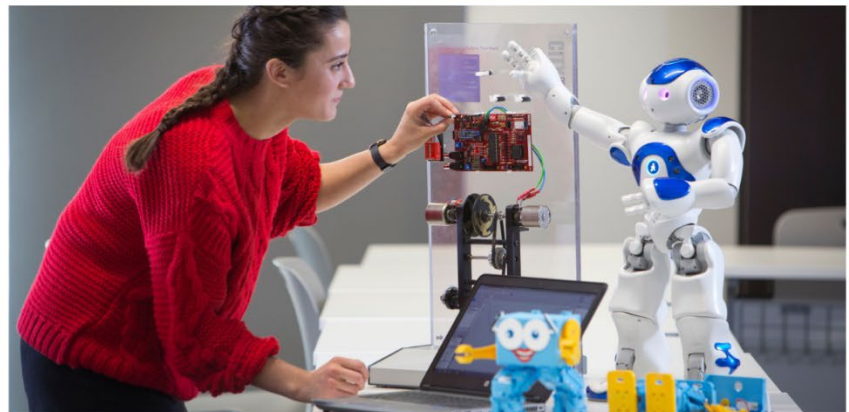


24 in 24 Blog Series



When colleges thrive, Scotland thrives

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Introduction

This year Colleges Scotland has been delighted to showcase a voice from each of our members in our blog series, 24 in 2024.

The series was created to mark the diversity and variety of work that Scotland's 24 colleges do and to hear from sector leaders and experts on the key questions facing the future of the college sector. Colleges have an unwavering commitment to education and skills development, aligned to employment, and contributing to a sustainable prosperous future, and transforming lives and communities.

The blog series has highlighted a broad range of topics and provided insights into college life and work – whether it's the sector's expanding role in energy transition through the Energy Transition Skills Hub, offering degrees in e-sports, working with businesses to deliver customised training solutions that enhances career pathways and strengthens industry capabilities, helping students in poverty or at risk of homelessness, providing employability support for individuals, or creating a Youth and Community Hub to provide health and lifestyle activities to children, young people, and adults.

It is clear that colleges serve a diverse population and are more than simply educational institutions - they are drivers of opportunity, aspiration, innovation and economic growth – for individuals, communities and industry. When colleges thrive, Scotland thrives.



People at the Heart of a Low Carbon Future

Neil Cowie, Principal and Chief Executive, North East Scotland College

Writing as we enter the final throes of election season, it has been intriguing to hear and read all that has been said and written about the future of energy on our shores.

Net zero targets, the climate crisis as our greatest long term global challenge, the parallels between emissions reduction and economic prosperity, the existential threat to the planet and the opportunity to create a greener and fairer country.

As a public servant, it's important to remain apolitical.

I don't think I'm breaking that stance when I say all of the above, taken from across the mainstream manifestos, are laudable ambitions and important discussion points.

There are, as you would expect, also fundamental points of difference between the parties. However, as interesting as what has been covered on the campaign trail is what hasn't been explored in any significant depth.

To achieve the UK's aims of a low carbon future will require many pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to be slotted together. Investment in infrastructure, research and development, a coherent strategy for energy transition ... the list goes on.

The one piece that brings that picture together is all too often overlooked: people.

A managed, sustainable and just energy transition will be driven by a workforce equipped with the skills and knowledge to embrace the huge opportunities this new chapter brings.

North East Scotland College is an anchor institution in a region which is home to Europe's oil and gas capital, Aberdeen.

We are proud of our contribution in that sector, both directly and through our successful subsidiary the ASET International Energy Training Academy, and are committed to continuing to support the needs of employers.

We are also enthusiastic about our rapidly expanding role in energy transition, as a key player in the evolution of new and exciting facets. From wind and solar to hydrogen, electric vehicle and energy saving technology.

Our track record in guiding thousands of students in engineering and related disciplines each year provides us with the foundation to build that workforce of the future.

At NESCol's Altens Campus, we are working in partnership with ETZ Ltd and Shell UK to create the groundbreaking Energy Transition Skills Hub. It will provide a purpose-built environment to not only deliver the skills needed here and now, but also to inspire the next generation to view the energy industry as a rewarding long-term career path. It's important to note that a significant portion of the costs are being met by the Scottish Government's Just Transition Fund, a welcome injection of resources.

Collaboration in the North East has never been stronger. We work with governments, with industry, with the wider energy sector, with our university colleagues and with schools to look forward and plan for that sustainable future.



We need political action to match the power of those partnerships.

Taking the college sector in isolation, we are operating under tighter constraints than I have experienced in a quarter of a century working in Further Education. Flat cash funding settlements over successive years have brought real-terms cuts of around 16%. We are able to deliver to fewer students as a result.

At the same time demand is growing, not least in and around renewables and energy transition. From employers, from prospective students – even, dare I say it, from governments who are signposting the skills gaps looming large on the horizons. Tens of thousands of fabricators, of EV charge point technicians and of wind turbine specialists.

Scotland's First Minister has growing the economy and tackling the climate emergency among the priorities for his tenure – both will hinge on getting energy transition right.

NESCol took the opportunity to put our concerns to the First Minister and the leaders of Scottish Labour and the Scottish Conservatives at a debate organised by the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce, focused on the future of energy. There was universal support for the college sector, without any immediate solutions to the current issues being offered. Those responses can be found at 1.30:15 in the recording of the session.

The message that came through loud and clear from the many representatives from industry and education in the room was that we have a golden chance to realise the environmental, economic and social benefits that are promised.

To seize that opportunity there must be significant backing and conscious policy decisions which have at their heart investment in training, in education, in skills – in people.

Words and manifesto pledges are easy, but it is deeds that will make the difference. Once the dust settles on the 2024 General Election, I look forward to working with our newly elected Westminster representatives and with their Holyrood counterparts to shift the dial on such a crucial subject and to shape the positive outcomes I have no doubt we all share.

Undergraduate School is a game-changer for tertiary education

Nicola Mullholland, Dean of the Undergraduate School, New College Lanarkshire



Scotland's colleges have never faced tougher challenges than those they face today.

While the needs of employers for increasingly skilled workforces has grown rapidly, funding within the nation's primary skills delivery sector has seen a significant decline.

In North Lanarkshire, the local economy has seen a significant uplift in recent years. However, with degree attainment lower than the Scottish average, too many local people have been missing out on the opportunities to benefit from the influx of investment,

For us at New College Lanarkshire and our colleagues at the University of the West of Scotland, it had become increasingly obvious that an innovative, collaborative approach was needed to remove barriers to access degree-level learning and to create a new home for those who have previously been excluded.

To effect change however, meant a great deal of work and trust between organisations who, like universities and colleges across Scotland, have often been in direct competition for students and the credits they bring.

However, the needs of students to have increased access to Higher Education and for our Region to be delivering the skilled workforces tomorrow's SMEs, businesses and industries demand meant that the leap of faith was taken and a new dawn for tertiary education in Lanarkshire was given the green light.

To that end, in September we will welcome the first cohort of students to our new Undergraduate School where they will begin their studies for six new industry-focused degrees, each of which is aligned to meet specific skills deficits in the Lanarkshire region as identified by key stakeholders such as Skills Development Scotland and North Lanarkshire Council.

The new degrees include health and social care, business, digital technologies, science and the Arts with a strong focus on supporting, developing and growing the SME community in the region.

Students will directly benefit from the teaching expertise, industry knowledge and resource capability of both New College Lanarkshire and the University of the West of Scotland.

These new degrees are added to our existing portfolio of industry-focused degree provision in computing, accounting, film-making and screenwriting along with music business, performance and sound production.

To further enhance the offer to students we are welcoming more than 20 Honorary Appointees from the worlds of industry, business and the third sector who will give their time to deliver lectures, seminars and other learning opportunities for our students, based on their own experiences in their chosen field.

From writers, broadcasters and academics to health professionals, industry leaders and technology specialists, each of them has committed to playing their part in bringing relevant real-life experiences and expertise directly to our students and offering them insights and guidance which they would never previously have acquired.

In the coming years the ambition for the Undergraduate School is to grow the collaborative portfolio of degrees available to allow even more Lanarkshire students to access a University degree within a supportive College environment which is also close to home.

The partnership between the University and the College is driven by a strong commitment to fairness and equality which is demonstrated by our shared determination to bringing the benefits of Higher Education to even more students across the Lanarkshire region.

This is the first time that a University has partnered in this way to formally establish an Undergraduate School within a College campus setting. The new Undergraduate School also signals the first direct presence of a University within the North Lanarkshire area.

Creating increased opportunities for students to succeed increases the opportunities for our Region to thrive. It provides pathways out of food and child poverty, creates the skilled workforces of tomorrow from within the local community and generates growth within the Lanarkshire economy.

In a few short months, students will begin their degree learning within the Undergraduate School. And that is just the beginning. As the University and College continue to work together our ability to deliver social justice through increased access to Higher Education and the opportunities that brings will only develop and grow.

The Undergraduate School represents a step-change in the delivery of Higher Education in Lanarkshire and September's launch will be a game-changer for our students, our communities and our Region.

Surviving and Thriving in Challenging Times

Stuart McDowell, Head of Innovation and STEM, City of Glasgow College

Surviving and Thriving in Challenging Times: A Year like no other for Scotland's Colleges

With 15 years at the College and responsibility for implementation of the College's innovation strategy, I have seen my fair share of change in the sector.

Few would deny that the past few years have been challenging for the college sector. We've battled headwinds of funding challenges, political turmoil, industrial action, and rapid technological change. This year, in particular, has been filled with competing demands for our time and energy. The challenges came thick and fast, and at times over the past year it felt like the sector was merely in survival mode. Yet, thanks to the collective effort of our teaching and support teams, not only did we survive, but we thrived, achieving remarkable feats rarely seen in the college sector.



Innovative Research

Earlier this year, City of Glasgow College was honoured at Buckingham Palace with the Queen's Anniversary Award for our life-saving research into oxygen depletion in confined spaces. This prestigious award is the highest honour in the tertiary education sector, recognising excellence, innovation, and impact in colleges and universities.

Our research project addresses a critical and often overlooked aspect of safety: the quality of air in confined environments. As we focus on creating sustainable and secure working conditions, City of Glasgow College has taken a pioneering step in ensuring the safety of seafarers. This project has been scaled globally, benefiting our partners in the maritime industry.

Seafarers operate in unique environments with specific safety challenges. Our online course, recognised by the Merchant Navy Training Board, is a crucial part of our broader initiative. It equips seafarers with the skills and knowledge to identify, assess, and mitigate risks associated with oxygen depletion on vessels. The innovative and lifesaving nature of this research, honoured by the Queen's Anniversary Award, places us alongside esteemed institutions such as Glasgow, Strathclyde, and Oxford Universities.

Supporting the Scottish Space Sector

In April, we were invited to brief the Scottish Affairs Committee on our work in Scotland's emerging space sector. Alongside Fife College, we outlined our innovative efforts to embrace opportunities and support the industry's growth.

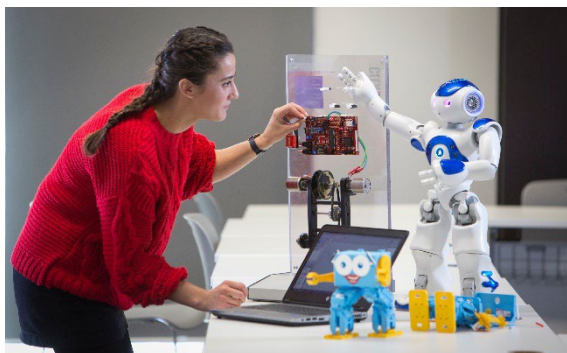
It was inspiring to see the Government's commitment to understanding this sector and its potential to drive significant contributions to the Scottish economy. This year, we introduced courses in Space Science & Sector, Sustainable Satellite Manufacturing, and Electronics & Eco-Design. These programs aim to equip individuals, regardless of their prior experience, with the knowledge and skills needed for roles in the space industry, from engineering and design to data analysis and other functional roles.

