Item 17
For Noting

GLASGOW KELVIN COLLEGE

Learning and Teaching Committee – 23rd November 2022

Mixed Methods Research on the Perceptions, Strengths and Weaknesses of a College Education

Report by Vice Principal Curriculum and Quality Enhancement

1. Introduction

Diffley Partnership was commissioned by the College Development Network to conduct primary research on the Scottish public's perceptions of colleges, and to identify ways to boost the profile and attractiveness of the sector. The attached report provides the results of this research which will used to inform our marketing of college opportunities.

2. Body of the report and impact on the College

As outlined in the attached report, the research employed a mixed-methods approach, comprising a national survey and a series of focus groups and interviews with relevant audiences. It highlights key factors differing age groups take into account when choosing to study at a college, with choice of courses and flexibility key assets of the college sector. The report also suggests that clearer information and support on student funding may help increase application levels.

3. Resource Implications

There are no resource implications arising directly from this report.

4. Impact on Students

The attached report will help the College to better understand and respond to student needs.

5. Equalities

There are no equality implications arising directly from this report.

6. Risk and Assurance

The College is currently investing in a new website which will support more effective marketing of our courses. No specific risks are identified by this report.

7. Data Protection

There are no data protection implications arising directly from this report.

8. Recommendations

Members are recommended to:

i. note the contents of the report and its appendix.

9. Further Information

Members can obtain additional information on the contents of this report from Robin Ashton, Vice Principal Curriculum and Quality Enhancement.

Glasgow Kelvin College
RA
11/11/2022

Appendix

Choose College

cdn College Development Network

Mixed Methods Research on the Perceptions, Strengths and Weaknesses of a College Education

Report by The Diffley Partnership for the CDN Marketing and Communications Network

June 2022

Choose College

cdn College Development Network

Contents

Contents 1

Background and methodology 3

- Background 3
- Methodology 3
- Presentation and interpretation of findings 4
- Report structure 5

Executive Summary 6

Knowledge of the College Sector 7

- Association of colleges with certain qualifications 9
- Association of colleges with modes and content of teaching 10

Who and What are College for? 11

Perceptions and Favourability 14

- Favourability towards aspects of a college education 15

Barriers to a college education 16

- Barriers to a college education 19

Strengths 20

- Young people 20
- Parents of High School age pupils 21
- Prospective adult returners 21
  - Strengths of the college sector 22
- Qualitative insights 23

Decision-Making Factors 27

- Young people 27
- Parents of high school pupils 27
- Prospective adult returners 28

Top factors 29
Assets and Importance 30
Assets and their importance 31
Sources of Information 32
Trusted sources of information 34
Conclusions and implications 35

Background and methodology

Background

Diffley Partnership was commissioned by the College Development Network to conduct primary research on the Scottish public's perceptions of colleges, and to identify ways to boost the profile and attractiveness of the sector. As well as understanding the broad views as a whole, the research focusses on the views and perceptions of young people, parents of teenage children and adults considering a return to education in some form. The research has covered gauging the perceptions, strengths, (perceived) weaknesses of the sector, and understanding the public's motivations and influences relating to education.

Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, comprising a national survey and a series of focus groups and interviews with relevant audiences.

The survey was designed by Diffley Partnership with input of the College Development Network, and invitations were issued through the *ScotPulse* online panel to a sample of the adult (16+) population in Scotland. Fieldwork was conducted between 27th October – 1st November 2021, and a total of 2,014 responses were received. Results have been weighted to the Scottish population by age and sex.

The qualitative research included focus groups of current senior-phase pupils, parents of senior-phase pupils, and senior-phase teachers. Interviews were also conducted with representatives of businesses and employers. These were conducted following the quantitative component to provide further depth and detail.

This report summarises the findings of the research to date relating to educational opinions and choices.

Presentation and interpretation of findings

The report summarises the main findings of the research, including relevant distinctions between demographic groups and between audiences where valuable. We outline the survey results both overall and with regards to our three groups of interest: namely, young people (aged 16-26), parents of high school-aged children (12-17), and people considering retraining and/or returning to education. The focus groups saw a number of consistent themes emerge across the different audiences of interest.

Report structure

The report is structured around headings that reflect the main facets of the research, and the predominant aspects of enquiry; namely, the public's perceptions of colleges, the relative strengths of the sector, and the barriers people report, among others.

We begin by gauging understanding and associations of the college sector, then general perceptions and favourability towards aspects of a college education. This is followed by the barriers people may face to a college education, the strengths of the sector, and the factors that influence their decisions. We then compare the strength and importance of various aspects of a college education to identify areas that might successfully sway new people towards choosing a college education. We briefly summarise the sources of information that people use when making educational decisions, and conclude with some brief reflections on the findings, their implications, and the next steps of the research.

Throughout the report, we outline the findings from our national survey and complement this with qualitative insights from our focus groups and interviews where this adds depth or detail.

Executive summary

- The public, and parents of high school-aged children especially, hold broadly positive impressions of the college sector.
- The flexibility and range of courses and qualifications, as well as the practical skills and experience available through a college education are seen as especial strengths. These are also important considerations for people when making educational decisions.
- College can be broadly seen as the more accessible and low-risk option compared to university: the options to work alongside studying and live at home are appealing, and – in contrast to university – people can gain qualifications incrementally even if they end up withdrawing earlier than expected.
- College is widely seen as a valuable stepping stone – pedagogically and personally – between school and university, especially adept at building the confidence of people who may have struggled in educational environments previously.
- A college education need not only lead to university, however; it was suggested that college can lead to a wider range of destinations.
- Qualitative research with employer-representatives found a very positive impression of the sector among businesses and employers; with the supply of university graduates arguably reaching a saturation point, skilled and experienced college graduates may have the edge in some circumstances.
- Despite this, college appears to fall short of parity of esteem in the public eye compared to university. While our qualitative and quantitative research found that many were at pains to stress that they did not share this perception, there was a concern that others, usually employers and older people, would think less of a college qualification.
- Nevertheless, there was limited awareness of college's degree-level offerings, and some scepticism (from younger people, employer-representatives and influencers) of the extent to which colleges should try to compete in this vein.
- There may be a growing role for colleges to develop and finesse its offer to prospective returners, as suggested by employers and influencers.
- There was a suggestion from representatives of business that colleges are uniquely well-placed to respond to current economic challenges and local labour market needs, and better able to develop new courses and offerings than universities.
- However, as things stand, influencers reported a paucity of part-time opportunities for adult returners, rendering this avenue unfeasible.
- A further issue was identified with regards to information-provision and the highly complex college landscape, especially with regards to funding streams and options.

Knowledge of the college sector

This section reflects on the extent to which the Scottish public in general, and subsets thereof, are aware of and/or familiar with different facets of a college education. This spans the qualifications that can be gained at college, the courses on offer, and the modes of delivery.

Respondents to the national survey were asked to assess the extent to which they associated a series of items with colleges on a scale from 0 (Not at all) to 10 (Completely). In terms of qualifications, Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNCs & HNDs) were most closely associated with colleges (at 8.94 out of 10), followed by work-based qualifications such as Modern Apprenticeships or Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) (8.22) and work-based training courses (7.42).

Other qualifications less associated with colleges included Highers and Advanced Highers, professional qualifications, and in last place by some margin, degrees. The latter was the only item with an average below 5 out of 10, and a quarter of respondents did not associate degrees with colleges 'at all'.

This points to a low awareness of degree-course offerings at colleges and may suggest that colleges are struggling to compete with universities in this regard. This was echoed in our qualitative research, where teachers noted a poor awareness and understanding of degree-level courses. As well as questioning whether colleges could compete with universities in this regard, some participants also questioned whether colleges *should* do so.

