VETprep
Empowering Europe's Youth through VET

VET policies enhancing youth participation in VET: Scottish national report

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Glossary

CESFEB	Care Experienced Student Further Education Bursary
CfE	Curriculum for Excellence
CIAG	Career Information Advice and Guidance
DYW	Developing the Young Workforce
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
FA	Foundation Apprenticeships
FE	Further Education
GA	Graduate Apprenticeship
GTCS	General Teaching Council Scotland
HE	Higher Education
HNC	Higher National Certificate
HND	Higher National Diploma
MA	Modern Apprenticeship
NUS	National Union of Students
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ONS	Office for National Statistics
S1 to S6	Names given to each year of secondary school. S1 to S4 is equivalent to ages 12 to 16, and denotes those year groups in compulsory secondary education. S5 and S6 (equivalent to age 17 and 18) denotes the final two years of post-compulsory secondary education.
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SDS	Skills Development Scotland
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
SIMD	Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation
SIMD20	A neighbourhood classified as being in the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland, according to SIMD
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
TQFE	Teaching Qualification in Further Education
UK	United Kingdom
VET	Vocational Education and Training

Introduction

The 'VETprep' project explores vocational education and training (VET) participation, retention and educational policies in the wake of COVID-19 across five countries (Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Scotland and Spain). This report relates to the project's second work package (WP2) which explores national, regional and local policies in the field of vocational education and training. WP2 aims to explore and compare the different approaches applied across partner countries to support students' choices of VET and their transition and participation in VET programmes. This report provides a detailed overview of Scotland's VET policies in the last 10 years, focusing on those which are relevant to young people as they transition from secondary school. The findings are based on a detailed review of the policy literature. This included academic literature, policy documents, national statistics and grey literature.

Scotland is a large country geographically, but with a relatively small population of 5.55m people compared to England's 58.6m (Office for National Statistics, 2025). The population of Scotland is unevenly distributed, with large proportions of people living in the country's 'central belt' close to the cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh. These post-industrial areas have high population density in contrast to the less densely populated and more agricultural areas of the rural uplands. The most sparsely populated areas can be found in the more remote parts of the highlands and islands. Multidimensional poverty and inequality feature heavily across Scotland, with significant gaps observable in health, life expectancy, educational outcomes and progression between those living in the most and least deprived areas (Scottish Government, 2022).

Since devolution in 1997, Scotland has been a devolved nation of the United Kingdom (UK). The Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh has powers over education and training, health and social services (among others). Although it has some limited powers to raise taxes, most aspects of economic, employment and immigration policies are controlled by the UK Parliament in Westminster.

Scotland retained a separate education system after the Act of Union with England in 1707. It has its own distinct national curriculum, with different academic and VET qualifications to England. Scottish pupils begin school at age 5 (a year later than in England) and have a compulsory school leaving age of 16 (compared with 18 in England). Scottish policy making can best be understood then in terms of its relations with England, with policies often framed by how distinct they are to those in England, while at the same time, being shaped by the same economic forces that inform policies throughout the UK.

The first part of this report (Section 1.1) provides an overview of the Scottish VET system and how it is integrated within a system of comprehensive secondary schooling with no tracking. It then provides details of Scottish VET programmes and how these enable transition to higher education and to the labour market, before considering access to VET for those from vulnerable groups. Section 1.2 provides an overview of the main recent reforms in VET in the last 10 years.

Sections 2 to 4 explore how Scottish VET policies have responded to specific focus areas of the VETprep project: (a) image and awareness of VET; (b) transition to VET and (c) participation in VET and prevention of dropout. The availability of evidence on which to assess implementation and impact was a key factor for inclusion of selected policies. Some more recent policy reforms, such as the *Review of Qualifications and Assessment* (Scottish Government, 2023) were not selected as it is too soon to assess their implementation. For each selected policy the report provides an overall assessment of the extent to which these policies might be transferable to other national contexts relatively quickly (considered as quick-wins). However, caution should be exercised when considering these, given how policy success or otherwise is highly dependent upon the context in which it is adopted.

1. Overview of the Scottish Vocational Education and Training (VET) system

1.1. General description of the Scottish VET system

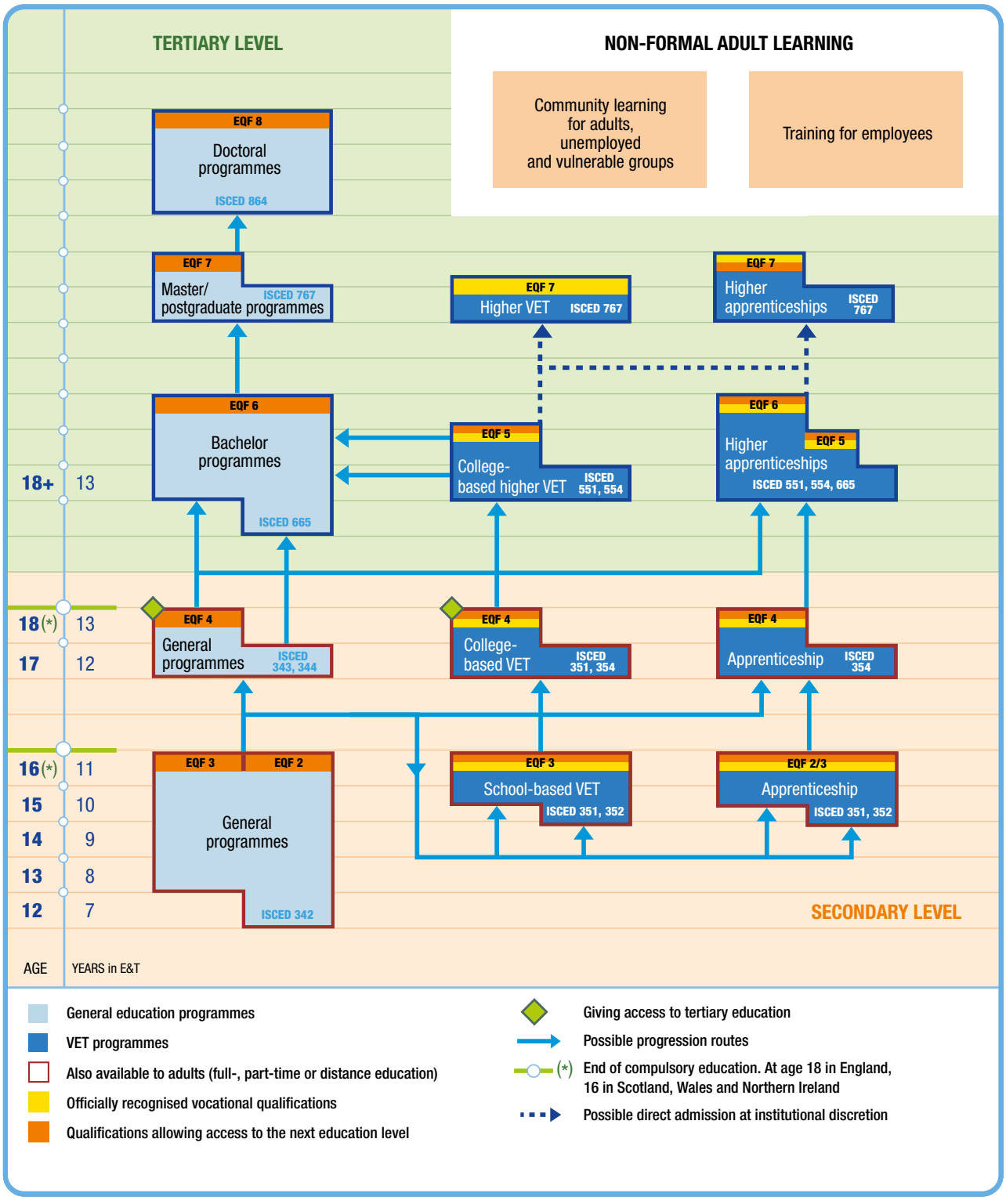


Figure 1: Vocational education and training in the UK (Cedefop and ReferNet UK, 2019)

In Scotland, as in the rest of the UK, VET takes place in multiple settings, including secondary schools, further education (FE) colleges and via apprenticeships (involving colleges, employers and/or independent training providers). Figure 1 above illustrates the range and complexity of VET pathways within the UK. While some aspects of this illustration are more relevant to the English system, the Scottish system is broadly similar.

1.1.1. Comprehensive upper secondary education (no tracking)

Secondary schools in Scotland provide general education without academic selection or tracking from the age of 12 (S1) to the age of 18 (S6). Education in Scotland is mandatory until the age of 16, usually coinciding with the end of S4. Comprehensive schooling has been in place across the UK since it was introduced by progressive governments in the mid-60s with the aim of providing equal opportunities to education to all social groups. Although comprehensive schools exist across the UK and each system shares some similarities, the education system in each of the devolved nations is distinct, with each adopting their own curricula and qualifications.