Launch of Innovation Hubs across Glasgow City Region

This year, it was also positive to see more than £1.2 million being invested to create six new innovation hubs at colleges across Glasgow and the west of Scotland to help encourage innovation in local businesses. The 12-month College Local Innovation Centres pilot project, funded by the Innovate UK Further Education Innovation Fund, will help businesses across the Glasgow City Region gain access to comprehensive support and guidance on embedding and embracing innovation within their organisations. The hubs will support businesses in several sectors including health, sustainability, and digital.

Six colleges across the Glasgow City Region will host the innovation hubs, including Centre for Innovation Leadership – City of Glasgow College, Centre for Digitally Enabled Health – New College Lanarkshire, North Lanarkshire; Centre for Sustainable Development – South Lanarkshire College, South Lanarkshire; Centre for Industrial Automation – West College Scotland, West Dunbartonshire; Centre for Digital Enablement – Glasgow Kelvin College; and Centre for Digital Creativity – Glasgow Clyde College.

Embedding Innovation



In times of challenge and change, innovation is not a luxury but a necessity. Our students are excited by the opportunities presented by technological advancements and need to be prepared to embrace opportunities when they enter the workplace. Many are motivated to pursue careers and even start businesses in growth industries. It is crucial for colleges to continue to be seen as innovative places of learning, which is why innovation remains a key value at City of Glasgow College.

Despite the well-documented challenges facing the sector, colleges remain the destination of choice for many students and we've witnessed first-choice applications increasing by 8%, year on year. It is essential we continue to build the innovation capabilities of colleges to ensure they remain key enablers of upskilling and reskilling in times of change.

Given colleges are a source of diverse talent (22% of our students are from areas of multiple deprivation - Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, SIMD10) this is an approach that will help ensure we continue to deliver opportunities for the many, not just the few.

Now is the Time to Invest in Skills

Joanna Campbell, Principal, Dumfries and Galloway College

Now is the time to invest in skills



When I was asked to write this blog piece, I gave some thought to what piece of the skills challenge Dumfries and Galloway College is really making a difference on at the moment. The answer is easy – green skills – and I'm proud of the steps we have taken to support local employers and our wider community to tackle climate change. But I wanted to unpack the mechanics a little of how our college has been able to do this and it's quite a revealing story in the current political context.

Capitalising on the work we have already been pioneering in this area, we have proudly launched a new Net Zero Skills Centre, a significant step towards promoting sustainability and supporting local businesses in transitioning to a greener future. This initiative is funded by the UK Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and aims to provide businesses with the essential skills and knowledge required to adapt to the evolving demands of a low-carbon economy.

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund, a vital element of the previous UK Government's Levelling Up agenda, has allocated just under £1m for local investment in Dumfries and Galloway College by March 2025. This funding will enable the Net Zero Skills Centre to not only update our construction teaching facilities but also offer a range of courses designed to upskill workers in the region. These courses are crucial for trades and professionals who will play a vital role in helping the public transition to more sustainable homes. Our training will cover areas ranging from heat pump systems to EV charging point installation.

Critically, we are able to offer these courses fully funded to local employers. I see this as an investment in skills for right now (as demand rockets from consumers keen to play their part in going green), and a great investment in the skills we need for the future. It is right that the Scottish Government and the UK Government support industry and employees to transition when regulation and legislation demands that changes are made to how we use energy and transport. There has to be a virtuous circle around the climate emergency of funded training, the sharing of skills and experience within industry, and investment into colleges to train the next cohort and the next and so on.

Scotland faces a significant challenge in transitioning to low-carbon heating systems, with an estimated need for 15,500 heat pump installers to meet the target of converting at least 50% of existing housing stock to such systems by 2030. Only 278,000 of the approximately 2.5 million homes in Scotland use renewable or low-emissions heating systems, underscoring the urgent need for retrofitting activities to future-proof buildings.

These courses are essential to meet the growing demand for green skills and innovation, particularly in the construction industry. The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) estimates that around 22,500 new roles will need to be created by 2028 to achieve Scotland's net-zero goals.



So, it seems obvious that investing in skills is essential – and the investment has to come quickly, and then be sustained for the long term. The investment from Levelling Up that our college has benefitted from may not come again in that form, but the new Labour UK Government has already made strong statements about skills even after just a couple of weeks in office. And the Scottish Government, who have removed funding from vital streams of funding like the Flexible Workforce Development Fund, may reconsider their position on critical funding streams so that Scotland is not left behind. Funding is falling for colleges in Scotland and continuing to do more with less year on year isn't viable anymore.

Colleges in Scotland are extremely well placed to provide training and education in emerging technologies and industries like the ones above therefore an investment in our sector would make perfect sense and adopting a "College First" approach to skills delivery will help deliver Scotland's economic priorities, now and in the years to come.

For more information on the courses and funding opportunities, visit <https://www.dumgal.ac.uk/free-net-zero-training/>.

Colleges at the heart of developing future-proof skills

Michael Jeffrey, Vice Principal, Edinburgh College

Last month saw the release of the results of the latest iteration of the [Scottish Social Attitudes Survey](#). Among the many interesting insights to be gleaned from diving into these results, one of those which stood out most to me was the huge rise in people who said that “improving the economy” should be the Scottish Government’s top priority (from 23% in 2019 to 42% this time around). The findings are unambiguous: the public is serious about economic growth.

So, how can colleges support the Scottish Government to address this stated public priority and play their part in “improving the economy”? Well, one thing we know to be absolutely central to economic prosperity is human capital and, by extension, one thing that can support growth in human capital is investment in education and skills.

The economic impact of colleges

In Scotland, colleges are at the heart of the skills system. Through their work they drive improvements in productivity and help ensure the alignment of skills supply and skills demand in the regions they serve. In the process they provide opportunities for people from all backgrounds to access education and improve their life prospects.

A recent [report from the Fraser of Allander Institute](#) showed the cumulative economic impact of colleges’ work. They estimate that the college graduate cohorts from 2016-17 to 2021-22 will provide a £52bn boost to the Scottish economy over their working lives, equivalent to a £72,000 boost to productivity per graduate.

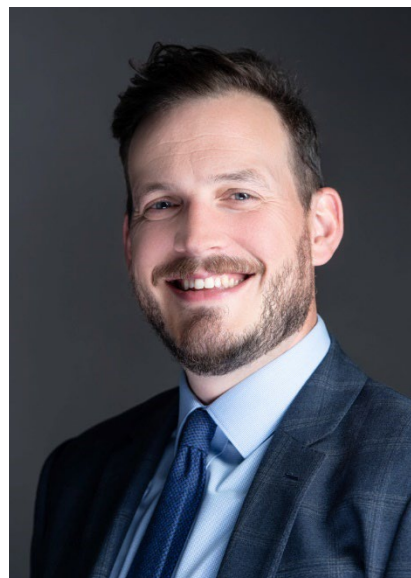
Data-driven innovation and digital skills

These top line numbers are abstract, and an example illustrates better how this works in practice. Research shows that there are growing digital and data skills gaps across a range of industries brought about by the introduction of new and evolving technologies and processes.

Supported by Equate Scotland and the Data Lab Community, Edinburgh College delivers an upskilling and reskilling course for Women in Digital and Data innovation, which facilitates access to higher education and training and supports women into employment in tech and related roles.

The course is part of the Data Education in Colleges initiative, a collaboration between Edinburgh, Fife, Borders, and West Lothian colleges, funded by the Data Skills Gateway programme, that aims to establish a Data Science skills progression pathway from SCQF levels 3 to 8. This pathway also offers opportunities for higher education at Edinburgh Napier University or direct employment as well as promoting digital, meta and transferable skills, whilst also ensuring intersectional equality is promoted and supported across the technology sector.

The course caters to two distinct groups of learners; women seeking to improve their effectiveness in their current work roles (SCQF 7) and women aspiring to specialise in the field of data science or analysis (SCQF 8). Through the course, a large cohort of women have achieved the SQA-recognised Professional Development Award (PDA) in Data Science.



This course not only focuses on imparting essential skills like Data Analysis and Visualisation, but also emphasises the development of transferable skills such as numeracy, digital literacy, and meta skills like collaboration, critical thinking, and communication.

As well as this course, through its portfolio, the initiative provides a consistent, joined-up approach across colleges serving as a benchmark in integrating digital skills into education. Moreover, as digital literacy and data science expertise become increasingly sought-after, the initiative provides a model for effectively bridging the skills gap, equipping learners with the digital and data competencies needed in a rapidly evolving job market, and ensuring Scotland's workforce is equipped to meet the challenges and opportunities of the digital age.

An economic anchor for the capital region

Returning to the question of the economy, this example highlights the role that colleges already play in improving Scotland's future economic prospects, and the potential they have to do more. It is part of a much wider array of work Edinburgh College is undertaking not only to support individuals, but also to address key economic challenges in the region, including innovation projects in collaboration with employers, green skills courses aligned to future skills needs, and a portfolio of reskilling and upskilling courses for partners across the region. Combined, these show that Edinburgh College is not just a place of social sanctuary and cultural diversity, but of economic dynamism for Scotland's capital and the wider city-region. Programmes like this – and their impact – show how Scotland's colleges continue to play a key role in addressing the economic challenges that the Social Attitudes Survey would suggest is currently the public's number one priority.

Embracing Digital Creativity in Scottish Colleges

John Rafferty, Vice and Deputy Principal, Glasgow Clyde College



In today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, digital creativity has emerged as a vital skill for both students and lecturers. For Scottish colleges, harnessing and developing digital creativity is not just a trend - it's a transformative approach to education that equips learners with the tools needed to thrive in a digitally driven world. By integrating creative digital practices into their curricula, Scottish colleges can avoid training a generation of young people for obsolete job roles, and instead put them in the vanguard of the newly emerging digital professions.

The Rise of Digital Creativity in Education

Digital creativity encompasses the use of technology to create, communicate, and innovate. In educational contexts, it ranges from multimedia production and graphic design to coding, digital storytelling and of course AI. This trend reflects the broader shift towards creative industries and the increasing demand for digital skills across almost every sector. For Scottish colleges, embracing digital creativity is about more than teaching students how to use the latest software; it's about nurturing a mindset that values creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving – the meta-skills that all of us have been working hard to inculcate in our students.

Glasgow Clyde College: A Hub for Digital Innovation

Glasgow Clyde College exemplifies how many Scottish colleges are leading the way in integrating digital creativity into their educational offerings.

Firstly, we recently hosted an excellent conference in AI for Educators using the AI interface Teachermatic to help upskill lecturers in using digital tools to reduce workload. After all, how can we develop innovation in our learners if we don't first enthuse our staff?

Secondly, the college has developed a reputation for its forward-thinking approach within its creative industries courses which include degrees awarded in partnership with UWS. By offering courses in areas such as animation, web development, digital marketing, and user experience design. we emphasize the importance of creativity in technology - ensuring that graduates are not only technically proficient but also capable of thinking creatively to solve complex problems.

Most exciting of all, Glasgow Clyde College has been working with five other colleges in the Greater Glasgow area to found the College Local Innovation Centre (CLIC) using the FE Innovation Fund. This has enabled all six partner colleges (Glasgow Clyde, Glasgow Kelvin, City of Glasgow, South Lanarkshire, New College Lanarkshire and West College Scotland) to be proactive in responding to the needs of employers. Colleges offer consultancy and upskilling interventions, with each picking an innovation theme that plays to its particular strengths.

