Learning Journeys
Student experiences in further and higher education in Scotland
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisions</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future plans</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endnotes</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the students, college and university staff, students’ union officers and staff, and external stakeholders who shared their stories, views and experiences during the research process.

We would also like to thank Edinburgh College Students’ Association, Edinburgh College, and the University of Strathclyde Students’ Association for hosting focus groups.

We would also like to thank NUS Services Ltd for their work and support in carrying out the research.

The research and findings in this report were the result of a joint partnership between the HEA and NUS Scotland. Any conclusions or statements, however, do not necessarily constitute the formal policy of both, or either, organisation. All errors are our own.
Executive Summary

A fair and flexible education system is one in which no student is shut out or held back by their background or circumstances, where individuals can progress, without barriers, and fulfill their full potential, without being disadvantaged by their choice of educational path.

This research was developed to find out if some students, or groups of students, were facing obstacles or experiencing more difficulties than others as they made their ‘journey’ through education. For this report we surveyed undergraduate students in colleges and university and students on postgraduate-taught programmes, focusing on the experiences of students from more deprived backgrounds, and ‘direct-entry’ students at university.

We looked particularly at students’ decisions on what to study, transitions between different levels of education, their learning experiences and future plans.

Decision time

One area we looked at was student motivations for studying and how they decided where and what to study.

In the main, students at all levels were motivated by improving their future prospects and gaining skills for work [Figure 1, p13].

Overall, students mainly chose their institution because of the courses available and its academic reputation. College students were more likely to choose an institution that was close to home, reinforcing the importance of local access to college. The research also found that students seemed less interested in the social aspects of institutions when making decisions, despite these often being highlighted in marketing material aimed at potential students.

Students were most likely to have looked at information published by colleges and universities to find out more about studying, followed by advice from family and friends, and then teachers or careers advisors [Figure 2, p14]. They were less likely to have used ‘official’ resources, such as the Unistats website.

A majority of students felt they had made the right choice of institution and course, based on their experience. Postgraduate taught students and students who had previously been working full-time were the least confident in their decisions about course or institution [Figure 3, p15].

College vs. university higher education

We also looked at the choice between studying higher education at college, or at university. A majority of college HE students had not considered university, and a majority of university students had not considered college [Figure 4, p16, Figure 5, p17]. Students’ backgrounds were a factor in these considerations, with students from more deprived communities less likely to have considered university.

Students’ perceptions of the different options were clearly also a factor, with college students saying they felt university would be more impersonal, more difficult, and more intimidating, and university students saying they saw college more as a ‘back-up’ plan, or somewhere students would go if they didn’t get the grades for university. Both college and university students felt that university was seen as the ‘normal’ option or a superior option to college.

Preparedness and transitions

A majority of students reported they did feel prepared for the experience of studying when they started – though students entering university in third year were least likely to agree with this. [Figure 9, p25]

Students at college, university, and in postgraduate study were positive about the information they received at induction,
though less positive that they’d received skills and guidance sessions which helped them to adjust [Figure 7, p22].

Students were less positive about inductions at university and in postgraduate study than at college; students entering in third year of university were the least positive about their induction.

**Direct entry**

We asked students about their year of entry to university degrees. Students with A-Level or Advanced Higher qualifications were more likely to enter in the first year, despite having the opportunity to enter later, and students with HN qualifications from college were more likely to have chosen later entry. These students reported wanting to save money, or qualify quicker, whereas the former group reported wanting to ‘ease in’ to the university experience or enjoy the social aspects.

Students choosing later entry were the most likely of all university students to report that they found settling in to studying at university challenging and reported issues with fitting in with other students, not knowing facilities or procedures, and difficulty adjusting to different ways of learning and teaching. Where specific direct entry support was available, students reported that this did help them settle in.

**Staff time and support**

A majority of students were positive about the support they received from staff and the benefits of working with others on their course – with college students the most positive about this [Figure 10, p27]. Students who entered university in later years were the least positive.

A significant proportion of both university and postgraduate taught students felt that the balance between contact time with staff and ‘self-study’ on their course was not right - with too much self-study required, and not enough time with staff [Figure 11, p28].

We also asked about the support available for using information technology, and while a majority of students were happy with this, a significant minority felt that there was little technology support available, or that the support available was insufficient for what they needed. Older students were more likely to feel that technology support was insufficient than younger students. [Figure 12, p29]

**Taking part**

In asking about ‘taking part’ in the classroom, we found that students from more deprived backgrounds and university students who entered in later years were less likely than students overall to say they felt confident to play an active role – for example, through asking questions or making comments in classes, tutorials or lectures.

Students who had recently been working full time felt the most confident to take part. Students were less positive that they were able to play an active role in shaping their educational experience than they were taking part in class, despite the increased focus in the sector on ‘students as partners in the learning experience’.

**Co-curricular activity**

A majority of students agreed that they had taken advantage of opportunities outside of learning and teaching while at college or university – though more university students than college or postgraduate students felt this way [Figure 14, p33].

A smaller majority agreed that they felt part of a community in their college or university. This feeling of community may be associated with getting involved in the wider aspects of college or university, as those students who reported they did not have time to get involved in these activities, or preferred to focus on work, were less likely to agree they felt part of a community [Figure 15, p34].

We also asked university and postgraduate students about getting involved in representation, and a majority of students
were aware of their class representatives. More than half agreed that they would feel confident to be a class representative for their course, however students from the most deprived backgrounds were less likely to say they would be confident to do so, as were students who entered university in later years [Figure 16, p35].

**Dropping out**

University students were the most likely to have considered dropping out before the end of their studies, and postgraduate taught students the least [Figure 17, p36].

Students from more deprived backgrounds and students who entered university in later years of a degree were the most likely to have considered leaving before finishing studies. Although data recorded elsewhere shows that drop-out rates for college students are actually higher than for university students, this is not something our survey could capture as we surveyed only current students.

The most common reasons given for considering drop out were financial pressures, workload, a lack of support or uncertainty about the value of a course.

The reasons student gave for being motivated to stay in education that they did not want to let people down, or felt to have wasted time in education, as well as the desire to achieve a qualification.

**Life after studying**

Following their studies, college students mostly reported they wanted to study at a higher level, or at university specifically, where university students and postgraduate students were more likely to say they wanted to get a job [Figure 18, p37].

Students were generally positive that their studies had prepared them for what they wanted to do next, but were more positive that they were prepared for future studies, rather than work [Figure 19, p39].

Students who had entered in third year were the least likely to agree that they felt prepared for what they wanted to do next. University and postgraduate students were mostly positive about the work relevance of their studies, but postgraduate students did raise concerns about provision of careers advice and information on opportunities to improve their work skills.

**Conclusions**

Some significantly positive findings came out of the research done for this report, particularly in terms of students’ experiences of college and university. However, the research has also raised some important questions for the sector to consider.

**Parity of esteem**

It is clear that there are issues with perceptions of the value of different qualifications, and the different routes to these qualifications, among students and those who advise and support them, as well as the wider population.

