



SFC Pathfinder Pilot Project

Developing Demand-Led, Aligned and Sustainable Pathways

Report - March 2024

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1.0 PROJECT BACKGROUND

- 1.1 This Pathfinder Project set out to intensify the partnership arrangements between North-East Scotland College (NESCol) and The Robert Gordon University (RGU), to ensure the establishment of an industry-informed and student-centred sustainable education and skills infrastructure within the North East of Scotland that is agile and responsive to both the challenges currently facing the region, and the opportunities of the future.
- 1.2 A paper, *‘Developing demand-led, aligned and sustainable learner pathways’*, was drafted collaboratively by members of the Executive at both NESCol and RGU in 2020. This was in recognition of the fact that the North East of Scotland was one of the UK regions most negatively impacted by Brexit, and most economically vulnerable to the global oil and gas downturn; the challenges facing the region remain substantial. The outlook was worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic and cost-of-living crisis partly caused by the terrible events ongoing in Ukraine which, in addition to its impact on families and communities, has compounded the economic challenges and increased the likelihood of significant recession in the region. It was agreed that the two institutions would come together to review skills and provision planning in the region. This would be pivotal to the promotion of economic recovery; investing in people who live and work here and attracting talented individuals to the region.
- 1.3 Colleges and universities need the flexibility and freedom to modify and adapt provision in an agile and responsive manner to meet regional need. The Cumberford-Little report highlights the role a high performing college, such as a NESCol, can play in working with partners to anticipate and respond to emergent need. Likewise for the University, there is a recognition that new forms of short, highly responsive provision can play an important role in meeting skills needs, for example through re-skilling and upskilling. By working together, NESCol and RGU can make best use of their resources and expertise, to build highly effective pathways which adopt the vision set out in Scotland’s national skills and education policy, delivering it impactfully to meet need within the communities of the North East.
- 1.4 By further deepening of the partnership, NESCol and RGU will be able to engage even more ambitiously and effectively to support Scotland’s education-led economic recovery, bringing expertise in advanced partnering with employers alongside substantial experience of work-based learning and commitment to learners of all ages.
- 1.5 By removing duplication and competition, the enhanced co-design and joint-planning arrangements aimed to deliver demand-led, skills-aligned, and sustainable learner pathways for the region and beyond whilst providing a model for other institutes to replicate. Together the college and university strive to increase community reach, provide clear and easy transitions, and enhance employability of students.

2.0 CONTEXT

2.1 Collaboration and Outreach

2.1.1 Historically, North East Scotland College (NESCol) and the Robert Gordon University (RGU) have had a close working partnership with over 20 years of joint working and trust. When the Pathfinder Project commenced there were 60 articulation pathways, spanning 11 academic schools, leading from either an HNC or HND into second or third year of an undergraduate degree at RGU.

2.1.2 Each year a series of Subject Level Review Meetings (SLRMs) take place, traditionally between October and December. These are hosted by RGU's Widening Access team and bring together key academic and professional service stakeholders in a formal capacity to review, develop and evaluate partnership activities and exchange knowledge to enhance the transitional experience of students. Held annually, SLRMs provide an opportunity for college and university staff to discuss key performance indicator data, to consider curriculum developments and to discuss regional/sectorial challenges and potential opportunities to collaborate. The format of these meetings was reviewed in 2021 and the focus of these meetings now is placed on developing meaningful discussion around transition support for students and updates on curriculum developments. The SLRM meeting notes are shared with all attendees and members of the Executive at both institutions. One ambition of the Pathfinder Project was to create an overarching Strategic Working Group, to which emerging themes from the SLRMs could be fed back to and then information disseminated to the appropriate individuals at the college and university as required.

2.1.3 Further to these annual meetings, the Widening Access College Engagement team at RGU deliver a number of outreach projects which provide support, information and guidance to students and staff at NESCol in relation to progression to RGU. In November 2022 the RGU Hub at NESCol was launched, where RGU's College Engagement Assistants are based at each of the college's three campuses on a weekly basis. In-class presentations, workshops and one-to-one bookable appointments are available covering a number of topics such as Degree Link progression routes, transition support, UCAS applications and study skills. Additionally, the College Engagement team coordinate and liaise between respective academic colleagues to facilitate visits and information sessions in NESCol, at RGU or online. The Widening Access team co-ordinate a number of induction activities as part of the Degree Prep programme to help familiarise NESCol offer-holders with the campus, the teaching staff and the support services that are available. NESCol students studying on a Degree Link course are also able to become Associate Students of RGU which enables access to the same online and in-person facilities and resources that full-time RGU students have access to.

