



REGIONAL  
PATHFINDERS

# Regional Tertiary Pathfinders: A System Level Report



**Cover Photos:**

**University of Aberdeen**

**Borders College**

**SRUC**

**University of Glasgow**



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## Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>A collection of insights and ideas for policy and practice based on the work of the Regional Tertiary Pathfinders.</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Introduction – System Redesign: Operating in a Shifting Context</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Section 1: Creating the Conditions for Regional Tertiary Pathfinders</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Section 2: Working Together Differently: Evolving collaborative practices in tertiary education</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Section 3: Models of collaboration</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Section 4: Understanding Skills Planning Partnerships</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Section 5: Future Focus: Maintaining Ambition Beyond the Pathfinder Programme</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Annex A – Pathfinder Skills Planning Partnerships (North East and South of Scotland)</b>	<b>100</b>

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## Our Objectives



Simpler pathways and improved outcomes for learners.



Alignment of provision against societal and employer need.



Enhanced coherence and sustainability across provision.

## Our Partners

### South of Scotland



### North-east of Scotland





## Our Outcomes



### Individual Learners and Employers

Partnerships boost regional skills development, enhancing learner outcomes and aligning with economic needs.



### Institutions and Key Stakeholders

Improved understanding of skills analysis, best practice, and efficient data use strengthens system-wide collaboration and leads to a consensus on future provision aligned with emerging needs.



### Operating Environment

An evidence-led approach and efficient data sharing deepen understanding of provision planning within and between institutions, which shapes policy and practice.

## Our Impact



### Individual Learners and Employers

Partnerships equip students for successful careers, satisfy industry needs, and co-create solutions to challenges, leading to a positive societal impact.



### Institutions and Key Stakeholders

Cross-sector partnerships enhance regional planning, drive knowledge, curriculum and skill development, and optimise resources to secure coherent provision and a sustainable future.



### Operating Environment

Strategic planning guidance leverages data, collaboration, and evaluation to improve tertiary education, while insights into future funding and assurance strategies, backed by a solid evidence base, inform national decision-making

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## Executive Summary



The Regional Tertiary Pathfinders Programme explored how regional collaboration among tertiary institutions, employers, and stakeholders could lead to more coherent, well communicated and sustainable education pathways and provision that align with regional economic and skills priorities.

This report presents findings from the Pathfinders Programme, offering insights from pilot projects in the North East and South of Scotland. The report also discusses the governance structures that underpinned these collaborations, the lessons learned from various models of partnership, and future directions for Scotland's tertiary education sector.



### Creating the Conditions for Collaboration

The report highlights the importance of the Programme's governance structures, including the National Advisory Board (NAB), Regional Delivery Boards (RDBs), and project steering groups, to facilitate effective collaboration. These structures played distinct roles: the NAB provided strategic oversight and guidance to ensure alignment with national priorities, while the RDBs focused on regional activities, making strategic decisions, and selecting projects which met regional needs. Steering groups played a crucial role in the day-to-day management of pilot projects. Together, these mechanisms ensured a coordinated approach to achieving the programme's objectives across institutions and regions.



### Working Together Differently

The report underscores the transformational impact of collaborative working within the Pathfinders Programme. Successful partnerships were developed which delivered positive outcomes. By focusing on joint curriculum development, shared resources, and regional alignment, institutions were able to create more effective learner pathways and information products. Examples from the programme demonstrate how deeper, sustained partnerships between colleges, universities, and employers contributed to more dynamic and responsive education models, providing benefits to both learners and the regional economy.



Photo: University of Aberdeen



## Models of Collaboration

A range of models for strategic collaboration emerged through the pilots. These included formalised strategic alliances between institutions, such as the partnership between Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) and Borders College, and more flexible, informal collaborations. In addition, the report highlights the importance of partnerships with other regional organisations, including local authorities, enterprise agencies, Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and industry bodies. These regional actors were integral to shaping curriculum and aligning educational provision with local workforce needs. The collaboration models varied in terms of governance and operational integration, illustrating a spectrum of approaches. Formal agreements provided long-term stability, while informal partnerships allowed for flexibility and adaptability in responding to emerging regional demands and both provided opportunities for collaborations to grow and deepen into new curriculum areas. By working with a broad range of regional stakeholders, institutions were able to create more targeted and cohesive educational pathways that met the specific needs of the local economy and communities.



## Skills Planning and Partnerships

While the Pathfinders Programme built on collaborative skills planning, there remains a need for greater clarity about the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders within existing regional and local partnership planning fora. The report highlights the importance of establishing clearer frameworks that define these roles more explicitly, particularly within and between existing governance structures like Regional Economic Partnerships (REPs) and Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs). Improving communication channels and formalising responsibilities would ensure that all partners understand their contributions to skills planning, enabling more effective alignment between educational pathways and regional economic needs.





## Future Focus and Emerging Themes

There are several key themes that will shape the future of regional collaboration in Scotland's tertiary education sector. The report outlines that regional collaboration must be an ongoing, adaptive process. This will require clear governance structures, committed leadership, and a willingness to address challenges collaboratively, ensuring that partnerships continue to thrive and deliver tangible benefits to learners, employers, and regional economies.

Sustaining partnerships and embedding collaboration into mainstream institutional processes is required for long-term success. It is essential that institutions continue to incorporate regional economic priorities into curriculum plans to ensure the learning offer remains responsive to both learner needs and evolving industry demands.

Overall, this report highlights the critical role of regional collaboration in addressing Scotland's educational and economic challenges. The pilot projects have demonstrated that shared governance structures, clearly defined roles, and focused, strategic collaboration can create more coherent and responsive education and skills pathways. The recommendations in the report outline the importance of embedding these collaborative practices and ensuring that they are sustained beyond the pilot phase. By strengthening partnerships between tertiary institutions, employers, and regional stakeholders, Scotland's tertiary education sector can continue to support delivery of regional economic strategies and meet evolving workforce needs.



## A collection of insights and ideas for policy and practice based on the work of the Regional Tertiary Pathfinders.

Scotland's colleges and universities have worked together in regional and place-based partnerships for many years and continue to do so as they respond to emerging challenges.

The Pathfinder programme was established to look at how we could join up, accelerate, and scale up regional approaches to meeting emerging and existing skills needs. The two Regional Pathfinders comprising seven pilot projects have their own distinct approaches. The projects are delivering changes in their curriculum, course offer and marketing materials which will have an impact on learners, including their choices, their learner journey/pathway and progress into key areas of employment in the region or wider. Schools, employers and other regional partners are also experiencing positive impacts.

The Pathfinder projects provided a real-world opportunity to learn from and to deliver quick improvements, however, we should not underestimate the time it takes for systemic changes to be embedded. It is clear that there is no one ideal way to collaborate, and there is still more to do to create the system structures and incentives which support collaboration to fulfil regional skills needs. However, there is an important opportunity for us to use the learning from the Pathfinder programme to inform future approaches. This report identifies what participants have found useful, motivating and rewarding in the work they have been doing as well as some key challenges of this type of collaborative work.

In this document we have brought together insights from those involved in the Pathfinders Programme. Their knowledge and experience of delivering change nationally, regionally, locally and at an institutional level is wide ranging and has resulted in some practical ideas to improve policy and practice which we are sharing here.

Findings and insights are drawn from several sources. These include workshops with the Regional Delivery Boards, established to facilitate the Pathfinders' regional work, and project leads and co-ordinators who have progressed the work of the pilots. We have also engaged with the National Advisory Board established to support the work of the programme; commissioned a small-scale qualitative research study conducted by a CDN Associate Researcher and a series of learning events run by Evaluation Support Scotland which brought together partners participating in the Pathfinders Programme for cross region and within region discussions.

This is a collection of ideas and learning which might be helpful for colleagues from colleges and universities involved in regional provision planning and delivery. All insights are offered in the spirit of co-operation and shared learning rather than as a prescriptive guide.



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## Introduction – System Redesign: Operating in a Shifting Context

Much has changed since the Regional Tertiary Pathfinders programme was launched in 2022. Reform of the Education and Skills public bodies landscape has been consulted on, in response to recommendations from the [Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape](#) and the [Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment](#).

This took place alongside the work to reform Scotland’s education bodies. As part of this reform, three new national education bodies are being created: a qualifications body, a national agency for Scottish education, and an independent inspectorate body. These will replace the SQA and Education Scotland.

Planned changes to the learning and skills delivery landscape are set out in the Scottish Government’s [Purpose and Principles document](#): a blueprint for the future of post-school education, research and skills.

The principles of the post-school system are:

- **Transparent, Resilient and Trusted:** The system is financially and environmentally resilient; trusted to deliver, and subject to effective governance.
- **High Quality:** High quality opportunities are available for people to enhance their knowledge and skills at the time and place that is right for them.
- **Supportive and Equitable:** People are supported throughout their learning journey, particularly those who need it most.
- **Globally Respected:** Research, teaching, innovation and knowledge exchange undertaken by Scotland, must make a difference; enhance and contribute to global wellbeing, addressing 21st Century challenges such as the climate emergency and attracting inward investment and talent to study, live and work in Scotland.
- **Agile and Responsive:** Everybody in the system collaborates to deliver in the best interests of Scotland’s wellbeing economy.



Photo: University of Glasgow

[The Initial Priorities document](#), published alongside the Purpose and Principles, outlines the key recommendations from the Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape to be addressed first. These include:

- The Scottish Government taking on responsibility for skills planning and the building of a regional approach
- Exploration of the development of a new single funding body
- Improving careers advice and education
- Reviewing student support for part-time learners, ensuring it takes account of all learning pathways including apprenticeships.

A [consultation on options](#) for Post-school education and skills reform, which closed on 20th September 2024, gathered views on proposed changes to the roles of public bodies in the post-school system. On 22 January 2025, the Scottish Government [confirmed](#) it will proceed with the proposal to consolidate all post-school provision funding with the Scottish Funding Council, including apprenticeship funding and provision, and all student support funding within the Student Awards Agency Scotland.

A [consultation on proposals](#) invited views on changes to the college regionalisation arrangements in Glasgow and Lanarkshire and for the dissolution of the Lanarkshire and Glasgow colleges' Regional Strategic Bodies (RSBs). The consultation closed on 20th September 2024, and on 12 December, the Minister for Higher and Further Education confirmed the Government's decision to dissolve the RSBs by the end of the current Academic Year. SFC, working closely with both RSBs, will oversee the successful implementation of a direct funding and assurance relationship with the three Glasgow, and two Lanarkshire colleges.

In addition to these programmes of structural change, delivery of the Scottish Government's aspirations for post 16 learning and skills will also need to take into account the planned implementation of the [Innovation Strategy](#) and the 10 year plan to implement Entrepreneurial Campuses at 43 universities and colleges in Scotland and any changes resulting from the recent review of [Community Learning and Development](#).



Photo: SRUC



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The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills has made clear that the reform programme must demonstrate that it is listening to learners and other stakeholders and be radical in its approach to re-shaping Scotland's educational infrastructure.

There is a recognition that the approach to delivering reform must reflect the clear expectation that all elements of the lifelong education and skills system will work together as one single system and an expressed desire to ensure that the system is incentivising collaboration, eliminating competition and driving cohesion with a relentless focus on delivering for Scotland's learners, economy and society.

This vision for a single system must also include the ways in which Scottish Government work to design integrated, deliverable policies and perform the essential civil service function of [system stewards](#), as well as actors in the system. The Scottish Government plays an important role not just in setting strategic priorities for the system but in creating the conditions, authorising and accountability environments in which public bodies, tertiary institutions, local authorities and Health Boards operate. Consequently, the way in which Government itself operates and the interconnections across policy priorities and delivery structures, set up by different parts of government both within Scotland and at a UK Government level, have a direct effect on the ability of the learning and skills system to function effectively.

As a new system is designed in line with the Scottish Government's purpose and principles, it is important that structures and processes are optimised and organisations have clear roles and responsibilities to deliver at national, regional and local level.

Recommendations in this report are made with this aim and should be used to inform emergent thinking on change and improvement across the education and skills landscape, including the potential future role of a single funding body.



## The Regional Tertiary Pathfinders

Over the last two years, Pathfinder projects in the North East and South of Scotland have been developing an understanding of how to improve regional delivery, deepen collaboration and support the identification, development and delivery of learning provision for skills priorities. They have:



Tested approaches to deepening regional collaboration between stakeholders – education and other key partners.



Carried out collaborative planning, to shape new provision, through institutional alliances and in response to the needs of priority sectors.



Worked together to build a talent pipeline and planned pathways for key industry sectors, testing out how to develop smoother and more coherent learner journeys.



Explored how institutions could become more responsive to changing 'demand' – for example digital and green skills.



Used regional insight to influence demand for new provision with a key focus on the role of careers advice and guidance.



Developed new models of shared governance, placing a greater emphasis on a systems approach to lower or remove some institutional boundaries.

Scotland's Wellbeing Economy



NSET

RUK, International/Global



## Six Lenses of Coherent Learning Provision

Through our Pathfinder work we have developed the Six Lenses of Coherent Learning Provision as a way of describing and better understanding broader interdependencies within the aims of the learning and skills system to meet different Scottish Government priorities and objectives.

### RUK, International and Global context:

Funding  
World Skills  
Foreign Policy  
Global Climate Emergency  
Research and Innovation

### NSET Ecological ceiling:

Scotland's nature is protected and restored, and we make a positive contribution to planetary protection

### NSET Social Foundation:

Sustainable Development Goals / National Performance Framework

### Six Lenses



**Regional**



**Sectoral**



**National**



**Socio-cultural/  
Community**



**Learner**



**Institutional**



## Regional

- Clear approaches to skills and provision planning to meet regional need.
- Engagement with City Regions, Local Authorities and other regional stakeholders.
- Schools, colleges, and universities as partners and providers to meet regional need.
- Ensure skills & education provision aligns with regional demographic challenges, including rural depopulation, urban growth, and ageing populations.



## National

- National priorities for the provision of learning and research opportunities are met.
- Systems level governance and funding.
- Engagement with national organisations.
- Impactful continuation to national recovery.
- Mission orientated research.



## Learner

- Clarity of opportunity for learners of all ages and stages.
- Clear, coherent and flexible pathways.
- Engagement with learners and a voice in the enhancement of their learner journey.
- An understanding of well-being and support needs and resources



## Sectoral

- Employer involvement
- Coherent planning for key sectors of the economy and public services
- Sectoral curriculum planning which makes sense at a national, regional and institutional level.
- Opportunity for work-based learning
- Research/knowledge exchange to support innovation and development.



## Socio-cultural / Community

- Socio-cultural role of learning provision for thriving communities
- Alignment with CPPs on place-based policies, and health and socio-economic priorities. Colleges are statutory partners.
- Develop skills and employability strategies alongside Local Employability Partnerships to address regional and local priorities and maximise funding opportunities.
- Support for underrepresented and vulnerable groups through Community Learning and Development partnerships in lifelong skills development.
- Cognisance of community wealth building activity to retain local wealth and reduce inequalities (legislation planned in 2024-2025).
- Utilise role as anchor organisations to leverage local assets to drive economic growth and tackle inequalities.
- Contribution to resilient and sustainable communities through National Planning Framework's 20-minute neighbourhoods.



## Institutional

- Institutional sustainability.
- Staff and students as stakeholders.
- Tertiary sector development.
- Schools, colleges, and universities (institutional interests).
- Institutional agency.
- Balance and quality of provision.
- Research and Innovation

An examination of Scottish Government policies and priorities for learning provision leads to questions about how best to create public value and focuses attention on the critical issues of power, agency and heterogeneity within the learning and skills system. The six interdependent lenses have been used with partners to consider the nuanced and interconnected drivers which must be balanced when making decisions on learning provision and curriculum.

The lenses helped us to explore what coherent provision might look like in different contexts and

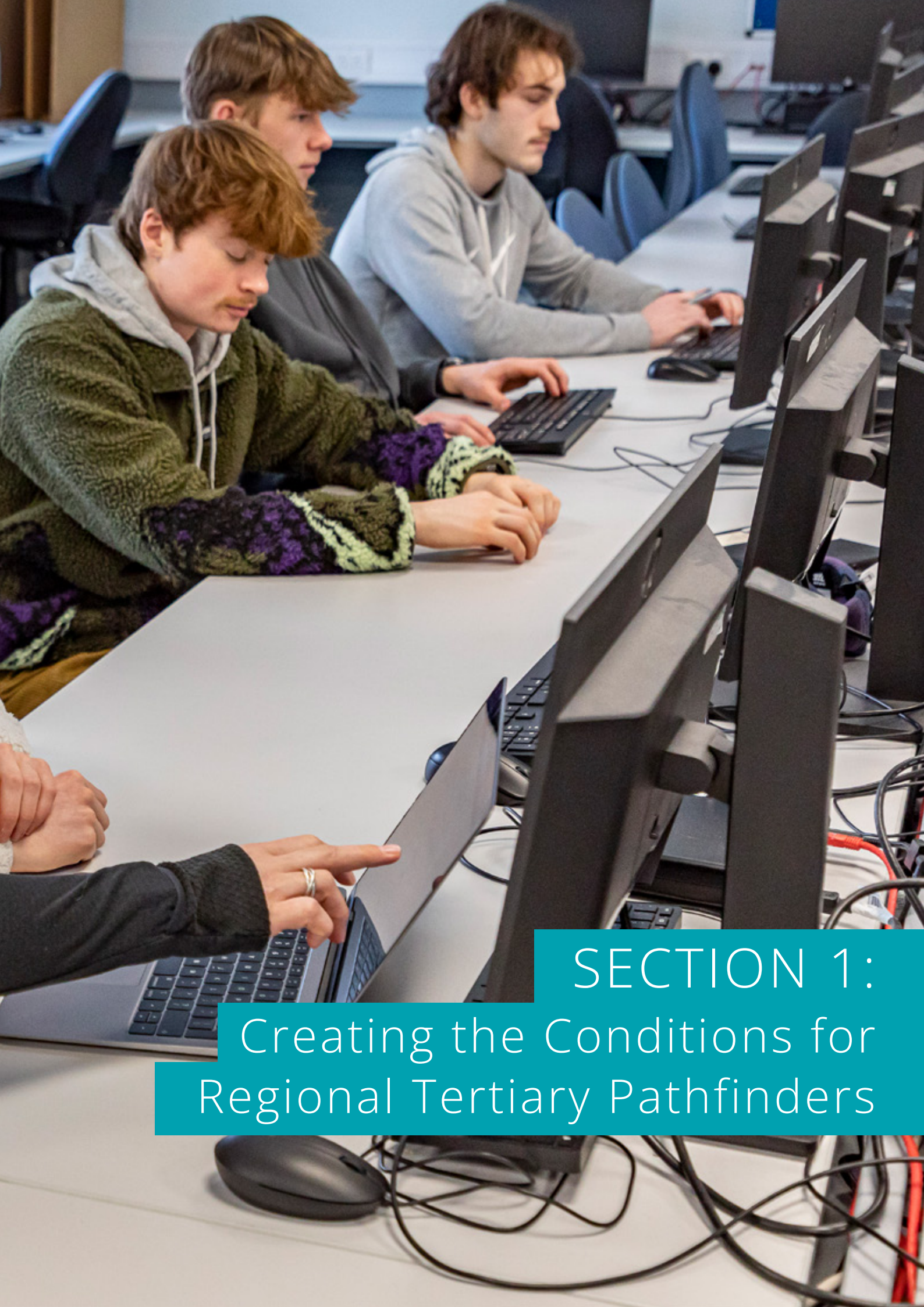
provide a way to recognise and discuss the inherent tensions, eliciting questions about:

- National, regional, institutional and student interests;
- Regional collaboration across institutions and the interplay with Regional Economic Partnerships (REPs), Community Planning/ Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs) priorities;
- The role of competition between collaborators – individual autonomy and sustainability vs collective interest; and
- Tertiary landscape vs institutional autonomy.









## SECTION 1:

# Creating the Conditions for Regional Tertiary Pathfinders





This section describes the creation of governance structures and strategic support that enabled the Regional Tertiary Pathfinders to align with local and regional skills needs.

