REGIONAL PATHFINDERS

Regional Tertiary Pathfinders: A System Level Report

Scottish Funding Council
Comhairle Maoineachaidh na h-Alba

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Models of
collaboration

Photo: North East Scotland College

This section examines the collaborative models used in the Pathfinder projects, describing how partnerships between institutions, as well as between institutions and wider regional stakeholders, have developed innovative and responsive education pathways that align with regional skills needs.

Models of collaboration

The relationships colleges and universities are developing with multiple partners and other providers are varied. Across the Scottish Tertiary education sector, there are examples of universities working with multiple colleges using different models of collaboration to design and deliver provision. Similarly, there are examples of colleges working with multiple universities in this way. Examples of this can be viewed on SFC's website.

Working collaboratively supports the expansion of provision, builds new and diverse curriculum pathways, improves operational effectiveness, supports staff development, and can help provide better outcomes for students. Institutions are working together to share information and intelligence and engage with employers, undertaking due diligence to understand the target population of learners has been essential. Institutions and regional partners can have different cultural norms and expectations when collaborating to deliver further and higher education and this needs to inform the offer of provision – one size does not fit all.

Pathfinder project collaborations involved two or more institutions working together, or two or more institutions working together with other education and skills stakeholders, towards the shared goal of developing regional coherent education and skills provision, through sustained formal and/or informal relationships that enabled joint actions.

Strategic Alliances between partnering Tertiary Institutions

A strategic alliance is an arrangement between two or more organisations with a shared mutual interest to undertake activities which bring mutual benefits, collaborating where it makes sense to do so, and bringing tangible benefits to the partners.

Strategic alliances can be short or long-term and the agreement should support all partners to work towards a common, shared goal. The alliance builds on the collective strength of the organisations, whilst respecting individual identity and independence.

A strategic alliance in tertiary education can produce a collaborative, agreed plan of work on key areas across academic, vocational, and regional priorities. A strategic alliance may be particularly beneficial where new opportunities or enhancements would not be possible without additional resource and collaboration.

Successful partnerships solve problems, are sustainable and create value for the partners that are involved in them. An alliance can provide more structure and strategic direction to a collaboration and support better relationships with industry and local businesses. A mix of strategies are being adopted to respond to the challenging financial environment, such as exploring opportunities for strategic collaborations.

Formal Strategic Alliances

Strategic agreements of intent clearly define the commitments and collaborative goals between partnering institutions underpin more formal alliances. They set out the shared objectives, governance structures, and resource allocations that underpin the partnership, providing a framework for coordinated action and sustained collaboration. These agreements ensure institutions remain aligned and accountable, demonstrate a long-term commitment to working together towards mutual benefits, and ultimately enhance the overall impact and sustainability of collaboration.

Some articulation agreements also offer an example of a formalised strategic alliance between institutions. These agreements, which facilitate the transfer of students and credits between institutions, can vary in their formality and scope. Some articulation agreements are highly systematic and align curricula across multiple programmes, reflecting a structured, institutional-level partnership, others are more informal, developed at the level of individual programmes or led by colleagues within institutions. This variability means that articulation agreements can range from comprehensive, strategic alliances that support broader shared educational goals to more localised arrangements that support a specific pathway. Regardless of their level of formality, all articulation agreements exemplify collaborative working to benefit student pathways and enhance the value and impact of partnerships between tertiary institutions.

Informal Strategic Alliances

In addition to formal strategic alliances, there are also more informal partnerships, often based on collaborative relationships that focus on co-developing practice. While these informal alliances may not involve explicit strategic agreements, they can still share many of the same characteristics as their formal counterparts. This includes sharing data, infrastructure and services, collaborative curriculum development, co-funding specialist staff to support both/multiple institutions, optimising the use of estates, and providing shared access to staff CPD opportunities. Informal collaborations tend to be time bound, and involve more one off activities.

Examples from the Pathfinder projects illustrate the spectrum of strategic alliances, ranging from formalised agreements to more informal collaborations, all aimed at achieving mutual benefits:

SoS - Developing a joint prospectus for learning and innovation in the land-based sector

Alliance: Formal

Reasons: The collaboration between SRUC and Borders College is considered a formal alliance due to the presence of a strategic agreement of intent, which explicitly defines the partnership. This agreement formalises key aspects such as joint curriculum development, shared infrastructure, and co-funding of specialist staff, all of which require structured coordination and long-term commitment. While similar features might be present in informal alliances, the formalised nature of this agreement ensures clear governance and accountability, setting it apart as a structured and intentional collaboration.