2.1.4 These collaborations and the partnership working across institutions at an operational level have helped to ensure that NESCol students are well informed regarding their progression opportunities and are supported when making the transition from college to university. In June 2022, there was a NESCol-RGU Away Day, attended by members of the Executive from both institutions, Heads of Sector (NESCol), Deans of School (RGU) and Widening Access colleagues. The aim of this idea generation workshop was to establish gaps in provision and economic growth areas within the local region. The discussions at the meeting across all sectors were recorded and shared with attendees.

- 2.1.5 In March 2023, there was a follow-up partnership workshop with attendance from key colleagues at both institutions, including members of the Executives, Heads of Sector, Deans of School and Widening Access colleagues. The focus of discussions was on maximising and developing existing articulation agreements and developing new pathways. RGU had recently undertaken an extensive portfolio review project, examining the potential for new pathways and these findings were shared on the day.
- 2.1.6 The outcomes of the discussions at this workshop fed into this Pathfinder Project, which has focused on the following areas of development:
- Pathways to new RGU provision
 - Missed opportunities with existing provision
 - Integrated teaching opportunities
 - Collaborative marketing and recruitment approaches
 - Support for learners as they progress on their pathway
- 2.1.7 An area that the Pathfinder Project wanted to build on was ensuring that dialogue was taking place across both institutions with colleagues with different levels of responsibilities, including members of the Executive, Heads of Sector and Deans of School and also develop the working relationship between professional service teams, including student recruitment, admissions and marketing. The Pathfinder Co-ordinator assumed responsibility for ensuring that the areas of development were explored and continued to progress as appropriate by identifying the correct members of staff, at the correct level, at the college and the university to attend development meetings.

2.2 Data Sharing Arrangements

- 2.2.1 In November 2022 NESCol and RGU signed a data sharing agreement, which permits the sharing of each institution's application and enrolment data. Prior to the Pathfinder Project commencing, there was a data sharing meeting hosted by RGU's Planning and Insight team with representation from colleagues at both institutions, including Vice-Principals and Senior Management responsible for recruitment, marketing, student access and admissions. At the initial meeting in March 2023, the Planning and Insight team utilised two data sets from NESCol: applications to NESCol by School (2018-2022), and destination of leavers data (AY2016-17 to AY2020-21), supported by internal data records from RGU on applications from 2018-2022. The objectives of this meeting were to improve local student recruitment to both institutions (with a more detailed understanding of articulation between the college and the university), and provide NESCol with further insight into the initial destinations of former students.
- 2.2.2 This Pathfinder Project intended to build on the impact of the data sharing agreement and shared market insight analysis to provide more detail in relation to the pathways taken by different demographic groups within the North East and the impact this would have for student recruitment at NESCol and RGU. The findings and recommendations from the market insight work would also be useful to feed back to the marketing teams at both institutions to reflect on the effectiveness of the Degree Link branding to date and the impact of marketing collateral which informs and inspires individuals in the north east to consider pathways between the college and the university.

3.0 INSPIRATIONAL PRACTICE AND NEW WAYS OF WORKING

3.1 Strategic Working Group (SWG)/Pathfinder Steering Group (PSG)

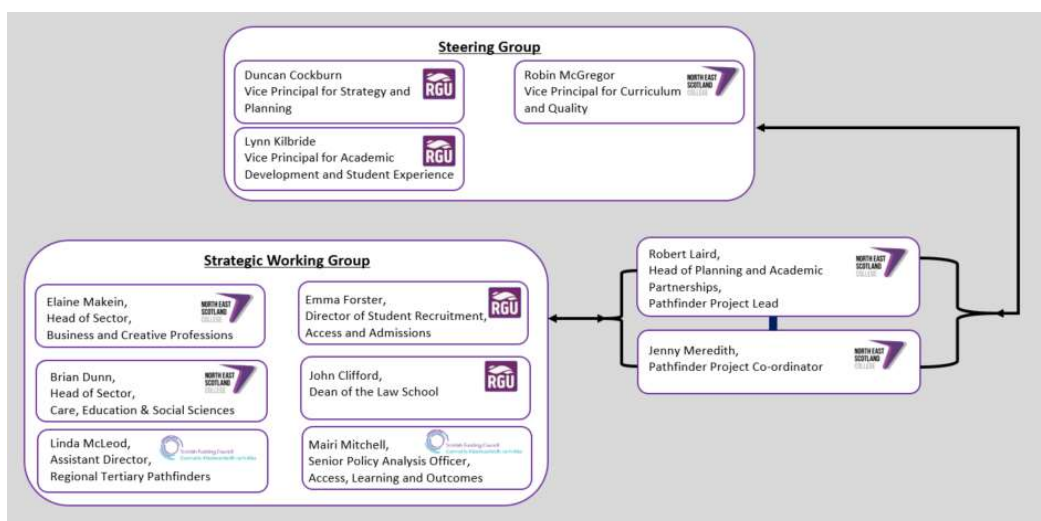
3.1.1 A Strategic Working Group (SWG) for this Pathfinder Project comprising of key members of staff from both NESCol and RGU with expertise in planning and academic development was established in August 2023 and continue to meet approximately every six weeks. There is also representation at each of these meeting from the Scottish Funding Council. The aspiration of the group is to identify opportunities for enhanced partnership working across all areas of business, with a primary focus on delivering better aligned pathways that are employment focused, responsive to skills needs, efficient in delivery, inclusive in design and provide the highest student experience.

