

# **Supporting disabled learners to realise their potential**

**Improving disabled learners' progression through learning in colleges**



**Lead Scotland, February 2015**

Commissioned by the Equality Challenge Unit

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# 1. Executive summary

Lead Scotland aimed to find out why disabled learners in college are not progressing through learning levels as well as non-disabled learners, and recommend practical steps for colleges to help learners overcome the learning barriers they may experience.

Lead Scotland has significant experience in working with disabled learners, families and colleges, and recognises the excellent work many colleges have undertaken in recent years to promote and develop inclusiveness. However, due to the nature of this research and the inevitable focus on barriers to learning, we recognise that this report inevitably foregrounds learners' negative experiences in order to move towards improvement.

Key findings from our survey of learners and parents/carers highlighted that:

- 43% of learners didn't receive any support to help them prepare for the transition to college
- 40% of learners didn't move up to the next SCQF level when moving between learning levels
- the majority of learners (43%) didn't progress to the next level for reasons relating to their impairment (primarily lack of appropriate learning support)
- younger learners, part-time learners, and those who have come to college straight from school are least likely to progress to the next learning level
- the majority of learners (65%) who left college early did so for reasons relating to their impairment (primarily lack of appropriate learning support)
- there is a perception that those who are confident enough to challenge decisions receive the most effective support.

Both learners and parents/carers suggested a number of measures for addressing many of the barriers which disabled learners experience. Lead Scotland recommends that there are a number of practical steps which colleges can take on board, whereas other issues will need to be addressed at a national level.

Our key recommendations for colleges:

- offer a broad range of courses at all SCQF levels
- put the learner at the centre of all processes and decisions affecting their learning journey
- recognise that parents often have a key role to play when identifying the learner's support package
- ensure that all disabled learners have access to a named staff member / keyworker
- aim to anticipate a wide range of reasonable adjustments which disabled learners may require, while still responding to individual requests for support
- put in place a wide range of pre-entry support measures
- aim to develop and improve partnership working with relevant agencies

The outcomes of this research will be used to inform the way in which the Equality Challenge Unit works with colleges to support them to develop relevant policies and practices to effectively meet the needs of disabled learners.

## **2. About Lead Scotland**

Lead Scotland is a charity that enables disabled adults and carers to access inclusive learning opportunities. At a local level, we do this by providing direct support to learners<sup>1</sup> through flexible person-centred learning opportunities and individualised guidance and support to help them plan their learning journeys. At a national level, we provide information and advice on the full range of post-school learning and training opportunities, as well as influencing and informing policy development.

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<sup>1</sup> We receive local authority funding to deliver community learning and development services in Aberdeenshire, Dundee, Fife, Glasgow, Highland, North Lanarkshire, Moray, and Perth & Kinross.

### 3. Background

Recent research from the Equality Challenge University (using data provided by the Scottish Funding Council for Further and Higher Education) found that disabled learners in colleges are not progressing as well through SCQF<sup>2</sup> learning levels compared with non-disabled learners. The following table shows the entire student population across Scottish colleges (for whom statistics are available), giving a breakdown for disabled and non-disabled students by the SCQF level studied at:

	Non-disabled learners		Disabled learners	
	Number	%	Number	%
<b>SCQF 11-12</b>	20	100%	0	0
<b>SCQF 9-10</b>	815	88.8%	105	11.2%
<b>SCQF 8</b>	18,570	90.6%	1,940	9.4%
<b>SCQF 7</b>	22,220	91.4%	2,085	8.6%
<b>SCQF 6-7</b>	30,915	89%	3,830	11%
<b>SCQF 5</b>	27,385	86.3%	4,345	13.7%
<b>SCQF 4</b>	58,255	85.6%	9,785	14.4%
<b>SCQF 3</b>	4,835	59.6%	3,275	40.4%
<b>Other: non-vocational</b> (e.g. entry level and non-recognised qualifications)	7,460	90.4%	795	9.6%
<b>Other: vocational</b>	55,845	83.1%	11,320	16.9%

This data indicates that for disabled learners studying between SCQF levels 3 and 7 (further education level), the higher the level of study the less likely disabled learners are to take part. For non-disabled learners, the higher the level of study, the more likely they are to take part. For example, 40.4% of learners at SCQF level 3 have declared themselves to be disabled, while only 8.6% of learners at SCQF level 7 are disabled; whereas 59.6% of those studying at SCQF 3 level are non-disabled learners, and 91.4% at SCQF level 7 are non-disabled.

Looked at another way, the following table shows the distribution of both disabled and non-disabled learners at each SCQF level across Scottish colleges (excluding vocational courses which are not SCQF rated). This shows that the majority of disabled learners (70%) are studying at SCQF levels 5 and below, whereas only 57.3% of non-disabled learners are studying at SCQF levels 5 and below. Looking at participation in higher education (SCQF levels 7 and above), 15.4% of disabled learners are taking higher education courses, compared to 24.4% of non-disabled learners.

<sup>2</sup> Scottish Credit & Qualifications Framework

	Non-disabled learners		Disabled learners	
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SCQF 3	4,835	2.8%	3,275	13.0%
Other: non-vocational	7,460	4.4%	795	3.0%

The need to better prepare young people for the transition to employment is a current national priority, as outlined in the final report of the Wood Commission, the Scottish Government's recommendations for developing Scotland's young workforce<sup>3</sup>. The report highlighted that young disabled people are likely to be offered a limited range of education and training opportunities, and ultimately to experience significant periods of unemployment.

The report points to data which demonstrates that young disabled people have a similar level of career aspiration at the age of 16 to their wider peer group. By the time they are 26, they are nearly 4 times as likely to be unemployed. The report therefore recommends that career advice and work experience for young disabled people who are still at school should be prioritised and tailored to help them realise their potential and focus positively on what they can do to achieve their career aspirations.

### **Aim of the research**

The aims of this research are to:

- find out why disabled learners are not progressing through learning levels as well as non-disabled learners
- identify the learning barriers that disabled college learners experience (both within college and externally)
- develop recommendations to support colleges in the development of relevant policy and practice to effectively support disabled learners.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Education Working for All!' Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce, Final Report (June 2014)

## 4. Methodology

### **Survey for learners and parents/carers**

Lead Scotland conducted two surveys to gather information about:

- disabled learners' experiences during the transition to college
- their learning journey throughout college
- barriers to learning and progression
- learners' and families' suggestions for improvement.

We conducted a survey for learners, and a separate survey for parents/carers (both as a means of hearing about the experiences of learners who were unable to complete the survey themselves, and to allow parents/carers to offer their perspective on the learner's experience at college).

### **Telephone interviews**

We conducted follow-up interviews with 14 parents/carers and 15 learners to allow them to discuss their experiences in more details, and discuss specific issues in more details.

### **Focus groups**

Participants were sought for focus groups (for both learners and parents/carers), however interest for this was very low as many respondents did not wish to discuss their experiences in group settings. Two parents took part in a focus group discussion (the group was intended to be larger, however there were 4 cancellations on the day). It was therefore decided to carry out additional telephone interviews instead.

### ***Additional input***

To take account of issues facing learners with complex needs, we conducted a telephone interview with PAMIS (a voluntary sector organisation working with people with profound and multiple learning disabilities and their families). We also received written comments from the Head Teacher from a special school and Share Scotland (a voluntary sector organisation operating the 'Moving on Transition Service').

## 5. Who responded to the surveys?

141 learners and 107 parents/carers responded to the survey (relating to their son/daughter or person they care for). The survey responses therefore relate to 248 learners. To avoid duplication, we have excluded 21 responses where parents and learners in the same family completed the survey (giving a total of **227 learners**), although we have included these responses in the analysis of questions for parents only.

The survey responses covered a wide range of characteristics and learning journeys...

*Personal characteristics\*:*

**42% were female and 44% were male.**

**24% were younger learners (aged 16-19), 19% were aged 20-24, and 42% were aged 25 and above**

**17% had a specific learning difficulty; 8% had a sensory impairment; 10% had mobility difficulties; 12% had mental health difficulties; 18% had a social/communication impairment; 16% had a learning disability; and 5% had another impairment**

**21% attended college in remote/rural areas, and 53% attended colleges in urban areas**

*Learning journeys:*

**44% were current learners, and 35% were no longer at college.**

**50% were first-time learners, and 50% had been to college previously.**

**44% were studying full-time, and 31% were studying part-time.**

**15% were studying at Access level (SCQF levels 1 and 2), 22% were studying at SCQF levels 3 – 6, and 14% were studying at higher education level (SCQF levels 7 and above)\***

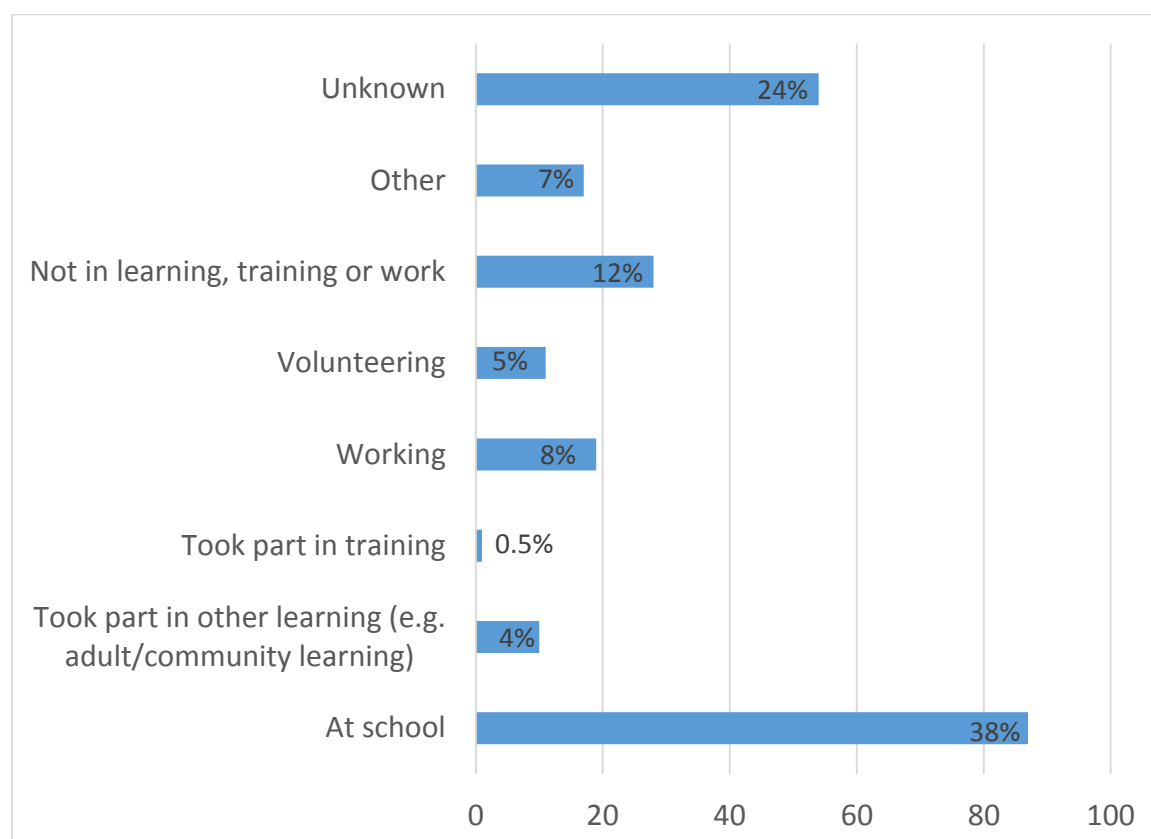
\* Full breakdowns available in Appendix 1.



## 6. The journey to college

Although the main focus of the research was around learners' progression through learning levels, we felt it was important to consider their transition to college and the support they received during this transition to determine the effect on progression.

