Regional Tertiary Pathfinders
Learning Sessions: Autumn 2023

Final report prepared by Evaluation Support Scotland

Purpose of this report

As part of the Regional Tertiary Provision Pathfinders Programme, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) funded seven pilot projects in two regions, to undertake 'tests of change' aimed at enhancing collaboration and effectiveness in addressing regional skills needs.

SFC and Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS) ran three learning sessions with people involved in the pilot projects to capture learning about "doing things differently" to address regional skills needs, and to identify transferable and sustainable learning for the future. There is more detail about the sessions in the annex.

This report synthesises and summarises process learning shared by session participants. Where appropriate we have illustrated the general learning with an example from a pilot project. The pilot projects were:

South of Scotland (SoS)
- Developing a joint prospectus for learning and innovation in the land-based sector
- West of Scotland Educational Pathways
- South of Scotland Digital Skills Hub and Pathfinder

North East Scotland (NE)
- National Energy Skills Accelerator (NESA) Energy Transition Skills Interactive Pathway
- Developing demand-led, aligned, and sustainable learner pathways
- Enhancing the Senior Phase
- Enhancing and Co-ordinating the region's simulation infrastructure for health and social care education

More information about the work and impact of the pilot projects is available separately from SFC.

The report is intended to complement other SFC reports about the Pathfinder Programme. It will be of interest to colleges, universities and policymakers interested in how to improve collaborative regional working to address skills needs in Scotland.

January 2024

A: What we learned about collaborative working to deliver curriculum change

1. Pilot projects consulted with, and gathered intelligence from, employers and learners and drew on a broad range of data and intelligence (see later sections) to make evidence-informed decisions about curriculum and other changes.

2. They brought **teaching staff** (people immersed in the subject) from partner institutions together to create new curriculum content.

3. They established formal and informal structures (such as meetings, joint working, and IT) to share information and resources (e.g., regarding short course content) and to generate ideas, such as how to better support progression and articulation. They ran partnership workshops to share and discuss data and intelligence and stimulate curriculum ideas.

THE DIGITAL SKILLS HUB created a central portal to house the curriculum development, tell the story of the work and ensure good communication.

4. They built on **existing good practice**.

WEST OF SCOTLAND EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS: both the college and the university had well defined curriculum development processes which were synthesised and ensured suitable levels of quality assurance throughout the process. This ensured that the offer to the student fits into the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and is clear in progression and employment opportunities.

5. It was important to view **staff engagement** in curriculum development as part of continuing development and investment in them; and for senior management to give time, permission, and resource for this to happen.

DEMAND-LED LEARNER PATHWAYS: to ensure collaboration happened at the right level *and* that senior staff time was used effectively, a select few with responsibilities across curriculum development, planning student recruitment and marketing, were invited to curriculum updates on a 6-weekly basis. This opportunity to share activity happening across different curriculum areas meant best practice was promoted to a senior voice who then shared this with other senior colleagues to help inform other curriculum developments.

6. Some curriculum development activities in pilot projects had resourcing challenges but the benefits to staff and learners of longer-term efficiency and better courses justifies the investment. Curriculum development work is better done in person than online, but geography made that challenging in the south of Scotland (not so much in the North East). Collaborative working resulted in **joined up promotion**. For example:

LAND-BASED PROSPECTUS The production of a joint prospectus in 2023 improved coherence and presented the land-based and natural economy course offering

across the SoS in a 'joined up' way. New courses were created to support learner progression and improve the skills of employees of SMEs and large businesses.

7. Collaboration made it easier for students to **transition between institutions**, for example by providing credit for prior study or creating specific school to college programmes. Co-location also helped, for example:

West of Scotland educational pathways has found that co-location of the college and the university is ensuring that the key message to learners and their advisor is being reinforced as there is no confusion around delivery location.

Land-based prospectus has already enabled learners to move institutions as part of their learner journey in HNC (Higher National Certificate) Agriculture (SRUC are delivering the N Gen Agriculture HNC pilot). Practical support such as onsite residential accommodation makes that easier for learners.

8. Collaboration has **improved course content** and made it more responsive to employer needs.

Enhancing the Senior Phase's winter leavers' programme includes contextualised core skills in each course, such as Craft Maths in the Construction course. This will enhance the students' employability and is supported by key stakeholders involved in the project, including Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and DYW (Developing Young Workforce) North East.

