



SFC Pathfinder Pilot Project

Enhancing the Senior Phase

Report - March 2024

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1.0 INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

- 1.1 The education landscape for senior phase learners in the North East of Scotland is a complex one. There are two local authorities, Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council, each with their own priorities and ways of working. There are also numerous partner organisations working in and with schools across the region on a variety of projects and course delivery.
- 1.2 The partners include North East Scotland College, the two local authorities and the two local universities (The Robert Gordon University and the University of Aberdeen) all of whom engage with senior phase learners in different ways.
- 1.3 This complex landscape, combined with evidence emerging from Scottish Government reports indicating a need for change in the Senior Phase (OECD 2021, Stobart 2021, Withers 2023, Hayward 2023), led to the initiation of this project. It was recognised that there was a need to have a more cohesive approach to the senior phase in the region, maximising opportunities, as a collective, for the enhancement of S4-S6 education.
- 1.4 Before the development of the Pathfinder project proposal, the College had detailed discussions with central officers and head teachers, from both local authorities, on the content, recommendations and case studies presented in the College Development Network research '*Co-Creating the Learner Journey – School-College Partnerships and Effective Skills Pathways*'. This led to some new approaches and initiatives in both Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire.
- 1.5 Two idea generation workshops, to look at potential collaboration, with all partners (local authorities and local universities) took place in November and December 2021. This activity included Regional Delivery Board members, or their representatives. From the idea generation workshops, it was clear that there was a commitment to work together to develop meaningful and engaging opportunities and pathways to enhance the senior phase in a regional context. Three tests of change were developed:

Development of a Regional Strategic Working Group to focus on enhancing the senior phase.

This group would see representatives from the College, both local authorities and both local universities, to improve the senior phase by working as a collective within the region.

Development of a meaningful Winter Leaver Programme

This Programme would offer an alternative pathway for exceptional entrants, which provides enhanced support and opportunities to progress to further study or employment, benefitting the students, the schools, the College, and the local economy.



Further development of HNC provision for S6 pupils

Enhancing and expanding the provision of HNCs for S6 pupils would create opportunities for more learners in the region to access Higher Education while in a school setting. The HNC programme would offer articulation to higher education at College and/or University, or directly into employment, benefitting the learners, local institutions and the local labour market.

2.0 EXISTING PARTNERSHIPS AND PROJECTS

2.1 Partnership Working

- 2.1.1 It is important to highlight the strong and longstanding partnerships that exist between Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Councils and the College. In fact, there are historic strong partnerships in place between all those involved in this Pathfinder project.
- 2.1.2 The College is a member of the Aberdeenshire Council DYW Partnership Group, and is a key partner in the development of Aberdeen City's ABZ Campus. This provides good insight and data that informs the College's offer. The College takes part in the National DYW Leads Network – this provides good sources of data, policy updates and insights relating to the Sector.
- 2.1.3 There has also been strong partnership working between NESCol and both of the region's universities, the Robert Gordon University and the University of Aberdeen, for a number of years.
- 2.1.4 These partnerships predominantly existed in siloes – with the College communicating with or working on a project with one partner at a time. What the Pathfinder Project aimed to do was bring all of the partners together to work towards a common goal.
- 2.1.5 Data sharing agreements with key partners were reviewed to ensure that they were appropriate for the scope of the Pathfinder Project.

2.2 The Schools-College Partnership course offer

- 2.2.1 One of the many important pieces of partnership working between the College and the region's local authority partners is the offer of course provision delivered by NESCol to secondary school pupils in Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire.
- 2.2.2 This offer comprises courses ranging from SCQF level 2/3 to SCQF level 7. The introduction of level 7 provision in 2022 was instrumental to this Pathfinder Project (see section 2.3). A range of qualifications are included in the offer, such as Skills for Work, National Progression Awards, Foundation Apprenticeships, National 5s, City and Guilds awards, HNCs, College devised units and industry-sponsored programmes. It is a comprehensive offer that is designed with careful consideration of the regional economy's needs and insights from local authority partners.

2.2.3 Almost 50 programmes of study are available, with delivery in the College's Aberdeen Altens, Aberdeen City, and Fraserburgh Campuses, and their Scottish Maritime Academy in Peterhead. Some course delivery is also offered in schools. Each year, approximately 1,300 pupils from across the region participate in this College-delivered activity. The College reports attendance, behaviour and progress of pupils to their school partners.

