



REGIONAL
PATHFINDERS

Regional Tertiary Pathfinders: A System Level Report

INTRODUCTION

Cover Photos:

University of Aberdeen

Borders College

SRUC

University of Glasgow

Contents

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

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

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.



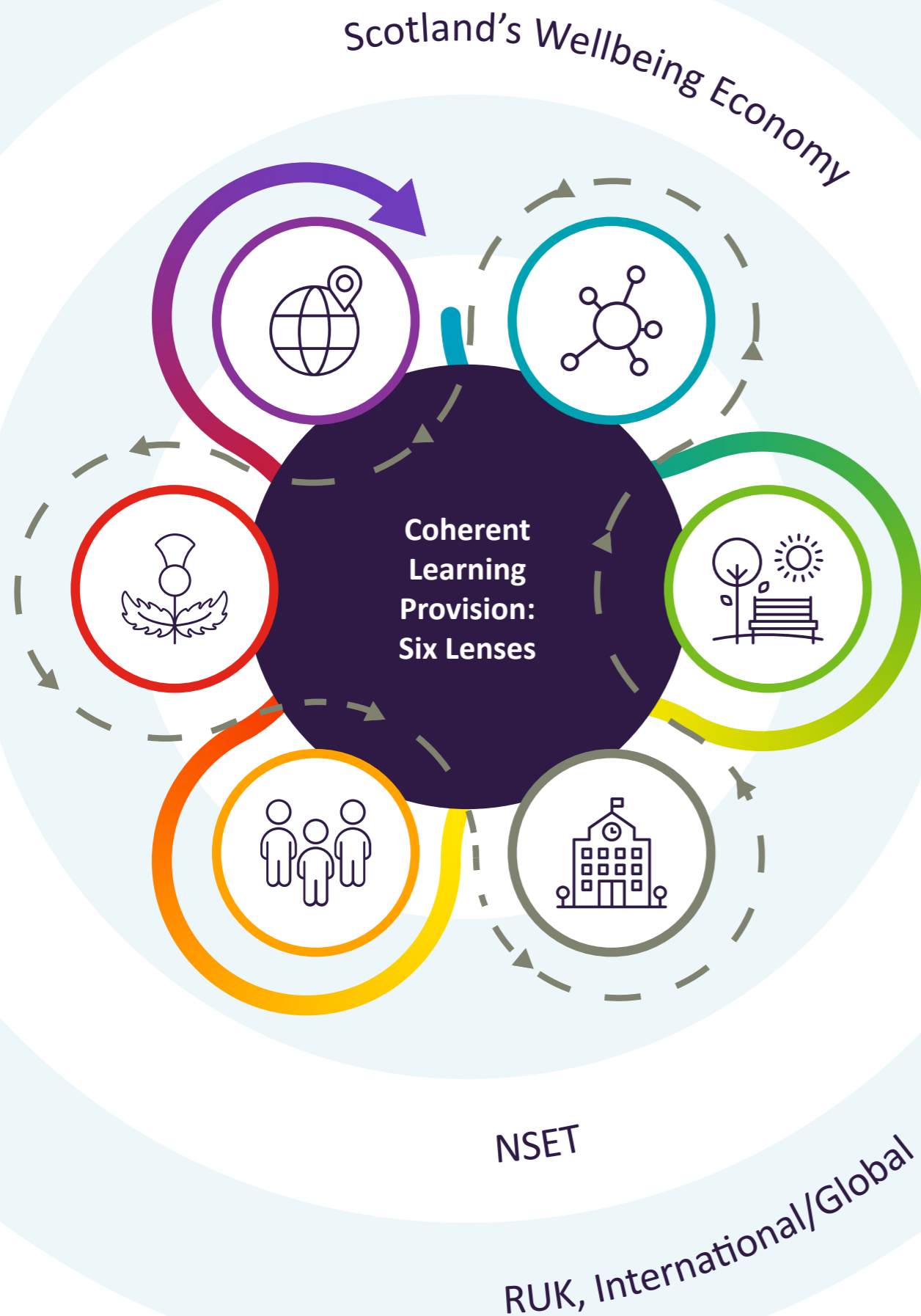
Developed new models of shared governance, placing a greater emphasis on a systems approach to lower or remove some institutional boundaries.



Photo: Robert Gordon University

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



NSET - National Strategy for Economic Transformation | RUK - Rest of the UK



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.



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