



A subject-based aspect report on provision in Scotland's colleges by HM Inspectors on behalf of the Scottish Funding Council



Social Subjects
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Foghlam Alba

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1. Introduction and methodology

Introduction

The HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) publication, *External quality arrangements for Scotland's colleges, September 2008*, specifies that HM Inspectors (HMIs) will produce a number of subject aspect reports over the four years 2008-2012. These reports complement in a subject-specific context the generic evaluations of learning and teaching in HMIs reports of colleges. Colleges should act on the recommendations contained in these reports. College inspectors will monitor action towards implementation of these recommendations as part of their normal dialogue with colleges, and will wish to discuss issues arising from subject aspect reports during annual engagement visits.

This aspect report evaluates current practice and identifies important areas for discussion and further development amongst practitioners. It identifies excellent practice found by HMIs featuring them within the report and sets out recommendations for improvement.

In preparing this report, inspectors visited a sample of eight colleges, drew on the findings of published HMIE reviews of colleges, and examined other relevant publications and reports. They consulted with key stakeholders, including the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), professional bodies and *Scotland's Colleges*.

This report evaluates college programmes within a wide range of disciplines subsumed within the social subjects area. Social subjects is a wide category, but includes: programmes designed to support access to further and higher education, social work or community education; Higher National Certificate or Diploma (HNC/D) Social Science; SQA Intermediate and SQA Higher programmes primarily in sociology, psychology and politics; and access programmes to specific occupational areas, such as, uniformed services. Care programmes, although having a high content of social subjects, are not covered in this report but are fully reported within a concurrent aspect report on Care. Programmes covered by this report are offered in a variety of modes at levels 4 to 11 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), but the report does not evaluate degree provision.

Methodology

Each college in the sample of eight was visited twice during the fieldwork. Inspectors observed learning and teaching and discussed issues with managers, teaching staff and learners. The views of a wide range of stakeholders were obtained through face-to-face interviews and through focus groups.

A desk analysis of relevant documents relating to social subjects provision was undertaken. This included a review of performance indicator information, programme information and other external reports.

In addition to the evidence obtained from the eight colleges that participated in the fieldwork stage, HMIs also drew on the evaluations contained in the published college review reports between May 2005 and September 2008.

2. Summary of key findings

Social subjects programmes in Scotland's colleges are characterised by many strengths:

- The variety in levels and content of programmes offered within social subjects across Scotland's colleges supports the promotion of access and helps provide opportunities for progression.
- The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) Access to Social Sciences programme, targeted at those with no qualifications, typically has a 70% progression rate to an HE programme.
- The involvement of all staff in interview, advice and induction activity with full-time learners allows for a clear consideration of individual needs and interests, and is valued by learners.
- Core skills and essential skills are integrated well into social subjects programmes.
- Staff use a wide range of methods in delivering learning, and the overall standard of teaching is high.
- Classrooms are well equipped for the specialist subjects, and almost all classrooms have access to appropriate technology. Technology is used well in learning and teaching.
- Learners are regularly asked for their views on learning and teaching, and provide formal and informal feedback to staff which is acted upon constructively.
- Almost all colleges have staff who have been actively involved with SQA in one of its development or quality groups. This has helped build capacity in the colleges for a clear understanding of SQA requirements and standards.
- The general trend on early retention is one of improvement over the last three years. Full year retention is similar, with a notable pattern of improvement over the last three years. Student outcomes are also improving, most notably in full-time provision.
- Learners who have undertaken social subjects programmes report a high level of satisfaction with the experience, and confirm that they have grown in confidence and developed employability skills that prepare them well for future study or work.

However:

- The application process managed by Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) used by learners to apply for a university place does not fully accommodate tracking of progression.

- References for learners written by college staff are not always timely, clear and individual.
- There are at times some subject related barriers to entry to university with advanced standing, such as, access to the industry standard software for statistics.
- There is a lack of useful feedback or information for colleges or prospective learners on the success of those learners who have come through college to undertake a university degree.
- Overall, retention rates in social subjects programmes are low, particularly for FE full-time learners. Attainment rates are also low in FE programmes.
- Around 30% of Higher National (HN) learners do not get the advanced standing into 2nd or 3rd year university that the SCQF system would suggest could be available to them for advanced standing in their university application.
- Employers and universities value the insights and experiences learners gain through voluntary work, but there is limited uptake of volunteering.
- External stakeholders are not routinely involved in self-evaluation activities. The absence of university partners in these processes is significant. This is a missed opportunity to gain useful feedback.

3. Background and context

The Scottish Government's *Skills for Scotland*¹ strategy highlights Scotland's long tradition of valuing learning for the wider benefits it can bring to the individual, to society and communities and to the economy. It also describes the need for transferable skills within the workforce as we enter a period where people are more likely to change jobs more often and may even change occupational sectors. The strategy states '*Our vision is for a smarter Scotland... Where people can work in teams, are creative and enterprising and hungry to continually learn new skills. They expect to realise their aspirations and are equipped to achieve their potential in a constantly changing world.*' This underpins an expectation of what colleges need to consider in designing programmes, particularly for those returning to learning for the second time, often following a negative experience of learning.

Curriculum for Excellence also provides clear expectations, outlining the need for: successful learners; confident individuals; responsible citizens; and effective contributors. This contributes further to the educational priorities within college programmes, particularly for social subjects, where the specific vocational content is limited. Colleges consider this context and the need to work with schools and others in the local planning of provision.

Study of social subjects is often viewed as an entry route for people into higher education. A high proportion of learners are *second chance* learners, returning to education to build their qualifications or change career. The design of many of the programmes in social subjects puts a great deal of emphasis on core skills and essential skills which aim to help learners develop the wider skills for work, skills for life and skills for learning.