2.3 HNC Pilot

2.3.1 In AY2022-23, a pilot for the delivery of an HNC to S6 pupils was tested. This pilot delivered one framework, HNC Business, to pupils from only one school in Aberdeen. The test was introduced following aforementioned discussions with local authorities around the CDN report, '*Co-Creating the Learner Journey – School-College Partnerships and Effective Skills Pathways*'.

2.3.2 With this pilot, 11 school pupils completed and achieved HNC Business. There was excellent feedback from participants. It is understood that almost all pupils who completed the qualification in 2023 progressed to degree level studies, with one pupil entering Year 2 of a degree programme.

2.3.3 Following the success of the pilot, and the alignment of school timetables across Aberdeen City, an enhanced pilot of the programme was offered in AY2023-24, with all City schools invited to apply. This time, three frameworks were offered: HNC Business, HNC Technologies in Business and HNC Mechanical Engineering. However, only HNC Business was viable. This is currently running with 17 pupils from 6 schools.

2.3.4 Going into the project, it was noted that the Short Life Working Group (see 3.2) for HNC Provision to S6s would explore the reasons for the lack of participation in the computing and engineering frameworks to help boost interest for AY2024-25.

2.4 Exceptional Entrants

2.4.1 A winter leaver, or exceptional entrant, is a young person who wishes to leave school after S4, but whose 16th birthday falls between 1 October and 28/29 February, meaning they are required to stay in full time education until the end of the year. NESCol accepts applications from winter leavers to full time courses which run for a full academic year.

2.4.2 If their applications are successful, the students enrol on a College course, but are still considered to be the responsibility of their school between August and December. For exceptional entrants, the College reports any poor attendance or problems to the young person's school, where they could be returned should problems persist.

2.4.3 Some Exceptional Entrants thrive with this pathway. Others reach the winter holidays and, when they are no longer required to be in full time education, drop out of their College course. Between 2019-2022, an average of 45% of winter leavers successfully completed a full time course at NESCol.

3.0 INSPIRATIONAL PRACTICE AND NEW WAYS OF WORKING

3.1 Regional Strategic Working Group

- 3.1.1 An opportunity presented by this project was to create a regional forum to work towards shared goals. This was done through the creation of a Regional Strategic Working Group (RSWG), which was established with clear terms of reference.
- 3.1.2 The RSWG is an aspirational group comprising NESCol, Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council, The Robert Gordon University and The University of Aberdeen. The aspiration is to enhance the school senior phase by working as a collective within the Region, and that this group would be a legacy of the Pathfinder Project.
- 3.1.3 It was important to set the right conditions for engagement, and to have the right people representing each partner organisation within the group – representatives with good knowledge, passion for change, and authority to make changes. Having representatives with these three attributes has been essential in the progress of the project’s outcomes. Please see Appendix 1 for an overview of the RSWG Membership.
- 3.1.4 Alongside partners in the region’s Local Authorities and Universities, representatives from DYW North East and SDS agreed to join the group at appropriate points, as critical friends.

3.2 Role of the Strategic Working Group

- 3.2.1 The RSWG was established to oversee the Pathfinder Project’s two tests of change, and also to explore the myriad of ways that provision for senior phase pupils could be enhanced. For example, after it was identified in the group that more could be done to educate teachers on the education pathways available in the region, the College and its university partners began working together to deliver a pathways information event for guidance teachers – some of the most important influencers for school leavers. This is currently in planning stages.
- 3.2.2 Another example of the additional work undertaken by the group saw the College share a partnership working approach with Aberdeenshire Council to support unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Fraserburgh/Peterhead area, as part of the school-links offer. As a result of this, a similar programme for young asylum seekers outside of school education has been established in Aberdeen.

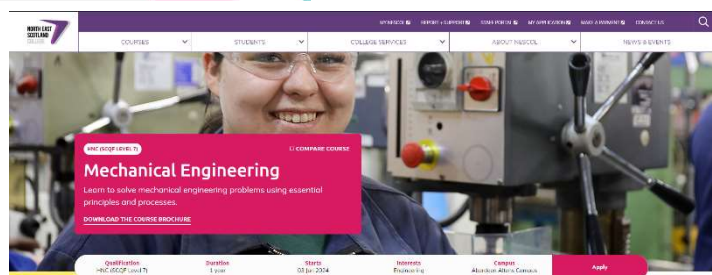
3.3 Short-Life Working Groups

- 3.3.1 Short Life Working Groups (SLWG) were set up to deliver the tests of change within the scope of the proposal. These are predominantly made of up representatives from the same organisations as the RSWG, but with some different remits that are relevant to the aims of each test of change. It was agreed that these SLWGs would have representation from Skills Development Scotland and DYW North East.