The lack of parity of esteem between different options – in particular, between college and university routes and qualifications – at present means students may face barriers in making decisions, progressing in education, and being successful in future employment, and it will be vital in creating a fairer and more flexible system for the sectors to consider how this can be addressed. This may be through changes in the way our education system is structured, greater collaboration between schools, colleges and universities, improved information and advice, or changes to the way we fund education or even students.

**Students from more disadvantaged backgrounds**

We know from previous research and existing data that students from Scotland’s most deprived communities are less likely to go to university than students from more affluent areas. Students from these backgrounds that do go on to higher education are more likely than ‘better off’
students to do so through higher education at college and direct entry to later years of university, which our survey has indicated can be a more challenging experience.

Our survey has also shown students from more deprived communities feel less confident to play an active role in their learning experience, are less likely to get involved in representation, and feel less like they are achieving their full potential.

It will therefore be important to look more closely at the experiences of these students, through further research, to ensure they are not facing barriers or being disadvantaged in their education experience, and that they get the support they need.

**Transitions and flexibility**

We recognise there will always be a period of adjustment between one level or form of education and the next. However, students are clearly finding transitions from one part of the learner journey to the next difficult. If we are aiming to create a wider and more flexible range of entry and exit points, it will be increasingly important to improve these transitions.

In light of this it may be beneficial to consider a new approach, where development, as well as information and support, is better explained throughout a student’s journey. It should also be explored whether students should be supported to better understand the 'how' and 'why' they are learning, in addition to the 'what', which could help students to ultimately adjust better after they transition from one form of education to the next. This could also support students to engage better and shape their learning experience.

Changes as a result of Curriculum for Excellence will mean students have greater choice in where and what they study in the later years of school, as well as the choice between Advanced Highers, HN qualifications in college or direct entry into first year of a university degree following their fifth year at secondary school.

As a result, greater collaboration between schools, colleges and universities in relation to this stage of learning may help to support students wishing to take more flexible journeys, and may be a key area for consideration in the coming years.

Institutions will also need to continue to work together and develop structures which support students to choose an education route which works for them, but which is also workable from an institutional and student point of view, and leads to a meaningful qualification.

Developing learning experiences which allow students to blend more ‘vocational’ or college-based learning with more academic or university-based learning will help students gain a range of experience and may help to address esteem issues. At the same time, it will be important to ensure that institutional partnerships and new routes broaden rather than restrict choice.

**Employability**

As students clearly value the employability benefits of education, colleges and universities need to ensure that the education experience supports students to gain and understand the skills they need to be successful in future careers. Students coming back to education from work experience, or a period of work, seem to feel more confident to engage with the education experience, and confidence is an important factor in student engagement and success.

Universities and colleges are already doing a great amount in terms of developing student employability, however there are clearly still issues for students in articulating the skills they have developed, and for employers in terms of the work-readiness of college and university leavers.

Institutions may need to consider a new approach to embedding employability and 'graduate attributes' alongside traditional curricula, and supporting students to be aware of skills as they are being developed.
Further recommendations

The research has also highlighted some more specific areas where developments could be made to support a fairer and more flexible student journey, in relation to information, advice and guidance, as well as induction, support, and outside opportunities.

Information, Advice and Guidance

Improving the information, advice and guidance available to all prospective students will ensure that they are aware of the range of options available to help make decisions that will prevent them from missing out or ‘wasting’ time on the wrong path. These improvements could include:

- Improving online resources
- Providing more information to schools and a more consistent approach to careers advice
- Providing more detail in institutional and official information on areas of interest to students, and making information accessible and reliable
- Extending outreach programmes, shared services and mentoring schemes so school pupils can access information on college and university experiences
- Increasing engagement with the SCQF by schools, colleges and universities to promote understanding of qualifications, what they mean and the range of options
- Identifying new and innovative paths through education through greater collaboration by institutions

Support

Students may lack the confidence to fully engage with a class, or get involved in representation, and ultimately may feel that they are losing out by not achieving their full potential. This could be improved by:

- Targeting interventions to support students who may be more likely to struggle, and sharing of best practice in early interventions and supporting ‘at-risk’ students
- Finding out why some students do not feel confident to engage, or why they feel that they are not achieving as well as they could
- Training and support for academic staff to help students find support
- Increasing collaboration between academic and support staff
- Developing support for university students during contact hours to enable students to make their independent study more effective

Induction

There will always be a period of adjustment between one level or form of education and the next. However, some students are clearly finding transitions more difficult and, in particular, students entering university in later years may be struggling. Transitions could be improved by:

- Undertaking further research to investigate the specific needs of direct-entry students and new postgraduate taught students
- Increasing co-ordination between colleges and universities
- Launching initiatives which would allow students to meet with other students in the same position for mutual support, or mentoring or buddy schemes
- Providing induction information, advice and support beyond the beginning of a course, and research into how to better target this information, advice and support

Opportunities beyond the classroom

Barriers to taking advantage of outside opportunities available while studying – such as workload – may prevent students from feeling they are getting the full experience of studying, or that they are part of a community within their college or university. This could be addressed by:
• Ensuring there are other ways students can engage with opportunities outside of learning and teaching due to time constraints or other commitments, and working to develop more inclusive communities or activities
• Institutions working to ensure that all students are aware of representative structures and how to get involved

Conclusion

There are many positives to take from the report’s findings, but also some key areas for consideration and development as we work towards a fairer and more flexible education system.

There is some progress which could be achieved through smaller improvements, expanding and sharing best practice, and further research into student experiences, and some areas which may require a wider rethink of how further and higher education is viewed and delivered.

We are committed to working with the sector to respond to these challenges and helping deliver a fairer and more flexible education system.
Introduction
Introduction

Recognising the ever-greater focus in the sector on ‘efficient, flexible learner journeys’ and a ‘fairer’ system of education, NUS Scotland and HEA Scotland launched this research to find out more about students’ current experiences of ‘journeys’ through education in Scotland.

For a truly fair and flexible education system we need to ensure that students are not disadvantaged by their choice of route through education, and do not face barriers to achieving their goals as a result of their background or circumstances.

To investigate this further, we asked undergraduate students in colleges and university and students on postgraduate-taught programmes about their experiences in education, looking at if and how these experiences differed depending on the students’ circumstances and what they’d been doing before their course – for example, if students returning to university study from a period of work felt differently about their experience than students coming directly from secondary school.

Scottish Government priorities have led to institutions being more focused on widening access to education for students from more deprived backgrounds, and on supporting students to progress from higher education courses in college to studying for a degree at university, so we particularly wanted to investigate the experiences of these students.

We’ve particularly highlighted the experiences of ‘direct-entry’ students as these students are an expanding group.

We then explored the areas further in our focus groups and structured interviews to find out more about the underlying issues behind students’ responses.

Methodology

The research used a multi-method approach, combining a Scotland-wide online survey, online focus groups with undergraduate university students, and in-person structured interviews with college students.

The online survey reached over 1,650 students studying in Scotland and the findings have been analysed using Excel.

Free-text responses were coded to identify the most commonly occurring issues raised by students and comments have also been anonymised and used to illustrate issues in the main body of this report.

The focus groups and structured interviews (15 students in total) were used to explore the issues emerging from the online survey and to find out more detail on students’ views.