"I feel like a university degree would just be kinda more versatile. Like, an employer would look out for a university degree over a college degree, just because of that underlying thing that people think that the university will just be at a higher level, even though it's the same course, even though it's the same coursework, it's perceived as higher level."

Focus group participant, current senior phase pupil

"The risk is that colleges are trying to ape universities in that regard. There is a limited number that could do that. Well do you want to be a second-rate university or do you want to be a first rate college? And a first-rate college delivering technical, vocational, and practical skills that are easily absorbed by employers that need them in a labour market that is looking for flexibility of

response. Why would you want to try and compete with universities that are already perceived as producing too many graduates at the moment?"

Focus group participant, employer representative

While our qualitative enquiry saw a large number of respondents talk about college as a precursor/stepping-stone to university, fewer people appeared to see it as an outright competitor with regards to degrees.

Younger respondents aged 16-26 reported below-average association on all items; this was especially low with regards to degrees, where a third (31%) did not associate these 'at all' with colleges.

In terms of content and modes of study, part-time study, reskilling and vocational courses were all closely associated with colleges, each scoring above 8 out of 10, followed by blended study and school-college partnerships. While short online courses had the least association with college, they still scored 6.16 out of 10, reflecting moderate awareness and association.

In our qualitative work, we heard from influencers that (prospective) adult returners are becoming a more significant part of their jobs and the college community, and employers stressed the potential value that colleges can add in this vein (especially as we recover from the pandemic).

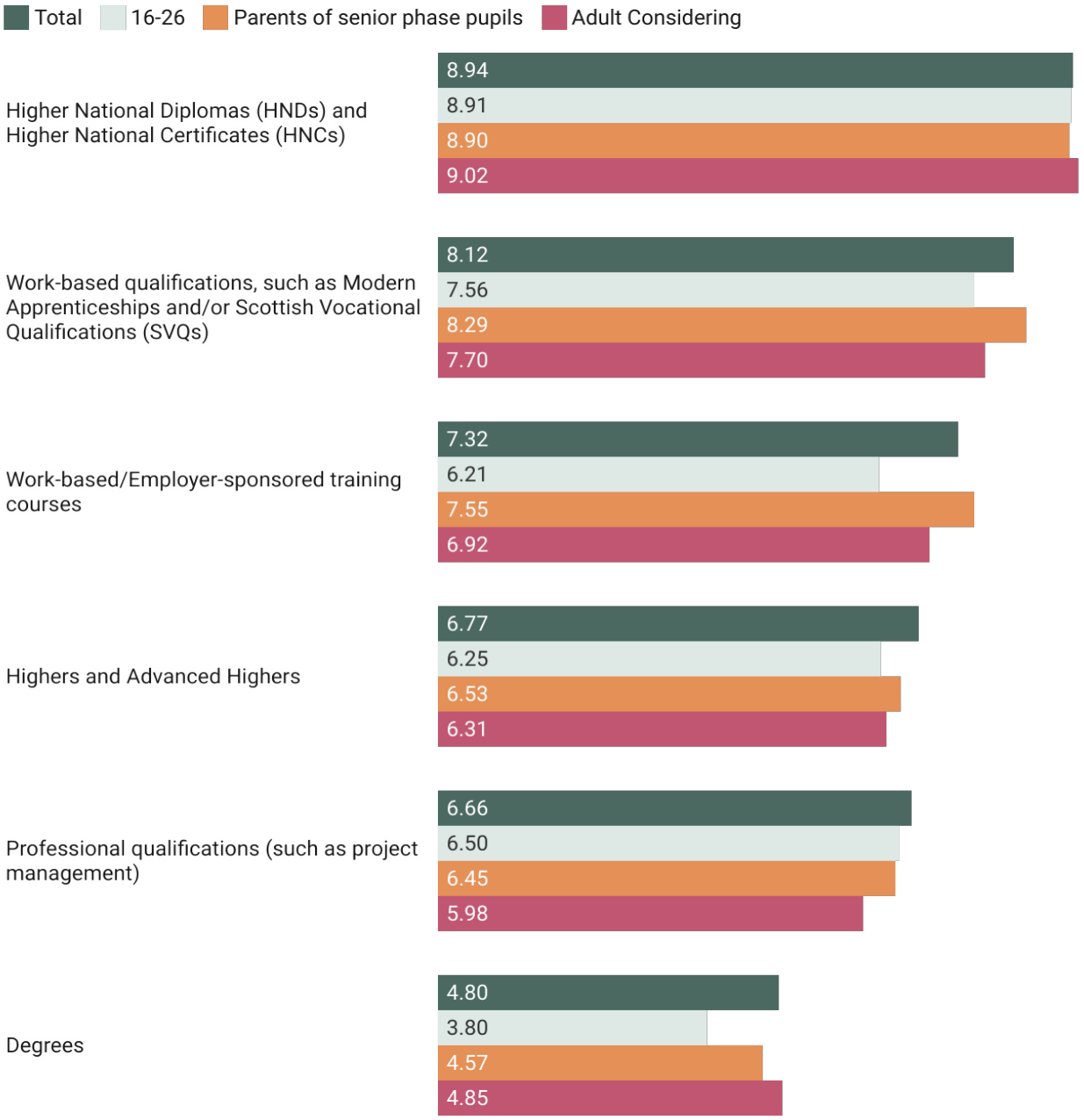
When asked what characterised a college education, parents and teachers were more likely to mention specific qualifications such as SVQs or NVQs, while younger people were more likely to focus on the content and substance of the (often more vocational) courses:

"Most of people that I know who go to college do a trade, whereas everyone I know that's applying to uni wants to do something a little bit more specialised, like physics or business or chemistry, something like that. I feel like uni has a perception of more, kinda, a niche kinda career if you're wanting to go down that path, whereas college is [more for] trades."