Since the introduction of Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) in the mid-2000s, the last three years (S4 to S6) of secondary school, known as the 'Senior Phase', have offered students increasing flexibility and choice to develop their own portfolio of qualifications. For example, students can study subjects of their choice over more than one year and sit examinations at the end of the first or the second year. The degree of choice will depend on how many subjects the school offers. Students can also mix and match academic and vocational qualifications at different levels, some of them being offered in collaboration with colleges, employers and training providers. Thus, in principle, and despite the lack of separation between vocational and academic tracks, CfE should provide enough opportunities for students to develop skills for learning, for life and for work according to their own interests and needs.

Qualifications Scotland (previously the Scottish Qualifications Authority; SQA) plays a strategic role in assessing and certifying the different levels of attainment of students, and in ensuring the equivalences of academic and vocational qualifications across different subjects (see Figure 2 below). National 3, 4 and 5 qualifications can be either academic or vocational in nature (EQF 1–3). Most students undertake National 4s (internally assessed) or National 5s (external exam or internally assessed depending on subject) in S4 at around age 16.

Academic qualifications include Highers, Advanced Highers and the Scottish Baccalaureate (EQF 4 and 5), which comprise one-year courses that are taken in the last two years of secondary school (S5/S6). Students may enter college with these, but more commonly they are used to access university. Students staying in S6 can take Advanced Highers (EQF 5) that will usually combine with additional Highers to meet admission requirements of the most selective universities.

School-based vocational qualifications (EQF 2–4) include Skills for Work Courses, National Progression Awards, Introduction to Workplace Skills, Certificate of Work Readiness, among others. These allow students to develop hands-on work experience, as well as skills and knowledge in a vocational field. These vocational qualifications are usually delivered in collaboration between schools and colleges under the umbrella of school-college partnerships. These have been introduced by the Scottish Government as a means to increase the proportion of school leavers going to VET in the recent years.

In these partnerships, colleges deliver vocational courses for school pupils in the senior phase, often on college premises.

With similar goals, the Scottish Government introduced in 2014–15 new work-based frameworks for school pupils through Foundation Apprenticeships (FAs). These frameworks became elective qualifications for students during the senior phase of school, initially at EQF 4 and later also at lower levels (EQF 2–3). As a result of all these efforts, in recent years we have seen a growing number of pupils achieve a VET qualification whilst in the senior phase of school. In fact, the proportion of school leavers attaining a vocational qualification has doubled from 20.2% in 2014–15 to 40.7% in 2023–24 (Scottish Government, 2025b).

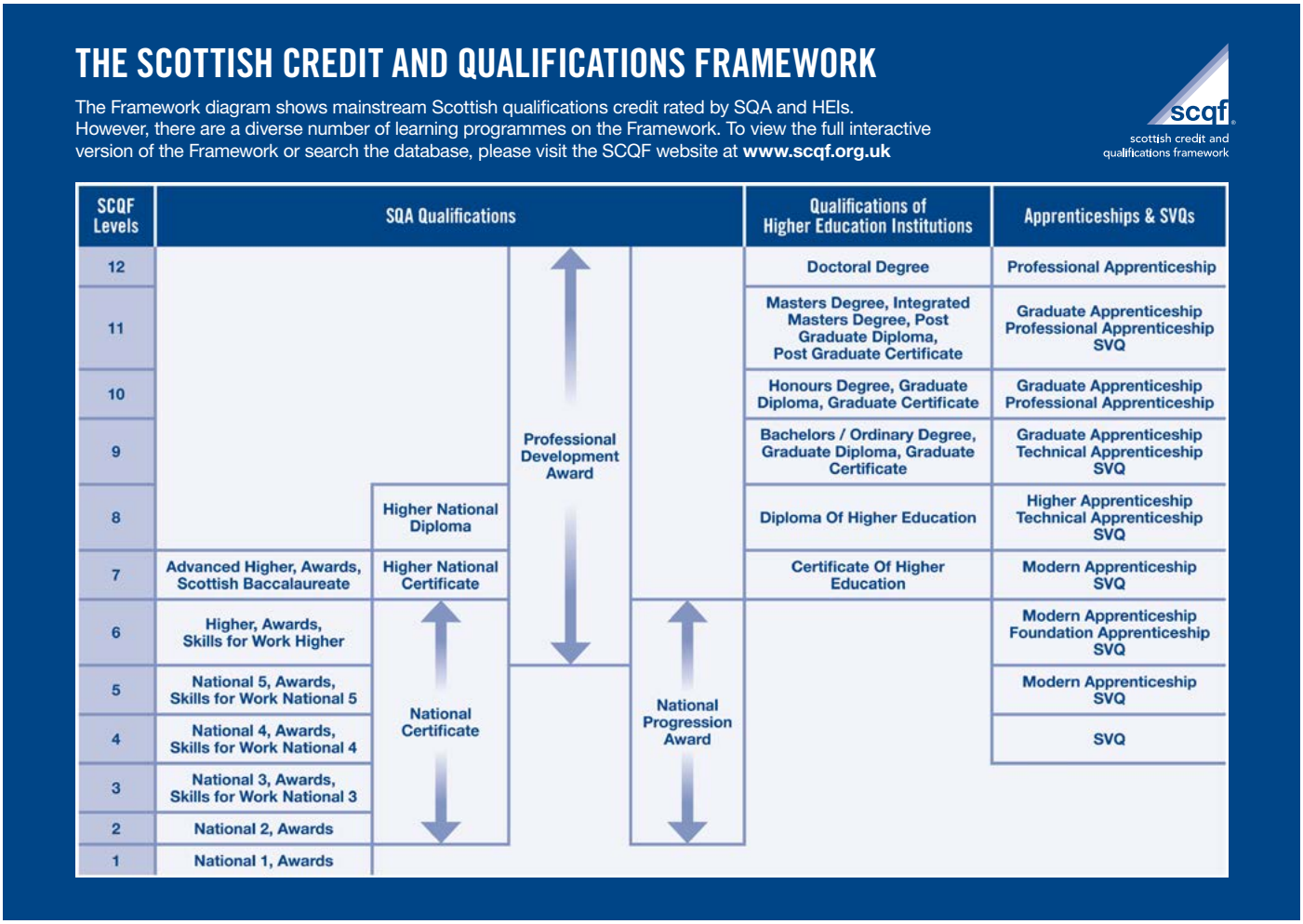


Figure 2: Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (*www.scqf.org.uk*)

1.1.2. Pathways to VET

1.1.2.1. FE colleges: delivering both FE and HE level qualifications

Although increasing numbers of young people obtain a VET qualification in secondary school, colleges remain the main providers of VET in Scotland. Scottish colleges offer both FE (EQF 2–4) and higher education (HE) level qualifications (EQF 5 and above). This is a distinctive feature of the Scottish system, with Scottish colleges fulfilling a dual purpose of delivering VET for the world of work as well as an alternative, second chance route, to HE and on to university.

There are 22 colleges in Scotland across 13 regions; an additional three sit outwith regional arrangements. After a difficult process of regionalisation and forced mergers, the system moved from 43 colleges in 2008–09 to the current reduced number of colleges with a regional focus (Colleges Scotland, 2025b). This restructuring of the sector was made in a moment of severe public cuts and austerity measures, and under the justification that many of the part-time adult education courses offered by colleges did not respond to regional economic realities and to the needs of young people seeking employment. Today the age profile of colleges is skewed towards younger students, with 41% aged 16–24 and 18% aged under 16. This age profile is still high when compared to other European countries because of historical involvement of colleges in the provision of adult education. In 2023–24 there were 218,145 students enrolled at FE colleges, including both further education and higher education students. Of the 267,668 enrolments in Scottish colleges in 2023–24, 85.2% were at FE level. Despite the reduction of public funding for part-time courses, in 2023–24 most students in FE (82.7%) were enrolled on part-time courses (Scottish Funding Council, 2025b).

FE level VET programmes offered by colleges include: National Qualifications (both vocational and academic options), Certificate of Work Readiness, Introduction to Workplace Skills, National Progression Awards, National Certificates and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). Some of these are delivered in collaboration with employers and independent training providers. It is possible to progress from these qualifications on to HE level qualifications provided by colleges. These include Higher National Certificates (HNC) and Higher National Diplomas (HND) which offer an alternative route into university (see Section 1.1.5 below).

Both FE and HE level study (at college or university) is free for students that meet residency and other eligibility requirements (Scottish Funding Council, 2024c). This contrasts with England where students are charged tuition fees of up to £9,535 for an undergraduate degree. Scotland's free tuition policy is linked to the Scottish Government's aims to widen participation to HE among students from under-represented groups. The public expense of free tuition entails less funding for further education in colleges and sends the message that university is the main post-school option. Scotland has in fact the highest attainment rates of post-secondary education in Europe, and the trend is that higher proportions of school leavers enter further and higher education every year and fewer go straight to work. Overall, higher education is the most common destination among young people leaving school. Government data (Scottish Government, 2025b) shows that most school leavers in Scotland (40.8%) entered HE in 2023–24, while 26.4% entered FE upon leaving school. However, it should be noted that a significant proportion of those entering HE (38% in 2022–23) are enrolled in FE colleges (Colleges Scotland, 2025).

