



REGIONAL
PATHFINDERS

Regional Tertiary Pathfinders: A System Level Report

SECTION 4

Cover Photos:

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SECTION 4:
Understanding Skills
Planning Partnerships

This section looks at the regional and local skills planning landscape and the wider group of stakeholder partnerships in which colleges and universities participate.

Understanding Skills Planning Partnerships

In the context of the Pathfinder programme, Regional Delivery Boards have played an important role in helping institutions to work with a wide range of stakeholders. However, the intention is not to replicate these across Scotland, but to use the learning from Pathfinders to support institutions as they engage with existing regional partnerships, e.g. Regional Economic Partnerships (REPs) and sub-regional partnerships, such as Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) and for the funding body to play an active role in REPs (See Annex A for an overview of these partnerships in the Pathfinder programme regions). This will be an important way in which to support institutions as they contribute to the delivery of the National Strategy for Economic Transformation.

To achieve this, we needed to make visible the ways in which skills planning is done regionally and locally in Scotland. In his Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape, James Withers was clear that although the Review focused on the ‘skills functions’ of national public bodies and related advisory groups, to inform his perspective he needed “to build an understanding of the system or wider landscape in which those bodies operate”. He described this system as “the actors, structures and processes that are in place to enable the smooth operation of Scotland’s post-school learning and training provision”. Withers also clarified that “a fundamental tenet of this report [is] that there is no separate ‘skills system’ and ‘education system’, but rather a single post-school learning system within which skills and knowledge are developed through the learning experiences that take place throughout our lives.” [para 1.03].

While Withers’ Review reinforces these concepts, the Pathfinder programme, which pre-dates the review, has collaborated with stakeholders over the last few years to gain a

deeper understanding of how the regional and local skills planning partnership system operates. It is well-accepted in the public sector that the systems within which we work and seek to enact change are complex. This complexity necessitates a thorough understanding of how different parts of a system are interconnected and how they work together to affect the behaviour of the whole.

Systems thinking, a method for understanding and analysing complex systems, their relationships, and interactions, has been central to our approach in the Pathfinder programme. The approach involves examining the entire system rather than just its individual components and understanding how the parts work together to deliver results.

The dynamics of skills planning in Scotland are neither primarily national, regional nor local. Instead, it functions as a complex set of interrelationships: local strategies are shaped by regional priorities, while regional objectives also take cues from local needs and circumstances. In this framework, local authorities emerge as important players. They play a pivotal role in organising and allocating funding, often due to their facilitative role within CPPs and REPs, as well as their foundation in democratic accountability.

As the interaction between various partnerships is primarily facilitated by the same actors participating in groups at both levels, rather than through governance, poor leadership, communication, or partnership structures can lead to duplication of efforts and a lack of clarity regarding roles and remits. Consequently, the system can be confusing for institutions and other stakeholders to navigate, creating uncertainty about where best to direct resources.

“We exist in silos that are driven by a policy system that is linked to Government and to a particular cabinet secretary. That is the tram line that bodies are set on, but they are asked, at the same time, to integrate and work in partnership with others. The system remains fragmented, but there is strong evidence that despite that, a lot of strong local partnership working is taking place.”

- Mark McAteer, representing the Community Planning Improvement Board at Scottish Parliament’s Inquiry into Community Planning.

The Scottish Government’s Purpose and Principles emphasises the importance of a lifelong education system that supports people at every stage of their lives. It states that the purpose is:

“To ensure that people, at every stage in life, have the opportunity and means to develop the skills, knowledge, values, and attributes to fulfil their potential and to make a meaningful contribution to society.”

To have a system that supports a coherent lifelong learning offer, there needs to be effective links at the local level, from local to regional, and vice versa. At the moment there is a reliance on proactive colleagues on the ground to make the system work and power imbalances. There needs to be trust from the wider system that institutions will make the right decisions as educational professionals when developing the curriculum offer.

The Purpose and Principles acknowledges the need for a more integrated approach, stating the goal of creating “a cohesive system that can deliver for the future; where everyone plays their part and is supported to achieve their full potential.” It calls for collaboration across the post-school system with shared values and a common purpose. Current system structures will need to adapt to support this.

There are successful examples of where the college has a lead role in convening skills groups related to the REP and Local Employability Partnership (LEP). For example, Ayrshire College has responsibility to chair the Regional Skills Group in Ayrshire. This is a result of a new strategic regional economic approach, which aims to retrofit the Ayrshire Growth Deal to a new RES, supported by a restructuring of REP subgroups. This has led to a regional governance framework with a clearer reporting structure, and the College is central to this.

Utilising its strengths as an anchor institution operating in all three Ayrshire CPP areas, with strong links to schools and employers, Ayrshire College has acted as a broker, making sense of the various partnership structures and skills priorities. The college has brought together the right colleagues, and steered skills planning discussions. The effectiveness of this relies on having the right structure and membership, as identified by the college. This includes the three senior leads for Local Authority Education, three Local Authority leads for Economic Development, three LEP leads, Chamber of Commerce, SDS, Ayrshire

College, University of the West of Scotland, SFC and the voluntary sector. The new governance approach has helped align regional skills activity and supported more coherent pathway planning from school to employability and/or further and higher education. This new approach has also unlocked skills funding via the Growth Deal and has fostered a regional appreciation of the internal curriculum development process.

Similarly, NESCol has co-chaired the regional Learning and Skills Partnership, alongside SDS, in the North East since 2018. This approach helps to coordinate skills activities across the region and has supported a more integrated and strategic approach to addressing skills needs.