4.0 INNOVATIVE OUTPUTS AND DELIVERABLES

4.1 Increased HNC Offer

- 4.1.1 In AY2024-25, the offer of HNC courses for S6s includes 3 courses: HNC Business, HNC Mechanical Engineering and HNC Technologies in Business. These courses are now open to applications from pupils in both local authority areas, with Aberdeenshire pupils able to select an HNC as part of their school timetable for the first time. Across 3 programmes, 80 places are available to S6 pupils from 28 schools.
- 4.1.2 Changes to the way the HNC offer is promoted have also been made following the SLWG’s exploration into engagement with the AY2023-24 offer. For instance, HNC Technologies in Business has been offered with a marketing title of HNC Computing & IT for Business, following feedback that the course name does not offer a clear reflection of the course content.
- 4.1.3 More work has been done to raise awareness of the HNC options among key stakeholders including parents and teachers as well as the pupils themselves – with messaging coming from all partners to reinforce the benefits of the courses. This awareness raising has been done via digital marketing content including web pages (see below), in-school information sessions for pupils and parents/carers, a virtual information session for teachers, and paid social media posts targeting parents/carers and influencers.



4.2 HNC Progression Pathways

4.2.1 Alongside the increased HNC offer for S6 pupils, we have also seen the formal agreement of articulation pathways from these courses to university. In collaboration with the Strategic *Developing Demand-led, Aligned, Sustainable Pathways* Pathfinder Project, 12 pathways have been agreed with RGU for entry into year 2 of related degree programmes:

- Pupils studying HNC Business could progress directly into year 2 of 11 degree programmes at the Robert Gordon University (see Appendix 2).
- HNC Technologies in Business pupils will have the opportunity to progress directly into year 2 of BA (Hons) Digital Marketing.
- Discussions around progression for HNC Mechanical Engineering pupils are ongoing.

4.2.2 Should pupils prefer, they could choose to progress into year 1 of any of the listed programmes as well as other degrees at RGU.

4.2.3 The University of Aberdeen have also agreed that they will consider any pupils studying an HNC in S6 on a case-by-case basis for entry into year 2 of a related degree programme.

4.3 Winter Leaver Programme

4.3.1 The project has led to the design of a winter leaver programme that is practical and provides suitable qualifications for progression to employment or higher-level study. The programme includes 3 courses – one delivered at each of NESCol's main campuses. Each of these courses has 15 places available:

- Foundation Apprenticeship Hospitality (SCQF level 5) at Fraserburgh Campus
- Foundation Apprenticeship Construction (SCQF level 5) at Aberdeen Altens Campus
- City & Guilds Level 1 Hairdressing (SCQF level 4) at Aberdeen City Campus

4.3.2 Each course will include hands-on learning experience in our purpose-built College facilities. To allow safe learning in these facilities, students will be provided with appropriate PPE that they will wear in College, and can take with them into their next steps.

4.3.3 Courses will run until December 2024, meaning students who successfully complete the Winter Leaver Programme will gain an industry recognised qualification before they are no longer required to be in full-time education.

4.3.4 Following the completion of these courses, there will be opportunities for students to continue their studies at NESCol, with progression into a relevant February-start course. The students will also be supported with applications for work or apprenticeships, should they prefer progression into employment.

4.3.5 The Winter Leaver SLWG has worked to identify ways in which the students' learning experience can be enriched. The aim is to provide students with additional skills and knowledge to take forward into further study or employment. The following enhancements have been added to the programmes of study:

Pre-summer induction period

Students will begin their course before the summer holidays for 3 weeks of induction starting week commencing 3 June. This will introduce students to the College, their lecturers, their classmates, and the course itself.

Summer engagement

To keep students engaged between finishing the induction in June and beginning the full programme in August, there will be 3 touch points throughout the summer holidays. The intention of this summer activity is to keep learners focused, and also enhance their learning experience.

These touch points are being developed at present, in partnership with DYW North East, SDS and both local authorities. They are likely to include employer engagement, a visit to College, pathway planning with support of SDS, and online learning opportunities.

Contextualised core skills

The courses will incorporate the teaching of core skills, delivered in context so pupils can understand their relevance to their industry of interest.

Co-designed skills unit

NESCol is co-designing a skills unit with partners at Skills Development Scotland, with input from young people. This unit will be delivered in each of the Winter Leaver Programme courses. The purpose of the unit is to equip students with the ability to reflect on the skills they have gained throughout their course; industry relevant skills, and also meta skills. It will give them an opportunity to document those skills and demonstrate how they have developed them, so that they can take this evidence and understanding forward into their next steps – whether that is education or employment.