The destination of students after leaving school depends largely on their exit point, and this varies across different profiles of students and socioeconomic groups. A key indicator used as a proxy for socioeconomic background by the Scottish Government is the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) which categorises geographic levels according to measurements of neighbourhood deprivation. Students from the 20% most deprived areas (known as SIMD20) are over-represented in FE colleges, and under-represented in universities, especially the oldest Scottish universities. For example, 33.7% of Scottish-domiciled students enrolled on full-time FE courses of more than 160 hours are from SIMD20 areas, compared to 29.2% of those enrolled on FT HE courses in Scottish colleges, and 16.5% of Scottish-domiciled undergraduate entrants in all Scottish universities (though this figure varies greatly by institution ranging between 6.5% and 31.4%) (SFC, 2025h).

In 2023 more than half of pupils remained at school until completing S6 (57.1%), with one fourth leaving after S5 (28.4%), and a small group leaving at S4 (14.4%). Those wishing to go to university tend to stay in school longer to achieve higher qualifications, while those entering further education colleges are more likely to leave school earlier (typically at S5). This is confirmed by the fact that more than half of pupils who left school in S4 in 2023–24 entered FE courses, compared with 37.7% of those who left school in S5, and 14.3% who left in S6. According to the same Scottish Government data, only 4.3% of young people did not achieve a positive destination in education or work upon leaving school (i.e. unemployed seeking work), and this proportion has decreased from 7.2% in 2013–14.

1.1.2.2. Modern Apprenticeship and Graduate Apprenticeship programmes

Since the mid 1990s, school leavers have also had the option of undertaking a Modern Apprenticeship (MA), if they manage to secure a job offer. Under this scheme, young people can earn a wage below the minimum salary and gain an industry-recognised qualification. In recent years, however, the trend has been for young people to enter MAs much later in their trajectories and not just after leaving school (Skills Development Scotland, 2025b). The Scottish Government has committed to expanding the number of Modern Apprenticeships, and to reducing some of the gender inequalities which are heavily present in particular sectors (e.g. social care and construction).

In 2017, the Scottish Government introduced the new Graduate Apprenticeship (GA) scheme. This offers a new route for people to obtain degree and Masters-level qualifications while working in paid employment. Graduate Apprenticeships are offered across 14 vocational sectors (including ICT/ Digital, Cyber Security, Data Science, Civil Engineering, Engineering, Construction and Business), and delivered by 14 Scottish colleges and universities with the support of Skills Development Scotland (SDS). GAs are co-designed between colleges, universities and employers and are intended for those who are currently employed, or who want to enter employment.

In an attempt to strengthen employer engagement in the development of Scottish apprenticeship policy and practice, SDS established the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board, an employer-led group, in 2015. The Scottish Government has allocated funding acquired from the Apprenticeship Levy, an employment tax introduced by the UK Government in 2017, to assist in the expansion of the 3 Scottish apprenticeship programmes (FAs, MAs and GAs).

1.1.2.3. Retention in VET programmes

Beyond access to VET, student dropouts in VET remain a big challenge for colleges. Indicators have recovered from the worst impact of the pandemic, but completion rates have been fairly static at around 65% complete success for FE enrolments on full-time recognised qualifications (Scottish Funding Council, 2024a). Latest data for 2023–24 provides a slightly differently calculated figure, but only because it excludes early withdrawals that account for a significant proportion of college non-completions. This data varies from college to college, but students from vulnerable groups such as care experienced students (Scottish Funding Council, 2025c) and those from the most deprived neighbourhoods tend to have higher rates of non-completion (SFC, 2025). Recent mixed methods research on student finance and wellbeing (Scottish Government, 2024b) found 46% of FE students and 76% of HE students undertook paid work alongside their studies to help support their finances while studying. FE students worked a median of 22 hours per week in paid work, significantly higher than the recommended 10–15 hours per week. Qualitative interviews undertaken with students as

part of the same study highlighted the impact paid work can have on academic performance and ability to complete studies.

Table 1: Outcomes for FE and HE students on full-time recognised qualifications in Scottish colleges 2022–23 (SFC, 2024a)

	Complete success %	Partial success %	Withdrawal %
FE enrolments in college	63.6	11.1	25.3
HE enrolments in college	65.5	14.0	20.6

Table 2: Known results of Foundation Apprentices 2020 (SFC/SDS, 2025)

	Full achievement %	Partial achievement %	No achievement %
SCQF Level 6	46.5	28.7	24.8
SCQF Level 4/5	54.9	12.5	32.6

1.1.3. Background of vocational teachers

In Scotland, teachers in FE colleges are known as lecturers. In 2023–24, 4,910 full-time equivalent (FTE) teaching staff were employed in FE colleges (SFC 2025). Reductions in college budgets in recent years have seen the proportion of FTE teaching staff decrease by 7.7% since 2014–15.

College lecturers have required professional registration since 2017's national bargaining agreement. To be employed as a college lecturer, it is mandatory to be registered with the General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS). In addition to their occupational qualifications, lecturers are required to have, or be working towards, a GTCS-recognised teaching qualification, such as the Teaching Qualification in Further Education (TQFE) (GTCS 2023). This can be obtained at four Scottish universities and is delivered either remotely or on campus, depending on choice of university.

1.1.4. Access for vulnerable groups

Colleges are the most accessible route for vulnerable groups to participate in post-secondary education in Scotland. The socioeconomic profile of school leavers going to FE is lower than the average school leaving population. Participation in FE among school leavers living in areas classed as being in the most deprived 20% areas of the country (36.4%) is more than double the participation of school leavers from the 20% least deprived areas (15.3%). Similarly, the proportion of school leavers with some form of disability going to FE is almost twice the proportion of those going to HE (Scottish Government, 2025b). The same happens with care experienced students, a group that is receiving increasing focus from policy because of their extreme vulnerability. In 2022–23, care experienced students made up 10% of enrolments to full-time FE vs 4% of those in full-time HE (Colleges Scotland, 2025a). Moreover, since 2014–15, the proportions of full-time Scottish FE college entrants enrolled on courses that are 160 hours or more in duration who have a disability, are care-experienced or are Black or Minority Ethnic have increased significantly.

This overrepresentation of school leavers from groups at risk of vulnerability in FE is partially explained by the wide attainment gap in school qualifications between different social groups. School leavers

entering FE tend to be less well-qualified than those going to HE. In 2023–24, the highest qualification of half of the school leavers (50.6%) entering FE was equivalent to a National 5 (EQF 3), with only a small proportion (15.8%) having acquired a Higher (EQF 4) as their highest qualification. This shows a sharp contrast with school leavers entering HE, where more than half (59.5%) had acquired at least one Higher as their highest qualification while in school (Scottish Government, 2025).

The Scottish Government offers different types of support to widen the participation of these social groups in education. Financial support is offered to young people from low-income households in the form of Educational Maintenance Allowance (16–19 in full-time school or college), FE bursaries, and funding for travel, childcare and course costs. As mentioned before, the increased policy focus on care experienced students in Scotland translates into a range of support initiatives to encourage access and retention for this group at both FE and HE level. Disabled students can access support staff and assistive technology via their college too. The Scottish Government's efforts to expand the educational opportunities of vulnerable groups materialise in concrete targets set by Scottish Funding Council in its Outcomes Agreements with colleges and universities. Progress towards these targets is regularly monitored through key performance indicators and publicly accessible statistics.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, the Scottish Government adopted the *Young Person's Guarantee – No One Left Behind* (Scottish Government, 2020) to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable young people (16–19) that were neither in education nor employment. This type of person-centred support is designed and delivered by employability services to help the most disadvantaged in society to overcome barriers to employment.

1.1.5. Transition from college to university

Colleges are a stepping stone on the path to university for many students in Scotland, particularly among those from lower socioeconomic background. In addition to the provision of further education, colleges offer Higher National Qualifications (SQA) that prepare students for the world of work and for the continuation of their studies at university. These qualifications include Higher National Certificates (HNC), that take one year to complete (48 ECTS), and Higher National Diplomas, that take two years to complete (120 ECTS). Under perfect articulation between college and university programmes, HNC graduates should gain entry into the second year of a university degree and HND graduates into the third year. However, overlaps and duplications between education programmes make articulation with advanced standing very difficult for many students. In fact, only 50.7% of HNC/D students went on to enter year 2 or 3 at university in 2022–23 (i.e. articulate with advanced standing), down from a high of 59.2% in 2020–21. Effective articulation relies on one-to-one agreements between individual institutions to 'match content' and recognise grades. And, in a context of a highly stratified university sector, it is not surprising that most prestigious and selective universities and faculties are precisely the ones less inclined to reach this type of articulation agreements with colleges. This fragmented articulation from college and university education penalises students from most deprived areas, as these tend to be overrepresented in HNC/HND courses when compared to their university counterparts (Scottish Funding Council, 2024c).