3.1.2 The Pathfinder Project Lead and Project Co-ordinator have used these meetings as opportunities to update but also seek feedback and direction from individuals at both institutions on:

- changes to curriculum and the development of new articulation routes
- plans taking shape as part of a joint marketing and recruitment approach
- the introduction of new undergraduate courses at RGU as part of the portfolio review project
- feedback from emerging themes and areas of development that arise from the Subject Level Review Meetings (SLRMs)
- the shared market insight regarding student recruitment trends in the region

3.1.3 Members of this group have been asked to ensure key messages, activities and objectives are shared beyond the group with relevant colleagues at NESCol or RGU as appropriate.

3.1.4 In addition to the SWG, the Project Lead and Project Co-ordinator meet with the Pathfinder Steering Group (PSG) which is attended by the Vice Principal for Strategy and Planning and the Vice Principal for Academic Development and Student Experience from RGU and the Vice Principal for Curriculum and Quality from NESCol. This group has excellent knowledge of wider curriculum and regional economic developments which have the potential to impact and influence new pathways and provision within the region.



3.2 Curriculum Team Collaboration

- 3.2.1 The Pathfinder Project has encouraged new and continued conversations between NESCol and RGU curriculum teams at a senior level to develop deeper partnership working beyond the annual Subject Level Review Meetings (SLRMs). Following the NESCol-RGU Partnership meeting in March 2023 there were initial follow-up meetings with each Dean of School (RGU) and Head of Sector (NESCol) held shortly thereafter to take forward the suggestions and maintain momentum on pathway enhancement and developments. These meetings involved a review of the existing NESCol-RGU articulation agreements to confirm their continuation, and looked to identify potential for new pathways or gaps within the provision. In the majority of cases, it was useful to share frameworks across institutions to identify where there may be alignment. In some instances the actions from these meetings were delegated further within the curriculum teams for example to Associate Deans, Course Leaders and Curriculum Managers, to take forward discussions concerning new initiatives. The Pathfinder Project proposal, and acknowledgement of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) as funders, was outlined at these initial meetings with an emphasis on the SFC's focus on how this project would 'do things differently' in the context of collaboration. In addition to this, having initial support from the Deans of School and Heads of Sector encouraged continued momentum and enthusiasm for doing things differently and improving not only the pathway provision but the student experience for those interested in moving from college to further study at university.
- 3.2.2 Those involved with these curriculum meetings at both institutions recognised that the impact of the Pathfinder Project work could be mutually beneficial to both institutions. As a result, this has promoted openness and commitment from colleagues to new ways of working collaboratively. The Pathfinder Co-ordinator held responsibility for sharing minutes and actions and monitoring progress against the suggested developments across each academic area. It should be noted that there has been no additional funding or resource allocated to curriculum teams and the expectation has been that staff should take forward these initiatives in addition to the other responsibilities of their roles. Therefore, one challenge that the project has encountered at times is staff availabilities to meet and capacity to complete actions against set deadlines.