Glasgow Clyde College's chosen role is to act as the Centre for Digital Creativity, working with the others to support up to 200 businesses across the West of Scotland. This work includes conducting innovation audits and connecting businesses to transformative training opportunities at Scottish colleges and universities.

Digital Creativity Beyond the Classroom

The impact of digital creativity at Glasgow Clyde College extends beyond the classroom of course. The college frequently collaborates with industry partners on projects that allow students to apply their skills in real-world settings. For instance, students in the Digital Media course have worked on live briefs provided by local businesses, producing promotional content that meets professional standards.

We are also especially proud of our use of digital innovation in our Marketing function. A recent PR campaign offered parents 'A Masterclass in Taylor Swift'. This one PR activation exploited viral social media coverage to earn a staggering potential readership of 2 billion worldwide, driving tens of thousands of applicants to our website and costing our marketing department a modest £200.

The Future of Digital Creativity in Scottish Colleges

As digital technology continues to advance, the role of digital creativity in education will only grow in importance. Scottish colleges are very well-positioned to lead this evolution, with institutions like Glasgow Clyde College and collaborative projects like CLIC, showing what colleges can bring to the Scottish economy. Digital creativity is not just a skill set; it is a mindset that encourages exploration, experimentation, and innovation and Scottish colleges are at the forefront of this educational transformation, ensuring that their students are prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

Apprenticeships: Then and Now

Kenny MacInnes, Principal, Forth Valley College

When I embarked on my apprenticeship at Falkirk College of Technology in August 1985, the ZX Spectrum and the Sony Walkman were the leading tech of the day.

Fast forward 39 years, and the technology of today would be unrecognisable to my 16 year old self. We have pocket sized wireless computers (smartphones) that are millions of times more powerful than the Apollo 11 guidance computers, and faster than our current laptops, which provides instant wireless worldwide communication, live streaming of limitless information, GPS linked mapping and immediate access to global entertainment. Our devices hold thousands of pictures, songs and hours of video which are instantly accessible through listening devices that are wireless.



The pace of change in technology has significantly impacted the skills needed in our modern industries, and I often reflect on how apprenticeships have changed since I started out. However, even with the fast pace of change of our tech, the core purpose and principles of our modern apprenticeships frameworks remains fundamentally the same and continues to play a key role in the skills pipeline.

Vocational training is the backbone of a resilient and adaptive economy. For employers, investing in apprenticeships means cultivating a skilled workforce tailored to their specific needs and growing talent from within their organisation. This approach ensures that employees are not only efficient in their roles, but also aligned with the organisation's culture and goals. Apprenticeships reduce recruitment costs, enhance employee retention, and improve overall productivity, by providing hands-on experience and fostering a deep understanding of industry standards and practices.

Furthermore, vocational training is instrumental in addressing skills gaps within the economy. By aligning apprenticeships with industry demands, we can ensure that the workforce is equipped with the necessary skills to drive innovation and economic growth. This is particularly vital in sectors such as engineering, construction, and life sciences, where technological advancements and evolving practices require a continuously updated skill set.

In the context of renewables, vocational training is indispensable. As Scotland strives to meet its ambitious net zero targets, the demand for skilled professionals in renewable energy sectors — such as wind, solar, and hydroelectric power — continues to rise. Modern Apprenticeships in these fields provide the technical expertise and practical experience needed to support the development and maintenance of renewable energy infrastructure. By investing in this training, we not only create job opportunities but also contribute to a sustainable future, reducing our carbon footprint and promoting responsible practices.

Vocational training has undergone significant evolution over the past 40 years since I started out. In the mid-1980s, apprenticeships were predominantly hands-on, with a strong focus on manual skills and traditional trades. Training was largely workshop-based, with apprentices spending most of their time learning directly on the job under the guidance of experienced mentors.

Today vocational training integrates advanced technology and digital tools, reflecting the changing demands of the modern workplace. The curriculum has expanded to include critical thinking, problem-solving, and digital literacy, ensuring that apprentices are well-rounded and adaptable.

Modern training uses simulated environments, virtual reality, and online learning platforms to enhance practical skills and theoretical knowledge.

The scope of vocational training has also broadened significantly. While traditional trades remain vital, apprenticeships now encompass a diverse range of industries, including information technology, healthcare, and renewable energy. This expansion allows more individuals to pursue vocational training in fields that align with their interests and the evolving needs of the economy.

As Principal of Forth Valley College, one of Scotland's largest trainers of Modern Apprentices, I take great pride in our achievements. We provide flexible, relevant training that integrates seamlessly into business operations coupled with expert lecturers and state-of-the-art facilities. We also work closely with organisations such as Skills Development Scotland (SDS), ECITB and other colleges to enhance Scotland's skills landscape, and our close professional links with each industry ensures that we achieve our mission statement of 'Making Learning Work' for a wide range of employers.

So in my current role, and knowing what I know now, what advice would I give to my 16 year old self now? I would tell myself to embrace this opportunity with both hands. That vocational learning, linked to employment and based in a college setting, is a catalyst for a successful career. I can genuinely say that it was my apprenticeship that gave me the skills and confidence to go on and have the diverse and successful career that I have had.

While school provided a foundation, it was at college that I connected learning to industrial processes, contextualising theories and practical skills. It's where I developed my people skills, which are fundamental to success in any field.

I would tell myself that this practical, work-based learning is a powerful catalyst for a successful career, as it will prepare you to meet the evolving demands of today's job market. The mentorship from experienced professionals and the immersive, real-world experience will build your confidence and expertise, laying a solid foundation for your future. This journey will transform you from an eager apprentice into a skilled professional, ultimately opening doors to countless opportunities, including leadership roles you might never have imagined possible.

I am immensely proud to be Principal of Forth Valley College and as I walk around our campuses, hearing the sounds of construction workshops, engineering labs, salons, and kitchens, I am reminded of the journey I began nearly 40 years ago. I look forward to seeing today's apprentices graduate as skilled tradespeople in the near future, and I am confident that many could become College Principals, Chief Executives, successful entrepreneurs, or achieve even greater success.

Hospitality Industry Experience

Shirley Simpson, Hospitality Lecturer, UHI Perth



After the pandemic, the tourism and hospitality sector struggled to recover and address the staff shortage gap. Therefore, there are excellent job opportunities in one of Scotland's largest industries to help allow tourism and hospitality to flourish. At UHI Perth our, highly commended programmes offer invaluable skills that set people up for a successful career which could ultimately take them all over the world.

We are also committed to continually upskilling our staff, to benefit our students and their learning experience.

Callum Walker, a former HNC Hospitality Operations student, reflects on his college education which has led him to Kisa's restaurant in Perth.

I started at UHI Perth when I was still in school, in fifth year, on an online course for Chartered Management. After I left school, at the end of fifth year, I applied and started on the HNC Hospitality Operations course.

UHI Perth is a great place for anyone who is maybe not in a position yet to go to university but also maybe not ready to be in no education at all. With the range of courses in hospitality and practical cookery, it's a great place to get qualifications straight after school. The support and effort lecturers provide in both delivery and out with is incredible. I was not overly academic at school; however, your lecturers are able to help with any questions on how to write academic pieces, or just general questions about anything to do with the course.

My full studies include Higher English, Modern Studies, Business Management and Administration and IT, Certificate in First Line Management, and my HNC in Hospitality Operations.

I am now going on to study with Edinburgh Napier University for BA (Hons) in International Hospitality Management, starting in September.

My role at Kisa's is one I gained through a work placement with UHI Perth and I am a Trainee Senior Restaurant Assistant. I assist colleagues and the management team with duties and responsibilities which are performed as back-office tasks. Although the majority of my hours are spent on the floor with our customers, my main responsibilities take place back office.

My other responsibility is technology, I look at new ways to improve current technology within the restaurant and try to come up with solutions. For example, this month our team are trialling headsets which will improve communication between our front of house teams and back of house to ensure customers are seen more quickly and effectively by all team members and hopefully improving our service we provide.

Hospitality Lecturer, Shirley Simpson, reflects on keeping her industry experience up to date.

For me, it was great to be back in industry. I love the buzz from working a restaurant service, and it is important to me and my professional development to regularly carry out industry experience to ensure I am aware of current practices, the successes and challenges of our fantastic industry. It helps me to have more insight and a fuller understanding of what our students are experiencing working, which in turn enhances my teaching. We are lucky to have – and work hard to maintain – our industry links which are invaluable to us. Industry colleagues provide work placements, employment opportunities, mentorship, guest lectures and visits and these connections are an important part of our department at UHI Perth.

I wish Callum the best of luck moving on with his studies and am excited to track his future journey as with his hard work ethic, focus, drive and passion for hospitality I know he will be a shining light in our industry and a great success story.

Interested in seeing what Shirley's team get up to throughout the year? Follow the department on Instagram.

Serving Remote and Rural Communities

Elaine Munro, Principal, UHI Argyll

When asked to contribute to this series of blogs, I began to think about how our college, with its unique structure of small centres, widely dispersed across the vastness of Argyll, has become an intrinsic part of the fabric of life for remote and rural communities in Argyll. What impact would communities feel if we had never come into existence?

Argyll and Bute is the second largest, and third most sparsely populated local authority area in Scotland. Covering nearly 9% of Scotland's total land area, the region is known for its natural beauty, including forests, beaches, and coastal landscapes. It has a rich history with ancient monuments and medieval castles. The region's diverse geography, from mountains and lochs includes 23 inhabited islands, and 4 out of 5 of us live within 1km of the sea. Sounds idyllic, doesn't it? We are fortunate to live in one of the most beautiful parts of the country, surrounded by wildlife, stunning scenery and endless opportunities to enjoy the outdoors.



This description though, belies the challenges which face our communities. Our population is not only rapidly aging, but also in decline, a trend which is projected to continue well into the next decade, despite efforts across the board to address this. Getting around can be difficult, with a fragile road infrastructure (think weather related major route closures which cut off communities for months at a time) and public transport options are extremely limited - sometimes based solely around the school bus.

Like young people in rural areas across Scotland, many school leavers in Argyll are eager to escape the perceived limitations of country living and experience the bright lights of the city. They are keen to move away to study, and may not return, contributing to depopulation and that ageing demographic which puts some small communities in a perilous state.

UHI Argyll offers people the chance to remain in the place they love; to continue leading the life they have established, while being given parity of opportunity with others all over Scotland.

This, I feel, is where the true value of a college like ours can be found. We underpin the viability of our community by offering an alternative to moving on to move up. Just one generation ago, the only option for those going into post-school education was to move out of the area. Now, I am happy to say, our communities can take advantage of further and higher education and can remain in Argyll to complete degrees and post graduate qualifications as part of the University of the Highlands and Islands.

Our college was established in 1999 specifically to support communities who at that time were unable to benefit from the burgeoning digital revolution and improvements in connectivity being enjoyed in more populated parts of the country. At that time, we pioneered the virtual classroom – a concept which, post pandemic, is second nature to most of us. The embryonic broadband network of the first years of the century ensured that our college learning centres were an essential component in providing access to high-speed online learning and interactive video lectures for communities who were still struggling with dial-up connections at home as little as 5 years ago.

Technology has come a very long way in the past three decades and if we were designing UHI Argyll today we may have a very different structure. Although most of us now have sufficient connectivity and digital devices which would enable truly remote learning, when I see the person-centred support provided to students in our network of centres, it's obvious to me that it's the personal touch which is the 'magic ingredient' making the difference to those who pass through our doors.