### ***“What were you doing right before you went to college?”***



'Other' included those who were signed off work through illness or had been classed as 'unfit for work, attending support groups or day care centres, learners taking part in school-college transition courses.

### ***“When you made the decision to go to college, did you consider any other options?”***

It was felt it was important to find out why learners had chosen to take part in college learning, and why other options may have been unsuitable, to give an indication of learners' aspirations. 44% of respondents said that college was the only option they had considered, whereas 24% had considered other opportunities<sup>4</sup>, including:

- attending a specialist residential college (3%)
- day care services (3%)
- staying on at school (8%)

<sup>4</sup> Percentages relate to percentage of those who had considered other opportunities. Respondents were able to select more than one answer.

- learning in a community setting (15%)
- taking part in training/apprenticeships (15%)
- volunteering (29%)
- going to university (29%)
- getting a job (46%)

15% of learners who didn't consider any other options told us that this was because they didn't feel ready for work or training. Some felt that employers were not ready to support people with certain impairments.

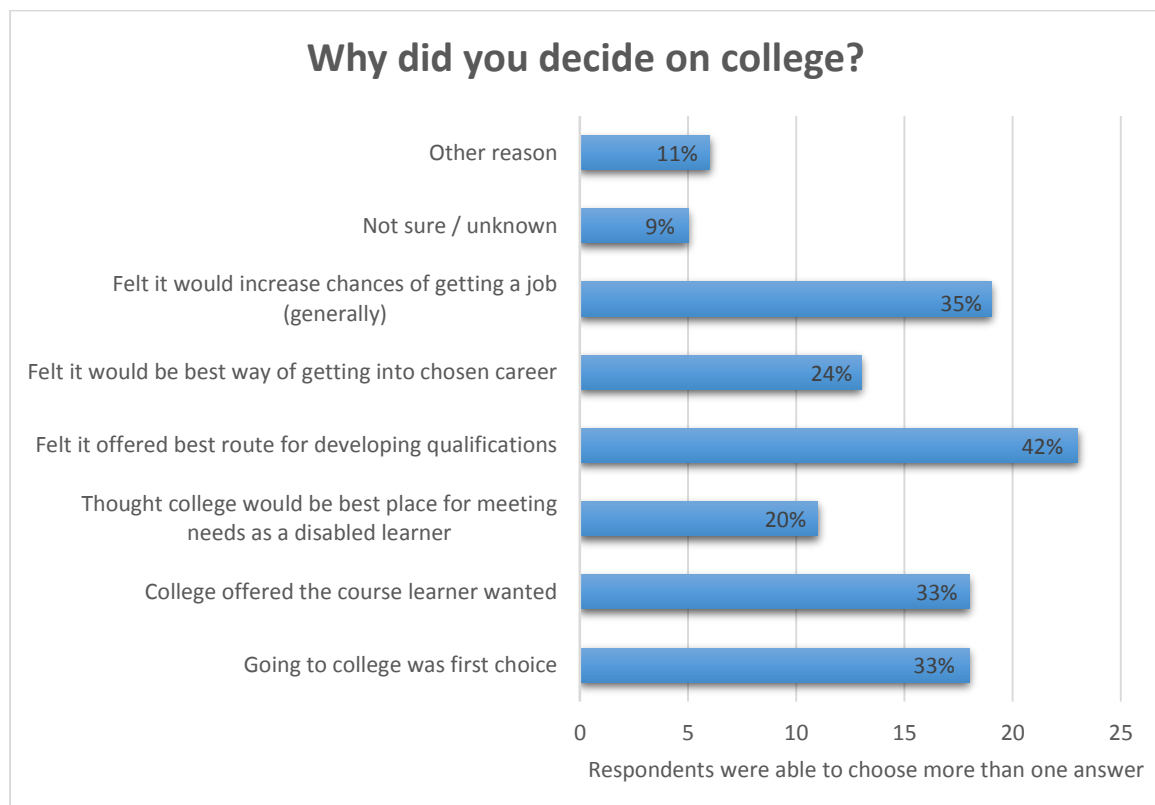
Some learners felt they needed to retrain as their impairment or illness meant they could no longer work in their former role, or that they no longer felt confident to do so. Others didn't necessarily plan to return to work after illness, and instead decided to go to college to allow them to take up a new interest or keep their mind active.

40% of learners who didn't consider any other options told us that this was because they didn't feel any other appropriate options were available. This was either because learners and/or their families felt there were no other options to meet their individual needs within the local area, or because they had been advised by staff in schools or social work that college would be the best (or only) option for them.

*“We were not given any other options. This was a school-link course while still in school (as part of the transition programme). The only choice available was college part-time with school, or school full-time”.*

Parent

When asked why learners decided on college, reasons included:



The majority of learners decided to take part in college learning as they felt it would increase their chances of getting a job, and/or offered the best route for developing their qualifications. Many learners also simply chose college as going to college (or studying a certain course) was something they really wanted to do. Some learners pointed to the social and life skills benefits that college could bring.

*“It would provide structure and routine, give me the opportunity to meet new people, and it would provide additional support as and when I needed it”.*

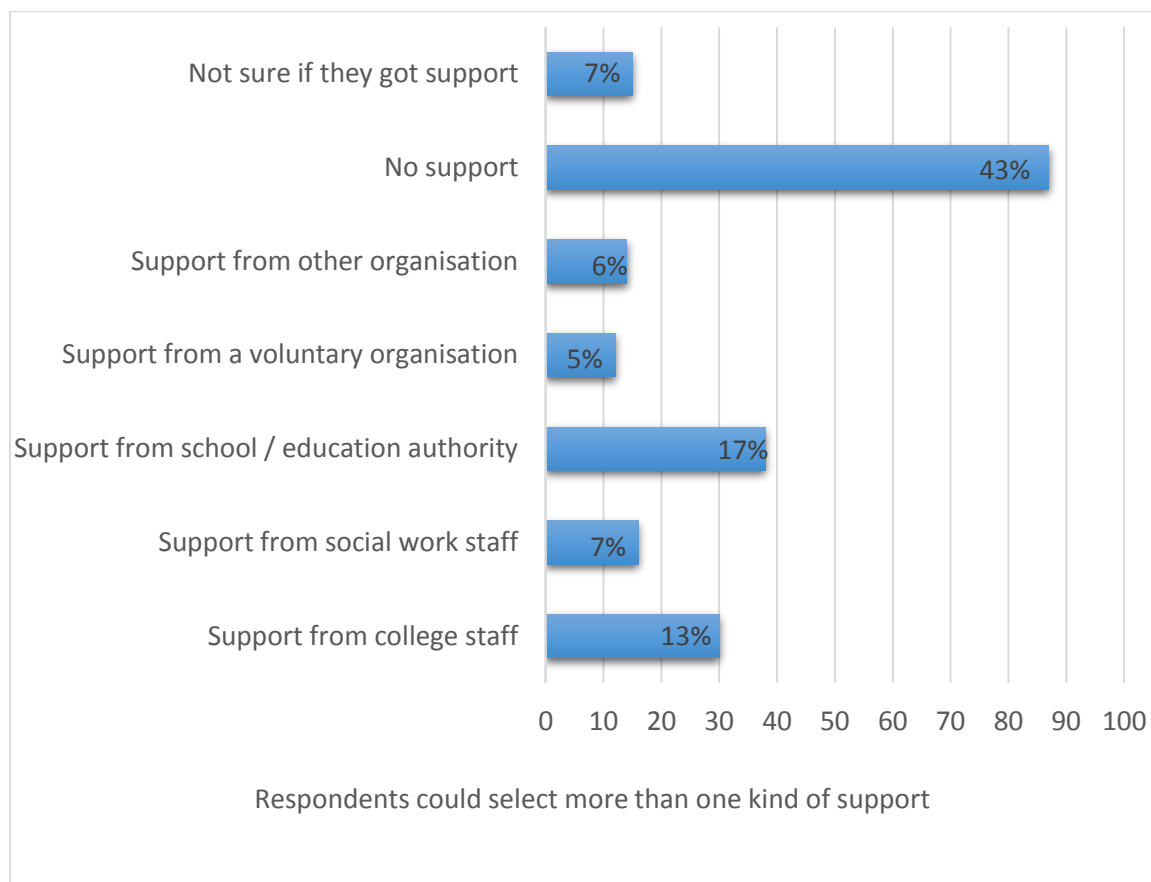
Learner

*“We felt that the whole college experience would be an invaluable life experience for him. Another new environment and hopefully an improvement in his confidence and social skills”.*

Parent

**“Did you get any support to help you prepare for your journey to college?”**

40% received support and 43% did not. Of those who received this support, this included:



Support from other people/organisations included:

- impairment-specific support groups
- day care centres

- travel buddy schemes
- Community Psychiatric nurses
- Employment Support Workers
- Parents
- A range of voluntary sector organisations, e.g. Lead Scotland, Sense Scotland, Share Scotland

Many learners received general advice and guidance from a range of organisations, including discussing learning options, the support infrastructure and help to complete applications and prepare for college interviews. Others met with college staff who provided information about the college learning environment, what kind of support was available and familiarisation visits at the college campus. Some older learners received help to *“get their education up to scratch again”* in preparation for returning to learning after a break.

Of those learners who did not receive support, many noted that they didn't receive any support or encouragement to apply to college, or just assumed it wasn't an option for them due to their impairment or health issues.

*“Quite often you are told that you “can't do” or “shouldn't do” by social work and medical professionals”.*

Learner

*“No one asked what I was doing when I left or if I needed any help to continue in further education”.*

Learner

Others received support but felt that the transition process was poorly planned, or that staff didn't fully understand their needs and learning requirements.

*“The transition process was fraught with difficulties - we had to fight to establish that my son had a learning disability and needed support. This despite him attending a special school for his entire primary and secondary education. So we had support, but it was grudging, I feel.”*

Parent

*“The school were very supportive but I don't remember the college support representative ever turning up at any of the transitional meetings that the school had arranged, despite numerous invitations. The school's view was that the support at college would be minimal.”*

Parent

Feedback from the head teacher of a special school highlighted particular concerns regarding post-school transitions for young people with sensory impairments. She felt that despite the school providing the college with all the information they need regarding young people's support needs, once they begin their course the support provided is very different than that discussed during transition planning.