Social science programmes account for the majority of learning within the wider social subjects category, which is reflected in the emphasis in the fieldwork for this report. Progression to higher education (HE) at college or in university is the main planned exit route for learners undertaking programmes in social sciences and for those taking SQA Highers. Indications are that almost all HN learners plan to progress to further study following their college experience. One study, by the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning², shows the planned exit route in social science as further study for 94% of HN learners, leaving 6% who plan employment only as their next step following college. This serves to highlight the importance of college links with other college programmes and with universities in the planning, design, delivery and evaluation of the social subjects programmes.

¹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/09/06091114/0>

² <http://www.crl.org.uk/media/crll/content/publications/researchreports/HNTrack2ndInterimReportNov2010.pdf>

Case study: Part-time access programme in Stevenson College Edinburgh

Stevenson College Edinburgh works in conjunction with the University of Edinburgh to provide a part-time access programme. This programme provides opportunities for less qualified learners to balance other commitments with study whilst preparing for university. This is a well-established programme that has been in place for many years, and has had considerable success.

The programme is run and staffed jointly and takes place on the premises of the university. The content is designed specifically to develop the skills needed for university. Therefore, a great deal of the work is on the research, thinking, writing and presentation skills needed regardless of the subject studied.

Having university staff involved gives the learners clarity and confidence about the requirements of future study, and how well they are prepared for it. Being on the university site with all the other undergraduates also gives the learners a sense of confidence and belonging. The part-time nature of the programme also attracts learners who might otherwise not be able to gain the standard qualifications required for university entry.

Learners enjoy the programme and benefit from the work. A very high proportion progress to university, and reflect positively on the skills and confidence provided through this programme.

Prior to 2006, there were relatively few formal articulation arrangements between individual colleges and universities, and arrangements were unique to each institution. The wider issue of articulation has been taken up by the Regional Articulation Hubs, funded by the SFC and established in 2008-09. There are five regional hubs, while the Open University (OU) is being funded to provide support for part-time learners in colleges who wish to articulate onto their programmes. Articulation hubs are aiming to improve articulation rates. There are many strands to the work, including research, the establishment of partnership groups, negotiated articulation arrangements on specific subjects and supported bridging activity.

Within this report, the term *articulation* is used as it is in SFC documents to mean students gaining entry to second year of a degree using an HNC or to third year of a degree using an HND obtained in a college as an entry qualification.

Case study: Supported selection process in Langside College

Langside College recognised the challenge for many learners on social subjects programmes of getting university places or advanced standing after one or two years of study. Along with other Glasgow colleges they have been involved with the University of Strathclyde and the University of Glasgow in a supported selection process. These universities have traditionally had more challenging entry requirements, and this process helps learners to overcome that barrier.

This process requires that learners apply to join the supported selection scheme, and are asked to complete a written piece of work in a robust academic style. Typically, learners will take one of the tasks or assessments already within the programme and do a more refined academic presentation of the work. Staff also complete a detailed learner profile and a reference. The university considers the material, and on the basis of this work and the profile information, the requirements for applicants can be revised, often from an A in the graded unit to a B.

This programme has been running for several years, and many learners benefit from the revised offer. Those learners on an HN programme can often take time developing over the year until they are at the level of consistently getting A standard work in graded units, and this mechanism takes account of their developing abilities.

This model shows a positive and useful relationship where the universities work with colleges to try to constructively identify candidates with potential to do well in degree programmes. It gives learners an opportunity they may not otherwise have to demonstrate their abilities and motivation and gain a place at Glasgow or Strathclyde Universities.

In 2009-10, there were over 1,000 learners on HN programmes for social sciences, making this around the 8th most popular SQA HN provision. There were over 3,000 college entries to SQA Higher psychology. Social subjects Highers are growing in entries year-on-year. The profile of learners going from colleges to universities is diverse, and helps universities attract learners from more varied backgrounds, thus helping universities who have an intention to promote inclusion and widen access.

4. Programmes in social subjects

The term *social subjects* is a broad ranging term, widely understood to be primarily social sciences. In addition, it includes specific programmes aimed at supporting access to HE and specific vocational areas, primarily access to uniformed services programmes. There is some social subjects provision in every college, although the levels of provision vary considerably.

Overall, the range of programmes in social subjects on offer is good, allowing entry at various levels with well-established progression routes. There is a great deal of variety in levels and content of social subjects programmes offered within Scotland's colleges which helps provide opportunities for progression. The levels range from Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 4 to SCQF level 8. Most of the provision is at SCQF levels 6 and 7, with SQA Highers programmes and Higher National Certificate (HNC) the most common provision for someone seeking a university place.

Further education (FE) programmes

At FE levels, there is a wide range of social subjects programmes on offer. SCQF level 4-5 and 5-6 National Qualification (NQ) programmes designed by colleges do not currently carry a group award, although the case for an award at this level is being considered by SQA. These programmes are normally made up of 12-18 SQA units that will help prepare learners for HN entry, but are not designed to prepare learners for direct university entry. Colleges often track progression from these programmes to their own HN provision, but rarely track learners who move elsewhere. This information gap makes it difficult to have a full picture of progression from the NQ programmes. Acceptance into HN provision from an NQ programme is determined by the number of units completed, and on getting satisfactory references. However, the number of completed units accepted for entry to the HN is not consistent across colleges or across years.

A few colleges have programmes in social subjects at SCQF level 4 or 5 specifically aimed at supporting entry to other SCQF level 5 or 6 programmes. These programmes are targeted at school leavers in need of more choices and more chances, who have struggled to gain qualifications whilst at school. Where these programmes are provided, they often result in positive outcomes for the learners.

Case study: Access programme for younger learners in City of Glasgow College

The City of Glasgow College Access to College programme, provided at the Riverside campus, is a former 'winter leavers' programme that attracted young learners. The programme was not initially successful and retention and achievement were poor. The college reviewed the programme and improved it. The programme now offers access to a wider group of learners. Those involved are learners who are in need of more choices and more chances and have few, if any, qualifications. The programme provides an extended induction to the college and the aim is that learners progress to different programmes across the college.