HEA and NUS Scotland recognise that at the closer levels of analysis the relevant sample size is small compared to the relevant student population, however, in illustrating our findings with the experiences of these students as described in the free-text comments, focus groups, and interviews, we believe we have developed an interesting picture of the issues which will be instructive and beneficial to inform future work.

All research was conducted in accordance with the MRS code of conduct.
Decisions
Decisions, decisions

We undertook this research to find out why people decided to study, and how they decided what and where to study.

In the main, students were motivated by a desire to improve their future prospects and help get a job [Figure 1].

College students were more likely to say that they were studying for ‘improved confidence’ and university students were more likely to say they wanted to ‘develop as a person’ or ‘make new friends’.

‘Direct-entry’ students at university were more likely to be focused on jobs or skills than broader personal development or making friends.

Postgraduate students were more likely than others to say they were studying to gain ‘the ability to think in new ways’.

Key issues:

- Improving employment and future prospects are key motivations for students going into education
- University and postgraduate students seem more likely to recognise the wider personal development impacts of study, and college students are more likely to be focused in particular on the skills impacts

Where to study?

At all levels of study, course availability was a key driver of choice. College students were more likely than university and postgraduate students to choose their institution because it was close to home.

College students from the most deprived backgrounds were even more likely than college students overall to cite this reason (61 per cent of students).

Student parents at university were more likely than students overall to choose an institution because it was ‘close to home’ as were students who entered university in third year.

In free-text comments, a number of students explained the need to study locally was due to cost, convenience, or family factors. One student commented:

“I mostly chose the college because they were local and offering a course I wanted. I couldn’t really have considered many other colleges because most aren’t close enough to easily travel to. I have studied at the only other local college, and the only deciding factor for me was the course choice.”

A number of college students indicated that more information on course content, previous student views on the course, or further advice from staff, or guidance professionals would have been useful in deciding what and where to study.

What’s ‘direct entry’ to university?

We wanted to look at any difference in the education experience for students who entered university in the later years of a degree, often called ‘direct-entry’ students.

Scottish degrees are typically four years long, however, with certain qualifications, students may be able to join a degree in later years.

This includes students coming to Scotland from elsewhere in the UK – who may be allowed to enter in second year if they have relevant A-levels with high enough grades, students with Advanced Highers from Scottish schools, or students who have taken higher level qualifications at college.

Students with an HNC may be able to enter university in second year, and students with an HND, in third year, if the subjects match and this is accepted by the university.
The next most popular driver for all students was the **academic or teaching reputation of the institution**.

Overall, factors such as accommodation, recreational facilities or nightlife factored much lower in students’ decision-making, despite often featuring more heavily in the marketing of institutions, and wider public information.

**Key issues:**
- Student choice of college is likely to be restricted by what is available locally so students can be shut out of education if there is a lack of course availability in their area
- Students are more interested in subjects available, the teaching, and the academic reputation of institutions rather than the social, physical or recreational facilities which are normally the focus of marketing

Figure 1. Questions 17, 47 and 82: What were you hoping to gain from studying? [n= 1687]
A little help from my friends...

We asked students about where they’d received information or advice on what studying would be like.

**Institution-published information** such as websites and prospectuses figured heavily in responses from all groups [Figure 2]. Significant proportions of all students had received information or advice from friends or family.

Significant proportions of university students indicated they had received advice from **teachers or college staff**, though the numbers of college students reporting they’d received information from teachers or careers advisors were lower.

Few students had used official resources such as the **UniStats website** (however, our survey did take place before the launch of the new UniStats website, which features the Key Information Set).

**Figure 2. Questions 26, 67, and 87: Where, if anywhere, did you receive information or advice on what studying would be like before you started? [n:1687]**
Key issues:

- Students are using institution-published information to find out more about studying and make decisions on where to study. Official sources of information on universities do not appear to be well used at present.

- Many students are also relying on recommendations from friends or family, which may not be a source available to all – in particular non-traditional students whose parents may not have had prior experiences of education. Equally, the value of this advice will depend on the information available to friends and family, and their experiences of, and perspectives on education, which will vary.

Good decision?

A key positive finding is that, a majority of students from all groups felt that they had chosen the right institution and course for them [Figure 3].

In comparison with this mean result, college students were the most confident in their decisions, and postgraduate taught students the least confident.

Students who had previously been studying at university and those coming straight from school were the most confident in their choices and those who were previously working full time were the least confident and more likely to say that they felt they had chosen the wrong university but the right course (11 per cent of students).

Figure 3. Questions 20, 49, and 85: From your experience so far, which of the following statements do you most agree with? [n: 1687]
Key issues:

- Students at university and in postgraduate taught study are less confident they have made the right choice of what and where to study.
- Students coming from education to education (i.e. those coming to university from school or college) were more confident in their decisions, which may be due to the greater levels of information, advice and guidance available to these students. This may also be due to differences in expectations as students returning to study from elsewhere may not know what to expect from the experience of college or universities.
- A number of students are remaining on courses, or at institutions, which they don’t feel are the best fit for them.

A majority of HE students in college had not considered university. Students from the most deprived backgrounds were less likely than students overall to say that they had considered university instead of college. This was perhaps to be expected as we know from existing research that people from poorer backgrounds are less likely to go to university and more likely to go to college.4

The most common reason students had decided against higher education in university, as opposed to college, was their qualification level – and it may be that entry requirements are a key factor here.

Many saw college as a step towards university and a way to gain the entry qualifications they needed. Others said they felt the college experience would help them feel more ready for university, particularly those who had taken time away from education. One student commented:

“College provides more support and is better to come back to after years of being out of education.”

A number of students also highlighted the importance of gaining a qualification in each year, and reducing any risk associated with leaving a university course before the end of four years.

Figure 4. Question 22: Did you consider studying higher education at university instead of college? [n: 409, college students]
One respondent said:

“I felt I would benefit more from a college course, where I am supported in my learning and have more opportunities and choices than at university. If I decided that it wasn't the right course, I could leave after one year and still gain a qualification, whereas [I feel] university does not give you that opportunity.”

We also asked how students felt university would be different to college. Many felt it would be more challenging, with a greater workload, and that there would be less support for learning, with less staff time and much larger groups in lectures or tutorials.

Linked to this they also felt it would be more impersonal and students would be less likely or able to approach staff for support or assistance. As one said:

“I very much enjoy the fact I know my lecturers by name and can always go to them for help. Whereas in university, students can go years without even speaking to their lecturers.”

Students also felt university would involve more independent study and more personal responsibility for learning than college.

One student particularly commented that the sense of being checked up on by staff, monitoring attendance and work was a motivating factor which helped them to succeed. One respondent said:

“College will not let you fail whereas university does not appear to be interested in whether you pass or fail.”

A majority of university students had not considered studying higher education at college. A number of students said this was because they felt a degree was required for the job that they wanted, or that they were studying a subject which wasn’t available at college.

Many said they went to university because they ’had the grades’ and there was a sense that students would go to college mainly if they did not achieve the results to get in to university, and not for any other reason. A number said they had considered college as a ’back up’ if they did not achieve the results needed for university.

