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Jesus Canduela[a]; Rachel Chandler[a]; Ian Elliott[a]; Colin Lindsay[a]; Suzi Macpherson[b]; Ronald W. McQuaid[a]; Robert Raeside[a]

[a] Employment Research Institute, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK [b] Equality and Human Rights Commission, Glasgow, UK

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Partnerships to support early school leavers: school–college transitions and 'winter leavers' in Scotland

Jesus Canduela[a], Rachel Chandler[a], Ian Elliott[a], Colin Lindsay[a]*, Suzi Macpherson[b], Ronald W. McQuaid[a] and Robert Raeside[a]

[a]*Employment Research Institute, Edinburgh Napier University, Craiglockhart Campus, Edinburgh, UK;* [b]*Equality and Human Rights Commission, Glasgow, UK*

This article explores the characteristics, destinations and progression routes of early school leavers – specifically 'exceptional entry winter leavers' – in Scotland. Exceptional entry allows students to enter college in the term before their statutory school leaving date – such young people attend college while formally remaining the responsibility of their school. Such arrangements represent an innovative model of supporting transitions to further education among a specific, potentially vulnerable client group, while also offering lessons for the development of school–college collaboration in other areas. Based on an analysis of official data, new survey research with schools and colleges, and in-depth case studies, this article identifies how schools and colleges work in partnership to support these early school leavers. We find that schools and colleges have developed a range of innovative approaches to engaging with winter leavers, and that the majority complete their programmes or achieve other positive end-of-year outcomes. However, the most disadvantaged young people remain least likely to progress. The article concludes by identifying lessons for good practice in school–college partnership-working and considering implications for policies to prevent young people from finding themselves not in employment, education or training.

Keywords: early school leavers; college; further education; NEET

1. Introduction

Policy-makers in the UK and devolved governments are committed to ensuring that all young people can be helped to develop sustainable learning and career pathways after their statutory school leaving date (DfES 2006; Scottish Executive 2006a; Northern Ireland Executive 2008). Specifically, there is a concern that some early school leavers are in danger of facing long periods 'not in employment, education or training' (NEET), which can lead to immediate

experiences of social exclusion (Furlong 2006) and have been shown to have a lasting, negative impact on individuals' progression in the labour market (Bynner et al. 2002).

The concern of successive governments in the UK and Scotland to assist disadvantaged young people 'at risk of being NEET' has informed a series of strategies to support early school leavers (Scottish Executive 2005a, 2006a; DCSF 2007). One key element of these strategies has been to encourage early leavers (where appropriate) to continue learning in the college sector. Consequently, schools and colleges have been supported to develop innovative partnerships to support such vulnerable young people (Scottish Executive 2005a). In Scotland, the Scottish Government-supported *Employability Framework* emphasises 'building more effective pathways from school to positive outcomes by enhancing school and college links' and providing appropriate vocational learning options (Scottish Executive 2006a, 6). Similar priorities are highlighted by the Scottish Government's *More Choices, More Chances* agenda, which seeks to inform a range of strategies to prevent young people from finding themselves NEET (Scottish Executive 2006b).

The situation in Scotland is somewhat complicated by the manner in which there are two different statutory school leaving dates. Young people whose birth date falls between the start of October and the end of February have the right to leave school at the end of the winter term closest to their sixteenth birthday (i.e. to leave in December).[1] These 'winter leavers', like other early school leavers, are likely to report relatively low levels of educational attainment, but can face additional barriers due to recruitment trends (many employers hold major recruitment drives to coincide with school, college and university summer leaving dates) and the lack of appropriate further education provision with January start dates. Given these issues, government, the college sector and schools have sought to develop early 'exceptional entry' routes to college for these young people (Scottish Executive 2005b). Under exceptional entry rules, some students aged under 16 in their fifth year of secondary education remain the responsibility of their school but spend most or all of their time (up to their school leaving date in December) attending college. Exceptional entry therefore represents an innovative model of supporting transitions to further education among a specific, potentially vulnerable client group, while also offering lessons for the development of school–college collaboration in other areas.

This article seeks to explore the characteristics, destinations and progression routes of exceptional entry winter leavers (EEWLs) entering college prior to their sixteenth birthday. It draws on interviews with key stakeholders, analyses of existing official student data, new survey research with Scotland's schools and colleges, and in-depth case studies to investigate the issues faced by EEWLs and identify how schools and colleges work in partnership to support these young people.

Following this introduction, the remainder of the article is structured as follows. Part 2 briefly discusses the barriers to progression faced by at-risk

early school leavers and the school–college partnership agenda that has emerged in response, before describing the methodology for our research. Part 3 presents an analysis of the characteristics, destinations and outcomes of winter leavers entering college under exceptional entry arrangements based on official datasets. Part 4 draws on new survey and case-study-based research with school and college representatives to discuss the barriers faced by EEWLs and, crucially, on examples of good practice in partnership-working to support learning progression for these young people. Part 5 reviews lessons from the research and discusses implications for policy.

2.   Background

2.1.   *Addressing the needs of early school leavers*

Policy-makers have long sought to develop targeted strategies to address the needs of young people at risk of experiencing long periods NEET. The so-called NEET agenda became a focus for policy in the 1980s and 1990s as increasing evidence emerged of 'delayed transitions' (Gray and Sime 1990), with lower-skilled young people struggling to find routes into entry-level employment. To some extent, the problems encountered by these disadvantaged young people also reflect the more prolonged and complex 'fragmented transitions' encountered by school leavers in general – a product of increasing job insecurity in entry-level positions (Bynner et al. 2002; Furlong and Cartmel 2004; Biggart and Walther 2005) and so 'uncertainty and discontinuity' in early careers (Fenton and Dermott 2006). To this end, Cote and Bynner (2008) note how structural labour market changes have resulted in a 'lowering of the social status of the young' and increasing precarious trajectories to employment, socio-economic progression and so a sense of 'adulthood'.