Rural schools face challenges too: a lack of housing and falling school rolls, amongst other factors, can complicate staff recruitment. The college's Senior Phase programme often enables high schools to ensure pupils receive a wide range of subject choices, vocational as well as academic, and without a local FE provider, the entire educational environment in the region would be diminished.

Argyll has a higher proportion of small businesses relative to the population than the national average. Three quarters of private sector employment comes from SMEs. Given the distances involved in accessing training in the Central Belt, having a local provider is critical to many business owners and we work closely with business and organisations such as Argyll and the Isles Tourism Co-operative to build an employability pipeline.

In a small college like ours, the success stories seem personal: apprentices working with employers at the pinnacle of their profession; previously disengaged students moving into meaningful employment; adult returners achieving master's degrees; and school pupils experiencing the very widest educational opportunities.

UHI Argyll is more than an educational institution; it's a catalyst for positive change in Argyll and Bute, and Arran. By creating equality of opportunity, addressing depopulation, and supporting small businesses, the college is helping to build a stronger, more resilient community.

Impactful Initiatives

Pete Smith, Principal, Borders College



During the COVID-19 pandemic, communities across the country came together to support each other, as what we recognised as normality was turned upside down. As we coped with the tragic loss of life and huge social and economic impact, our colleges were at the centre of recovery in many of those communities. At the onset of the pandemic, colleges swiftly switched to online learning and then supported the learning and welfare of their students through a variety of means, each specific to their learners and communities. Many college buildings were repurposed to support the emergency services. Many donated PPE to the NHS, charities and community groups. As we emerged from lockdown, colleges were key to re-enabling safe learning opportunities while also providing significant additional learning and welfare support to

their students. Those students and their families trusted their colleges, and rightly so. Colleges have long been civic anchors; places people recognise as being of the community and for the community. It is essential that we allow those roles to continue.

Many of Scotland's colleges were created to deliver skills to support the industries specific to local towns and cities, and their dominant industry sectors. As those industries changed and diversified, the towns and their people wanted broader and richer opportunities. Our colleges delivered, eventually providing a vast array of learning opportunities, from entry to degree level at their centres across Scotland.

In developing their curriculum offer, colleges listened to their communities, they consulted with industry, they delivered on government policies. They continue to do all this in a number of ways, from active participation in community planning and regional economic partnerships to direct engagement with industry, schools and local authorities; but more than that, they are often focal points for community events, and remain places where people can not only learn, but socialise, use as sports hubs, attend conferences and seminars, or simply find a warm place to shelter in the colder months.

At Borders College we truly believe in our community responsibility: of course we recognise our place in developing global citizens; of course we work across our region to deliver the skills identified in our Regional Economic Strategy. But we also engage directly with community groups in our regional towns to find out what they want from their college. Without that type of engagement, our further education sector risks becoming homogenised, with reduced opportunities to access the life-changing experiences we provide.

As our society becomes increasingly globalised, it is more important than ever that we remember how true community assets such as colleges are essential in supporting our people throughout their lifelong learning journey, adding significant economic value to our country, and that they also create enormous social value in the way they interact with their communities, improving equality of opportunity and a sense of belonging.

Discover the inspiring ways Borders College is transforming our communities for the better. Dive into a glimpse of the impactful initiatives that have touched the lives of numerous students, members of the public and external organisations.

Hairdressing Global Citizens cutting it for the NHS

A group of hairdressing students has been nominated for a Global Citizenship Award for their work at Borders General Hospital's Borders View Ward, a unit for dementia patients. NHS Borders invited the students to provide hair services, including shampoo, sets, cuts, and blow drying. This opportunity allowed Level 5 A students to enhance their customer service skills and cutting techniques while offering essential grooming services to patients who might otherwise lack access to such care. Read the full article [Hairdressing Global Citizens cutting it for the NHS](#).

College welcomes Cornerstone to support jobs inclusion

Borders College recently welcomed Cornerstone, a Scottish social care charity, to use its Galashiels campus facilities twice weekly. During a visit coinciding with DuoDay, the charity engaged with staff about job roles and support for disabled employees. DuoDay promotes workplace diversity and inclusion by connecting disabled people, employers, and Supported Employment providers. Cornerstone aims to encourage social inclusion, reduce loneliness, and enhance health, independence, and well-being. Read the full article [College welcomes Cornerstone to support jobs inclusion](#).



Yuriy follows his passion for metal sculpting thanks to ESOL course

Ukrainian student Yuriy Shostask is excited to advance his metal sculpting skills by joining the Introduction to MIG Welding program. To prepare, he is taking the English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) course, which has improved his English and communication skills. Borders College, in collaboration with Scottish Borders Council Community Learning and Development (CLD), offers ESOL classes to adults in the Scottish Borders, helping them gain essential language skills for better community interaction. Read the full article [Yuriy follows his passion for metal sculpting thanks to ESOL course](#).

Charity-minded students gear up for Alzheimer's fundraiser

Borders College students Laia Reid and Amy Horsebrugh supported Alzheimer's Research UK's Walk for a Cure in June. As Higher Social Care students who have cared for family members with dementia, they were raising funds for the charity. They organized a bake sale at the Galashiels campus and have raised over £700 online. Additionally, they have joined the Royal Voluntary Service, supporting public health, social care, and well-being through vital services. Read the full article [Charity-minded students gear up for Alzheimer's fundraiser](#).

ESOL course helps Svitlana find her artistic touch again

Scotland's colleges are helping Ukrainian refugees integrate, with English language learning being crucial. Svitlana Norel, a Ukrainian artist and mother of two, moved to Scotland two years ago from Odessa. Now living in Galashiels, she studies ESOL at Borders College and previously completed a Community Learning course. Aspiring to become an art teacher in Scotland, she also attends weekly Conversational Café sessions and online classes to enhance her language skills. Read the full article [ESOL course helps Svitlana find her artistic touch again](#).

Sign language learners contribute towards an inclusive society

The College's Galashiels campus recently hosted a successful Introduction to British Sign Language (BSL) Community Evening Class for beginners. Attendees aimed to build confidence and communication skills before starting a Level 1 certificated course. The sessions covered finger spelling, basic introductions, numbers, weather, transport, directions, and fundamental grammar and vocabulary. Participants practiced these skills through pair work, enhancing their ability to understand and use BSL for everyday communication. Read the full article [Sign language learners contribute towards an inclusive society](#).

NHS Borders benefits from college phone upgrade

NHS Borders received a generous donation of telephone handsets from Borders College following the college's phone system upgrade. These phones, compatible with NHS Borders' system, will replace damaged units or support new extensions across the NHS estate. Read the full article [NHS Borders benefits from college phone upgrade](#).

Journalist Isla Glen talks about her career journey from Borders College to DC Thomson

Former student Isla Glen, from Southdean, Scottish Borders, graduated from Stirling University and started a journalism career with DC Thomson at the Dundee Courier and Evening Telegraph. Isla studied NPA Journalism at Borders College in 2017 while in S5 at Jedburgh Grammar School. She credits the college course with launching her career and highlights how college can be a crucial step toward university and professional success. We wish her the best in her journalism journey. Read the full article [Journalist Isla Glen talks about her career journey from Borders College to DC Thomson](#).

Isla's commitment to her role commended by her peers



Isla Simpson has been praised for her dedication to her studies and support for children after completing the Social Services Children & Young People SCQF2 course. Following her time volunteering at Seashells Nursery in Eyemouth, her employer nominated her for the course. Despite initial apprehension due to past school experiences and dyslexia, Isla's regular meetings with her assessor and preparation boosted her confidence. Over seven months, her creative thinking, teamwork, and child support skills were notable. Read the full article [Isla's commitment to her role commended by her peers](#).

College supported frontline care workers by 3D printing face shields

Borders College aided frontline care workers by producing face shields for Scottish Borders staff. Staff members Davie Lowe and Mark Catto use their 3D printers at home to create headbands, which were then fitted with acetate shields. Each shield, taking about an hour to make, served as a protective barrier for healthcare workers. Read the full article [College supported frontline care workers by 3D printing face shields](#).

College staff and students aided delivery of vital medical supplies

During the Coronavirus pandemic, College volunteers were crucially ensuring medical supplies reach vulnerable individuals. A team of 37 staff and students runs a delivery service, and completed over 176 deliveries to homes identified by the NHS. This initiative, a collaboration between Scottish Borders Council, NHS, and Borders College, adhered to strict no-contact guidelines to ensure safety. Read the full article [College staff and students aided delivery of vital medical supplies](#).

UK Government funding awarded to offer free green skills training

Borders College has obtained funding of £530,400 to facilitate the no-cost provision of tailored skills and training initiatives, aiming to bolster the green economy and enhance the local supply chain for housing. This programme is strategically crafted to optimise the decarbonisation of existing housing stock and elevate the workforce's skills to meet evolving property standards. Read the full article [UK Government funding awarded to offer free green skills training](#).

Renowned chef Mark has all the ingredients for success

Former Borders College student Mark Drummond has tasted success in several high-end hospitality positions throughout his career. We caught up with him at the SCHLOSS Roxburghe to talk about his journey since leaving the College.

Now Culinary Director at the historic luxury hotel, Mark oversees all culinary aspects of catering and leads a team of 16 chefs in the kitchen. Read the full article [Renowned chef Mark has all the ingredients for success](#).



Transforming Lives

Jacqui Taylor, Head of Marketing and External Relations, UHI Moray

UHI Moray as it is called now was established in 1971 as Elgin Technical College and has been serving the community of Moray Speyside since then. Our commitment to the people and employers of Moray has grown from strength to strength over the years as we have expanded and developed our educational offering as part of the University of Highlands and Islands. Our mission is to 'Transform Lives' and achieve this through the important work do within and for our communities.



Moray Speyside is located in one of the most beautiful areas in Scotland and is known worldwide as "Malt Whisky Country" with over 50% of the total amount of distilleries in Scotland located in the area. Additionally, we share much of what's best about the Highlands of Scotland, including 35 miles of golden sandy beaches, unspoilt countryside and rich biodiversity.

Popular outdoor activities in our region include climbing, golfing, kayaking, sailing, mountain biking, surfing and rafting. With the Cairngorms on our doorstep for skiing and snowboarding, outdoor action runs right through the winter.

We have over the years developed close and very important collaborations with local industry, partners and our local communities.

This includes:

Employability Project



UHI Moray have been involved in the delivery of employability support to individuals across our communities for over 25 years. The Scottish and Westminster governments recognise the value of providing support to the most vulnerable and disaffected to boost skills and economic growth and at UHI Moray we are proud to be able to support this work.

Since October 2023 UHI Moray have been delivering the Moray SWAP employability programme in partnership with Enable Works. The project - which is currently supporting over 130 individuals - is funded by the UK government Shared Prosperity Fund and works with individuals aged 16+ who are facing barriers to progressing into employment, training and/or education.

Key to the success of this project is the ability to work effectively in partnership with a range of key stakeholder agencies and employers. The project supports the upskilling and reskilling of individuals making them more work ready, meeting industry needs and supporting the overall economic growth of the Moray Speyside area.

Moray Local Employability Partnership [LEP]

The Moray Local Employability Partnership [Moray Pathways] delivers a wide range of interventions to support employability across Moray focused on key areas where there is an identified need to increase provision and/or where there is a gap. UHI Moray sit on the partnership and chair the Marketing and PR group. The LEP delivery plan identifies the following areas for investment:

- Improve employability outcomes for the people of Moray and address skills gaps in key economic sectors
- Improve the effectiveness of the Moray Pathways Partnership
- Work in partnership with local employers, anchor organisations and communities to create fair jobs for the future, increasing the skilled workforce, stimulating labour market growth and enhancing local wealth.