Enhanced employer engagement

In addition to the employer engagement already embedded into the two Foundation Apprenticeship qualifications, NESCol are working alongside DYW North East and both local authorities to identify employer partners for the Winter Leaver Programme. These employers will provide opportunities for students on the course relevant to their industry. What these opportunities look like will differ from employer to employer and course to course, but may include a work placement, site visit, or information session.

- 4.3.6 To support the launch of the Winter Leaver Programme, a multi-pronged approach to promotion and awareness raising was implemented. Messages to schools detailing the programme, targeted at depute head teachers and guidance teams, were sent by the College, and were reinforced by messages from the local authorities. The same information was shared with SDS Career Advisors.



- 4.3.8 An information brochure (see above) was produced and shared both digitally and physically with school contacts and partners at SDS and DYW North East, and a web page was created for the College website. Following this, a virtual information session was held for teachers across the region.
- 4.3.9 Promotion of the programme to parents was implemented through social media marketing and through targeted communication from schools.

5.0 PROJECT AMBITIONS AND ASPIRATIONS

5.1 Legacy of the Regional Strategic Working Group

- 5.1.1 An ambition of this project is that the strategic working group will be a legacy of the project. It could provide a mechanism to identify possible future regional pilots and areas of development, with the College, both universities, and both local authorities around the table.
- 5.1.2 This forum for discussion and development of senior phase activity will provide an opportunity for a collective, cohesive approach to any changes to the Scottish education landscape. It will also lend itself to a similar joint approach to needs identified by the regional economy that could be addressed by senior phase learners.
- 5.1.3 One of the key ambitions of the group is to develop pathways that are linked to areas of growth in the region. Time has already been spent on information gathering – there are many organisations working with schools, and it is challenging to collate a map of all senior phase activity across Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. The continuation of the RSWG will allow further information gathering to take place, with a view to clearly illustrate the scope of opportunities for S4-S6 learners in the North East of Scotland. This activity map will allow all organisations to identify where there are gaps in delivery and address how partners in the group can work together to tackle those gaps with meaningful activity.

5.2 Continuation and expansion of tests of change

- 5.2.1 One of the aspirations of this project is to evaluate the HNC and Winter Leaver course provision to inform how both programmes can be expanded upon. We will work with the learners themselves as well as partner organisations to gather feedback, look at course demand, explore other curriculum areas of interest for course delivery, and continue to develop a course offer to pupils that reflects the needs of learners, schools, and the regional economy.
- 5.2.2 At the time of writing, recruitment for both HNCs and the Winter Leaver Programme for AY2024-25 is still underway. Section 5.4 will explore what evaluation and measurements of success will be considered to inform development and expansion of our test of change courses.

5.3 Awareness and Understanding of Senior Phase Options

- 5.3.1 Throughout this project, acknowledgement has been made at various stages, by both SLWGs and the RSWG, that one of the biggest hurdles we face with regards to senior phase provision, is a lack of awareness of pathways. This lack of awareness is not unique to one specific group of stakeholders, but is true of teachers, parents/carers and pupils.

- 5.3.2 A body of work has been done to raise awareness of the new and exciting pathways that have been established as part of this pathfinder project's tests of change. Through this work, effective methods of awareness raising have been identified: in-person and virtual information sessions; social media; digital marketing; promotional material; joint approaches to reinforce messaging. Learning from this, and from ongoing work across the three educational partners involved in the project, it is hoped that work can be done to raise awareness of all senior phase pathways and post-school progression pathways within the region.
- 5.3.3 This will consider 3 stakeholders: pupils, parents/carers and teachers. Each of these stakeholder groups has different requirements in terms of awareness raising, and work is ongoing to explore how each group can be targeted.
- 5.3.4 An initial project that is already underway will see the creation of an event for Depute Head teachers and Guidance teachers that explores positive pathways within the region. This event also links in to the *Developing Demand-led, Aligned, Sustainable Pathways* Pathfinder Project. This event will be led by North East Scotland College, the Robert Gordon University, the University of Aberdeen, DYW North East and SDS. A proposal for the event was presented at the RSWG and was supported by representatives from Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Councils.
- 5.3.5 The aim of the event is to upskill attendees, improving their knowledge and understanding of education pathways: school to College; school to university; school to apprenticeship or employment; College to university; College to apprenticeship; College or university to employment. These upskilled teachers would then take their knowledge and share it with other teachers and key staff within their respective schools.
- 5.4 Measuring success**
- 5.4.1 With the project still underway, it is difficult to measure success with quantitative information at present. Once information is available, we will consider application and enrolment numbers for both HNC provision and the Winter Leaver Programme courses. We will also consider the learner journeys of students enrolled in both programmes, including retention, withdrawal and successful completion data. Progression pathways and positive destination information for learners on HNC and Winter Leaver courses will be very good indicators of success.
- 5.4.2 Alongside this, we will measure success by consulting with learners through focus groups, surveys and feedback to curriculum teams. Learner voice will be instrumental in the evaluation of the project and will inform positive changes to future delivery of these programmes. We will also consult with partners involved in the delivery of the tests of change – employers, DYW, SDS, and schools for their feedback.