1.1.6. Transition from VET to the labour market

The youth unemployment rate for 16 to 24 year olds in Scotland has fluctuated in recent years. Between 2013–14 and 2023–24, it decreased from 18% to 10.4% (Scottish Government, 2025c), and is currently estimated to be 11.5% (SDS, 2025c).

In 2022–23 (the latest year for which data is available), 86.7% of college leavers were recorded as having entered a 'positive destination' (SFC, 2025i). The largest group of college leavers entered work (48.4%), while 46.4% went on to university or other destinations. More than a tenth (13.3%) of college leavers were either unemployed or unavailable for work. In 2019–20, the proportion of college leavers entering work dropped from 47.9% the previous year to just 37.5%, showing how the pandemic impacted on young people's employment prospects.

College leaver employment rates were highest in 2022–23 among those who studied at SCQF Level 1–6 (61.9% of leavers gained employment), with those studying SCQF Level 7+ more likely to enrol in a Higher Education Institution (HEI). Additionally, the proportion of college leavers gaining employment varies greatly by subject grouping. Among college leavers with an SCQF level 1–6 qualification, employment levels were highest among those studying Nautical Studies (91.7% of whom gained employment), Engineering (88.5%) and Construction (82.6%). By contrast, employment rates were lowest among college leavers who studied Science (22.8%), Social Subjects (27.3%) and Care (35.5%), where higher proportions were going on to further study and enrolled in an HEI. These differences in terms of subject grouping are also reflected in gender differences. Among college leavers with SCQF level 1–6 qualifications, 51.1% of females gained employment, compared to 72.9% of males. Female college leavers with SCQF 1–6 were more likely to enrol in an HEI (26.9% did so, compared with 6.7% of males). Among college leavers with SCQF levels 7 and above, the gap between male and female students' destinations is considerably smaller, with the majority enrolling in an HEI.

Salary data for college leavers is unavailable in Scotland.

1.2. Main recent reforms in VET (2015–2025)

After the devolution of education powers to the new Scottish Parliament in 1999, the approach of Scottish policymakers to VET did not immediately change. It was driven by similar lifelong learning ideas that had been present in Scotland and the UK over the last decade, and that had been promoted across Europe by the European Commission. The perception that a knowledge-based global economy would require a highly educated and flexible workforce seemed to justify the expansion of the participation in post-compulsory education both for economic competitiveness and social cohesion reasons. After a long process of political consultation, the lifelong learning strategy adopted by the Scottish Government set widening participation to higher education as the main objective of the system (Cook, 2006). The Scottish Qualifications Authority became a key government agency to implement this strategy, as it was responsible for integrating academic and vocational qualifications within a unified framework that should allow articulation and progression of studies (e.g. the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework/SCQF). On the delivery side, colleges were asked to play the double role of equipping learners with the occupational skills demanded by the labour market and, at the same time, preparing them for the academic requirements of continuing their studies in higher education (i.e. through HNC/HND courses).

The alignment of the Scottish and UK governments around lifelong learning principles came to an end with the arrival to power of the Scottish National Party in 2007, and with the Global Financial Crisis of 2008–09 and its devastating effects on youth employment (Field, 2009). The lifelong learning strategy was quickly replaced by a skills strategy more heavily focused on preparing young people for the world of work (Scottish Government, 2007). Some of the measures proposed in this 'skills strategy' were: expanding school-college partnerships, refining the curriculum to emphasise vocational aspects, improving career guidance, and facilitating partnership working with employers. The overall objective was to build a more demand-led VET system that could contribute to the competitiveness and sustainability of the economy in a potentially independent Scotland. Interestingly, the economic turn in VET policy happened at the same time that the Scottish Government decided to abolish tuition fees in higher education under social justice arguments, creating budgetary strains in post-compulsory education that later contributed to severe austerity cuts and forced mergers in the college sector.

Since 2007, the policy of the Scottish Government has openly pursued the differentiation of its VET system from the market model of skill formation in England. The right-wing UK governments of the 80s had put skill formation in the UK in an institutional path of low state commitment and neoliberal market-based solutions, and the Scottish Government in the recent years has been trying to abandon this path (Keep, 2017). Under the skills strategy of the Scottish government, the state was going to gain a greater coordinating role in skill formation through its different agencies (Gallacher & Reeve, 2019). Skills Development Scotland was established as the national skills body responsible for providing career guidance, delivering apprenticeships in collaboration with employers, and gathering labour market intelligence for VET planning. On the side of vocational education supply, the Scottish Funding Council became the main public body responsible for the funding of further and higher education, setting outcome agreements with colleges and universities around government priorities (i.e. widening participation and labour market insertion). This policy architecture was supposed to ensure political direction to the system and guarantee alignment from providers through centralised accountability measures.

The most important VET policy reform adopted by the Scottish Government during this period was *Developing the Young Workforce – DYW* (Scottish Government, 2014a). Conceived as a seven-year plan to tackle youth unemployment, the policy aimed to get more students into work relevant education and training while still in school. To achieve this objective, it created regional partnerships between schools, colleges and employers to facilitate collaboration between schools and businesses to inform career services, curriculum design, the delivery of work placements and the offer of vocational courses while students were still in school. In addition to these regional groups, the policy created new work-based learning qualifications, called Foundation Apprenticeships (EQF 2–4), that school pupils could take in the senior phase of secondary education. Both initiatives shared the purpose of getting employers more involved in the design and delivery of VET, especially during schooling. The underlying assumption was that the experience of learning in real work environments would make vocational pathways more attractive and accessible to students not interested in the academic route to university.

1.2.1. Most recent period of policy reviews (2021–date)

After a period of intensive policy reform in VET under the skills strategy and DYW, a new time of political impasse and ongoing reviews of the system was initiated coinciding with the hit of the pandemic. School and company closures disrupted the learning trajectory of many students, but especially of those from disadvantaged backgrounds and in work-based learning routes. DYW created new vocational pathways and facilitated greater involvement from employers in VET, but the scale of these pathways was very modest and the quality of the engagement from employers and other actors in the terrain very uneven (Scottish Government, 2023b). At the same time, perceptions of vocational options as "second class" when compared to academic routes persisted in the system (Scottish Government, 2023e). The complexity and overlap of qualifications, learning pathways and the difficulties to navigate them (Scottish Government, 2018c) also persisted. In addition, the architecture of VET governance through government agencies demonstrated inefficiencies due to the competition for public funding between them, the proliferation of small initiatives on similar issues, and the contradictory incentives placed on VET providers (Scottish Government, 2023d). In a context of public finance constrains and political uncertainty, the Scottish Government has embarked on a process of external reviews of the VET system that is still ongoing and it is difficult to predict which direction this will take.

2. Promoting VET attractiveness

2.1. Image and awareness of VET

The comprehensive model of upper secondary education in Scotland presents several challenges from the perspective of learning in VET. Despite CfE's attempts to make the learning of academic subjects compatible with learning experiences relevant for the world of work, the widespread perception is that schools mainly prepare students to access university (Scottish Government, 2023d; 2023e). The formal equal value between academic and vocational qualifications is not matched by the perceptions of the actors involved, especially parents and students, but also teachers. The lack of a structured vocational offer at this level makes it very difficult for students to recognise this educational route, to experience work relevant education and to acquire a better understanding of the world of work. This has undesirable consequences from an equity perspective for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic minorities and those with disabilities, precisely those groups which traditionally have poorer access to university education. In recent years the Scottish Government has tried to facilitate collaboration between schools and a wide range of other actors (colleges, employers, skills agencies) through career guidance and new vocational qualifications to increase the visibility and awareness of VET. While increasing numbers of young people are undertaking vocational qualifications in school, data is not available which would allow us to gauge the scale of these activities, how prevalent they are in schools, and how this impacts on young people's awareness of post-school VET.

Scotland and the UK are typical examples of the lower profile of VET when compared to academic education. Even in VET policy documents the Scottish Government recognises that the university sector in Scotland is 'world class', while the college sector is not (Scottish Government, 2014c). These social perceptions may be more or less accurate representations of reality, but they do have causal efficacy on how employers recruit, families invest in education, schoolteachers guide their students, and these

students form their aspirations. In recent years the Scottish Government has taken sustained policy action to raise the profile of VET and make it more attractive to the student population. *Developing the Young Workforce* (DYW) has been its most significant and ambitious VET policies during this period (Scottish Government, 2014a). Conceived as a 7-year national plan (2014–21), DYW aimed to increase the relevance and attractiveness of VET by facilitating greater engagement of employers with schools and colleges (*DYW Regional Groups*) and by creating new work-based education programmes available to students while still at school (*Foundation Apprenticeships*).