*“Once the young person is at college, many of the supports which were promised are not there... We have had young people going to college and barely lasting one term due to the lack of support provided”.*

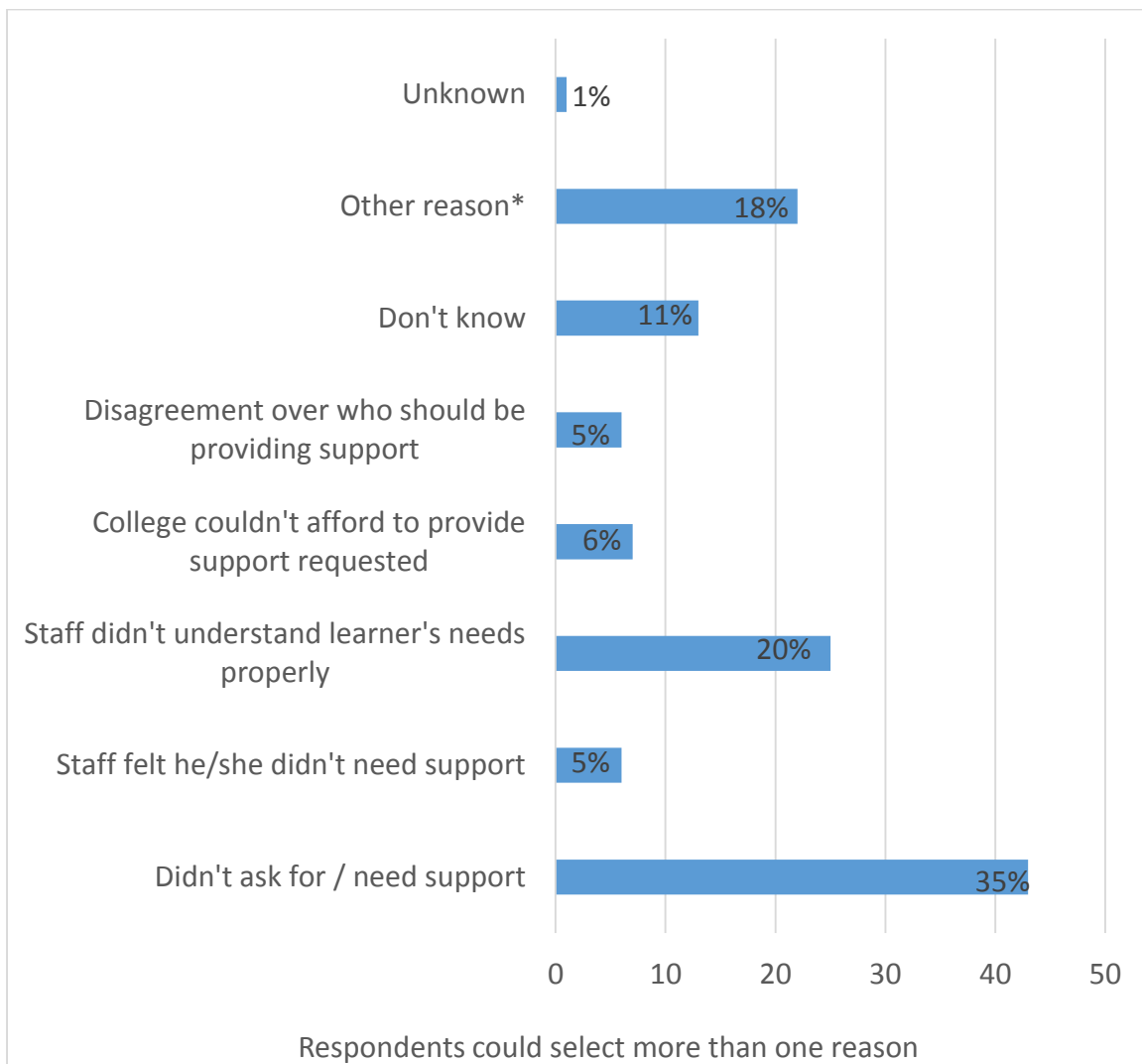
She felt that teaching staff often fail to recognise or address sensory impairments as they are not obvious physical impairments.

For others, the transition to college was a positive and supportive process. An ongoing trend throughout the research was the dedication and supportiveness of individual staff members as a key factor in successful transitions. This primarily included staff working in learning support and guidance roles, as well as teaching staff (in both schools and colleges).

*“Secondary school learning support teacher who went over and above her duty to ensure she got all help possible not always with school support.”*

Parent

### ***“Why do you think you didn’t get any support?”***



\*Other reasons included late diagnosis of impairment, the individual not accepting that they were disabled and needed support, and a belief that staff don't recognise that people with invisible/hidden impairments need support.

The majority of learners who didn't receive support during the transition to college told us they didn't receive any help because they didn't ask for any (35%). For many, this was simply because they felt they didn't need any support to make the transition from school to college, whereas others didn't know that support was available.

*"We didn't know support was available. We would have asked for it if we had known."*

Parent

Some learners would have perhaps benefited from support, but were unsure as to whether they were eligible for support, or felt too embarrassed or reluctant to ask for it.

*"Without a diagnosis, I didn't know what label to put on my illness, therefore didn't know what help I could ask for and whether I was considered disabled or not"*

Learner

*"I didn't know there was anything they could do for me and to me, it felt like I was complaining and not worthy of it"*

Learner

*"He wanted to be seen as just being like everyone else. ie not obviously taken out of class for support"*

Parent

20% of respondents felt that they didn't receive the support they needed as staff didn't understand their needs properly. Some parents pointed out that certain impairments which are difficult to diagnose and understand the impact of (e.g. autistic spectrum disorders and mental health difficulties) can often make this more difficult, particularly when the learner, their family and professionals don't fully understand the nature of the impairment. For others, they felt that lack of understanding was as a result of limited staff time and expertise.

*"The Learner Support member of staff who was allocated to me upon starting was only in the college one out of the 3 days I was attending and was 'work overloaded'."*

Learner

6% of learners and parents believed that financial considerations were the reason why they didn't receive support, while 5% pointed to disagreements over who should be providing the support they needed. This primarily referred to day-to-day support such as transport to college (including human support to accompany the learner during journeys).

## 7. Progression through SCQF learning levels

As the Equality Challenge Unit research found that disabled learners were not progressing through SCQF levels as well as non-disabled learners, we wanted to find out why this might be happening, if learners received any support to help them progress, and which support measures appear to be working best.

A number of respondents pointed out that while all learners may experience difficulties in learning at some point, the additional stress and pressure which disabled learners often experience can compound problems with learning progression. Many also highlighted that learners often have mild problems in different areas, none of which may be a significant problem on their own, but the combination of these difficulties can have a significant effect on progression.

### ***“When moving between learning levels, did you move from one level to the next?”***

38% of respondents moved up to the next SCQF learning level, and 40% did not. Of those who did not move up to the next level:

- 29% of learners repeated their course
- 55% moved on to another course at the same level
- 16% moved on to a course at another level

Further analysis of the survey data highlighted trends in relation to learner characteristics and progressed to the next level, including:

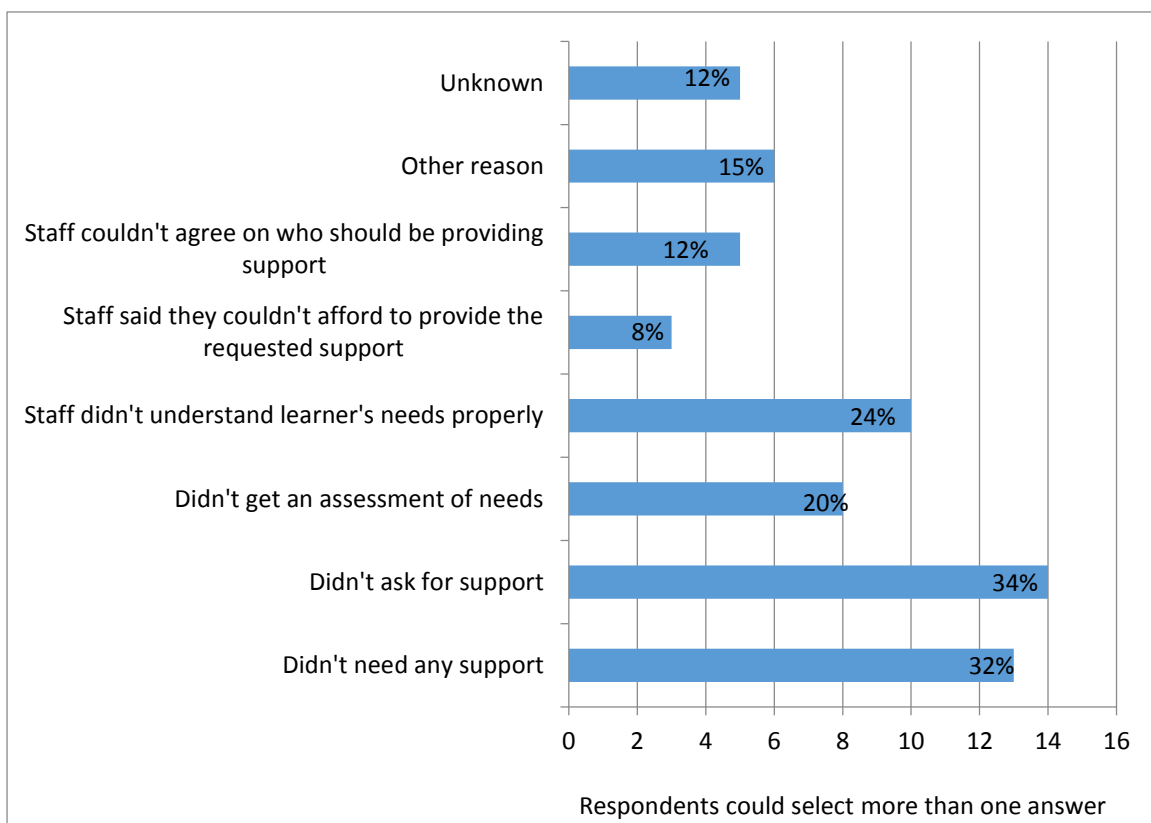
- progression rates for males and females were identical;
- older learners were more likely to progress (38% of all those aged 25+) compared to younger learners (26% of 16-19 year olds, and 26% of 20-24 year olds);
- learners with the following impairments displayed the highest progression rates: 39% of learners with specific learning disabilities, 40% of learners with hearing impairments, and 41% of learners with mobility problems / wheelchair users. Learners with learning disabilities (13%) and social/communication impairments (20%) were least likely to progress to the next level;
- those who had been in work directly before college were most likely to progress to the next level (47%), while those who had come straight from school (33%) were least likely to progress;
- learners whose highest/current learning level was at SCQF level 8 (66%) and level 5 (53%) were most likely to have progressed to the next level. Those whose highest/current learning level was at SCQF level 1 (12%) and level 4 (19%) were least likely to progress;
- full-time learners were more likely to progress (44%) compared to part-time learners (19%).

We asked those who did move up to the next level if they received any support to help them progress: 34% received support and 66% did not.

Support measures to help learners progress to the next learning level included:

- support from the college specifically relating to the learner’s impairment (e.g. reasonable adjustments such as extra time and separate room in exams, scribes, notetakers, provision of equipment and specialist software, training to use equipment/software, adapting the way courses are delivered)
- general learning support (e.g help to understand the subject, study skills support, etc)
- extra tuition
- transition support to help adjust to the new course
- help with transport
- extra financial support (e.g. Additional Support Needs for Learning Allowance, Disabled Students Allowance, discretionary funding)
- other support (e.g. personal care support from social work, support with travel)

Those who did not get support to help them progress to the next level were asked why they thought they didn’t receive support:



The primary reason for learners not receiving support was because they didn’t need or ask for support. 44% felt that they didn’t get the support they needed as staff didn’t understand their needs properly, or they didn’t receive an assessment of their needs.

*“The support was completely inadequate, there was no knowledge of how her autism would impact her studies”*

Parent



One parent pointed out that even if support is available, if the learner doesn't want to accept this support it can be difficult for the college to meet their needs and support them adequately.