The funding comes from a range of provision under the banner of No One Left Behind.

Moray Local Outcome Improvement Plan [LOIP]

We are part of the LOIP for 2 of the most deprived areas of Moray. The LOIPs are linked to the Community Planning Partnerships and are a focus for the Scottish Government. The LOIPs overall aim to improve communities and individuals futures through the provision of:

- Education and Employment
- Health and Wellbeing
- Community Involvement
- Environment and Infrastructure.



Each plan has been developed in partnership with the communities so they reflect what the community feels it needs to support an improvement in environment, lifestyle, skills and opportunities.

Our input is focused on supporting the Education and Employment strand however we support across the whole plan and have been involved with community and family events, one of which included a healthy cookery evening with families supported by our Hospitality Team, provided accommodation for events at our campuses and staff have volunteered at weekend events in the community.

Curriculum Supporting Communities

UHI Moray are involved in supporting specific sector-based provision where there is an identified gap in provision. One example is the lack of childcare provision across Moray Speyside which is a significant barrier to individuals looking to return to work. We deliver courses to support unemployed individuals to become self-employed childminders and have delivered flexible childcare courses via our curriculum. We work in partnership with the Parent Poverty team and our childcare lecturers support this work.

Across the curriculum areas, staff and students support community groups including our sports team who provide community based physical activity for individuals with long term health conditions and sporting activities for young people, whilst our integrative healthcare team provides non-clinical health interventions to care home residents.

Apprenticeships – Foundation and Modern



We manage contracts for both the Foundation and Modern Apprenticeship programmes. Through this, we work with over 130 employers and their apprentices towards a positive outcome. We provide support from the recruitment stage to the achievement of the SVQ qualification. Employers benefit a great deal from employing apprentices as it offers them the opportunity to invest in Morays young people by providing the opportunity to train towards a

nationally recognised qualification while working.

We continue to expand our involvement across additional apprenticeship frameworks which are based on employer requirements.

Moray Growth Deal

UHI Moray are leading on the Business Hub project - part of The Moray Growth Deal - and are involved with at least 3 of the other projects including: Early Years STEM, Cultural Quarter, and the Rural Centre for Excellence. The deal overall includes 6 other projects with 1 to be developed. The deal is an investment of over £100 million from UK and Scottish governments and aims to deliver transformational investment to drive economic growth across the region.

The Growth Deal will also support major new developments in key sectors of health and aerospace, as well as early years education, all of which will expand Moray's Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) skills-base.

One other area UHI Moray is involved with linked to supporting the Moray Growth Deal is the Elgin Town Board which has been established to develop projects funded by the £20M from the UK government to Elgin as part of the Long-Term Plan for Towns.

Construction Awards

We hold an annual celebration event recognising the achievements of our construction apprentices from years 1 to 4. This event is supported by 24 employer sponsors and is a testament to the relationship developed between UHI Moray and our employers across the construction industry.

These are just a few examples of the involvement UHI Moray has in its communities and we will continue to build on this vital work to ensure that we can act as the local university but also a vital cog within our community support the future growth and development of the Moray Speyside area and the communities living in the area.



Driving Positive Change in Industry through Strategic Partnerships

Miles Lagan, Head of Business Development, Fife College



At Fife College, we are deeply committed to forging partnerships with industry to deliver customised training solutions that drive significant positive change.

This commitment has been exemplified by our pivotal role in Babcock's innovative Production Support Operative (PSO) programme. Developed collaboratively with Fife Council, Kingdom Works, trade unions, and local industry partners, this initiative was launched to address critical skills gaps in the shipbuilding sector. Our goal was clear: to create a transformative training

programme that not only enhances career pathways but also strengthens industry capabilities.

Fife College served as the educational cornerstone of this initiative, delivering tailored training at our Rosyth Campus. From comprehensive health and safety protocols to specialised skills development, each participant received personalised training aimed at ensuring their success in their roles.

The impact of our collaboration became evident as Babcock successfully integrated over 150 trained PSOs into their workforce between 2022 and 2023. This achievement not only met immediate staffing needs but also laid the groundwork for sustained growth and development within the industry. Babcock plans to expand further, creating an additional 350 PSO roles over the next four years as part of a broader initiative to add 1,000 new jobs at their Rosyth site—with Fife College poised to provide essential specialist training.

The PSO programme's recognition at the recent Centre for Engineering, Education and Development (CeeD) Industry Awards underscored its effectiveness in driving transformative change. Winning the 'Transformational Change through Education & Skills' category validated our collaborative efforts in promoting industry innovation and addressing critical skills shortages.

Further accolades from the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) Sanctuary Awards and a nomination at The Herald's Higher Education Awards reinforced the programme's impact and our steadfast commitment to enhancing industry engagement and empowerment.

As Babcock continues to expand and innovate, Fife College remains dedicated to supporting them every step of the way. Our focus on delivering cost-effective, tailored training packages ensures that we can nurture talent and empower individuals to excel in their careers.

Our partnership with Babcock in pioneering the PSO programme not only meets vital industry needs but also serves as a testament to the power of collaboration in driving meaningful change. As the programme continues to succeed, it stands as a beacon of how education and industry partnerships can create a brighter future for all stakeholders.

For more details on the tailored training solutions Fife College offers, visit <http://www.business.fife.ac.uk>.

Building Stronger Futures in our Communities

Tracy Leavy, Director of Community Engagement & Curriculum and John Montgomery, Senior Curriculum Manager - Service Industries, Sport, and Community Learning, Glasgow Kelvin College



Here at Kelvin, our campuses are based in Springburn, Haghill, and Easterhouse in the north and northeast of Glasgow, some of the areas of greatest deprivation in the whole of Scotland.

Engaging with these communities and bringing the people who live here closer to education, qualifications and sustainable employment, is a critical part of the work we do at Kelvin.

Sometimes that means delivering education at outreach centres across the areas but often, it is also about bringing the community on campus.

The Youth & Community Hub was established by the College in 2021 to deliver a dynamic and engaging range of learning opportunities as well as to provide healthy activities to local residents two evenings per week.

In an area where 20% of residents have few or no qualifications and around a third are economically inactive (NOMIS 2021), northeast Glasgow is already significantly disadvantaged. We try to ensure that our provision is inclusive and addresses the needs of our local communities to improve access to skills, qualifications and learning opportunities.

Existing challenges were compounded further by the pandemic, which brought increased isolation and a lack of access to amenities and, as a renowned community anchor in northeast Glasgow, the College was deeply concerned about the impact of the pandemic on local residents' mental and physical health.

Coupled with the closure of partner venues, our ability to support community provision and widen access to opportunity was curtailed. To deliver on our ambitions and priorities of strengthening communities and building capacity, in early 2021 we worked with partner organisations and young residents in the Springburn area to identify the areas of need.

In October 2021, the College established the Springburn Youth and Community Hub which delivers health and lifestyle related activities to young people, adults and children all under one roof, creating a sense of ownership and engaging them in the learning process in a sustainable and social environment - a safe, welcoming space where people can make friends, learn and have fun.

In 2022, we built on the Hub's success with the launch of a Youth & Community Hub at our Easterhouse Campus. Each member of the Hub, regardless of age, is an enrolled student at Kelvin which often provides a real sense of pride and belonging. The College also provides help and support to Hub members who want to progress on to other college courses and to advance their learning.

The image shows the logo for the Youth and Community Hub, which includes the text 'YOUTH AND COMMUNITY HUB' in large, bold letters, with 'AND' in smaller letters between 'YOUTH' and 'COMMUNITY'. Below the text are several small images showing people engaged in various activities. To the right of the logo is the Glasgow Kelvin College logo. Below the logo is the text 'For families, adults and young people' and the email address 'communitylearning@glasgowkelvin.ac.uk'. To the right of the logo is a pink flyer for the Easterhouse Campus, which includes a location pin icon, the text 'Easterhouse Campus', 'Monday & Wednesday 5pm - 7.00pm', and 'come along and join us for food and activities'. At the bottom of the flyer, it says 'Children must be accompanied by an adult'.

The project is funded by the STV Children's Appeal and makes use of all the campus facilities when they would otherwise be unoccupied. These Hub activities take place in professional cookery kitchens, hair and beauty salons and gym halls.

The programme is run by college Teaching Staff, Community Learning & Development staff and Support Staff to create formal and informal learning opportunities. Many partners join us in the delivery, including community groups, Police Scotland, and local sport organisations. The College's advanced-level students also get involved in running the Hub's supervised activities which in turn provides these students with invaluable work and leadership experience.

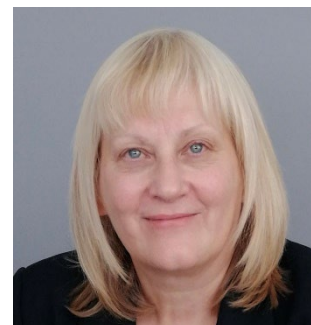
You can see more about the work of the Hub on the STV Children's Appeal programme, later this year.

Colleges have a Critical Role to Play in Tackling Child Poverty

Jackie Galbraith, Principal and CEO, West Lothian College

This is Challenge Poverty Week (#CPW24). From Monday 7 to Sunday 13 October, the campaign will highlight the injustice of poverty in Scotland and call for collective action to create solutions based on justice and compassion. According to the Scottish Government's Programme for Government 2024-25:

"Eradicating child poverty is the single greatest priority for this Government. No individual's opportunities should be dictated by the circumstances they are born into."



Priority calls for action of this year's Challenge Poverty campaign are:

- Everyone has enough income for a decent life
- Secure, safe and affordable housing
- Affordable, accessible and reliable transport
- Dignified access to good, healthy and sustainable food
- Sustainable funding over three years for third sector organisations that support people affected by poverty.

Tens of thousands of college students live in poverty. Many are legally children as they are under-18. Some are parents with children to support and the government's statement that "children's poverty is parent's poverty" is very relevant.

Students experiencing poverty often face additional challenges such as being care experienced, having a disability, experience of childhood trauma and poor mental health. Aware of the interconnectedness of these, West Lothian College adopted a whole-college, trauma-skilled approach to tackling student poverty five years ago and this is now being adopted by other colleges.

Colleges Mitigate Student Poverty

Student poverty is not new. But it is getting worse and student funding teams in colleges across the country deal with the effects of this every day.

Colleges understand poverty. Many who work in colleges have their own experience of adversity and the mitigations we put in place come from a place of empathy rather than sympathy. We know that the poverty experienced by our students and their families often gets in the way of their learning which is why we do so much to mitigate it. For example, West Lothian College has provided a free hot breakfast and lunch for students since 2018 after reports of learners fainting in class due to hunger. Most colleges now provide some form of free food to students.

Colleges help students who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness through rent arrears or other circumstances. We have a washing machine on campus for students in precarious housing situations who otherwise cannot afford to clean their clothes. We help students with transport and childcare costs. Through close working with local third sector organisations, our students can access free school uniforms for their children, as well as Christmas presents for children who would otherwise go without.

These mitigating efforts were recognised earlier this year when our Student Association won an NUS Scotland Award for how it works in partnership with college staff and external partners to tackle student poverty.

Colleges Provide Pathways Out of Poverty



But colleges do so much more than mitigate the immediate effects of students experiencing poverty. We help people build pathways out of poverty through education and skills, something I experienced myself over thirty years ago. Going to college in the mid-1980s, after a lengthy period of unemployment, interspersed with low-paid and insecure jobs, led me into better jobs and out of poverty.

Access to good jobs that offer at least the real living wage and living hours is essential for eliminating poverty. And people have a better chance of accessing good jobs if their skills are current and relevant. This is where colleges are so essential. Seeing parents, siblings and carers embarking on life-changing college courses is incredibly powerful for children living in households experiencing poverty.