Focus group participant, current senior phase pupil

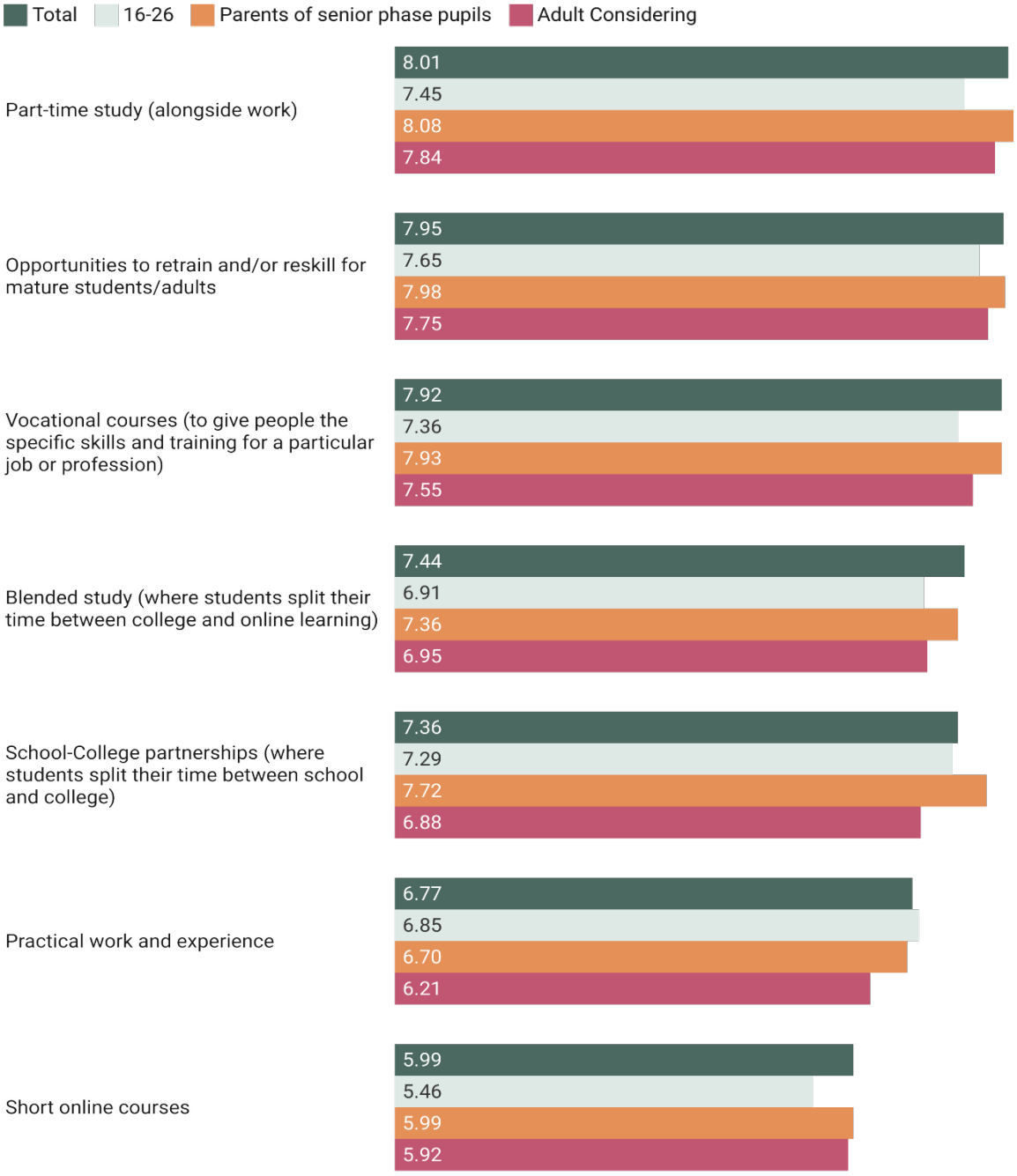
Association of colleges with certain qualifications

Average reported association out of 10, where 0 is ‘not at all’ and 10 is ‘completely’



Association of colleges with modes and content of teaching

Average reported association out of 10, where 0 is 'not at all' and 10 is 'completely'



Who and what are colleges for?

Our qualitative research also explored who and what participants thought college was for. There was a broad perception that college suits a wide range of people, including but not limited to those who were less academically inclined or people wanting to study more vocational courses. A number of participants suggested that college is simply a better match for some people:

"I've got a son who's gone on to university and [college] wasn't something, he would have considered, but my daughter…it's absolutely the path for her."

Focus group participant, parent

However, there was also an understanding from some that college can be a positive destination for people who have not traditionally enjoyed school, but who are not yet ready to leave education.

"If they're struggling at school or dinnae like it then they can go to the college and find something like that like, instead of just dropping out and doing nothing basically."

Focus group participant, parent

"But my best friend since, like, nursery and all that, she hated school by the end of fifth year, and she's at college but she still wants to go to uni after her college is finished, so for her it's a better approach."

Focus group participant, current senior phase pupil

This idea of college as a stepping-stone towards higher education recurred throughout our conversations (see below).

One employer-representative that we spoke to suggested that colleges have a dual-purpose: providing a stepping-stone to university education on the one hand, and supporting a local labour market on the other.

"Colleges are also quite a good staging post for folks if they want to get into university and some of the colleges will be the natural route in if they haven't quite managed to get the qualifications

to get into university and get into the graduate level route into whatever disciplines they want to go into. Colleges for us are about being either a stairway towards that university education or a deliverer of that technical practical level straight into the labour market."

Colleges were seen to be rooted in and more responsive to local labour market needs, giving them an instrumental strength for employers over universities. Their focus on skills and experience, in contrast with more research-oriented and often heavily bureaucratic universities, was seen to lend the college sector a specific role in providing local opportunities and driving localised development.

"I've always imagined that colleges are closer to the specifics of the local level market. And that they were closer to their local community and therefore more likely to be engaged in trying to solve problems […] and colleges are quite well placed to tackle that. Glasgow [for instance] has a long, long history of disadvantaged communities. […]. I always thought Glasgow colleges were more likely to be better positioned to tackle that than the universities were. I always imagined that colleges would be able to be more flexible in developing their courses in order to tackle that and also to perhaps respond to particular conditions in the labour market. University is set with a 3 or 4-year degree, and a 1-year post grad or whatever. Whereas colleges can perhaps do shorter courses, more microcredential based courses and can do shorter interventions and can do more full time and part time mixes."

Focus group participant, employer representative

There was some, though limited, attention to older returning students, though these did not surface as readily in our conversations as other (arguably more obvious) audiences.

"[College can be] very youth focused. It is also worth thinking about colleges as being cross age and college can be used as a mechanism for re-entering the labour market if you have been kicked out for some reason or have withdrawn for some reason. I think it is easier to look at going back into college if you are a mature student."

Focus group participant, employer representative

However, those with experience of working with prospective adult returners noted that there is a shortage of part-time courses for those seeking to retrain.

There was, nevertheless, a positive perception that the ‘packages’ that colleges are currently offering are broadly right for individuals – and, from employers, for business. There was, however, a suggestion that colleges and the private sector would benefit from a clear forum and operating environment to ensure that they are meeting each others’ needs, and with the necessary governance and funding structures to respond proactively and at speed.

“I think there is scope for individual colleges to set out more explicitly what the arrangement between college and business is. I would like to think that is predominantly done at a college level [rather than a national or regional level]. But I think that that needs the regional structure or a future regional structure to give flexibility to the colleges.”

Focus group participant, employer representative

Perceptions and favourability

The college sector enjoys an evidently positive reputation across the Scottish population as a whole, and across our three groups of interest. Respondents were asked to assess their perceptions of various aspects of a college education on a scale from 0 ('entirely negative') to 10 ('entirely positive'). Overall perceptions of college were highly positive, at 7.59 out of 10, and a quarter of respondents (24%) reported an 'entirely positive' impression. All items scored, on average, at least 6.88 out of 10, pointing to a high degree of favourability.

Across all aspects surveyed, parents of high school-aged children showed above-average favourability. In all instances, young people aged 16-26 and adults considering retaining had below-average favourability but were still overwhelmingly positive.

Qualifications earned at college were viewed most positively, followed by overall perceptions. In the case of young people, more specifically, the practical skills and experience gained at college came in second place. Both qualifications and practical experience surfaced unprompted in our qualitative research, and especially clearly with parents and carers, as a particular asset of the college sector.

While still seen positively, the student support on offer at college garnered the least positive impressions. Its relatively low place may reflect a lack of awareness of the services on offer at college, with a third of respondents answering 'don't know' to this item. The awareness and salience of the pastoral and extra-curricular aspects appeared low among young people that we spoke to as part of our qualitative research.