*"The problem is he doesn't gauge his own needs very well and wants to be independent, resists receiving support and doesn't want to draw attention to himself... I know it is hard to give a young person support that they don't want or think they don't need, therefore the support givers need to have strategies to help students in this position".*

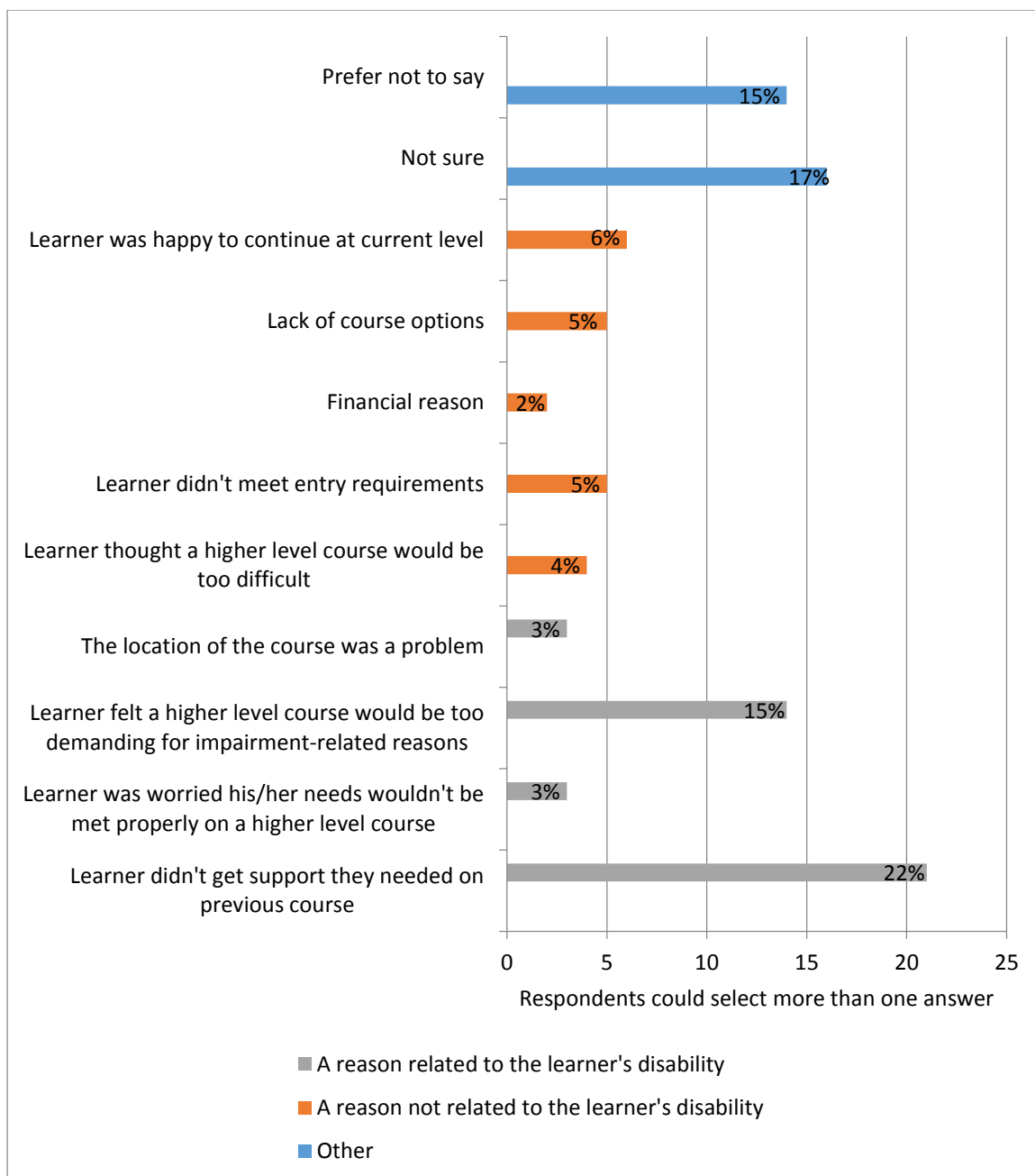
Parent

A common concern among many respondents was that only those learners/families who are confident and proactive enough to challenge things get the support they need.

8% of learners and parents believed that financial considerations were the reason why they didn't receive support, while 12% pointed to disagreements over who should be providing the support they needed. This primarily referred to day-to-day support such as transport to college (including human support to accompany the learner during journeys). Other reasons why respondents felt support was not provided related to college staff believing that the learner would not pass their current course.

### ***"Why didn't you move up to the next level?"***

43% cited disability-related reasons for not moving up to the next level, and 22% cited reasons which were not related to their impairment (respondents were able to select more than one reason).



The primary disability-related reason for not progressing to the next level related to learners not receiving the support the needed on their previous course (22%).

*"I kept asking for help because of my dyslexia, but no-one seemed to want to help so I struggled on and didn't do very well in my exams".*

Learner

*"Because of the difficulties in transition, my son was initially placed into an SCQF level 3 course with no support... Later, when it became apparent he actually did need support, a lower level SCQF 1/2 course was suggested by college staff. We then fought for additional support using his failure to achieve without support as leverage. He is now much happier and progressing well".*

Parent

*"I was told by the college that I should get a tutor for my son, because they cannot give him 1:1 support in class... I am not sure what my next step will be but I am furious that they expect me to solve their problem and are not prepared to look at other options first".*

Parent

Feedback from the head teacher of a special school highlighted particular concerns relating to learners with sensory impairments. She felt that college support staff often take a "we know best" attitude and that support staff often make assumptions about the level of support learners with sensory impairments require.

*"If the young person is deaf and able to lipread a little, the college often decides that a communication support worker is not necessary even if the young person is a sign language user. If the young person is registered blind and has a little useful sight, the college may decide they don't required everything in enlarged print".*

20% of learners felt that a higher level course would be too difficult or demanding (15% of which related to the learner's impairment).

*"I didn't feel 'clever' enough to go to university, I felt it would show how unintelligent I was/am".*

Learner

*"Motivation and staying power is a real problem for her because of her learning disability".*

Parent

Some respondents noted that although learners were keen to progress to the next level, some colleges did not have any appropriate provision at the next level (particularly Access level courses specifically designed for learners with complex needs).

*"No other options were available. I feel now that my son was very "lucky" to have been able to access the two year course.... The College is about to withdraw the course completely at the end of this academic year - with nothing available for learners with significant additional support needs."*

Parent

*"We just accept what is offered, which in my view is really just a form of respite with a variety of interesting activities that offer no clear progression and have no clear objective or outcome".*

Parent

Feedback from Share Scotland suggested that for some courses, the jump onto the next learning level may be too big for some learners. They believe that this is

because there are few appropriate courses at SCQF levels 3 and 4, resulting in many learners skipping a level/s and therefore struggling on the higher level course, and limited progression routes.

*“Progression routes for students who have additional support needs are not as clear as the routes for mainstream courses. There can be lack of clarity about the particular course content, the level of teaching, attainable qualifications, level of support within the class setting, and the ability levels of other students on the same course. All of these factors can lead to the college experience not being as anticipated”.*

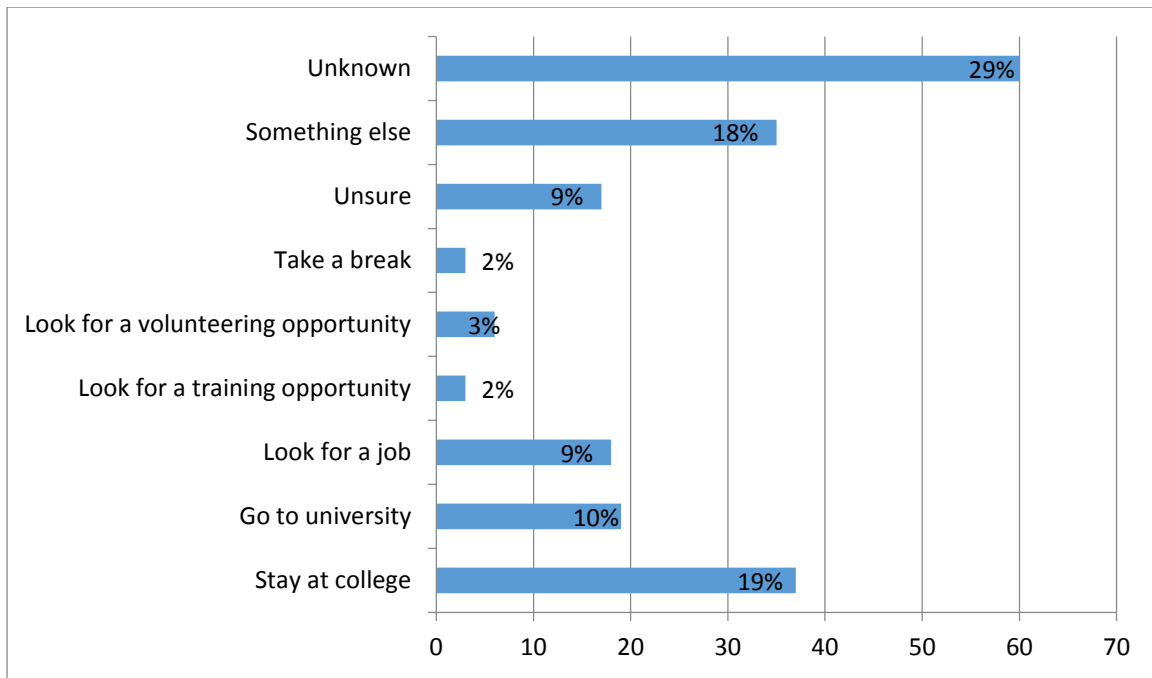
Share Scotland also reported working with learners who had been placed on courses which were a poor match for their individual skills/abilities. They believed this could be due to a lack of knowledge of the learner or lack of appropriate course options, and difference of opinion on the suitability of a particular learner for a specific course (including lack of awareness of the impact of the learner's impairment).

### ***“What support would make it easier for you to move up to the next level?”***

Respondents who had not progressed or were still on their first learning level were asked which support measures may (or could) help them to progress. Responses included:

- better healthcare support (3%)
- better personal care support (4%)
- transition support to adjust to learning at a higher level (12%)
- extra tuition (12%)
- general learning support (24%)
- impairment-specific support (32%)

### **“What are your plans when you finish your current level of learning?”**



The majority of respondents who responded to this question either wanted to stay at college (19%) or do something else (18%). All of those who planned to stay at college hoped to progress to the next level, either to achieve a qualification from the college (as their highest qualification) or to allow them to progress on to university.

'Something else' included pursuing learning ambitions outside of the education system, applying to another college (which better meets their needs), attending a day centre, taking part in informal learning opportunities, and gaining practical experience in the sector learners wish to work in.

9% were unsure what they would do when they finished their current level of learning, some of whom were concerned about the limited opportunities available for them.

*"We are unsure of the options available to him at this time, all we know is that there is no more options for him at college as the college does not fund supporting special needs and they have no staff for this type of care that my son requires".*

Parent

Some learners wanted to stay at college, but were concerned about their ability to do so if appropriate support was not in place.

*"She's struggling to remain at college due to lack of support and understanding from the college staff".*

Parent

*"I would like to continue studying but there are a number of financial barriers and restrictions that make it difficult for me to progress".*

Learner

A few parents felt that progression to employment or work-related activities (including supported employment) was not an option for some learners with more complex needs. In some colleges where supported programmes have (or will be) withdrawn, parents were concerned that only learners who had prospects of moving on to employment would be supported.

*“The scale of learning disability and other disabilities mean there is not an option to move on to employment”.*

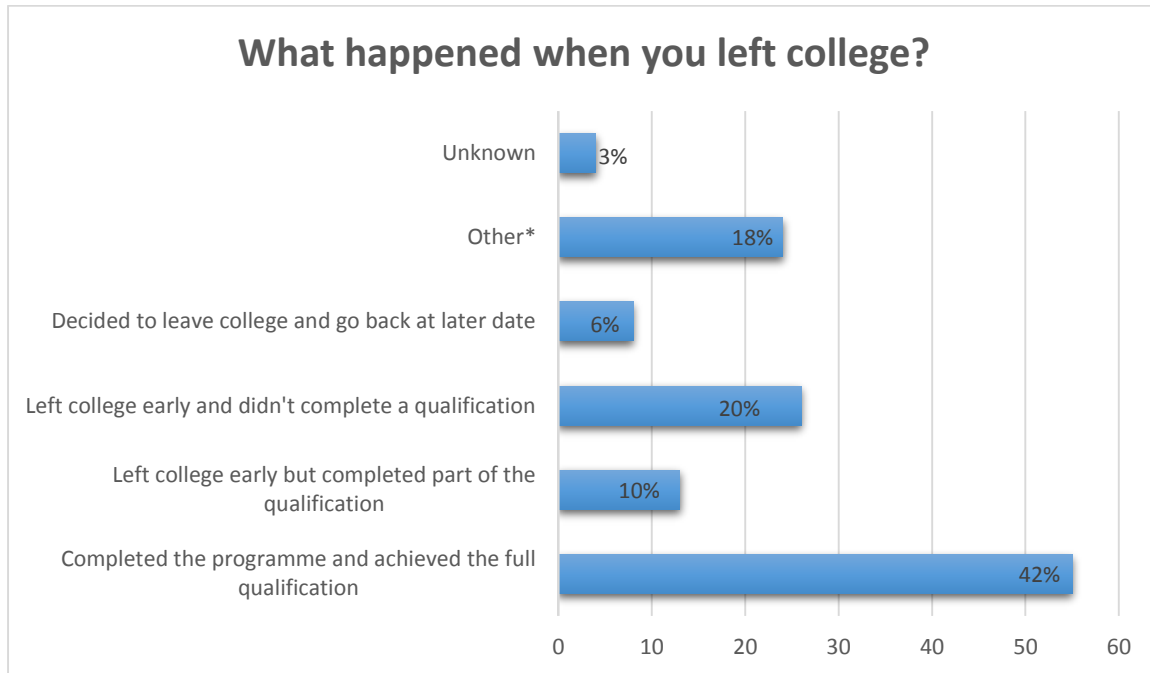
Parent

*“I have a friend whose son is on his 2nd year of Towards Employment course and was told at a review in December, that he would not be able to go on a mainstream course after June because he would not get any help and they have no job prospects for him, the whole point of this course as the title state towards employment, his mother was devastated by their attitude”.*

Parent

## 8. Withdrawal from college

50% of respondents had been to college previously, and were therefore asked to tell us if they had completed their course and why they left college.