In addition to DYW, other major education initiatives launched by the Scottish Government during this period also aimed to achieve more parity of esteem between academic and vocational education. Among the most important, the *15–24 Learner Journey Review* made recommendations to improve the coherence and articulation of the learning pathways available to students in the senior phase and after school (Scottish Government, 2018a); the *Career Service Strategy* expanded careers education to primary schools and promoted a greater role for employers in career services at school (Scottish Government, 2020); and the *Qualifications Review* proposed the reduction in the number of examinations taken by students at school and a greater recognition of practical and experiential forms of learning in national qualifications (Scottish Government, 2023f). Despite the interest of many of these policy proposals, their level of adoption and implementation by the Scottish Government has been very uneven, not leading to concrete and observable changes in VET (at least, yet). For the period of reference, only the policy measures included in DYW (*Regional Groups*, *Foundation Apprenticeships*) could have had a significant impact on the image and awareness of VET.

Something that all these initiatives have in common is the focus on schools. Research is indicating that there is space in secondary schools for widening the palette of study options and for expanding the horizons of self-realisation:

> *"In general, the young people in the sample wanted to see a more balanced focus on vocational as well as academic learning in the last years of school rather than pressure to stay on and sense of failure if the right number of Highers at the right grades for university were not achieved:*
>
> *Anita: That's the sort of culture that we're in–in that you've not done well unless you get 5 Highers, … I'm in a better position now than some people that have had 5 Highers but speaking to teachers now that I had in school they're very impressed …. with what I'm doing but yes, there's that sort of stereotype that you have to go to uni or you're not doing well." (Doyle & Wang, 2022, p. 83).*

The problem that schools also face is that it is difficult for them to find well delineated vocational routes for their students. The complex governance architecture of the VET system in Scotland has given birth to a vast array of vocational qualifications and courses that compete between them for the attention of students. This is in part explained by the lack of strong occupational identities and broad qualifications, favouring the emergence of parallel offerings tied very closely to narrower skill sets needed for specific entry-level jobs. Colleges are the most stable and capable VET institution in Scotland, but their conflicting role between the provision of work relevant education and a second route to universities does not help to build a prestigious brand around a VET identity (Husband, 2018, p. 7). Furthermore, the college route to HE is precisely the one where students suffer more

duplications and institutional barriers for progression (Watson et al., 2020), particularly in the case of the most selective and prestigious universities. And on top of that, the discriminatory financial treatment that colleges receive from government in comparison to universities (Reeve, 2020, p. 12) reinforces the message that VET is of a lower value and puts at risk the sustainability of the service in these institutions (Scottish Funding Council, 2025g).

2.2. Policy measures to promote VET attractiveness

Elevating the prestige of VET and reaching 'parity of esteem' between academic and vocational learning has been a central concern for education policy reforms in Scotland in the last decade. Several policy measures and reviews were found under this heading:

1. The *Developing the Young Workforce* (DYW) strategy (2014–2021) of the Scottish Government explicitly aspired to create a "world-class vocational system" by promoting parity of esteem between academic and vocational routes. We will focus on one specific policy measure of this strategy: the DYW Regional Groups. The work of DYW Regional Groups facilitating school-employer partnerships clearly targeted VET awareness and attractiveness among the school population as its main policy objective (see more in Chapter 2.3).
2. The *Careers Strategy* of the Scottish Government (2020) sets a new universal, digital and collaborative model for better informed choices and improved destinations. The disruption of the pandemic to learning, work and transitions, also affected the provision of on-site Career Information, Advice Guidance (CIAG) services. The new model intends to provide a more resilient service through online delivery. It is also designed to support the CIAG needs of all the population and not just of the most disadvantaged. Finally, the usability and adaptability of the digital tools will allow key stakeholders to develop their own CIAG activities adapted to their own needs and populations. In terms of VET attractiveness, the careers strategy is interesting because of the early integration of careers education in primary schools and the way it was embedded within the work of DYW Regional Groups through the collaborative career service model. It was also the first policy initiative in the VET sector that incorporated the voice of beneficiaries (i.e. young people) in the management and development of the service. Due to the recent adoption of this initiative, the literature on its implementation and effects is still scarce or unavailable (Skills Development Scotland, 2024), not yet allowing for an integrative review of evidence.
3. The *Apprenticeship Network* was established in 2018 as a means of linking schools throughout Scotland with current and former apprentices who would visit schools to share their experiences and promote apprenticeships.
4. The Scottish Government's independent review of the skills delivery landscape (*Fit for the Future: Developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation*) was published in 2023. It brings together various elements of reforms to colleges (going back to the regionalisation of colleges in 2013) and other structural reforms (to training and skills bodies) which impact on the perceived attractiveness of VET. The review has been integral to the development of the *Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill* which is currently proceeding through Parliament and will change the way that funding is provided for post-school education and skills training.

5. *It's our future: Report of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment* was also published in the same year (2023). This seeks to outline ways in which qualifications and assessment can be better aligned with the aspirations of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence. It also recommended that parity of esteem between types of qualifications be enhanced by recognising all qualifications at the same SCQF level with the same credit points be recognised as equal. The review is a critical piece of the policy landscape in Scotland and is key to plans for educational reform. It informed the development of the *Education (Scotland) Act 2025* which establishes a new Scottish qualifications body and a new body for education inspections.

2.3. Selected policy measure: DYW Regional Groups

The Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) Regional Groups are industry-led bodies created by the Scottish Government to act as brokers between schools, colleges and business. Their main aim is to raise the attractiveness of VET among school pupils and to better align education with the needs of regional labour markets. They seek to achieve this by promoting employer engagement in education through the establishment of school-employer partnerships.

DYW Regional Groups were one of the policy measures included in the youth employment strategy adopted by the Scottish Government in 2014. The government strategy was a response to the Commission led by the businessman Sir Ian Wood, which called for (among other things) stronger partnerships between the education sector and employers, allegedly emulating the VET models of best performing EU countries (Scottish Government, 2014c). The Scottish Government responded to this recommendation with the creation of the *Regional Invest in Young People Groups* to connect schools, colleges, and employers (Scottish Government, 2014a).

The implementation of the DYW strategy was designed as a collaborative effort between government agencies (Education Scotland, Skills Development Scotland, Scottish Funding Council), schools, local authorities and the business sector. DYW governance groups were created at national level to provide direction and oversee the whole implementation process of the government strategy (Scottish Government, 2014a, pp. 43–46). In this sense, the creation of the DYW Regional Groups was aligned with the government's ambition to get employers more involved in the governance of VET through partnerships across different levels.

The DYW joint implementation plan of 2015 set a target that all secondary schools would have active partnerships with employers and regional colleges by 2018–19. In the 2015 guidance, DYW Regional Groups were positioned as key intermediaries, supporting DYW school coordinators and local authorities to set up and sustain meaningful employer partnerships. (Education Scotland, 2015, p. 7). These school-employer partnerships are supposed to facilitate a potentially broad and varied range of collaboration activities, depending on the needs and capacities of the schools and employers involved. These can include one-off events such as careers fairs, mock job interviews, and workplace visits. But they can also involve greater levels of commitment and long-term forms of engagement, for example, with employers participating in the design of the school curriculum (Education Scotland, 2019).

The implementation of DYW Regional Groups started with the establishment of 8 initial groups between 2014–16. In 2016–17, additional Regional Groups were launched, creating a national network

of 21 DYW Regional Groups covering all of Scotland. Despite being originally conceived as part of DYW seven-year plan, Regional Groups have continued operating since 2021 integrated into the broader Young People's Guarantee and Skills Action Plan (Scottish Government, 2023g). The cost of each Regional Group ranges from £200,000 to £340,000 per annum, with contributions covering staff, events, and overheads. This public funding has been supplemented by in-kind contributions from employers and Chambers of Commerce, for example by hosting the Regional Groups in their premises.

Regional Groups are led by a board, chaired by an employer, with participation from education and local authority representatives. The work of the board is supported by an executive team formed of programme managers and project officers usually provided by Skills Development Scotland (SDS). The executive team is the one responsible for the management of the different engagement initiatives: the digital platform to match schools and employers, innovation funds to incentivise collaboration, employer awards, public awareness campaigns, etc. Regional Groups are under the strategic oversight of the National Group of the Scottish Government and report biannually against a nationally streamlined set of performance indicators, which include the number of school-employer partnerships they have facilitated, their quality, impact, and longevity (Developing the Young Workforce, 2019).

A key performance indicator for DYW Regional Groups is the number of employers that actively engaged in preparing young people for work while in school. According to self-reported data for 2021–22, as a result of the work of the Regional Groups 3,374 employers offered work experience, 6,397 employers offered work inspiration/preparation activities, and 380 employers offered volunteering opportunities (Developing the Young Workforce, 2022). While this data seems to suggest that Regional Groups are having a positive effect on employers' engagement with schools, it is difficult to assess the size of this effect. Data from the Scottish Employer Perspectives Survey 2021 seems to corroborate this positive effect as employers that engaged with DYW Regional Groups were significantly more likely to provide work inspiration activities (53% vs 8%) and work placements (55% vs 27%) compared to employers overall. However, the same survey also showed the limited reach and visibility of this work, as only 15% of employers were aware of DYW Regional Groups, though awareness increased with employer size (Scottish Government, 2023c).