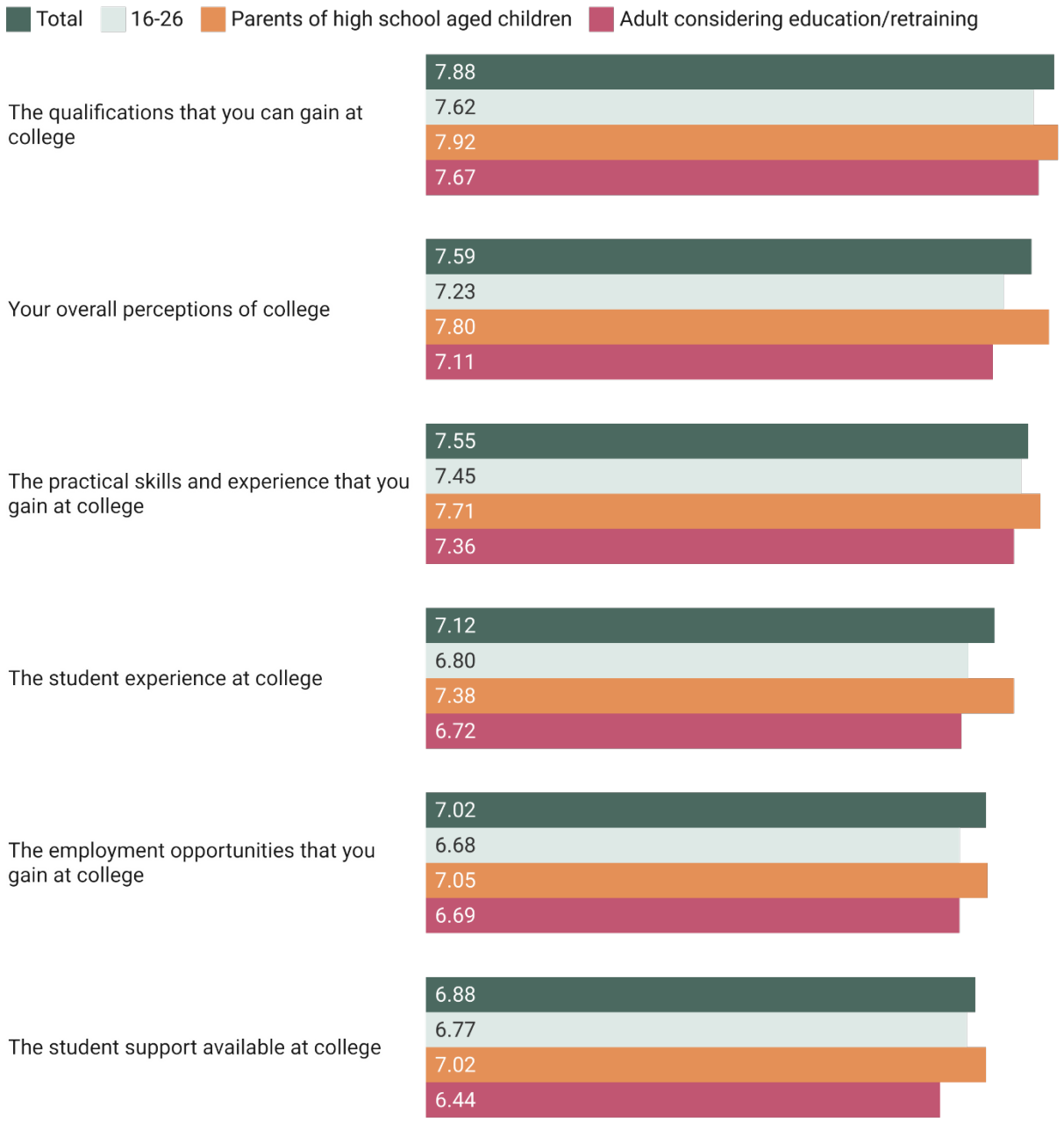
Similarly, a quarter of respondents (23%) were not sure of the student experience at college. In our qualitative research, one senior phase pupil cited this as a relative weakness of college compared to university:

"I dunno if this is just our local colleges, but I don't see that it has much of a lifestyle behind it, I feel like you can just kinda continue on with your regular life [whereas with university you have] that idea of going out and being with other students. I feel like that isn't as prominent in college culture. I feel like the university lifestyle was a bit more appealing to me than a college lifestyle, which seemed a bit more low-key."

Focus group participant, current senior phase pupil

Facets such as student support did enjoy positive reviews in our survey from those with more direct and/or recent experience of college/education, with the parents of college students rating it 7.5 out of 10) but the wider population appears to have limited knowledge of this.

Favourability towards aspects of a college education



Barriers to a college education

Our quantitative work drew on our earlier qualitative enquiry which identified certain recurrent (perceived) barriers and/or weaknesses of a college education and sought to assess the extent to which these views were held across the broader population.

Our analysis suggests that the quality of teaching at college is not a major barrier to a college education. 41% believed that the quality of teaching as at least as good in colleges as in universities, compared to only 22% who disagreed with this statement. However, a notable proportion of respondents were either unsure or ambivalent on the question, with 37% answering either 'don't know' or 'neither agree not disagree'. This may suggest that more could be done to communicate the high quality of teaching that colleges (aim to) offer.

Prospective returners were more likely to believe that the quality of teaching at colleges is at least as high as at university with half (51%) of respondents agreeing. Young people were broadly in line with the average in terms of agreement, though were more divided on the issue, with a lower proportion neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and an above-average proportion disagreeing (31%).

More evident impediments would instead appear to relate to professional aspirations. Firstly, nearly half of all respondents (46%), and two thirds of young respondents (68%), stated that the careers to which they aspired required a university degree.

Secondly, there is a common perception that an education and qualifications gained at college may be, or may be seen to be, somewhat inferior to qualifications gained elsewhere, such as university. It is evident from our analysis that many people who do not believe this themselves do believe that others may see it as such. While a third of respondents (35%) believed this to be the case, three in five (62%) thought that others believed this to be true.

Younger respondents and prospective returners were more likely than the overall population to believe that college qualifications were less valuable, with almost half (47% and 45%, respectively) agreeing with the statement, compared to an overall average of 35%. This compares to 33% of younger respondents and 35% of prospective returners disagreeing with the statement.

Three quarters of young people (76%) also agreed with the suggestion that others may see a college education as less valuable, as did two thirds (67%) of prospective returners.

Our qualitative findings were consistent with this picture, with most respondents pointing to wider societal perceptions of college as an inferior substitute for university. This applied across all audience, though almost all participants were at pains to state that they did not necessarily share this perspective. A key concern for young people seemed to be the extent to which employers would be favourable or unfavourable towards a college qualification. Relatedly, the prestige of a university education was seen by some as a point against colleges:

"I think it's just a perceived kinda weakness, but a lot of colleges haven't been around for as long as universities so I think, from what I've heard, when employers are looking at, like, your education, they'll look for older universities for example."

Focus group participant, current senior phase pupil

"So, I guess the perception would be that college is second best. I know that is what colleges fear, because colleges are looking for parity of esteem with universities."

Focus group participant, employer representative

While this was usually attributed to parents and/or employers, some senior phase pupils suggested that it could also come from schools:

"With our school, they really emphasised the fact that college was kind of a back-up option. If you wanted to get into university [but didn't] you go to college. I feel like that's quite a big part of a negative stigma because it always seen as 'you've something to fall back on' as opposed to a main option."

Focus group participant, current senior phase pupil

A number of influencers that we spoke to implied that some of these negative stereotypes can be perpetuated by schools' decisions. They suggested that senior pupils who are more disruptive might be sent to college simply to get them off the school's books, and shift responsibility elsewhere, with little regard to the suitability of this environment. This was seen to be negative for the pupils in question, as well as their peers in college and the sectoral reputation.