\* 'Other' included learners who completed the programme but no qualification was awarded due to the type of course they had taken (e.g. 'Life Skills' courses or other entry level access courses).

The majority of learners (52%) either completed their programme in full (achieving the full qualification) or completed part of the qualification. However, some of these learners pointed out that they had only "scraped through" or had not achieved the grades they had hoped for. For some, this was as a result of lack of support to meet their disability-related learning needs, whereas others were struggling with the demands of the course.

Some learners pointed out that negative experiences on their previous course had discouraged them from returning to college, or had negatively affected their morale and motivation.

*"He now refuses to attend college courses because of his experience. The staff had no understanding of his difficulties".*

Parent

*"He was disciplined for saying distasteful jokes. He became anxious and could not cope so he left. College staff perhaps did not understand autism. He was only using language he had heard from his peers".*

## Parent

We asked learners who left college early (both those who returned to college at a later date and those who did not return) their reasons for leaving. 65% cited disability-related reasons, and 25% cited non-disability related reasons (respondents were able to select more than one answer). The majority of learners (31%) pointed to lack of learner support to meet impairment-related needs, although 17% also cited lack of support for other needs (personal care, health care and transport) as reasons for leaving early. Many told us that the culmination of various factors led to their decision to leave college early.



### Why did you leave college early?



## **Disability-related reasons for leaving college:**

### ***Learner didn't get appropriate learning support***

Respondents noted various areas where they felt support was limited, including exam arrangements (extra time, separate rooms, etc), specialist equipment or furniture, flexibility with timetabling and start times, impairment-specific support (especially for those with sensory impairments or autistic spectrum disorders), and the way in which classes and course materials were delivered and presented.

*“Changing course details of time and day after registration meant I was driving in heavy traffic which did not allow enough energy to concentrate on the course”.*

Learner

A number of learners felt that college staff didn't fully understand the effects of their impairment, resulting in limited, inappropriate or no support learning support.

*“I felt that not enough support was given in the course itself. My course had a lot of diagrams relating to Sound Engineering. The staff had no training on visual impairment and how it affected people. The theory part of my course was very visual and staff didn't know how to teach the subject to someone who had little sight”.*

Learner

In some cases (particularly for students with social or communication difficulties), teaching staff had little understanding of the way in which the learner's impairment affected their behaviour and assumed that they were misbehaving or being disruptive.

*“[My son faced] disciplinary action. He wasn't supported to learn/communicate although the college thought they did a good job”.*

Parent

A number of respondents felt that college staff didn't know how to deal with the way their impairment impacted upon their learning, or found it easier not to address the barriers they were experiencing. Many suggested that college staff should undertake further training about the needs of disabled learners, with more comprehensive training on complex impairments such as autistic spectrum disorders and mental health problems (largely due to the vastly different ways in which these impairments affect individual learners).

*“I was having too many seizures and the college recommended that I leave as they could not cope with the amount of seizures I was having. I felt that they could have put in place more support for me. They made me feel like I was not good enough for the course”.*

Parent

*“I felt they just couldn’t be bothered thinking of ways to help me as my needs were quite demanding – it was easier for them just to do nothing and focus on other less demanding students”.*

Learner

*“There is a lack of specialist training and understanding amongst college staff as to how best to support many of the students in their care, thus leading to a skewed version of individuals’ needs”.*

Share Scotland

Some parents believed that involving the learner and their family in the provision of learning support could have prevented learners from withdrawing from college. One parent pointed out that parents are usually the primary expert in the way child’s impairment affects them individually and what works best for them, and their input should therefore be paramount.

*“I feel he did not receive the full support he needed to fulfil the course requirements which was why he failed. With the right amount of support and checks to ensure he understood the tasks and deadlines and follow-up support when he required it he would have been capable of completing it and gaining the qualification”.*

Parent

*“I do think one of the areas of difficulty is that when young people over 18 are expected to speak and act for themselves but are still not really fully independent. I want my son to be independent but it didn't just arrive like magic on his 18th birthday! It's a process and I think the parents should still be involved if possible into young adulthood”.*

Parent

### ***Learner didn’t get appropriate support to meet other needs***

While colleges are responsible for meeting the learning needs of their students, many also require support from local authority social work departments to meet other needs. This includes personal care support (e.g. help going to the toilet, preparing and eating meals, etc.) and help with day-to-day needs (e.g. transport, getting around, etc.) from local authority social work departments, or support from health boards to meet their healthcare needs (e.g. help taking medication).

Many learners told us that without such support it can often be very difficult (or impossible) to access or remain in college. The research highlighted learners’ (and parents’) confusion around who should be providing transport, and arrangements often vary between different regions. While both colleges and social work departments are able to provide support with transport, in many cases both cite financial reasons for not being able to provide support and often refer learners to the other agency. In some areas, both colleges and social work may provide support with transport, whereas in other areas some learners struggle to get support from either agency.

*“Without social work providing door-to-door transport then my son would not have been able to attend the course at all. The college were very unhelpful and unsympathetic when talking about this matter. All they kept saying was there was no budget for this type of care.”*

Parent

### **Physical accessibility problems**

Some learners reported problems with the layout and design of college campuses, including building design, classrooms and public spaces, and car parks.

*“No disabled parking slot allocated meant I couldn't always park on the premises let alone close to college entrance”.*

Learner

*“Large colleges are not good places to be if you have learning difficulties... Other settings are much better at providing personalised programmes and support”*

Parent

### **Financial problems (disability-related)**

Some learners told us that that financial problems made it difficult for them to remain at college, including difficulties securing funding for learning or day-to-day needs, additional costs associated with their impairment or illness, and welfare benefits being reduced or removed. Many highlighted the additional stress many disabled learners experience due to having their benefits subject to review at any time. Others had to take time off their studies due to illness and therefore experienced additional difficulties relating to additional costs and arranging new financial support packages.

### **Illness / effects of impairment**

Many learners reported that illness and other problems associated with their impairment resulted in spells of absence from college (some of whom were unable to return to college at all), or difficulties with their performance on the course. Others returned to college on a part-time basis (either at the same level or repeating their course), or took time out before returning.

*“I completed the course. However I had been developing schizophrenia during the whole period of study. I did not know it and neither did anyone else. It was a big shock when I finished with a breakdown”.*

Learner

One learner felt that the problems she experienced at college were the cause of her illness, resulting in her withdrawal from college.

*“The stress and anxiety also caused me to become severely ill with a glandular fever and fatigue, so I was asked to leave and I was homeless”.*

Learner

## **Non disability-related reasons:**

### ***Learner found the course too difficult***

The primary non-disability related reason for leaving college was difficulty with the course, including difficulties with comprehension and course requirements, teaching style and support, and general demands of the course. Some learners pointed to difficulties with the amount of online materials and course requirements as little support or training was provided for those not familiar with the internet.

*“I did what I could and I was unable to do the (HNC) higher level as it would have proved too difficult for me”.*

Learner

*“I found I was really struggling with essay writing and didn't feel that it was really taken seriously enough by staff. I was ashamed that it took me so long to write up assessments and when I asked for an extension it was only reluctantly granted as I had asked for them in the past”.*

Learner

### ***Financial problems***

Learners told us that difficulties with general living costs had a significant impact on their college experience. One learner pointed that while many learners experience financial difficulties, disabled learners often don't have the luxury of being able to work while they were studying to top up their income. Others experienced problems with the additional costs of course materials and equipment on certain courses.

### ***Limited course options***

Many families told us that although the learner was keen to continue at college, college decisions to reduce or completely remove certain courses resulted in the learner's withdrawal. This was a particular problem for students taking supported programmes such as 'Life Skills' or 'Independent Living', many of whom were unable to choose other courses or programmes as they were unable to take part in mainstream learning. While some learners repeated their previous course, others decided to leave college.

*“I have serious concerns about the withdrawal of the supported Towards Independence course for the more complex young people. I feel it is discriminatory as it is the only course available to those with high support needs... When I see what a positive experience this has been for my son, the course's withdrawal offers them even less choices and less chances in what is already a narrow choice of options”.*

Parent

Many parents felt that the main reason for colleges reducing/removing such courses was as a result of the current national focus on employability and employment-focused outcomes. One parent was told by college managers that they would only support students who were likely to move on to employment after college.

***Other reasons for leaving college***

Other reasons included the learner not liking the course or college in general, wanting to do something else, and personal issues such as relationship problems and bereavement.

## **9. Transition to higher education**

We asked respondents if they were considering moving on to higher education learning in the future (either at college or university). 13% were already taking higher education courses, 27% said they would be considering progressing to higher education, and 43% were not interested in (or felt they would be unable to move on to) higher education learning.

The majority of those who were already taking higher education courses (42%) were adult learners who had directly entered higher education at college. 26% had moved into higher education straight from school, and 21% had progressed from college.