The Scottish Government commissioned several evaluation studies about the impact of DYW on education and on employers (Scottish Government, 2023c). On the education side, school populations reported that awareness of VET had increased and that a more balanced status with academic learning had been achieved among students and parents. They reported that students were more aware of the opportunities available in the world of work, having a particularly positive effect on the aspirations of those students that did not thrive in the school environment (Scottish Government, 2023h). These positive perceptions about the effect of DYW on VET awareness and attractiveness could be one of the possible explanations for the growing participation of school pupils in VET qualifications in Scotland. In fact, the proportion of school leavers attaining vocational qualifications at SCQF level 5 or above rose from 10.7% in 2015–16 to 34.9% in 2023–24 (Scottish Government, 2025a). It is impossible to make causal attributions to policy interventions, but it seems clear that the implementation of the Scottish Government DYW strategy has been followed by a period of growing interest for VET among students in the senior phase of schooling.

2.4. Strengths and weaknesses

Scotland is not the only country pursuing greater coordination between education and the world of work, and higher levels of engagement of employers in the training of young people. In contrast to market-based solutions that try to alter the structure of economic incentives of employers (e.g. the UK government's apprenticeship levy), the Regional Groups adopted by the Scottish Government try to achieve their goal through the institutionalisation of the collaboration between education and business actors. This more institutional approach has the advantage of allowing different actors in different contexts to build the type of partnerships that better respond to their local needs and priorities. The Regional Groups dashboard sets standards to assess and classify the reach and the intensity of school-employer partnerships, but it does not promote competition between Regional Groups or schools against these indicators. The clearest potential weakness of this approach is the fragility of these ad hoc institutional bodies and lack of collective representation from trade unions and employers.

Other countries may pursue similar goals but the starting point for them will probably be very different, making it difficult to extract concrete policy lessons. Scotland adopted this model of collaboration from a very low baseline of institutionalisation of VET coordination. The potential positive effect of this initiative on VET awareness and attractiveness in Scotland could be explained by the paucity of links between schools and the world of work before the adoption of DYW.

3. Promoting transition to VET

3.1. Policy measures to promote transition to VET

Several education initiatives have tried to contribute to the design of flexible and coherent vocational pathways for students in the senior phase of schooling. The two policies that we initially pre-selected are very different in their approach and in their level of concretion in tangible policy changes that could be evaluated.

1. *Foundation Apprenticeships* (FA) are one the main policy innovations introduced by Developing the Young Workforce (2014) in the VET system. FAs were created as work-based learning qualifications that students could take while in their senior phase of schooling. The expectation was that this practical learning experience in the workplace would better prepare young people for the world of work at the same time as allowing them to continue their studies through a vocational route. This is the policy that we will focus on in Chapter 3.2.
2. The *15–24 Learner Journey Review* (Scottish Government, 2018a) refers to a report commissioned in 2016 by the Scottish Government and published in 2018. The report called for a more coherent design of the learning pathways available to students in their trajectories. This education policy debate linked with the original aspiration of the major schooling reform, *Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Government, 2009), to develop young people's skills and knowledge while at school without the hierarchical differentiation between academic and vocational curriculum. Tensions around the equivalence of academic and vocational qualifications, pressure on exams to access university, and unnecessary duplications in the system were some of the issues questioned by

the *Learner Journey Review* (Scottish Government, 2018), the OECD's *Review of Curriculum for Excellence* (2021) and by the *Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment* (Scottish Government, 2023f) that was commissioned and published a few years after. Despite the richness of the debate originated by these reviews, no concrete measures have been possible to identify in this policy stream, making it impossible to evaluate this approach to implementation and impact.

3. *The Scottish Attainment Challenge* was established in 2015 and has been in place since then as a means to close the poverty-related attainment gap. This is done via the *Attainment Scotland Fund* which is made up of Strategic Equity Funding, which provides funding to all 32 local authorities, and Pupil Equity Funding which is allocated directly to schools to be spent at the discretion of headteachers. Schools' allocation of PEF is dependent upon the proportions of pupils living in deprived areas. Additional funding is available for local authorities to target initiatives, activities and resources to improve the educational outcomes of pupils who are care experienced.

3.2. Selected policy measure: Foundation Apprenticeships

Foundation Apprenticeships (FA) were introduced to provide a new vocational pathway in the senior phase of secondary school (age 15–18). They allow pupils to study a vocational qualification alongside their academic qualifications (e.g. Nationals and/or Highers). Pupils spend time outside of school and attend the local college, local authority training or independent training providers, while also undertaking a practical, work-based element with an employer.

Foundation Apprenticeships are one of the main policy measures that emerged from the youth employment strategy *Developing the Young Workforce* (DYW) adopted by the Scottish Government in 2014. In the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis, and in a context of high rates of youth unemployment (18.4%), the Scottish Government established a Commission led by a business representative, Sir Ian Wood, that should propose recommendations for making the education system more responsive to the needs of work. Looking to examples of EU countries (e.g. Germany, Switzerland, Netherlands), the Commission recommended the expansion of work-based learning opportunities for young people and the creation of apprenticeship pathways that could begin in school, and continue until HE (Scottish Government, 2014c). This publication was followed by a Scottish Government response in the form of a youth employment strategy that already mentioned the launch of the first pilots of FAs (Scottish Government, 2014b). Interestingly, earlier iterations of DYW reports mentioned that completion of FAs would provide a direct route and accelerated entry to Modern Apprenticeships (Scottish Government, 2015), but the aspiration of articulating the different apprenticeship pathways was never developed into concrete policy mechanisms and today has disappeared from official policy documents.

The first FAs were designed as 2-year courses leading to a SCQF 6 qualification (EQF4). These courses were piloted in two local authorities between 2014 and 2016 and then rolled out nationally in 2016. Under this design, students spend one day per week with a learning provider during the first year, and one or two days per week at the workplace in the second year. In 2017–18 a Short Duration Delivery Model (SDDM) was introduced for some of the frameworks in these courses. The measure was introduced to align better with school subject timetables and give flexibility for students to take them in the last year at school (S6). Under the one-year formula, students devoted two days per week to their FA programme. In 2019–20 FAs at lower levels (EQF 2–3) were introduced as a pilot in S4, and numbers have been growing at this level since then (SFC/SDS, 2025). These are delivered over

a single year, and students work towards achieving a customised Skill for Work Award or a National Progression Award in their trade.

Today FAs are offered across 12 frameworks aligned to key sectors in the Scottish economy. At SCQF level 6 (EQF 4), these frameworks include accountancy, business skills, civil engineering, creative and digital media, engineering, financial services, food and drink technologies, IT: hardware/system support, IT: software development, scientific technologies, social services and healthcare, social service children and young people. In the case of SCQF levels 4 and 5 (EQF 2–3), the frameworks offered are automotive, construction and hospitality.

DYW was initially planned as a time-limited seven year project from 2014, but FAs are one of the measures that appear to have become routine policy. Responsibility for FAs has changed over time between government agencies. Up to 2021, Skills Development Scotland (SDS) was responsible for all FAs but, since then, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has become responsible for those FAs run through colleges, while SDS has responsibility for FAs provided by Local Authorities and Independent Training Providers. This is likely to change again if the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) Bill is passed which will see all responsibility for FAs passed to SFC in an attempt to address some of the fragmentation and complexity within the governance of the system (SPICe, 2025). It is hard to find out exactly how much the FA programme itself has cost or how much budget was allocated to it as it is funded out of the overall SFC and SDS budgets. According to the OECD review of apprenticeships in Scotland (OECD, 2022), public spending on FAs accounts for £14.57m, compared to £16.89m for Graduate Apprenticeships and £61m for Modern Apprenticeships.

The implementation of FAs has been incremental. In 2022–23, there were 4,655 FA enrolments, 13.5% more than in the previous year. However, FAs still represent a very small proportion of the student population attending the senior phase. Enrolments are clustered in specific frameworks, with social services frameworks accounting for almost half of all enrolments at SCQF Level 6 (EQF 4) and construction for more than half of those at SCQF Level 4/5 (EQF 2–3). Enrolments by framework are heavily skewed in terms of gender; 90% of students enrolled on the social service frameworks are female, compared with less than 10% of female students in the construction frameworks. Enrolment trends seem to indicate growing numbers in lower-level frameworks (EQF 2–3) and a preference for shorter duration delivery model of 1 year, accounting for 65% of total enrolments. Completion rates for FAs SCQF Level 6 (EQF 4) are low, less than 50% for all years between 2016–17 and 2020–22. This contrasts with a slightly better completion rate for those in FAs SCQF Level 4/5 (EQF 2–3), above 65% for the same period (SFC/SDS, 2025).

As one would expect, the implementation of a new work-based learning modality at school faced many challenges. Schools had to adapt to a new reality of subject choices and delivery modes in collaboration with external providers. That meant that students were not always given the right information, that timetables did not accommodate their choices, and that schools continued prioritising academic subjects over FAs (Scottish Government, 2023h). Consequently, many students felt unprepared for the requirements of their FA, contributing to the high rates of withdrawal. Similarly, the lack of coordination between key stakeholders is perceived as one of the factors hindering the original vision of FAs as offering an entry point for higher level apprenticeships (MAs) after school, leaving students with the only exit route of either college or university after completing their FAs (Education Scotland, 2022, p. 14).