## Structures and governance

The [Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability](#) recommended the establishment of the [Regional Tertiary Pathfinders](#). The [Shared Outcomes Framework](#), published in March 2022, is how SDS and SFC and the Scottish Government monitor and report on a programme of collaborative projects including the Pathfinders programme, which contribute to the overarching skills outcomes set in the [National Strategy for Economic Transformation](#), which has recently been refreshed. This framework was created in response to the Audit Scotland, [Planning for Skills report](#).



SFC established a Pathfinders [National Advisory Board](#) (NAB) to provide strategic direction, support, and constructive advice to the Pathfinder programme. The NAB's role was advisory, but the Board has been instrumental in shaping the direction of the Pathfinder's work, ensuring that it aligns with the wider strategic aims of the Scottish education and skills system and individual members of the NAB have been actively involved in learning and dissemination events on Pathfinders.

To support this work two [Regional Delivery Boards](#) (RDBs) were established by SFC in the South of Scotland and the North East of Scotland. The South of Scotland region encompasses the Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway Local Authority areas. This region is characterised by rural landscapes, with key industries including agriculture, forestry, and tourism. The North East of Scotland includes the Local Authority areas of Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City. This region is traditionally known for its strong ties to the oil and gas industry, with Aberdeen being recognised as the energy capital of Europe. However, the area is also diversifying into renewable energy, food production, and other sectors.

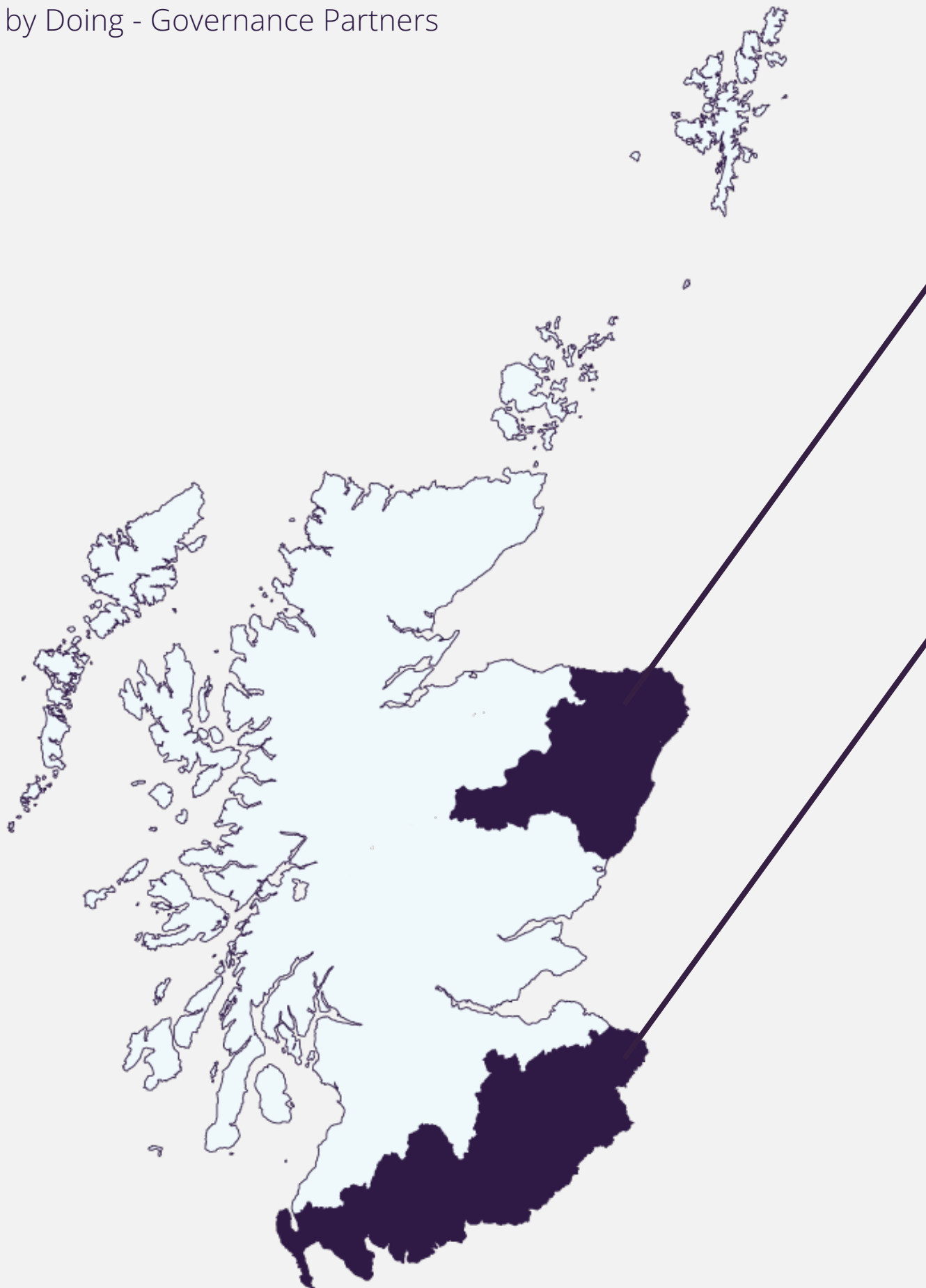
RDBs included institutional representatives and regional stakeholders (Local Authorities, Skills Development Scotland (SDS), Enterprise Agencies, and employer representatives). They were set up to make strategic decisions relating to the development of tertiary learning provision, coordinate the efforts of regional partners, and ensure the alignment of projects with regional and local needs and priorities. The RDBs identified and endorsed the pilot projects for their regions based on their understanding of emerging or existing regional skills priorities. There were seven pilot projects: three in the South of Scotland and four in the North-East.



Photo: Robert Gordon University

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## Learning by Doing - Governance Partners





NORTH EAST



SOUTH OF SCOTLAND



Photo: University of Aberdeen

## Seven Pilots Approved by RDBs and how they respond to regional needs

### Enhancing the **Senior Phase**



Responding to: **Learner pathways**

### Developing demand-led, aligned, and sustainable **learner pathways**



Responding to: **Learner pathways**

### National **Energy Skills** Accelerator (NESA) - Energy Transition Skills interactive Pathway



Responding to: **Regional skills priorities**

### Enhancing and co-ordinating the region's **simulation infrastructure for health and social care education**



Responding to: **Regional skills priorities**



Photo: North East Scotland College



## West of Scotland **Educational Pathways**



**Responding to: Learner pathways**

Developing a joint prospectus for learning and innovation in the **Land-based sector**



**Responding to: Regional skills priorities**

## South of Scotland **Digital Skills** Hub and Pathfinder



**Responding to: Regional skills priorities**

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Planning learning provision as a group of regional partners makes sense. It provides the opportunity to move towards more ‘joined up delivery’ between organisations to meet the needs of regions, sectors and learners. There are also financial imperatives for institutions to work collaboratively to create complementary provision and learner pathways.

This regional approach is in line with the [Regional Economic Partnership Advisory Group](#) (REPAG) review which signalled the importance of linking skills strategies to regions in terms of labour markets and sectoral strengths, encouraging Regional Economic Partnerships (REPs) to work closely with SDS and SFC, Universities and Colleges. The report recognised that tertiary institutions are significant anchors within their regions, responding to regional needs and playing a role as major regional assets, employers, and drivers of economic growth.

The projects selected were a balance between some existing activity which needed to be accelerated and new activity which offered opportunities for the region. This mix allowed institutions to progress specific areas of

work together, which then established a basis for deeper collaboration leading to new opportunities. Deeper partnerships expanded the range of curriculum subjects planned and delivered jointly, and established strategic agreements, signalling a commitment to continue collaboration beyond the pilots and the Pathfinder.

The regional approach helped ensure that the projects selected aligned closely with regional economic strategies. The three South of Scotland Pathfinder projects, for example, align well with the priorities set out in the [South of Scotland Regional Economic Strategy](#) (RES), contributing to the priority themes of skilled and ambitious people, innovative and enterprising economies, and a green and sustainable economy. Similarly, the North East Pathfinder projects closely reflect the [North East RES](#)’s key objectives, particularly in supporting the energy transition, fostering innovation, and developing a skilled workforce ready for future challenges. These projects also contribute to the just transition by ensuring equitable access to education and training opportunities, addressing the social and economic impacts of the region’s transition to a greener economy.

When asked, Pathfinder participants told us:

“Defining what is different about the approach is important, it’s not just a talking shop; it’s about getting things done and meeting the needs of our young people and industry and for the region. “

“Colleagues see that the Pathfinder work is really clear and focused. There was a lot of wasted time before.”

“What makes the approach successful is being really clear about what we’re trying to achieve; using action plans for delivery means people own the actions and the outcomes; they can see that the outcomes will make a real difference to learners, college staff, employers and employees and make life easier for business providers in the region.”

## Implementation

Implementation is hard to get right. Many change efforts meet their initial goals but fail to deliver sustained results over time. Aware of this, the Pathfinder programme focused on understanding the conditions needed for successful collaboration in both the short and longer term.

Successful implementation requires: [McKinsey \(2017\)](#)

- Clear organisational commitment to change across all levels of the organisation
- Ability of organisation to focus on prioritised set of changes
- Sufficient resources and capabilities to execute changes
- Clear accountability for specific actions during implementation
- Continuous improvements during implementation and rapid action to change and adapt plans if necessary
- Planning for the sustainability of the changes from day one
- Effective programme management to support the change process

The Pathfinder projects delivered a range of learner pathways and outputs which are summarised below and set out in detail in the individual project reports. The projects also provided valuable insights into the dimensions of change required for successful collaboration and these are explored later in this report.

### Developing a joint prospectus for learning and innovation in the Land-based sector:

**Project partners involved:** SRUC, Borders College and South of Scotland Enterprise.

- The joint prospectus in the land-based sector was launched in June 2023.
- A new statement of strategic intent was signed by the two institutions.
- Collaborative working groups for staff from the two institutions to come together to discuss skills needs in the sector, gaps in provision and plan joint provision.
- Collaborative planning for regional provision beyond the Pathfinders Programme is now underway, for instance, the Therapeutic Horticulture qualification is currently undergoing the SQA approval process. This is a professional development award co-delivered by both institutions.

### West of Scotland Educational Pathways:

**Project partners involved:** the University of the West of Scotland, Dumfries and Galloway College and Dumfries and Galloway Council.

- Two new integrated degree pathways were developed - BSc Cyber Security and BA Business.
- The first cohort of students in the senior phase of high school have engaged and there are strong cohorts on the HNC / HND programmes in both business (40) and cyber security (29) programmes.
- Dumfries and Galloway College were shortlisted for the South West Education Pathways pilot under the widening participation category in The Herald - Higher Education Awards 2023.



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## South of Scotland Digital Skills Pathfinder:

**Project partners involved:** Dumfries and Galloway College, Borders College, Skills Development Scotland, Developing the Young Workforce Dumfries & Galloway, CENSIS, Digital Health & Care Innovation Centre, Dumfries & Galloway Council, Edinburgh Napier University, SCDI, ScotlandIS, Scottish Borders Chamber of Commerce, Scottish Borders Council, South of Scotland Enterprise, The Data Lab, University of Edinburgh and the University of the West of Scotland.

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- New curricula in hospitality, construction, social services, and health care have been developed and are now being taught to students.
- Meta-skills development for staff has been delivered.
- Five well-attended ‘Meet the Learner’ events were held to inspire learners to pursue computing qualifications.
- The Digital Skills provision map for employers was launched successfully.

## NESA Energy Transition Skills Pathway:

**Project partners involved:** Robert Gordon University, the University of Aberdeen and North East Scotland College, supported by key partners Skills Development Scotland and Energy Transition Zone Ltd.

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- The [Energy Career Pathways](#) website was launched in March 2024, hosting an interactive pathway tool to clearly communicate the qualifications and education routes into specific jobs in the renewable energy sector.
- The website provides information to support people to join, re-enter, transition into new roles or progress careers within the sector. It provides information, FAQs, and signposting to opportunities from education providers. Short overviews and videos for six low carbon energy roles are showcased to highlight what the jobs entail and real-life case studies for each of the priority roles identified.
- NESA has built and developed connections and links with sector employers and industry to understand energy skills and job needs, deepened relationships with three education providers, and enhanced engagement and links into community partners and schools to better enable responses to energy skills transition.



Photo: Dumfries and Galloway College

## Developing demand-led, aligned and sustainable learner pathways:

**Project partners involved:** North East Scotland College (NESCol) and Robert Gordon University (RGU).

- Strong collaboration between NESCol and RGU on joint curriculum planning and development resulted in new articulation routes being developed, approved and mapped for AY24/25 including multiple new pathways across different schools within RGU (e.g., Aberdeen Business School, School of Computing, School of Creative and Cultural Business, and the School of Pharmacy and Life Sciences).
- A shared approach to marketing, insights, analysis, and promotion offering seamless pathways from Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 6 to 10 and beyond. The NESCol-RGU Progression Pathway Matrix, detailing all available progression pathways, the year of entry at the university, and the conditions of entry for each route was developed.
- NESCol and RGU are working together to increase community reach, provide clear and easy transitions, and enhance employability of students.
- 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 institutions to replicate.
- The project has been a key means of ensuring that dialogue was taking place across all levels and responsibilities in institutions, 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. This work was led by the Pathfinder co-ordinator.
- Data sharing agreements were put in place which covered application and enrolment data. Meetings were held to analyse data together with the objective 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.

## Enhancing the Senior Phase:

**Project partners involved:** North East Scotland College, Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council, Robert Gordon University, the University of Aberdeen.

- Building on several pilots, this project developed and increased the HNC offer for S6 pupils across the region in three areas: HNC Mechanical Engineering, and HNC Technologies in Business. Applications were open to pupils in both local authority areas, with 80 places available across 28 schools.
- In collaboration with the Developing Demand-Led, Aligned and Sustainable Learner Pathways project detailed above, articulation pathways have been agreed with RGU for 12 pathways into year 2 of related degree programmes.
- A Winter Leaver Programme has been launched for AY 2024-25, the programme includes three courses: Foundation Apprenticeship Hospitality, Foundation Apprenticeship Construction, and City & Guilds Level 1 Hairdressing, each with 15 places available.
- A Strategic Working Group continues the commitment to a joined-up approach to senior phase provision in the region.

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## Enhancing and coordinating the Simulation infrastructure for Health and Social Care Education:

**Project partners involved:** Robert Gordon University, University of Aberdeen, North East Scotland College with NHS Grampian and Social Care partners.

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- Development of a Simulation Strategic Plan (Road Map) which outlines the vision and strategic objectives for simulation education in the region. Key areas include:
  - Improved access to and quality of spaces and resources for the current and future workforce
  - Improved communication and collaboration to support faculty development and simulation education provision
  - Maximised utilisation of the simulation resource to enhance and develop learner pathways
  - Raised awareness of the simulation training and expertise in the North East
  - Promoting the benefits of simulation in the NE region.
- Development of Grampian Interprofessional Simulation Group with representatives from RGU, NESCol, the University of Aberdeen, NHS Grampian, Aberdeenshire Council, Aberdeenshire Health and Social Care Partnership, private industry, and members of the public. The group promotes simulation-based education and supports interdisciplinary learning across health and social care sectors, aiming to provide better outcomes for learners and institutions.
- Improved co-ordination of resources (physical or teaching), improve efficiency and efficacy for institutions, new ways of linking together.
- Faculty development and training needs. The group can improve quality of education delivery and expand and enhance opportunities for learners.
- Development of data set on simulation education.
- Development of a Foundation Apprenticeship Simulation Day – introducing students to range of potential careers in Health and Social Care. The day included simulation learning opportunities for a range of health and social care professions and provided an opportunity for students to be exposed to various occupations within health and social care, potentially inspiring future career choices.
- Building on the above, and in light of pressure on health sector recruitment, a Careers in Health event is being organised by RGU and NESCol. This is aimed at raising awareness of the varied job roles that are available in the region for individuals that are interested in a career in healthcare. The curriculum teams involved include Nursing, Pharmacy and Life Sciences and Sports Science; all of which have articulation agreements in place for students wishing to progress from NESCol to RGU with advanced entry. Alongside the promotion of healthcare careers. It also aims to raise awareness of different learner pathways available in the region, including routes straight from school to university and articulation routes via college courses.



## Enablers and challenges for achieving pathfinder aims

Having established the governance structures and the strategic framework for the Pathfinders, it is important to evaluate the key enablers and challenges that shaped the success of the programme's core aims. The Pathfinder Programme was designed to address key regional and national priorities by focusing on three main aims:

1. Simpler pathways and improved outcomes for learners.
2. Alignment of regional provision with societal and employer needs.
3. Enhanced coherence and sustainability across provision through regional collaboration.

The enablers and challenges encountered during Pathfinders are summarised below, outlining the conditions that supported or hindered progress. These insights provide a foundation for understanding how bespoke governance models introduced through the Pathfinders enabled more agile and responsive planning processes, while also highlighting potential improvement points for the current system.

### Alignment of Regional Provision with Societal and Employer Needs

There were pre-existing and emerging enablers that supported alignment efforts, as well as the challenges that institutions and regional partners faced:

#### Pre-existing and emerging enablers

- Robust curriculum review and planning processes across individual institutions
- Good practice on joint curriculum planning via the Pathfinder pilots
- Evidenced-based decision making across institutions on provision / aligned with mission
- Wide-ranging employer engagement at all stages of the curriculum planning process
- Close working with schools and LAs to better understand/influence student demand/ needs
- Close working with regional partners/existing fora to align skills provision with need

#### Challenges

- Planning processes in institutions not seen
- Competing demands influence decisions
- Range of data and evidence used is vast and comes from local/regional/national sources
- Shared understanding of robust/timely data
- Forecasting needs active employer engagement
- Employer involvement appears uncoordinated
- Requires local/regional/national approaches
- Aligning student choice with employer need
- Regional/local partnership landscape is busy
- Institutions viewed as responders to emerging regional needs rather than key partners.



## Simpler Pathways and Improved Outcomes for Learners

The key enablers that facilitated the creation of simpler pathways and improved outcomes for learners during Pathfinders, as well as the challenges encountered are outlined below:

### Enablers

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- Pilots developed with learner at the centre
- Joint mapping of existing provision/ pathways
- Joint data collection, data analysis and resource mapping
- Joint development of articulation pathways, joint planning with cross institution curriculum teams, joint decision making
- Joint stakeholder engagement and marketing
- Co-ordinated approach with schools, industry and employers
- Sharing risk to achieve sustainability / value for money

### Challenges

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- Learner engagement required at all stages
- Timelines for gathering, sharing and making sense of data
- Collaboration takes time and authorisation
- Need to follow curriculum planning processes
- Requires close link with quality arrangements
- Responding to 'big ticket' issues more complex
- Working with schools is resource intensive
- A duty to learners to ensure that pathways/ provision remain in place once projects end
- Evidence for improved outcomes for learners from pilots may not be available immediately

## Enhanced Coherence and Sustainability Across Provision

There were key enablers that supported enhanced coherence and sustainability across provision, as well as challenges faced:

### Enablers

- Pilot projects built on existing relationships and developed new, innovative partnerships
- A spectrum of approaches to collaboration - varying governance/operational arrangements
- Formal agreements provided stability, while informal partnerships allowed flexibility and adaptability to emerging demands
- Mainstreaming of new, collaborative, processes for future sustainability
- Pre-existing fiscal environment
- Geography as well as institutional fit important to emerging partnerships

### Challenges

- Partnership work takes place at many levels – the wider authorising environment needs to support and recognise time/resource needed
- No one model of collaboration was promoted
- Discussions can be challenging when different dynamics across individual institutions and takes times to work around barriers
- Mainstreaming requires commitment from leadership
- Pre-existing fiscal environment
- Essential to determine the most appropriate geography on which to plan/offer provision

The enablers and challenges highlighted provide insights into how the bespoke governance and collaborative structures of the Pathfinder Programme influenced its success. They underscore the importance of adaptable and responsive governance mechanisms in navigating complex regional priorities and addressing the diverse needs of learners, employers, and wider societal goals. While the Pathfinders demonstrated the potential of regional collaborative approaches, the challenges outlined highlight areas that must be addressed to ensure long-term impact and progress within the broader skills planning system.