3.3 Market Insight

- 3.3.1 A shared approach to market insight, made possible by the data sharing agreement in place between the two institutions, has highlighted recent trends that have effected college and university recruitment and progression of learners in the region, including grade inflation, dual-enrollers at both RGU and NESCol and key subject areas that attract students to study out with the region. After identifying a number of collaborative projects across the institutions that the Market Insight team could support with, a working group has been set up with colleagues from RGU's Market Insight, Widening Access and Marketing teams and NESCol's Student Records and Marketing team. The aim in the establishment of this group has been to identify shared projects of interest for both the college and university, for example identifying trends in mature learners returning to education in the North East, and using the findings and recommendations to better inform and direct a collaborative approach to the marketing and recruitment of pathways in the region.

3.4 The role of the Project Co-ordinator

- 3.4.1 The Pathfinder Project Co-ordinator, funded by the SFC, has oversight of all collaborative activity taking place across a number of different teams, including curriculum, marketing, recruitment, admissions, student records and market insight, which ensures that the correct links are made in relation to the new developments taking place. The role of the Project Co-ordinator in establishing an overarching understanding of collaborative practice alongside specific actions and agreed timelines ensures that progress against the project's objectives is sustained.

4.0 INNOVATIVE OUTPUTS AND DELIVERABLES

4.1 Broader Portfolio of Progression Pathways

4.1.1 Although the Pathfinder project has not yet come to an end, the college and university can already evidence a broader portfolio of progression pathways, as a result of the work carried out by those involved with the Pathfinder Project. To date, the project has seen the introduction of a number of new articulation routes which have been mapped and approved by senior colleagues at both institutions. The new articulation routes confirmed so far include:

Within Aberdeen Business School:

- HND Business in Technologies to Year 3 BA (Hons) Business with Data Analytics
- HND Business to Year 3 BA (Hons) Business Management with Finance and Economics
- HND Business & HND Admin and IT to Year 3 BA (Hons) Business Management (online course)

Within the School of Creative and Cultural Business:

- HND Media and Communication (Journalism) to Year 3 BA (Hons) Journalism
- HND (Next Gen) Television to Year 3 BA (Hons) Media

Within the School of Computing:

- HND (Next Gen) Software Development to Year 3 BSc (Hons) Computing (Application Software Development)
- HND (Next Gen) Software Development to Year 3 BSc (Hons) Digital Media
- HND (Next Gen) Networking and Cloud Infrastructure to BSc (Hons) Cyber Security and Network Management

Within the School of Pharmacy and Life Sciences:

- HND Applied Sciences (Chemistry/Biology) to Year 3 BSc (Hons) Forensic and Analytical Science

4.1.2 In addition to traditional articulation pathways, academic teams have been open to different approaches to progression and have identified groups of students and other pathways that should be considered, formalised and supported by both institutions. As a result, progression agreements formalising non-traditional pathways have been drafted and an example of this is shared below.

HN AWARD	DEGREE COURSE	ENTRY STAGE	CONDITIONS
HNC Applied Sciences (Chemistry / Physics) OR HNC Applied Sciences (Biology/Chemistry)	MPharm Pharmacy	Year 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National 5 English and Maths (grade C if not held at Higher) • Successful completion of the aforementioned 12 credit HNC programme and in addition the successful completion of a further 3 additional credits from the programme. • Achieve an 'A' grade in the HNC Graded Unit. • Applicants to the course will be required to successfully undertake an online activity and follow-up interview with an academic member of staff. • Applicants should note that the General Pharmaceutical Council's Standards for Pharmacy Professionals applies to pharmacy students throughout their journey towards registration and practice. Offers of a place on the MPharm course are subject to compliance with these standards and a satisfactory Good Health and Good Character declaration. • PVG clearance • RGU will not accept applicants who have previously been enrolled on an MPharm in the UK.

4.1.3 For the above example, it is not possible for students to enter this courses at university with advanced standing due to set requirements by the accrediting body on the MPharm Pharmacy course. It should also be noted that a place on the MPharm Pharmacy course is not guaranteed for the HNC students and applicants are required to apply via UCAS and demonstrate that they are able to meet the conditions of entry. Through the establishment of NESCol-RGU progression agreements, academic teams at the university are now more aware of new groups of students that the university could provide outreach and guidance for so that students at the college are better informed about all available educational and career pathways available to them.

4.1.4 Working closely with colleagues on the *Enhancing the Senior Phase* Pathfinder Project, discussions have taken place with RGU academics and admissions staff regarding advanced entry to second year from NESCol's School Links S6 HNC courses. Following a review of the Programmes of Study for these courses to confirm course alignment, articulation agreements are now in place from NESCol's School Links S6 HNC Business and HNC Technologies in Business courses to second year of a number of RGU's courses within The Aberdeen Business School and The School of Creative and Cultural Business.