B: What we learned about the conditions to enable change

1. Taking a "test of change" approach created a **tangible focus** for the pilot projects, establishing manageable priorities and actions. It took away a sense of competition between institutions. In addition, this **focused** approach has gone on to lead to **wider** collaboration with institutions. Ways of working set up to deliver pilot project activity have been continued and mainstreamed.

2. **Senior management** played an important enabling role by
   - setting a "statement of strategic intent" at the start to ensure the purpose of the pilot projects was clear to all who needed to be involved.
   - giving permission to innovate and to find ways around system "rules".

3. Success required setting up clear **governance structures**. This meant:
   - Senior oversight involving all institutions and key stakeholders to endorse and authorise the work.
   - A single overall project lead, coupled with single points of contact in each partner and clear agreements on who does what.
   - A project team with enough **on-the-ground knowledge** coupled with the **authority** to make decisions. In many projects that meant senior people naturally delegating decision-making power to the person best placed to achieve project objectives. Others had a steering group supported by operational teams.

NESA INTERACTIVE PATHWAY: Board gave responsibility to a Delivery Group so it could act quickly. Approval process is responsive and flexible.

4. Most pilot projects set up **working groups** at different levels to support and guide the work with key individuals linked to areas of planning, marketing, recruitment, and curriculum development involved regularly with project updates. Some working groups are being mainstreamed beyond the pilot.

THE LAND-BASED PROSPECTUS project managed to get all relevant staff at the start to block regular slots in their diaries for meetings. Pilot projects that were unable to do this found it harder to make progress as people could not make meetings.

5. The **project coordinator** was crucial to pilot projects success. They drove and facilitated partnership. They had a good balance of project management skills (can get things done) and people skills (can bring people with them and get buy in). In many (not all) pilot projects, the coordinator was a secondee with existing knowledge of the institutions and systems.

6. Project coordinators found it helpful to meet each other and share practice on how they were coordinating the change (so it's helpful to have access to a **network of people** in similar roles outside your own project).

7. All pilot projects spoke about the importance of creating a **culture of trust** amongst partners to achieve the change. They said indicators of trust were:
   - People from each partner say yes (and don't say no!)

- People come to meetings consistently
- People share information
- People are open about challenges – and feel safe to share
- People not directly involved (e.g. more senior) don't suddenly step in with questions that stop things progressing
- People complete the actions they agreed to do – and without delay
- Off-shoot and related projects and relationships develop

8. **SFC seed funding** was crucial. Without funding for project coordinators, the delivery of the pilot projects would not have been possible – it's an example of small funding with a big impact. In some pilot projects funding also enabled **lecturers** to have **development time** and time to collaborate.

9. **SFC** also played an important **enabling role** across the pilot projects, over and above the funding. They "gave permission" for innovation and validating engaging, giving advice (e.g. on funding guidelines) and making connections to other national organisations, for example: SFC's Memorandum of Understanding with NHS Education for Scotland was useful in the development of the *SIMULATION INFRASTRUCTURE* pilot project.

10. Other enabling factors that were important for some pilot projects included **champions to "sell" the change** and **profile-raising activities** to maintain momentum. Students who benefited from changes developed by the pilot projects were advocates for their peers. Visible evidence of success is important for schools and parents/carers who need evidence that the programmes are of quality and that articulations are honoured in practice. Staff need to see the success of deeper collaboration and tangible benefits for students.

SIMULATION INFRASTRUCTURE has passionate practitioner advocates who want to improve their own and others' practice and this has helped drive success. They held an event for stakeholders early on in their work that helped engagement and buy in.

ENHANCING THE SENIOR PHASE benefitted from an enthusiastic local authority partner who coordinated an alignment of timetables across all Aberdeen City Schools.

LAND-BASED PROSPECTUS pilot project had a high-profile launch of the prospectus with press coverage and attendance by Principals and SFC. This helped all involved feel valued, maintained momentum and was crucial external publicity.

C: What we learned about good practice in learner engagement

1. DYW was a key partner for most pilot projects, helping them to engage young people and employers.

2. **"Meet the Learner"** events encouraged more young people to take up new courses. It was important to talk to students in spaces they are comfortable in so that they are open to new learning opportunities. In some cases, peers were used as advocates. For some the target was senior high school pupils. *Simulation infrastructure* (RGU, DYW, and NHS Grampian) ran a simulation day for those following Foundation Apprenticeships.