Photo: North East Scotland College









SECTION 2:  
Working Together Differently:  
Evolving collaborative practices  
in tertiary education





Photo: University of Aberdeen

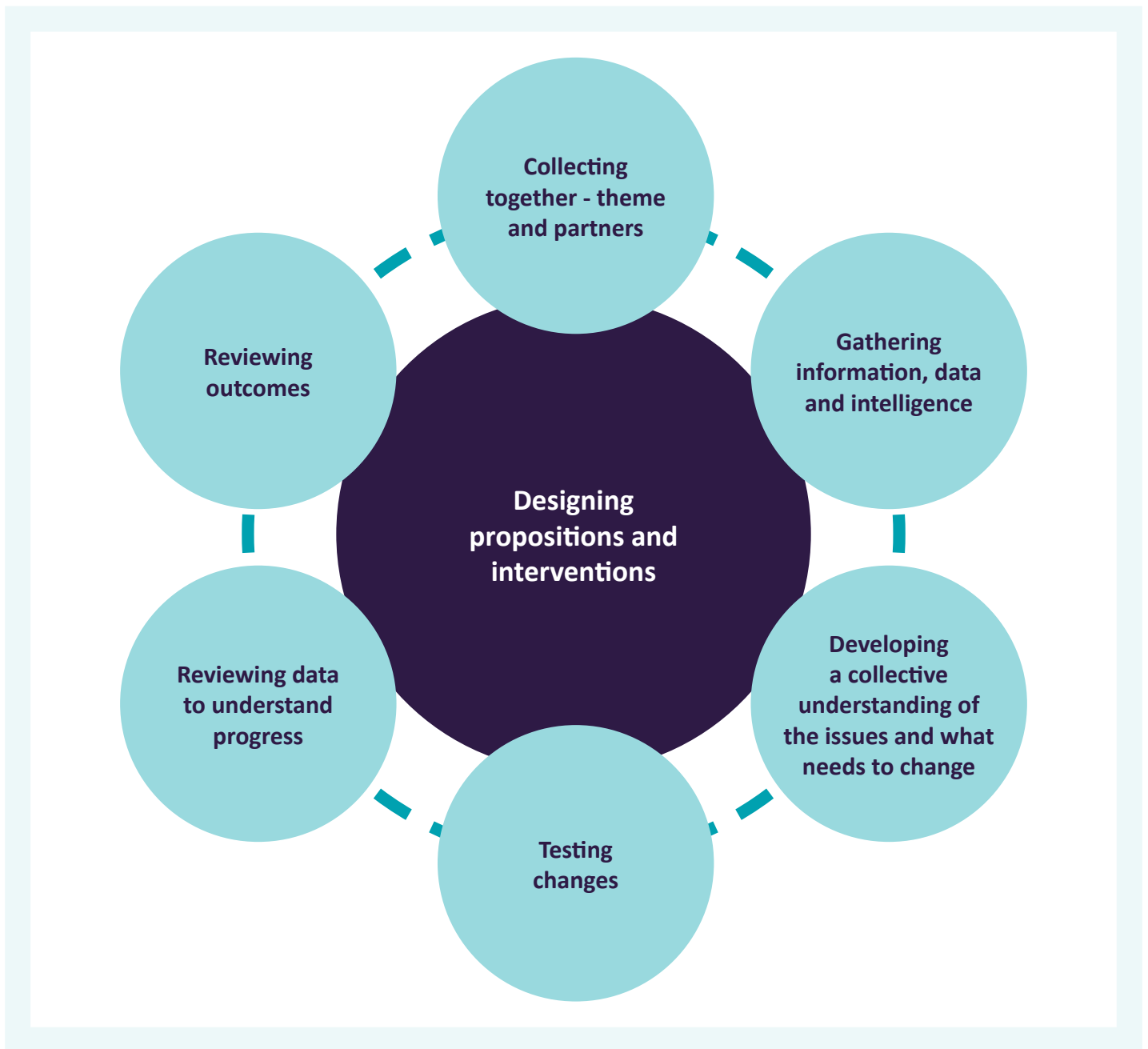
## Working together differently

Collaborative work is not new, but the nature of collaboration is changing. Over many years colleges and universities have been working in partnership locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. Many of these partnerships have delivered successful outcomes and outputs, but it has been more difficult to scale and spread successes and to move beyond localised improvements led by individual leaders working together to achieve systemic improvement.

This section explores how the Pathfinder programme encouraged partners to work together to improve regional outcomes. These experiences can be used to draw lessons for the wider system, identifying potential opportunities to reduce competition and increase collaboration between partners beyond the lifetime of the individual pilot projects.

More than a decade of thinking about and working towards improving outcomes rather than delivering outputs has enabled us to collectively understand that the complex, interconnected systems in which we work are not machines where an action has a direct, quantifiable impact on an outcome. Working in complexity means taking a 'systems thinking' approach to understanding multiple causes and feedback loops in order to develop a shared theory of change and test new interventions. Pathfinders has provided a means for us to explore working together in these ways. Even though there was no prescribed methodology for Pathfinders, discussions with pilot projects made it clear that everyone is employing some form of learning cycle in their work.





Current challenges in the tertiary education system incentivise institutions to consider a shift in strategy. Regional collaboration is becoming increasingly important to how the tertiary sector will need to operate. This means working together in new ways to develop a joined-up approach to regional economic development and the transition to a green economy; creating and promoting opportunities for people to access learning as part of a differentiated regional learning offer that is supporting employers of all sizes to address skills gaps.

In this context, effective partnership work relies on discovering areas of interdependence and the complex issues that can only be addressed by joining forces. How and when institutions partner depends on their size and stability, but this way of working can offer valuable opportunities for institutions to create partnerships that offer a strategic fit for the future. Potential partners are most likely to cooperate and sustain partnerships if they cannot accomplish their objectives alone and if the system supports collaboration over competition.

However, it is well understood that working collaboratively comes with both opportunities and challenges. Partners each bring their own priorities, skills, resources, connections, understanding and organisational cultures to the partnership. For partnerships to work, partners need to understand each other's positions, priorities and concerns and acknowledge that there may be imbalances of power, knowledge of the issues and access to resources within the group. It is crucial to continuously negotiate relationships, remain positive and be clear about what is possible for each partner.

Indicators of good partnership include:



**Communication:**  
open and effective exchange between partners.



**Coordination:**  
shared understanding of goals, activities and contributions needed to progress work.



**Mutual support:**  
partners who are willing to work together to achieve shared aims and be understanding if unforeseen events cause delays.



**Aligned investment:**  
partners' expectations about resource and delivery match the contributions made.



**Unity:** a shared commitment to collaboration across the partnership.



Photo: Dumfries and Galloway College

## Focusing on sustaining the benefits of a partnership

The work of the Pathfinders Programme has shown that learners and employers benefit from tertiary partnerships because they improve the value of the education offer. Sustaining the benefits of a partnership over the long term can prove challenging, but it is essential to make the effort of investing in the development of the partnership worthwhile and, as was repeatedly highlighted by Pathfinders partners, there is a duty to learners to ensure that pathways and provision remain in place once projects end. Ways of working set up to deliver pilot project activity have been continued and mainstreamed following the end of the pilot, further details of this are contained later in this report.

While cost savings were not the focus of the Pathfinder programme; seeking efficiency savings is nevertheless an important factor in collaborations between tertiary institutions, as they can offer opportunities to “save costs” that would otherwise have been required to develop those capabilities. Seeking opportunities to work with partners to create a complementary offer incentivises cooperation and reduces competition.

When institutions are considering who to partner with it is important to reflect on:

- How collaboration can add value to learners through the improvement or expansion of services and the learning offer.
- Where there are opportunities for efficiency savings: co-creating and jointly teaching courses, systems integration, estate infrastructure sharing and optimisation.

## Exploring some dimensions of change

Regional ‘reconfigurations’ in the education and skills landscape are contributing to the development of new models of tertiary provision. The Pathfinder programme has allowed us to explore different dimensions of the changes which are happening as a result of collaboration and partnership in order to better understand how working together enables institutions to mitigate risks and build on the specific strengths of different partners.

Throughout the Pathfinder programme partners did this by:






- Senior leaders giving their staff permission and authority to work collaboratively.
- Developing a shared understanding of purpose through work done on focused projects.
- Balancing individual and collective interest.
- Creating and maintaining positive working relationships within the regions, between colleges, universities and other partner organisations.
- Securing resources and capacity for collaboration.
- Building and strengthening joint models of tertiary delivery based on trust and being willing to share data and resources.
- Mitigating risks by understanding the strengths of different partners and utilising these to maximise benefits.
- Developing appropriate leadership and governance structures which supported delivery.
- Engaging in participatory learning through reflection, evaluation and continuous improvement throughout the programme.

In order to make the investment needed to establish partnerships and make them effective, the changes they introduce have to make a real difference and support how the system sees its purpose. This explains the impact being achieved through the Pathfinder programme – it has gone with the grain and acted as an enabler to support the work the education and skills system knows is needed on behalf of learners, employers and government.

In establishing the Pathfinders Programme, SFC drew on the work of Myron Rogers, a leader in the theory and application of complexity and living systems approaches for generating the capacity for change in complex organisations. [Myron’s Maxims](#) provide some thought-provoking principles for system leadership, which include: people own what they help create; real change happens in real work; those who do the work, do the change; connect the system to more of itself; and start anywhere, follow everywhere.



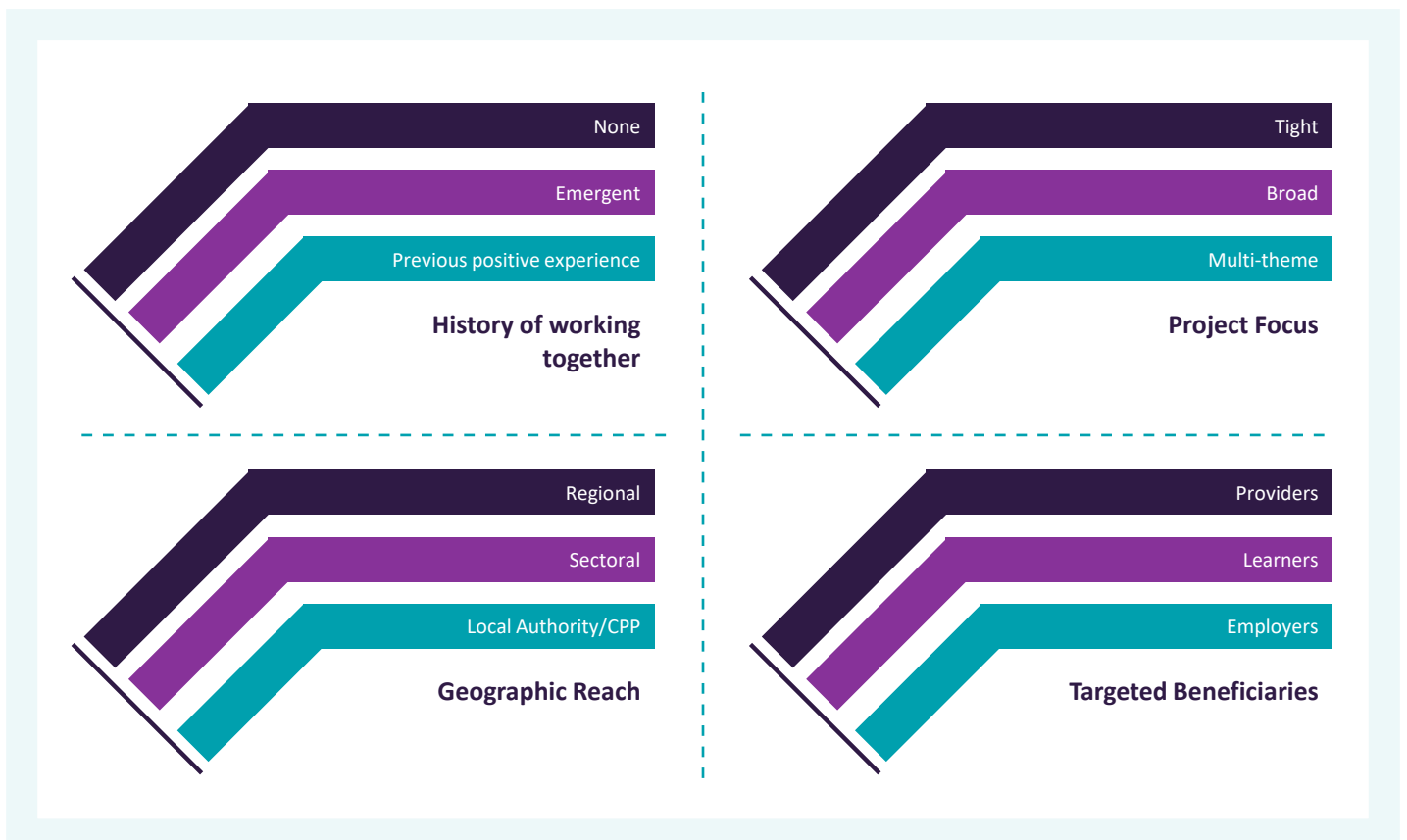
The table below sets out how these principles are reflected in the work of Pathfinders:

<b>Myron Rogers (1996): Five Principles for working with adaptive change</b>	<b>How these principles are reflected in the work of Pathfinders</b>
 <p>Real change happens in real work.</p>	<p>Pathfinder regions were asked to do real work rather than just ‘set up a partnership’ – to identify regional issues, actively diagnose contributory factors and create potential interventions. They did this by finding areas of potential collaboration and choosing partners based on complementary strengths.</p>
 <p>Those who do the work do the change.</p>	<p>Senior leaders were asked to be actively involved in the work [VPs, heads of curriculum, local authority heads of service etc].</p>
 <p>People own what they create.</p>	<p>Pilot projects were encouraged to work closely with partners to co-create and test solutions.</p>
 <p>Start anywhere, go everywhere.</p>	<p>As shared issues and aims emerged between partners, new forums were created to have those discussions and move to resolutions which cut across organisational and administrative boundaries. This work led to the identification of opportunities relating to enhancement and differentiation of learning provision.</p>
 <p>Connect the system to more of itself.</p>	<p>Many opportunities were created to strengthen existing connections and to connect people from previously unconnected parts of the learning and skills system.</p>



## Different starting points

In the two regions, the pilot projects each had different starting points as to the extent to which partners knew each other and had worked together previously, as well as their being differences in terms of the focus of the projects, the geography being worked within, and the people the project was designed to benefit.



## History of working together



**None** – individuals and teams had not worked together previously.

**Emergent** – individuals and or teams and organisations had previously done some work together. Relationships existed which could be built on and developed.

**Previous positive experience** – individuals, teams and organisations had a history of successfully working together, in some cases over many years. These existing relationships were an accepted part of ‘how work was done’ and could be built on and further developed and strengthened.

A key enabler of Pathfinder projects was the value placed on building strong partnership working and relationships, capitalising on previous connections and partnerships, to enhance regional planning, drive knowledge, curriculum and skill development, and optimise resources to secure coherent provision and a sustainable future. At a project level, many people contributed to the leadership of change beyond organisational boundaries.

- Partners involved in three out of four projects in the North East had previous positive experience of working together; e.g., strong relationships between the college and the two Local Authorities (LAs) and between college and university partners.
- NESCol has a history of working closely with each of the two local authorities in the region, each with different priorities and expectations of their partnerships. Previously, there was not a forum where both LAs and the college would meet to solely discuss senior phase provision. The establishment of the Strategic Working Group (SWG) provided a vehicle to progress this joint working across the region. This was an opportunity to build from bilateral relationships with each LA to multilateral one to include both LAs for a joined-up approach.



- The National Energy Skills Accelerator (NESA) partnership of regional organisations and institutions was established before the Pathfinder project was initiated, this meant that relationships and clear governance structures were already established and enabled the Pathfinder work to deliver more quickly.
- In the Health and Social Care Simulation pilot, some partners had collaborated previously, for example the two universities hold interprofessional learning events for health and social care, but other partnerships were new, and this pilot brought together and connected health and social care partners relevant to simulation education across the Grampian Health Board region.
- In the South of Scotland, the extent to which partners had worked together previously was more varied. The Digital Pathfinder project partners had a history of collaboration through the South of Scotland Digital Skills Hub.
- Prior to the Land-based Pathfinder, SRUC and Borders College had experience of working together on the South of Scotland Economic Partnership (SOSEP) funded rural skills and entrepreneurship project, however the land-based Pathfinder project resulted in the development of a more formal or structured collaboration between SRUC and Borders College. The relationships between partners involved in the South West of Scotland Pathways project had been emergent prior to Pathfinders but were consolidated, formalised and accelerated through the work of the project.

Through the Regional Delivery Board sessions, colleges, universities and Local Authorities shared some of the operational constraints and challenges they are facing. Other partners such as enterprise agencies and SDS valued understanding the institutions' perspectives and operating constraints and said they would work to make these more widely understood by employers. This improved the partnership as all partners could see what was shaping decisions about provision.

## Learning Points

- Partnership work takes place at many levels within organisations – the wider authorising environment needs to support and recognise the time and resource needed to make these relationships work.
- Discussions can be challenging at times because there are different dynamics across individual institutions and how they work together.
- Even long-established partnerships benefit from people investing time to explain the circumstances, operational constraints, and challenges they are facing. This improves understanding and helps partners see what is influencing decisions and behaviours.

## Project focus



**Tight** – the project was tightly focussed on delivering specific products/pathways/outcomes.

**Broad** – the project explored a board range of topics or areas for improvement and developed associated products/pathways/approaches to deliver outcomes.

**Multi-theme** – the project explores multiple themes which may be distinct or may intersect and overlap with each other, delivering products/pathways/ outcomes related to the themes.

Partners defined the aims of their projects based on regional economic assessments and strategic plans. These shared aims provided the necessary clarity of focus for collaborative working and fostered willingness and commitment to working together, even through sometimes difficult conversations, and engendered trust among partners:

“Collaboration is really key, but it needs to have a purpose, where things are undefined it’s a talking shop. The purpose and aim are defined here which is why it works and because we’ve built trust and because you can have frank conversations.”

“Projects are joint endeavours with agreed aims and outcomes with all partners present. Institutions have volunteered themselves for this collaboration because they see it as a new way forward.”

- Six of the seven projects started with a tight focus on delivering specific products or learning pathways.
- In the North East this was the development of a Winter Leaver Programme and enhanced HNC provision for S6 pupils; the development of a broader and seamless portfolio of progression pathways for learners between college and university supported by a joint offer letter from NESCol and RGU; the mapping of provision across Health and Social Care partners; and the building of an interactive pathway tool and the Energy Careers Pathway website to clearly communicate qualifications and education routes for specific jobs in the energy sector.
- In the South of Scotland, the project to develop a joint prospectus for learning and innovation in the land-based sector was initially tightly focussed but has led to much broader collaborative work and the development of new courses. The South West Scotland Educational Pathways project had a tight focus to identify at least two new degree pathways to be delivered locally – these were launched in AY 2023/24. This has subsequently led to the development of additional degree pathways being considered. The South of Scotland Digital Skills Pathfinder project maintained a tight focus on addressing the region’s digital skills needs. It developed a Digital Skills Provision Map and an online events programme to promote digital courses, directly supporting the region’s educational and economic goals.

## Learning Points

- Where there are pre-existing relationships, project work can help to re-energise partnerships and accelerate delivery.
- Where partnerships are new – project work can support the development of trust and present opportunities for new work with a clear focus.
- Partnerships are most effective where real, time bound work is being done to deliver tangible results.



Photo: North East Scotland College



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## Target beneficiaries



**Providers** – colleges, universities and schools, benefit from the work done through the project e.g. increase student numbers, develop complementary provision which reduces competition etc.

**Learners** – new products, pathways and provision are developed which improve the opportunities, experience and outcomes of learners.

**Employers** – employers establish positive working relationships with the colleges and universities and become involved in the design of products/provision to meet their needs. Learners acquire the qualifications and skills needed by employers.

