Regional Tertiary Pathfinders: A System Level Report

SECTION 2

Scottish Funding Council
Comhairle Maoineachaidh na h-Alba

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Cover Photos:
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Photo: SRUC

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

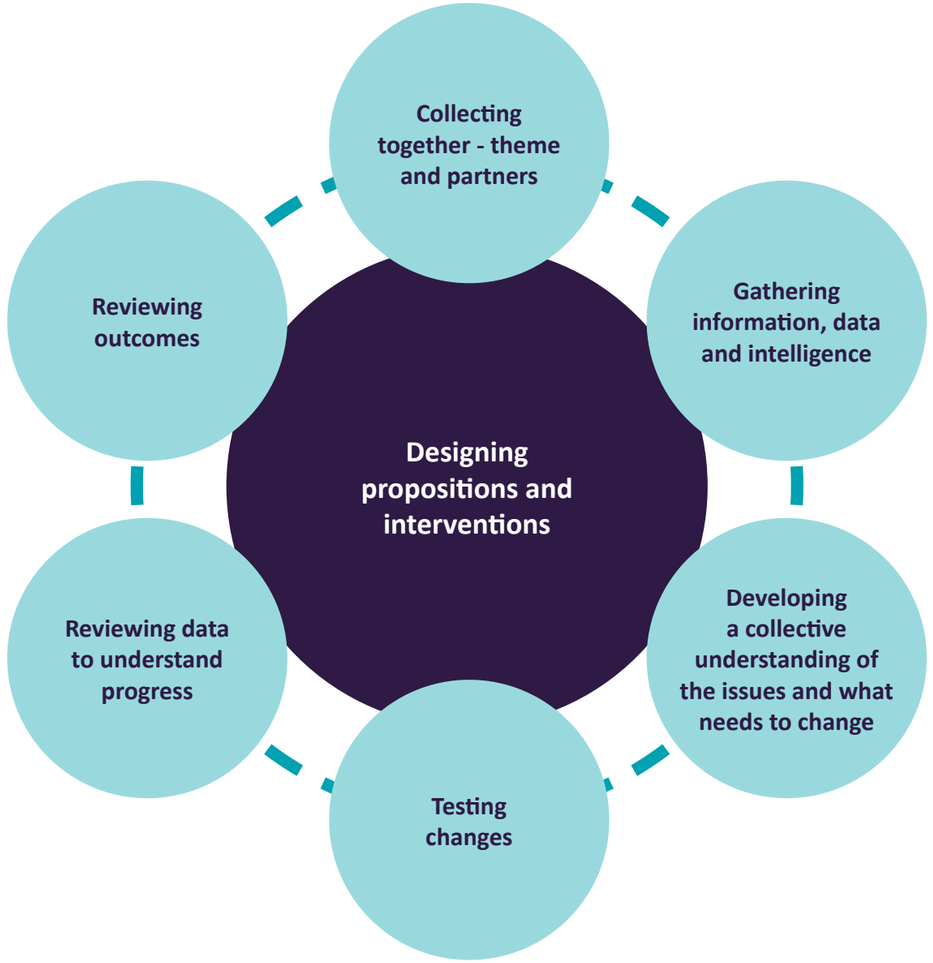
Photo: University of Aberdeen

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.

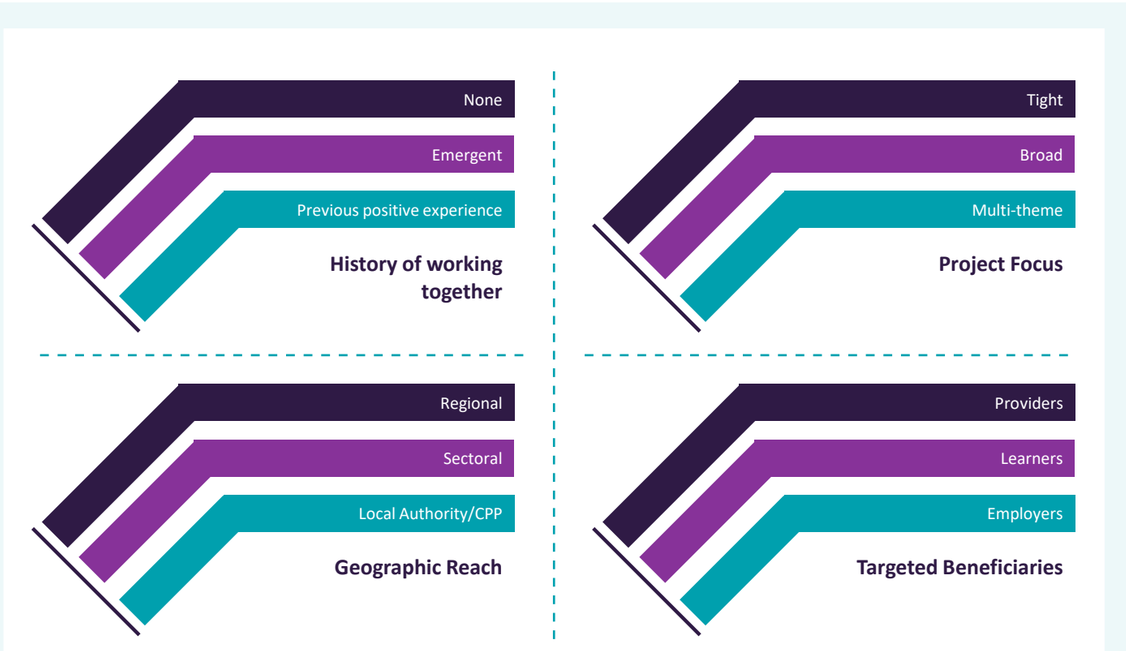
The table below sets out how these principles are reflected in the work of Pathfinders:

Myron Rogers (1996): Five Principles for working with adaptive change	How these principles are reflected in the work of Pathfinders
Real change happens in real work.	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.
Those who do the work do the change.	Senior leaders were asked to be actively involved in the work [VPs, heads of curriculum, local authority heads of service etc].
People own what they create.	Pilot projects were encouraged to work closely with partners to co-create and test solutions.
Start anywhere, go everywhere.	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.
Connect the system to more of itself.	Many opportunities were created to strengthen existing connections and to connect people from previously unconnected parts of the learning and skills system.

Photo: SRUC

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

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 NESA 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 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 seperate 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 NESA 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 NESA 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.

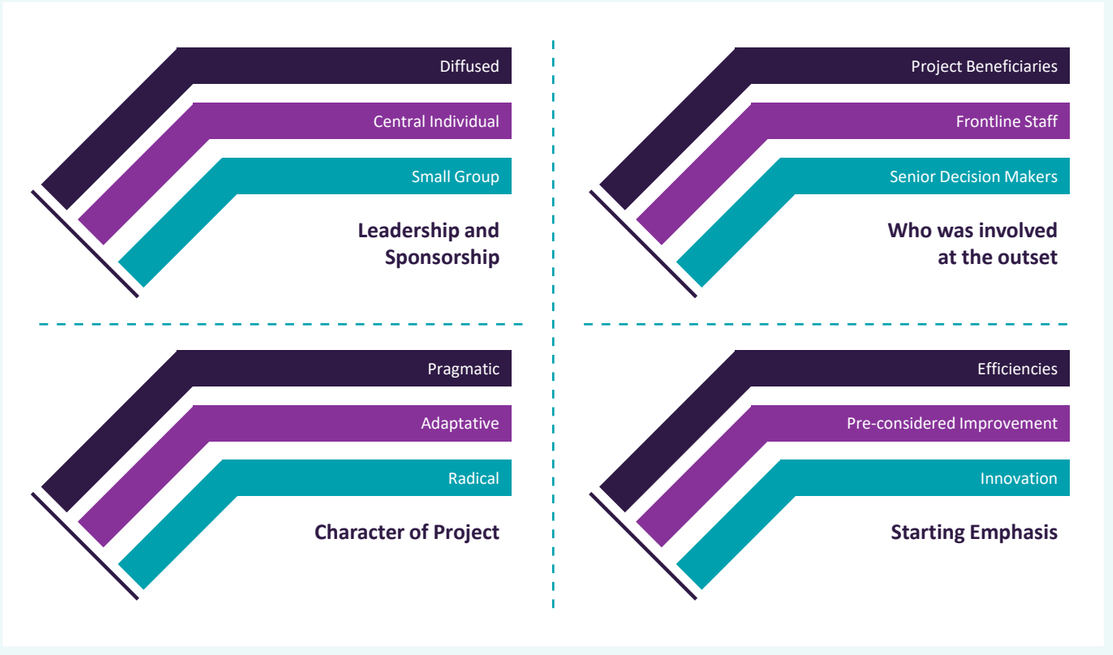
- The land-based Pathfinder project made connections with colleges beyond the South of Scotland in support of curriculum development, including Gamekeeping.
- The Digital Pathfinder project included representation and expert input from the Data Driven Innovation programme element of the Edinburgh and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

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.

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.

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.

Photo: Robert Gordon University

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

SFC's Current Role in the Learning and Skills System (Pathfinders)

Based on Policy Lab's Government as a system work

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