Enhancing the Senior Phase's HNC in S 6 – Pilot 2022-23 was launched at ABZ campus – correct messages to correct audience. A video was made where existing learners raised awareness of the course for prospective learners. They also targeted "influencers" (e.g. parents and teachers) to help share understanding of options.

3. Some pilot projects have built **learner engagement into staff CPD (Continuing Professional Development)** to widen the number of staff involved and stop relying on individual staff goodwill.

Land-based prospectus had college lecturers going into schools to talk about their subject and introduce pathways that young people might not have thought of. This created a buzz and led to young people signing up to courses. Staff enthusiasm is key – not just for young people but also in raising awareness amongst teachers as they are key influencers.

4. The above are examples of encouraging young people onto new pathways. Some pilot projects also **consulted young people** on the creation of those new pathways or new information about pathways. For example, they:

   - asked school pupils why they did / didn't apply for particular courses and what was actual destination.
   - ran focus groups to get learners' views on what's working or not
   - tested new information with users and potential users to get feedback such as focus groups conducted as part of the *Demand Led Pathways* project to collate feedback on joint communications to students around pathway progression.

NESA Interactive Pathway is user testing its interactive pathway with young people to ensure it makes sense to them and meets their needs. They are learning as they go and adapting based on what works. They are engaging different age groups and getting the right links into schools through DYW.

Enhancing the Senior Phase has involved pupils in the creation of a new career management skills unit for the winter leaver programme.

D: What we learned about good practice in employer engagement

1. DYW was a key partner for most pilot projects, helping them to engage young people and employers.

2. Engaging employers was important to gather **data and intelligence** about the skills gaps, to get insight into employers' views on specific **curriculum** content and to help with improving the **transition** from education to work.

NESA INTERACTIVE PATHWAY: To underpin and inform the NESA Just Transition Fund (JTF) project and SFC pilot project it was vital to engage with industry as it was their requirements that would inform course development and the job roles selected for the pilot project pilot. This work was resource intensive – being able to gather and make contact with the right people - gaining people's trust and buy in to give up their time – delivering different sessions to meet different organisations' needs, ie SMEs generally have less time so 1-2-1s in half an hour was preferred to half day workshops. The intensive work paid off, leaving a legacy of contacts and relationships that are continually evolving and developing. These contacts have been used multiple times and will be leveraged for future work. In order for NESA to deliver continued successful impacts these relationships must be sustained to be able to jointly address emerging skills issues.

3. Employer engagement required a range of approaches. One project distributed **surveys** (for example to DYW database contacts) and ran roundtable **events** asking specific questions. Data sets were used to support discussions.

4. A couple of pilot projects found SMEs harder to engage (understandably they don't have enough staff to release someone to come to an event). One way around that was to secure an agenda item on an **existing forum** eg Borders Construction Forum to reach contractors. Some sectors (eg health) required a tailored **1-1 approach**.

5. Several pilot projects worked to create a **shared language** with employers. They found that employers can struggle to communicate what the education response should be or don't know themselves what skills will be needed.

E: What we learned about good practice in gathering and using intelligence and data

1. Pilot projects were clear about the need to base their 'tests of change' on evidence. However, they had to be creative because published official data is not always up to date, detailed enough, or easy to access. They used data from a **range of sources** including employer round tables and surveys to capture skills needs and data from national agencies such as Skills Development Scotland. Intelligence gained from practitioners talking to one another went further than the data alone.

DIGITAL SKILLS HUB used grant application data as evidence of skills needs and gaps (Scottish Government digital boost grant data and south of Scotland college data on workforce development funding). They also used SCVO (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations) data on third sector digital skills with advice on how to apply it locally.

2. Pilot projects used data to:
    - set performance measures for the pilot project at the start to inform ongoing data collection
    - identify what (potential) learners want and what skills employers need – and use that to attempt to bridge differences
    - triangulate pilot project attainment data with data hub and council data
    - identify low take up or potential growth areas
    - ask questions about what we need to be doing in the future

ENHANCING THE SENIOR PHASE spent time researching (nationally) what was the best qualification for learners (not necessarily easiest).

3. It was important to **integrate data collection** about the pilot work within partner institutions to avoid having parallel data sets. This meant using data sharing agreements and reviewing data (such as matriculation data, student transition data) and subject level review.