Our colleges and universities have established ways of planning and delivering core curriculum to meet the needs of learners and the economy. A separate Pathfinders report on the curriculum provides further case study examples from the pilots and beyond.

- All seven pilots were designed and developed with the learners at the centre:
  - ensuring learners benefit from new, more efficient, more accessible, seamless learner pathways that increase their employment options (SW Educational Pathways and NE Developing Demand-led and Sustainable Learner Pathways projects);
  - preventing young people falling out of the system (NE Winter Leavers programme of the Senior Phase project);
  - ensuring learners benefit from greater access to more facilities and resources (NE Health Simulation project);
  - developing more visually appealing and interactive information sources for learners (NE Energy Transition Skills and SoS Landbased joint prospectus projects);
  - and increasing opportunities for learners who may not otherwise have had access to opportunities to gain digital skills (SoS Digital Skills Pathfinder)

The breadth and depth of employer engagement in Pathfinder projects is considerable. Employers were actively involved in shaping the skills / provision planning process relevant to their sector through discussions with the institutions. Resources such as the [Digital Skills Provision Map](#) allow employers to locate and access digital skills training for employees. Employers benefit from an increased talent pool developed through relevant regional skills programmes. The NESAs project took a coordinated approach with colleges, universities, industry and employers, to build positive working relations and input to support the development of the [Energy Careers Pathway Tool](#). The approach resulted in the clear signposting of pathways through education to employment ensuring employer and industry needs are met with the relevant learner qualifications and skills for the low carbon energy jobs. The separate pathfinders thematic report on the curriculum provides further detail and examples on institutional employer and industry engagement in the design of provision.

- Colleges and Universities need to work with schools in an ongoing way, to help pupils and influencers understand new pathways and course provision that will lead to future jobs. Clear and effective careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) should be accessible to support informed decision making. Employers are key to ensuring that young people and their influencers understand what the jobs of the future are and what skills/education will be required. The schools and partnering institutions involved in all seven pilots have benefitted by having a more coherent approach for skills provision in their regions. Partnering institutions have benefitted from sharing data, expertise and resources through collaboration.
- In the North East, institutions will continue to benefit through the collaborative activity of NESAs and all institutions will benefit from the articulation agreements and pathways for learners into the university from college.
- In the South of Scotland, SRUC and Borders College have signed a strategic statement of intent, and the partnership will be working together beyond the Pathfinder project. Most of the work of the Digital

Skills Pathfinder project has now transferred to business as usual and is owned across the partnership. DGC and UWS are taking forward their work on integrated degree pathways by actively exploring additional sectors and programmes which would support pathways for learners.

## Learning Points

- Learners, institutions and partners all benefit from more focused collaboration between tertiary providers and between schools and tertiary providers as this improves the coherence of the learning opportunities offered to meet identified skills needs.
- Colleges and Universities have structured curriculum planning processes which incorporate assessment of need and demand and builds in stakeholder and partner engagement. Our Pathfinder programme research analysing the curriculum planning process shows that there is flexibility within the process to allow for responsiveness depending on the type of course to be developed and delivered.
- Course development times vary according to a number of factors, including the type of programme and the institution's development and governance processes. Degree courses can typically take 12-18 months to develop from concept to delivery, constrained by the UCAS cycle.
- Short courses (e.g. microcredentials) can be developed more quickly but often depend on staff with other duties to prepare the proposal and create or modify course material.

## Geographic reach



**Regional** - for the Pathfinder programme this means aligning to the boundaries of the Regional Economic Partnership (REP)

**Sectoral** – aligned to the needs of a particular sector e.g. Health, Energy

**Local Authority/Community Planning Partnership/Local Employability Partnership** – working within a particular LA Boundary rather than across the REP.

- The principal focus of all seven pilot projects was regional skills development. Four projects specifically addressed sectoral skills demands within their respective regions: two in the North East and two in the South of Scotland. In the North East, the NESAs Energy Transition Skills project targeted the renewable energy sector, while the health simulation project focused on the health and social care sector. In the South of Scotland, the SRUC-Borders College partnership addressed skills needs in the land-based sector—the fourth largest employer in the region—while the Digital Skills Pathfinder project aimed to enhance the region’s competitiveness by catering to digital needs across various sectors.
- In the North East, two of the four projects have expanded their work beyond their respective region. The health simulation project has involved partners from Moray region and the NE Energy Transition Skills project worked with regional education institutions and employers regionally and nationally. Although this project is situated geographically in the North East of Scotland, learners from across the country have access to the interactive tool.
- In the South of Scotland, the two innovative products produced by the Digital Skills Pathfinders project, ‘Meet the Learner’ events and the ‘Digital Skills Provision Map’ for employers, have the potential to be applied beyond the regional and sectoral context.



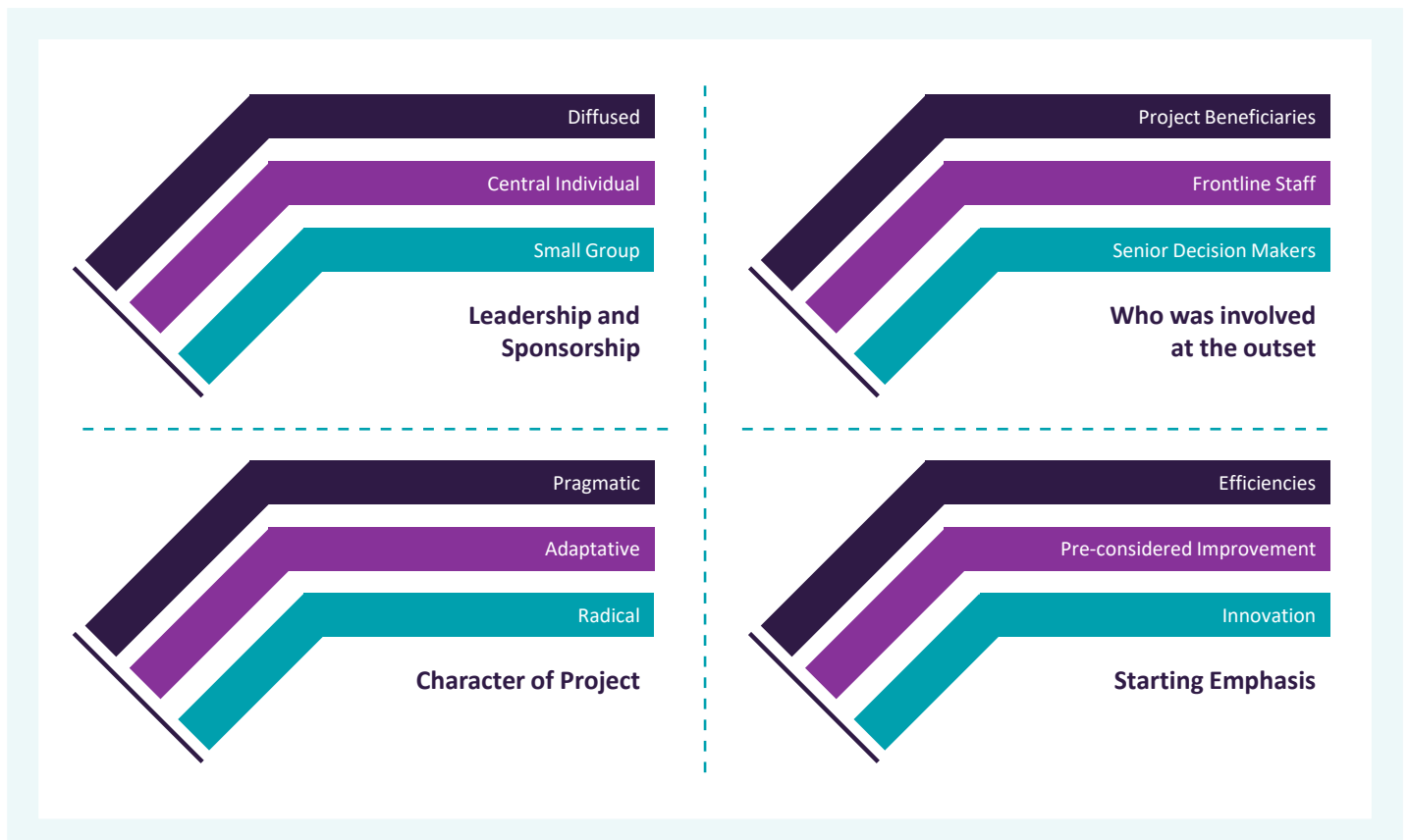
- The land-based Pathfinder project made connections with colleges beyond the South of Scotland in support of curriculum development, including Gamekeeping.
- The Digital Pathfinder project included representation and expert input from the Data Driven Innovation programme element of the Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal, led by the University of Edinburgh.

## Learning Point

- In planning learning provision and creating tools to support learners and employers, it is essential to determine the most appropriate geography on which to plan and offer provision, i.e., national planning may be needed to meet sectoral needs and regional planning to meet place-based needs. This will shape which colleges, universities and other organisations institutions partner with to develop provision and the recruitment strategies used to promote the learning offer.

## Different approaches

Projects adopted different approaches to the work in terms of their starting emphasis, leadership and sponsorship, who was involved in the work at the outset and the character of the project.



## Starting emphasis



**Efficiencies** – cost saving as a result producing the desired outcome with little waste of time or resources.

**Pre-considered improvement** – changes and improvements which had already been identified as needing to be made but which this programme gave the opportunity to deliver with renewed focus and pace.

**Innovation** – the development and delivery of a new method, idea or product to achieve desired outcomes.



“We have to be able to take risks, try things without blame, recognise that something might not work, appreciate one partner might need to bear more of the burden of the work than another, it needs trust and to recognise the constraints on the other partners.”

- Five of the pilot projects have successfully delivered clearly articulated routes for regional learners. They did this through collaborative joint curriculum planning which allowed regional skills demands to be met more quickly.
- Data, information and resource sharing has been a key factor for the efficient operation of all seven pilot projects, leveraging expertise across partnering institutions and avoiding duplication.
- Six of the seven pilot projects were focused on new innovations in the form of a new product, method or idea and the seventh built on and accelerated existing provision.
- Three of the pilot projects, Senior Phase project and Health Simulation project in the NE and the Land-based project in the South of Scotland created new partnerships in the form of strategic working groups/ steering groups which did not exist prior to the Pathfinders Programme, while SW Educational Pathways project developed a new form of deeply collaborative working between the partnering institutions.

## Learning Points

- Pathfinders has shown the importance of creating the right organisational and system conditions in which changes can be tested without fear of failure.
- There are many routes to delivering successful outcomes through collaborative work, whether the starting point is the desire to develop new products or methods, accelerate and improve existing programmes or to deliver efficiencies. By working with other tertiary providers, it is easier to identify possible ways to free up resource and capacity.
- When finances are tight, instinctively people might want to retrench, but what is needed is to look up and out. The challenge is for leadership teams to do this within the current fiscal environment.

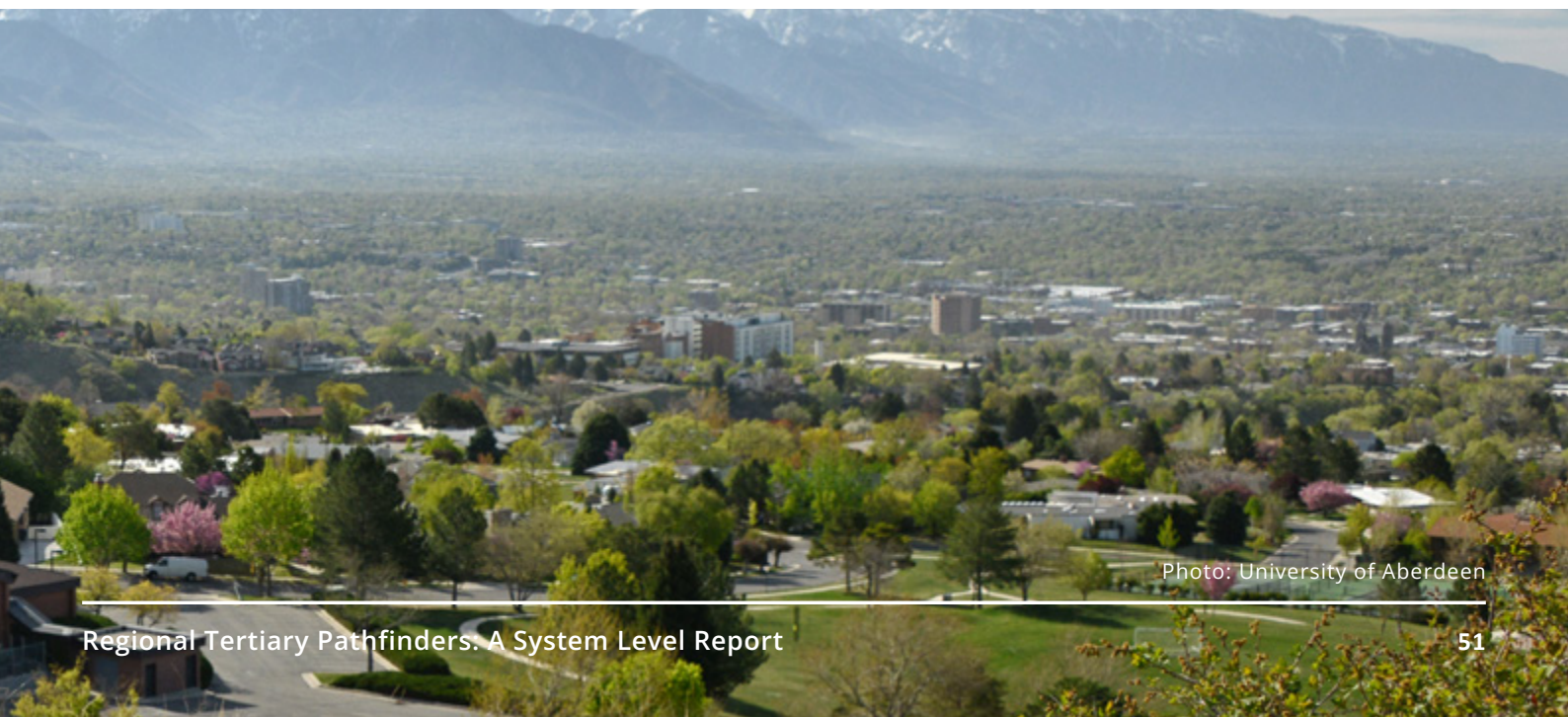


Photo: University of Aberdeen

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## Leadership and sponsorship



**Diffused** – responsibilities are spread between organisations and groups.

**Central individual** – a leader/coordinator acts as the main driver for change and delivery.

**Small group** – a small number of people champion and lead the work acting as a guiding coalition.

Leadership patterns and capacities strongly influence the direction partnerships take. Multi-organisation partnerships need strong collaborative leadership, as they rely on enabling people to work together, sharing responsibility and being empowered to tackle difficult issues.

Senior managers shape an organisation's culture, vision, and strategic goals, they play an essential role in championing innovation and change through their sponsorship, playing an active and visible role throughout the change process.

- All projects benefitted from senior leaders to champion the work and a project co-ordinator who brought people together and steered the delivery of the project. Working groups brought together people from partner organisations with relevant skills for delivery. While existing regional or local planning groups may juggle multiple priorities, these working groups were uniquely focussed on putting in place a learning offer/product.
- Senior management played an important enabling role by setting a strategic direction 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". This led to better alignment of curriculum for students and will improve destinations.



Photo: University of the West of Scotland



- There was recognition amongst participants that teams do well when senior leaders invest in supporting relationships, demonstrate collaborative behaviour themselves, building relationships with partners, resolving conflicts, and creating a work environment where everyone feels included and respected.

## Learning Points

- Once a strategic agreement has been reached it is important that Principals continue to meet to drive work forward and open possibilities for new exciting collaborative work to be pursued.
- Spend time early in the work to gain agreement and understanding of how institutions can share resources and bring staff and students together.
- Developing joint programmes and sharing facilities and assets is really valuable. The projects that managed to get all relevant staff at the start to block regular slots in their diaries for meetings enjoyed quicker success. Pilot projects that were unable to do this found it harder to make progress as people could not make meetings and build relationships.
- Make sure curriculum development starts early so it fits with the college's and university's curriculum development and delivery cycles.
- An effective project co-ordinator was essential. A co-funded staff member with specialist experience can support multiple institutions, build trust and drive connection, collaboration and deliver. Project coordinators found it helpful to meet each other and share practice on how they were coordinating the change. There are benefits to having access to a network of people in similar roles outside people's own project.

## Who was involved from the outset



**Project beneficiaries** – learners, employers and organisations which would benefit from the outputs and/outcomes from the project were involved from the outset.

**Frontline staff** – staff who would be developing/delivering products/courses were involved at the outset.

**Senior decision makers** – senior staff able to provide authorisation and create the conditions for project success were involved at the outset.

Establishing effective working arrangements is the foundation for large-scale change. It has been important to allow new ideas and ways of doing things to emerge rather than trying to predict everything in advance.

In each of the regions, partners:

- Created the right environment of permission and trust and give staff tasks they can achieve and time to do the work to develop what's needed academically.
- Understood what different partners can bring to the work. For example, there was an explicit recognition of the networked position of colleges within region and the important benefit of working together with universities who generate and hold different information to together understand what provision is needed.
- Built and evolved different relationships and connections with partners both within the tertiary sector and beyond, e.g., NHS, LAs and businesses.

Committing to these partnerships in the long-term and keeping things going will be crucial. Partners were clear that the new pathways set up through partnerships needed to be maintained in the longer term – we owe it to the learners.

Both academic staff and non-academic staff from regional institutions were involved at the operational level of the pilot projects working on the development and delivery of the projects, led by the project coordinators. Project coordinators brought together, oversaw, and reported on the work of the project delivery working groups and teams.

Projects engaged with the students and teachers from local schools and employers in relevant sectors at different stages of planning and development to obtain their feedback:

- In the North East, as part of the Winter Leavers Programme, in the Enhancing Senior Phase Pathfinder project, learners were involved in the creation of a new career management skills unit;
- The NE Energy Transition Skills Project has involved young learners in user-testing of its newly developed interactive tool, which demonstrates customised pathways in energy careers skills, to ensure it caters for learner needs;
- In the South of Scotland, the Digital Skills Pathfinder project held round table discussions with employers to understand the digital skills needs for their sectors e.g. construction.

The pilot projects all have their own governance and reporting arrangements in place, with the lead institution through which SFC directed funding, having an oversight role for project delivery. Governance arrangements involved:

- The senior team from all institutions and key stakeholders involved in the project endorsing and authorising the work.
- Appointing a project lead and nominating people to act as single points of contact in each partner institution with clear agreement on who does what.
- Establishing a project team who together had enough on-the-ground knowledge and authority to make decisions.
- Most working groups were linked to areas of planning, marketing, recruitment, and curriculum development. Some groups are being mainstreamed beyond the pilot to continue the commitment to a joined-up approach.

## Learning Points

- From the start of the project, involve people with expertise and with the authority to make decisions on resourcing and remove organisational barriers to staff collaboration.
- Bring together people with access to information, data and local insight into regional skills priorities and opportunities in order to develop a shared analysis of issues and then work together to scope and address them.
- Some projects needed to gather information that did not yet exist. By working together partners can pool information and identify and fill their gaps in data and insight. Data sharing and collaboration agreements underpin the effectiveness of this work.
- Institutions need to lead on whatever they can to play to their strengths to improve the education offer, working with employers, learners and course leaders to fill knowledge gaps and co-design the learning offer.
- An openness to working through challenges has supported partnership development and built a shared understanding among diverse groups of partners.



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## Character of the project



**Pragmatic** – projects were identified and developed based on practical considerations and a realistic view of what could be achieved.

**Adaptive** – projects evolved to take account of changing contexts or as a result of gaining more understanding/information about what was needed/possible.

