabilities and/or transport. The risk is that many people will miss out on college opportunities because of their situation and therefore may miss out on opportunities to improve their employability, progress to further study and reduce social exclusion.

Table 9 illustrates the reduction in overall part-time students at FE colleges between 2007/08 and 2015/16. There have been particularly significant reductions in the number of students undertaking evenings and weekend courses, day release and other open learning or directed private study systems. Many of these students will have been undertaking HNCs, SVQs or courses which did not lead to a recognised qualification.

Table 9. Mode of Attendance 2007/08 and 2015/16.

	2007/08	2015/16	Change	Significance
Full-time	67,549	78,220	+10,671 (16%)	
Overall part-time	355,851	171,084	−184,767 (52%)	
Evenings and weekends only	54,835	21,612	−33,223 (61%)	
Part-time (Day release)	75,231	20,675	−54,556 (73%)	
Other part-time day release	124,773	67,505	−57,268 (46%)	
Flexible learning	13,970	12,399	−1,571 (11%)	
Other open learning or directed private study systems	30,753	11,986	−18,767 (61%)	
Distance learning	13,613	10,438	−3,175 (23%)	
Short full-time	15,762	8,785	−6,977 (44%)	
Block release	8,658	6,407	−2,251 (26%)	
Assessment of Work Based Learning	10,686	9,147	−1,539 (14%)	
Part-time, but previously met old full-time criteria	3,745	1,435	−2,310 (62%)	
Locally based learning	2,806	540	−2,266 (81%)	
College based private study	1,019	155	−864 (85%)	
Total				0.234

Source: Infact database (2017), Scottish Funding Council, www.sfc.ac.uk

Older Students

The number of students aged 25 and over has fallen from 190,557 in 2007/08 to 97,030 in 2015/16 (Infact Database, Scottish Funding Council). There is a concern that many older workers are losing the opportunity to upskill or study for a new career and people without formal qualifications are losing the opportunity to study taster and access courses before progressing to further study (Belgutay 2014). Analysis of the Infact database illustrates that there had been a significant fall in the number of students over 25 undertaking courses in the IT and health-care sectors (Infact Database, Scottish Funding Council).

The number of students listed as retired fell from 10,558 in 2007/08 to just 2,646 in 2015/16. The most popular courses taken by retired students in 2007/08 were: IT computer use (3,811), using software and operating systems (1,030), computer technology (840), languages (723) and photography (575). These numbers had fallen in 2015/16 to: IT computer use (598), using software and operating systems (149), computer technology (58), languages (664) and photography (93) (Infact Database, Scottish Funding Council). Many of these courses will likely not lead to a recognised qualification.

There are significant issues with substantially fewer retired students enrolled in college courses, not least from a social exclusion perspective. Furthermore, it is recognised that older people are more likely to be digitally excluded and therefore less likely to be able to fully participate in society and risk becoming financially excluded given the digitalisation of the financial sector (Low Incomes Tax Reform Group 2012).

The Scottish Government run a *Let's Get On* campaign which advertises opportunities for people to learn basic digital skills and using the Internet. These courses are generally held in libraries and community centres. However, it may be that for many older people their local FE College was the most convenient place for them to learn and they may not take up opportunities elsewhere.

Impact on IT

There is a recognised IT skills shortage within Scotland which may affect growth in this critical sector (ScotlandIS 2016). Colleges have a role to play with school students learning about IT, as well as school leavers gaining qualifications and older students looking to develop or retrain for the IT sector.

Table 10 illustrates the significant decline of students undertaking IT courses in colleges. These figures include students of all ages studying IT courses at different levels. When it comes to HND (or equivalent) level, the figures are more mixed. There has been an increase in the number studying IT: Computer Science/Programming/System from 522 in 2007/08 to 1,186 in 2015/16. Conversely, when it comes to HNDs in Text/Graphics/Multimedia Presentation Software, the numbers fall from 729 in 2007/08 to 216 in 2015/16.

Table 10. Number of Students undertaking IT courses 2007/08 and 2015/16.

	2007/08	2015/16	Change	Significance
Computer Technology	11,303	3,418	−7,885 (70%)	
IT: Computer Science/Programming/System	3,591	3,570	−21 (1%)	
IT: Computer Use	27,942	10,378	−17,564 (63%)	
Using Software and Operating Systems	9,582	2,370	−7,212 (75%)	
Text/Graphics/Multimedia Presentation Software	3,141	875	−2,266 (72%)	
Software for Specific Applications/Industries	2,214	926	−1,288 (58%)	
Information Work/Information Use	252	78	−174 (69%)	
Information Systems/Management	754	265	−489 (65%)	
Total	58,779	21,880	−36,899 (63%)	0.230

Source: Infact database (2017), Scottish Funding Council, www.sfc.ac.uk

Private Training Providers

Private training providers provide an alternative to FE colleges for individuals, business and government training programmes. Indeed, only 9% of Modern Apprenticeship starts in 2015/16 received

their training component in an FE college (Skills Development Scotland 2016). The number of private training providers nearly doubled between 2000 and 2008, with 12,300 private training providers in the UK operating above the VAT threshold (Simpson 2009). The boundaries between different types of delivery are being eroded by the use of blended learning approaches and technology (Simpson 2009). There is evidence that large companies have cut their training budgets and have increasingly turned to online training (Prince 2014).