Figure 5. Question 50: Did you consider studying higher education at college instead of university? [n: 730, university students]
One respondent said:

“I gained all the results I wanted from school to get into my university course so there was no need for me to go to college.”

Students from the most deprived backgrounds studying in university were more likely to have considered studying at college and also more likely to say that they had studied higher education at college previously.

Students from the least deprived backgrounds were more likely to say that they had not considered college study.

In our structured interviews with college students, they felt that university was promoted as the superior or only option following school and that they were 'expected' to take Highers and then apply to university.

They also said there was limited advice about college, and that students not wishing to stay on or go to university were more likely to given advice on employment options.

“In high school, I stayed on until sixth year which was the biggest mistake ever because if I’d known about college I could have left at fourth year, done my NC [National Certificate qualification], because I never got any Highers, the last qualification I got was fourth year with my standard grades, which is what got me into my NC, so I could have done my NC in fifth year HND year one when I was in sixth year and I’d already be in university by now, which would be a lot better, and I regret that.”

Students in our university focus group noted that university following school seemed like the ‘logical’ or ‘normal’ option and this was backed up by students responding to the survey, a number of whom also said they weren’t aware of college as an option for higher education, or that it wasn’t what was normally done. Others felt that college was just somewhere students went to sit, or to re-sit Highers rather than a different learning environment to school with a range of different options. One respondent said:

“[I didn’t consider college] because it was never really presented as an option for students doing Highers and Advanced Highers. The expectation was you would go to university, or fail.”

Some university students felt that there were negative opinions about college in the wider population, amongst employers, or at universities, and this was a reason for not going, or felt that attending university would be better for their future employability.

Students felt that the competitive job market meant a lot of pressure to get the highest qualification you could, or that individuals with a degree would beat those with HN qualifications to jobs.

“A degree is worth more than an HND/HNC. I want to achieve the highest level of education I possibly can and I need a degree for all the types of job I want to do. There is also a slight stigma attached to colleges because people think they are for people who were not intelligent enough to go to university.”

Key issues:

- Students may be put off studying at university, or considering university, by misconceptions about what the experience will be like
- Students may be choosing college higher education because they feel it is the best way to receive a recognised qualification at the end of each year of study, or that a three or four-year degree course is too great a commitment
- Students may be unaware earlier on in their school career of the options open to them at college and miss out
on opportunities, or not discover opportunities until later in life

- Parity of esteem for higher education qualifications is a key issue for the future of our education system – it is clear that students are receiving messages from schools, from parents, from employers and the media which portray one set of qualifications, and indeed one route through education as the ‘normal’ or ‘superior’ option
Transitions
Are you ready?

We wanted to know how prepared students felt when they began studying and how they found the experience of settling in to studies. A majority of students from all groups did feel prepared for the experience when they first started, though this figure was higher for college students.

University students who had previously been studying at college were more likely to agree that they felt prepared for the university experience whereas those who had been out of education – either due to caring responsibilities or working part-time – were less likely to say they felt prepared.

Comments indicated that where students felt underprepared for university it was in part due to the need for more independent and self-directed study than in their previous education experiences.

“At university we were never really taught how to study or research effectively. We were left to deduce how to write essays from scant feedback that revealed little constructive guidance.”

Within this, those students who had previously been working full-time were more likely to say they felt prepared when they started. University students who entered in third year were least likely to say they felt prepared – just 51 per cent. From comments, it seemed that the transition from college to university may have been a factor. One respondent said:

“[It would have helped me] if college had perhaps prepared you a little better, providing more coursework and deadlines in order to get you used to managing your time appropriately.”

Figure 6. Question 26a, 58, 88: Please indicate to what extent, if at all you agree or disagree with the following statements: When I first started on my course I felt prepared for the experience of studying at college/studying at university/postgraduate study. [n: 1653]
Key issues:

- Our research found that some students struggle with the transition into university education. Academic skills, time management and subject-specific knowledge gaps are key issues.
- Students with prior experience of working full-time may feel more prepared and more confident to take on the experience of studying at a higher level.

Inductions

Looking at inductions, college students were the most positive about the information they were given when they started college, though a majority of students overall agreed they received information on what they needed to know.

In structured interviews, college students reported that they valued the inductions they had received at the beginning of their course, in particular as a means of getting to know staff and classmates.

However, it was felt that more information on the course content and how this would be structured throughout students’ time on the course would be useful.

At all levels students were less positive about having received skills or guidance sessions than information. In our survey, only 60% of college, 53% of university and 46% of postgraduate students agreed with the statement, ‘when I first started on my course there were skills and guidance sessions which helped me to adjust to studying,’ compared to 79%, 69% and 57% who agreed that they were given information which ‘told me what I needed to know about studying.’

One university student commented:

“We were given a lot of information during the Induction Week. However, it was far too much to take in and it really didn’t help much at all. I do have a programme director that is very helpful; however, I still feel that support was not that great.”

Figure 7. Questions 26c, 61b, 91b: Please indicate to what extent, if at all you agree or disagree with the following statement: When I first started on my course the information I was given told me what I needed to know about studying at college/studying at university/postgraduate study [n: 1653]
Later-entry students to university were less likely to agree that the information they were given when starting at university told them what they needed to know, or that they had received guidance or skills classes to help them adjust to studying at university.

This is particularly important when considering that a higher percentage of these students may be non-traditional students, and less familiar they the study skill they need.

“I had difficulties adapting to the learning style, referencing and getting used to lectures and tutorials - as well as dealing with not having the same rapport with tutors/lecturers that I would normally have at college.”

Postgraduate students were less positive than others about the information and support they received on beginning study and some reported that a lack of information was a factor which made it difficult to adjust, in particular in relation to procedures within their institution.

Some also raised concerns about the lack of information about the course and what was expected them in their work.

“Clearer information about procedures would be really useful. It’s assumed we’ll know how to hand in essays, sign up for courses, and find all this information online.”

Some postgraduate students felt they would have settled in better if they had received more of an induction to their institution and their course, or greater staff support.

“[I] wished tutors had spoken to us on one on one basis to ask how we are settling in - I don’t think I needed specific help but it would have made me more reassured.”

Key issues:

- Students find college inductions useful in getting to know staff, surroundings and other students. However, there may be less emphasis on other areas which students would find useful, such as course content, layout and learning objectives in more detail.

- University students may feel overloaded with information but lacking in support. College students were more positive which may be due to greater staff contact time at college compared to university, and smaller staff-student ratios.

- Postgraduate taught students feel they are expected to understand the workings of universities, and the skills they need for postgraduate study, by virtue of having completed undergraduate studies, however this is not always the case.

Direct entry

We asked university students about their year of entry to their degree, and about their reasons for choosing to start when they did [Figure 8].

Figure 8. Question 53: Did you have the option to enter university in later years? [n=615]

17% 18% 65%

[Yes  No  Not sure]
The availability of options for direct entry was raised as an issue by college students. Students were aware of direct entry agreements which their college had with certain universities, but recognised that attending other universities, or wanting to study particular courses, may mean starting again in first year and spending longer in education overall. One respondent said:

“Obviously one university can’t do all [of one subject] so a lot of folk in the class won’t go to [the link university] cause they don’t do a lot of the courses that most of us want so we automatically lose that ability to go straight into third year... It sort of limits who can and can’t use it.”