**Radical** – project affecting fundamental/far-reaching change.

- Pathfinders pilot projects have taken innovative and radical approaches to provision planning and the development of new outreach and mapping tools:
  - Senior leaders of the partnering institution have created a collaborative authorising environment for staff members at operational level allowing them time to build trust to work together on achievable goals;
  - the Digital Skills Pathfinder project engaged with learners through ‘Meet the Learner’ events that allow young people in schools to learn from get inspired by the students in college and university pursuing digital skills pathways;
  - the NE Energy Transition Skills Project created a new interactive tool with custom job profiles that allows learners to discover specialised pathways. There is already interest in adopting a similar approach in other sectors;
  - the health simulation project established the Grampian Interprofessional Simulation group that brings collaboration and coordination to a new level in the region.

- Pilot projects also used adaptive and pragmatic approaches for the effective planning, implementation and the delivery of learning products and pathways.

They:

- Expanded and developed pathways based on previous collaborations;
- developed collaborations between partners to achieve a new level of data sharing;
- addressed regional skills demands through joint provision planning and delivery by identifying the institutions' respective strengths and focussing on each other's expertise in the sector to deliver pathways which would result in learners remaining in the region to progress their education;
- invited employers to round table discussions, actively involving them in identifying skills needs in specific sectors;
- considered intelligence from the discussions between the college, the University and the Local Authority in light of a number of additional information sources to inform skills planning.

## Learning Points

- Different types of project approach are needed to secure coherent provision. At times the answer to an issue will be clear and there will be easy agreement about what change is needed to deliver improvement. In these cases, a pragmatic approach to project delivery can realise benefits.
- In other instances, work may already be in train to address an issue, and it is evident that adaptations to the original approach are needed to deliver the anticipated benefits. In these cases, an adaptive approach to the project will allow flexibility about how results are achieved and can be supported through cyclical testing to plan the change, carry out the change, evaluate the results and then adapt the approach based on learning from previous tests.
- A radical approach is needed for those pieces of work which involve systems redesign and delivery.
- Success depends on understanding at the outset what type of approach is needed to deliver specific projects and the resourcing these appropriately.

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## How has SFC worked differently?

Through the Pathfinder programme institutions have made a considerable investment in working differently with their partners to achieve positive outcomes. SFC has also worked differently to enable and support this work and to learn from it:



### **Creating a programme culture that supports participatory learning and improvement:**

SFC worked alongside Pathfinder partners to provide a time when learning was prioritised and to build a culture that encouraged honest and open reflection. This was crucial because participants needed to feel that they could share perspectives and experiences honestly and that there was no pressure for everything tested to work perfectly from the outset as we were learning together.

The approach focussed on:

**Enabling learning:** identifying insights from evidence and building an understanding of what this means for future work.

**Analysing learning:** making sense of evidence and synthesising the lessons that emerge from learning activities and discussions between participants.

**Sharing learning:** sharing lessons learned and good practice with the sector and policymakers, considering the implications for each audience and for SFC.





The diagram below sets out SFC's current role in the learning and skills system. In developing this matrix we have drawn on the [policy lab's work](#) on the Government as a System Toolkit.

The role SFC has played in the Regional Tertiary Pathfinders Programme has been focused on particular aspects of the matrix [coloured Teal in the diagram below] in order to support collaboration and learn alongside partners. The approach we have taken represents a test of change in relation to SFC's support for institutions to develop learning provision in response to priorities identified through regional planning fora.

Pathfinder participants recognised SFC's contribution to the Pathfinders work as a convenor of the Regional Delivery Boards (RDBs) and in providing an authorising environment for institutions to work collaboratively on regional skills development.

Providing SFC funding for the initiatives was also crucial and meant that partners were not distracted by the question 'whose problem/budget is this?' and instead were able to focus on 'what needs to be done and how do we do it?'

"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."

Pathfinder participants also spoke of the important enabling role SFC played across the pilot projects:

"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 for Simulation infrastructure."

However, SFC is conscious that the broader political and public finance environment within which the work is being carried out also had a bearing on institutional perspectives and outlook. SFC as a funder may not be viewed as a neutral actor in the collaborative spaces or interactions with institutions, where wider funding settlements and policies led nationally affect institutions' operation and in turn how SFC is viewed.

Relational powers shared with others

Patterns of actions across national, regional, & institutional contexts

More formal powers associated with SFC as an NDPB



Influence	Engage	Design
<b>Publishing</b> (plans, statistical reports, priorities, guidance and reviews)	<b>Listening</b> (create spaces for stakeholders to protect and voice rights and interests)	<b>Connecting</b> (encourage experts and stakeholders to co-create change, standards)
<b>Advising Institutions</b> (advising, negotiating and signposting options to help institutions find support)	<b>Informing</b> (providing data, sharing knowledge and insight)	<b>Forecasting &amp; modelling</b> (foresight, horizon scanning, predictive analytics, modelling different scenarios, shaping and deciding on delivery models)
<b>Advising Ministers, Government</b> (providing specialist advice, opinions and insight to Ministers)	<b>Convening</b> (drawing together expertise and interests from across tertiary systems)	<b>Testing and piloting</b> (prototyping and learning through small scale tests of change to establish efficacy of proposed intervention)
<b>Modelling funding</b> (determining appropriate mechanisms for system resource allocation)	<b>Collaborating</b> (collaborating with different actors across the system to deliver outcomes)	<b>Evaluating</b> (evaluating efficacy of activities or interventions to establish value for money and impact)

SFC's Current Role in the

**Develop****Resource****Deliver****Monitor****Analysing and Interpreting**

(data analytics, translating policies across different regions, and places)

**Incentivising**

(promoting behaviour change through grants, financial transactions, funding or incentives)

**Planning**

(agreeing priorities and delivery plans with institutions and stakeholders)

**Assessing and Approving**

(reviewing performance, SPFM, business cases and plans)

**Commissioning**

(commissioning services and outsourcing contracts. Includes decommissioning)

**Investing**

(investing in various forms, including SG, UK funding, and direct investment)

**Providing**

(delivering services directly or indirectly through funding and target setting, includes legal and compliance eg FOI)

**Enhancing**

(contributing to continued improvement and enhancement for positive outcomes)

**Partnering**

(establishing formal partnerships on issues of importance)

**Funding**

(providing finance to institutions for provision, infrastructure and research to delivery positive outcomes)

**Protecting**

(protecting learner rights and supply-chain. Upholding and enhancing standards/quality)

**Assuring and monitoring**

(provide assurance, reports, checks and balance on powers)

**Agreeing**

(formal agreements, OAs, MoUs, FM, SLAs)

**Recovering**

(recovering funding and other actions to address irregularity, under-spent, under-performance or fraud)

**Reforming**

(working with political stakeholders to deliver change to improve outcomes)

**Intervening**

(making an intervention to correct or improve a market or social context eg institutional sustainability/provision planning)

**Learning and Skills System (Pathfinders)**

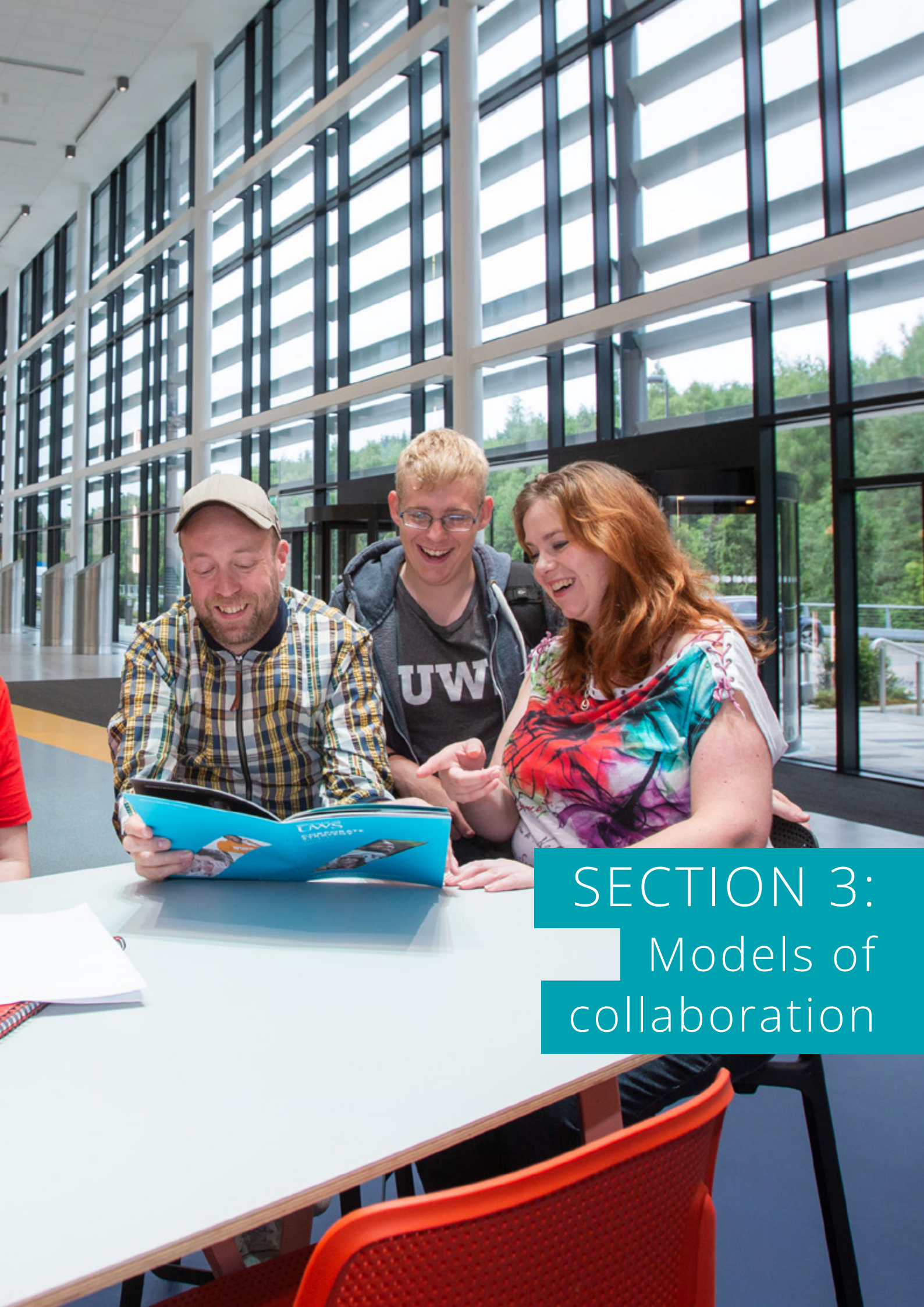
Based on Policy Lab's Government as a system work





Photo: University of the West of Scotland





SECTION 3:  
Models of  
collaboration

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This section examines the collaborative models used in the Pathfinder projects, describing how partnerships between institutions, as well as between institutions and wider regional stakeholders, have developed innovative and responsive education pathways that align with regional skills needs.

## Models of collaboration

The relationships colleges and universities are developing with multiple partners and other providers are varied. Across the Scottish Tertiary education sector, there are examples of universities working with multiple colleges using different models of collaboration to design and deliver provision. Similarly, there are examples of colleges working with multiple universities in this way. Examples of this can be viewed on [SFC's website](#).

Working collaboratively supports the expansion of provision, builds new and diverse curriculum pathways, improves operational effectiveness, supports staff development, and can help provide better outcomes for students. Institutions are working together to share information and intelligence and engage with employers, undertaking due diligence to understand the target population of learners has been essential. Institutions and regional partners can have different cultural norms and expectations when collaborating to deliver further and higher education and this needs to inform the offer of provision – one size does not fit all.

Pathfinder project collaborations involved two or more institutions working together, or two or more institutions working together with other education and skills stakeholders, towards the shared goal of developing regional coherent education and skills provision, through sustained formal and/or informal relationships that enabled joint actions.



Photo: North East Scotland College



## Strategic Alliances between partnering Tertiary Institutions

A strategic alliance is an arrangement between two or more organisations with a shared mutual interest to undertake activities which bring mutual benefits, collaborating where it makes sense to do so, and bringing tangible benefits to the partners.

Strategic alliances can be short or long-term and the agreement should support all partners to work towards a common, shared goal. The alliance builds on the collective strength of the organisations, whilst respecting individual identity and independence.

A strategic alliance in tertiary education can produce a collaborative, agreed plan of work on key areas across academic, vocational, and regional priorities. A strategic alliance may be particularly beneficial where new opportunities or enhancements would not be possible without additional resource and collaboration.

Successful partnerships solve problems, are sustainable and create value for the partners that are involved in them. An alliance can provide more structure and strategic direction to a collaboration and support better relationships with industry and local businesses. A mix of strategies are being adopted to respond to the challenging financial environment, such as exploring opportunities for strategic collaborations.

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## Formal Strategic Alliances

Strategic agreements of intent clearly define the commitments and collaborative goals between partnering institutions underpin more formal alliances. They set out the shared objectives, governance structures, and resource allocations that underpin the partnership, providing a framework for coordinated action and sustained collaboration. These agreements ensure institutions remain aligned and accountable, demonstrate a long-term commitment to working together towards mutual benefits, and ultimately enhance the overall impact and sustainability of collaboration.

Some articulation agreements also offer an example of a formalised strategic alliance between institutions. These agreements, which facilitate the transfer of students and credits between institutions, can vary in their formality and scope. Some articulation agreements are highly systematic and align curricula across multiple programmes, reflecting a structured, institutional-level partnership, others are more informal, developed at the level of individual programmes or led by colleagues within institutions. This variability means that articulation agreements can range from comprehensive, strategic alliances that support broader shared educational goals to more localised arrangements that support a specific pathway. Regardless of their level of formality, all articulation agreements exemplify collaborative working to benefit student pathways and enhance the value and impact of partnerships between tertiary institutions.

## Informal Strategic Alliances

In addition to formal strategic alliances, there are also more informal partnerships, often based on collaborative relationships that focus on co-developing practice. While these informal alliances may not involve explicit strategic agreements, they can still share many of the same characteristics as their formal counterparts. This includes sharing data, infrastructure and services, collaborative curriculum development, co-funding specialist staff to support both/multiple institutions, optimising the use of estates, and providing shared access to staff CPD opportunities. Informal collaborations tend to be time bound, and involve more one off activities.

Examples from the Pathfinder projects illustrate the spectrum of strategic alliances, ranging from formalised agreements to more informal collaborations, all aimed at achieving mutual benefits:

## SoS - Developing a joint prospectus for learning and innovation in the land-based sector

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**Alliance:** Formal

**Reasons:** The collaboration between SRUC and Borders College is considered a formal alliance due to the presence of a strategic agreement of intent, which explicitly defines the partnership. This agreement formalises key aspects such as joint curriculum development, shared infrastructure, and co-funding of specialist staff, all of which require structured coordination and long-term commitment. While similar features might be present in informal alliances, the formalised nature of this agreement ensures clear governance and accountability, setting it apart as a structured and intentional collaboration.

## SoS - West of Scotland Educational Pathways:

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**Alliance:** Formal

**Reasons:** This project represents a formal alliance between UWS and Dumfries and Galloway College, evidenced by structured articulation agreements that provide clear pathways for student transitions across various programmes. The formality is reinforced by joint curriculum development in response to regional needs, shared infrastructure and resources, and co-location of staff. Regular executive-level coordination and the use of UWS's quality assurance processes further support the structured nature of this collaboration, ensuring long-term commitment and sustained impact on regional education and skills provision.

## SoS – Digital Skills Pathfinder:

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**Alliance:** Informal

**Reasons:** This project is an informal alliance between Borders College and Dumfries & Galloway College and a wider range of stakeholders. Without a specific focus on strategic agreements, instead, the partnership is characterised by joint curriculum development, shared resources and good practice. This informal alliance focuses on practical outcomes and collaboration without formal institutional commitments.



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## NE - NESAs Energy Transition Skills Pathway:

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**Alliance:** Formal

**Reasons:** This project represents a formal alliance between the University of Aberdeen, Robert Gordon University, and North East Scotland College. The established NESAs governance structures provide a coordinated and organised approach. The partnership is further formalised through the Memorandums of Understanding with industry partners, structured coordination across institutions, and shared digital resources. The continued operation of NESAs and the sustained use of the Energy Transition Skills tool demonstrate a long-term commitment to comprehensive strategic collaboration.

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## NE - Developing demand-led, aligned and sustainable learner pathways:

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**Alliance:** Formal

**Reasons:** This project represents a formal alliance between NESCol and RGU, evidenced by the creation and enhancement of structured articulation agreements and the development of a joint offer letter to support student transitions across various programmes. The collaboration involved joint curriculum development, shared resources, and services, such as data sharing agreements to inform market insight and recruitment strategies. These elements reinforce the structured and long-term nature of the partnership.

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## NE – Enhancing the senior phase:

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**Alliance:** Formal

**Reasons:** This project represents a formal alliance between NESCol and RGU, supported by the University of Aberdeen and Aberdeen City Council. The formal nature is evident through the enhancement of articulation agreements across various programmes between NESCol and RGU, joint curriculum development, and shared CPD programmes. While the project focuses on specific outcomes like the HNC Pilot and the Winter Leaver Programme, the sustained commitment and governance structures in place reflect a formal alliance aimed at enhancing educational pathways for students in the region over the long-term.

## NE - Enhancing and coordinating the Simulation infrastructure for Health and Social Care Education:

**Alliance:** Informal

**Reasons:** This project can be defined as an informal alliance between Robert Gordon University, the University of Aberdeen, and NESCol. The collaboration was structured through the formation of the Grampian Interprofessional Simulation Group and the development of a strategic plan. However, the absence of formal structured agreements between the institutions suggests that the partnership for this work stream is focused on specific, project-based outcomes rather than a long-term, formal alliance. The project resulted in sharing resources and joint faculty development, but without formalised agreements, it remains an informal collaboration aimed at enhancing simulation-based education in the region.

## Partnerships with other stakeholders

“This project has taken skills planning to another level by looking at regional needs and mapping across who is offering what, so we have been able to take a targeted focused approach and not duplicate effort to where the jobs are, and qualifications are needed.”

“What was there previously was fragmented. It’s allowed us to build a scaffold for skills development regionally. It’s a clear example of knitting together all the agencies.”

The Pathfinder projects exemplified the importance of strategic partnerships between tertiary institutions and a wide range of other organisations. These collaborations were essential in aligning educational provision with the specific needs of local communities, industries, and regional economies. The projects highlight the successful transition from bi-lateral collaboration approaches—such as those between a university and a college, or a college and an employer—into multi-partner collaborations that can involve multiple institutions, local authorities, industry bodies, and community organisations. This shift utilises the expertise and resources of various partners to identify and address regional skills gaps and workforce needs more effectively.

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## Key Partners Engaged



**Skills and enterprise bodies:** Partners from SDS, South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) and Scottish Enterprise (SE) were members of the Regional Delivery Boards and supportive of the Pathfinder programme and pilots. Their help ensured the pathfinder pilots selected linked to regional priorities and the needs of the regional economies. Partners also played an important role in supporting the Pathfinder programme through promotion and incorporation within regional planning fora and associated groups. They provided insight, supporting project collaborations, providing an understanding of the business base and connections for projects ensuring they were aligned to the broader regional economic strategies and industry demand.



**Local Authorities:** Local councils were crucial in securing buy-in for the curriculum being developed. Their involvement helped gain a deeper understanding of local community needs, ensuring that pathways were accessible and relevant to the population. Councils across various regions, including Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Dumfries and Galloway, and the Scottish Borders, played key roles in shaping skills responses tailored to local demands.



**Industry Partners:** Regional employers and industry bodies across sectors such as agriculture, energy, digital skills construction, and healthcare were involved in shaping curricula to meet current and future workforce demands. Their input helps ensure that educational programmes were relevant and that students were equipped with the necessary skills for employment.



**Health Boards and NHS:** In health and social care education projects, partnerships with NHS Grampian and other health boards were crucial for aligning simulation training and other educational resources with the needs of the healthcare sector.



Photo: Borders College



**Developing the Young Workforce (DYW):** DYW was a key partner in supporting the transition from education to employment, particularly in projects focused on expanding senior phase offerings and creating accessible pathways for young people. DYW's involvement helped ensure that educational programmes were closely aligned with workforce development goals.