4.1.4 To ensure clarity of information, the Project Co-ordinator has developed a NESCol-RGU Progression Pathway Matrix document which details all available progression pathways, the year of entry at the university and the conditions of entry for each route. The matrix includes



traditional articulation pathways and also progression from SWAP courses, NESCol's School Links S6 HNC courses and other non-traditional progression routes where articulation is not possible, for example due to specific requirements set by accrediting bodies or due to the integrated Masters nature of some courses. The NESCol-RGU Progression Pathway Matrix has been shared with members of the Executive at both institutions and then further distributed to the Deans of School at RGU and Curriculum Managers at NESCol. The matrix has also been shared with colleagues at both NESCol and RGU who are involved with student recruitment outreach at schools and in the local communities and the document will be used by marketing teams as part of the Degree Link rebranding project.

School	Pathway	NESCol Course Name	RGU Course Name	Entry Stage	Conditions of Entry
Aberdeen Business School	Degree Link	HND Accounting	BA (Hons) Accounting and Finance	3	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HND course.
	Degree Link	HND Admin and IT	BA (Hons) Business and Management	3	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HND course.
			BA (Hons) Business with Marketing	3	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HND course.
			BA (Hons) Business with Human Resource Management	3	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HND course.
			BA (Hons) Business Management (online degree)	3	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HND course.
	Degree Link	HND Business	BA (Hons) Business and Management	3	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HND course.
			BA (Hons) Business with Human Resource Management	3	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HND course.
			BA (Hons) Business with Marketing	3	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HND course.
			BA (Hons) Business Management (online degree)	3	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HND course.
			BA (Hons) Business with Finance and Economics	3	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HND course.
	Degree Link	HND Technologies in Business	BA (Hons) Business with Data Analytics	3	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HND course.
	Progression Pathway	HND Accounting	BA (Hons) Accounting with Data Science	2	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HND course. Knowledge of Python, RGU offers a 15 credit L9 short course (see note).
	SWAP	Access to Arts, Social Sciences and Primary Teaching (SWAP)	BA (Hons) International Business Management	1	BBB, 18 credits
			BA (Hons) Business and Management	1	BBB, 18 credits
			BA (Hons) Business with Human Resource Management	1	BBB, 18 credits
			BA (Hons) Business with Marketing	1	BBB, 18 credits
	Graduate Apprenticeship		BA (Hons) Business Management		Potential for advanced entry, depending on employment circumstances and previous qualifications.
	Graduate Apprenticeship		BA (Hons) Accounting		Potential for advanced entry, depending on employment circumstances and previous qualifications.
School Links	S6 HNC Business	BA (Hons) Business and Management	2	- Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HNC course Please note: - If students enter into year 2 of these courses, the study abroad placement cannot both be undertaken. Students must decide which option they would undertake. - If entering Year 2 of BA (Hons) International Business Management course	
		BA (Hons) Business Management (online degree)			

- 4.1.5 The ambition of this project is for the portfolio of pathways to grow, with the addition of RGU's new courses being introduced in 2024. We are working towards a broader portfolio of pathways that will be marketed in a way which clearly highlights all available learner progression routes between the college and university.

4.2 Meeting Regional Skills Gaps

- 4.2.1 Alongside identifying gaps within existing provision where there is not already a formal pathway, work has also taken place to consider the potential for new course provision in the region. Through RGU's Portfolio Review Project and feedback on NESCol student destination data the development of an SCQF Level 9 top-up course in Light and Sound Production is now in motion. As it stands, students studying on an HND Sound Production course are required to apply to universities out with the North East if they would like to continue their studies at Level 9 or above. A small working group, with representation from NESCol, RGU and individuals with industry expertise will continue to meet to take forward the development of this.

4.3 Shared Approach to Pathway Promotion

- 4.3.1 At the heart of a joined up approach to student recruitment is the assurance that there is a strong understanding within the student recruitment teams at NESCol and RGU of the wide range of learner journey pathways on offer to individuals in the region. To help improve understanding of the student experience at college prior to progressing to RGU the Pathfinder Co-ordinator and NESCol's School-College Partnership Manager arranged an upskilling event in October 2023 at the college for staff from RGU's Widening Access and Student Recruitment teams. This event presented an opportunity for university colleagues to find out more detail about the Degree Link HN courses, see the teaching facilities and learning environment and hear from student advice, support and admissions teams. There are plans for a reciprocal upskilling event to take place at RGU with attendance from colleagues at NESCol.
- 4.3.2 Further to these staff development opportunities there has also been increased collaboration on existing student recruitment programmes. RGU's Widening Access School Engagement team showcased both direct entry routes and Degree Link pathways during their S5 and S6 'Access To' programmes for prospective pupils from Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire schools which took place from August to December 2023.

