



REGIONAL
PATHFINDERS

Regional Tertiary Pathfinders: A System Level Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Scottish Funding Council
Comhairle Maoinachaidh na h-Alba

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Cover Photos:

University of Aberdeen

Borders College

SRUC

University of Glasgow

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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



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.

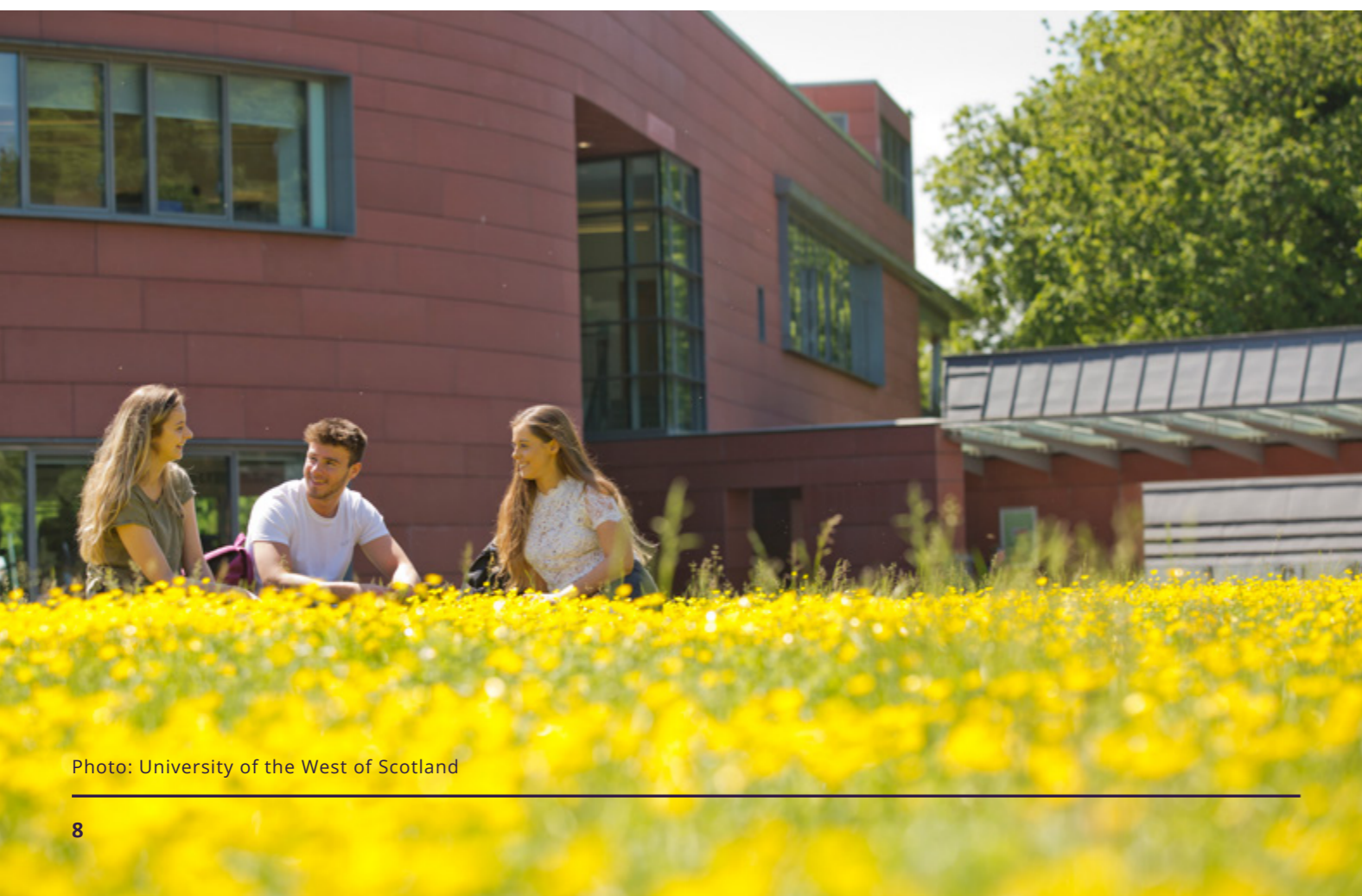


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