Students who did have the opportunity to take direct entry to later years but chose to begin in first year were typically those with Advanced Higher or A Level qualifications. Students said they mainly chose first-year entry to ease into the university experience, to enjoy the social side before they faced a higher workload, and start with everyone else at the same time, or because they wanted the ‘whole experience’ of a university degree.

“I wanted my whole degree from university and not from a college. I didn’t want to feel like I had joined part the way through a programme.”

Students who took the opportunity to enter study in later years of university were typically students with HN qualifications and said they chose later entry because they had the qualification and felt ready, wanted to qualify faster to save money, or wished to avoid repeating study.

Key issues for direct-entry students were the change to different systems and practices in university compared to college, having missing skills or knowledge gaps compared to others, and being unsure what staff expected of them.

When asked about things which may have made it hard to settle in to university, a number commented that later entry meant fitting in with already established social groups, and that they had missed out on information about university practices – for example timetabling or submitting assessments – which were well known to others. As one student commented:

“[I] didn’t get shown around the university or how to use the facilities or where the office was to hand in coursework. A lot of the time we were expected to know, but didn’t ever get told.”

In terms of particular support which helped direct-entry students to settle in to their studies, a number mentioned that specific inductions, bridging programmes and guidance sessions were useful, including “a week-long run up to freshers’ week to introduce direct entries to the university resources” and “extensive adjustment programmes for direct-entry students and workshops throughout the year to help with academic skills.” Others mentioned information sessions and opportunities to visit the university whilst at college which helped. Meeting students in the same situation or getting advice from students in later years was also cited as beneficial.

“The lectures and the practical work between second and third year is at relatively similar levels at times. However, the transition between college and university really needs to be looked at. It took about four or five weeks for myself and other direct entrants to third year to adjust. The lecturers don’t know you and focus more on the 'existing' students who have had time to build a rapport with them.”
Key issues:

- Students are opting for the ‘full degree experience’ where they feel they have the time and finances to do so, clearly valuing what is gained from the extra time at university. Where students are choosing direct entry they are more likely to be motivated by saving money and reaching their qualification more quickly, in spite of perhaps missing out on part of the experience.

- Students clearly valued inductions, bridging support, guidance or skills sessions specifically designed to support direct entry students, where these were available, including events designed to help students integrate socially.

- Students felt they benefitted where they were able to speak to or work with other direct-entry students or students in later years of university who could advise them.

- Students are struggling with skills or knowledge gaps which could be addressed through a more co-ordinated approach from colleges and universities, looking at curriculum fit and skills needs of those taking the direct entry route to university.

Figure 9. Question 58: Please indicate to what extent, if at all, you agree or disagree with the following statement: When I first started on my course I felt prepared for the experience of studying at university. [n= 746, university students]
Learning experiences
**Working with staff and other students**

We wanted to know if there were differences in how students felt about the support and time available from staff, and working with other students on their course. College students were the most positive about the support from staff on their course, and the benefits of working with other students [Figure 10], though a majority of students in all groups agreed that staff were supportive and they had benefitted from working with others. 87% of college, 75% of university, and 76% of postgraduate students agreed with the statement ‘teaching staff were available and supportive when I first started.’

The response was more positive from those students who had come to university straight from school and those who started their course in first year (82 per cent), and less positive from students entering in second and particularly third year (76 per cent and 66 per cent respectively). One student commented that they experienced issues with this:

“They are all already friends. When put in groups the groups would forget to include me or update me with information.”

A majority of college students felt that the balance between contact time with staff and ‘self-study’ on their course was just right, though university and postgraduate students were more likely to feel that contact time was insufficient. [Figure 11] One student commented:

“[Tutors have a] lack of understanding of how difficult the transition is to university, having been out of education for a large number of years. Tutors didn’t know anything about me, and I didn’t feel they really care, they just wanted you to submit on assessments on time.”

University students who had previously been at college were more likely to say that there was not enough contact time on their course, and less likely to say that there was not enough independent study.

**Figure 10. Questions 26g, 61f, 91f: Please indicate to what extent, if at all you agree or disagree with the following statement: I have benefitted from working with other students on my course [n= 1642]**

![Chart showing the distribution of responses to the question on working with other students](image-url)
Key issues:

- Students are overall really positive about the support they receive from staff and the benefits from working with the other students.
- College students in particular are really positive about their contact time with staff.
- University students have real concerns about the amount of teaching time or time with staff as part of their course and feel they would benefit from greater amounts of contact time. In particular, students who have experienced a more contact-based higher education in college seem to have concerns about the university system.
- Postgraduate students feel they are expected to have certain skills which they may not, causing difficulties in adjusting to study. At the same time, they may feel they have insufficient access to staff.

Tech support

We were also interested in the support which was provided to help students with the technology used on their courses.

A majority of university students either got the support they needed or felt they didn’t need any support, but a significant minority (20%) felt either that there was little or no support provided, or that support wasn’t sufficient for their needs.

Students who started their course in third year were less positive about support, and students beginning in second year were mostly likely to report that support wasn’t sufficient for their needs.

Postgraduate students were also more likely than undergraduates to say they felt support when starting was either hardly available or insufficient.

Figure 11. Questions 33, 67, 97: What do you think about the balance between ‘contact time with staff’ (e.g. lessons, tutorials, and so on) and ‘self-study’ on your course? [n= 1645]
Older students were more likely to report concerns with the support available for using technology on their courses. 11% of university students aged 21 and over, compared to 8% of those 15 to 20, said there was little or no support for using technology on their course, with 24% of students in the 41-50 category reporting this. Older students also commented on this issue in free-text responses.

"Being ten years older than my colleagues is a large generation gap in terms of technology. I have really struggled with learning computer technology and noticed that my colleagues pick it up with ease and naturally. I would be very grateful for more support in learning essential digital and presentation skills."

Key issues:

- While a significant proportion of students reported they didn’t need support with technology on their course, there are clearly some who struggle. Postgraduate students and students starting university in later years may be missing out on support with technology.

Figure 12. Questions 31, 60, 91: When you first started on your course how helpful was any support on the use of information technology (e.g. computers, software, internet etc) which would be involved in your studies? [n= 1642]
Taking part in the classroom

We wanted to know if students felt they were fully involved in their education, and getting the most out of it.

Overall, a majority were positive about playing an active role in classes - for example, by asking or answering questions, or putting forwards ideas - with college students the most positive. At university, students who had previously been working full-time agreed most that they felt confident.

In our analysis of the survey, students from more deprived backgrounds were also less likely than students overall to agree that they felt confident to play an active role (66 per cent) and students from the least deprived backgrounds were more likely to agree (71 per cent).

Students who had joined a degree course in the third year were the least likely to agree with this statement.

We also asked university and postgraduate students if they felt they were able to shape their learning experience. University students overall were less positive about their ability to shape the content of their course or how it is delivered, than they were about taking an active role in class.