**Secondary Schools:** Collaboration with local secondary schools was a common feature, ensuring a smooth transition for students from school to further and higher education. This collaboration, supported by Developing the Young Workforce (DYW), also helped generate awareness and build appetite for the new courses being developed, while focusing on enhancing senior phase curricula and expanding access to higher education.

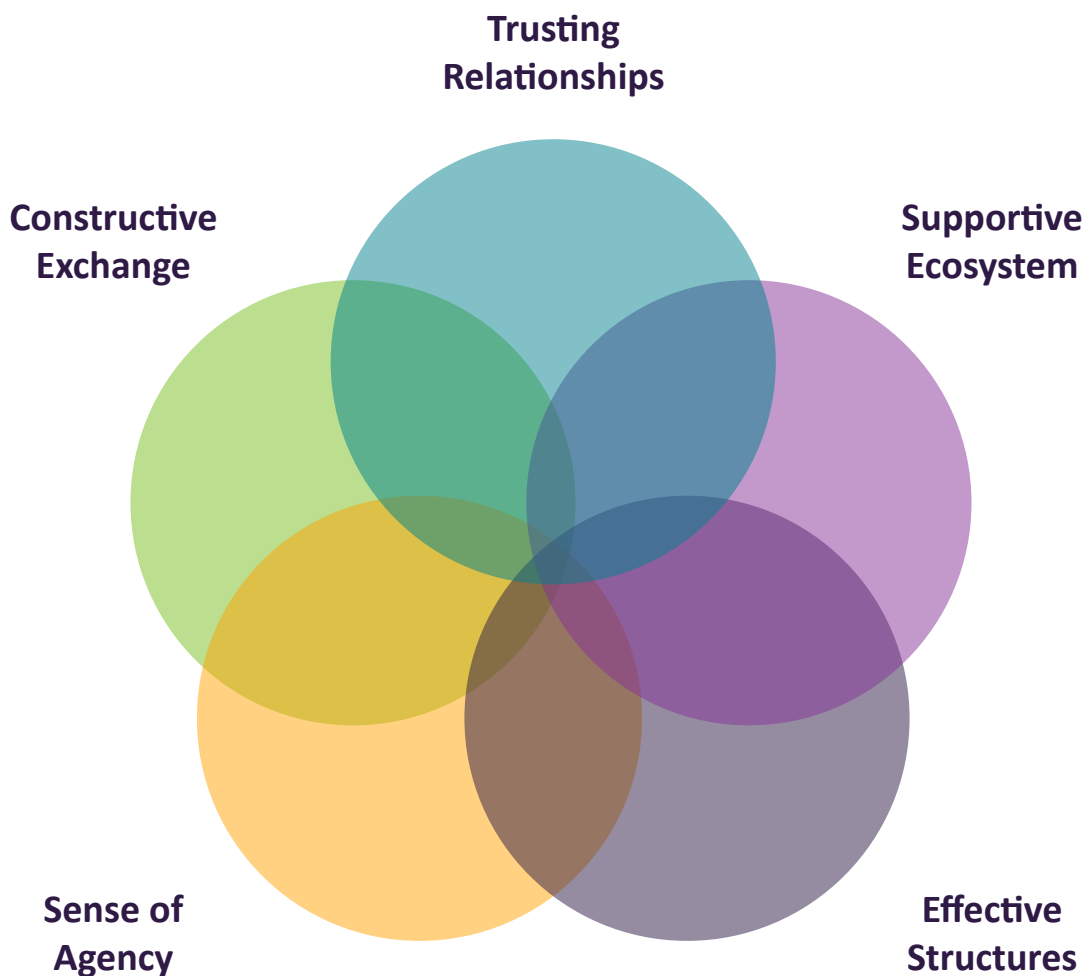


**Community and Third Sector Organisations:** In some projects, community groups were engaged to broaden access to educational resources, particularly in digital skills initiatives. This aimed to ensure inclusivity and addressed the needs of underrepresented groups.

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## Cross-cutting behaviours and contextual factors

The success of the various models of collaboration, whether between educational institutions or partnerships with other regional stakeholders, is deeply rooted in five cross-cutting behaviours and contextual factors that have emerged as foundations for effective regional collaboration through the Pathfinder projects. These behaviours underpin both structured, long-term strategic alliances and more flexible, informal collaborations, allowing partners to achieve shared goals despite differences in formality or scope.





**Trusting relationships:** Trust fosters security and confidence, encouraging active, empathetic listening, identifying shared goals, and transforming competitive behaviours into cooperative practices. It is essential for sustaining relationships despite external pressures and for building long-term commitment. Foundational to both formal and informal partnerships, trust enables institutions to share resources, align strategies, and navigate challenges. In formal institutional alliances, it is often embedded in strategic agreements and long-term commitments, while informal institutional collaborations rely on it to maintain flexibility and adaptability. For partnerships with regional actors—such as local authorities, industry partners, and community organisations—trust is key to ensuring flexibility, mutual benefit, and smooth coordination across diverse sectors and interests.



**Supportive Ecosystem:** An innovation-friendly ecosystem that encourages “learning by doing” is essential for testing new approaches and adapting to change. Support for tests of change and flexible funding schemes further facilitate these processes. National and regional bodies, such as SFC, along with regional partners like SDS, local authorities, enterprise agencies, and community organisations, play a critical role in creating a supportive and resilient system. This ecosystem enables both formal and informal institutional alliances, as well as partnerships with wider regional stakeholders, to experiment, learn, and respond to evolving needs by providing the necessary flexibility, resources, and local insight.





**Constructive Exchange:** Sharing knowledge and resources is critical across all forms of collaboration. Whether through formal data-sharing agreements or informal exchanges of best practices and lessons learned, constructive exchange helps partners utilise each other's strengths and avoid duplication, supporting more effective collaborations.



**Effective Structures:** Clear governance and operational frameworks at the project, institutional, or regional levels are essential. In formal institutional alliances, structured agreements and clearly defined roles are necessary to ensure alignment and commitment, ensuring that the purpose and direction of projects are clarified between partners. Informal institutional alliances benefit from flexible but well-defined structures to support collaboration. In partnerships involving wider regional stakeholders, governance benefits from clearly shared goals and well-defined responsibilities for each actor. Success across different models of collaboration relies on the capacity to collaborate effectively, the involvement of the right individuals, equitable partnerships, and a clear direction with commitment from senior leadership.



**Sense of Agency:** Effective collaborations thrive when partners feel empowered to take ownership of their roles. A strong sense of agency, where responsibility and authority are delegated appropriately, fosters initiative, leadership, and commitment to driving projects forward. This is particularly important for maintaining momentum and ensuring partnerships are not constrained by top-down control.

These cross-cutting behaviours ensure that both formal and informal alliances and partnerships with regional stakeholders, are not just agreements on paper but dynamic, evolving relationships capable of adapting to regional needs, achieving mutual benefits, and delivering tangible results.

We anticipate that institutions will use their regular engagement with their Outcome Manager to keep SFC informed of opportunities and developments of strategic alliances. SFC may be able to provide additional expertise to support the development of alliances, as well as share best practice at a sector level.

Photo: University of Aberdeen



## Learning Points

Take a step back as institutions - start from 'place' and what the region needs and then challenge yourselves as institutions to take a strategic approach to do more to deliver for the region, leveraging approaches which will have the biggest impact for learners and the region.

Embrace regional and sectoral geographies when agreeing the institutions and organisations to involve in collaborations.

Move beyond personal relationships and agree how the whole institution is involved in collaboration.

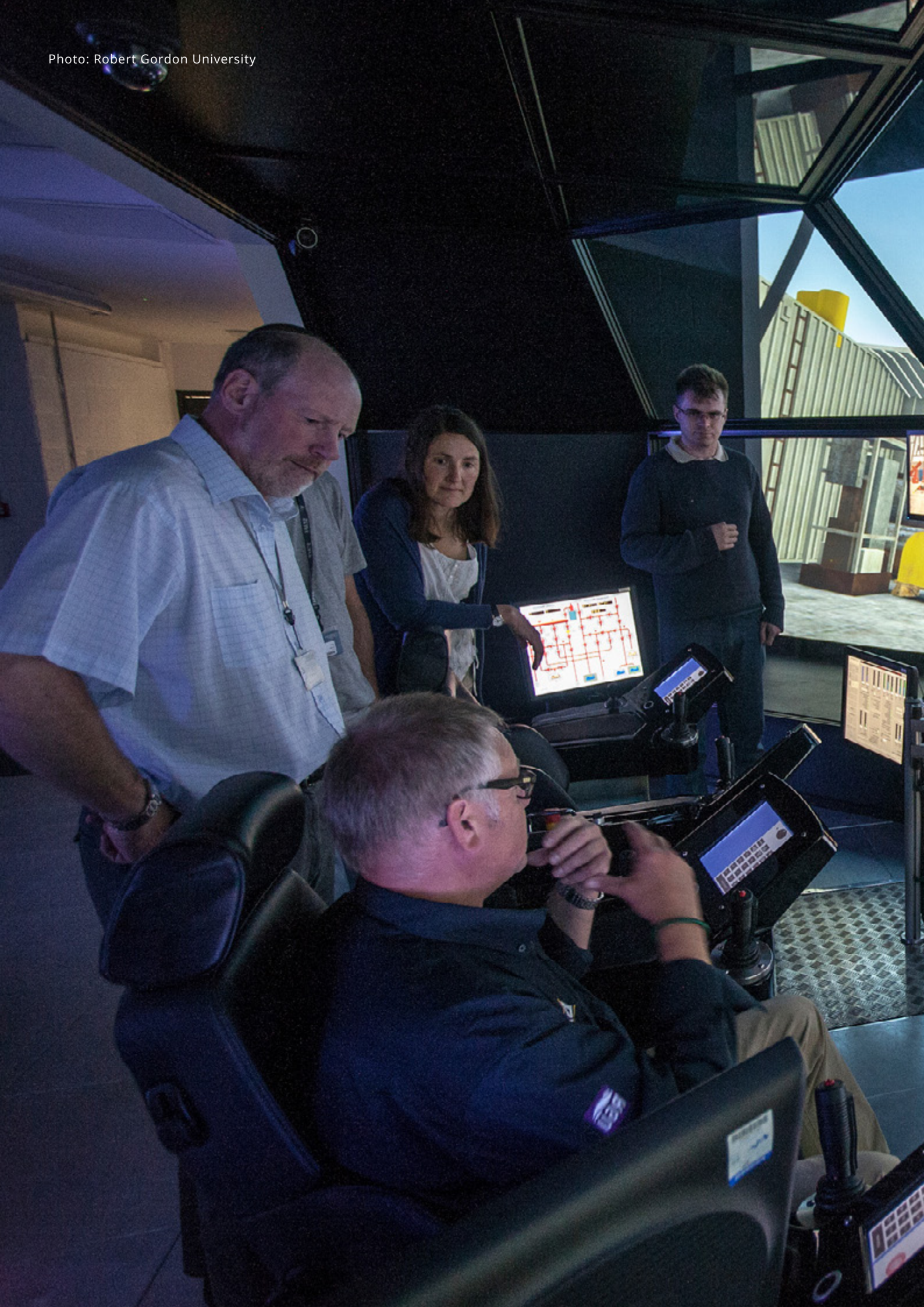
Culture change within tertiary institutions, and with regional partners, happens on the ground and grows momentum. It requires clear oversight and authorisation from governing bodies. Secure ownership at all levels to enable sustained change

Work with partners in the co-development and sharing of infrastructure and services and making best use of estates. Share access to staff CPD opportunities.

Maintaining momentum matters. Work together as institutions on the alignment of courses and progression pathways to develop a cohesive education and skills offer for people, communities and employers.

Colleges and universities can operate with autonomy in terms of partnership and collaboration practices. Any regionally focused work needs to be carefully informed by an understanding of the regions' ongoing efforts in terms of partnership and collaboration to avoid hindering effective efforts and prevent shifting effective collaboration practices towards unproductive competition.









SECTION 4:  
Understanding Skills  
Planning Partnerships



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This section looks at the regional and local skills planning landscape and the wider group of stakeholder partnerships in which colleges and universities participate.

## Understanding Skills Planning Partnerships

In the context of the Pathfinder programme, Regional Delivery Boards have played an important role in helping institutions to work with a wide range of stakeholders. However, the intention is not to replicate these across Scotland, but to use the learning from Pathfinders to support institutions as they engage with existing regional partnerships, e.g. Regional Economic Partnerships (REPs) and sub-regional partnerships, such as Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) and for the funding body to play an active role in REPs (See Annex A for an overview of these partnerships in the Pathfinder programme regions). This will be an important way in which to support institutions as they contribute to the delivery of the National Strategy for Economic Transformation.

To achieve this, we needed to make visible the ways in which skills planning is done regionally and locally in Scotland. In his Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape, James Withers was clear that although the Review focused on the ‘skills functions’ of national public bodies and related advisory groups, to inform his perspective he needed “to build an understanding of the system or wider landscape in which those bodies operate”. He described this system as “the actors, structures and processes that are in place to enable the smooth operation of Scotland’s post-school learning and training provision”. Withers also clarified that “a fundamental tenet of this report [is] that there is no separate ‘skills system’ and ‘education system’, but rather a single post-school learning system within which skills and knowledge are developed through the learning experiences that take place throughout our lives.” [para 1.03].

While Withers’ Review reinforces these concepts, the Pathfinder programme, which pre-dates the review, has collaborated with stakeholders over the last few years to gain a

deeper understanding of how the regional and local skills planning partnership system operates. It is well-accepted in the public sector that the systems within which we work and seek to enact change are complex. This complexity necessitates a thorough understanding of how different parts of a system are interconnected and how they work together to affect the behaviour of the whole.

Systems thinking, a method for understanding and analysing complex systems, their relationships, and interactions, has been central to our approach in the Pathfinder programme. The approach involves examining the entire system rather than just its individual components and understanding how the parts work together to deliver results.

The dynamics of skills planning in Scotland are neither primarily national, regional nor local. Instead, it functions as a complex set of interrelationships: local strategies are shaped by regional priorities, while regional objectives also take cues from local needs and circumstances. In this framework, local authorities emerge as important players. They play a pivotal role in organising and allocating funding, often due to their facilitative role within CPPs and REPs, as well as their foundation in democratic accountability.

As the interaction between various partnerships is primarily facilitated by the same actors participating in groups at both levels, rather than through governance, poor leadership, communication, or partnership structures can lead to duplication of efforts and a lack of clarity regarding roles and remits. Consequently, the system can be confusing for institutions and other stakeholders to navigate, creating uncertainty about where best to direct resources.

“We exist in silos that are driven by a policy system that is linked to Government and to a particular cabinet secretary. That is the tram line that bodies are set on, but they are asked, at the same time, to integrate and work in partnership with others. The system remains fragmented, but there is strong evidence that despite that, a lot of strong local partnership working is taking place.”

**- Mark McAteer, representing the Community Planning Improvement Board at Scottish Parliament’s Inquiry into Community Planning.**

The Scottish Government’s Purpose and Principles emphasises the importance of a lifelong education system that supports people at every stage of their lives. It states that the purpose is:

“To ensure that people, at every stage in life, have the opportunity and means to develop the skills, knowledge, values, and attributes to fulfil their potential and to make a meaningful contribution to society.”



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To have a system that supports a coherent lifelong learning offer, there needs to be effective links at the local level, from local to regional, and vice versa. At the moment there is a reliance on proactive colleagues on the ground to make the system work and power imbalances. There needs to be trust from the wider system that institutions will make the right decisions as educational professionals when developing the curriculum offer.

The Purpose and Principles acknowledges the need for a more integrated approach, stating the goal of creating “a cohesive system that can deliver for the future; where everyone plays their part and is supported to achieve their full potential.” It calls for collaboration across the post-school system with shared values and a common purpose. Current system structures will need to adapt to support this.

There are successful examples of where the college has a lead role in convening skills groups related to the REP and Local Employability Partnership (LEP). For example, Ayrshire College has responsibility to chair the Regional Skills Group in Ayrshire. This is a result of a new strategic regional economic approach, which aims to retrofit the Ayrshire Growth Deal to a new RES, supported by a restructuring of REP subgroups. This has led to a regional governance framework with a clearer reporting structure, and the College is central to this.

Utilising its strengths as an anchor institution operating in all three Ayrshire CPP areas, with strong links to schools and employers, Ayrshire College has acted as a broker, making sense of the various partnership structures and skills priorities. The college has brought together the right colleagues, and steered skills planning discussions. The effectiveness of this relies on having the right structure and membership, as identified by the college. This includes the three senior leads for Local Authority Education, three Local Authority leads for Economic Development, three LEP leads, Chamber of Commerce, SDS, Ayrshire



Photo: University of the West of Scotland

College, University of the West of Scotland, SFC and the voluntary sector. The new governance approach has helped align regional skills activity and supported more coherent pathway planning from school to employability and/or further and higher education. This new approach has also unlocked skills funding via the Growth Deal and has fostered a regional appreciation of the internal curriculum development process.

Similarly, NESCol has co-chaired the regional Learning and Skills Partnership, alongside SDS, in the North East since 2018. This approach helps to coordinate skills activities across the region and has supported a more integrated and strategic approach to addressing skills needs.

Work continues in other REPs in Scotland with different models of college and university involvement. For example, in the Glasgow City region, the 6 colleges have formulated a proposal working with partners to respond to regional skills priorities including suggestions around collaborative working, flexibility of funding and responsive provision.

In the Edinburgh and South East of Scotland City Region Deal, universities and colleges are engaged in planning through the HE/FE Group and play a significant role in the delivery of the Integrated Regional Employability and Skills programme (IRES), notably the Data Driven Innovation (DDI) and Housing, Construction and Infrastructure (HCI) skills gateways.

The programme learning from undertaking joint planning, development and in some cases marketing of new learning provision, career opportunities and pathways outlines the critical role of effective careers information advice and guidance (CIAG). Learners and their parents and carers and guidance teachers need timely, up to date information and support to make informed choices on subject choices and career pathways, particularly for new or emerging careers. Effective information sharing between partners including schools, local authorities and SDS, helps tertiary institutions de-risk new programme development and delivery.

Projects tested different approaches to providing information and engaging learners, influencers and partners. The Digital Pathfinder in the South of Scotland hosted a series of Meet the Learner events supported by DYW Borders and Dumfries and Galloway Council, using peer advocacy to promote digital pathways to school pupils. In the North East Skills Accelerator (NESA) Interactive Pathway partners created an Energy Careers Toolkit and involved young people in the design and product testing phases. In terms of careers education young people involved in the Southwest Educational Pathways pilot experienced the UWS Foundation Academy jointly delivered with DGC providing higher education transition support and engendering aspiration. Use of regional insight to tailor careers advice through events, showcases and digital platforms has proved effective for the pilots.

The Pathfinder's programme has provided insights into what needs to change to enable tertiary institutions to increase their responsiveness within the existing system. SFC proposes the following to support a more responsive skills planning system:

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## Learning Points

Pathfinders show that when institutions lead skills responses, they can both inform regional economic strategies and better align curricula to regional and local needs. A greater leadership role for institutions in partnerships could streamline skills planning. SFC can also strengthen its presence and involvement in key regional groups, including REPs.

Institutions should actively seek collaboration opportunities with other colleges and universities within their region. By pooling resources and best practices, institutions can engage more effectively with regional and local skills planning systems and develop more coherent pathways for learners. This approach strengthens institutional capabilities and ensures a unified response to regional skills needs.

While SFC cannot provide direct financial support for these partnerships, we can recognise effective collaborations through thematic reviews, case studies, and best practice sharing. Additionally, SFC can offer advisory support, networking opportunities, and strategic guidance to help institutions leverage external funding sources, such as through local or regional partnerships.

Curriculum planning can be effectively done at a regional level, where appropriate, planning across multiple local authority areas within a region. Taking on a regional coordination role can give institutions improved access to industry partnerships, public bodies, and regional and local funding opportunities. This access can help them build strong alliances, align their strategies with national priorities, and secure and shape the spend of partnership funding for the greatest impact, that is aligned with regional and local skills needs through being informed by institutions strong connections with employers.