As Bynner et al. (2002, xiii) argue, these changes particularly affect those young people with limited educational attainment – 'a gap appears to be growing between those who gain good educational qualifications and those who do not'. Low attainment not only increases the chances of early school leaving but also of unemployment and unstable post-school careers in general (Howieson 2003). Also, young people at risk of experiencing long periods NEET can face other complex barriers to progression. Recent reviews of the Scottish School Leavers Survey have noted that those NEET were significantly more likely to have few qualifications, experienced behavioural and/or attendance problems at school, and come from households where one or both parents were unemployed (Anderson et al. 2004; Furlong 2006). Research elsewhere has also noted that disaffection with education and basic skills gaps can act as barriers to learning for such young people (Pemberton 2008), although some studies have pointed to the heterogeneity of the broader early leaver client group and the positive

outcomes achieved by many of these young people (Dekkers and Claassen 2001).

Strategies developed in response to the NEET problem have tended to emphasise the need for more flexible forms of further education and one-to-one support if potentially disadvantaged young people are to be supported to re-engage with learning (Maguire and Thompson 2007). Building partnerships between secondary and vocational/further learning providers has been a key priority in developing such approaches to combat NEET. In the case of Scotland, successive governments have placed a strong emphasis on promoting integrated learning partnerships involving schools, colleges and the national careers agency, Careers Scotland (Hodgson et al. 2004; Ramsden, Bennett, and Fuller 2004). Providing college sector pathways for early school leavers is central to both the Scottish Government's strategy to prevent young people from finding themselves NEET, *More Choices, More Chances* (Scottish Executive 2006b), and its broader labour market inclusion strategy and *Employability Framework* (Scottish Executive 2006a). In terms of education policy, the Scottish Government's *16+ Learning Choices* agenda (rolled out in Scotland from 2008 to 2010) similarly prioritises early planning and collaborative interventions so that all young people have an appropriate offer of learning, 'well in advance of their school leaving date' through a flexible but coherent system of further, higher and community learning (Scottish Government 2008a). *16+ Learning Choices* in turn reflects the priorities of the *Curriculum for Excellence* initiative, which has sought to modernise the whole Scottish curriculum, with the 'senior phase' of reform emphasising the benefits of school–college collaboration, from integrating vocational training and literacy provision to enhancing employability and workplace-relevant skills and more generally promoting 'positive attitudes to learning' (Scottish Government 2009).

Within this context, one group of potentially vulnerable young people targeted by school–college collaboration projects are winter leavers. Arrangements for leaving school in Scotland were laid down in the Education (Scotland) Act 1976 and the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. Students are able to leave school at age 16, with two separate leaving date criteria: students whose birthday falls between 1 March and 30 September are entitled to leave school at the end of the school year nearest their sixteenth birthday; pupils whose birthday falls between 1 October and the end of February can leave school at the end of the winter term closest to their sixteenth birthday. As noted above, these winter leavers may share many of the characteristics of other early school leavers, but may also face additional barriers, and schools, colleges and careers providers have accordingly developed vocational learning opportunities within the college sector that are aimed at meeting the specific needs of this group. Specifically, many of these young people are permitted to transfer to college prior to their statutory school leaving date under exceptional entry rules (although it is worth noting that in legislative terms, these school

pupils remain the responsibility of their local authority education provider until their statutory school leaving age). The then Scottish Executive's (2005a) 'Lifelong Partners' strategy noted not only that full-time college learning for such 'EEWLs' can present options that may be more suitable for some but also that schools, colleges, local authorities and Careers Scotland should work together to ensure that vulnerable pupils attending college full-time alongside adult learners receive the support that they need.

The research reported here sought to develop new evidence on approaches to assisting EEWLs and the progression routes of these young people when making the transition to college. Specifically, the research aimed to gather substantial new data and provided new insights on the characteristics of winter leavers entering college and how these are related to individuals' trajectories and outcomes, how schools and colleges work in partnership to support these potentially vulnerable young people, and challenges to the development of effective partnerships.

2.2.   *Methodology*

This article seeks to identify the number and characteristics of winter leavers securing places on college courses through early exceptional entry and the progression and outcomes achieved by EEWLs (and variations according to geography and individual characteristics). It also discusses examples of good practice in partnership-working and the delivery of learning to promote successful school–college transitions for winter leavers, and any barriers to effective school–college partnerships.

The methodology for the research involved three stages. First, analysis of official data on EEWLs entering college during the 2006–2007 academic year, provided by the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council (hereafter Scottish Funding Council). These data were analysed using SPSS for Windows to provide insights into the characteristics of winter leavers and, importantly, the association between area-based deprivation, individual characteristics (such as educational attainment) and school–college transition experiences. They also provided information on end-of-year outcomes achieved by winter leavers, and we explore the relationship between winter leavers' characteristics, destinations and outcomes below. Second, an online survey of Scottish secondary schools and colleges collected information on learning professionals' views on key issues around supporting early leavers and partnership-working on school–college transitions. Third, a case study research was carried out with 10 schools and nine colleges. Case study institutions were purposively selected so as to reflect learning professionals' experiences of supporting EEWLs across a range of different contexts, including different local authority areas (schools and colleges were drawn from 14 local authority areas), urban and rural geographical contexts (based on Scottish Government 'rurality' categories, and taking in 'large urban', 'other urban',

'accessible small towns' and 'accessible rural' areas), and different sizes of institution and EEWLs client group.

The case study research focused on how schools and colleges address the needs of winter leavers, the role and importance of exceptional entry as a progression route, partnership-working and information-sharing between schools and colleges, and priorities for taking forward school–college collaboration (especially on the needs of winter leavers). In most areas, case studies did not capture the views of EEWLs themselves due to difficulties in accessing contact data for individual students within the timeframe for the research. While this is an important limitation of our research, the combination of client profile and outcomes information from an official dataset, and both qualitative and survey evidence from schools and colleges, enabled us to develop a comprehensive picture of these young people's key characteristics and progression routes.