In common with other programmes of this nature, the programme focuses on core skills and tasters. The outstanding feature of this programme is the degree of learner engagement. Learners are involved in determining the curriculum and are regularly consulted about how the programme is meeting their needs and what can be done to improve it. Learners attend pre-induction meetings from October to December, prior to the start of the programme. Together with the programme teaching staff, they plan out the programme. This allows the college to plan a very good range of taster activities. Learners are also consulted over their learning and assessment. Together with staff, learners identify a theme around which to plan learning activities. In 2010-11, it was a fashion show. Their involvement in the various aspects of this allows learners to access different areas of the college. For example, learners develop skills in media production, design or administration, depending on their interests. Learners are also presented with opportunities for assessment in vocational and core skills.

Learners comment on delivery and teaching through regular sessions led by the programme tutor. The revised programme has resulted in a considerable improvement in retention and high levels of learner satisfaction. This has underpinned positive opportunities for progression to other programmes.

The Scottish Wider Access Programme is a well-established project aimed at supporting mature, *second chance* learners with little or no formal qualifications back into education. It aims to get learners into a guaranteed HN or university place after one year's structured programme in a college. Under the SWAP umbrella, almost all programmes are full-time and made up of an agreed programme of 18 SQA Units at SCQF levels 5 and 6. Twenty-five colleges provide the SWAP Access to Social Sciences programme, making it one of the most popular subject areas. Learners on SWAP programmes have specific additional guidance and support, and their progress is tracked. The programmes and places are negotiated by SWAP staff. There is a well-established track record of success, with a progression rate of 70%. The programmes are well regarded by staff and learners and make a significant contribution to widening access to those with specific challenges. They are highly successful, and provide a fast route to degree level study for those who had poor educational outcomes earlier in life.

There are a number of FE social subjects programmes on offer which are described as *Access to...* at SCQF levels 4-5 aimed at preparation for the uniformed services. Numbers of learners involved in this provision are low. In most instances, these programmes related to uniformed services offer a very general preparation for this

vocational area, and primarily concentrate on physical fitness and a wider general range of social subjects. The programmes motivate younger learners who may otherwise have few options to undertake a structured programme of study. Overall, however, learners rarely progress to work or further study related to uniformed services. The use of the term *access* in the title can raise expectations of an assured place at the next stage for learners during the application process.

Entry to HE programmes is often through a bespoke programme of SQA Highers offered at college, such as psychology, sociology or politics. SQA Highers and Intermediate programmes provided by colleges are tailored to the individual circumstances of learners. Colleges have few conditions for entry to these programmes, but also have difficulties of retention and success, with pass rates for SQA Highers in social subjects generally being lower than similar programmes offered in schools. Comprehensive information is not readily available on progression rates to university from college SQA Highers programmes, although the information that is available from individual colleges suggests a high level of success.

Higher education programmes

At HE level, the SQA HNC and HND Social Sciences are the main awards that Scotland's colleges offer in social subjects. SQA revised the HNC and HND Social Sciences awards recently and they were validated in April 2011. The validation process itself required a high level of consultation with colleges, universities, former HN learners and employers. The HNC and HND awards have a core and options structure, with some graded unit activity, and a strong emphasis on core and essential skills.

There is little information available about what employment sectors former college social subjects learners work in. Colleges do not routinely follow up what employment sectors social subjects learners move in to. This is, in part, because the next step for the majority of learners is another educational programme. Indicative information³ on the destinations of psychology and sociology graduates suggests that, six months after graduating, the top three employment sectors are: retail, catering, waiting and bar staff (19%); social and welfare professionals (15.6%); and other clerical and secretarial occupations (11.4%). Learners themselves express a very wide variety of long-term employment intentions, including teaching, social work, nursing, care, police and local government. Improved information on the longer-term employment circumstances of college learners is required to support appropriate programme design.

³ <http://www.gradfutures.com/blog/2010/11/03/graduate-employment-2010-university-degree-subject> 10th March 2011

5. Learning and teaching

Planning of provision

Almost all colleges view their social subjects provision as being central to their work on access and inclusion. With the exception of the recruitment process for SWAP programmes, there is no active process to ensure disadvantaged learners are placed on social subjects programmes. There is, therefore, limited impact on widening inclusion. However, the access and FE provision, part-time provision, and clear progression routes are in place to encourage learners with few or no qualifications to enter programmes at lower levels and progress to HN or degree level. This range of levels of entry in social subjects supports positively the extension of access to higher education, and staff encourage learners to continue their learning as far as they can. This has a positive impact on encouraging access and progression.

The structure of SQA Higher and Intermediate provision entails an individual programme being made up of several SQA courses. The courses within these programmes are typically a combination of SQA Highers that would add to a portfolio of qualifications already attained. These full-time programmes offer a limited amount of additional support beyond tutorial work to pass the individual courses, and rarely provide a thorough grounding to help prepare learners for university life. Learners often include *additional* SQA Higher or Intermediate courses that may not be required for progression. These additional courses are included by the learner to ensure they complete enough taught hours to be considered full-time and therefore eligible for bursary support. In many instances, when the pressure of work builds up, learners stop attending the specific additional course.

Planning of learning and teaching

All teaching staff are involved in interview, advice and induction activity with full-time learners. Learners consistently view this as positive and feel that their individual needs and interests are fully considered. Core skills and essential skills are integrated well into social subjects programmes. They are central in the design of units, and are important in the design of group awards. Core and essential skills feature heavily in delivery as there is a range of vocational areas and exit routes that learners will progress to. The general principles of Curriculum for Excellence are reflected in the programme design of almost all programmes. Most colleges have actively audited and matched the Curriculum for Excellence capacities to their social subjects programmes.