"A concern I have is that sometimes schools will push people into going to college – what are called 'December leavers' who aren't old enough to leave school so they have to come back – but there's sometimes a push to get those kids out of school because they're often seen as the more disruptive ones so they get sent to college, and the college gets filled up with people who don't want to be there."

Focus group participant, influencer

A further issue identified by a number of influencers was the lack of part-time courses for adult returners. While the flexibility shown by the sector was seen as a positive, there were suggestions that a blind spot persisted (especially around funding and planning) when it came to people wanting to retrain.

"With adult [returners], over the last ten years and since the Credit Crunch, a lot of the focus has been on young people, understandably. But I think there's a lack of provision for part-time flexible learning opportunities for adults. Adults can't necessarily give up work, and there could be a lot more opportunities to study and work. Often the issue for adults isn't working out what they want to do, it's the practicality of it."

Focus group participant, influencer

"It seems like everything above HNC or HND level is all full-time and I find it quite difficult sometime to identify the learning that's appropriate for someone that's working."

Focus group participant, influencer

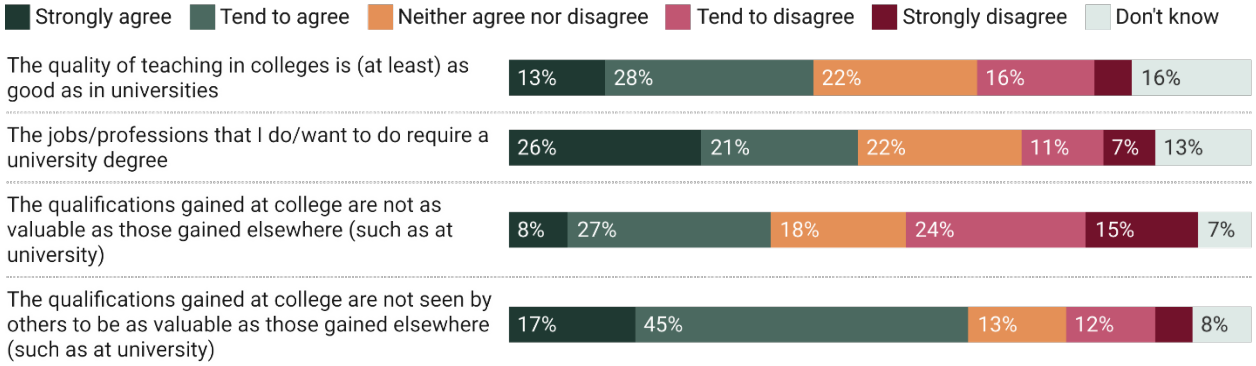
While there were positive cost-savings associated with a college education (for instance relating to the option to work alongside studying, or to live at home, the funding landscape – both in complexity and generosity – was highlighted as a potential barrier.

"The funding can be a real barrier, maybe someone who really wants to go to college, would really benefit from it but financially it's not clear whether it's doable. I don't know whether there should be a central point purely concentrating on college funding, or whether each college should have that information, but it should be a lot clearer. It's a [question of] knowing who to ask as well as knowing what you can get."

Focus group participant, influencer

Barriers to a college education

Proportions of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the following statements relating to the obstacles to a college education



Strengths

Overall, the key strengths of a college education were deemed by survey respondents to be:

- its flexibility (cited by 43% as being among the top 3 strengths)
- the courses on offer (38%)
- the practical skills and experience gained (36%)
- colleges' links with local employers (33%)
- and the convenience of studying locally (32%)

However, there was considerable variation within this between groups of interest, which we will now explore in turn. While there was a strong degree of consistency to the main strengths identified by each group, there was some variation in the relative order and magnitude of these. The reported strengths identified in the survey were broadly consistent with the finding from our qualitative research, which we discuss below.

We stress that if an item is not identified as a strength, it does not necessarily mean that it is a weakness, but rather that it does not stand out in people's minds as a particular forte.

Young people

For young people aged 16-26, the main strength of a college education, by a margin of 10 percentage points, related to the courses available to study. This was cited as being among the top three strengths by 45% of respondents in this category. The flexibility afforded by a college education, including the option of studying and working jointly, came in second place at 35%, followed closely by the convenience and cost savings of studying locally (32% and 30% respectively).

Young respondents were over twice as likely as the general population to cite colleges' small class sizes (30% compared to a national average of 14%); this was the most notable outlier recorded relative to the overall population. Colleges' links with employers and the practical skills it offers were still widely seen as strengths (by 29% and 28% respectively), but marginally less so than among the population more broadly.

Parents of high school age pupils

Among parents of children aged 12-17, the main strengths were more tightly clustered between flexibility to study and work part-time (41%), the convenience of studying locally (39%) and the practical skills and experience one gains for entering the workplace (39%). Other key strengths included the courses on offer (36%) and colleges' links with employers and industry (31%).

While parents were especially positive about the convenience of studying locally compared to the overall population, all other items were broadly in line with the national averages.

Prospective adult returners

Those considering retraining and/or returning to education showed rather particular perceptions of a college education, with consistent deviations from the national average. This may perhaps reflect their more specific circumstances compared to those of a young person or parent.

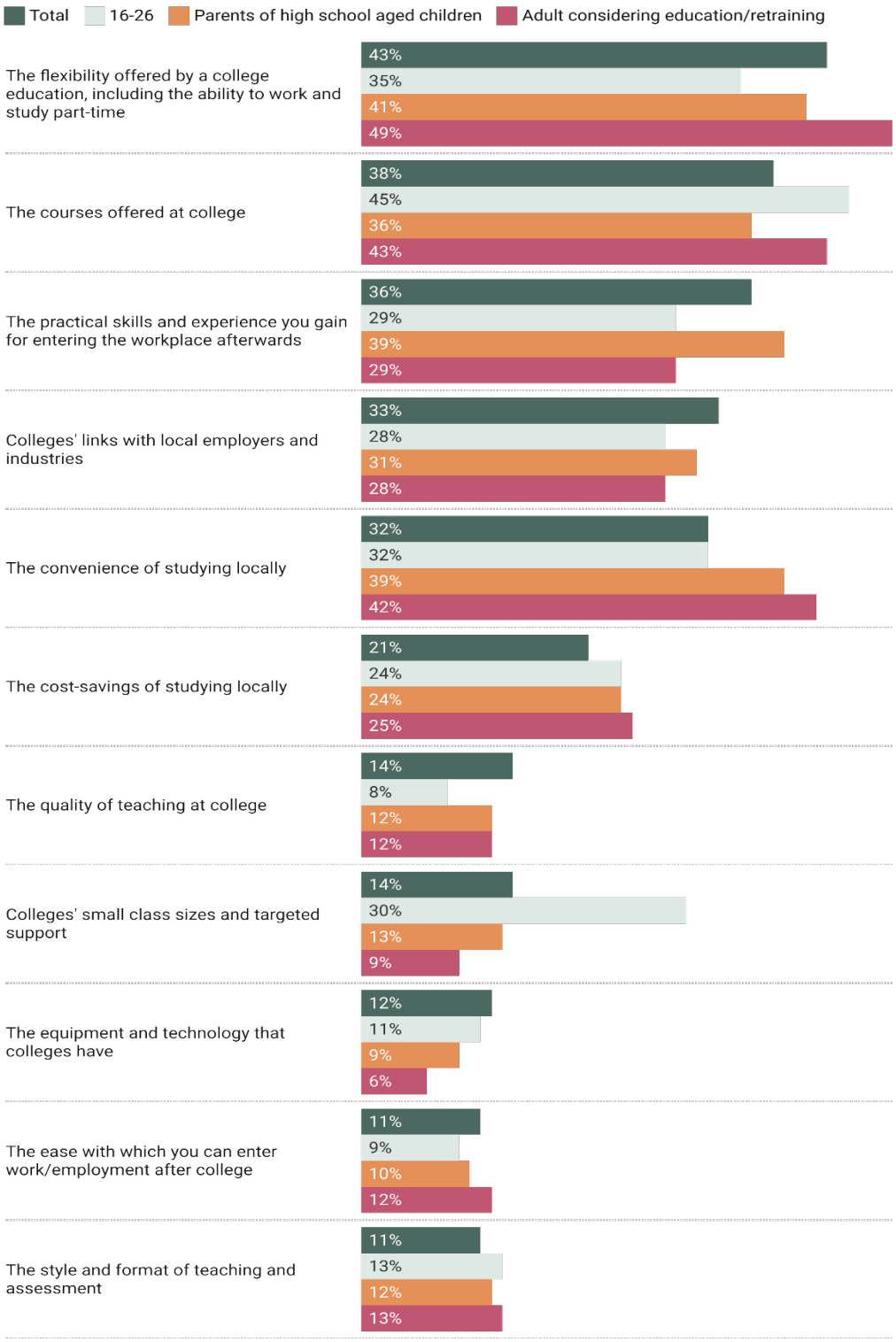
Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most frequently cited strength of a college education for this group was the flexibility offered by a college education to work and study part time, seen as a key strength by almost half (49%) of respondents.