SoS - West of Scotland Educational Pathways:

Alliance: Formal

Reasons: This project represents a formal alliance between UWS and Dumfries and Galloway College, evidenced by structured articulation agreements that provide clear pathways for student transitions across various programmes. The formality is reinforced by joint curriculum development in response to regional needs, shared infrastructure and resources, and co-location of staff. Regular executive-level coordination and the use of UWS's quality assurance processes further support the structured nature of this collaboration, ensuring long-term commitment and sustained impact on regional education and skills provision.

SoS – Digital Skills Pathfinder:

Alliance: Informal

Reasons: This project is an informal alliance between Borders College and Dumfries & Galloway College and a wider range of stakeholders. Without a specific focus on strategic agreements, instead, the partnership is characterised by joint curriculum development, shared resources and good practice. This informal alliance focuses on practical outcomes and collaboration without formal institutional commitments.

NE - NESA Energy Transition Skills Pathway:

Alliance: Formal

Reasons: This project represents a formal alliance between the University of Aberdeen, Robert Gordon University, and North East Scotland College. The established NESA governance structures provide a coordinated and organised approach. The partnership is further formalised through the Memorandums of Understanding with industry partners, structured coordination across institutions, and shared digital resources. The continued operation of NESA and the sustained use of the Energy Transition Skills tool demonstrate a long-term commitment to comprehensive strategic collaboration.

NE - Developing demand-led, aligned and sustainable learner pathways:

Alliance: Formal

Reasons: This project represents a formal alliance between NESCol and RGU, evidenced by the creation and enhancement of structured articulation agreements and the development of a joint offer letter to support student transitions across various programmes. The collaboration involved joint curriculum development, shared resources, and services, such as data sharing agreements to inform market insight and recruitment strategies. These elements reinforce the structured and long-term nature of the partnership.

NE – Enhancing the senior phase:

Alliance: Formal

Reasons: This project represents a formal alliance between NESCol and RGU, supported by the University of Aberdeen and Aberdeen City Council. The formal nature is evident through the enhancement of articulation agreements across various programmes between NESCol and RGU, joint curriculum development, and shared CPD programmes. While the project focuses on specific outcomes like the HNC Pilot and the Winter Leaver Programme, the sustained commitment and governance structures in place reflect a formal alliance aimed at enhancing educational pathways for students in the region over the long-term.

NE - Enhancing and coordinating the Simulation infrastructure for Health and Social Care Education:

Alliance: Informal

Reasons: This project can be defined as an informal alliance between Robert Gordon University, the University of Aberdeen, and NESCol. The collaboration was structured through the formation of the Grampian Interprofessional Simulation Group and the development of a strategic plan. However, the absence of formal structured agreements between the institutions suggests that the partnership for this work stream is focused on specific, project-based outcomes rather than a long-term, formal alliance. The project resulted in sharing resources and joint faculty development, but without formalised agreements, it remains an informal collaboration aimed at enhancing simulation-based education in the region.

Partnerships with other stakeholders

"This project has taken skills planning to another level by looking at regional needs and mapping across who is offering what, so we have been able to take a targeted focused approach and not duplicate effort to where the jobs are, and qualifications are needed."

"What was there previously was fragmented. It's allowed us to build a scaffold for skills development regionally. It's a clear example of knitting together all the agencies."

The Pathfinder projects exemplified the importance of strategic partnerships between tertiary institutions and a wide range of other organisations. These collaborations were essential in aligning educational provision with the specific needs of local communities, industries, and regional economies. The projects highlight the successful transition from bi-lateral collaboration approaches—such as those between a university and a college, or a college and an employer— into multi-partner collaborations that can involve multiple institutions, local authorities, industry bodies, and community organisations. This shift utilises the expertise and resources of various partners to identify and address regional skills gaps and workforce needs more effectively.

Photo: Borders College

Key Partners Engaged

Skills and enterprise bodies: Partners from SDS, South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) and Scottish Enterprise (SE) were members of the Regional Delivery Boards and supportive of the Pathfinder programme and pilots. Their help ensured the pathfinder pilots selected linked to regional priorities and the needs of the regional economies. Partners also played an important role in supporting the Pathfinder programme through promotion and incorporation within regional planning fora and associated groups. They provided insight, supporting project collaborations, providing an understanding of the business base and connections for projects ensuring they were aligned to the broader regional economic strategies and industry demand.

Local Authorities: Local councils were crucial in securing buy-in for the curriculum being developed. Their involvement helped gain a deeper understanding of local community needs, ensuring that pathways were accessible and relevant to the population. Councils across various regions, including Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Dumfries and Galloway, and the Scottish Borders, played key roles in shaping skills responses tailored to local demands.