4.4 Curriculum Development Collaboration

- 4.4.1 Via this Pathfinder Project we have seen new collaborative practice, between teams who have previously not been connected, and the introduction of new initiatives with the intention of improving the student learning experience. Please find below a few examples of curriculum collaboration in practice:

HND Business Unit Development and Integrated Teaching Opportunities

The Curriculum Manager for Business is working with RGU's Lead for a Project Management module for their input on the development of a new HND Business 2nd year Project Management Strategy Decision-Making and Risk Unit. These two colleagues are well engaged, with ongoing dialogue around the development of this unit and a shared Teams area to record development work. As part of this process it is recognised that students on the HND would benefit from direct input from RGU at the point of completing this unit for their college course, via use of RGU labs, shared group work or attending relevant university lectures. Consideration will therefore be given to integrated teaching at RGU for this HND unit which would help familiarise students who are looking to progress to university and encourage a successful transition from college.

Advanced Construction (Built Environment) Level 6 Course Development

Following the cessation of the HNC Built Environment course at NESCol from August 2023, the Head of Sector, Curriculum Manager and Head of Planning and Academic Partnerships at the college worked with Senior Lecturers from Scott Sutherland's School of Architecture for their input on the development of an SCQF Level 6 Advanced Construction (Built Environment) course which would permit entry to year 1 of two courses within this academic school. Academic colleagues across the institutions met, alongside representation from RGU Admissions, to confirm the required pre-requisite units which would ensure students were prepared for university study. This process ensured that the provision to progress within this subject area is still in place in the North-East.

School of Computing: Upskilling Event

The School of Computing academic team at RGU were keen to improve and reinvigorate the working relationship with the computing team at NESCol, in order to improve understanding of each team's course offerings. The Pathfinder Project Co-ordinator arranged for the NESCol Computing team, which included the Head of Sector, Curriculum Managers and lecturers, to visit the School of Computing at RGU. The visit provided an opportunity for networking and improved understanding of course content and the specific technologies and facilities that are used in the teaching. In doing so, both teams are now better equipped to advise students of the available pathways and professional connections that were made on the day should encourage a continued dialogue beyond the Pathfinder Project.

4.5 NESCol-RGU Joint Offer Letter:

- 4.5.1 A working group has been established with representatives from RGU's Admissions and Widening Access teams and NESCol's Student Records team, chaired by the Pathfinder Project Lead, to take forward the proposal of a joint offer letter which will provide students with a seamless transition from HN to undergraduate study at RGU. Conversations are ongoing in relation to establishing the processes to provide this offer and identifying best practice across the application processes at each institution. Once established, a joint offer letter will remove the need for students to apply for a place at RGU via UCAS, thus simplifying the transition



process and providing clear information about the students' potential education progression opportunities at an earlier stage.

5.0 PROJECT AMBITIONS AND ASPIRATIONS

5.1 Clarity of Pathway Information

- 5.5.1 An ambition of this Pathfinder Project is to evidence a broader portfolio of progression pathways for learners in the region, not limited to traditional articulation routes, but including a wider range of meaningful pathways including progression from SCQF Level 6 courses to first year, SWAP pathways, HNC to first year of select courses (due to accreditation standards or integrated masters programmes) and progression via the apprenticeship family. Not only will these pathways be well established, recognised and supported by members of staff at NESCol and RGU. The ambition is that these are recognised, understood and promoted by internal stakeholders and external parties such as teachers, parents/carers, Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and Developing the Young Workforce (DYW).
- 5.5.2 In practical terms, this Pathfinder Project has linked with the *Enhancing the Senior Phase* Pathfinder Project to organise an interactive upskilling event for guidance teachers and Depute Head Teachers from City and Shire schools to promote positive pathways in the North East. The partners leading on this include the University of Aberdeen, the Robert Gordon University, North East Scotland College, DYW and SDS and the proposal for this event was shared at the Strategic Working Group for the *Enhancing the Senior Phase* Pathfinder project and supported by Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire council representatives. The aim is to raise awareness of pathways from school to college, school to university, school to apprenticeships, school to employment and also pathways between college and apprenticeships, college and university and university apprenticeships.
- 5.5.3 Further to this, senior managers from RGU's Widening Access team and NESCol's School College Partnership team meet regularly with the Pathfinder Co-ordinator to identify opportunities to promote positive pathways with school pupils in the region. Recognising the importance of raising awareness of the links between the college and the university at an earlier stage, there are initial plans to develop and collaborate on an event for S3 and S4 pupils which showcases the Degree Link partnership and associated courses. This will be piloted with an identified economic growth sector in the North East, clearly linking the learner pathways with associated career opportunities.