This was followed by the courses on offer (43%) and the convenience of studying locally at 42%, which exceeded the national average by 10 percentage points.

For this group, the practical skills and experience gained, and colleges' links with employers, while still noteworthy strengths, appear less prominently than among the overall population.

Strengths of the college sector

Proportion of respondents citing each item as being a top strength of a college education. (Showing only items cited by at least 10%)



Qualitative insights

Our qualitative work provided an opportunity to explore the (unprompted) strengths of a college education identified by participants and to explore how people view these. A key theme that emerged from this research was the range of pathways into and out of college. The various flexibilities that college provides were summed up aptly in the following sentiment:

"If you're unsure about where you want to go in your career, it gives you plenty of thinking time to find yourself as a person. I think that college will be a really good stepping stone in your life to help you get to that next level if that's where you think you want to go, but it also gives you the reassurance that you're able to step out at any time. You know, if you don't like something, you don't have to do it, you can move between courses and things."

Focus group participant, teacher

The value of this flexibility was reiterated by influencers. In implicit contrast to university, they noted that in college, people can attain qualifications incrementally, rather than working over years up to one final qualification. This allows people to leave at any point with a qualification and without feeling that their work has been fruitless.

"I like that ability to progress: you can start off on a relatively low-level course and just work your way up. […] That flexibility of learning, being able to go as far as you want, but at any point be able to leave with something. Whether it's an NQ, an NC, an HNC, an HND, there's always something to leave with."

Focus group participant, influencer

There was a perception from influencers that while school qualifications are well-recognised and understood, the range and breadth of college qualifications is a double-edged sword.

"I feel the qualifications system can be very tricky to navigate. There's all the different levels, but then you have Nationals and there's even more levels within Nationals. Then you've got terms like National Certificates and so on, and I can understand why parents and pupils as well find it really difficult."

Focus group participant, influencer

College was compared favourably with university by participants for the multiplicity of options that it opens up, while higher education was seen to be somewhat more rigid.

"It probably links in with the fact that you can get placements for some of the courses and local businesses, so I think it does offer a lot more flexibility and you can go several different paths from the courses that you're doing, whereas universities are a bit more down the one path."

Focus group participant, parent

College was seen to offer a range of possible destinations, including work or university, and at a decent pace. Many described it in terms of a 'stepping stone'; while this typically referred to an intermediary stage between school and university, it also applied at a number of different levels.

Pedagogically, college was seen as a valuable middle-ground between the 'hand-holding' teaching stye of school and much more autonomous learning at university.

"I think it is an easier segue from high school, cos university is quite a big jump and a lot of people are kinda shocked by it because you're so familiar with the type of teaching style [at school] compared with university. I feel like a lot of university is a lot more independent [compared] to college – there's so much stuff that just gets thrown at you and then you're supposed to kinda digest it. I think college eases you into it a bit more."

Focus group participant, parent

This middle-ground was seen by influencers to help build confidence and support the transition towards higher education, with especial value in more deprived areas where aspirations of going to university might appear less attainable.

"I work in a small school but it's in a very deprived area, so a lot of the pupils lack the confidence to jump straight to university. So, a lot of people in my area will use college as a stepping stone, but keeping young people in education which is really important."

Focus group participant, influencer

College was also seen as a stepping-stone in a more personal sense, providing a degree, more personal independence, and opportunities for young people to grow in confidence before going on to university or employment.

"[Our local college] is just along the road from the High School – 10 minutes on a bus or something – so it gives our kids a little bit of a sense of freedom while still feeling safe."

Focus group participant, teacher

"Like, if you're not feeling too confident to go straight to university you've also got that stage and you can just kinda ease into it and you'll meet different people."

Focus group participant, parent

Another common observation was the more relaxed atmosphere in college, and the distinct dynamic between college students and their teachers. Where school was seen to have somewhat arbitrary and arguably infantilising rules, college was seen to treat students as more mature. This was framed by one participant as a counterpoint to colleges' purported weakness in terms of 'prestige'.

Another key strength of the college sector as opposed to university, related to finance. College was seen as a cheaper alterative, allowing people to try out a course without taking on the high levels of debt associated with university, to enter university at a mid-way point and thus avoid certain fees, to live at home and study locally, and to work alongside their studies.

"Particularly with the way things are at the minute [and] let alone where we live, which is very rural with fewer opportunities, actually having the option to learn and gain qualifications while you earn money […] I just think that it's probably going to be more and more what people are looking to do in the current job market."

Focus group participant, parent

"With college I'd be able to, you know, stay at home and that would be a lot less expensive [so] I wouldn't have to work as many hours in my job."

Focus group participant, current senior phase pupil

This and in-course practical experience were also commonly cited benefits of a college education. Across the different audiences, there was a broad perception that college provides

more specific and practical skills and experience, leaving college graduates in a better position to immediately enter the world of work.

"I think it's [good] for people who are trying to getting into the working world faster. Like, you spend a lot of time at university before you get to your career so I think it's just a faster route."

Focus group participant, parent

However, there appears to be a somewhat mixed picture in this regard: while most cited the experience gained at college, a number of participants also cited a perceived need for degree-level qualifications to secure the most desirable jobs. However, employer representatives stressed the very positive reputation that college graduates have among employers. Improving the public's and employers' mutual understanding will thus likely be central to an effective campaign to improve the attractiveness of colleges in Scotland.

"I think actually employers, the more I talk to employers, you quite often get the message 'god, we have far too many graduates coming from universities, what we need are apprenticeships or folks with practical technical, what's the right word for this, employability skills' that we don't get from a high flown graduate that comes out with outrageous expectations and limited experience. Whether that is fair or not is another question, but that is not an unusual comment you get from employers."

Focus group participant, employer representative

Despite this broadly positive picture of the college sector – and the range and flexibility it affords – some teachers cast doubt on the public's awareness of this breadth.

"I think the general public would actually be quite amazed and surprised at the breadth of things that college actually offers. I don't think they realise that they do everything from taster courses for S3s right on to helping adults re-train in terms of work and things, and everything that's in between."