3.   Exceptional entry winter leavers: characteristics and outcomes from official data for 2006–2007

3.1.   *Characteristics of winter leavers*

The Scottish Funding Council data on the characteristics and outcomes of EEWLs, during the academic year 2006–2007, covered the Year 1 outcomes achieved by young people entering college through EEWLs routes. As well as providing information on individual characteristics, they were linked to other secondary data indicators on whether individual students resided in more 'deprived' localities based on Scottish Indices of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD).[2]

The Scottish Funding Council reported 2203 EEWLs starting college during 2006–2007, of which approximately 53% were male. Only five of Scotland's 32 local authority areas together accounted for more than two-fifths (42.3%) of all EEWLs: Fife, Glasgow, Aberdeenshire, North Lanarkshire and Edinburgh. However, these relatively large local authorities host a number of large colleges – and therefore reported high numbers of students entering further education through a range of different routes – in general, winter leaver entry tended to reflect college entry rates in most local authority areas. Overall, EEWLs represented 16% of all entrants to Scotland's colleges during the year.

Approximately 15% of EEWLs were reported as having some form of physical and/or learning disability (compared with only 2% of all state school leavers). Almost two-fifths of those reported as having a disability were dyslexic. Without more detailed data on the nature and severity of disabilities (not provided by the Scottish Funding Council dataset), it is difficult to fully consider the challenges faced by both students and learning providers. However, it is notable that the proportion of winter leavers reporting disabilities within

individual colleges varied considerably. Some (especially smaller) colleges received no winter leavers with disabilities, while more than 30% of one college's intake did have a reported disability. There may be a need for further research on the experiences of vulnerable learners with disabilities at college and any additional resources required by those colleges that support considerable numbers of disabled learners. Among EEWLs, 30% were reported as having Additional Support Needs (compared with only 4% of all state school leavers).

EEWLs were more likely to reside in the most deprived 15% of SIMD data zones (30% of these winter leavers, compared with approximately 16% of all secondary school students[3]). However, living in deprived neighbourhoods was understandably more common among winter leavers based in local authority areas, where there are major concentrations of area-based disadvantage. Accordingly, in the (largely urban) Dundee, Glasgow, Inverclyde and West Dunbartonshire local authority areas, more than half of EEWLs resided in the 15% 'most deprived' data zones, compared with, for example, less than 9% of their peers in the rural Aberdeenshire local authority area (see Table 1). However, even in areas where there were large minorities of the population residing in deprived neighbourhoods, EEWLs were significantly more likely to live in the most disadvantaged of these communities.

Finally, EEWLs were significantly more likely to be unqualified than the total population of public school leavers, with 63% of those on the Scottish Funding Council dataset not having achieved any Standard Grades (the equivalent of GCSEs elsewhere in the UK) or Scottish Qualification Authority/ National Certificate modules. Female EEWLs were slightly more likely to be unqualified. Results based on chi-square[4] tests show a significant association between living in deprived SIMD data zones and lower levels of qualification – for example, those who lived in the 15% most deprived data zones were significantly more likely to be unqualified (with 69% of these winter leavers not holding any qualification compared with only 61% of those living in less deprived data zones). The evidence suggests that those early school leavers gaining exceptional entry to college are among the lowest qualified and most disadvantaged young people – the proportion of unqualified EEWLs was much higher than is typically reported in surveys of early leavers (Howieson 2003; Hodgson et al. 2004; Scottish Government 2008b).

3.2.   Learner outcomes

3.2.1.   Course destinations

The Scottish Funding Council data show that the three most popular areas of study at colleges among EEWLs were 'family care, personal development or personal care' (21% of all students entering college), 'engineering' (17%) and 'construction and property/built environment' (14%). These three areas of study accounted for more than half of all destinations for winter leavers.

Table 1.   Percentage of exceptional entry winter leavers residing in deprived data zones areas.

Local authority	% of total population residing in most deprived 15% of areas	% of winter leavers residing in most deprived 15% of areas
Aberdeen	8.86	30.34
Aberdeenshire	1.87	8.74
Angus	5.83	17.65
Argyll & Bute	7.04	0.00
Clackmannanshire	23.59	46.15
Dumfries and Galloway	5.83	15.73
Dundee	28.86	65.52
East Ayrshire	17.99	35.59
East Dunbartonshire	2.20	13.51
East Lothian	0.90	0.00
East Renfrewshire	2.18	9.09
Edinburgh	11.35	33.64
Eilean Siar	0.00	0.00
Falkirk	8.81	11.36
Fife	10.04	25.61
Glasgow	46.66	64.57
Highlands	5.64	11.43
Inverclyde	36.39	61.90
Midlothian	4.81	0.00
Moray	0.00	3.64
North Ayrshire	18.00	34.57
North Lanarkshire	19.53	41.60
Orkney Islands	0.00	0.00
Perth & Kinross	4.24	15.52
Renfrewshire	15.43	41.54
Scottish Borders	2.12	8.60
Shetland Islands	0.00	0.00
South Ayrshire	8.68	24.49
South Lanarkshire	13.60	34.85
Stirling	5.67	14.81
West Dunbartonshire	27.23	53.13
West Lothian	6.05	21.43
Total	14.79	29.63

Within these general areas of study, certain subjects were particularly popular. For example, more than half of those engaged in 'family care, personal development or personal care' were undertaking 'hair/personal care services' training. Among those taking 'engineering' programmes, 'vehicle maintenance/ repair' was the focus of study for the two-fifths of students (with 'mechanical engineering' also popular). Within the 'construction and property/built environment' study area, more than half of students were undertaking 'general construction' courses, with a further third involved in 'building/construction operations' programmes.