Shared planning of learning, teaching and assessment within programme teams works well. Social science programmes often have a high level of relatively long written assessments, and programme planning takes full account of this to minimise the risk of assessment overload on individuals. Almost all programmes have a high number of links outwith the college, using visits, guest speakers and voluntary experience to enhance the programme. These links help support the development of citizenship, independence in learning and provide a useful planning focus for project work.

Case study: Learners developing academic posters in Aberdeen College

In Aberdeen College, academic posters are used extensively on all levels of social science programmes. They can be used for a number of purposes including review of research findings, overviews, analysis and evaluation of theories and case studies. The posters are produced individually or through collaboration. For example, in small groups, learners begin by discussing a particular topic or debate and begin to identify key concepts, issues etc. Roles are then allocated around research and resources that, through collaborative work, result in a single slide presentation. This is gradually built up using a range of text boxes, images, hyperlinks, animation, film clips and a reference or bibliography section. The completed task is then printed in full poster size in colour. The finished poster can then be the focus of an oral presentation, group discussion or used for display. These posters are framed and decorate learning spaces and corridors. Exhibitions of posters are held throughout the year with the best posters displayed in an exhibition in the college coffee bar.

Feedback from learners is very positive. They can see how academic posters are an excellent tool for demonstrating knowledge, understanding and critique and for developing literacy, ICT, core and soft skills. Posters become more sophisticated as learners progress through and from their programmes. The more detailed and complex posters prepared at later stages of study can demonstrate distance travelled. Feedback from journal entries shows that learners enjoy doing academic posters and there is a sense of pride and increasing confidence that comes with each one they produce, particularly when they are displayed in classrooms and corridors. The value of academic posters as a tool for revision has also been recognised by learners.

Staff and learners use a wide range of texts and information and communications technology (ICT) resources effectively to enhance learning. Libraries are well stocked with appropriate social subjects books, which are used well by learners. Extracts from videos are often used to introduce or illustrate points. On almost all programmes, handouts and learning materials are shared electronically, and are accessed by learners outwith class time. The materials are used to give more depth and detail, exemplify points and to provide a structure for learning and revising. In a few colleges, the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is not fully developed, limiting the type and quality of support material provided to learners. Social networking sites are used to encourage discussion and communication amongst learners. Literacy and numeracy are developed through the planned activities. In particular learners are supported well to improve their writing skills. These approaches and the constructive use of ICT enhances the core skills of learners and prepares them well for work or further study.

Case study: Mock elections in James Watt College

Staff in James Watt College recognised the benefit of making the UK election process more interesting and real for learners, and decided to support learners in organising mock elections. This project involves a number of class groups and a wide range of educational and citizenship activities.

Teams engage in informative debates on foreign policy, education and youth issues, attended by learners, staff and management. The Access to University and Primary Education class design and conduct an opinion poll to ascertain voting intentions. This is relevant to their Introduction to Psychology unit. Political advisors from the HND Social Sciences programme have been candidates in the previous years election.

The British political system is part of the social sciences programme from Intermediate 1 to HND, so there is real value in work which promotes further interest and understanding. This is the second year that learners have delivered and organised well communicated and effective campaigns. In contributing to the mock elections, learners have demonstrated skills necessary for securing future employment whilst completing their required units and enhancing their college experience. The last campaign raised over £250 for Help for Heroes, demonstrating another significant contribution from the learners to their community.

The mock election has in previous years captivated the attention of learners who may be at risk of being disengaged. For example, the first learner to be elected President in these mock political elections was by his own admission, on the verge of leaving college until the campaign captured his imagination. He has now successfully achieved an HND and secured a place at university.

The task allows learners to work to their strengths but also stretch themselves in terms of their research, presentation and organisational skills. These are all transferrable skills which are evidenced in the ability of HND learners to secure direct entry level places at university.

The mock elections have allowed the college to utilise established relationships with guest speakers, including MSPs and MPs. This project raises the motivation, engagement, understanding and profile of the learners.

Delivering learning and teaching

Classrooms are well equipped for specialist subjects, and almost all classrooms have access to appropriate technology, such as, internet connected computers and boards appropriately equipped to run video clips. Technology is used well in learning and teaching. Video clips, primarily those freely available on the internet, are used effectively to inform and motivate learners. Learners regularly access the internet within their research tasks, and use this research to inform themselves and others. Research and group activity often involves finding and formally presenting information to others in the group or in the class, helping to develop confidence and communication skills. The approaches used support learners to further develop independent learning skills.

The overall standard of teaching is high. Almost all staff put notes on a slide presentation or supply notes on a VLE allowing learners to access these outwith college class times. Learners are regularly asked for their views on learning and teaching, and provide formal and informal feedback to staff which is acted upon quickly. Staff often amend approaches or methods based on learner feedback, or the extent of learner engagement. Teaching staff typically use a wide and appropriate range of methods in each lesson involving reading, video, presentation, discussion and question and answer. Tasks provided for groups or individuals are often designed well to take full account of equality and diversity in terms of the examples used.

Case study: Cooperative learning in Angus College

Staff at Angus College have been actively involved in using the cooperative learning approach with learners in social science. Having embedded the general approach successfully within these programmes, a more focussed approach has been taken to using cooperative learning around the principles and approaches of interculturalism.

This approach has been developed for dissemination and use within the social science curriculum and the wider college sector, based on the intercultural principles and the work of Gudrun Pétursdóttir and Professor Philippe Shale.

This learning model is designed to develop and inform a systematic and deeper experience of learning for both staff and learners based upon the adoption of an intercultural mindset and delivery of cooperative learning around specific themes. Additional input around the development of diverse assessment methods has also been developed and delivered.

Intercultural cooperative learning approaches have been threaded through all elements of social subject delivery and are currently being rolled out to other subject areas and, via Scotland's Colleges, to the sector as a whole.