4. There was a particular challenge around **destination data**. *LAND-BASED PROSPECTUS* used SDS regional skills analysis but also benefited from the fact that some learner pathways are within SRUC, so it is easier to track destinations. Other pilot projects found it harder to access destination data. **The National Articulation Database** is a potential promising solution: comprehensive dataset allowing tracking and avoiding data sharing agreements.

SFC will produce a separate thematic report on use of data and intelligence.

F: What we learned about potential impact for learners and employers

1. Pilot projects will report separately on their impact. However, the learning sessions helped **reinforce our understanding of the intended theory of change**. The outcomes that we should expect to see from curriculum changes and new pathways are as follows:

Learners
- ➔ have **better and broader information** about learning and job options
- ➔ can **progress more easily** between institutions and through qualifications
- ➔ are **better equipped** for the jobs that are available and needed

Employers
- ➔ get the employees with the **skills they need** / have fewer skills shortages
- ➔ are better able to **support work-based training** and upskilling

Education providers
- ➔ better understand and complement each other's provision
- ➔ face **fewer barriers** and more permission to collaborate
- ➔ are better able to **use specialist and national support**
- ➔ are better able to **support staff** CPD and engagement in curriculum development

2. Measures of these outcomes will include:

- Examples of partnership groups building on pilot project activity
- Examples of more communication and collaboration between institutions

- More applicants on new pathways and courses
- Learner feedback that they are on the right pathways for them
- Learner feedback that they can seamlessly transition between institutions
- Positive data about learner outcomes

- Data showing fewer skills shortages in the workforce
- Data showing more people applying for certain job roles
- Employers feedback that they can recruit the staff with the skills they need

3. It is too soon to say whether the changes that pilot projects have implemented will contribute to these outcomes. However, it was important for pilot projects to know they are on the right track and moving towards positive outcomes. Here are two examples to illustrate how some of them gathered early evidence of this:

SIMULATION INFRASTRUCTURE showed that a first step in system change is to raise awareness – in their case of the extent and level of simulation education. This led to organisations collaborating and an agreed approach to address identified gaps. They aim to establish a working group to take forward the project aims beyond the life of the pilot project programme. They are not yet fully aware of those seeking access to simulation activities as the requirements of postgraduate and undergraduate curricula develop so that's a next step.

DIGITAL SKILLS HUB embedded digital skills within existing courses, and this has generated 80% positive student feedback and they have already received positive feedback from employers. This shows the value of embedding generic skills that employers need within existing courses (and upskilling teaching staff).

4. Some other (perhaps) **unintended outcomes** of the pilot projects

- They showcased to young people the benefits to them of staying in the respective region to study.
- Some have improved diversity by enabling women and minorities into course where they have been historically under-represented. *DIGITAL SKILLS HUB* used young person guarantee funding to enable some disadvantaged young people access learning.

G: What is sustainable and what is transferable

1. Pilot projects themselves aim to **sustain** the work from their 'tests of change' by doing some, or all, of the following:

   - launching and growing what has been piloted
   - mainstreaming the pilot project governance structures and working groups
   - getting more employer engagement
   - identifying more funding where needed, possibly from industry.

LAND-BASED PROSPECTUS has created a new "innovation broker" role to continue the work. An early task is to formalise the ongoing governance structure and make the project working groups the permanent single point of contact.

The South of Scotland is drawing on its learning from embedding digital skills to look at costing and booking systems skills in hospitality and how this can be adapted amended in other areas like hairdressing and beauty therapy. Costings could also be embedded in a lot of construction and engineering programmes.

2. In terms of what might be **transferable,** pilot project participants identified particular **activities** and **approaches** that could be rolled out and adopted by other parts of their own institutions, and in other parts of Scotland.

3. **Activities and outputs** that could be rolled out or transferred include the following:
   - **"Meet the Learner"** is scalable nationally (on a regional basis). DYW's national team is already discussing this with others including Education Scotland. At the south of Scotland level, the programme will be repeated in the springtime on subject choice. Similarly, the specific example of a simulation education day could be rolled out nationally to promote pathways for health and social care.
   - Integrating **core or meta skills into existing courses** and creating a repository of curriculum resources around core / meta skills.
   - The **joint prospectus** as developed by SRUC and Borders College for learning in the land-based sector could work for other sectors or subjects.
   - The **interactive web-based pathway tool** that is being developed by NESA for the energy sector could work for other sectors or subjects.