The global e-learning market has witnessed significant growth. The worldwide market for Self-Paced E-Learning reached $35.6 billion in 2011. The five-year compound annual growth rate is estimated at around 7.6%, thus revenues should have reached some $51.5 billion by 2016 (Docebo 2014). The past four years has seen an increasing commercialisation of education, a clouding of boundaries of vocational training and education and a rising trend in individuals taking responsibility for their own learning (Little 2014). There has been an increase of massive open online courses (MOOCs), small private online courses (SPOCs), synchronous massive online courses (SMOCs), vocational open online courses (VOOCs) and other forms of open content learning (Little 2014). The UK e-learning industry has more than doubled in size from its annual worth of £250 m in 2007 (Little 2014).

There has also been a rise in private training companies which offer fast-track courses to learn a trade (Elliot 2010). The growth in private training providers and online learning represents a significant challenge to FE colleges in terms of finding a role in an increasingly competitive and technological economy.

Discussion

There have been significant changes in the Scottish FE college sector with budget cuts and mergers. This has led to a reduction in staff, numbers of courses offered and number of students attending colleges. Some of these are likely to be welcome. An increased focus on employability and qualification attainment, particularly among young people is vital to increase employability and reduce the likelihood of NEET and/or enter a long-term cycle of low skilled work and unemployment. Furthermore, the switch in focus towards full-time courses has meant that average hours of learning per student have increased and a higher proportion of students are studying for a recognised qualification (Scottish Funding Council 2016a).

Similarly, when it comes to disabled students and/or ASN, some changes are welcome. For too long, many students simply repeated courses or did similar courses which did not lead to recognised qualifications and progression routes. There is a positive change in an increased focus on employability, particularly for people with learning disabilities. However, there appears to be difficulties with the removal of basic courses, which many students may require before going onto more employability focused courses. If the FE sector is not going to provide such courses, it is imperative that alternative provision is provided.

There is some evidence that school students benefit from attending college, from trying out different subjects to being better prepared to manage the transition from school to FE or HE. It is likely to be positive that some senior school pupils are able to study HNCs whilst still at school. Though, there should be some concern that some school students may miss out from the potential benefits of attending college.

There clearly has been a significant fall in the number of part-time and older students. This is clearly a concern for many people who have reported not being able to get on the course they wanted. Many people will be prevented from upskilling or retraining as they are only able to study part-time. This would likely hit those with caring responsibilities and disabilities proportionately harder. Likewise, many older students may miss out on training for a new career. When it comes to students who are listed as retired, they may miss out undertaking courses that interest them and also IT courses to help them with social and digital inclusion.

The overall decline in students studying IT courses is concerning. There is a need for new IT qualified students to meet skills shortages. There may be a requirement to revisit the Scottish Government's digital strategy to see what role colleges have from getting school students interested in IT through to getting older people taught in IT skills and utilising the Internet (Scottish Government 2013). Though, it is likely that many students are learning IT skills through other providers and online courses.

Conclusions

There have been significant funding cuts to the FE sector in Scotland in recent years. Tough choices have needed to be made in a time of reduced public spending. It is understandable that in such a climate priority has been focussed on full-time courses for school leavers which lead to a recognised qualification with a focus on employability.

There is, however, a wider question about what the role of FE should be in the economy and society. Traditionally, FE colleges met the training needs of the workforce and provided post-school vocational training and education, primarily for young people. This evolved into providing lifelong-learning, independent living skills and social inclusion. Therefore, there may be a tension within the FE sector between employability and social inclusion. The role may be further complicated by the rise of private and online training providers which offer an alternative in developing employability.

The previous UK Labour government commissioned Sir Andrew Foster to review the role of further education colleges. His report stated that the primary purpose of an FE college is to improve employability and skills in its local area, thus contributing to economic growth and social inclusion, whilst also recognising that this is delivered in a way which improves equality of opportunity and diversity (Foster 2005). It may be argued that FE colleges removing some of their basic courses are not delivering social inclusion.

The research commissioned by Colleges Scotland suggested that there was a significant benefit in investing in FE learners from an expanded tax base and social benefits related to higher employment and better health. Thus, there may be a danger that in reducing the budgets to colleges and the overall number of students that there are economic and social consequences further down the line. That said, the decision to prioritise school leavers into full-time college courses may mitigate the overall detriment of the reduction in investment by reducing the likelihood of young people becoming NEET and damaging long-term employment prospects.