The most serious challenge for FAs is the low student numbers. Since 2016–17 more than 20,000 school pupils have enrolled in FAs, but this represents a very modest figure of around 1,300 school leavers having attained an FA per year. And this compares with a much higher number achieving other VET qualifications while at school (Scottish Government, 2025b). None of the evaluations of the programme explicitly discuss the factors that may explain the stagnation of the programme. Only a recent SDS report (Skills Development Scotland, 2025a) clearly signalled that demand for FAs exceeded current supply, and that the reason for the low numbers was the cap on 2,500 starts imposed by public funding restrictions.

There have been several external independent evaluations of DYW commissioned by the Scottish Government, but none specifically targeting the impact of FAs. No research has been undertaken with young people exploring whether and how their participation in the FA impacted on their career and educational aspirations or their thoughts and experiences of the vocational pathway. Also there has been a lack of research with school, college, ITPs, employers and other stakeholders about the delivery of the FAs and their views on their success or otherwise. FAs in Aberdeenshire are highlighted as an example of good practice by DYW evaluations because of positive perceptions among actors, but the data is very superficial and does not explore young people's experiences and post-school trajectories in any depth (Scottish Government, 2023a). Existing evaluations overall seem to concur in reporting the high satisfaction with a learning experience that blends theory and workplace experience combined with continuous assessment. But this positive experience does not appear to lead to more students taking apprenticeship pathways, as most of those taking an FA progress to college or university, with increasing numbers going to university (Education Scotland, 2022).

3.3. Strengths and weaknesses

The main strength of FAs is that they offer a learning experience that combines the theoretical knowledge acquired at school with the practical skills developed at the workplace. This early experience with the world of work is also expected to have a positive impact on the aspirations and choices of young people, as they will have an experiential knowledge of what they like (or not) about a specific trade or sector. However, all these potential benefits for the small group of students participating in FAs probably do not justify the mobilisation of energy and resources if the programme cannot be escalated. The diversification of school activity to make compatible different timetables and organisational logics, necessarily requires greater levels of public commitment in VET funding. Contrary to what sometimes has been argued in the VET transfer literature (Euler, 2013), the main challenge for those countries trying to adopt dual forms of VET is not on the side of employers, but on the side of a state sector that does not commit enough resources to the education of young people.

4. Supporting participation and preventing dropout in VET

4.1. Policy measures to support participation and preventing dropout in VET

As highlighted in section 1.1.2.3 college retention rates vary depending on qualification or programme and by student group, with students from more disadvantaged backgrounds generally having poorer rates of retention. However, in the Scottish policy literature reviewed as part of this report, there is little mention of national measures to support participation and prevent VET dropout. Instead, most of the measures to support students while in college are managed by the same colleges as autonomous educational bodies. The Scottish Government sets widening participation targets on colleges and universities through their Outcome Agreements with the Scottish Funding Council, but it does not interfere in how education institutions organise this support. The policy measure we have selected is one of the few government initiatives that have a direct effect on the ability of colleges to retain some of their students in vulnerable situations.

1. The Care Experienced Student Bursary was originally designed to incentivise the participation and retention in higher education of students with experience of any form of care (including foster care, residential care and kinship care) before turning 18. It was not until the year after its implementation in HE that the bursary scheme was extended to FE students. Despite not having been specifically designed for the college sector, it is precisely in this sector where students can benefit the most due to their lower socioeconomic background. This policy is also the focus of Chapter 4.2.
2. The Scottish Government established a National Improvement Programme to look at college student attainment (2017–2019), with 5 colleges taking part in the first phase of the project. The project aimed to explore what was working well and what more the FE sector could do to ensure college students continue in their studies. We were unable to find any further published information on this work and so were unable to include it as part of our detailed review.

4.2. Selected policy measure: Care Experienced FE Student Bursary

The Care Experienced Student Further Education Bursary (CESFEB) is a policy that entitles care experienced students enrolled on full-time FE courses to a non-repayable bursary, for up to 3 years, if they remain enrolled in college. The bursary aims to improve access to FE and support participation and retention among care experienced students by providing financial security. It is intended to take the place of parental financial support, which is often lacking for this group of students. The bursary is not means-tested, with eligibility linked to care experienced status, not income (Scottish Government, 2019).

The term ‘care experienced student’ is used in education policy in Scotland but it does not have statutory basis. It refers to any student:

"who has been or is currently in care or from a looked-after background at any stage in their life, no matter how short, including adopted children who were previously looked-after. This care may have been provided in a one of many different settings such as in residential care, foster care, kinship care, or through being looked-after at home with a supervision requirement" (Scottish Funding Council, 2025a).

In recent years, care experienced students have become a key target group for the Scottish Government, who have sought ways to increase their participation and retention in education in response to their poor educational outcomes.

Scottish Government data shows that looked after children (that is, children who have been cared for by the State in some way) are more likely to leave school at age 16 or under and to leave school with fewer qualifications. They also have lower attendance rates at school and are less likely to be in a positive destination 9 months after leaving school. They are more likely to be enrolled on an FE college course (47.3% of those looked after in the last year vs 26.6% of all school leavers) or training (12% vs 3.4%) three months after leaving school than all school leavers (Scottish Government, 2024a). Scottish Government data also shows that care experienced students have significantly poorer outcomes than their non-care experienced peers if they do reach further education, with much poorer rates of retention and course completion.

The introduction of the CESFEB is just one of a range of different policies targeted at supporting care experienced students implemented by the Scottish Government since 2014. For example, The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act, 2014, named FE colleges and universities as 'corporate parents'. This gave them legal responsibility towards every child who is looked after by a Local Authority, and every young person (up to age 26), who was previously looked after. As corporate parents, colleges and universities have a range of responsibilities including promoting the interests of their care experienced students, assessing their needs for services provided by the institution, being alert to matters which might adversely affect their wellbeing, providing opportunities for them to participate in activities designed to improve their wellbeing, and helping them to access opportunities in the institution (Scottish Government, 2018b).

Interestingly, the care experienced bursary was first introduced in HE and only later in FE. The *Commission on Widening Access*, established by the Scottish Government in 2015 and responsible for assessing fairness in access to higher education, recommended that a non-repayable bursary should replace student living cost loans for HE students with experience of care (Scottish Government, 2016). It was not until the *Independent Review of Student Support in Scotland* (Scottish Government, 2017), that the government decided to extend the bursary to FE. The Review highlighted the financial challenges faced by care experienced students in FE and recommended the provision of parity of student support between those in FE and HE. The following year, in 2018–19, the bursary was extended to care experienced students in FE.

When the CESFEB was introduced in 2018–19, students were paid £202.50 per week during term-time only, for a maximum of 43 weeks (Scottish Funding Council, 2018). Bursary levels remained the same until 2023–24 when it was increased to £225 per week for FE. This increase brought the bursary in line with the Real Living Wage, after a period of rising student poverty caused by the pandemic

and the cost-of-living crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on students' finances (Minty & Vertigans, 2021), but the financial difficulties faced by students did not improve in the post-pandemic period when Scotland and the rest of the UK were hit by a cost of living crisis and rising inflation (ONS, 2023; NUS Scotland, 2023). The effects of this were felt particularly by those who were care experienced and/or studying in FE (NUS Scotland, 2022).

To receive the bursary students must provide proof of their status as a care experienced student. This might include a letter from their social worker or from the local authority. Students apply directly to their college to receive the bursary, which is funded by the Scottish Government via the Scottish Funding Council. In addition to the CESFEB, care experienced students are also eligible to receive funding support from their college from all the means-tested schemes available to students from low-income households. These schemes can cover travel, study costs, additional support needs, childcare and discretionary awards for students experiencing financial hardship (Scottish Funding Council, 2025f). In addition to financial support, any student who discloses their care experienced status to their college is allocated the support and guidance of a named person at the college who they can discuss their situation and needs with. The Named Contact is expected to guide care experienced students with their transition to college; support before and during their studies; and assist with preparation for post-college destinations.

The main strength of the CESFEB policy is that it provides care experienced students with a regular source of income for the duration of their studies that is not repayable, means-tested, nor limited to a specific age group. The initial eligibility requirement that students had to be aged under 26 was removed in 2020–21 as it proved to be problematic, given that care experienced students often take longer to access further education. Eligibility was also extended, first in 2022–23 to students who were looked after in informal care arrangements, and later in 2024–25 to those whose experience of care occurred outside the UK (Scottish Funding Council, 2025e).