Focus group participant, teacher

Decision-Making Factors

Respondents were asked to identify the three most important factors to them when making decisions about their own education or when giving advice to others relating to educational choices. This issue saw substantial variation between groups, in both relative and absolute terms. Different groups have markedly distinct priorities which we outline below.

Overall, by a considerable margin of 18 percentage points, the most important factor in people's educational decision-making relates to the courses on offer. This item leads across all groups of interest, and the margin is even greater among young people and prospective returners.

Young people

Among people aged 16-26, courses were by far the most important factor in their decision-making with 71% of people citing it as a top factor, almost double the proportion citing the next-closest item.

This was followed by cost and funding options (36%), the quality of teaching (31%) and the location of the establishment (31%). While employment prospects came second among the overall population, they are evidently a less pressing concern for young people, coming in fifth place. Similarly, links with local employers was markedly less important among young people (13%) than the general population (23%).

Instead, more practical and short-term considerations such as funding and location play a larger role in young people's estimations.

Parents of high school pupils

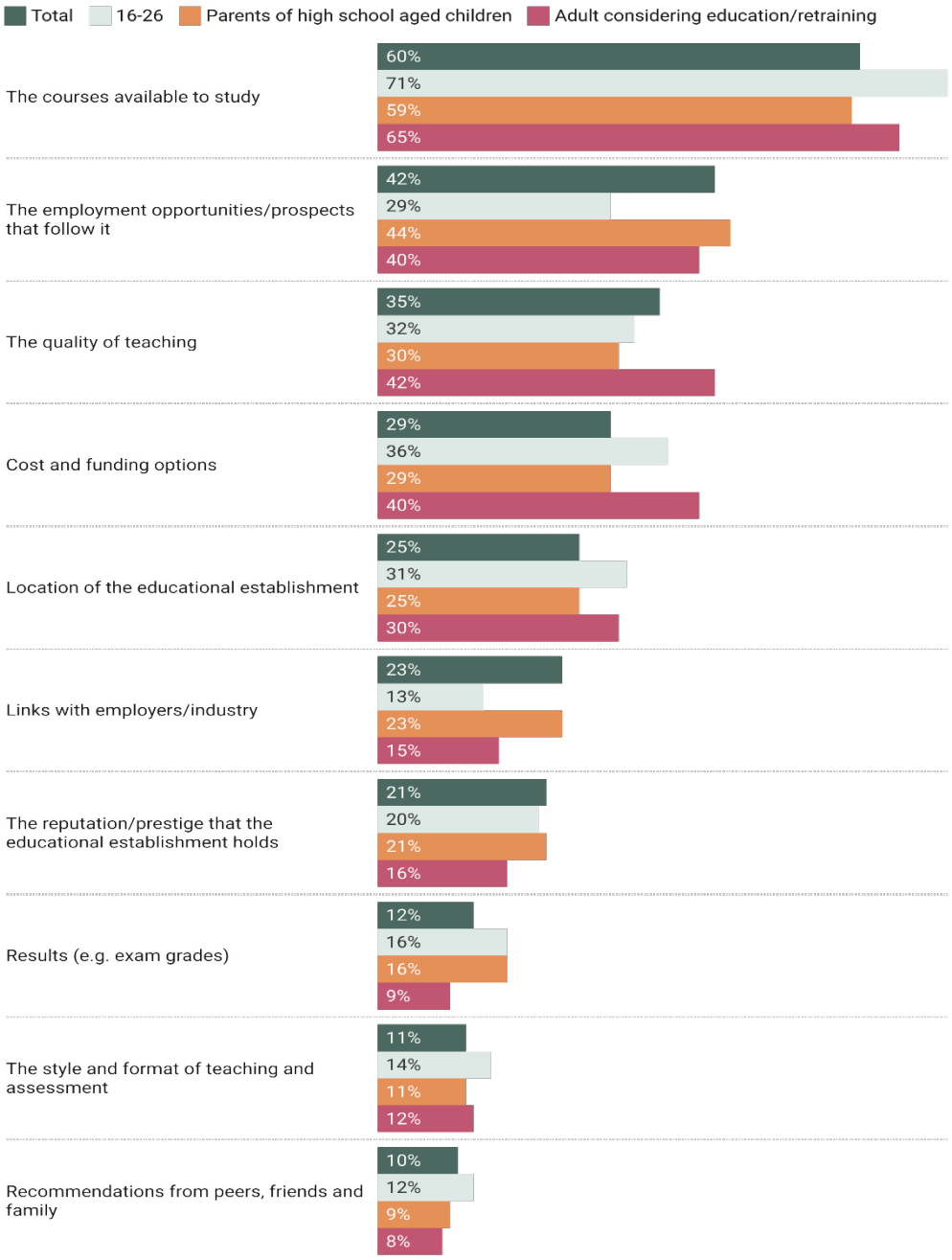
Among parents of children aged 12-17, the courses on offer were again the most important factor (59%), albeit by a markedly narrower margin than in the other two groups. Employment prospects were a much more prominent consideration for parents than young people, with 44% citing it as a key factor, followed by the quality of teaching (30%), cost and funding options (29%) and location (25%).

Prospective adult returners

Among those considering returning to education, the main factor in decision-making was again courses, with 65% citing it as a top consideration. This led the quality of teaching (42%) by 23 percentage points. This, in turn, was followed jointly by employment prospects and cost and funding (both at 40%), and location (30%).

Top factors

Proportion of respondents citing each item as a top factor in their educational decision-making. (Showing only items cited by at least 10%)



Assets and importance

We now synthesise the two preceding sections to jointly identify the areas where colleges are particularly strong, and those which matter to people when making their educational decisions.

The horizontal axis of the scatterplot below reflects the proportion of people identifying each item as a particular strength of a college education, and the vertical axis reflects the proportion citing each item as a top factor in the educational decision-making.

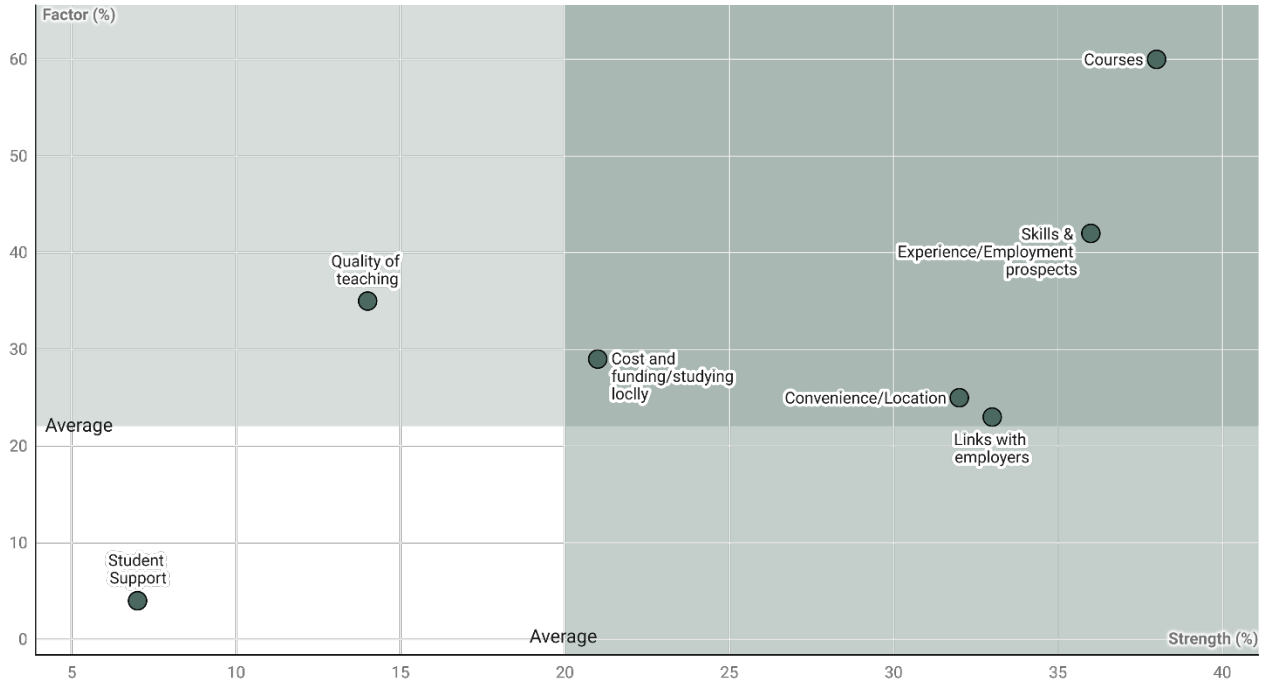
It should be noted that the two questions used different phraseology, examples and items in order to make each question as relevant, accurate and understandable as possible. Therefore, there is not necessarily exact conceptual equivalence between each aspect, but items have been paired where it has been judged that they can be reasonably compared and/or conflated. We also note that owing to phraseological requirements, certain aspects, such as the flexibility to work part-time were not measured on one dimension, so cannot be included here even if they constitute a strength or important factor. The list is therefore not exhaustive, but it highlights valuable learnings, even if these should be interpreted with a degree of discretion and caution.