There was clear evidence of the strongly gendered nature of many study choices among winter leavers. Male winter leavers were significantly more likely to select 'construction and property' and 'engineering' courses. Conversely, female students were significantly more likely to pursue 'healthcare, medicine or health and safety' and 'family care, personal development or personal care' courses. Careers Scotland, schools and other stakeholders have consistently sought to challenge gender stereotyping in career choice among school leavers (McQuaid and Bond 2004) but these data demonstrate that gendered attitudes remain prevalent.

Perhaps the most valuable element of the data provided by the Scottish Funding Council relates the outcomes recorded by EEWLs at the end of the academic year 2006–2007. As shown in Table 2, 61% had what might be termed a 'positive' outcome, having completed their programme successfully following assessment (46%) or completed a programme that does not require assessment (2%), started work (8%), continued studying on the same programme (4%), or transferred to study elsewhere (1%). However, a substantial minority of students (approximately 22%) left to unknown destinations, and further 17% did not successfully complete assessment. There were no significant differences between genders with regard to students achieving *any* form of positive outcome. However, male students were significantly more

Table 2.   Outcomes of exceptional entry winter leavers, 2006–2007.

Outcome	Number	%
Completed programme – successfully passed assessment	1015	46.07
Withdrawn unknown	477	21.65
Completed programme – did not pass assessment	355	16.11
Withdrawn to start work	167	7.58
Continuing on programme to next year	89	4.04
Completed programme – non-assessed study	48	2.18
Completed programme – not assessed but should have been	24	1.09
Transferred to another course	20	0.91
Withdrawn – studying elsewhere	8	0.37
Total	2203	100

likely to leave college to start work and to transfer to other courses, while female students were significantly more likely to continue studying on the same programme to a second year.

Students residing in the 15% most deprived of SIMD data zones were significantly less likely to have experienced any kind of positive outcome (57%, compared with 63% of students from other areas having positive outcomes). Specifically, students living in these disadvantaged areas were significantly more likely to withdraw to unknown destinations. They were also, however, significantly more likely to withdraw to start work. While job entry can be seen as a positive outcome for winter leavers, leaving college to find work may also reflect the financial pressures on some learners. The reasons for potentially vulnerable young people from the most disadvantaged areas withdrawing from college (whether to start work or for unknown reasons) require further in-depth analysis.

The lowest-qualified winter leavers were significantly less likely to achieve any positive outcome (41% of low-qualified students achieved no form of positive outcome, compared with 36% of other winter leavers). This was because they were significantly more likely to have withdrawn to an unknown destination or to have completed an assessed course without successfully passing assessments. Accordingly, the same group were also significantly less likely to successfully 'pass' an assessed programme of study (43% of the lowest-qualified winter leavers had achieved this type of positive outcome, compared with 52% of other students).

Those students who were reported as having Additional Support Needs were generally not significantly less likely to have positive outcomes. The main significant difference between the two groups was that those with Support Needs were more likely to have completed non-assessed programmes, but the numbers involved were small. All the main subject areas reported some form of positive outcome for the majority of EEWLs, but positive outcomes were least often achieved by those engaged in 'engineering' activities (perhaps reflecting the technical demands of these courses or that male students were more likely to leave to start work).

One potentially important factor affecting some young people's completion and progression rates at college relates to the structure and duration of the programmes that they entered. The relatively small number of EEWLs undertaking short August–December courses (385 of 2203 students) was significantly more likely to leave to unknown destinations (56% of these students left to an unknown destination, compared with only 13% of those undertaking other courses). Those undertaking courses ending in May, June or July were also significantly more likely to report any positive outcome (67%, compared with just 33% of August–December programme participants) and were significantly more likely to successfully complete assessed programmes (52%, compared with 16% of August–December winter leavers). This may partly reflect the likelihood that those less committed to staying in education would be more

likely to enter short courses that took them up to the earliest available leaving date (December), rather than commit to longer-term training. So while short-term winter leavers' transitional programmes may be helpful in providing some young people with an immediate 'taster' of college life, non-completion rates *appear* higher. If this does reflect higher levels of non-completion, then it may mean that the benefits of attending and completing courses during the final phase of their compulsory education need to be re-emphasised to these young people. However, we should recall that the numbers involved are relatively small (less than one-fifth of 2006–2007 EEWLs attended programmes ending in December) and that the apparently higher proportion leaving to unknown destinations may reflect problems in tracking these young people, rather than (or as well as) the barriers to progression faced by this group.

4. Supporting winter leavers: the views of schools and colleges

4.1. *Research with schools*

Research with schools was conducted in two phases. First, an online survey was sent to head teachers at 386 secondary schools in Scotland, drawn from contact lists provided by Careers Scotland. Of these, 117 schools provided useable responses, including 96 state secondaries, 19 independent and two special schools. The response rate of 30% is acceptable and typical of the results achieved by online surveys in this area (Shih and Fan 2009) – indeed, the response rate exactly matched that of a major survey of English schools on vocational learning provision conducted around the same time as our research (QCA 2006). In total, responses were received from at least one school in 29 of Scotland's 32 local authority areas. Of those schools responding, 36 (31% of all responses) reported having no EEWLs during the preceding academic year 2007–2008, while 81 reported having between 1 and 49 students progressing through this route. Case study visits were undertaken at 10 schools, reflecting a range of geographies and variations in the size of the winter leavers client group. During the school case study visits, interviews were undertaken with senior teachers (usually the deputy head teacher or assistant principal with overall responsibility for school–college transitions and/or 'pupil support') and other staff members working with EEWLs, including principal teachers of guidance (and other guidance staff), education welfare officers, pastoral care teachers, 'pupil support team' teachers, and heads of year.