Colleges educate practitioners with a deep understanding of how poverty impacts health, education and life chances. We are critical in developing the child, health and social care workforce that understands the harm that poverty, trauma and poor mental health causes children and adults.

Colleges as Fair Work Employers

As employers, colleges have embraced the Fair Work principles that are so important in tackling in-work poverty. We are Living Wage employers and offer our employees excellent terms and conditions, including generous employer contributions to their pensions. Importantly, we encourage our staff to maintain and enhance their skills through training and professional development opportunities.

Employee assistance programmes help staff facing financial, health and personal challenges throughout their career, and colleges offer an ever-expanding range of support for wellbeing. For example, at West Lothian College all staff have a wellbeing day each year in addition to their annual leave entitlement and we offer family friendly policies that include hybrid working and compressed hours.

Colleges have an important role to play in encouraging the businesses we work or contract with to adopt Fair Work principles like the real living wage.

Challenge Poverty

Returning to the priorities for this year's Challenge Poverty Week, students like anyone else living in poverty need a decent income. They need affordable and reliable public transport. They need somewhere decent to live and access to healthy, affordable food.

On the last point, West Lothian College will launch Pennies Pantry during Challenge Poverty Week to provide affordable food and hygiene products for students and staff (5 items for £1). Supported with food donations from West Lothian's Financial Inclusion Service, the pantry will be run by our assisted programmes students.

The government wants sustained and cohesive effort across local and national government, the third sector, businesses and communities to eliminate child poverty.

Colleges are responding to this call, and will continue to work in partnership with partners in our regions to strengthen our communities and enable success for all.

Supporting Rural Communities

Susan MacLean, Engagement Manager, UHI North, West and Hebrides



At UHI North, West and Hebrides, we care passionately about our regions and embody the UHI mission to have a transformational impact on our people, communities, and economies. We are rooted in the culture, location and economic needs of our communities, and are committed to providing flexible and supported learning from access level to degree and beyond, allowing people to live, work and study without leaving the communities they care about.

This was a major driver for our recent merger, which saw UHI North, West and Hebrides form on 1st August 2023. Communities are the beating heart of the Highlands and Islands, and we needed to create the capacity to better meet their needs. Our goal is to connect these communities to create a more equitable experience for students across the region, increase access to learning opportunities, and provide a platform for growth to enable us to realise the opportunities associated with energy, renewables, and aquaculture, to name but a few.

With 19 campuses and centres in towns and villages across the North and West Highlands, Skye and Outer Hebrides – an area larger than Wales - plus an online community spanning the UK and beyond, our communities are diverse. They face challenges associated with depopulation, transport and accommodation, but they also have huge opportunities, optimism and people passionate about making a difference.

A recent report by Highlands and Islands Enterprise found an increasing number of young people want to live and work in the region. Almost 70% surveyed agreed that people who stay are lucky to be able to work or study locally.

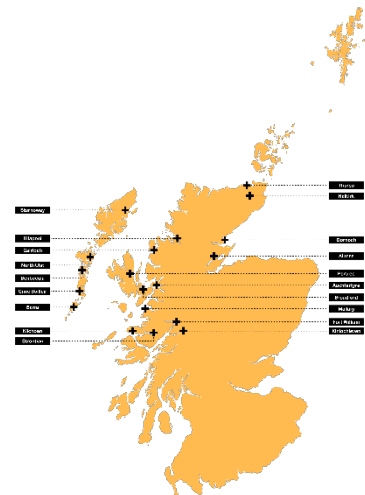
That's key for us – we need to make sure we get it right for these people.

So, how does a college like ours stay connected with such diverse communities?



It starts with our local staff, campuses and centres, which are deeply immersed in their communities. Traditional campuses in places like Fort William, Stornoway, and Thurso are complemented by smaller centres in community spaces like secondary schools, museums, community centres, and even harbours. These locations provide safe and supportive places for all our students to study, regardless of their mode of study.

Our staff know their communities, they live there, they work there, and they contribute to their success. It's not just about being the 'face of the college' locally, it's about being part of the fabric of these communities. Many staff sit on community councils, volunteer for local organisations, or participate in local groups. Our staff are well-known and it's not unusual for them to be approached while their doing their weekly food shop. They engage with local schools, speak to employers, carry out surveys, and build relationships with local groups.



These staff are a vital cog in what makes UHI North, West and Hebrides work. Their insight informs our thinking on curriculum, enterprise and engagement activity, ensuring we have an offer that meets community needs. This can range from local leisure programmes tackling loneliness to developing training courses for businesses or launching a new full-time programme. We combine local intelligence with regional and sector-wide insights to ensure we remain responsive to opportunities that benefit our communities.

Applied research in our communities is also helping to address local, national and international challenges. Our research on peatland science helped The Flow Country, an expansive blanket bog spanning Caithness and Sutherland, secure UNESCO World Heritage Site status. The area is leading research on climate change and biodiversity loss and has the potential to create new skills and job opportunities linked to the land and sustainable tourism and hospitality.

But above all this, our real strength lies in our personalised approach to learning. We're proud to be providing people with access to learning at all levels, from senior phase courses through to access level programmes, practical, vocational training, through to degree and beyond, in their local communities. They can choose from face-to-face, practical study in our campuses and centres, work-based study, or online via our virtual classroom, as well as full-time and part-time options.

This flexibility – along with a high level of support – is critical for a college like us, where many of our students combine study with work, family, or other commitments. We also know things like childcare, transport and accommodation can be barriers in our communities, so we want to make it as easy as possible for people to study.

I recently met Emma, from Thurso, an SVQ3 hairdressing student. After health issues, we helped her back into study by tailoring the programme to suit her. She came in one day a week, gradually building up her days and tailoring the content to suit her needs. She said this flexible, individually tailored approach was the only reason she succeeded.

In another example, Charlotte, from Skye, completed her Honours Degree in Energy Engineering by studying online and using our local centre in Portree. During her studies, she did an internship that led to a graduate position with SSE, enabling her to remain in the Highlands and Islands to start her career.

Our personalised approach builds our students' confidence and enables them to achieve more than they ever thought possible when they first joined us. By supporting and empowering our students in this way, we create a close-knit college and university community which will always be at the heart of what makes UHI truly special.

Levelling Up Esports Education in Scotland

Laura Louch, Digital Curriculum Project Leader, Dundee and Angus College

The global esports industry has experienced explosive growth in recent years, evolving from a niche interest into an industry sector with many career opportunities. At the forefront of this transformation, Dundee & Angus College is setting the benchmark for innovation and inclusivity in esports education. As the first institution in Scotland to offer a degree-level qualification in esports, validated by the University of West London, Dundee & Angus is providing students with a complete understanding of the esports landscape.



The programme, which goes beyond traditional gaming, includes event management, live production, broadcasting, sports psychology, and nutrition. Despite its rapid growth, the sector remains a predominantly young and male-dominated profession, with only 30% of the industry being female. Recognising the need for diversity and the demand for skilled professionals, Dundee & Angus College has created innovative pathways that not only teach the skills of competitive gaming but also open doors to the broader esports landscape.

Building a Future-Ready Workforce



The degree-level qualification equips students with a versatile skill set tailored to meet the diverse needs of the esports industry. As esports continues to expand, so too does the demand for skilled professionals who can cover all aspects of the esports industry, including event management, content creation, live production, sports psychology, nutrition and more. By covering a wide range of disciplines, the curriculum ensures that graduates are not only ready for the technical aspects of esports but are also

prepared for careers that support and drive the industry forward.

Teaching the programme alongside industry professionals, Dundee & Angus have employed current international gamer, Adam Ryan onto the teaching staff. Adam is committed to addressing the importance of mental health and well-being in esports and preparing students for the varied and evolving roles that esports offer beyond the competitive gaming element.

Driving Inclusivity and Equality in Esports

To ensure that our esports offering is open to everyone from all ages, backgrounds and genders Dundee & Angus College launched a variety of programmes to promote inclusivity and diversity. Initiatives like our weekly esports Kids Club attract more than 100 young people aged 8 to 14 years to provide our young gamers with structured guidance and support from ECA certified youth esports coaches. By breaking down barriers and providing early access to esports in supportive environments we



ensure that young people are provided with a balance of screen time and physical activity. We have also partnered up with rural schools to provide them with the equipment to offer esports skills and development within their learning and teaching.

We have created our own After School esports Girls Club to provide a safe and supportive environment for girls to build their skills and confidence in the gaming world. Providing young girls with the opportunity to develop a range of skills in the creative and digital aspects of esports, from gameplay and tactics to designing team logos and merchandise these programmes have fostered inclusivity and encouraged young people from all backgrounds to explore opportunities within esports.

One of the most significant challenges in esports is the underrepresentation of women and other marginalised groups, with women making up only 30% of the industry. To promote inclusivity within the industry we hosted 'The Levelling Up Debate: Esports for Everyone' panel discussion with industry leaders such as Lizzie Spires, Emma Rose, John Jackson, and Emma Williamson to highlight the vital contributions of women in esports and address the barriers they face. By creating spaces for dialogue and showcasing diverse role models, as well as the vital contributions of women in esports we have challenged typical stereotypes and inspired a new generation to pursue careers in esports, regardless of gender or background.

Industry Collaboration and Real-World Impact



The success of Dundee & Angus College's esports education is built on strong partnerships with leading industry players like Corsair, Ninja Kiwi, and eRena. These collaborations have provided our students with invaluable resources, expertise, and real-world insights that enhance their learning experience. Our state-of-the-art facilities, including our esports arena, two industry-standard tournament rooms, a broadcasting studio and a recording booth are designed to mirror professional esports environments,

giving students hands-on learning experiences with cutting-edge technology that simulates the real-world esports industry. This connection between education and industry ensures that graduates are not only well-trained but also highly employable in the fast-evolving esports landscape.

These industry partnerships also play a crucial role in curriculum development, ensuring that the content remains relevant and aligned with current industry standards. By working closely with these partners, the programme provides students with opportunities to engage with live projects, internships, and networking events that can lead directly to employment.

Creating a Community of Esports Enthusiasts

Beyond academic and technical training, Dundee & Angus College has a strong focus on building a community around esports. The launch of our very own competitive team and esports society has created a vibrant environment where students can engage with esports at all levels, whether they aim to compete professionally or simply enjoy the friendship that comes with gaming. Allowing all members of our College community to come together with a mutual interest in esports, regardless of ability or background, and promoting a culture of collaboration, inclusivity and a shared passion for esports.



Students participating in the competitive team have already made a mark, competing in high-profile tournaments with major industry brands, such as Battle for Scotland and Dundee Duel which were hosted in our specialist studios at Gardyne. The team have had the chance to participate in a number of showcase events with Corsair, Kitplus and live on BBC Children in Need. The team currently participates across a number of game genres such as Rocketleague, League of Legends, Counterstrike and FIFA.

Setting a New Standard for Esports Education

As the esports industry continues to grow, educational programmes that emphasise inclusivity, skills development, and industry alignment are setting new standards. By addressing the needs of a rapidly evolving sector and creating opportunities for underrepresented groups, these initiatives are making a profound impact on the esports landscape.

This approach is not just about filling seats in classrooms; it's about shaping the future of esports by developing a diverse, skilled, and forward-thinking workforce. Through innovative education and strategic partnerships, Dundee & Angus College is not only preparing students for the careers of today but also inspiring the next generation of leaders in the esports industry.