Feedback on the impact of intercultural developments has been very positive from both learners and staff, highlighting the impact on both thinking and practice.

Embedding the cooperative learning work has helped enthuse learners, and given them a greater sense of ownership of learning, and a deeper understanding of the issues involved. It also has enhanced their confidence and ability in research and group work activity.

Empathy between learning peers has been enhanced and the intercultural and cooperative approaches adopted have underpinned many other developments in the successful delivery of social science programmes.

Guidance and support

The recruitment, induction and guidance processes are welcoming and include formal or informal assessment of learners, typically at interview. Learners are encouraged to identify strengths and areas for development when they join programmes to help determine with staff the appropriate level of programme and whether the individual has any particular support needs. Colleges respond well in meeting the needs of individuals and there are many examples where learners are given additional support or additional time to meet their needs. For example, staff often identify learners with specific challenges, such as, dyslexia that may not have been identified in the learner's earlier educational experience.

Full-time learners are provided with formal guidance within their programmes. This involves a number of formal and structured progression interviews throughout the year, with many less formal advisory meetings as needs arise. The arrangements and implementation of guidance activity are delivered well. Learners are fulsome in their praise about the support given by staff, and have commented positively upon the useful advice given. Learners also access central support services, where they

are given more specialised help in areas, such as, finance or university applications. Almost all full-time programmes in social science have some additional activity aimed at supporting learners who want to progress to HE at college or university.

The UCAS application process used by learners to apply for university places is complex, and some changes are being considered to help identify and track articulating learners. A study⁴ facilitated by The Edinburgh, Lothians, Fife and Borders Regional Articulation Hub (ELRAH) identified the change requirements. This has been recognised by UCAS, who are considering changes to the fields of information to be collected.

It is important that references help universities differentiate between candidates, and there is at times too much similarity in references supplied by colleges. One difficulty in preparing highly individualised references is the time of year that UCAS references are completed. Colleges may have only had a learner for a matter of months, so find it difficult to provide a full and detailed reference reflecting on their work and abilities. Universities report occasional difficulties with the timeliness of this work, or with the clarity of references. There is a case for finding a mechanism to supplement this initial UCAS information.

Assessment

Almost all staff use a wide variety of approaches for monitoring progress and for assessing the attainment of learners. Questioning techniques are used skilfully to revise key topics and to check learners' understanding. Learners enjoy class questioning and discussions, and are motivated by the interaction. Assessment methods used for monitoring progress and unit assessment include peer assessment and group tasks. These approaches, where they are used, work well, and help encourage learners to have greater interaction with the material and deeper learning.

HN programmes have well-established assessment models, and staff are familiar with SQA requirements. The graded units within HN programmes are extended tasks which provide the opportunity to design assessment that is more consistent with university styles of assessment. These assessment tasks are used to give the learner some experience of university style assessment. However, the less onerous requirements applied and the style of feedback given, do not give the learner the full picture of improvements needed to cope with university assessment.

Almost all colleges have staff who have been actively involved with SQA in one of the SQA's development or quality groups. This has helped build capacity in colleges resulting in a clear understanding of SQA requirements and standards, for example, in teaching and marking the graded unit. The graded units are large pieces of work which are becoming more important, as many universities are now looking for specific grades to give entry or to offer advanced standing to second or third year.

Progression

⁴ <http://www.elrah.ac.uk/Documents.aspx?itemID=bc5bdc4e-9933-41e4-ab7f-745f88c0f247>

Progression to further study from social science access programmes within colleges is good. Learners on access programmes are often those who have particular challenges in their learning and in spite of this, most learners are accepted onto a college programme at a higher level.

Case study: Preparation for higher education in Dundee College

Dundee College has developed work specifically to help prepare social subjects learners for HE programmes at college or university. The Preparation for HE course is a mandatory element of the SWAP access programme frameworks. Within the design and delivery, there is a great emphasis on increasing personal confidence and interpersonal skills.

The course, which is run throughout the academic year, is constructed around two SQA HN units: Developing Skills for Personal Effectiveness; and Using Learning Skills. The units are used as scaffold for a range of personal development exercises, stress management techniques, learning and research skills. As well as taught elements of the course, learners have one-to-one meeting time with their personal tutors regularly throughout the year.

Initially learners are introduced to academic skills, such as using the VLE, registering for an Athens password, and how to access academic journals. Following this, there is a range of exercises around learning based on current research in this field. This covers areas like cooperative learning methods, the concept of metacognition, learning styles, multiple intelligences, positive psychology and fixed and growth mindsets. Stress management is initially experienced as a cooperative learning task followed through with a research project and final presentation. Learners are invited to write, create poems, perform, record songs or role play activities, create posters or leaflets, or use more conventional methods, such as, slide presentations.

Learners are also encouraged to incorporate their developing academic skills into everyday practice, including use of methods, such as, Harvard Referencing. The varied elements of the course are synthesised into a reflective, dynamic document called My Action Plan. This is further supported by a portfolio, now moving to an e-portfolio, to provide evidence of learning and progression. With this, the learners are demonstrating their successful application of the concepts and skills developed. Learner feedback confirms that the skills developed on this course are improving learning and achievement, and the skills are likely to contribute to success at university and in future years.

A high proportion of learners move from NQ programmes to HN and ultimately degree programmes. Progression to other colleges or universities is not systematically tracked in all colleges from NQ or SQA Higher programmes. Where learners participate in a full-time NQ programme, colleges know if progress has been made within the college to an HN programme. However, a number of learners apply elsewhere and college systems are rarely robust enough to know if these offers are taken up. Learners on SQA Higher programmes are supported well in their university application process, and colleges normally know how many of these learners get offers of a university place. However, colleges are not able to confirm

who took up these places. Research⁵ suggests that a number of these learners may defer their places, have gap years or take up other offers.