5.2 'Degree Link' Rebranding Project

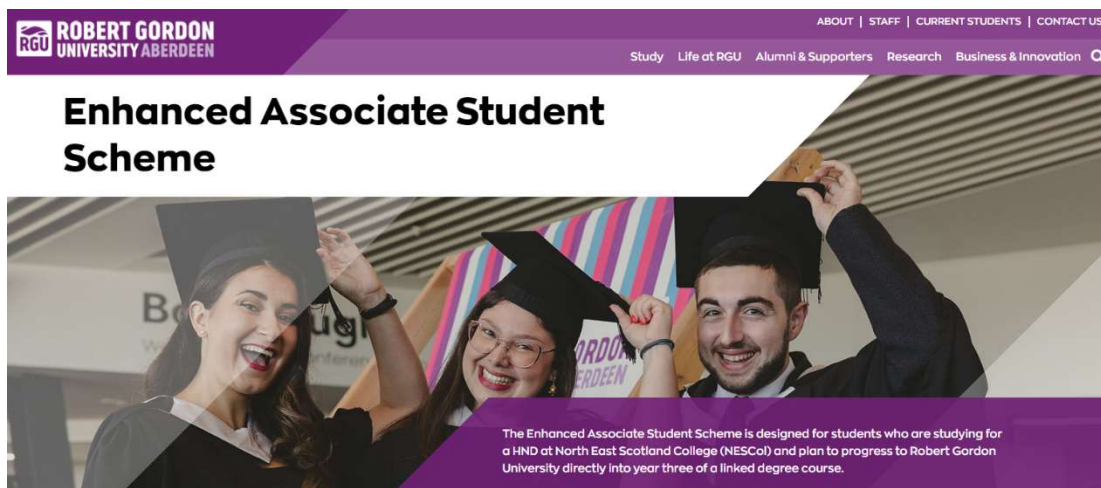
- 5.2.1 The Pathfinder Project has started work with RGU's Market Insight team and colleagues from each institution's marketing team to look at rebranding Degree Link; the current branding associated with the articulation pathways in place between the college and the university. Work is being developed to gain a better understanding of the perception of Degree Link amongst students currently studying on a Degree Link pathway at the college and the university and amongst guidance teachers in the North East. RGU's Market Insight team intends to evaluate these stakeholders' understanding of the vocabulary associated with progression. Terms such as 'articulation', 'advanced standing', '2+2' and 'Degree Link' will be used as part of a survey to determine how well placed these are in marketing collateral and promotional materials. The Pathfinder Project aims to rebrand the partnership between NESCol and RGU creating a brand identity which encompasses all pathways between the institutions as well as the close working relationship and transition support available to learners on this journey. The objective underpinning this ambition is for individuals and their

influencers (parents, carers, teachers and careers advisors) within the North East to have a clear understanding of all available learner pathways which will enable them to make the right choice about which pathway would best suit their needs and their future career aspirations.

5.3 Joint Offer Letter: Improved Student Experience and Transition

- 5.3.1 For students already enrolled at college, work is underway across the institutions to improve the student experience and provide an easy and seamless transition from study at NESCol to the university via a joint offer letter.
- 5.3.2 This process is being piloted on a small group of 129 students enrolled on the *Additional Funded Places (AFP)* Scheme and colleagues with admissions and student recruitment responsibilities at NESCol and RGU continue to meet to finalise the processes involved with this and to develop a plan of joint communications and outreach to inform and support these students from the point of pre-application to NESCol, throughout their HND studies and up to and including enrolment at RGU. Central to these developments is feedback from the student voice and the draft of the first joint communication to these students was shared with a small group prior to distribution for their feedback. It is an ambition of the project to look at how this offer could be rolled out to more students on other courses at the college, once the mechanics of the process and associated benefits to the students have been tried, tested and evaluated.

NESCol students attended information sessions regarding the benefits of the *Additional Funded Places Scheme* and were invited to register as Enhanced Associate Students of Robert Gordon University. In doing so, the students receive an RGU email address and can access both online and in-person resources and facilities, in a similar way to current RGU students.