Meeting the Demands of an Advancing Regional Economy

Professor Chris O'Neil, Principal and Chief Executive, UHI Inverness

I like to use the analogy of a three-legged stool when explaining the unique tertiary education we offer at UHI Inverness. We give each of the three elements – higher education, further education and apprenticeships – equal significance and weight, ensuring a balance of flexible and relevant study, work-based learning, underpinned by our world leading, innovative research. That stable blend produces a diverse and skilled workforce with valuable industry knowledge that is crucial in supporting the economic development of the rural and semi-rural communities we serve.



In achieving that balance, we have had to understand who we are; by that I mean recognising and meeting the needs of our region, our employers, our apprentices and students. The nature of tertiary education relies on a dynamic partnership with employers and community partners, and we are proud of the collaborations we have forged as we have adopted more work-based learning and practical assessments in our curriculum.

We engage with more than 800 employers and industry bodies, and those relationships have resulted in a significant rise in the number of Graduate Apprentices and Modern Apprentices trained at our campuses. Our Graduate Apprentices numbers have risen from just 13 students in 2020 to well over 100 in 2024 and our own Modern Apprenticeships have increased year on year to over 700.

Partnerships with industry and sector partners have led to the development of innovative new courses to meet national skills demands. This has included a new Modern Apprenticeship in Building Standards and the CECA Scotland Academy Civil Engineering Operations Course, to provide a new talent pipeline to replace an aging workforce in civil engineering.

Employers and businesses have supported us in so many ways, and we couldn't deliver training to the high standard that we do without their input. Sponsorship from industry partnerships has enabled us to update our renewables training centre to upskill existing practitioners and train apprentices in the emerging sustainable heating technologies.

The Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport promises to create thousands of jobs and attract billions of pounds in investment, offering enhanced opportunities for our graduates and apprentices. UHI is a Freeport Partner, and we are playing a full role in building the workforce and attracting new talent by continuing to transform our curriculum offer and establishing links with organisations across the region and beyond.

Our approach to the freeport reflects our overall response to industry needs and the demands of an advancing regional economy - a focus on vital industry partnerships and curriculum innovations.

Meta Performance Tracker: Supporting Individual Growth

Martin Timoney, Curriculum and Quality Leader, Education, Training and Professional Enhancement Department, West College Scotland

At West College Scotland, we recognise that each student's journey is unique. Meta Performance Tracker is a tool designed to see the person first, allowing students to reflect on their skills, strengths, and challenges. By focusing on the individual, this system helps students understand their development in a way that aligns with their personal and academic goals.



A Holistic Approach to Student Support

Meta Performance Tracker is designed to help students reflect on who they are, their progress, and their aspirations. It supports a wide range of learning styles and provides students with a clear picture of their growth across both academic and personal areas. The system captures the full scope of their achievements—from practical skills in the classroom to personal development in areas such as teamwork and leadership.

The goal is to give students a comprehensive view of their progress so they can make informed decisions about their learning journey. Whether it's excelling in a project or identifying areas for improvement, Meta Performance Tracker helps students stay engaged and in control of their development.

Dynamic, Real-Time Feedback and Interaction

The dynamic nature of Meta Performance Tracker means that students have immediate access to their progress. They can track their learning in real-time and adjust their approach based on what they see. This flexibility allows them to stay proactive and responsive to their own needs.

Staff are equally engaged in this process, offering regular feedback and support. Lecturers and mentors use the system to provide timely, relevant support, creating a strong two-way dialogue with students. This interaction makes the learning experience more fluid and adaptable, ensuring that students receive the right support at the right time. It also fosters a deeper connection between students and staff, enhancing the overall educational experience.

Seeing the Person First

Meta Performance Tracker emphasises the person behind the performance. It isn't just about measuring academic results; it's about understanding how students grow and develop across different areas of life. The system encourages students to reflect on their learning and personal growth, helping them build a deeper sense of self-awareness and personal discovery. By focusing on the individual, the system recognises that every student has unique strengths and challenges. Whether it's improving technical skills or building confidence in communication, Meta Performance Tracker gives students the tools to navigate their own paths to success. This personalised approach makes students feel seen and supported, ensuring their learning experience is as meaningful as it is productive.

A System Built on Relationships



The strength of Meta Performance Tracker lies in the relationships it fosters between students and staff. Regular interaction and opportunity to articulate thoughts, feelings and emotions and to express learning requirements, creates an environment where students feel supported and more connected to their lecturers. Staff play an active role in helping students set goals and achieve them, making sure that each student feels guided throughout their journey.

This connection ensures that the system adapts to the needs of the student, rather than expecting the student to fit into a predefined and predetermined set of criteria. It's about creating an evolving learning experience that responds to each student's individual growth. By supporting students in both academic and personal development, the system strengthens the bonds between students and staff, making learning a collaborative and engaging process.

Conclusion: A Personalised, Dynamic Path to Success

Meta Performance Tracker at West College Scotland is built around the student. By offering real-time feedback, fostering reflection, and creating meaningful relationships between students and staff, it provides a dynamic and personalised path to growth. The system empowers students to take control of their learning, preparing them for both academic success and life beyond college.

Through Meta Performance Tracker, students are given the tools to understand their strengths, overcome challenges, and actively shape their futures. It fosters growth, builds confidence, and helps students develop the skills they need to succeed in a world that's constantly evolving. This system isn't just about academic achievements—it's about supporting students as they discover their potential and take the next steps on their unique journeys.

Innovation Centre for Sustainable Development

Stella McManus, Principal, South Lanarkshire College

Last month I was delighted to welcome a number of guests to South Lanarkshire College to launch the Innovation Centre for Sustainable Development. In writing this blog today, I want to unpack a little around why this Centre will be good for South Lanarkshire College, and good for our partners, stakeholders and for employers in the Glasgow region.



I'm not a lover of jargon, so the way I explain innovation is that it creates something new and useful – whether that's innovation in terms of a new service, a new product, or a new way of doing business. Crucially for my college, hosting the Innovation Centre for Sustainable Development is in fact bringing two issues together which are facing Scotland at the moment, helping businesses to innovate alongside taking steps to tackle the climate emergency in practical and meaningful ways like decarbonisation.

The Innovation Centre for Sustainable Development is the sixth Centre of Innovation to be hosted by a college across the west Central Belt. The College Local Innovation Centre (CLIC) project arose due through the Colleges Partnership West Group, which consists of South Lanarkshire College, New College Lanarkshire, Glasgow Kelvin College, Glasgow Clyde College, City of Glasgow College and West College Scotland.

This is an informal group which allows these six colleges, focus on identified priorities within the Glasgow City Region which includes health, a just transition to a sustainable future, developing equality – tackling poverty and productivity. The remit of the group seeks to facilitate effective and productive collaboration among Principals and their college management teams with a view to identifying, seeking out and pursuing opportunities jointly, where a partnership approach is likely to secure optimal outcomes with a focus on operational efficiency and sustainability; improved socioeconomic outcomes; and environmental sustainability.

In terms of activity, at the launch we heard from innovative businesses that the College has already developed solutions for. Our in-house experts also explained the culture of innovation that can help businesses face the future with confidence.

What does innovation actually look like when it is being delivered by the College? It starts with partnership and a deep understanding of the problem we are collectively trying to solve, under the banner of sustainable development and sustainable business practices. There are then a really wide range of services the Centre can offer, including technical mentoring, upskilling, access to funding and fully funded support and bespoke work on innovation audits, access to technical experts, and opportunities to collaborate. Some businesses we already work with are accessing innovation support with 2D and 3D CAD, heat pump and solar installation, thermal imaging, external and internal wall treatment and drone technology. All of these technologies are helping to support sustainable operations for businesses – innovation is in many cases assisting businesses to future-proof so they can concentrate on growth.

The South Lanarkshire College campus incorporates our Low Carbon House and Outstanding BREAAAM building, both of which have received awards from the Alliance for Sustainability Leadership in Education. With a continuous programme of technological adaptations underway for a “greener” campus, the College is the embodiment of sustainable development with a transition journey to net zero by 2040.



The event also allowed participants to find out about the fully funded support available through the College Local Innovation Centres (CLIC) project, a 12-month pilot project funded by the Innovate UK Further Education Innovation Fund, which is dedicated to driving digital innovation and productivity across the region.

This is an incredibly exciting project to be part of. I'm a firm believer that innovation starts with collaboration and the CLIC initiative presents the perfect platform to work with our local business community, offering opportunities to educate, grow, upskill and expand to increase productivity.

It was fantastic to see such support from our exhibitors on the day, KTP Centre, Hub South West Scotland, South Lanarkshire Council and Business Gateway Lanarkshire.

We are unashamedly ambitious around innovation. Alongside our partner Colleges, the aim is to engage with more than 200 businesses across Glasgow, Inverclyde, North and South Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire and East Renfrewshire, and West Dunbartonshire.

To find out more about the College Local Innovation Centres (CLIC) project and all six Innovation Centres, please visit the [CLIC website](#).

Relationships and Partnerships as the basis of Student Support

Dr Kirsty Adamson, Depute Principal, Newbattle Abbey College



When I joined Newbattle Abbey College as Depute Principal in October 2022, I quickly understood why people often call it a “special place.” Every new student and visitor is struck by the atmosphere here, frequently responding with, “Wow” or “This is incredible.” One student described it perfectly: “It’s like we get to go to college in a mixture of Downton Abbey and Hogwarts!”

Part of that magic comes from our remarkable setting. The College’s 125-acre estate was originally the site of a Cistercian Abbey, founded in 1140. This was replaced after the Reformation with the stately home of the Marquis of Lothian. Left in trust in 1937 to serve as an adult education college, Newbattle operates as a specialist institution outside Scotland’s regional college structure. While 52% of our funding comes from the Scottish Funding Council, the remainder is generated through diverse income streams reinvested into our curriculum and infrastructure to support our mission.

Newbattle’s unique environment fosters strong, supportive relationships between students and staff across all departments, from catering and housekeeping to senior management. Our approach is anchored in two principles: relationship-building and partnerships. In our small, close-knit community, we know our students well, sharing daily (free) lunches that create trust and openness. One student remarked, “The cleaners, the reception, the catering team, the Senior Management Team—everybody makes the whole college a welcoming and supportive place.”

With over 80% of our small student cohort declaring a disability and with 16% from care-experienced backgrounds, it’s really important that we equip all of our staff with the skills to create a positive environment – and that’s where our partnerships are crucial. Collaborating with Who Cares? Scotland and Women’s Aid, we developed bespoke training to ensure all our staff have the knowledge and skills to support students who have experienced care, trauma or domestic abuse. The success of this approach is evidenced in student feedback, with student comments such as, “The support is incredible” and “It’s been life-changing!”



Our Student Wellbeing and Support team works closely with lecturers, tailoring one-to-one support to meet the often complex needs of our students. For example, when a student displayed disruptive behaviour in class, the team quickly identified that it stemmed from medication changes and personal challenges. Within minutes, they collaborated to support the student, reassure him about his progress, and put a plan in place to support his return to learning. Whole-college adjustments like consistent start times and “base” classrooms have also reduced anxiety, especially for neurodivergent students.

The College extends its nurturing approach far beyond its 'core' curriculum. Through our Forest College initiative, we deliver Prescribe Nature programmes to some of the most disadvantaged individuals in our wider community. A collaboration with Women's Aid led to the creation of a therapeutic healing garden within our grounds, providing participants with a safe space to recover from trauma while developing practical and transferable skills. Additionally, we have leveraged our Adult Achievement Awards to design and deliver a successful programme in partnership with Mayfield and Easthouses Youth 2000 (Y2K) Project. This co-designed initiative supports young people over 16 who have faced severely disrupted school experiences, helping them take their next steps into adulthood. Key to this programme is the deep trust between the young people and Y2K staff, which often represents one of the few stable adult relationships these young people have known. The College is carefully woven into this thread of trust, with our skilled staff playing a vital role in supporting these transitions.