However, there are consequences if people cannot get places on the courses they apply for. They may need to train for a new career and are prevented in doing so. This seems particularly relevant in the IT sector and there may be a need for FE colleges to be more flexible in the provision of courses where there is a recognised shortage of skills in the economy.

Additionally, many students may need to undertake a very basic course before progressing onto a course which has a recognised qualification, thus if the basic course has been withdrawn, they would likely not participate at all. Indeed, this may put more financial pressure on already stretched social work services in the case of people with disabilities and/or ASN. Likewise, with older learners there is a danger that they miss out on opportunities to increase their skills, and also socialise, therefore reducing their social inclusion. Therefore, it is important not just to view education in the context of employability but also simply for the fun of learning.

The evidence suggests that the funding cuts have had a significant impact on the FE sector in Scotland with less participation of school pupils, disabled students, part-time students and older students. The likely implications of having fewer students within Scottish FE colleges are that fewer students will be able to progress into more advanced studies and reduce social inclusion.

Notes

1. Abertay University, Edinburgh Napier University, Glasgow Caledonian University, Robert Gordon University, University of the West of Scotland.
2. WSUMS are derived by multiplying the Student Units of Measurement (SUM), (1 SUM is equal to 40 h of learning), by the 'weight' (the relative cost to a college of delivering different subjects).

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Notes on contributor

Stephen McMurray was employed as a Research Assistant at the Employment Research Institute, Edinburgh Napier University in 2016. He has undertaken research for a number of organisations including working as the Researcher for the Edinburgh Jobs Strategy. His research interests include employability, labour market intelligence, psychology of disadvantage and welfare reform.

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Appendix 1. College Mergers

Region	Incorporated colleges prior to regionalisation	2012-13 Merger Dates	Current incorporated colleges
Borders	Borders	N/A	Borders College
Central	Forth Valley	N/A	Forth Valley College
Dumfries and Galloway	Dumfries and Galloway	N/A	Dumfries and Galloway College
West Lothian	West Lothian	N/A	West Lothian College
Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire	• Aberdeen • Banff and Buchan	November 2013	North East Scotland College
Ayrshire	• Ayr • Kilmarnock • James Watt (North Ayrshire Campuses)	August 2013	Ayrshire College
Edinburgh	• Edinburgh's Telford • Jewel and Esk • Stevenson	October 2012	Edinburgh College
Fife	• Adam Smith • Carnegie • Elmwood (non-land based courses)	August 2013	Fife College
Tayside	• Angus • Dundee	November 2013	Dundee and Angus College
West	• Clydebank • Reid Kerr • James Watt (Inverclyde Campuses)	August 2013	West College Scotland
Lanarkshire	• Coatbridge • Cumbernauld • Motherwell • South Lanarkshire	November 2013 / April 2014	• New College Lanarkshire • South Lanarkshire
Glasgow	• City of Glasgow	N/A	• City of Glasgow College
Glasgow	• John Wheatley • North Glasgow • Stow	November 2013	• Glasgow Kelvin College
	• Anniesland • Cardonald • Langside	August 2013	• Glasgow Clyde College
Highlands and Islands	• Inverness • Lews Castle • Moray • North Highland • Perth	N/A	• Inverness • Lews Castle • Moray • North Highland • Perth • (operating as UHI campuses)

Notes: Barony College, Oatridge College and Elmwood College (land-based courses) merged with the Scottish Agricultural College on 1 October 2012 to form SRUC, a new higher education institution focused on rural and land-based education. Cumbernauld College and Motherwell College merged in November 2013 to form New College Lanarkshire. On 1 April 2014, Cumbernauld College also merged into this institution.

Source: Audit Scotland (2015b).

Appendix 2. Framework of qualifications

SCQF Level	Types of Courses	Description
Pre-entry	Pre-entry level courses	Often include school-college courses, life skills, or taster courses.
1	Access level 1	Often include basic skills such as reading, writing, and communication skills. Can include taster courses in a range of subjects.
2	Access level 2	As above.
3	Access level 3Standard grades (foundation level)	As above.Available in a range of subjects usually taken at school.
4	Standard grades (general level)Intermediate 1SVQ 1	Level above foundation level Standard grades.Available in a range of subjects. May be taken at the same time as Standard grades or after Access level 3. Work-related qualification – provides skills and knowledge for particular job.
5	Standard grades (credit level) Intermediate 2SVQ 2	Level above general level Standard grades.Generally taken Standard grades or after Intermediate 1 course.Work-related qualification (Modern Apprenticeship).
6	HighersSVQ 3	Generally taken after Standard grades or Intermediate 2, often used to progress to university.Work-related qualification (Modern Apprenticeship).
7	Advanced HighersHigher National Certificates (HNCs)	Taken by students after they have completed their Highers.Higher level work-related qualifications in a range of subjects.
8	SVQ 4Higher National Diplomas (HNDs)	Work-related qualification (Technical Apprenticeship).Next level after HNCs, and often allow you to progress on to the second year of a degree course.

Source: Scottish Government (2012c).