
PATHFINDERS – NATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD MINUTES

PRESENT: Karen Watt, Chair
Professor Ewart Keep
Mhairi Harrington
Professor Ron McQuaid
Gavin Lee
Robin Ashton
Sara Rae
Chris Brodie
Gerry Lyons
Helen Webster
Linda Hanna
Gillian Docherty
Dr Melanie Smith
Professor Chris Millward

OFFICERS: Claire McPherson
Seamus Spencer
Jessica Armstrong
Morven Pritchard

Apologies: Jane Martin
Prof Colm Harmon
Kirsty Evans

Welcome

1. The Chair welcomed members to the meeting and thanked them for their commitment.
2. The membership represents a variety of expertise spanning labour market intelligence, practitioners in planning, academics, enterprise and skills agencies, Local Authorities,

Scottish Government, as well as the Scottish Funding Council Board.

3. It was noted that the National Advisory Board would have a key role in shaping the Regional Tertiary Provision Pathfinders and would provide an important contribution as SFC examines the complex process of provision planning in an ever-changing environment.

Terms of Reference

4. Draft Board Terms of Reference were circulated in advance of the meeting. The remit of the Board was agreed by members in addition to their proposed contribution over the duration of the Pathfinders programme. It was felt that the Board would be valuable in assisting SFC navigate the challenges of the current financial crisis and the implications for the sector, as it adapts and pivots to ensure flexibility for learners, institutions, and stakeholders alike.

Skills Planning and Alignment

1. The Chair thanked Professor Ewart Keep for permitting his paper on Skills Alignment to be shared with the Board. Members were specifically asked to consider Paragraph 13, which highlighted a range of challenges to effective skills alignment. These included:
 2. the availability of relevant labour market intelligence;
 3. the improbability of striking an exact match between learners and vacancies;
 4. striking the balance between local and regional insights versus top-down planning;
 5. the fact that much skills alignment takes place through gradual adaptation of courses and provision over time;
 6. where SFC could have a role scaffolding the process and how it gets assurance of the processes; and
 7. the need to prepare learners for jobs of the future with unknown requirements.
 8. driving learner demand in some sectors would need to go beyond tailoring provision, and that resource was a requirement for effective skills planning.
9. Discussion on the challenges facing and requirements for effective skills planning included:

Influences on Skills Trends and Outcomes

10. Provision is one of many factors with an influence on skills outcomes. There are other factors at play, including labour market pressures and demographic trends, and these

need to be taken into consideration.

11. As well as looking at any possibilities for targeted investment in the education and skills system, it would be important to maximise opportunities to invest behind key strategic areas for skills development e.g. Net Zero. Attention should also be given to opportunities to stimulate investment from elsewhere (e.g. FDI).
12. Robust labour market intelligence (LMI) is costly to produce and there is need for this to be constantly updated. It is important for regions to engage with local employers, taking a bottom-up view to current and emerging skills needs, while also ensuring that decisions are data-driven.
13. It was noted that negotiating a balance between information on opportunities and learner choice is complex, though important.

Collaboration with Employers

14. In addition to enhancing education and skills provision, it was felt there was a need to consider incentives for industry engagement and involvement, particularly in sectors with acute skills shortages.
15. It was suggested that coherence is different from planning, if considering dialogue with employers and co-production. Equally, coherence should mean more than learner choice. We need to consider what incentives exist to activate the co-production and in turn reflect on the accountability frameworks. One opportunity could be funding geared around national challenges; institutions will respond to hypothecated funding. It is less clear how as a funder you can influence employers, there should be join up for example around the industrial strategy.
16. It is important to be proactive in engaging with employers and local industrial strategies, while also recognising the complex national and local dynamics at play within the operating environment. Also consider that some skills gaps are a product of pressures in the labour market, unattractive sectors or poor pay and terms and conditions.
17. Deepening connections with employers was highlighted as a priority, as well as being cognisant of the range of employers (e.g. SMEs and third sector) based within a region, and the variation in operating contexts (e.g. remote and rural). Developing targeted engagement approaches is key to effective engagement and co-creating solutions.
18. It was acknowledged that while the SFC-led Pathfinders were institution-led, private sector or employer representation and engagement could be highlighted further. It was felt that the role of the private sector and its influence should feature in the ongoing development of the work. This could include skills academies, Innovation Centre's, key employers, and representative groups. It was highlighted that employer engagement was taking place on an institutional level, in testing the pilots.

Learner Engagement

19. Members noted the importance of ensuring learners were aware of the choices and learning routes available to them at an early stage. As well as engaging learners at an early point, consideration should be given to how best to engage school leavers and inform them of potential pathways. This includes young people who would be well-placed to benefit from opportunities, but lack awareness and support to put themselves forward, e.g. new training in heating and ventilation engineers.
20. Teaching experts based in institutions have a critical role in driving curriculum development and helping to shape well-rounded individuals. It is important to have provision in place to enable them to be steeped in both teaching and vocational contexts.
21. It was noted that enhanced careers services and information would be key to ensuring learners are aware of the wide-ranging opportunities available to them. Join-up with other policy commitments, such as the Hayward Review of Qualifications and Assessment and the Career Review, is essential to avoid duplication and maximise impact.

Responsiveness and core competencies

22. Members discussed the importance of creating the right conditions to enable the education and skills system and its agencies to be responsive and agile to meet skills gaps. Institutions have demonstrated that they are capable of doing this, to recognise the complexity, consideration needs to be given to the reality of timelines for the development of new undergraduate degrees and the need to balance long and short-term planning e.g. university provision for undergraduate study or College flexible workforce development provision, and how additional flexibility can be enabled.
23. Addressing perceptions and building the narrative around qualifications and competencies may hold the key to alleviating skills gaps in some sectors of the economy. Work to improve existing levels of esteem and reputation would need to be done in collaboration with employers and industry and cannot be solved by institutions alone.
24. There may be benefit in considering transferability of qualifications and skills gained across sectors (e.g. developing competencies allowing veterinary workers to transition into human healthcare settings). It was highlighted that striving to develop coherence would be all the more important given the financially challenging backdrop facing institutions.

Presentation – Pathfinders Aims and Project Update

25. Seamus Spencer presented an overview of the Pathfinder delivery approach, aims, outcomes and activity delivered to date through each of the four work packages. Detail was provided on the seven regional pilots emerging from the work of the Regional Delivery Boards in the North-East and South of Scotland, underlining that we are interested in understanding how partners are collaborating as well as what they are delivering. The NAB will have a particular role in shaping how the outputs of the interlinked work packages will inform our overall approach to skills planning. It was agreed that the National Advisory Board papers would be shared with the wider programme governance to maintain a flow of information between those involved.

Date of next meeting

26. A future meeting date in December will be scoped and confirmed in due course.