4.1.1. *Meeting the needs of EEWLs – the views of schools*

Our survey work and case studies with schools sought to probe learning professionals' views of the challenges facing winter leavers and the role of exceptional entry to college in promoting positive progression routes. All the

participating schools stressed that winter leavers could not be seen as a distinctive, homogenous client group. A number of interviewees spoke of having to address the needs of two or three distinctive groups within the winter leavers population (to some extent reflecting distinctive groups in the broader population of school leavers). For some winter leavers, college offers a route to vocational learning, especially to access a specific course of study that they want to pursue – schools are happy to support that choice, especially if students are unlikely to make significant academic progress during a fifth year at secondary school. For others, who may feel that they have 'outgrown school' and want to leave at the same time as their peers, exceptional entry is about the 'adult environment' offered by college. A number of interviewees spoke of the benefits of exceptional entry to college as a progression route for this group. One deputy head noted how some students who have struggled at school 'thrive outside the school environment'. Finally, there are students 'who will do anything to get out of school', often 'school refusers' whose long-standing attendance, attainment and behaviour records are predictors that they will leave school at the earliest opportunity. Many of these young people face complex barriers to progression linked to social or family issues – as one fifth year principal teacher noted: 'For many school refusers the issue is not school, the issue is an external social factor, and they respond against it at school.'

Schools' representatives noted the challenges faced by both schools and colleges in ensuring that progression routes and student support are sufficiently flexible to address the needs of such diverse winter leaver groups:

> There's one group who, looking at the options, think college is the better option for them. They may be young people who have achieved qualifications at Level 4 and 5, but may struggle to go further and would not gain academically from coming back to school for a year. There's another group who are switched off from school. It's more about them saying that they will not come back to school and maybe even being resentful that they can't leave at the end of fourth year [at secondary school], when many of their friends may have left. College is an option for them. Some will be 'up for it'; for others they will apply for college without having much of a sense of direction, and may struggle to maintain direction. There's a final group who are not really engaged in school at all, who have been absent for long periods and perhaps through education welfare officers have come to the conclusion that college may be the best option.

Accordingly, despite acknowledging the disadvantage faced by many, school representatives were reluctant to accept the argument that most early college entrants end up there because other routes are closed to them (Bathmaker 2005). However, while winter leavers were seen as an internally diverse group in their own right, it was also suggested that they were not easily distinguishable from other early school leavers. Indeed, a consistent theme throughout our interviews was that winter leavers face many of the same issues (and are as diverse a group) as other early leavers, irrespective of age. One deputy head's argument that 'the only thing that's different with these young people

is their date of birth' was supported by senior school representatives at almost all our other case study institutions. This led many learning professionals to query the appropriateness of having two different school leaving dates:

> Changing young people's school career and leaving date on the basis of whether they were born one minute before or after midnight on a certain date doesn't make sense.

Nevertheless, school representatives also noted that some winter leavers (like other early school leavers) could face substantial barriers to progression. Across all the schools responding to our survey with information about the characteristics of their winter leavers, there was again consensus that a substantial minority of EEWLs had complex Additional Support Needs. Furthermore, our survey research with schools enabled us to estimate that around 26% of reported EEWLs had previously been eligible for free school meals – the average for all school leavers is 12% (Scottish Government 2008b). Finally, schools confirmed the relatively low levels of qualification among many EEWLs. While many other (especially early) school leavers will face similar challenges, it is likely that winter leavers will often require support and guidance in making the transition from school to college.

Schools responding to our online survey highlighted a number of specific methods of supporting winter leavers' transitions to college. For many schools, the need to 'start early' when engaging with winter leavers was an important lesson for practice. Guidance staff in many schools started working with potential winter leavers 12–16 months before their statutory leaving date. Schools described how guidance staff worked with colleges, careers advisers, parents and students to explore potential progression routes (including exceptional entry). Some schools also described more thorough-going 'audits' (led by 'Pupil Support Teams') conducted six months prior to students' leaving date. For these schools, preparation in advance and supporting students through one-to-one guidance and advice on the application process were seen as vital to successful transitions.

4.1.2. *The value of exceptional entry to college – the views of schools*

All the schools participating in our survey research valued exceptional entry to college as an 'important' or 'very important' option for winter leavers. There was an acknowledgement that college routes were appropriate for the range of different learners described above and that there were benefits in students leaving early to allow for continuity in the learning experience. Senior teachers took the view that if exceptional entry achieved the best learning outcomes for young people, then it was justified. For 'refusers' who have struggled to engage at school, exceptional entry was seen as a means of reducing the risk of them ending up NEET.

Where relationships between schools and colleges were strong, maintaining a continuous flow of information was considered crucial. Some schools described how local colleges provided detailed, regular feedback on both attendance and attainment. In these cases, schools worked closely with colleges to monitor the progress of EEWLs (e.g. through regular review meetings between the school's Pupil Support Team, college staff and students). However, representatives of a small number of schools noted that information-sharing on winter leavers could sometimes be sketchy. One deputy head at a school with a substantial number of winter leavers suggested that there could be a danger of a 'no news is good news approach' – with the school only hearing about winter leavers if there are attendance or behaviour problems. It was also accepted that there could be delays in picking up on attendance problems among EEWLs at college.

Some school representatives raised the broader issue of evidence on the longer-term benefits of exceptional entry as a progression route. One deputy head suggested that more information on progression in the years immediately following college was required in order to understand the efficacy of exceptional entry as an option for different learners:

> For some with few academic qualifications [exceptional entry to] college is likely to be a good option. My only reservation is that they might go to college for a year to get a taster of lots of different things but they are still in the same situation a year later. We need a long-term analysis of what happens to these students between, say, the ages of 15 and 19. Obviously, the hope is that after a year starting with exceptional entry they will be in a better place to progress.