Progression to university is tracked effectively only where the programme leader follows up with the learners their specific destinations. Some universities provide graduation lists to colleges. Although this offers some information, it does not help the college understand what happened to those learners who did not take up the university place offered, deferred a year, left, changed programme or did not succeed. Knowing what happened to all the learners on a programme might give a greater insight into why people complete a degree, and why people do not. This insight may help in ensuring programme design takes account of success factors and barriers to learners.

Entry with advanced standing is a challenge for college learners. Recent research by the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CRLI)⁶ has indicated that around 30% of HN learners in a range of subject areas do not get the anticipated advanced standing that the SCQF system would suggest could be available to them. Although there can be many complex reasons for this, the broad statistic suggests that many learners are not getting the level of recognition and advanced standing that they could be getting. The levels of learner satisfaction regarding advanced standing varies by university. Universities are also under financial pressure and in some cases are reducing the full-time provision in social science, and therefore there will be fewer places in coming years. A number of learners progress onto part-time degree programmes, particularly with the Open University (OU). These programmes give full SCQF recognition to HN qualifications, and provide an option where work and study can be combined. Some colleges have already developed early links with the OU, and part-time study is likely to present a positive exit route for an increasing number of learners.

One difficulty around articulation to university with advanced standing into 2nd year is the notional SCQF credit points for HNC. An HNC, made up of 12 SQA units, is nominally 96 SCQF credit points, and an HND made up of 30 units is 240 credit points. A few universities will therefore ask for some additional units or accredited top up activity so that learners have the notional 120 points for entry to 2nd year. There are different approaches to dealing with this. Some universities accept the HNC group award as equivalent to their first year, some offer accreditation of prior learning to evidence attainment, some colleges teach a 15 unit HNC programme and some offer additional bridging activity which gives credit. The main difficulty for learners is that the approaches adopted by universities are variable. Further, learners with an HNC looking for advanced standing and entry into the second year of a degree will, in some instances, need to complete more academic work.

⁵ CRLI Student Experience Project – Profile of new f/t undergraduate articulating students with HN level qualifications on entry to GCU in 2009/10

⁶ <http://www.crlil.org.uk/media/crlil/content/publications/researchreports/HNTrack2ndInterimReportNov2010.pdf>

There are, at times, some subject related barriers to entry with advanced standing. The most common issue is that college learners do not use the industry standard software for calculating and presenting statistics in social sciences. This was cited on several occasions as a reason for universities being reluctant to give advanced standing. However, learners who have moved on to university successfully confirm that this is a minor element of work, and could readily be dealt with by a one day introductory programme.

6. Outcomes and impact

Social subjects full-time FE programmes in 2009-10 had a 73% positive outcome, which is low, with full-time HE having an 83% positive outcome, this being satisfactory. The overall trend in retention and attainment has been one of improvement over the last three years, primarily with full-time learners. The main planned outcome for social subjects learners is articulation or progression to a further programme, eventually leading to a degree. Overall, most learners successfully progress to further study or are qualified to do so. The majority of learners progressing to 2nd or 3rd year at university are satisfied with the level of advanced standing given.

Articulation and progression

Articulation and progression is a complex matter as current mechanisms make it difficult to fully track destinations or success. Many college learners who undertake SQA Higher programmes will go on to HE study in college or university. In some instances, this may be after a gap of one or more years, or they may join a part-time programme and the college would often be unaware of this. The OU, for example, has recognised an average nine year gap for their learners from an HN qualification in a college to OU enrolment⁷. This highlights the challenge of understanding the exit routes and progression routes used by social subjects learners.

Developments in recent years, such as the work of the articulation hubs, have helped highlight the difficulties in tracking learner journeys. Information on this being developed in conjunction with ELRAH will soon be available to help track learners on their journey from college to university. There is also a lack of comprehensive information on the success of those learners who have come through college to university, and further work is needed for colleges to fully understand progression routes and success rates.

Learners who have progressed from college are likely to do well in completing a university degree. Discussions with staff from a few universities who expressed a view suggests that former HN learners do at least as well as other learners in gaining a degree. There are no data sets currently available to confirm the detail of this view in a range of universities, but there were many examples given which are consistent with this view.

Retention and attainment

Overall, retention rates on social subjects programmes are low, and do not compare well to the sector norms for other subjects. The general trend on early retention is one of improvement over the last three years. Student retention also has a clear pattern of improvement over the last three years.

Retention has been recognised as an issue by colleges, and a great deal of work has gone into understanding the issues and working towards improvement. One factor that may help to explain poor retention and attainment is that colleges take learners with particularly difficult or chaotic lifestyles in a few social subjects programmes. This means that their circumstances are more likely to change over the year. Further, many colleges have identified as a difficulty the loss of learners on

⁷ OU From college to The Open University: tracking learner journeys Dec 2010

SQA Higher programmes, where learners choose to stop attending subjects they no longer need. In addition, a number of learners who already have appropriate qualifications for university entry take SQA Highers or an HN programme. These learners are often given unconditional offers part way through their programme so are not motivated to complete their programme. These are unusual features of social subjects programmes that make comparisons with other subject areas more difficult.

Attainment rates in social subjects have been low but are improving. Learners in HE programmes attain better than FE learners. The attainment for SQA Intermediate and Higher awards are low. NQ programmes in social subjects vary in the number of SQA units and content across the country. Varying numbers of completed units are deemed as success by different colleges.

A helpful indicator of a positive outcome on many programmes would be the number of learners offered a place on a programme at a higher level. Although many colleges look at and reflect upon this information, it is not collected and analysed in a way that readily allows comparisons between programmes or different colleges.

Wider achievement

Almost all programmes in social subjects fully recognise the benefit of incorporating activity to support wider achievement. In most colleges, wider achievement is promoted through approaches to learning and teaching, particularly in the work to extend the skills needed for further study. Almost all learners make good progress in developing confidence, research skills, literacy and skills for independent study. As almost all programmes cover areas such as sociology, opportunities arise and are used effectively to discuss social issues, such as, equality and diversity. The high level of group work also supports the core skills of communication and working with others and skills for citizenship.