5.4 Legacy of the Strategic Working Group and Curriculum Partnerships

- 5.4.1 As referenced earlier in this report, an early success for this Pathfinder Project has been an increase in collaboration across the institutions, with staff members at different levels, on a more regular basis. Importantly the establishment of the Strategic Working Group has provided a forum for upwards reporting so that curriculum development, recruitment activity and future ambitions can be shared and disseminated more widely across the institutions as

appropriate. Beyond this project, the intention is for this group to continue to meet to maintain strong partnership links and encourage momentum around course developments and enhancing the student transition and overall learning experience.

- 5.4.2 The Project Co-ordinator has an overarching understanding of progress against actions across development areas, including curriculum developments, marketing and recruitment activity and market insight. To ensure that this activity is sustained, consideration would need to be given to how these different groups continue to meet beyond the project and whether more formal structures need to be implemented to maintain these positive collaborations.

5.5 Measuring Success

- 5.5.1 In terms of measuring success we will look at data trends and market insight to identify whether the increased number of pathways and collaborative approach to marketing and recruitment has been successful and increased the numbers of students in the recruitment pipeline from regional schools to NESCol and from NESCol to undergraduate study at RGU. The data sharing agreement will allow us to review the numbers of applications and subsequent enrolments.
- 5.5.2 The impact of the joint offer letter on the pilot group in terms of enhancing the student experience and the transition from college to university will require evaluation. Alongside qualitative data, student retention and progress tracking will be recorded and shared with admissions teams as this pilot group progress in their HN studies. In the longer term, student case studies of their experience and subsequent transition would be useful to inform next steps and to evaluate the success and the impact of the joint offer letter.

6.0 FINAL CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 This Pathfinder Project has endeavoured to build upon the strong foundations of partnership working that have existed between the institutions for more than twenty years. Where collaboration was already in place at an operational level, there is now an increased level of partnership working and an openness to dialogue between colleagues at different levels at NESCol and RGU. There is a renewed sense of commitment from both institutions to working more collaboratively to improve the student experience and a more aligned and shared focus on doing things differently to develop sustainable and aligned provision to attract and retain students to study in the North East. This is evident in the commitment from colleagues to attend meetings, agree actions and take forward new initiatives. There have already been tangible changes as a result of this Pathfinder Project, with the addition of new confirmed progression pathways and new working groups to take forward course development projects and the joint offer letter in the near future.
- 6.2 The establishment of formal groups such as the Strategic Working Group, the Pathfinder Steering Group and the NESCol-RGU Collaborative Projects (Market Insight) Working group has been vital to the success of this Pathfinder Project. These groups have provided opportunities to shape the direction of the project and to identify best practice across curriculum areas which could then be expanded upon as appropriate across different academic schools. In addition, a shared Market Insight analysis which reflects on the regional demographic and economic factors that may affect student recruitment for NESCol and RGU continues to impact, influence and inform a collaborative marketing and recruitment approach to ensure clarity of pathway information in the somewhat complex landscape of advice and guidance that currently exists. It is an ambition that these groups will be a lasting legacy of the Pathfinder Project.
- 6.3 On reflection, the impact and successes to date can largely be attributed to an openness to innovative practice by all colleagues involved with the project, for the benefit of regional economic growth, improved student recruitment and more aligned learner pathways. The Project Co-ordinator was seconded from RGU's Widening Access team and this prior knowledge and understanding of the partnership working and intricacies associated with this were hugely beneficial in driving forward project progress. That is not to say the project was without its challenges. When discussing curriculum changes, particularly in relation to the new interdisciplinary courses at RGU, there has been concern around how well aligned the current SQA HN provision would be for students to apply for advanced entry. The rigidity of the SQA frameworks has been highlighted at several meetings, and could be an area for policy makers to reflect on in terms of producing more flexible frameworks that could be adapted to suit the interests and subsequent progression opportunities of each individual learner.
- 6.4 Moving forward consideration now needs to move to how this positive momentum for change and development can be sustained. This may mean introducing more formal structures to ensure that dialogue continues to take place across different staffing levels and between different teams at the college and university. In doing this and with the legacy of the Strategic Working Group, Pathfinder Steering Group and continued shared market insight analysis, NESCol and RGU can continue to evaluate the success of the current learner journey pathways and ensure that their offerings are aligned with regional economic growth; promising a positive student experience at both institutions and strong employability prospects.