The implementation of the CESFEB has faced many challenges since its inception. In its first year of implementation, some councils restricted or removed the funding they provided to care experienced students based on a poor understanding of the measure. Instead of seeing the bursary as an addition to existing benefits, they thought the policy came as a substitution. This misunderstanding left many beneficiaries in a very vulnerable situation (The Herald, 2019) forcing the Scottish Government to intervene (Scottish Government, 2019). The implementation of the policy on the side of colleges was problematic too. Lack of consistency in bursary administration and in the monitoring of attendance requirements led to the interruption, or removal, of payments in some cases. Furthermore, as the bursary relies on self-identification, awareness among students depends largely on the ability of colleges to inform them. Some students may be reluctant to declare their care experience, given the stigma associated with this. Beyond information, some care experienced students reported that their application processes at college were stressful and 're-traumatising' (O'Neill et al., 2019).

Since the first *Commission on Widening Access Report* (Scottish Government, 2016), universities and colleges have had to submit data on the background of their student populations so progress against a range of widening access measures can be tracked. This data shows that the proportion of Care Experienced FE students enrolled at Scottish colleges on courses 160 hours+ in duration has increased from 0.4% in 2013–14 to 10.4% in 2023–24. This is significantly higher than the proportion of care experienced students in HE (Scottish Funding Council, 2025h). Also, when comparing data

on FE students from before and after the bursary was introduced, completion rates among CESFEB recipients increased from 51% in 2017–18 to 57.3% the year after (Scottish Funding Council, 2021).

The positive impact of the policy on beneficiaries recorded in official statistics has been corroborated by several qualitative and quantitative studies (Howard & MacQuarrie, 2022; Minty & Vertigans, 2021; O'Neill et al., 2019; Scottish Government, 2024b). They highlight the ways in which the care experienced bursaries help students by allowing them to focus on their studies, undertake less part-time work, improve their ability to socialise, and reduce worries about debt, which in turn improves mental health. However, they also show that some care experienced students struggled to cover all of their costs using their bursary alone (Scottish Government, 2024b) and some continued living in very precarious situations (O'Neill et al., 2019). Additionally, the bursary is only paid during term-time, leaving students with little financial support during vacation periods (Scottish Government, 2024b).

Despite the clear signs of a positive impact of the bursary, large inequalities between care experienced students and the rest of the student population persist. The SFC's national ambition (Scottish Funding Council, 2020) that the gap between care experienced and non-care experienced students' outcomes should be 10% by 2022–23 was missed. College performance indicators for 2022–23 showed that care experienced students enrolled on college courses lasting 160 hours or more had a complete success rate of 55.4% compared to 68.1% among all students on those courses (Scottish Funding Council, 2024b). In fact, care-experienced students had the lowest success rate (60.5%) and highest non-completion rate (21.4%) when compared to all other reported key interest groups (deprived postcode, disability, ethnic minority) (Scottish Funding Council, 2025d).

4.3. Strengths and weaknesses

One of the most intriguing aspects of the care experienced bursaries is that they define a target group that only exists in the education sector. One would expect any effort to target the poor to be consistent across social services and education. This way beneficiaries would not need to apply to their college for their care experienced status to be recognised. Another aspect that also requires consideration is the insistence of the Scottish Government in presenting the bursary as an incentive for care experienced people to enrol in education. One may think that the government would support this population in any productive activity for them or for society, but it is specifically in education that the Scottish Government is interested in care-experienced people investing their time. Widening access to education has played a very important role in the legitimation of the powers of the Scottish institutions and it appears to play also an important role in the recognition of citizenship rights for those in the most vulnerable groups in society. Scotland's care experienced bursaries certainly offer a very good example of how targeted policies coordinate across public services, manage conditionalities on beneficiaries and contribute to their citizenship rights. While the CESFEB plays an important part in supporting FE access and retention, it should also be noted that it represents just one element of a raft of policies targeted at care experienced students. If this form of targeted support is to be transferable to other contexts then, it will require significant political will to take a more holistic approach to improving the life chances and outcomes of a targeted group.

5. Summary

This report provides an overview of the VET system in Scotland and the policy reforms adopted by the Scottish Government to enhance participation in VET among young people. The final aim of the report is to inform the comparative analysis of VET system characteristics, policy approaches and lessons learned across European countries to be carried out as part of the second work package of the Horizon Europe VETprep project. The first part of the report (Section 1) shows how the education system in Scotland organises the opportunities to access initial VET from secondary school to higher education. It analyses recent participation trends in VET through official statistics with a specific focus on the trajectories of those young people in vulnerable situations. The second part of the report focuses on the education policies adopted by the Scottish Government in the last decade to promote the attractiveness of VET (Section 2), support the transitions to VET (Section 3), and prevent dropouts in VET (Section 4). This second part of the report draws on an integrative review of literature to evaluate the implementation and impact on VET participation of three selected policy measures of the Scottish Government (*DYW Regional Groups, Foundation Apprenticeships, Care Experienced FE Student Bursary*). The review of evidence on these policy initiatives informs reflections on policy learning from the Scottish case for other European contexts.

Scotland's secondary education is comprehensive and non-selective from the age of 12 (S1) to the age of 18 (S6), and the national *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) offers students in the Senior Phase (S4–S6) great flexibility to combine academic and vocational qualifications while at school. Despite the formal equivalence between qualifications (SCQF), studying at university is the most prestigious destination after school. Colleges are the main providers of VET after school, both at FE and HE levels. Apprenticeships (MAs) represent another major pathway into VET but increasingly enrol older learners and fewer school leavers.

Colleges in Scotland fulfil the dual role of delivering VET for work and offering a second chance route to university. Colleges play a strategic role in widening access as socially disadvantaged and minority groups are overrepresented in colleges when compared to universities. However, many of the students completing their HE in colleges (HNC/HND) face institutional barriers and duplications in their transition to university, which damages the educational opportunities of those from less privileged backgrounds. Retention rates are also a matter of concern for college students, with only two thirds of those in FE achieving successful completion. This is due to several financial constraints and personal circumstances that disproportionally affect young people in vulnerable situations.

VET policy in Scotland has followed a trajectory of purposeful differentiation from the market-led model of skill formation established in England over the years. The Scottish Government's approach to VET has been characterised by a greater coordinating role of the state in the provision of VET through its agencies (i.e. SFC, SDS, SQA) and the aspiration of making the contribution of VET to economic growth compatible with the aim of social justice. The Global Financial Crisis marked a period of intense VET policy reform that crystallised in a seven-year plan *Developing the Young Workforce* (DYW) (2014–2021). This aimed to expand the participation in VET among young people from school through greater collaboration between schools, colleges and employers in the provision of VET, particularly through work-based learning. The period after the pandemic has been

characterised by several policy reviews (e.g. *Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment*, *Skill Delivery Landscape Review*) that have not led to concrete institutional changes but have certified the permanence of recurrent challenges in the system, like the low prestige of vocational routes, confusing and overlapping qualifications, and delivery gaps between providers and across regions. The present report systematises existing publicly available evidence on the implementation and impact of three Scottish Government policy initiatives from this period directed to increase the attractiveness of VET (*DYW Regional Groups*), support the transition to VET (*Foundation Apprenticeships*), and prevent dropouts in VET (*Care Experienced FE Student Bursary*).

DYW Regional Groups are industry-led bodies designed to act as brokers between education providers and employers. The range of collaboration activities facilitated by these groups range from the joint organisation of punctual events like work fairs, to the provision of work placements, or more rarely the direct involvement of employers in the joint development of some aspects of the school curriculum. Thousands of employers have engaged in collaborations with schools, and the general pattern is of high satisfaction among all the parts involved in these experiences. However, the level of implementation and awareness of these initiatives is very uneven across regions and sectors, and the level of engagement varies significantly from case to case. It seems that the policy has been one of the contributing factors to the higher uptake of vocational qualifications in schools in the recent years, but its specific contribution cannot be established because of the lack of impact evaluation data.

Foundation Apprenticeships (FAs) were originally conceived to offer a structured work-based learning pathway from school to Modern Apprenticeships and Graduate Apprenticeships. However, this initial aspiration was quickly readjusted as most young people continued their studies at college or university after completing their FAs. In their FAs, school pupils have the chance to follow a work-based learning programme delivered in collaboration between an employer and colleges or training providers, leading to a vocational qualification. FAs have undergone many implementation challenges because of difficulties coordinating school timetables and the prioritisation of academic subjects at school. Local coordinators have become crucial actors for its implementation and their cost is one of the main limitations for the expansion of the policy.

Finally, the Care Experienced Student Further Education Bursary (CESFEB) is a policy initiative that seeks to target young people with experience in foster, kinship or residential care because of the substantial barriers they face in education. The initiative is part of a larger pool of measures targeting this group, for example designating colleges and universities 'corporate parents' with legal duties towards these students. The bursary was originally designed for HE and one year later expanded to FE. It provides a guaranteed and non-repayable income (aligned with the Real Living Wage) for care experienced students enrolled in full-time FE courses. The quantitative evidence suggests a positive impact of the policy as participation rates have risen sharply with the bursary. Also, qualitative evidence indicates that the bursary facilitates students' ability to focus on their studies by reducing the need to work and their worries about money.

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