32% of those taking higher education courses told us that they had experienced problems when moving between further and higher education, including:

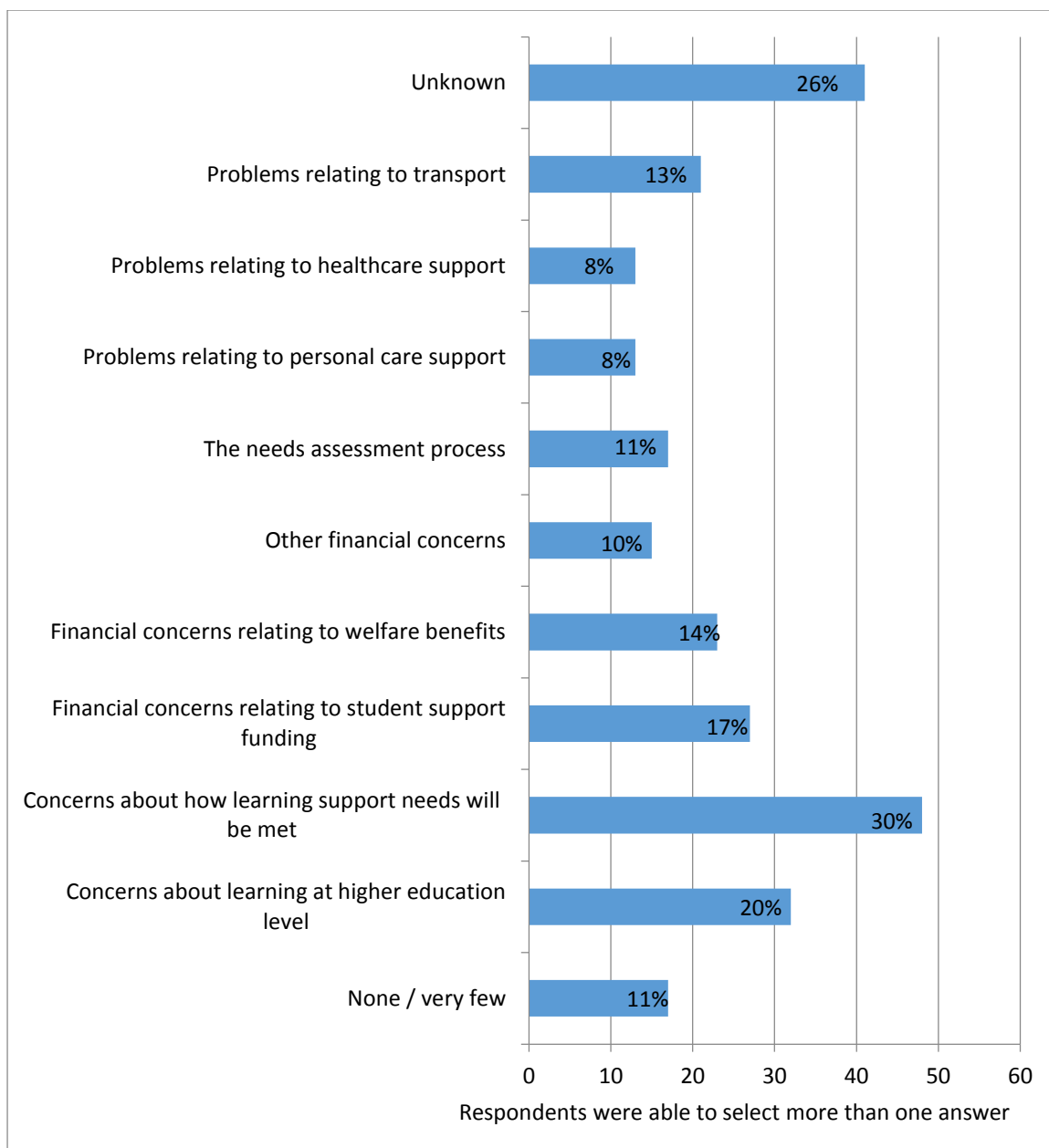
- difficulties adapting to learning at higher education level
- problems with learning support to meet learner's needs as a disabled learner (e.g. Disabled Students' Allowance, teaching staff making reasonable adjustments to classes and coursework, etc)
- financial concerns (relating to student support funding)
- financial concerns (relating to welfare benefits)
- problems relating to healthcare support
- problems relating to transport

One learner who was taking a degree course at college experienced problems with staff believing that the college didn't have a responsibility to support him any more.

*"When one lady retired, a new staff member took over. She was quite nasty, and said 'you're at university now, we don't need to support you'".*

Learner

Those who were currently taking further education courses (both those who were considering moving on to higher education and those who were not) were asked if they had any concerns about progression to higher education. Concerns included:



The majority of concerns related to how learning support needs would be met (30%) and financial concerns (41%). Concerns relating to learning support included both practical support and reasonable adjustments to course delivery and assessment, including:

- exam arrangements (e.g. extra time, separate rooms, using computers or software, etc)
- staff knowledge and understanding of specific impairments
- providing class notes in advance
- concerns around what support learners can ask for (eg. providing class notes in advance, flexibility with timetabling and coursework extensions, etc).

Financial concerns related to student support funding (which is different from the further education funding system), welfare benefits and general financial concerns. Some learners felt it was important to know the financial implications of moving on to higher education beforehand, including knowing how their welfare benefits may be



affected and what student support will be available. One learner suggested that communication between the Department of Work and Pensions and colleges/universities needs to be improved to avoid confusion over student support and welfare benefit eligibility.

Learners who had not experienced any problems (or few problems) moving between further and higher education were asked to tell us about some of the things that made their transition go smoothly. Responses included:

- support from student support staff at college/university
- parental and peer support
- support from voluntary sector organisations
- support from healthcare providers, e.g. community psychiatric nurses
- provision of good quality information and advice about higher education / the course
- understanding and supportive teaching staff
- individual determination to succeed
- college / university open days

## 10. Suggestions for improvement

We asked learners and parents/carers to provide suggestions on the best way of addressing some of the barriers they had experienced, as well as highlighting practices that work well.

### ***Putting the learner at the centre / improved understanding of impairments and how they affect individual learning needs***

Many learners and respondents felt that it was vital to place the learner at the centre of all processes relating to the way they are supported at college. This includes asking them about the barriers they are experiencing, what works best for them as an individual, and listening to their concerns along the way. For learners with complex needs, a few parents suggested allowing learners to progress at their own pace while also recognising achievements other than qualifications and employability skills.

*“I felt college education wasn't tailored to student's capacities when there was a disability present. The student had to fit what was offered which just doesn't work for someone like my son. It was a very disappointing experience”.*

Parent

*“Talk and listen to the students themselves, we want to learn and you can help us”.*

Learner

*“They have to look at the persons individual needs... they need look at what can we all do, not pass the buck onto parents end of conversation. My son loves college, I want him to progress not just do the course end of story”.*

Parent

One learner suggested that particular focus needs to be given to quieter students who may not have the confidence to speak up to tell staff when they are experiencing problems or when they need help.

*“Depending on the subject there should be extra one on one support as it can be very difficult for a disabled person to have confidence speaking out in a class full of non-disabled people. An example is that because of my sight problems I didn't want to make a fuss or draw attention to myself by speaking out to say I don't know what you are talking about or I can't see what you are doing etc”.*

Learner

Many learners felt that some college staff did not have a good understanding of their impairment, or the impact it had on their learning needs. Many impairments affect learners in very different ways, and respondents therefore felt it was very important for staff to undertake training to help provide a fuller understanding of a wide range

of impairments and the various support measures they can put in place to help learners overcome any barriers.

*“I would suggest that support staff actually listen to the ways that my disabilities affect my learning, not just come to their own conclusions and then recommend a support plan that isn't really meeting my needs. Teaching staff should also actually look at the support plans and arrange support according to that rather than on their own opinions about what you need”.*

Learner

*“Disabled student advisers are great, but teaching staff often don't believe students' needs are as complex as they say they are”.*

Learner

Many also pointed out that it was important for staff to be more aware of the impact their impairment had on other aspects of their lives, which in turn affect their learning needs.

*“For students on the Autistic spectrum, lecturers should be aware of how much distress socially-intensive tasks, such as going around asking people to fill in permission forms for photography, can cause”.*

Learner

*“We have additional issues to contend with over and above those of able bodied or non-disabled students. We do not expect easier assignments on modules but more consideration needs to be given for some of these issues when being criticised during assignment marking. It does not matter how many times you read a piece of work but if you only get 3 or 4 hours sleep a night mistakes tend to creep in”.*

Learner

A common issue highlighted throughout the research was the way in which learners' experiences were affected staff members' attitudes, personalities and willingness to help. While some staff went 'above and beyond' to support disabled learners, others were dismissive, unhelpful or reluctant to consider support measures which they were unfamiliar with.

### ***Improvements in learning support***

While many learners were happy with the learning support available to them, suggestions for improvement included<sup>5</sup>:

- assessment and learning materials available in a wide range of formats, including audio
- using a minimum font size of 14 for all written materials
- using Kindles for downloading books
- providing course materials and reading lists at least 4 weeks before the course start date

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<sup>5</sup> Many colleges are already providing some of these support measures

- extra time for assignment submission
- clear instructions of course start times and location
- powerpoints and class handouts available at the start of each class
- classroom assistants and IT staff who can provide 1-1 support
- providing a quiet room for students to take a break and/or study in a smaller group
- more support staff to allow them to spend more time on needs assessments, providing advice, and training students how to use equipment
- general IT support to allow learners to become more digitally confident

One learner suggested that all colleges should sign up to some form of charter to set out the minimum quality standards students can expect in relation to learning support.

Suggestions for ways in which learners can help themselves, included:

- creating a structure and routine to help cope with stress
- breaking workload down into manageable chunks
- ensuring a good balance between and study and social time

A number of learners reported that they did not receive an assessment of their needs until after the course had started. They therefore recommended that colleges begin the needs assessment process and meet with learners to discuss their support arrangements much earlier.

*“The college did not offer any support until weeks after the course had started, I had to find out how to get support, despite having declared my disability on my application and on enrolment. Support should have been made available immediately. The support I did get was too late and I am now leaving my course”.*

Learner

One learner suggested that the process for obtaining support should be simpler and less bureaucratic to minimise stress upon learners.

### ***Anticipating reasonable adjustments***

A number of learners felt that they had to constantly ask for support, which resulted in delays in receiving support and concerns that staff and other students believed they were getting special treatment. Respondents felt that while many colleges were good at anticipating physical adjustments (such as building design, ramps, etc.), most adjustments relating to learning support were reactive.

A common suggestion was therefore that college staff should anticipate the types of adjustments that disabled learners are likely to need, while still taking account of the individual needs of each learner.

### ***Someone to talk to***

A number of learners told us that sometimes they just needed someone to talk to, particularly during times of stress or when they were experiencing problems.

*“Students advisers didn’t have much time to speak/listen to me. I really needed someone to talk to. Often a 10am appointment next Tuesday isn’t good enough”.*

Learner

Some learners said they felt they would benefit from either a named staff person/key worker to talk to about any aspect of their support needs, or support from other students. Suggestions included disabled student support/discussion groups, student mentors/buddies or drop-in centres (specifically for disabled learners) to allow them to ask questions on any aspect of college support, and/or where to access information from other agencies in relation to other support needs.

*“Students need one person they can deal with – it’s too difficult dealing with 10 teachers, IT staff, department heads, support staff, etc”.*

Parent

*“It would be nice to have a student mentor, someone who has done the course and who you could ask questions of or get some support from, my college doesn’t have a student union, and most of this course is done on-line, so I’m on my own a lot, and don’t feel particularly confident about what I’m doing, I’d appreciate someone to talk to”.*

Learner

One learner told us that she (and other learners on her course) struggled with online learning materials and communication from the college, and felt that that many learners would benefit from more personal, face-to-face communication.

*“I felt isolated as I wasn’t mixing with other people/peers. If the course continued to be online, I would have dropped out (many non-disabled students struggle with this too”).*

Learner

In relation to learners with learning disabilities, one respondent highlighted that many learners do not require a significant amount of one-to-one support, but would still benefit from having someone they know and trust to talk to about any problems they may be experiencing.

### ***Pre-entry support for disabled learners***

One learner suggested that further pre-entry support could potentially benefit disabled learners to help them adapt to change and cope with stress.

*“Lifestyle and wellbeing classes could be offered to help disabled people adapt to change and develop their confidence and skills as a pre-entry requirement during the summer so that they are better equipped with knowledge, confidence and coping strategies when things get too stressful”.*

Parent

### ***Further information for learners and families on the support available to learners***

Both learners and parents highlighted the importance of ensuring they are able to access information on the full range of support available to them, both support from social work and NHS provision, and specialist disability organisations). Learners stressed the importance of information being clear, accessible and available in plenty of time before the course start date. Suggestions included:

- more information on the support the college can provide on college websites and prospectuses
- a presentation on what support is available to disabled students to all students at the start of the college year
- further information on coursework deadlines to enable students to plan in advance
- further information on the way in which student support funding and welfare benefits affect each other.

### ***Improved support and monitoring during key transition stages***

A number of learners felt that colleges should improve the way in which they monitor students' learning progression, and provide appropriate support to ensure that their support package is continuous when moving between learning stages. Suggestions included regular reviews of learners' progress and support measures, and ensuring all learners have a named staff member to support them during transition stages.

### ***Offer more flexible learning opportunities***

Many students felt that some courses did not offer enough flexibility to meet the needs of disabled students, especially those who needed to take time off through illness or found it difficult to study full-time. Suggestions for improvement included offering more opportunities to study part-time, deferring exams and assignment deadlines, and flexibility re timetabling.