4. **Approaches** that could be rolled out or transferred include the following:
   - The model of a focused and manageable **test of change** to do something new and through that enhance partnership working and culture change.
   - The model of college and university **co-designing and co-delivering** new degree pathways and enabling standardised and joined-up timetables.
   - The model of enabling **regional solutions** based on their understanding of local need (with funding that follows).

- The possibility of SFC building and resourcing the "collaborative ask" and involvement more strongly into **mainstream arrangements**.

H: Wider barriers to address

The changes tested by the pilot project are not the only changes needed to improve the education and skills system. Those staff working on the pilot projects identified a number of wider system changes required. Some of these are for institutions and others are for national agencies, including SFC, and Scottish Government to facilitate. Examples are outlined below.

1. Improve **funding** arrangements:
   - Align college and university funding
   - Enable funding to follow the learner more easily

2. Improve and join up **qualifications:**
   - Create more responsive and agile qualification development
   - Make it easier for learners to progress through qualifications

3. Enable **better support for learners:**
   - 'One stop shop' for information
   - Personalised learning journeys including meaningful work experience
   - Earn and learn routes: there's a negative impact on student experience if they are working at the same time or forced to stay at home due to cost of living so need to prioritise of apprenticeships / work-based learner routes.

4. Better **communication** about learner pathways:
   - Starting at **nursery/primary**
   - Influence the **influencers** with streamlined messaging (schools, parents, carers)

5. Address **staff skills gaps:**
   - More computing and maths teachers
   - Better CPD for existing staff at all levels

6. Facilitate better liaison with **employers:**
   - Encourage more industry engagement in curriculum
   - Wider range of work-based learning opportunities

7. Improve **data sharing:**
   - Create central data sharing agreements and data itself to reduce institutional burdens
   - Have overarching tracking data for all

Annex – Methodology

1. The learning in this report was collected over three sessions. The first (30 October 2024) and the third (12 December 2024) were for both pathfinder regions and took place online. We intended that the second session be in person in each region. This happened in the north-east (16 Nov) but in the South of Scotland the sessions were online, and one pilot project met on 22 November 2024 while the others met together on 24 November. The sessions were planned and facilitated by Evaluation Support Scotland and SCF, except 22 November 2024, which was SFC only.

2. The format was directed discussions around learning questions. Participants' reflections were captured in electronic and written formats and summarised in a report of each session that was shared with participants to check for accuracy. The first hour of the final session also involved discussion and engagement with four members of the Pathfinders National Advisory Board (NAB). The agendas for each of the sessions are included below for reference.

3. In total, 35 people from the pilot projects attended at least one session. Of the 35, 11 attended all three sessions, nine attended two, and 15 attended one. Across the 35, seven colleges and universities participated along with some other project partners such as NESA, SDS and some local authorities.

4. The sessions were designed to enable participants to identify learning for themselves, share their learning for wider use and network with other pilot projects. Participant feedback is that these aims were met – and more strongly for those who attended all three sessions. Participants valued the opportunity to hear from others and were positive about the facilitation and quality of discussion.

5. Each session built on the previous one. At the first session participants identified general learning points in relation to agreed learning themes. At the second sessions participants delved deeper and unpacked specific examples of inspirational practice, successful innovations and how to achieve better outcomes for learners. By the third session the focus was on identifying transferable lessons and ambitions for students in future and what needs to be sustained or changed to achieve those ambitions.

6. There were a few limitations with the model and with timing of sessions:
   - We focused on identifying projects' collective learning and took an appreciative enquiry approach (learning from what works). This ensured we generated (we hope) positive transferable learning. Nevertheless, we may have underplayed learning from differences between pilot projects and missed learning about what did not work. Also, some projects have finished but others are still underway and had less learning to contribute.

   - There is plausible theory that the changes pilot projects were testing will ultimately lead to a better skilled workforce, but it is too soon to have strong evidence of this (see section F above). There is a small risk that we

have identified good learning about doing things differently but not necessarily doing things better.

- Timing was a challenge. A few participants commented negatively on the time commitment and on the short turnaround between sessions. It might have been better to have more time between sessions to ensure the next one built on the previous one and to allow participants more of a say in content. More notice of dates for participants might have improved attendance. We may have missed some learning because people were unable to attend – although there was a strong core group who attended all sessions. Some institutions, and some projects had more people than others. We had limited participation from non-academic partners and of course no actual learners.