Developing the Young Workforce (DYW): DYW was a key partner in supporting the transition from education to employment, particularly in projects focused on expanding senior phase offerings and creating accessible pathways for young people. DYW's involvement helped ensure that educational programmes were closely aligned with workforce development goals.

Industry Partners: Regional employers and industry bodies across sectors such as agriculture, energy, digital skills construction, and healthcare were involved in shaping curricula to meet current and future workforce demands. Their input helps ensure that educational programmes were relevant and that students were equipped with the necessary skills for employment.

Secondary Schools: Collaboration with local secondary schools was a common feature, ensuring a smooth transition for students from school to further and higher education. This collaboration, supported by Developing the Young Workforce (DYW), also helped generate awareness and build appetite for the new courses being developed, while focusing on enhancing senior phase curricula and expanding access to higher education.

Health Boards and NHS: In health and social care education projects, partnerships with NHS Grampian and other health boards were crucial for aligning simulation training and other educational resources with the needs of the healthcare sector.

Community and Third Sector Organisations: In some projects, community groups were engaged to broaden access to educational resources, particularly in digital skills initiatives. This aimed to ensure inclusivity and addressed the needs of underrepresented groups.

Photo: SRUC

Cross-cutting behaviours and contextual factors

The success of the various models of collaboration, whether between educational institutions or partnerships with other regional stakeholders, is deeply rooted in five cross-cutting behaviours and contextual factors that have emerged as foundations for effective regional collaboration through the Pathfinder projects. These behaviours underpin both structured, long-term strategic alliances and more flexible, informal collaborations, allowing partners to achieve shared goals despite differences in formality or scope.
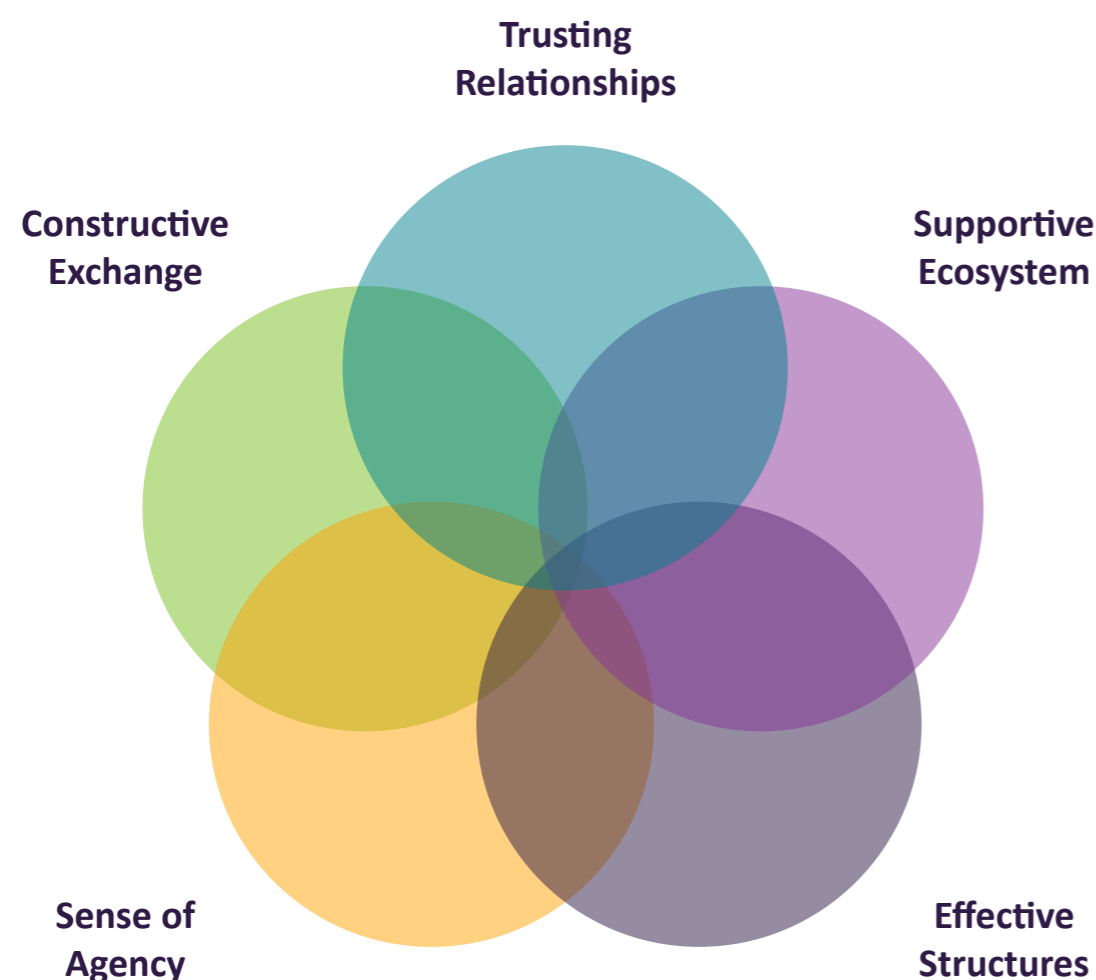
Trusting relationships: Trust fosters security and confidence, encouraging active, empathetic listening, identifying shared goals, and transforming competitive behaviours into cooperative practices. It is essential for sustaining relationships despite external pressures and for building long-term commitment. Foundational to both formal and informal partnerships, trust enables institutions to share resources, align strategies, and navigate challenges. In formal institutional alliances, it is often embedded in strategic agreements and long-term commitments, while informal institutional collaborations rely on it to maintain flexibility and adaptability. For partnerships with regional actors—such as local authorities, industry partners, and community organisations—trust is key to ensuring flexibility, mutual benefit, and smooth coordination across diverse sectors and interests.