One parent felt that the teaching staff should be more flexible in the way they teach to take account of the varying needs of their students.

*"If the children don't learn the way the college teaches, the college should teach the way the children learn".*

Parent

### ***Provision of a wider range of courses for learners with complex needs***

Parents of learners with complex needs suggested that colleges should offer a greater range of courses for such learners as there are often very little (or no) courses for them to move on to. There appear to be a limited range of courses at SCQF level 3.

One parent felt that the current focus in the college sector was centred around the interests of the college, and offered little opportunity for real progression.

*"It's a revolving door child-minding service, designed to suit the staff, with very limited evidence of goals and no sharing of objectives with parents".*

He suggested that programmes designed just for disabled learners should be removed completely to help achieve full integration and inclusion. Another respondent (a carer) believed that enabling learners with learning disabilities to take part in mainstream learning would also benefit other learners in the class.

*“There is a misconception that having them in a class of ‘normal people’ would be disruptive for the class, but I have generally found that their inclusion has actually helped the others in their class to see beyond the disability”.*

She believed that people with learning disabilities are often regarded as “poor wee things” who have no understanding of what they want, and suggested they should be given more opportunities to make their own decisions regarding learning.

### **Improved financial support**

Many learners and parents felt that financial support for disabled learners should be improved to make it easier for them to remain at college. Many pointed out that while all learners may experience financial difficulties, the additional barriers which disabled learners experience can make their college experience much more difficult. Suggestions included:

- increased funding for transport, one-to-one support, and purchasing books and course materials
- financial assistance to purchase meals at college
- financial support to ‘tide learners over’ if they are struggling between student support/benefits payments

One parent believed that social work funding for one-to-one support was often limited as many rely on the unpaid carer to provide this support. In relation to transport, many respondents highlighted difficulties accessing any kind of financial support from the college as college staff told them they didn’t have a responsibility to provide the requested support. One parent felt that only those who fight for transport support receive it.

Share Scotland highlighted the issue of disabled learners experiencing problems with the online application process for bursary and course fees, which can present significant barriers for learners with learning disabilities, dyslexia and sensory impairments.

### **Better senior management understanding of and commitment to equalities**

A few parents felt that college management seemed remote and had limited understanding of equalities issues.

*“The College appears to have very little if any experience of disability issues amongst its 16 Board Members. I feel that this is a huge hole in the governance of the College... There also appears to be no representation from the Third Sector or from any group representing people with protected characteristics”.*

Parent

### **Better partnership working**

A number of learners and parents felt that partnership working needed to be improved, both within the college and when colleges worked with external agencies. One parent felt that the current way in which agencies who support disabled learners operate is very much a silo culture.

*“They need to work together better. The lectures and learning support did not liaise at [my] college. It was a shambles and impacted my confidence greatly”.*

Learner

### **Increased parental involvement**

Many parents were disappointed in the way in which their views were disregarded, and felt that college staff did not involve them sufficiently when considering the learner’s support package and throughout their learning journey. Some parents felt that it was difficult to liaise with college staff as they believed that “*they knew best*”, and suggested there needed to be more professional humility and an understanding that parents are usually the primary expert regarding their own child’s needs.

*“Professionals should be able to recognise that parents have a key part to play”.*

*“Make it possible for parents to be copied into college email communications if necessary. Have more discussion with parents - invite them into college to see their work, or have other opportunities”.*

*“Learners with Complex needs or their parents should have more involvement in choosing what they learn at college based on what interests them allowing them the same opportunities as other learners”.*

Similar concerns were noted when dealing with local authority social work departments:

*“Social work decisions need to be made more transparent. Views of other professionals were routinely ignored, as were ours. Complaints were dealt with only superficially. I suspect an agenda to exclude due to budget restraints?”*

A few parents highlighted difficulties in trying to discuss their child’s needs with college staff as a result of data protection issues for those aged 18 and over, even if the young person had given consent for the parent to do so.

Some parents accepted that there is a need for learners to become more independent, but felt that the additional barriers which disabled learners often experience (in comparison with non-disabled learners) increased their need for parental support.

*“I was discouraged by my daughter from contacting the college as she likes and is well able when well to attend to things by herself. However, her attendance has been limited due to her condition and, despite being told at her needs assessment interview that she needn’t worry about her attendance, she was e-*



*mailed 'out of the blue' on her bona fide day off last week to be told she was being withdrawn from the course because of her attendance”.*

***More focus on other ‘positive outcomes’***

Many respondents felt that colleges were too focused on learners’ progression to further learning or employment, and didn’t take sufficient account of learners’ achievements in other areas. This was a particular concern for learners with learning disabilities and those with complex needs.

*“For some people with learning disabilities, the word progress means an academic achievement or qualification which is beyond their ability. I would like to see a different type of course being more available that enhances quality of life and gives a bit of variety of subject to suit individual interests and enhance social interaction”.*

One parent pointed out the lack of progression through SCQF learning levels should perhaps not be regarded as negative, as such learners may be achieving in other areas.

*“Colleges could acknowledge that many learners working at the lower levels (1-3), may not keep progressing up the levels but most benefit from working at the same level for a number of years and making horizontal progression. The qualifications gained are not the most important part of the experience.”*

She believed that the goalposts for people with learning disabilities were different, and that colleges need to therefore give more consideration to learners’ achievements in other areas, i.e. “the hidden curriculum”. This includes skills such as:

- socialising and being part of society
- communication
- being accepted as part of a group
- mental well-being
- cultural engagement
- keeping healthy
- being mentally stimulated.

## 10. Key recommendations

While colleges may wish to consider many or all of the recommendations set out in the previous section, Lead Scotland would suggest that the following should be considered as key recommendations for addressing many of the barriers which have been identified in this report affecting learners' progression.

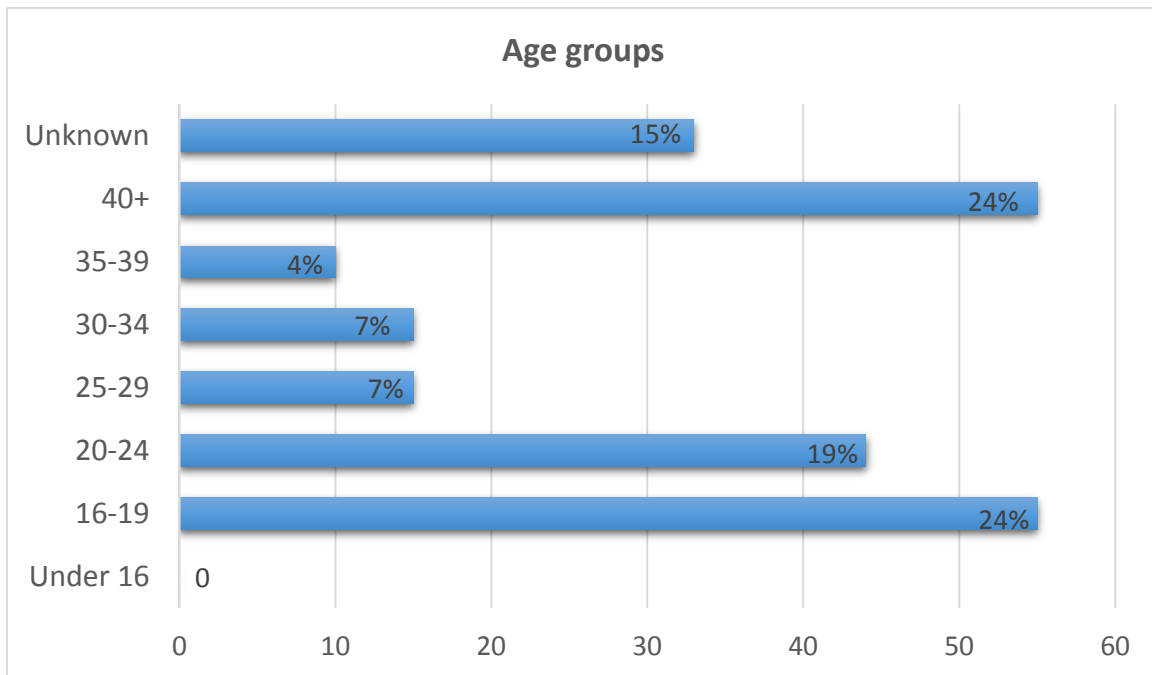
Steps which colleges can take:

- offer a broad range of courses at all SCQF levels which meet the needs and aspirations of disabled learners
- put the learner at the centre of all processes and decisions affecting their learning journey
- recognise that parents often have a key role to play when identifying the learner's support package
- ensure that all teaching and support staff undertake regular training to ensure they have a good understanding of the way in which different impairments may affect individual learners
- ensure that all disabled learners have access to a named staff member / keyworker as a means of helping them identify and address any learning barriers, and having someone to talk to during periods of difficulty
- aim to anticipate a wide range of reasonable adjustments which disabled learners may require, while still responding to individual requests for support
- put in place a wide range of pre-entry support measures
- aim to develop and improve partnership working with relevant agencies

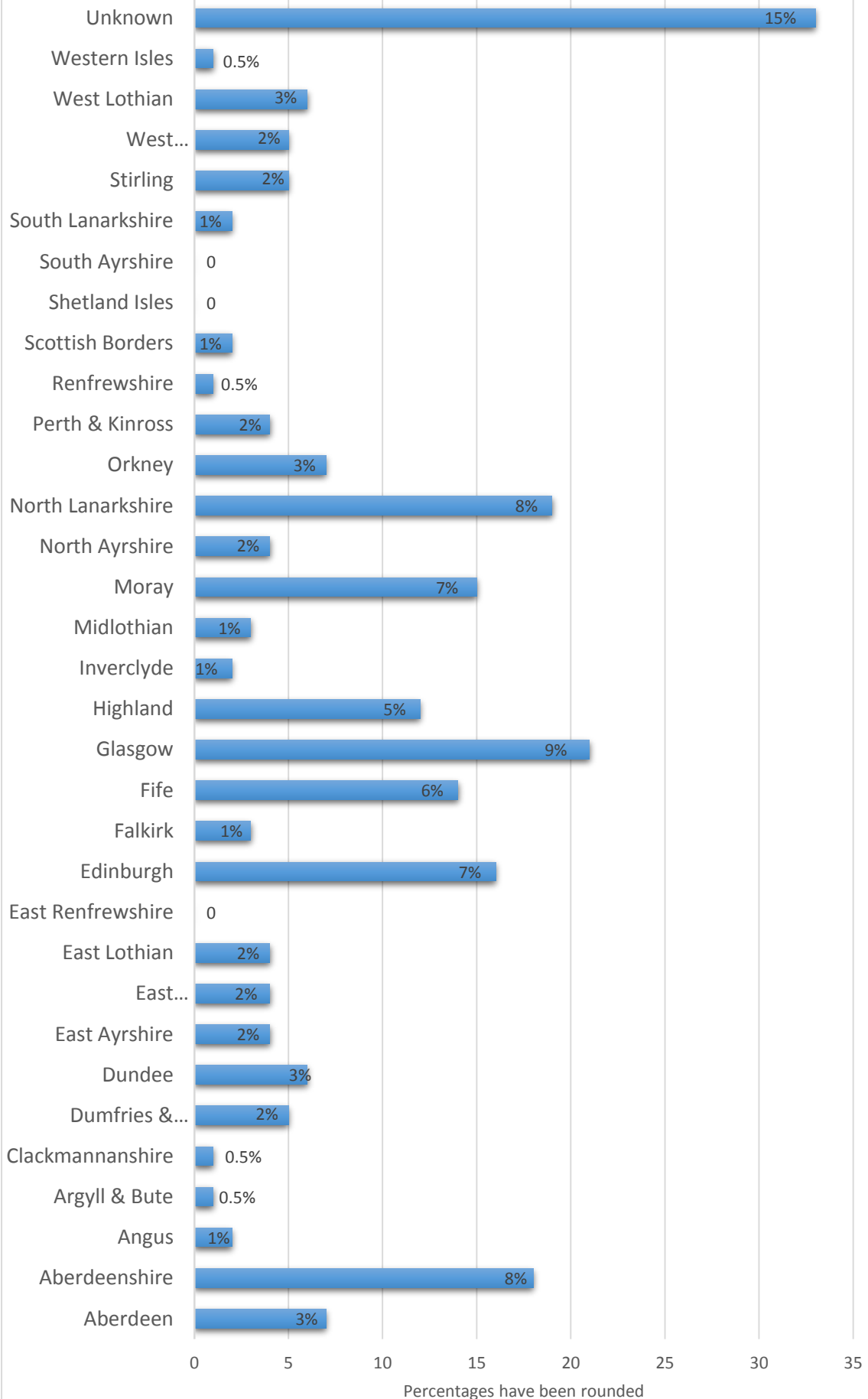
Recommendations for the Scottish Government / Scottish Funding Council:

- clarify the roles and responsibilities of all agencies involved in supporting disabled learners, specifically in relation to support for transport
- improved financial support for disabled learners
- broaden the definition of 'positive outcomes' to include measures of learner success other than achieving qualifications or progressing to further learning or employment
- identify and highlight examples of good practice in the college sector.