The pilot projects have shown the importance of improved data sharing for more effective skills planning. Formal data-sharing agreements between institutions, CPP and REP partners can provide access to more granular and relevant data, supporting better-informed decisions in curriculum development. In particular, the Pathfinder projects

show that there is a need to better consolidate data with schools and local authorities to support curriculum planning.

Institutions optimising participation in regional and local groups are contributing to a virtuous circle of data and intelligence. By actively engaging, they gain access to insights from local partners, while simultaneously enriching these conversations with the data they possess on student and employer needs.

To support responsive skills planning, institutions and partners should proactively engage with CIAG services as they develop through the work of the Careers Review and the Careers Service Collaborative.

SFC has a role to play sharing the learning from the Pathfinder programme relevant to pathway development, CIAG and careers education within the Careers Collaborative Delivery Group and wider.

Locally, partners can engage through Careers Collaborative groups and structures as they are established (eg Borders Careers Collaborative) to ensure promotion of careers pathways.

Institutional engagement with CPP subgroups—particularly LEPs and Community Learning and Development (CLD) partnerships supports the delivery of a comprehensive lifelong learning offer. Colleges can bridge gaps between LEP-managed employability programmes and CLD community learning activity, ensuring that pathways are aligned and mutually supportive. This can be resource intensive but important for effective transitions from education to employment, especially for those furthest from the labour market. Active participation in these partnerships provides institutions with critical insights into local skills needs and strengthens links with DYW (highlighted by Pathfinders projects as key in connecting with young people and employers). Engagement with LEPs is particularly important, as they play a central role in allocating UK and Scottish Government funding sources, such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Multiply and No One Left Behind.



Photo: Borders College



## System Change

The Pathfinder programme has shown that clear organisational and governance structures are crucial for enabling institutions to work together effectively in a joint response to regional skills needs.

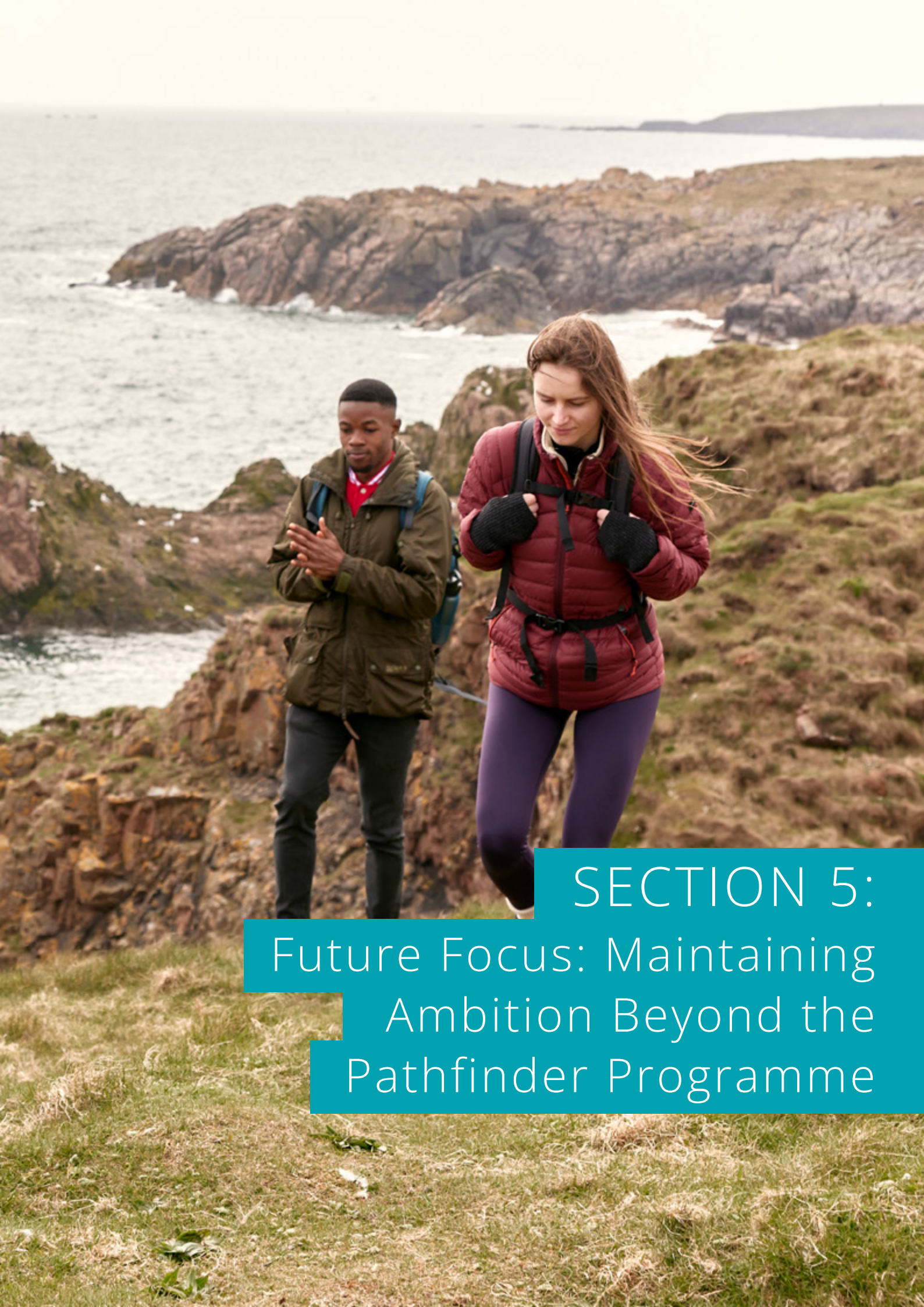
There are several ways in which the current skills planning system could change in order to deliver improved outcomes:

- Ensure REPs establish place-based partnerships involving colleges and universities to maximum effect, and that they cohere with other local or regional planning processes taking place at sub-regional levels, rather than adding layers of complexity to an already complex system.
- Enable effective employer relationships, ensuring that the focus reflects the broad range of employers within a region and that attention is paid to long-term priorities rather than simply current vacancies.
- Understanding the funding context, recognising the impact of both the level of funding going into the system and the funding approach, as either enabling or undermining ability to deliver on a region's economic plan.
- Establishing a clear and coherent approach to accountability, so that everyone is clear on their roles and responsibilities in developing and delivering regional skills priorities and associated provision. This approach will involve employers reflecting on how their role needs to change too.









SECTION 5:  
Future Focus: Maintaining  
Ambition Beyond the  
Pathfinder Programme



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This section outlines the key strategies needed to sustain the collaboration and momentum built through the Pathfinder programme. It examines which elements can be scaled or adapted for use in other regions or sectors and addresses the complexity of scaling within multi-organisational partnerships. The focus is on managing adaptive change in complex systems, ensuring continuous collaboration through regional planning, and emphasising the importance of leadership, data-sharing agreements, and inter-regional collaboration for long-term success.

## Scaling and spreading change within complex systems

The systems we operate in are characterised by uncertainty, unpredictability, and emergence. Scaling change within such a system or spreading a change or innovation across these systems is hard, especially when working through multi-partner collaborations.

Scaling change involves full-scale implementation of pilot projects. Spreading change typically refers to adapting an initiative for a different context rather than replicating it. This adaptation involves addressing infrastructural challenges across an organisation, region, or system.

In practice, these concepts often overlap, but ideas or changes that spread more quickly tend to possess certain characteristics. [Research by Everett Rogers](#) on the diffusion of innovations across many sectors identified five key factors that increase the likelihood of successful spread:

1. Clear advantage compared with current ways.
2. Compatibility with current systems and values.
3. Simplicity of change and its implementation.
4. Ease of testing before making a full commitment.
5. Observability of the change and its impact.

Some changes, particularly those that are complex, multi-faceted, or represent a significant shift from current practice, are harder to spread. In these cases, more resource may be needed to drive understanding and buy-in, or ambitions for the scale of spread may need to be adjusted in light of the challenges.

Achieving and sustaining change requires effort, resources, and a willingness to challenge deeply held cultural or professional practices. To work effectively, change involves spending money, diverting staff from their daily work, and taking risks, which can be difficult for organisations to commit to especially at time of budget pressure.

Change is dynamic. There is no simple or universally replicable way of implementing change at scale in a complex system. An educational approach or pathway that works efficiently in one setting may not work at all in another. Those adopting an idea or change often need to adapt it to fit their local or regional situation. Therefore, in spreading change it is important to focus on the key principles of the innovation, rather than specific solutions, which may not work as effectively in other contexts.

Complex systems adapt through self-organisation. This relies on individuals and teams making continuous adjustments to deliver changes in ways that fit local circumstances and resources. In making these adaptations teams need to bring people together to become aware of interdependencies and the relationships between different parts of the system and work out how to connect processes and organisations together to enable meaningful activities to be undertaken across the system. In this context, both scaling and spreading change must be managed through adaptive processes that account for the unpredictable and evolving nature of the work and wider context.

[Lanham and colleagues](#), for example, recommend the following principles when planning major change programmes in complex systems:



**Acknowledge unpredictability:** designers of interventions should contemplate multiple plausible outcomes and tailor interventions to the local context. Implementation teams should embrace surprises as opportunities.



**Recognise self-organisation:** designers should expect their designs to be modified, perhaps extensively, as they are taken up in different settings, Implementation teams should actively capture data and feed it into the adaptation process.



**Facilitate interdependencies:** designers should develop methods to assess the nature and strength of interdependencies within the system. Implementation teams should attend to these relationships, reinforcing existing ones where appropriate and facilitating new ones.



**Encourage sensemaking:** designers should build focused experimentation into their designs; implementation teams should encourage participants to ask questions, admit ignorance, explore paradoxes, exchange different viewpoints, and reflect collectively.

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## What can be scaled and/or spread from the Pathfinder Programme?

Across the Pathfinder projects, several key elements emerged that demonstrate significant potential for scaling and spreading. These components, present in multiple projects, highlight the potential for replicating and adapting successful models of collaboration, engagement, and programme development across different regions, institutions, and sectors.



### Inter-Regional Collaboration

A consistent feature across all projects was the collaboration between institutions in different localities, aligning their programmes and resources to serve the broader region. This approach has not only reduced duplication but also created more cohesive learning pathways. Expanding this model to other sectors and regions offers the potential to improve coordination, ensuring consistent and accessible educational opportunities across local authorities.



### Role of the Project Co-ordinator

The Project Co-ordinator played a critical role in ensuring project success by facilitating collaboration, engaging the right stakeholders, and maintaining continuous progress. The success of this role demonstrates its potential to be scaled and adapted for use in other projects, ensuring smooth facilitation of partnerships and sustained momentum in multi-institutional collaborations.



### Data Sharing and Collaborative Analysis

Several projects benefited from data-sharing agreements that allowed institutions to analyse application and enrolment data together. Shared analysis helped align recruitment strategies, improve learner outcomes, and enhance marketing efforts. The model of using shared data to drive collaborative insights and decision-making can be scaled to other institutions, sectors, or regions, offering a framework for improving alignment between educational programmes and market needs.





### Cross-Institutional Dialogue at Multiple Levels

A key feature of projects was regular dialogue between senior leaders, heads of departments, and professional service teams (including recruitment, admissions, and marketing). This dialogue enhanced collaboration at multiple levels, ensuring that institutions were aligned in their goals and activities. The multi-level dialogue model can be adopted by other institutions aiming to build closer working relationships across departments and leadership levels.

## North East Pathfinder Projects: Scaling and Spreading Potential

### NESA Energy Transition Skills Pathway

The NESA Energy Transition Skills Pathway project shows how regional collaboration between educational institutions and industry stakeholders can create scalable solutions that address critical skills gaps in the energy sector. This programme of work showcases how the alignment of industry needs with educational programmes can provide a model for wider application across both geographic regions and other sectors facing similar workforce challenges:



### Scaling the Energy Skills Tool

The NESA energy interactive tool has significant potential for expansion and scaling, reaching a wider audience beyond its initial focus on specific areas within the energy sector in the North East of Scotland. It can be adapted to cover more areas of the energy industry or even applied across other sectors, making it a powerful resource for learners in various industries.

As a scaled-up version with additional job roles and sectors included, the tool could have a far wider reach, contributing to sustainable improved learner outcomes across Scotland and the energy industry. It could apply to all levels of learning, from school education to tertiary education, and even upskilling/reskilling.

Whilst the tool is focused on the NESA institutions and is place based to the North East of Scotland, its benefits have the possibility to impact a far wider audience. Learners across Scotland can learn from the tool, which also includes information for learners from the Rest of UK and abroad, in mapping their qualifications to those cited in the tool. The general course information is transferable, and whilst the focus remains on the NESA institutions, the knowledge gained from the tool could be transferred to other Scottish and UK institutions.



### **NESA Partnership**

The partnership model led by NESA is unique, with NESA taking a leading role in coordinating collaboration between the three major educational institutions in the North East of Scotland. This effort, supported by Skills Development Scotland and Energy Transition Zone Ltd, has allowed these institutions to combine resources, expertise, and infrastructure, contributing towards unified and impactful educational offerings that directly align with both local and global energy sector needs.

While not a Pathfinder project output, the NESA leadership approach could be scaled and applied in other industries where cross-institutional collaboration is required to tackle sector-specific skills gaps. This model of partnership-led governance and decision-making shows how a leading organisation like NESA can drive multi-institutional.



### **Industry Engagement**

The NESA project worked closely with industry stakeholders, ensuring that all programmes and tools were aligned with the practical skills required by the energy sector. Industry consultation played a central role in determining key career pathways, with six initial roles being identified in the pilot tool. By working directly with energy companies and industry bodies, NESA ensures learners are equipped with the skills needed for employment, reskilling, or upskilling in the energy transition sector. This industry engagement approach is a central aspect of the project's success and can serve as a model for expanding similar programmes into other sectors or regions.



### **Learner Testing and Engagement**

Learner feedback was central to the tool's development, ensuring it remained user-friendly and relevant. This process of continuous feedback allowed the project to adapt and evolve according to learners' needs and industry demands. The learner-centric development process will remain crucial for its success if the tool is scaled and spread in other educational contexts. Learner input drives improvements and keeps resources relevant.

## Enhancing the Senior Phase

This pathway model has potential for scaling and spreading, with key elements that can be adapted and expanded across more institutions and local authorities:



### Approach to Strategic Working Group

The project is built on a Strategic Working Group (SWG) approach that brought together key partners from NESCol, RGU, University of Aberdeen, and the local authorities of Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City. This forum allowed for regular collaboration and joint decision-making, creating a formal structure for addressing shared goals across multiple work areas.

The SWG approach engaged multiple local authorities and demonstrated that joint pathway planning is beneficial in aligning the educational offer across an entire region. By coordinating senior phase education, the project has shown that regional collaboration is an effective way to meet the diverse needs of learners and institutions. This model offers a framework for multi-partner collaboration. The clear engagement of both educational institutions and local authorities ensures that the project is grounded in local needs and could be spread to other geographic areas.



Photo: North East Scotland College





### Enhanced Mapping of Opportunities

One of the project's key outcomes was the creation of a map of senior phase opportunities across more than one local authority. This identified gaps and areas of overlap in provision, highlighting where existing programmes could be streamlined or expanded. The mapping approach can be applied to other regions, providing a coherent view of educational opportunities for learners.



### Joint Approach to Promotion of Opportunities

The project established a joint approach to promoting senior phase opportunities across the three NE institutions. This involved coordinating outreach efforts to ensure that students and families had access to clear, cohesive information about educational pathways, and consistent messaging. By joining up resources and collaborating on outreach, this integrated promotional model can be replicated and scaled in other regions, helping institutions better inform students about their choices.



### Model of Testing and Piloting

The project employed a model of testing and piloting small-scale outputs, such as the Winter Leavers Programme and enhanced HNC pathways, before scaling them up based on feedback and success. This flexible approach made sure new courses were responsive to local needs and allowed for improvements before broader implementation. This pilot-based model offers a framework for other regions to test and adapt their provision before committing to larger-scale rollouts.



## Enhancing and Coordinating the Region's Simulation Infrastructure for Health and Social Care Education

This project demonstrates significant potential for scaling and spreading, both within and beyond the health and social care sector:



### Approach to Partner Engagement

The Grampian Interprofessional Simulation Group brought together over 20 partners, including NHS Grampian, RGU, NESCol, and the University of Aberdeen, to identify gaps, needs, and opportunities in simulation education. This unique interprofessional collaboration, spanning institutions from Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, and Moray, helped ensure regional challenges were addressed in a coordinated manner.

Although the focus was on health and social care, the model can be adapted to other sectors, such as digital health or green technology, where similar workforce needs exist. The development of Simulation Education Days, focused on immersive, practical training, further demonstrated the flexibility and scalability of the approach.

This multi-partner inter-professional collaboration provides a blueprint for other regions. By joining up goals and sharing resources, the project drove sustainable educational development, providing a scalable model that can be replicated across sectors.



### Simulation Education Days

The project introduced Simulation Education Days, which became a platform for delivering practical training sessions. These days allowed for innovative approaches to simulation delivery, engaging participants across various institutions to improve their skills in real-world settings. This model is adaptable and can be implemented in other sectors or regions where hands-on training and simulation are important for workforce development.





### **Data Collection/Analysis and Mapping of Simulation Resources**

The project introduced an innovative approach to data collection and analysis, starting with a baseline study of existing simulation education resources. By gathering data from all partners and mapping it against regional needs, the project laid the foundation for ongoing improvements and data-driven decision-making.

One of the key outcomes of this process was the creation of a regional database that mapped simulation resources, highlighting current infrastructure and available facilities. This map improved information sharing and enhanced the coordination and use of simulation facilities among partners. The approach to mapping can be replicated in other sectors or regions where resource sharing and infrastructure coordination are key for delivering educational provision.

## **Developing Demand-Led, Aligned, and Sustainable Pathways**

This collaboration provides a model for other institutions to learn from, providing a roadmap for joint curriculum design and effective resource sharing:



### **Cross-Institutional Dialogue at Multiple Levels**

Regular dialogue between institutions was a key component, as it ensured collaboration from senior leadership to operational teams. The Strategic Working Group included members of the Executive, Heads of Sector, and Deans of School, which improved alignment at a high level. Engagement also extended to professional service teams, such as student recruitment, admissions, and marketing, creating a multi-level partnership that deepened working relationships between NESCol and RGU. The multi-level collaboration model can be scaled and could be scaled and spread to other institutions seeking to foster cross-institutional collaboration at all levels of their organisations.



### **Data Sharing Agreements and Sharing Marketing Insights**

A crucial element of the project was the data-sharing agreements between NESCol and RGU. By sharing application and enrolment data and holding regular meetings to collaboratively analyse it, both institutions were able to align recruitment strategies, improving local student recruitment. The data-sharing model demonstrated in this project can be spread and adapted to other institutions, offering a framework for data-driven decision-making to enhance recruitment efforts. Shared marketing insights also informed both institutions and can be used to guide other regions in enhancing data-driven student recruitment efforts.





## South of Scotland Pathfinder Projects: Scaling and Spreading Potential

### Developing a joint prospectus for learning and innovation in the land-based sector

This project provides models for joint curriculum design and strategic partnerships that can be adapted to other sectors and regions:



#### **Joint Prospectus**

The model of co-designing a curriculum can be applied in other sectors where institutions can collaborate to provide aligned pathways that meet regional workforce demands.



#### **Strategic Agreement of Intent**

SRUC and Borders College formalised their partnership through a strategic agreement, ensuring ongoing collaboration in delivering land-based education. The approach supports joint planning, resource sharing, and curriculum development. This model of formal partnership could be adapted by institutions in other sectors, where multiple institutions seek to collaborate to support workforce development.



Photo: SRUC



### **Place-Based Innovation Broker**

The project's innovation framework linked education with local industries, using an innovation broker to ensure the curriculum was responsive to regional demands. The development of the Professional Development Award (PDA) in Therapeutic Horticulture showcased the project's focus on place-based innovation. The model can be adapted to other sectors to support alignment of education provision with the skills needed for sustainable regional development.