The College also supports student parents, co-creating and co-delivering programmes that have opened crucial new pathways into education for parents and carers. One of our students, Lee Ryan, participated in one of our Prescribe Nature programmes a few years ago as a single parent. At that time, in Lee's own words, "I wasn't able to get out of the front door other than to take my bairn to school. I'd come home and go straight back to bed. That's all I could do. I just wasn't in a place where I could let the world in, I needed to shut it all out."



Lee went on to enrol on our NC Rural Skills course, during which she founded an organisation to support parents. She then progressed to our SWAP Arts and Humanities course the next year, and is now on our Associate Degree programme (in partnership with Queen Margaret University) and is our current Student President. Lee's story is a powerful testament to her resilience and determination, and also to the pathways and support that the College provides.

The roots of Newbattle Abbey College run deep into the community creating pathways into formal education that are inclusive, supportive, and transformative. Our relationships and partnerships—with our students, our team, and our wider community—enable us to provide holistic, person-centered support in an environment that is truly unique.

Creating a Sustainable Future for Environmental Archaeology

Professor Ingrid Mainland, UHI Archaeology Institute, UHI Orkney

The UHI Archaeology Institute is a teaching and research organisation dedicated to advancing our understanding of the historic environment through the creation, interpretation and dissemination of archaeological knowledge.

Founded in 2015, the institute provides a locus for innovative research, university education and lifelong learning in outstanding heritage environments.

Based at UHI Orkney, the institute also has research and teaching staff in Shetland and the Western Isles.

The Institute recently secured £1.6 million funding to establish a world-class centre for environmental archaeology in Orkney.

The Archaeology and Environment Science (AEonS) project is in partnership with Orkney Museums, Historic Environment Scotland (HES), Glasgow University, Archaeology Scotland, the Scotland's Coastal Archaeology and the Problem of Erosion (SCAPE) team based at St Andrew's University, and the University of Southampton.



The facility will include specialist environmental archaeology laboratories, allowing the scientific study of plant and animal remains, together with ancient soils and sediments fundamental to understanding the past. It will also host new imaging equipment for creating digital records of archaeological artefacts.

The centre will enable partners, visiting researchers, museums, commercial units, community groups, and UHI students access to a central research hub.

It will be supported by a mobile laboratory and use of the HES Engine Shed facility in Stirling that will enhance the delivery of projects across the Highlands and Islands and more widely through Scotland. The mobile laboratory will be available for outreach events hosted by community groups and schools as well as to support research fieldwork across Scotland.

Environmental archaeology is recognised as being an important discipline, not only in understanding the effects of natural environmental changes and human impact in the past but also in looking forward through researching subjects such as biodiversity change, sustainability, economic strategies, rewilding and futureproofing natural resources. This Orkney-based environmental research has true potential for global reach.

Unfortunately, across the UK expertise and facilities for environmental archaeology research are diminishing. Gaps in capacity are emerging at national and regional scales particularly in specialisms, such as soil science, zooarchaeology and archaeobotany, which may lead to generational gaps in these specialisms and a national inability to take such research forward in the future.

The AEonS facility and partnership has been established to meet these needs and ensure that skills gaps and shortages are met to provide a sustainable future for Scotland in Environmental Archaeology.



Responding to Student Needs

Wendy McColl, Head of Student Experience, Ayrshire College



Equipping students with the skills to identify their own solutions and support mechanisms is a vital yet often undervalued aspect of their overall learning experience. Investing time in these areas can have long-lasting and far-reaching consequences throughout a student's life, stretching beyond education and into the world of work.

Ayrshire College prides itself on being an inclusive and trauma-informed college; dedicated to listening to and empowering our students. We are committed to driving change and delivering outstanding student experiences. Yet the impact of poor mental health and wellbeing on our student population cannot be underestimated.

Poor mental health reporting from adolescents in Scotland is on the rise with 15% of 16 to 24-year-old males and 20% females reporting a mental health condition in the 2022 Census. This picture takes in a host of contributing factors such as the cost-of-living crisis, the continued legacy of the pandemic and increasingly overstretched mental health services. It is present in a myriad of ways in a college setting, including absenteeism, poor concentration, falling behind on coursework, and disruptive behaviour.

Ayrshire College takes pride in being flexible, agile and trauma-informed in our response to changes in student needs. We have developed and invested in our workforce with innovative training, processes and collaborative partnerships. These ensure students have easy access to professional services and the most up-to-date information that best supports their mental health and wellbeing.

Our work in this area has also been influenced by the Student Mental Health Action Plan, which was launched by the Scottish Government in September 2024 as a roadmap for enhancing student mental health and wellbeing.

Identifying Wellbeing Needs

One area of priority was identified through our student safeguarding process. Safeguarding concerns were increasing daily, which was creating a worrying picture. The Student Experience Team investigated further to determine how best to offer the right support to our students. It was noted that, in many cases, the concerns raised were not directly related to safeguarding issues and more to supporting mental health and wellbeing needs.

In response to these findings, an Engagement & Wellbeing Team was established to deliver a more specialised style of support aimed at early intervention and the promotion of positive mental and physical health and wellbeing.

We looked at the College infrastructure and at formats that would work across the institution to enable greater internal collaboration and embed this new supportive practice. After further investigation and consultation with staff and students, we devised a new process focusing on identifying, supporting, signposting, raising awareness, strengthening resilience and, most importantly, empowering our students.

Personalised and Inclusive Approaches

The first stage of this was the development of a Wellbeing Concern form, a new reporting tool that allows staff to log any mental health and wellbeing issues impacting on students. We then needed some form of communication across our curriculum teams and other support services, which would allow them to identify and support students. This became our Wellbeing Plan, which captures the student's voice in relation to their mental health and wellbeing support needs.

The Wellbeing Plan was created via a co-design process. We listened to students, discussed their needs and collaborated with them to identify partners, strategies and tools to support and develop independence.

Working with our Business Intelligence and Information System colleagues we were able to seamlessly integrate this with existing Education Support processes to create a comprehensive support network. Students have access to their Wellbeing Plan to allow them to revisit the information at times of need. They can also download the Plan and take it with them when they progress into employment or higher education.



Empowering Students and Building a Resilient Workforce

Working with our students, external partners and local employers as a partner of choice, we aim to support our local communities and the regional economy and national economy by enabling the future through building a highly skilled and resilient workforce.

Creating and Shaping the Next Generation of Gaelic Speakers

Dr Gillian Rothach, Principal, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig

The landscape of Gaelic is changing. You've only to look at the 2022 census data to see that the language is fluctuating in unexpected areas. As the National Centre for Gaelic Language and Culture, we make it our aim to understand these trends and support the Gaelic language in this ever-changing climate.

Yet, despite this shifting landscape full of both opportunities and challenges, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig's aim has remained the same since we began in 1972. Our mission is to promote the growth and use of Gaelic in Scotland through our learning and cultural opportunities, with a wider aim to promote Gaelic language at a global level.



How do we do this? Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is the only place in the world where you can get your entire education through the medium of Gaelic. From Gaelic immersion years to undergraduate degrees, to postgraduate studies – all our courses are taught through Gaelic, creating a unique language-rich campus unrivalled by any other institution in the world.

Our activity aligns with the Gaelic National Language Plan (2023 – 2028) which, at the heart of its commitments, echoes the shared core aim to increase the number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland.



Through short courses (delivered both online and on campus), summer schools, music courses, and immersion years, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig gives Gaelic learners a clear pathway to fluency in the language.

For fluent Gaelic speakers, our degrees, validated by UHI, offer career pathways to the world of work, be that in language development, education, or cultural industries. Many of our Alumni are key influential figures within the Gaelic world, positively impacting policy, culture, and contributing directly to the growth of Gaelic. Similarly, our world-leading research provides insights into the status of the language, enabling progressive ways of thinking about Gaelic whilst positioning it within global conversations surrounding minoritised languages and policy. Our aim is not just to increase and support Gaelic speakers, but to understand and actively support the growth of Gaelic use within Scotland.

This is why – at the heart of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig – we have built a community where Gaelic language and culture permeates day to day life. Our kitchen staff, the bar team, our sports clubs, and management teams conduct their day-to-day activity in Gaelic. This immersive experience extends out with the campus, and Gaelic language and culture is very much part of everyday life in Sleat and Skye.

As the Scottish Languages Bill approaches parliament and promises a new commitment to the Gaelic language, culture, and communities, we're reflecting on our role within Gaelic's future. We will continue to support the next generation of Gaelic speakers through our courses and community, whilst also looking at innovative ways to promote and grow the language.

However, for anyone reading this article and thinking... where do I start? How do I become a part of Gaelic's future? How do I become fluent? The answer is this... come to Sabhal Mòr Ostaig!



Shaping the Future of UHI Shetland

Professor Jane Lewis, Principal and CEO, UHI Shetland



In a few short weeks, the Scottish Parliament will hear from Ministers on their plans for funding each part of the public sector in 2025/26. Colleges as part of the Education and Skills portfolio will be watching carefully to understand the level of investment that is available. Colleges Scotland have recently made a compelling case in a Budget Submission on behalf of all 24 colleges in Scotland which, if the investment was granted, would bring some stability to the college sector. Audit Scotland in its most recent college finance report show there has been a real

terms 17% cut in college investment since 2021/22 – a very stark drop.

I want to use this article to give some examples of the really challenging choices and decisions which have come to colleges like UHI Shetland because of falling funding. Going into the new academic year, which began just a few weeks ago, our financial situation continues to be challenging, and we are still working to put the college on a sustainable footing.

Additionally in this period there have been rises in the cost of living, not least for the college an increase in energy costs – non-domestic energy costs having risen by 66% across the period 2021 to 2024. Substantial operational costs for our college are incurred for both our campuses in Shetland. Maintenance, heating, lighting, rent, and other costs amount to some £250,000 per year for our Scalloway Campus and for Lerwick some £340,000 per year. Usage surveys of our teaching spaces show that both campuses are underutilised compared to sector norms.

Both ageing campuses will need substantial maintenance input in the coming years as well as being in need of upgrade and improvement, notably to meet our Net Zero commitments. The Scottish Funding Council are working through an overarching Infrastructure plan for the college sector which should, hopefully, give a direction of travel in terms of our estates and spaces.

Faced with these challenges, the College Board has made the decision to reduce the college to one campus and to explore the feasibility of this move being to Scalloway. This will preserve our limited student accommodation, access to the sea and specialist engineering and laboratory facilities. Other facilities and teaching spaces will need to be accommodated on the Scalloway site, but there are unused buildings on the campus that we would hope to repurpose to accommodate Shetland's training and learning needs for the future.

We are also keen to ensure some Lerwick based provision. Gremista, where the Lerwick Campus is currently situated, is not easily accessible, whereas a base in the heart of Lerwick would be beneficial for students and the local economy. We will be working with stakeholders such as the Shetland Islands Council to look for a suitable space. We have started meetings with staff and students to establish our future needs. Over the coming year we will consult further with staff, students, and our stakeholders to develop plans for change. We anticipate these changes will likely take some 3-4 years to implement to see a single campus for UHI Shetland come to fruition.

Our aim is a modern, welcoming and campus, meeting the future needs of a tertiary college for Shetland, students, and staff, providing the education needed to support industries in the isles. We hope our current and future students, staff, stakeholders, and the community will engage with us over the coming year to help us shape the future of UHI Shetland.

In essence, while the financial landscape is extremely challenging, UHI Shetland is utilising every opportunity to cement the future of the college for this generation, and the next. Sustainable investment from the upcoming Budget, and the SFC Infrastructure plan, is essential to help us achieve this goal.