6.0 FINAL CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 The *Enhancing the Senior Phase* Pathfinder Project has built on strong existing partnerships that have been established for many years, and has brought these partners together to work towards a common goal. One of the most important factors for success in the project was the establishment of a Regional Strategic Working Group – particularly having the right people from each represented organisation on board.
- 6.2 The group’s membership includes those with an excellent understanding of the region’s educational landscape, and with the authority to make decisions that could influence this landscape. Each member of the group is also passionate about making positive changes to senior phase provision, and exploring and creating new and exciting opportunities for learners. This has been instrumental in the roll out of tests of change and other projects.
- 6.3 The opportunities for students created by our tests of change will not only benefit the learners themselves, but will create school-leavers with an enhanced leaver portfolio that will be advantageous to whichever organisation they move onto. Whether they are HNC learners progressing to College or university study, or winter leavers entering the world of work, they will be more prepared for these next steps because of their College experience.
- 6.4 Though the tangible success of our tests of change remains to be seen, we can view the rollout of an enhanced S6 HNC offer and the creation of an ambitious Winter Leaver Programme as legacies of this project. These offers have been established through thorough planning, research and collaboration. This process has resulted in valuable insights that we will carry forward into future planning, which – in and of itself – is a legacy of the project.
- 6.5 It is hoped that the strategic working group will be a legacy of the project, with support from DYW North East and SDS. This could prove a mechanism to identify possible future regional pilots and development opportunities.

Appendix 1: Regional Strategic Working Group Membership

Membership of the Regional Strategic Working Group		
Organisation	Name	Role
North East Scotland College	Robert Laird	Head of Planning & Academic Partnerships/ Pathfinder Project Lead
	Rachael Stirling	Pathfinder Project Coordinator
	Lauren MacAskill	Schools-College Partnership Manager
Aberdeen City Council	Mark Jones	Quality Improvement Manager
Aberdeenshire Council	Andrew Ritchie	DYW Lead
	Paul Macari	Head of Planning & Economy
The Robert Gordon University	Peter Tormey	Regional Schools Engagement Manager
	Connor Anderson	Head of Access & Widening Participation
The University of Aberdeen	Sally Middleton	Access & Articulation Manager
	Anna Johnston	Lead Access & Articulation Officer
Scottish Funding Council	Linda McLeod	Assistant Director: Regional Pathfinders Programme
	Mairi Mitchell	Senior Policy Analysis Officer

Appendix 2: Agreed articulation pathways from S6 HNC courses to the Robert Gordon University

HN Award	Degree Course(s)	Entry Stage	Conditions
S6 HNC Business	BA (Hons) Business & Management BA (Hons) Business Management online degree BA (Hons) International Business Management	2	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HNC course. Please note: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If students enter into year 2 of these courses, the study abroad and placement opportunities cannot both be undertaken. Student must decide which option they would like to undertake. • If entering year 2 of BA (Hons) International Business Management course, students must complete the compulsory study abroad element in year 3 thus relinquishing the opportunity to complete a placement year.
S6 HNC Business	BA (Hons) Business with Human Resource Management BA (Hons) Business with Marketing BA (Hons) Business with Finance and Economics	2	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HNC course. Grade A in the Graded Unit Please note: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If students enter into year 2 of these courses, the study abroad and placement opportunities cannot both be undertaken. Student must decide which option they would like to undertake.
S6 HNC Business	BA (Hons) Events Management BA (Hons) Digital Marketing BA (Hons) Fashion Management BA (Hons) International Hospitality Management BA (Hons) International Tourism (Taught Route)	2	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HNC course.
S6 HNC Technologies in Business	BA (Hons) Digital Marketing	2	Satisfactory completion of the aforementioned HNC course.