In addition, despite higher level and more self-directed study, postgraduate taught students were only slightly more likely than undergraduate students to agree that they felt involved in shaping their course.

Key issues:

- Certain groups of students feel less confident to engage fully with the educational experience at college or university than others. In particular, students from more deprived backgrounds seem to be lacking in confidence in comparison to those from better off backgrounds, which could have significant impacts on their experience and success in education. Further research should be undertaken into the underlying causes of this, its impacts, and how it might be addressed, to prevent certain groups being disadvantaged.

Figure 13. Questions 34b., 65e., and 95e: Please indicate to what extent, if at all, you agree or disagree with the following statement: I am achieving my full potential on my course [n=1619]
in education

- Significant proportions of students at university and studying for postgraduate taught qualifications do not feel able to shape their learning experience, despite the increasing focus from the sector on ensuring students are partners in the learning experience, or ‘co-creators’ of their curricula. This may also be an area which would benefit from further research.

Potential difference?

College students were the most likely to agree that they were ‘achieving their full potential’ on their course.

University and postgraduate students were less sure, with a significant minority of students who did not feel they were achieving as well as they could. [Figure 13]

In our analysis of the survey, students from the most deprived backgrounds were less likely than students overall to agree they were achieving their full potential (53 per cent) and students from the least deprived backgrounds were more likely to agree (61 per cent).

Students who had entered in third year were the least confident of this (51 per cent).

Key issues:

- It is a real concern that a number of students surveyed don’t feel like they are achieving their full potential at college or university, which could be due to a number of factors including students’ own personal effort, or support and guidance from staff, so further research would be beneficial to identify any key causes and how these might be addressed. In particular, factors which may lead to certain groups of students feeling they are underachieving should be investigated.
Future plans
Otherwise engaged?

Looking at the wider experience of studying, we wanted to know if students felt able to get involved in activities and felt part of an educational community.

A majority of students said they had been able to take advantage of activities and opportunities – though more university students agreed with this than college or postgraduate students [Figure 14]. Of those who disagreed, the most common reason for this was not having time to get involved, followed by preferring to focus on work.

We also wanted to find out if students felt that they felt part of a community at college or university, and a majority did, though again this was less true at higher levels of study [Figure 15]. Students reporting that they did not have time to take part in outside opportunities or preferred to focus on work were less likely to agree that they felt part of their institution as a community.

Indeed, some university students indicated that they did not feel particularly part of a university community because they didn’t have the time to participate in groups and events outside of their course.

Students felt that a sense of being part of their institution was linked to involvement in clubs and societies within the university, or the availability of these societies and events organised on campus, or something which was more apparent when staying on or near campus in institutional accommodation. Being ‘part’ of the university was also associated with on-campus spaces to meet and be around other university students.

Figure 14. Questions 35, 71, 101: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I have been able to take advantage of activities and opportunities at my university outside of learning and teaching. [n= 1641]
It was clear from the open comment responses to our survey that students who do take advantage of outside opportunities do feel that they benefit from them, in terms of meeting fellow students and settling into university. In focus groups, involvement with university societies was also highlighted as beneficial in discovering new interests and gaining experience which would be beneficial for future careers.

**Key issues:**

- Not all students will be able to engage with opportunities outside of learning and teaching due to time constraints or other commitments (for example, student parents or carers) – students do gain real benefit from taking part in these opportunities and we should support students to feel part of a community by ensuring there are other ways students can engage

- University students were most likely to report engaging in activities outside of the classroom, and this may be due to fewer opportunities being available at college – extracurricular activities were also something pointed out by students as an area of difference between college and universities. It may be that college students would benefit from access to more opportunities outside of learning and teaching, while they study

- The workload of postgraduate study meant more students reported they had less time to take advantage of opportunities outside of study, which may mean missing out on beneficial experiences. Students could be supported to engage with the university outside of their studies in other ways

---

**Figure 15. Questions 34 h, 65f, 95f: Please indicate to what extent, if at all, you agree or disagree with the following statement: I feel like I am part of a college/university community [n= 1632]**
Class act

We also asked students about their awareness of class representatives and if they would feel confident to be the class representative for their course. Results were positive in that a relatively small percentage of students were unaware of having representatives.

Overall, more than half of the undergraduate students agreed that they would feel confident to represent their class, though postgraduate students were slightly more confident [Figure 16].

Within this, students who had come to university straight from school were more likely to agree that they would feel confident to represent their class, and students who had entered university after first year were least likely to agree they would feel confident to take this role.

Students from more deprived backgrounds were also less likely to say they would be confident to be the class representative for their course and students from the least deprived backgrounds were more likely to say this.

Key issues:

- All students should feel that they can be involved in class representative structures and in ensuring their views are heard by the institution, and a particular concern of this may mean institutions are missing out on key issues for direct-entry students.
Leaving so soon?

We also wanted to know if students had ever considered dropping out of study and about the factors affecting this [Figure 17].

University students were the most likely to say they had thought about leaving their course early and postgraduate students the least.

At all levels, students from the most deprived backgrounds were more likely than students overall to report that they had considered dropping out.

Students who had entered university in later years were also more likely to say they had considered leaving.

The most common reasons given by college students for considering drop out were financial problems, being unable to cope with the required workload or a lack of confidence in their success in the subject or support with their work.

Students in particular commented on issues with funding delays which left them struggling to get by.

University students reported that workload and stress of studying, or uncertainty or a lack of interest in their chosen course were reasons for considering dropping out. A number of these students mentioned struggling with a lack of support and the amount they were required to do alone.

“[I] feel like there is far too much emphasis on independent study and not enough learning time in class, and this can be quite stressful when you feel like you are trying to teach yourself.”

Postgraduate students said they considered leaving as they were unsure or had issues with their course, were finding it difficult to cope with the workload, or felt that the course was poorly organised.

Workload was also mentioned by other students, along with costs and a lack of staff support, as one of the more negative aspects of their postgraduate experience. The cost of postgraduate study, particularly following on from undergraduate study without a period in work, was a clear concern to a number of students and for
many, added to the pressure they felt on the course. In terms of reasons for staying, having considered withdrawal, the most common response was a sense of wanting to see something through to the end, to persevere and not be a ‘failure’ or let people down, or a sense that the time spent would have been wasted.

Others said that they were motivated to stay because they needed the qualification for what they wanted to do next or it would improve their future prospects. A number of students also said they had received support from friends, family, other students or staff which helped them to stay.

**Key issues:**

- Students at university are more likely than students in college to have considered leaving their course before the end and where this is for negative reasons, this is clearly a concern, in particular if certain groups – such as direct-entry students – are more likely to think about dropping out.

- Students may be struggling as a result of funding delays - including Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) delays which currently seem to affect HE students in college more frequently than those in university.

- Students may be considering withdrawal due to issues of confidence on their course and uncertainty over what they have chosen to do, and may feel forced to ‘stick with’ courses which aren’t for them. Students may therefore benefit from a more flexible system with the ability to transfer credits or move more easily between courses.

- Students from the most deprived backgrounds and those entering university in later years of a degree are more likely to be considering dropping out of studies.

