



REGIONAL
PATHFINDERS

Regional Tertiary Pathfinders: A System Level Report

SECTION 1

Cover Photos:

University of Aberdeen

Borders College

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SECTION 1:
Creating the Conditions for
Regional Tertiary Pathfinders

Photo: SRUC



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.

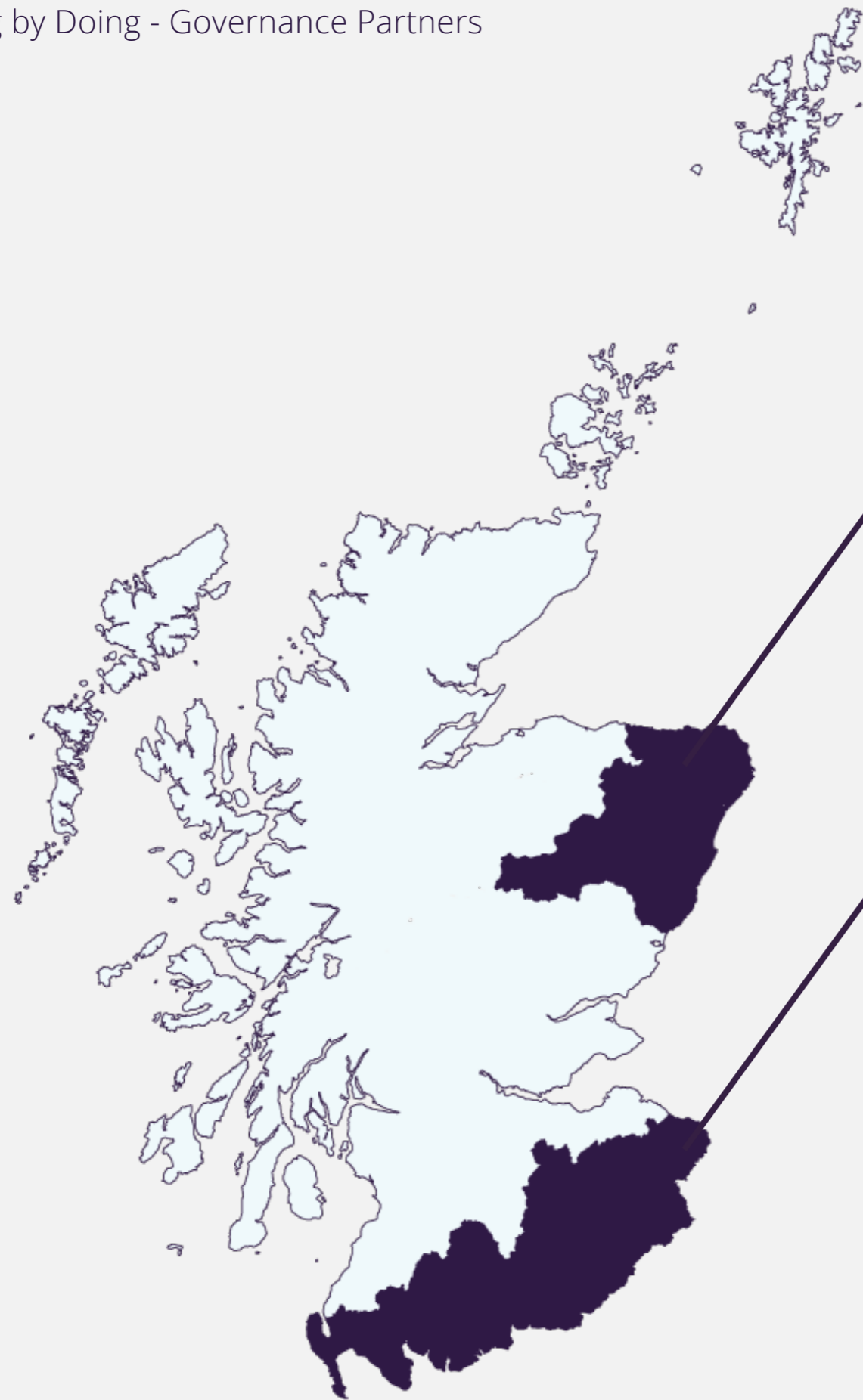
To support this work two [Regional Delivery Boards](#) (RDBs) were established by SFC in the South of Scotland and the North East of Scotland. The South of Scotland region encompasses the Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway Local Authority areas. This region is characterised by rural landscapes, 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

Learning by Doing - Governance Partners



NORTH EAST

SOUTH OF SCOTLAND



Photo: University of Aberdeen

Photo: North East Scotland College



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**

West of Scotland **Educational Pathways**



Responding to: **Learner pathways**

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



Responding to: **Regional skills priorities**

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



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**

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



Responding to: **Regional skills priorities**

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 intuitions 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.

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.

- 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.

- 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.

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.



Photo: Dumfries and Galloway College

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.

- 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.

Photo: SRUC



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

- 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

- 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



Scottish Funding Council
Comhairle Maoineachaidh na h-Alba

Apex 2 - 97 Haymarket Terrace

Edinburgh - EH12 5HD

T 0131 313 6500 - F 0131 313 6501

www.sfc.ac.uk