A number of school representatives particularly highlighted how colleges have worked hard to integrate essential skills and employability provision within their practical, vocational programmes. Senior teachers were aware of, and impressed by, vocational programmes that have maintained a strong commitment to literacy, numeracy and core employability skills (often delivered within, or connected to, practical learning). School representatives did, however, consistently raise concerns regarding gaps in capacity within the college sector. A number of school representatives said that mainstream courses popular among winter leavers were often massively over-subscribed. As one deputy head noted:

> For the most popular courses – things like construction and childcare – the college is telling us that they have 10 applications for every place. There is huge demand and not the capacity.

The same interviewee acknowledged that local colleges were working to build capacity, but noted that winter leavers were often left disappointed when unable to find a place on a course of their choice. Of course, winter leavers failing to

gain a place in a course of their choice is particularly problematic, given that (unlike other applicants to mainstream college courses) they remain within the compulsory education system.

4.2. *Research with colleges*

An online survey was sent to 43 Scottish colleges (although it is estimated that only 41 of these colleges are likely to have dealings with EEWLs, based on the previous funding data from the Scottish Funding Council). Seventeen colleges responded to the online survey (a response rate of 37%). All colleges responding reported having EEWLs participating in courses at their college at the time of the survey. The number of students varied significantly from three at rural college to more than 100 students each at four major regional colleges.

Nine colleges participated in the in-depth case study research. Colleges were again purposively selected to ensure findings from a mix of urban and rural contexts and to ensure the inclusion of a number of colleges serving deprived areas and identified as prioritising the Scottish Government's *More Choices, More Chances* policy agenda. As noted above, case studies gathered views from school–college liaison staff, classroom support staff, careers guidance staff and teaching staff, programme leaders and senior managers and, in one case, exceptional entry students.

4.2.1. *Meeting the needs of EEWLs – the views of colleges*

College representatives were similarly careful to note not only the diversity of the EEWL client group but also that some students required substantial additional support, having become disaffected with a formal learning system that they saw as branding them as failures (see also, e.g., Ball, Macrae, and Maguire 1999). Our online survey work with school–college liaison officers working at colleges also reported that high numbers of EEWLs arrived with few or no qualifications. Across all the colleges participating in our online survey, it was estimated that on average around one-quarter of EEWLs had Additional Support Needs – half of these students reported a learning disability.

4.2.2. *Approaches to supporting EEWLs*

For policy-makers, good practice in school–college partnership-working can be defined as facilitating a number of benefits around widening opportunities for progression, easing students' transition from school to further learning, and broadening curriculum choices (Scottish Executive 2004, 2005a). Government advice on good practice in school–college collaboration has emphasised the need to provide opportunities for students to undertake a range of tailored

academic and vocational courses, and to access educational environments different from that of school which encourage them to place in context aspects of their learning. The broader aim should be to 'demystify post-school learning', improve work-readiness and re-engage with those most at risk of disengagement with the education system (Scottish Executive 2004). The availability of specialist staff and facilities where required by students with Additional Support Needs is seen as essential.

Many of the examples of good practice described below had developed intuitively and were highly specific to the local context. As such, no single model of 'best practice' emerged from our research. Yet the principles of effective partnership-working identified above were reflected in the services outlined by Scottish colleges delivering winter leavers provision, while our case studies identified a number of specific 'good practice' strategies. The majority of colleges participating in our online survey and case studies had developed specialist support services or tailored 'transitional' courses for EEWLs, but sought to integrate such provision wherever possible with mainstream college learning. Some winter leavers programmes were run between August and December, with students able to complete the programme, usually with an award for completion, at the time when they would formally end their compulsory schooling. Offering specialist programmes for this short period was partly about building transferable skills that can be useful for the move into employment, training or mainstream college learning.

In a minority of case studies, colleges offered no specialist/transitional winter leavers programmes. In most cases, this reflected a conscious choice among learning professionals. First, there was the view that winter leavers were not significantly different from other young learners and that, in particular, their needs were similar to other early school leavers transferring to college. There was a clear recognition that many early leavers require support and advice in the college environment, and a commitment to ensuring that all students have the same access to college provision. There were also apparent advantages in directing students onto mainstream programmes: enabling students to make immediate progress towards qualifications; offering engagement and learning from older, more mature learners who could potentially serve as positive role models for younger students, while also preventing winter leavers from being seen as different from other learners.

Some colleges expressed concern that short-term, transitional winter leavers courses – if not clearly linked to January-start mainstream programmes or other clearly defined progression routes – may be seen as a 'stop-gap' by some young people, a concern that is also raised through our analysis of the Scottish Funding Council data (see above). Those colleges offering short-term transition programmes for winter leavers shared these concerns and had generally made arrangements to ensure that students had access to progression routes at college following their school leaving date in December (with the idea being

that such young people would eventually enter mainstream programmes at the start of the following academic year).

However, what is of particular interest is that despite some local variations, the support for winter leavers offered within mainstream programmes and through specialist/transitional courses shared a number of common good practice features:

- immediate access to one-to-one support services from guidance staff for those who need additional help in making the transition from school to college;
- delivery of learning by the 'right staff' (experienced teaching staff who are willing and able to be particularly flexible and supportive in how they interact with young people) and through innovative methods (e.g. using team teaching or involving support workers in classes);
- an emphasis on continuity in teaching and guidance, with a small number of teaching staff responsible for building relationships with winter leavers and other potentially vulnerable learners;
- creative approaches to engaging winter leavers (and other learners who might be disaffected) that clearly emphasise practical skills and reflect 'real-life' and workplace scenarios where possible; and
- innovative approaches to integrating employability skills and essential skills (literacy and numeracy) into more practical/vocational learning formats.