Case study: Learning by doing in Aberdeen College

Over the past two years, social sciences staff at Aberdeen College have endeavoured to make active learning a fundamental aspect of the learning and teaching of social sciences. The aim was to make an organised and structured move from predominantly didactic approaches to activities and approaches that focus on facilitating and enabling learning through collaboration. Structured group work is used where learners have defined roles that alternate over a set period of time. This group work is focussed on a task, such as researching, analysing and evaluating topics and organising or preparing a piece of work, for example, an academic poster, animation, short film, presentation, debate/discussion or an event.

The Health and Wellbeing Day was a good example of active learning. Learners from all levels of social science programmes were involved in planning and producing material for an exhibition of learners' work on various aspects of health and wellbeing. This included work on sociology and eating disorders, psychology and atypical behaviour, personal development and an AIDS day. Learners produced academic posters, leaflets and raised funds for the Terrence Higgins Trust. The exhibition included work from learners outwith social sciences, such as, care and beauty therapy and the Student Association, which promoted a message of positive mental health.

Feedback from learners is very positive especially where they are in the second year of a programme that has committed to the active learning approach. Reflective learning journals provide an opportunity for learners to personally reflect on their learning and how they are developing the four capacities of Curriculum for Excellence. This is also evident in the improved retention and attainment rates.

In a few colleges, learners gain valuable experience through volunteering. This can be a challenge for learners, as many already have part-time jobs. Colleges have positive feedback about the improvement in personal skills and the added employability skills gained from voluntary work. Employers and universities value the insights and experiences gained through voluntary work, and greater effort is needed to promote this activity. However, many learners are not sufficiently encouraged or supported to engage in voluntary work.

One college heavily promotes voluntary activity and links with the community and has taken this work one step further through their use of an 'internship' programme.

Case study: Internship in Angus College

Angus College has developed a programme of work which benefits existing learners through helping them succeed, and helps recent learners gain useful work experience. The college has developed a comprehensive and innovative work shadowing scheme, Angus Interns, to provide work-based learning support for volunteer interns, whilst supporting a broad range of learning and teaching developments for learners and staff. This scheme is particularly effective within the social science curriculum with three interns currently supporting the work of learners and staff.

Interns enthusiastically support a wide range of activities including the organisation of learner events to add additional value to curriculum delivery and the provision of support to allow enhanced one-to-one working with learners to take place.

Recent intern supported activities include:

- *learner conference days*
- *cooperative learning theme days*
- *study trips and visits*
- *learner focus and feedback groups*
- *materials development*
- *introducing new or specialist topics*
- *facilitating group work*
- *assisting learners to catch up after absences*
- *delivering supervised lessons*

In return, interns receive genuine work experience and opportunities to develop their skills and expertise in learning and teaching. Across the college, interns have successfully made the transition from volunteer to staff member.

Learner impact has been very significant with the interns involved directly in a very broad range of activities. These activities have enriched the curriculum, added specialist support on some topics, supported learners who have had absences and helped learners to provide useful feedback to the college. This support has contributed to the high learner retention and attainment rates.

Learners who have undertaken this role report a high level of satisfaction with the experience, and confirm that they have grown in confidence and developed employability skills that prepare them well for future study or work.

7. Enhancement through self-evaluation and internal review

Programme teams have been using the self-evaluation and review processes to support improvement with particular success over the last three years. Teams have initiated many changes to content and delivery. In colleges, these self-evaluation processes are well embedded and are done thoroughly. Enhancement is supported by a wide range of reflective and developmental activities. For example, the use of peer observation, and extensive continuous professional development help make this work robust and effective.

All staff contribute well to self-evaluation, and actively encourage learner participation. Actions which are clear and impact on practice are recorded in operational or improvement plans.

In all social subjects programmes, the nature of the topics studied and a methodology that typically involves a lot of group discussion encourages learners to engage in open discussion and provide feedback about their learning. This feedback is encouraged by teaching staff both within the normal teaching sessions, and at formal periodic review opportunities. Informal and formal feedback is used well, and learners are aware of the changes that happen as a result of their feedback to staff.

Case study: Self-evaluation in James Watt College

James Watt College recognises the need to make continuous improvements in its social studies provision. Learners and staff express views on improvement, and analysis of performance indicator information helps identify priority areas for attention.

To minimise the risk of self-evaluation processes becoming routine, there are a number of inputs to the reflection. This includes a Curriculum for Excellence audit where programmes are considered and a traffic light system put in place. This highlights areas where elements may need to be developed further. These elements include areas, such as literacy, applying critical thinking and making informed choices and decisions. This reflection is particularly appropriate and useful in the areas of social subjects, where these elements are central to the programme. A recently developed Reflect, Enhance, Develop (RED) model is being rolled out to help evaluate learning and teaching. This includes the establishment of a peer evaluation group that observes each other's practice and discuss what they observe.

The outcomes of these and other inputs are considered in a focused day of activity primarily based around 'what went well' and 'even better if...'. Staff contribute actively to these considerations, and have a sense of ownership of the process. The resulting actions of this established model are clear, impact on practice and have led directly to improvements in the programmes.

All programme teams consider fully learner feedback, staff feedback and PI information. External stakeholders are not routinely involved in self-evaluation, either by being asked for their view of the programme or attending meetings in person. The absence of university partners in this process is a missed opportunity to gain useful feedback. As HN awards are used primarily for university progression, it is important to have feedback on what programme activities may better prepare

learners for success. There have been very few opportunities for sharing ideas between university and college staff for improvement in the teaching of social subjects programmes. When asked, university staff give broadly consistent messages about which changes of emphasis might further improve the chances of college learners. These include: greater concentration on writing skills; more independent research skills; better exam experience and clarity about working to deadlines; and improved referencing in academic work. However, the lack of practical sharing opportunities has resulted in colleges having limited opportunity to consider this feedback.