The plot shows that pastoral care/student support are deemed neither particular strengths of a college education, nor important factors in people's decision-making. Quality of teaching is an important factor, but one where colleges are not perceived to have especial strengths. (This is not to say that the quality of teaching is colleges is thought to be poor, but simply that it is not a stand-out strength of the sector.) Financial questions reflect neither disadvantageous nor particularly advantageous terrain for the college sector.

Conversely, the courses on offer at colleges are seen to be both a particular strength of the sector, and a vitally important factor in people's decision-making. Similarly, the skills and employability associated with a college education, and to a somewhat lesser extent, the sectors' links with employers and the convenience of studying locally are also advantageous in both regards. Our findings would suggest that these aspects of a college education should be highlighted in promotional campaigns to raise the profile and attractiveness of the college sector in Scotland.

Assets and their importance

Scatterplot reflecting the extent to which certain items are deemed a strength of the college sector (x-axis) and their importance within people's decision-making (y-axis)



Sources of information

For all groups, websites and prospectuses are the most used sources of information when thinking about educational choices.

For younger people and prospective returners, this is followed by open days and then local reputation, while this order is inverted for parents.

Peers and family are evidently important sources of information, and especially so for young people, even if they are not the most influential. Therefore building positive perceptions of college and its offerings across the population will be central to a successful campaign.

Social media is also an important channel by which to engage and influence young people, with 11% citing it as a top source of information.

There was a clear consensus from influencers that the landscape can be very difficult to navigate, and especially with regards to funding streams and opportunities.

"I find even as an advisor sometimes, you look at these courses and it can be quite challenging, and we're meant to be the experts!"

Focus group participant, influencer

"My biggest worry about a lot of the pupils I work with is that they'll go into college to do a NC where they might get education maintenance or a bursary. When you get into the realm of HNCs and that, that's where you start having to borrow money. A lot of my pupils who go ono a college course for a year will then not continue because their parents are in difficult circumstances, don't want them to take on debt, want them to get a job. So that year at college – I'm not saying it's wasted – but they end up doing something different because needs must. The funding landscape is really complicated and potentially off-putting."

Focus group participant, influencer

In our qualitative research, we found some evidence that certain audiences (specifically, parents) can find the landscape difficult to understand and navigate. There was a vocal appetite

from a number of parents and certain senior phase pupils for improved communication and information relating to the sector, and local colleges' course offerings.

"I certainly have not been invited to the local college to come and have a look around or see what's [there], because I do know that they're [pupils] getting to a certain age and they need to take responsibility for themselves and do that, but its still maybe within the secondary school, where parents are involved, to make those links."

Focus group participant, parent

A number of parents reported that their children's schools could do more to communicate with them directly about further and higher educational options and opportunities.

A number of pupils spoke positively about introductory opportunities (such as open days, trials, and placements) that allowed them to familiarise themselves with an environment. This idea was reiterated by influencers, who suggested that school-college partnerships were effective in allowing senior phase pupils to experience college, check its suitability and find a course they could commit to.

"One thing I really liked was the introduction of School-College Partnerships where senior phase pupils can spend part of their time in college – they can make a decision whether it's their kind of learning environment, whether they offer the courses they want to do, how to behave in college."

Focus group participant, influencer

Trusted sources of information

Proportion of respondents citing each item as a top source of information regarding education.

Conclusions and implications

In this section we reflect on the findings outlined above and their strategic implications for the college sector's efforts to raise its profile and attractiveness to young people, their parents, and adult returners.

Courses and flexibility are key assets of the college sector

The courses on offer are positively viewed by all groups, and are a vitally important factor in people's decision-making. Flexibility too is a key strength of a college education, and especially so among prospective adult returners and certain young people, enabling them to balance education and work. The range of courses, destinations and modes of study were cited across all audiences in our qualitative research as key assets of the college sector.

A strong emerging theme from certain audiences, especially influencers, was the opportunity to incrementally gain qualifications, in implicit contrast to university where a long period of study culminates in a degree. Colleges, in contrast, allow pupils to pursue various qualifications more flexibly and incrementally, with the option to leave if necessary, but still with a qualification and without facing a penalty.

However, while flexibility was seen as a key strength, there was some qualitative evidence that there are insufficient part-time opportunities for prospective returners who cannot give up work entirely to pursue full-time study. With the increasing need to retrain, this could prove a growing barrier.

Messaging matters: younger people are concerned by day-to-day questions, while parents take a longer perspective

Our quantitative analysis has shown that different audiences are more concerned and/or motivated by distinct questions, and have discrete priorities. To young people, more immediate and quotidian concerns and questions around courses, finances and location play a larger role in decision-making, while it is their parents who are more likely to be motivated by longer-term employment prospects. Messaging should be differentiated – primarily by content but also by medium – to take account of these differences.

Certain aspects are important for educational standards, but not for decision-making

Our analysis has found that certain aspects of an education, such as student support or extra-curricular activities are not especially important for people's decision-making. While these may be enormously valuable within education, they appear unlikely to sway large numbers of people towards choosing college.

Colleges may struggle to sell their degree offerings

A key impediment to people taking up a college education relate to professional aspirations, the perceived need for a degree, and the perceived inferiority of a college qualification (despite employers' assurances to the contrary). However, at present, people largely do not associated colleges with degree courses. This is especially true of younger people, who are also more likely to deem a degree necessary for their professional aspirations.

However, young people and employer-representatives cast aspersions on the extent to which colleges should seek to compete with universities, suggesting instead that they should emphasise their own specialisms and comparative advantage in specific courses and employer links. Employer representatives stressed the value that employers place on college qualifications, and their need for college graduates with experience and skills, pointing to a saturation of university graduates.

Clearer information and guidance, including on funding options, could help to demystify the college landscape

Information-gaps appear to be sizeable barriers to pursuing a college education, with inadequate information-provision for a highly complex landscape. The range of courses, qualifications and funding streams can make a college education off-putting or, in certain cases, short-lived. There was some appetite for a centralised support system, while a number of parents wanted clearer communication from schools on their children's future.

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