In the latter case, a number of college representatives highlighted the importance of 'core skills screening' tools in identifying gaps in literacy and numeracy (and other aptitudes and problems) at the outset of students' college experience, enabling staff to direct them to appropriate learning options. However, a recurring view was that even where such systems were well developed, more crucial was ensuring that the right mix of professionals were in place to support early school leavers. For one programme leader: 'the people who teach are the right people … that is what makes the programme successful'. This and other interviewees pointed to the need for experienced teaching staff who were nonetheless flexible and creative in how they went about engaging non-traditional learners. Elsewhere, one of our case study colleges had been able to access funding from the Scottish Government (under its *More Choices, More Chances* programme to combat NEET) to recruit dedicated Support Workers to assist all younger students, including EEWLs, with the transition to the college environment – a role particularly valued by teaching staff and a small number of students who participated in our research. The availability of specialist staff and facilities, the delivery of a distinctive and contextualised learning experience, and the action to ease transitions to further education have all been identified as principles of good practice in supporting vulnerable learners – and these principles informed interventions across our case study colleges.

4.3.   *Good practice in partnership-working – the views of schools and colleges*

Scottish Government guidance, along with evaluations of school–college part-nership-working under the Government-funded *Skills for Work* programme (which provides college-based vocational learning for younger secondary school students), highlights a number of recurring features of effective collab-oration such as the agreement of vocational provision that is distinctive in its content and format, yet clearly integrated within (or at least linked to) the broader curriculum; and effective information-sharing and reporting systems and an understanding between schools and colleges of each other's cultures and ways of working (Scottish Executive 2004; Spielhofer and Walker 2008).

Both schools and colleges participating in both our online survey and case study interviews highlighted a number of examples of good practice in partnership-working, with many of the features identified above apparently in place. While a service-level agreement or other formal partnership agree-ment generally covered relationships between schools and colleges, direct cooperation between senior teachers/guidance staff and colleges' school liai-son officers (and sometimes staff in the relevant college departments) was also considered vital. For example, a number of school representatives high-lighted the importance of having dedicated, named individuals taking the lead on collaboration within both institutions:

> We have a deputy head who is the named person who liaises with a named person at the college. Having a named person is important for co-ordinating activities and raising awareness of the school's needs. It can be frustrating, there's a lot of financial and organisational navigation. So having a fruitful rela-tionship with the college's liaison officer is important.

In the best cases, school–college partnership-working took several forms, including:

- regular contacts between school and college staff to share information on potential winter leavers and exceptional entry routes;
- information (and induction) events delivered by college staff at school so that EEWLs and other students preparing to move onto college received advice on transitions in a supportive setting; and
- visits to colleges arranged for potential winter leavers and other students.

Interviewees also noted the value of school–college links through a range of years and courses. The success of a range of vocational programmes delivered in partnership with colleges (starting with students aged 12 and continuing throughout their secondary school careers) means that schools and colleges have been able to build relationships over time based on 'solid projects' with clear objectives. The Scottish Government's *Skills for Work* programme,

targeting younger students still at school (see Spielhofer and Walker 2008), was consistently highlighted as having previously helped to establish effective school–college partnerships based around clear objectives and well-funded provision. The mainstreaming of vocational elements throughout many students' school careers therefore means that many winter leavers are comfortable with the idea of learning in college environments. So the information-sharing and formal systems, broader culture of joint-working and integration of specialist services within existing provision that has often characterised effective collaboration appeared to be in place in many partnerships supporting winter leavers.

However, case studies with school and college representatives also highlighted a number of challenges to partnership-working. While schools generally commended the work of school–college collaboration staff within the college sector, there was a perception that such liaison activities had relatively limited funding. School representatives valued the way in which colleges were responsive to any problems or queries, but argued for additional resources for colleges to work more proactively with schools on the winter leavers and linked agendas. For example, some school representatives felt that there would be value in colleges 'getting involved earlier' with winter leavers to provide guidance on applying for courses and on the interview/selection process. There were also consistent calls for clearer lines of communication so that information can be shared in advance on potential numbers of winter leavers and predicted capacity within popular courses. It was noted that local authorities may have a role to play in coordinating improved communication and formalising relationships across schools and colleges.

College representatives acknowledged that partnership-working on the winter leavers agenda (and broader school–college collaboration) was affected by limitations on resources. Some colleges have been able to access government funding in order to develop additional specialist support for winter leavers (and other vulnerable learners) in collaboration with schools, but additional resources to promote broader partnership-working (combined with improved coordination within and beyond the local authority level) were seen as important to the continuing development of effective school–college collaboration. For example, a number of college representatives noted the need for appropriate 'buy out' from mainstream teaching for Programme Leaders and others involved in the delivery of provision of early school leavers and other forms of school–college collaboration. It was not always clear whether sufficient resources were available to meet the needs of planning and delivering provision for these vulnerable learners.

5. Conclusions and implications for policy

Exceptional entry to college provides an important, and in some cases and areas, crucial, progression route for winter leavers. An analysis of the Scottish

Funding Council data and a research with schools and colleges suggest that some winter leavers share the characteristics of other young people at risk of being NEET – they are more likely than other school leavers to have a learning or other disability, Additional Support Needs and relatively low educational attainment. EEWLs are also more likely to reside in disadvantaged areas and, according to our survey research, to be in receipt of free school meals (i.e. residing in low-income households). By linking the Scottish Funding Council data to learners' characteristics and progression with new survey evidence gathered from schools, we have been able to offer new insights into the extent of the disadvantage faced by some students and how (despite the additional support offered to these students) the level of qualification and area-based poverty remain significant predictors of individuals' outcomes at college.