- While college students were less likely to report considering withdrawal from studies before completing, we know from statistics that college students are more likely to drop out of study than university students.

**Figure 18. Question 37, 72, 102: What are you hoping to do once you finish your current course? [n=1652]**

![Bar chart showing the distribution of responses to the question.](chart.png)
students – though we are unable to capture this in our research. It may be that investigating the reasons these students do withdraw – alongside the concerns of the current students we surveyed – may also be beneficial in improving college retention.

- Postgraduate students may be considering early withdrawal due to problems with workload or the way in which their course has been organised.

Is there life after studying?

Most college students reported that on finishing their course they were hoping to take another course at a higher level, to go to university, or to get a job [Figure 18]. A majority agreed that their experience had made them feel prepared for what they wanted to do next.

Within this, students who were hoping to go on to further study at a higher level were the most likely to say they felt their college experience had prepared them for this, followed by those hoping to go on to university (85 per cent), indicating that a high proportion found the college experience useful as preparation for studying at university [Figure 19].

Students hoping to get a job, placement or training opportunity, were less positive that they were prepared.

In free-text survey responses and in our structured interviews, students did comment that college had helped them to be more prepared for university study - that it is less of a step from school but helped them to acquire the confidence to go on to further study.

"I felt I was too immature to attend university straightaway. I am a very nervous and quiet person with new people, large crowds and new environments so I felt going to college first to help me adapt was the best idea, which is definitely has been."

Students studying for higher education qualifications at college most commonly said that on finishing their course they were hoping to continue their studies at university. However, in structured interviews and open survey responses some raised concerns that this may be given too much focus in higher education courses at college, and students may be advised that this should be their next step, and not continuing to a degree could be harmful to their job prospects.

"Our college has just never said you can just have your diploma to get a job, and when I’ve done job searches it’s just a diploma that they’re looking for [for what I want to do] which our college have just always been saying look you need to go to university."

Just under half of university students were hoping to get a job once they had finished their course, with 29 per cent saying they hoped to take another course at a higher level. The majority said they felt prepared for what they wanted to do next, with students who had entered in third year the least likely to agree with this.

University students were also relatively confident about the relevance of their studies to the future world of work; 69 per cent agreed that the balance of theory and vocational or work skills on their course was about right, and 75 per cent agreed that the course had clear ‘real world’ applications outside of studies.

In our focus groups a number of students felt that their university experience had made them want to study further, though said cost would be a clear factor in whether or not they would continue their studies further.

Following postgraduate studies, the majority of students were hoping to get a job [Figure 18].

Looking at the free-text responses, those who were hoping to continue to further study likely to say that they were considering a career in academia or that
further study was necessary for their chosen job.

In the open comments, a number of students indicated that they felt they needed to find work to earn money and begin to repay the debts accrued from studying, and the possibility of returning to study once they had paid off some debt.

Overall, nearly two-thirds said they felt that their experiences had prepared them for what they wanted to do next, with those wanting to progress to further study more likely to say that they felt prepared for this than those hoping to get a job. In terms of the work-relevance of their studies, a majority of students were confident – 76 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that their course had clear ‘real world’ applications outside of study, and 74 per cent agreed that the balance between vocational work and theory on their course was about right.

In open comments a few students highlighted concerns around the value of their qualification for future employment or said they felt there was a need for advice on careers or future opportunities for postgraduate students.

Just over half (54 per cent) agreed that sufficient information was provided to them on the opportunities which would be available for improving their skills for work during the course. Students who were hoping to go on to a placement or training indicated that they felt they would need time to pick up the more practical skills for work, in addition to more theoretical knowledge obtained through study.

Key issues:

- Students leaving college and university feel they are more prepared for further study than the world of work, so they may feel they are missing important skills for employment. At the same time, while college students clearly feel their experiences in college are helping them to prepare for further study, or university in particular, elsewhere in our survey, students have reported struggling with this transition, so it may be that more information on the

**Figure 19. Question 38, 73, 104: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: My experience at college/university/postgraduate study experience at university has made me feel prepared for what I want to do next? [n=1652]**
realities of university study would be beneficial

- Students clearly feel that higher qualifications are better qualifications, rather than different qualifications, and that employers will therefore value a university degree over HN qualifications, and this may be being reinforced by advice in colleges
- Students may be concerned about prospects following postgraduate study and may have access to less careers advice and guidance than undergraduate students
Conclusions
Conclusions

Overall, we feel we have some really positive findings in terms of students’ experiences in college and university in Scotland.

However, we believe the picture raises some key questions for the sectors to consider in developing a fairer and more flexible system for the future, in particular, in relation to parity of esteem between college and university-based study, students from more deprived backgrounds, transitions between different forms and levels of education, and employability.

Parity of esteem

Running throughout the research, it is clear that there are issues with perceptions of the value of different routes and qualifications among students and those who advise and support them, as well as the wider population.

The key to a learner journey which is fair and flexible is to ensure that every individual can choose the educational option which is best for them and can progress in education and on to employment based on their talents, with their skills and achievements properly recognised.

The lack of parity of esteem between different qualifications, pathways, or modes of study at present means students may face barriers in each of these areas, and it will be vital in creating a fairer and more flexible system for the sectors to consider how this can be addressed. This may be through changes in the way our education system is structured, greater collaboration between schools, colleges and universities, improved information and advice, or even changes to the way we fund education, or even students. Work with employers and professional bodies will be important too in changing perceptions.

Students from more deprived backgrounds

We know from previous research and statistics that students from Scotland’s most deprived communities are less likely to go to university than students from more affluent areas. Students that do go on to higher education are more likely than ‘better off’ students to do so through higher education at college and direct entry to later years of university, which our survey has indicated can be a more challenging experience.

At the same time, our survey has shown students from more deprived communities feel less confident to play an active role in their learning experience, may be less likely to get involved in representation, and feel less like they are achieving their full potential.

Students who are the first in their family to go on to further or higher education may also face barriers in the advice and guidance available, or may feel they are steered in a particular direction by their family or by schools or other advisors. It will therefore be important to look more closely at the experiences of these students, through further research, to ensure they are not facing barriers or being disadvantaged in their education experience, and that they get the support they need.

Transitions and flexibility

There will always be a period of adjustment between one level or form of education and the next. However, students are clearly finding transitions difficult and with the aim of creating a wider and more flexible range of entry and exit points, it will be increasingly important to improve these transitions.

In light of this it may beneficial to consider a new approach, where development, as well as information and support, is better articulated throughout a student’s journey, and students are supported to better understand how and why they are learning – as well as what. Rather than a more narrow induction process at each stage, this could support students to adjust better, and to better identify and articulate issues, as well as appreciating the need to seek out information and support beyond the beginning of their course.

This could link well with the new approach to education through Curriculum for
Excellence and may mean a greater focus on support delivered through academic staff rather than support services. It could also help students to engage better in their learning experience and shape their learning experience.

Changes as a result of Curriculum for Excellence in secondary schools may also mean students take a wider range of different journeys before leaving school, and have greater choice in where and what they study in fifth and sixth year.