Supportive Ecosystem: An innovation-friendly ecosystem that encourages "learning by doing" is essential for testing new approaches and adapting to change. Support for tests of change and flexible funding schemes further facilitate these processes. National and regional bodies, such as SFC, along with regional partners like SDS, local authorities, enterprise agencies, and community organisations, play a critical role in creating a supportive and resilient system. This ecosystem enables both formal and informal institutional alliances, as well as partnerships with wider regional stakeholders, to experiment, learn, and respond to evolving needs by providing the necessary flexibility, resources, and local insight.

Constructive Exchange: Sharing knowledge and resources is critical across all forms of collaboration. Whether through formal data-sharing agreements or informal exchanges of best practices and lessons learned, constructive exchange helps partners utilise each other's strengths and avoid duplication, supporting more effective collaborations.

Effective Structures: Clear governance and operational frameworks at the project, institutional, or regional levels are essential. In formal institutional alliances, structured agreements and clearly defined roles are necessary to ensure alignment and commitment, ensuring that the purpose and direction of projects are clarified between partners. Informal institutional alliances benefit from flexible but well-defined structures to support collaboration. In partnerships involving wider regional stakeholders, governance benefits from clearly shared goals and well-defined responsibilities for each actor. Success across different models of collaboration relies on the capacity to collaborate effectively, the involvement of the right individuals, equitable partnerships, and a clear direction with commitment from senior leadership.

Sense of Agency: Effective collaborations thrive when partners feel empowered to take ownership of their roles. A strong sense of agency, where responsibility and authority are delegated appropriately, fosters initiative, leadership, and commitment to driving projects forward. This is particularly important for maintaining momentum and ensuring partnerships are not constrained by top-down control.

These cross-cutting behaviours ensure that both formal and informal alliances and partnerships with regional stakeholders, are not just agreements on paper but dynamic, evolving relationships capable of adapting to regional needs, achieving mutual benefits, and delivering tangible results.

We anticipate that institutions will use their regular engagement with their Outcome Manager to keep SFC informed of opportunities and developments of strategic alliances. SFC may be able to provide additional expertise to support the development of alliances, as well as share best practice at a sector level.

Photo: University of Aberdeen

Learning Points

Take a step back as institutions - start from 'place' and what the region needs and then challenge yourselves as institutions to take a strategic approach to do more to deliver for the region, leveraging approaches which will have the biggest impact for learners and the region.

Embrace regional and sectoral geographies when agreeing the institutions and organisations to involve in collaborations.

Move beyond personal relationships and agree how the whole institution is involved in collaboration.

Culture change within tertiary institutions, and with regional partners, happens on the ground and grows momentum. It requires clear oversight and authorisation from governing bodies. Secure ownership at all levels to enable sustained change

Work with partners in the co-development and sharing of infrastructure and services and making best use of estates. Share access to staff CPD opportunities.

Maintaining momentum matters. Work together as institutions on the alignment of courses and progression pathways to develop a cohesive education and skills offer for people, communities and employers.

Colleges and universities can operate with autonomy in terms of partnership and collaboration practices. Any regionally focused work needs to be carefully informed by an understanding of the regions' ongoing efforts in terms of partnership and collaboration to avoid hindering effective efforts and prevent shifting effective collaboration practices towards unproductive competition.