Our research with schools and colleges highlighted a number of good practice features in partnership-working to support winter leavers, including early intervention to explore progression routes, collaborative events to induct those making the transition to college, and one-to-one support for winter leavers from guidance and careers staff. Colleges have developed creative approaches to engaging winter leavers (and other potentially vulnerable learners) that emphasise 'real-life'/workplace settings and the integration of employability and essential skills (numeracy and literacy) into more practical/vocational learning formats. Most reported highly developed student support structures that are open to all potentially vulnerable learners, offering one-to-one advice, guidance and mentoring. Colleges have also used a range of other support mechanisms, from initial screening exercises to identify support needs to the deployment of support workers in classroom settings to help identify and resolve learners' problems. These elements of good practice offer important lessons for supporting transitions among *all* early school leavers and other potentially vulnerable learner groups.

However, there remain challenges for policy-makers and learning professionals. The Scottish Funding Council data show that the majority of EEWLs were reported as gaining some form of positive outcome at the end of the academic year. Many among the majority who successfully completed or continued their programme may fall into a category of young people described by Bathmaker (2005) as 'hangers-in' – those with a tenuous but continuing foothold on the academic ladder, in this case, facilitated through transferring to college. However, more than one-fifth left college to unknown destinations. As noted above, there appeared to be statistically significant associations between residing in disadvantaged areas and leaving college early both to unknown destinations and to start work. The lowest-qualified winter leavers were significantly more likely to leave college to unknown destinations or to be unsuccessful after completing an assessed programme. There is a need for further research on the different trajectories in learning and the labour market experienced by those winter leavers who leave to unknown destinations, particularly investigating the relationships between

area-based disadvantage, poverty and decisions to leave formal education. If similar patterns of outcome achievement are reported among other early school leavers entering college, then the implication would appear to be that specific services targeting potentially vulnerable students still struggle to meet the needs of the poorest and most disadvantaged.

Some schools also raised concerns around the limited capacity of local colleges to find places for winter leavers, leaving some young people unable to gain access to the course of their choice. Perceived capacity problems to some extent reflect the multiple client groups that the college sector is required to respond to, including adult learners undertaking vocational training or higher education, people facing substantial barriers to learning, and young people at various stages of their school careers (although it should also be noted that Scottish colleges are generally less involved than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK in delivering the mainstream academic curriculum). In all parts of the UK, the college sector is required both to support some of the most vulnerable learners and to develop high-end skills provision – 'an uneasy nexus of policies relating to social inclusion and global competitiveness' (Thompson 2009, 30). Colleges will therefore always need to carefully consider the implications of attempts to grow capacity in order to benefit particular learner groups. Nevertheless, there may be benefits in colleges and education authorities exploring the potential to coordinate *some* provision for early school leavers at local authority level (or in groups of local authorities, where appropriate) in an attempt to ensure that students can access courses in their chosen area of study wherever possible.

In conclusion, there are important lessons for the broader school–college collaboration and NEET agendas. The Scottish Government has suggested that for *16+ Learning Choices* to work effectively, three key elements need to be in place: the right learning provision (the responsibility of local authorities and their partners as they implement *Curriculum for Excellence*); the right information, advice and guidance (with Skills Development Scotland, which incorporated Careers Scotland in 2008, playing a central role); and the right financial support (Scottish Government 2008a). Our research suggests that these priorities are appropriate but that additional targeting of resources may be required if some of the most vulnerable learners (and EEWLs are more likely to be among the most vulnerable) are to be assisted. Specifically, there is evidence that retention and progression differ considerably according to the characteristics of early school leavers and the type of learning undertaken, perhaps suggesting that access to the 'right learning provision' is variable; also, it is clear that the poorest learners, and those living in the most disadvantaged areas, remain among those least likely to achieve positive learning outcomes. Despite an avowed commitment by policy-makers to 'refocusing of the support available to young people in school, college and work-based learning so it effectively targets the most vulnerable young people', there remains work to be done (Scottish Government 2010, 1).

EEWLs (like other early school leavers) form a heterogeneous and complex client group, and it is important that individualised support is available to facilitate transitions to further education. In some cases, particularly vulnerable early leavers will need considerable help in college, either through one-to-one support and mentoring (which the college sector is well placed to provide) or through entry into specialist transitional programmes (which are valuable for those who are unsure of what course of study they wish to take or are unable to secure a place on the course of their choice). Others will find their way into mainstream college provision, but may again need additional support to sustain successful transitions. This research has highlighted many examples of good practice in how the college sector works with schools to promote successful transitions for early school leavers. Schools and colleges need to be supported to build upon and strengthen both effective partnerships and innovative approaches to engaging with (and delivering learning for) these and other early school leavers. Colleges in particular have a crucial role to play in promoting a range of choices for young people, and the funding and support that they receive from government must continue to reflect the importance of providing opportunities for, and supporting, potentially vulnerable school leavers.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Scotland is the only UK nation to retain two different statutory school leaving dates. Official statistics suggest that approximately 9% of those who enter fifth year at Scottish secondary schools are 'winter leavers'. See http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/02/25145216/56.
2. SIMD provides information about the geographical distribution of relative deprivation in households based on indicators of income, employment, health, education, access to services, housing and crime. The 15% most deprived data zones have often provided a geographical focus for anti-poverty and social inclusion measures in Scotland.
3. Scottish Executive Social Focus on Deprived Areas: www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/09/2792129.
4. Significance when quoted throughout this article has been tested to a 95% confidence level.

Notes on contributors

Jesus Canduela is a research fellow at the Employment Research Institute, Edinburgh Napier University.

Rachel Chandler was formerly a research assistant at the Employment Research Institute, Edinburgh Napier University.

Ian Elliott is a lecturer in management at the School of Business, Enterprise and Management, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh.

Colin Lindsay is a senior research fellow at the Employment Research Institute, Edinburgh Napier University.

Suzi Macpherson was formerly a senior research fellow at the Employment Research Institute, Edinburgh Napier University.

Ronald W. McQuaid is professor and director of the Employment Research Institute, Edinburgh Napier University.

Robert Raeside is a professor in applied statistics at the Business School and a member of the Employment Research Institute, Edinburgh Napier University.

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