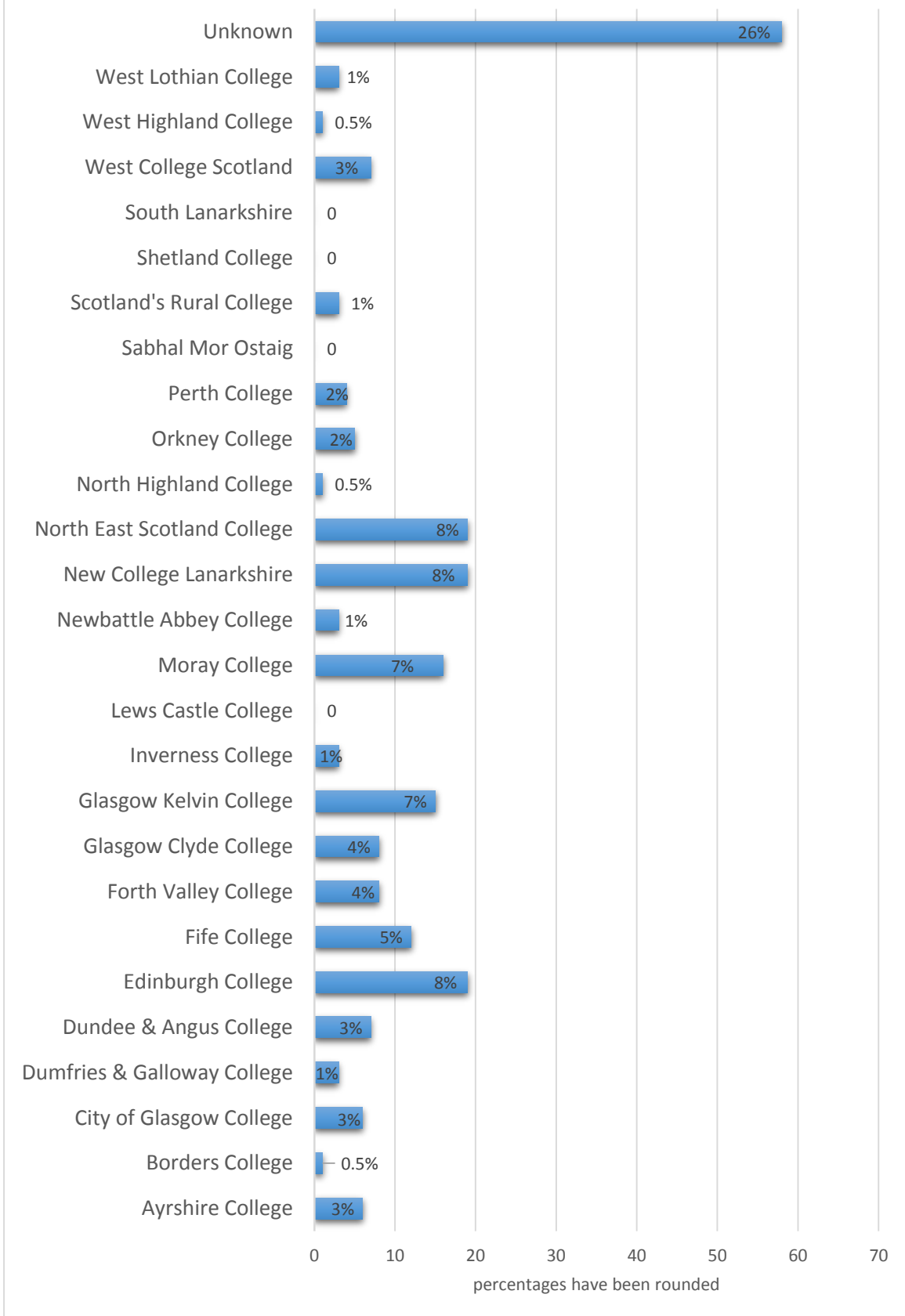
## Appendix: Characteristics of survey respondents

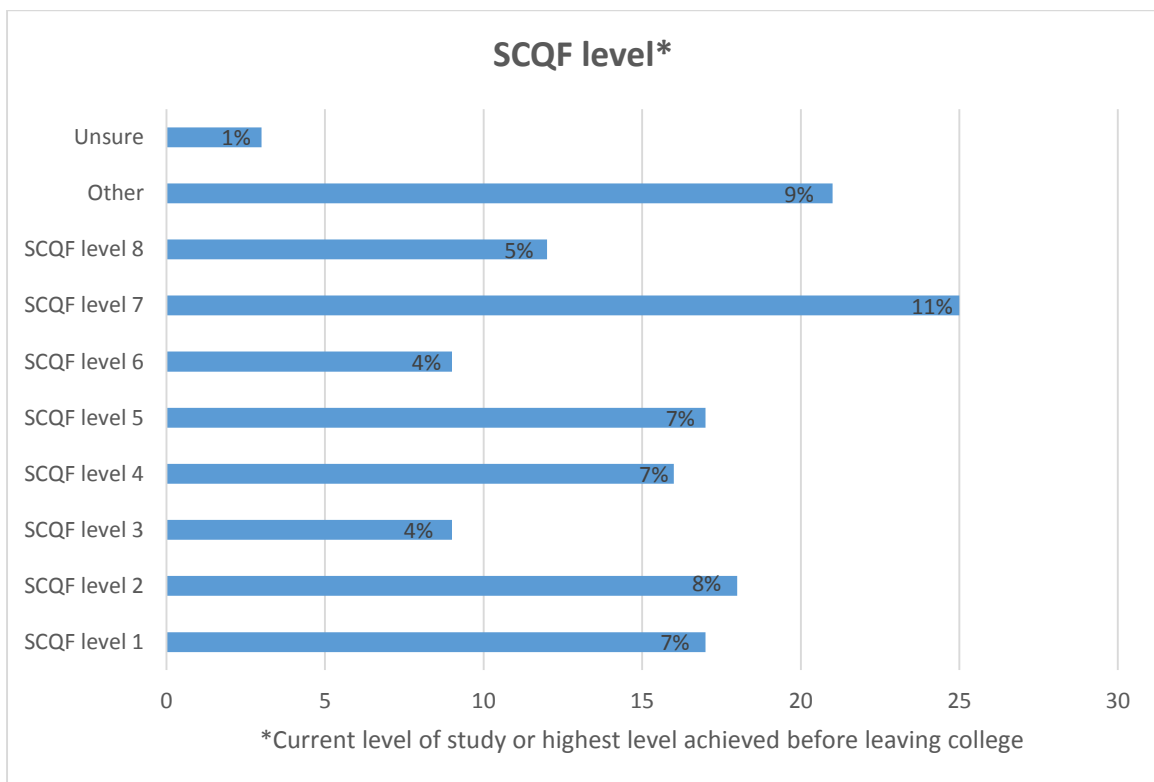
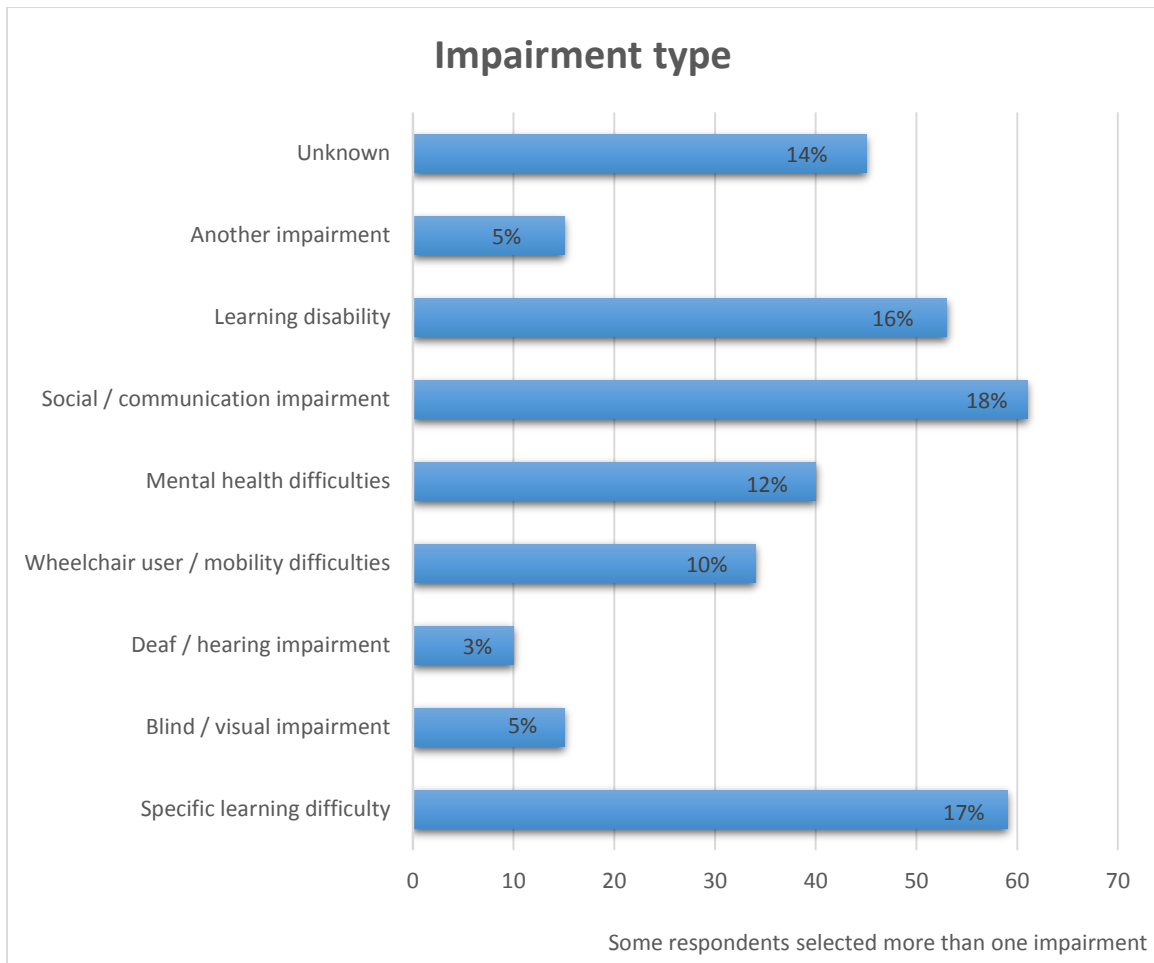


## Local authority



## College attended





## Subject studied