With sixth year being a crossover point with HN qualifications in college and the first year of a university degree, greater collaboration between schools, colleges and universities may help to support students wishing to take more flexible journeys, and this may be a key area for consideration in the coming years.

Institutions will need to continue to work together and to develop structures which support students to choose an education route which works for them, but which are workable from an institutional and student point of view, and lead to meaningful qualifications.

Across the sectors we need to ensure that there are a range of options for students and that neither the experience nor the final qualification for these students is devalued by the route they have chosen. It will also be important to ensure that individuals do not feel that under pressure that any one education choice will decide their entire future, but to instead emphasise a range of choices and the flexibility available.

Learning experiences which allow students to blend more ‘vocational’ or college-based learning with more academic or university-based learning will help them gain a range of experience and help to address esteem issues by promoting a greater understanding of these qualifications, and creating more blended qualifications.

At the same time, it will be important to ensure that institutional partnerships and new routes do not restrict choice instead of broadening it.

Employability

Students clearly value the employability impacts of education, which is why colleges and universities need to ensure that the education experience is really supporting students to gain and understand the skills they need to be successful in future careers.

Students coming back to education from work experiences or a period of work seem to feel more confident to engage with the education experience, and confidence is an important factor in student engagement and success.

Universities and colleges are already doing a great amount in terms of developing student employability; however there are clearly still issues for students in articulating the skills they have developed, and for employers in terms of the work-readiness of college and university leavers.

Institutions may need to consider a new approach to embedding employability and ‘graduate attributes’ alongside traditional learning, and support students to be aware of skills as they are being developed.

Exploring innovative approaches to personal development planning tools will also help, provided they encourage all students to consider their breadth of skills and experiences even where these are not acquired directly through college or university-led activity. This also links well with Curriculum for Excellence and should benefit students who may be unable to engage with more traditional co-curriculum aspects of college and university.

Beyond these key issues for consideration, we also feel the research has highlighted some more specific areas where developments could be made to support a fairer and more flexible student journey, in particular in relation to information, advice and guidance, induction, support, and outside opportunities.

Information, Advice and Guidance

Improving the information, advice and guidance available to all prospective
students will ensure that they are aware of the range of options available and support them to find the best option for them – and prevent students from missing out or 'wasting' time on the wrong path. This could be done by:

- Improving online resources to signpost the full range of study opportunities and information on what different types of study involve
- Providing more information to schools and careers advisors on the range of study options and working towards a more consistent approach to careers advice in schools
- Ensuring that institution-published and official information has more detail on the areas of interest to students in making decisions – for example course and teaching information – and that this information is accessible, reliable and accurate
- Ensuring that school pupils have access to college and university experiences from an early stage – through outreach programmes, shared services and mentoring schemes
- Schools, colleges and universities should engage further with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework to promote greater understanding of qualifications and what they mean and the range of options that are open to students. Institutions should work together to identify new and innovative paths through education which will support students to develop the skills they need for their goals

**Induction**

There will always be a period of adjustment between one level or form of education and the next. However, some students are clearly finding transitions more difficult and, in particular, students entering university in later years may be struggling. This could be improved by:

- Further research with direct-entry students to find out what they need and sharing best practice on transitional support
- Increasing co-ordination between colleges and universities to support direct entry to later years of university – looking at curriculum fit and identifying skills or subject gaps which may affect college students
- Initiatives which would allow students to meet with other students in the same position for mutual support, or to be mentored by or 'buddied' with students in later years who have had similar experiences
- Providing induction information, advice and support beyond the beginning of a course, and making sure students know how to access support throughout studies – including with the use of technology in learning – and conducting research into how to better target this information, advice and support
- Further research into the support needed at the induction stage for new postgraduate taught students.

**Support**

Students may lack the confidence to fully engage with a class, or get involved in representation, and ultimately may feel that they are losing out by not achieving their full potential. This could be improved by:

- Targeted interventions to support certain students who may be more likely to struggle. Institutions should research these issues further to identify groups who may be having difficulties and provide support, and share best practice in early interventions and supporting 'at-risk' students
- Institutions should investigate further to find out why some students do not feel confident to engage, or that they are achieving as well as they could, with a view to providing greater support to help students make the most of their talents
- Developing support for university students during contact hours to enable students to make their independent study more effective, with greater signposting and
availability of support and advice outside of contact hours

Opportunities beyond the classroom

Barriers to taking advantage of outside opportunities available while studying – including workload – may prevent students from feeling they are getting the full experience of studying, or that they are part of a community within their college or university. This could be addressed by:

- Ensuring there are other ways students can engage with opportunities outside of learning and teaching due to time constraints or other commitments, and work to develop more inclusive communities or activities Institutions working to ensure that all students are aware of representative structures and how they can be supported to get involved

Overall we believe there are a lot of positives to take from our findings, but also some key areas for consideration and development as we work towards a fairer and more flexible education system that does not disadvantage any student, or group of students, as a result of their background, circumstances, or choice of educational path.

We believe some progress could be achieved through smaller improvements, expanding and sharing best practice, and further research into student experiences.

There are also some areas which may require a wider rethink of how further and higher education is viewed and delivered.

We are keen to work with the sector to respond to these challenges and ultimately to help to deliver the fair and flexible education system we all want to see in the future.
Endnotes


2. We have identified the ‘most deprived’ students responding by taking details of their home postcode and locating this on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. SIMD is the standard measure of deprivation in Scotland and used by the Scottish Government. It identifies small area concentrations of deprivation across all of Scotland in a consistent way, based on seven individual domains. For more information, see [http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/SIMD](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/SIMD)

3. The *Unistats* website is the official government website for providing data on universities across the UK, including information from student satisfaction surveys, information on fees, graduate employment information and student retention statistics. More information is available on the *Unistats* website at [http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/](http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/)


5. We asked college students ‘What do you think it would be like studying at university compared to college?’ and university students ‘What do you think about what it would be like studying at college compared to university?’ This was an open question and students could give free-text responses.


© The Higher Education Academy, 2013

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) is a national body for learning and teaching in higher education. We work with universities and other higher education providers to bring about change in learning and teaching. We do this to improve the experience that students have while they are studying, and to support and develop those who teach them. Our activities focus on rewarding and recognising excellence in teaching, bringing together people and resources to research and share best practice, and by helping to influence, shape and implement policy - locally, nationally, and internationally. The HEA supports staff in higher education throughout their careers, from those who are new to teaching through to senior management. We offer services at a generic learning and teaching level as well as in 28 different disciplines. Through our partnership managers we work directly with HE providers to understand individual circumstances and priorities, and bring together resources to meet them. The HEA has knowledge, experience and expertise in higher education. Our service and product range is broader than any other competitor.

www.heacademy.ac.uk | www.twitter.com/heacademy

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Higher Education Academy. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the Editor. Such permission will normally be granted for educational purposes provided that due acknowledgement is given.

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact the communications office at the Higher Education Academy: 01904 717500 or pressoffice@heacademy.ac.uk

The Higher Education Academy
Holyrood Park House
106 Holyrood Road
Edinburgh
EH8 8AS
+44 (0)131 202 3191
scotland@heacademy.ac.uk