In programmes offered by the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), the same staff teach HN awards as teach degree programmes. This facilitates continuity and a reflection upon the experiences at degree level. It has allowed UHI staff to recognise the main differences in approach that need to be addressed. It also supports better feedback to learners to give them an insight into areas for improvement, even where they currently meet all the requirements of the HN programme. These differences have been identified broadly as writing, depth of study and style of assessment.

Almost all programmes aimed at preparing learners for uniformed services do not take full account of feedback from those services, instead relying on very informal links made by members of staff. This limits the potential for learners to be well prepared to meet the requirements for entry to the uniformed services.

The self-evaluation activity within social subjects programmes has been successful in contributing to improved retention and attainment rates over the last three years. The extensive use of learner feedback has been particularly useful in contributing to positive change. The further involvement of other stakeholders and an understanding of the skills learners need at the next stage of learning will bring another useful perspective. The self-evaluation processes are robust, and over time will contribute to further improvements in retention and success.

8. Recommendations

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) should

- work with UCAS and the articulation hubs to develop identified improvements in tracking information from college to university and to improve the methods of tracking the long-term career progression of college graduates; and
- work with articulation hubs to ensure that more learners receive the full level of advanced standing that could be available to them when moving from college to university.

Scotland's Colleges should

- draw on the findings of this report, and working with the subject network, support colleges in taking forward the recommendations.

Colleges should

- take steps to improve the attainment rates on SQA Intermediate and Higher programmes;
- support teaching staff to ensure references for learners are always completed in a way that helps universities differentiate between applicants;
- liaise with universities to ensure learners on HN social science programmes are given an introduction to the standard software for statistics used within social sciences;
- continue to improve retention and attainment rates for learners in social subjects;
- promote and support more voluntary activity to learners in social subjects; and
- ensure university partners are actively involved in programme design and review.

Education Scotland should

- continue to monitor the progress made by colleges in taking forward the above recommendations.

Appendix 1

Social Sciences sector-level summary, 2007/08 to 2009/10

2007/08

Mode	Level	No. of progs	SUMs	% SUMs	Enrolments	Completing 25%	Completing	Successful	Early Retention	Student Retention	Outcome
FT	FE	74	36914	54%	2280	1875	1368	888	82%	73%	65%
FT	HE	64	17422	26%	1317	1173	884	655	89%	75%	74%
PT	FE	325	12708	19%	2747	2494	2186	1540	91%	88%	70%
PT	HE	40	1127	2%	226	175	136	102	77%	78%	75%

2008/09

Mode	Level	No. of progs	SUMs	% SUMs	Enrolments inc non-assessed	Completing 25% inc non-assessed	Completing inc non-assessed	Completing exc non-assessed	Successful exc non-assessed	Early Retention	Student Retention	Outcome
FT	FE	82	49089	58%	2460	2122	1596	1596	1171	86%	75%	73%
FT	HE	60	19200	23%	1280	1155	922	922	742	90%	80%	80%
PT	FE	319	15785	19%	4374	4173	3471	2303	1706	95%	83%	74%
PT	HE	42	1245	1%	221	189	166	166	136	86%	88%	82%

2009/10

Mode	Level	No. of progs	SUMs	% SUMs	Intial counting towards ESR ¹	25% counting towards ESR ¹	Completing 25% inc non-assessed	Completing inc non-assessed	Completing exc non-assessed	Successful exc non-assessed	Early Retention ¹	Student Retention ²	Outcome
FT	FE	82	45725	60%	2652	2303	2303	1795	1786	1309	87%	78%	73%
FT	HE	61	18705	25%	1359	1259	1259	1044	1044	871	93%	83%	83%
PT	FE	281	10797	14%	3855	3681	3762	3463	1759	1244	95%	92%	71%
PT	HE	46	761	1%	160	147	147	123	120	91	92%	84%	76%

¹ Note that the early retention PI for 2009/10 excludes courses where the funding qualifying date was reached in the previous academic year. This is a change in definition issued by SFC for the 2009/10 data so the 2009/10 percentage is not directly comparable to previous years.

² Note that the student retention PI for 2009/10 is not directly comparable to previous years due to an error in guidance issued for the student retention PI by SFC. This category includes outcome 21 for 2009/10 (see student record outcome - code list I FES 2 guidance) which is 'Completed programme/ course, student not assess although programme/ course designed to be assessed. Studying on a flexible open learning programme'. This category was excluded from the student retention PI in previous years.

Glossary of terms

CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CRLL	Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning
ELRAH	Edinburgh, Lothians Fife and Borders Regional Articulation Hub
FE	Further Education
FT	Full-Time
GCU	Glasgow Caledonian University
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HMI	HM Inspectors
HMIE	HM Inspectorate of Education
HN	Higher National
HNC	Higher National Certificate
HND	Higher National Diploma
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
NQ	National Qualifications
OU	Open University
PI	Performance Indicator
PT	Part-Time
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
SWAP	Scottish Wider Access Programme
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

Colleges and organisations involved in fieldwork for this report

Aberdeen College

Angus College

City of Glasgow College

Dundee College

James Watt College

Kilmarnock College

Langside College

Stevenson College Edinburgh

University of Strathclyde

Edinburgh Napier University

Glasgow Caledonian University

The Open University

SFC funded University Articulation Hubs

Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP West)

Scottish Qualifications Authority

Scotland's Colleges

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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at:

Education Scotland
Denholm House
Almondvale Business Park
Almondvale Way
Livingston
EH54 6GA
Tel: 01506 600 200
Fax: 01506 600 337
e-mail: enquiries@educationscotland.gsi.gov.uk

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