### **Wider Regional Partner Engagement**

Collaborating with South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) and the South of Scotland Education and Skills Strategic Coordination Group (ESSCG) ensured the project's outcomes linked to regional priorities and were sustainable long-term. This partnership model supported strategic planning and implementation. Similar partnerships between educational institutions and key regional stakeholders can be spread across Scotland to create educational pathways that are responsive to local industry needs and regional priorities.

## West of Scotland Educational Pathways

This project established a model for collaboration that can be spread to other regions:



### **Collaborative Portfolio Planning**

The project developed a collaborative portfolio planning process to create new degree pathways that addressed regional educational needs. By aligning curricula across institutions, the project reduced duplication and streamlined education provision. This model can be scaled and applied in other regions, helping institutions meet local workforce needs more efficiently.



### **Data Sharing Agreements**

Data-sharing agreements enabled both institutions to collaboratively analyse enrolment and application data. Regular meetings helped link recruitment strategies, improving efforts to attract local students. The success of using shared data to inform recruitment and marketing strategies can be scaled beyond Dumfries and Galloway, outlining how joint data initiatives can enhance local student recruitment and inform learners about educational opportunities more effectively.

## Digital Pathfinder

This project can serve as a scalable model for other regions or sectors looking to strengthen digital skills and future-proof their workforces.



### **Partner Engagement Approach**

The project built on previous collaboration efforts from the South of Scotland Digital Skills Hub, bringing together key partners from local authorities, education institutions, industry representatives, and organisations like Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) and Skills Development Scotland (SDS). The collaborative model supported by a large network of partners can be replicated in other regions for similar cross-sector programmes of work.





### Digital Skills Provision Map

A key output of the Digital Pathfinder was the creation of the Digital Skills Provision Map (DSPM) - an interactive tool developed in partnership with employers to help them locate and access local digital skills support and training. The map improves accessibility to training resources and can be expanded or replicated in other sectors to map skills provision for local businesses. The DSPM provides a clear, scalable framework for linking regional employers with relevant educational pathways.



### Scaling and spreading 'Meet the Learner' Events

The 'Meet the Learner' events successfully engaged school and college students with digital pathways, showcasing learner journeys from school to university level. These online events, initially focused on the South of Scotland, offer a spreadable model for engaging learners in other regions. An innovative approach to CIAG, the flexibility of the online format ensures that educational opportunities can be promoted more inclusively across geographic boundaries, making it a strong candidate for replication in other subject areas or regions.

## The role of SFC in sustaining Pathfinders impact

In the context of reform, it is important to consider short, medium and longer-term actions for SFC to sustain and spread the impact of Pathfinders. [The Programme for Government 2024/25](#) states that the Scottish Government will “lead a new, national approach to skills planning and work with partners to strengthen regional approaches – bringing [...] partners together to ensure the system is responsive to regional and national skills needs”. Achieving this will require significant collaboration between public bodies and Government, and SFC is well positioned to draw on insights from the Pathfinders to enhance collaboration and improve the responsiveness of the education and skills system. Moving forward, SFC can consider:

## Enhancing our role in regional partnerships to identify and respond to regional priorities

- Education and skills providers are at times not brought into planning early enough. Enhancing SFC’s regional role could help create a more receptive authorising environment, similar to the Pathfinders approach, by enabling SFC to work closely with institutions to support deeper collaboration and improve joint planning and delivery of provision.
- Building on the Pathfinders approach, SFC can provide advisory support, facilitate networking opportunities, and offer strategic guidance to help institutions develop alliances and leverage external funding sources, such as through local or regional partnerships.

SFC can support and recognise effective collaborations by conducting reviews, developing case studies, and sharing best practice. Specifically, SFC could undertake subject or thematic reviews on a national or regional basis across groups of institutions to provide insights into the coherence of provision.

## What will sustain the collaboration in the long run?

Developing a shared understanding of how to work together within the learning, skills and economy regional planning structures

SFC continuing its role catalysing, facilitating change and considering how best to incentivise collaboration and curriculum transformation within existing funding limits.

A dual focus on doing things together and maintaining the relationships that underpin joint delivery.

Meaningful buy-in from leaders at all levels, to enable and encourage staff to take the time required to build relationships and explore opportunities for deeper collaboration.

Facilitate better liaison with employers e.g.

- Encourage more industry engagement in curriculum
- Wider range of work-based learning opportunities

Avoiding over-reliance on individual relationships, which can be put at risk due to staff turnover – take a systems-based approach instead – there is a role for SG and SFC in creating the conditions for the system to work effectively.

Recognising that there is an institutional cost associated with co-ordination and appropriately resource the partnership element of the work.

Discussing and agreeing attitude to risk – how open are partners to exploring and testing innovative solutions?

Regular review points (as built into the Pathfinder programme) where partners step back and review, reflect and adapt together.

Improve data sharing e.g.

- Create central data sharing agreements and data itself to reduce institutional burdens
- Have overarching tracking data for all

Continuing to ask the questions:

- How far will what we are proposing meet learner, employer and societal needs?
- To what extent will our current proposals enable us to cope with increasingly tightening budget settlements?
- What can we learn from what's happening elsewhere?
- How do we meaningfully incorporate learner feedback to shape future collaboration and curriculum design?

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## Annex A – Pathfinder Skills Planning Partnerships (North East and South of Scotland)

### North East Skills System

“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.” (PP Final Report - NE Senior phase)

The new Regional Economic Strategy (RES) builds upon its 2015 predecessor and sets regional skills priorities. Influenced by the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET), this strategy addresses a broad spectrum of priorities, including objectives from the City Deal, Just Transition, and projects funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), while also reflecting specific local needs. The colleges and universities in the North East are members of the REP, which oversees the RES.

Opportunity North East (ONE) plays a significant role in the North East REP, focusing on economic development and diversification across key sectors, including tourism, life sciences, food, drink, agriculture, and digital technologies. Previously, ONE’s remit included energy, but this shifted with the creation of the Energy Transition Zone (ETZ). As part of the business case for ETZ, a section on skills development led to the creation of the National Energy Skills Accelerator (NESA). NESA, a collaborative effort among all the institutions, acts as a one-stop shop for meeting the energy sector’s skills needs.

A refreshed Regional Skills Action Plan (RSAP) is currently in development and will address the employability and skills priorities outlined in the RES. The Regional Learning and Skills

Partnership, which includes representatives from the North East institutions and is co-chaired by NESCol, will oversee this plan.

The Aberdeen City Region Deal served as a delivery mechanism for the previous RES and was governed by a joint committee from the two local authorities. The governance approach for these deals involves a collaborative local authority committee framework to ensure effective planning, implementation, and monitoring.

With a focus on capital projects, the deal indirectly impacted skills development. For example, many of the capital projects funded by the deal, particularly in construction and engineering, required a skilled workforce, thereby creating demand for apprenticeships and training programmes. The region tracked apprenticeships linked to City Deal construction projects which highlighted its influence on skills training.

The North East has been designated as an Investment Zone, building on the work of the REP to identify sectors and locations and is poised to benefit from an £80 million investment over the next decade. The institutions in the region participate in the Strategic and Operational Groups of the Investment Zone.



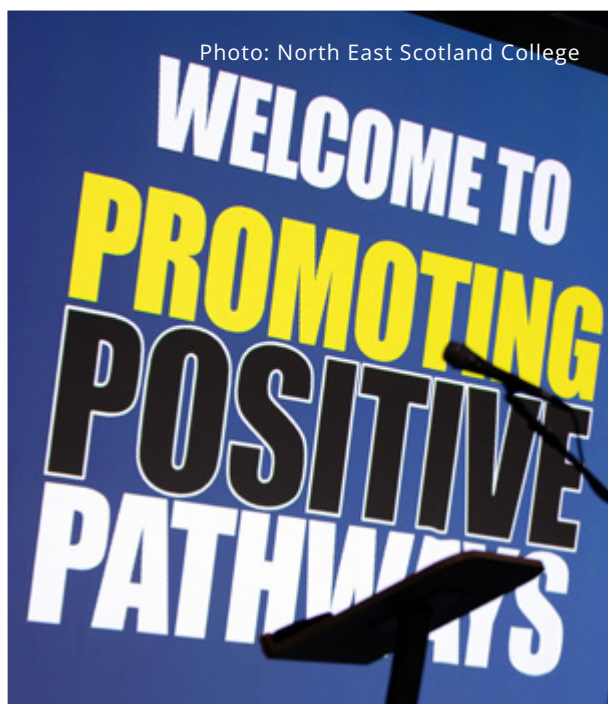
Regional alignment with local skills projects is largely facilitated by the same actors participating in both regional and CPP groups, however Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs), which operate as part of Community Planning Partnerships and attempt to align with REPs, are involved in planning and funding activity related to skills. In both NE areas, the LEPs report on progress towards Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP) objectives to the CPP through a LOIP group. Both the Aberdeen City and Shire LEP Delivery Plans are linked to CPP and wider city region strategies.

## Aberdeenshire Approach

In Aberdeenshire, the ‘Reducing Poverty’ group, associated with the LOIP, plays a notable strategic role. This group aims to align the LEP Delivery Plan and Action Plan with regional strategies, while also serving as a reporting forum for the LEP within the CPP. This alignment aims to optimise funding allocation and enhance the integration of employability services with other support mechanisms.

According to the LEP Delivery Plan, Aberdeenshire’s focus is on developing and implementing pathways into emerging regional employment opportunities. The goal is to assist those affected by labour market shifts in reskilling or upskilling.

NESCol actively participates across Aberdeenshire’s CPP subgroups, including the LEP and Community Learning and Development (CLD) Partnership. The University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon University (RGU) have also been involved in Aberdeenshire CPP projects, and SRUC is also involved due to its role as a key skills provider in the North East, especially in sectors such as food, drink, and agriculture, including agritourism.



## Aberdeen City Approach

The ‘Aberdeen Prospers’ group in Aberdeen City, associated with the LOIP, serves as a key reporting group for the LEP. Tertiary institutions are involved in this group which plays a strategic role by aligning the LEP Delivery Plan and Action Plan with regional strategies, including the RES and Regional Skills Action Plan.

As outlined in the delivery plan, the vision for the Aberdeen City LEP is to develop employability success through collaboration and collective ownership. The LEP looks to leverage the strengths of existing national and local services to better align funding and integrate employability services with other support.

There is mixed institutional membership of CPP groups, perhaps understandably given their areas of focus, NESCol participates in the LEP and CLD Partnership. As an example of an institution utilising LEP funding sources, NESCol recently secured a UKSPF contract to deliver green skills training.



Photo: Borders College

## South of Scotland Skills System

The RES is overseen by the South of Scotland REP (SoSREP). This document serves as the cornerstone of skills planning, specifically focusing on the theme 'Skilled and Ambitious People'. The regional Education and Skills Strategic Coordination Group (ESSCG) is responsible for delivering on this theme and reports progress to SoSREP.

Other thematic areas of focus include promoting innovative and enterprising initiatives, developing a green and sustainable economy, ensuring rewarding and fair work, and celebrating culture and creativity. The strategy also underscores the importance of community wealth building and utilising the region's natural capital and cultural heritage. These efforts align with the overarching goal of transitioning towards a green and fair future.

South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) was established in 2020 and plays a key role in the region. This agency was created to drive sustainable economic growth and development, mirroring the roles played by the other regional enterprise agency in Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE).

Regional funding initiatives like the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal and, for the Borders Council area, the Edinburgh and South East City Deal contribute to the delivery of the RES vision. These initiatives aim to capitalise on growth and diversification opportunities in sectors such as agriculture, renewable energy, and tourism.

The SoS RES integrates a broad spectrum of regional interests, including the Edinburgh City and South East Growth Deal and the Borderlands Growth Deal. It incorporates strategic insights from local authorities on local needs and also aligns with national priorities.

Regional alignment with local skills projects is facilitated through the same actors operating across regional and local partnerships, largely through the two LEPs. Both CPPs in the SoS have LEPs that report on LOIP progress directly to CPP Strategic Boards or Executive Groups. Both LEP Delivery Plans link to several CPP and wider regional strategies.

## Dumfries and Galloway Approach

Dumfries and Galloway's approach is novel in that the LEP takes the form of a thematic LOIP Employability and Skills Partnership. This partnership reports directly to the Community Planning Executive Group, composed of senior officers, on an annual basis.

The LEP's goal is to contribute to the Community Planning vision outlined in the LOIP and the College's Regional Outcome Agreement. To achieve this, the LEP oversees the strategic development of employability and skills provision, supported by shared UK and Scottish Government funding sources. To effectively manage this, the LEP has developed a 5-year Delivery Plan that outlines key actions and performance measures. These measures are informed by the broader SoS RES, SDS Regional Skills Assessments, and a deep understanding of local skills and employment needs.

The LEP holds shared oversight and coordination responsibilities to ensure that the employability and skills strategies of various partners align with regional objectives. This is facilitated by maintaining a Partnership Risk Register, which is regularly reviewed.

In terms of institutional representation, Dumfries and Galloway College are part of several CPP subgroups, including the CLD Partnership and LEP, in which SRUC also participates.

## Scottish Borders Approach

The LEP was established in 2021 with the vision of working together to deliver effective and easily understood employability and skills pathways. These pathways focus on positive, person-centred outcomes that lead to sustainable, fair, and rewarding work. The aim is to realise the employability goals outlined in the LOIP while also aligning with regional priorities.

The LEP reports directly to the Community Planning Strategic Board, which comprises a selection of councillors and a representative from each statutory partner, including Borders College. Borders College participates in various CPP subgroups, including the CLD Partnership and the LEP, alongside Heriot-Watt University.

There is a LEP Skills Subgroup, chaired by Borders College and also attended by Heriot-Watt University. This group focuses on skills-related activities and delivery, reporting to the LEP.



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## Key System Issues

The analysis of partnerships involved in regional and local skills planning has identified several issues:

- **Lack of coordination:** Interaction between partnerships is often managed by the same actors participating in both regional and local groups, rather than through a coherent governance approach. This lack of coordination can result in misaligned skills strategies, leading to gaps and overlaps in provision. Without clear governance structures and defined roles and responsibilities, confusion and inefficiencies arise. Consequently, various local partnerships, and planning bodies within a region, such as CPPs and their subgroups (i.e. LEPs), may work on similar programmes of work without effective communication. This can lead to wasted resources and efforts within a region, highlighting the need for a more joined-up approach.
- **Confusing system to engage with for skills responses:** The number of overlapping partnerships, means that the system can be confusing for institutions and other stakeholders to navigate, creating uncertainty about where best to direct resources to develop skills responses. The same rings true for employers, with single points of access challenging to establish.
- **Complexity and fragmentation of funding sources:** At the regional level, City and Growth Deals can provide substantial targeted funding to drive economic growth. Locally, the availability and competitive nature of numerous separate and short-term funding opportunities make it challenging for institutions to determine where to direct their resources effectively.

Applying for these funds can be challenging and time-consuming, and institutions may also be unaware of potential funding sources available.

- **Suboptimal institutional skills planning role:** Institutions have not typically been driving regional skills discussions and do not always chair regional skills groups. They can be overlooked for regional and local funding opportunities, including skills led projects.
- **Siloed CPP partnerships impact pathway development:** Lack of sufficient join up within and across CPPs can potentially impact pathway development. Within a given region, LEPs can operate differently and may not communicate which can lead to duplicative efforts. Moreover, within local authorities, communication between Economic Development and Education services can be mixed, which can inhibit pathway development. Communication between CLD partnerships and LEPs could also be improved to support pathway planning – as noted by the CLD Independent Review (2024).
- **Limited REP interaction with other regional partnerships:** REPs could have stronger planning links to other regional partnerships i.e. NHS Health Boards, as this limits the integration of health plans with skills planning undertaken in regional economic partnerships.

## Interplay between national, regional and local

At the national level, broad policy priorities and strategic goals are outlined, but how these are intended to interact with regional and local actions is often unclear. This lack of clarity can lead to confusion and misalignment.

In the absence of a formal governance approach, the join up between regional and local partnership priorities is largely facilitated by proactive stakeholders on the ground who participate in both regional and local planning discussions. As highlighted by a LEP lead, a critical aspect of this process is attempting to find the right balance between how LOIPs can aid in executing the objectives of the RES and, conversely, how the RES can bolster the implementation of LOIPs. Essentially, both fora attempt to avoid duplication and find areas to add value and specialisms.

The dynamics of skills planning in Scotland cannot be simply categorised as primarily national, regional, or local. Instead, it functions as a highly complex, multi-directional system: local strategies can look to regional priorities, while regional objectives are informed by also take local context and needs.

In this framework, local authorities are crucial players. They play a pivotal role in organising and allocating funding, often due to their facilitative role in CPPs and REPs, as well as their foundation in democratic accountability.

As the interaction between various partnerships is primarily facilitated by the same organisations participating in groups at both levels, rather than through a coherent governance approach, ineffective leadership, communication, or partnership structures can lead to duplication of efforts and a lack of clarity regarding roles and remits. Consequently, as skills planning occurs through this system, it can be confusing for institutions and other stakeholders such as employers to navigate, creating uncertainty about where best to direct resources.

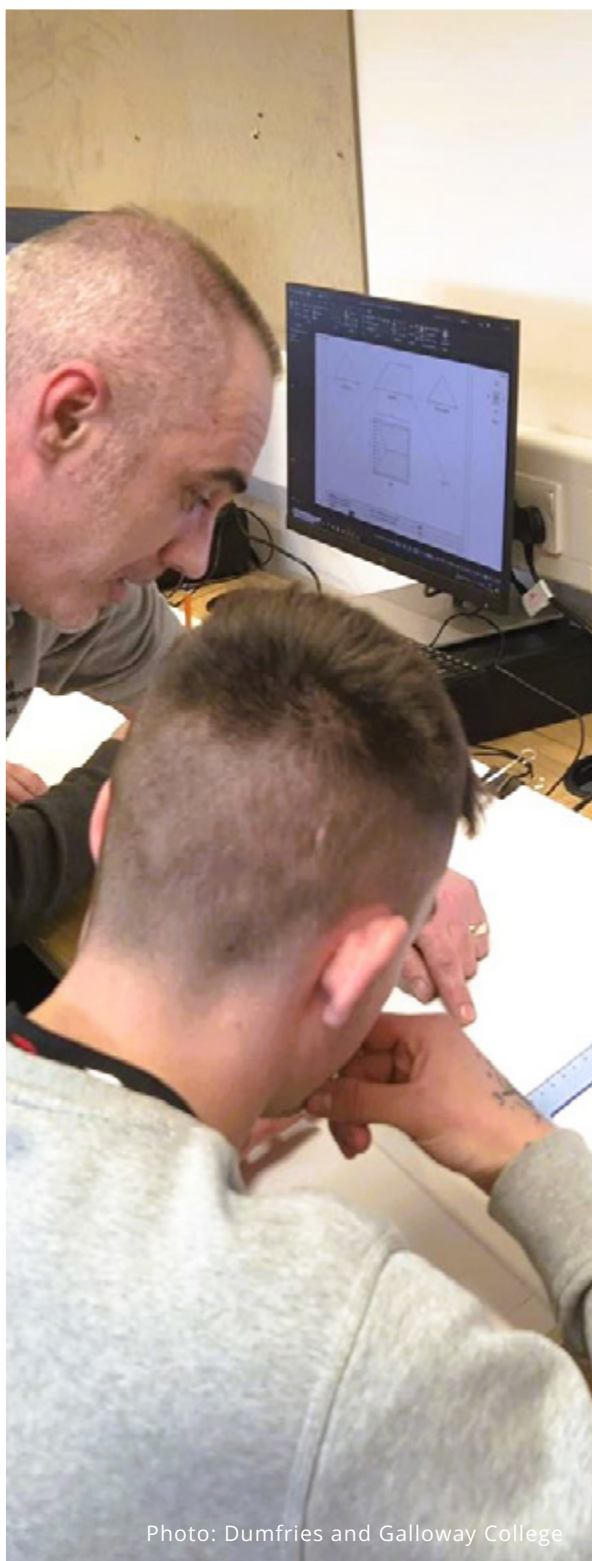


Photo: Dumfries and Galloway College



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