Work continues in other REPs in Scotland with different models of college and university involvement. For example, in the Glasgow City region, the 6 colleges have formulated a proposal working with partners to respond to regional skills priorities including suggestions around collaborative working, flexibility of funding and responsive provision.

In the Edinburgh and South East of Scotland City Region Deal, universities and colleges are engaged in planning through the HE/FE Group and play a significant role in the delivery of the Integrated Regional Employability and Skills programme (IRES), notably the Data Driven Innovation (DDI) and Housing, Construction and Infrastructure (HCI) skills gateways.

The programme learning from undertaking joint planning, development and in some cases marketing of new learning provision, career opportunities and pathways outlines the critical role of effective careers information advice and guidance (CIAG). Learners and their parents and carers and guidance teachers need timely, up to date information and support to make informed choices on subject choices and career pathways, particularly for new or emerging careers. Effective information sharing between partners including schools, local authorities and SDS, helps tertiary institutions de-risk new programme development and delivery.

Projects tested different approaches to providing information and engaging learners, influencers and partners. The Digital Pathfinder in the South of Scotland hosted a series of Meet the Learner events supported by DYW Borders and Dumfries and Galloway Council, using peer advocacy to promote digital pathways to school pupils. In the North East Skills Accelerator (NESA) Interactive Pathway partners created an Energy Careers Toolkit and involved young people in the design and product testing phases. In terms of careers education young people involved in the Southwest Educational Pathways pilot experienced the UWS Foundation Academy jointly delivered with DGC providing higher education transition support and engendering aspiration. Use of regional insight to tailor careers advice through events, showcases and digital platforms has proved effective for the pilots.

The Pathfinder’s programme has provided insights into what needs to change to enable tertiary institutions to increase their responsiveness within the existing system. SFC proposes the following to support a more responsive skills planning system:



Photo: University of the West of Scotland

Learning Points

Pathfinders show that when institutions lead skills responses, they can both inform regional economic strategies and better align curricula to regional and local needs. A greater leadership role for institutions in partnerships could streamline skills planning. SFC can also strengthen its presence and involvement in key regional groups, including REPs.

Institutions should actively seek collaboration opportunities with other colleges and universities within their region. By pooling resources and best practices, institutions can engage more effectively with regional and local skills planning systems and develop more coherent pathways for learners. This approach strengthens institutional capabilities and ensures a unified response to regional skills needs.

While SFC cannot provide direct financial support for these partnerships, we can recognise effective collaborations through thematic reviews, case studies, and best practice sharing. Additionally, SFC can offer advisory support, networking opportunities, and strategic guidance to help institutions leverage external funding sources, such as through local or regional partnerships.

Curriculum planning can be effectively done at a regional level, where appropriate, planning across multiple local authority areas within a region. Taking on a regional coordination role can give institutions improved access to industry partnerships, public bodies, and regional and local funding opportunities. This access can help them build strong alliances, align their strategies with national priorities, and secure and shape the spend of partnership funding for the greatest impact, that is aligned with regional and local skills needs through being informed by institutions strong connections with employers.

The pilot projects have shown the importance of improved data sharing for more effective skills planning. Formal data-sharing agreements between institutions, CPP and REP partners can provide access to more granular and relevant data, supporting better-informed decisions in curriculum development. In particular, the Pathfinder projects

show that there is a need to better consolidate data with schools and local authorities to support curriculum planning.

Institutions optimising participation in regional and local groups are contributing to a virtuous circle of data and intelligence. By actively engaging, they gain access to insights from local partners, while simultaneously enriching these conversations with the data they possess on student and employer needs.

To support responsive skills planning, institutions and partners should proactively engage with CIAG services as they develop through the work of the Careers Review and the Careers Service Collaborative.

SFC has a role to play sharing the learning from the Pathfinder programme relevant to pathway development, CIAG and careers education within the Careers Collaborative Delivery Group and wider.

Locally, partners can engage through Careers Collaborative groups and structures as they are established (eg Borders Careers Collaborative) to ensure promotion of careers pathways.

Institutional engagement with CPP subgroups—particularly LEPs and Community Learning and Development (CLD) partnerships supports the delivery of a comprehensive lifelong learning offer. Colleges can bridge gaps between LEP-managed employability programmes and CLD community learning activity, ensuring that pathways are aligned and mutually supportive. This can be resource intensive but important for effective transitions from education to employment, especially for those furthest from the labour market. Active participation in these partnerships provides institutions with critical insights into local skills needs and strengthens links with DYW (highlighted by Pathfinders projects as key in connecting with young people and employers). Engagement with LEPs is particularly important, as they play a central role in allocating UK and Scottish Government funding sources, such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Multiply and No One Left Behind.

Photo: Borders College



System Change

The Pathfinder programme has shown that clear organisational and governance structures are crucial for enabling institutions to work together effectively in a joint response to regional skills needs.

There are several ways in which the current skills planning system could change in order to deliver improved outcomes:

- Ensure REPs establish place-based partnerships involving colleges and universities to maximum effect, and that they cohere with other local or regional planning processes taking place at sub-regional levels, rather than adding layers of complexity to an already complex system.
- Enable effective employer relationships, ensuring that the focus reflects the broad range of employers within a region and that attention is paid to long-term priorities rather than simply current vacancies.
- Understanding the funding context, recognising the impact of both the level of funding going into the system and the funding approach, as either enabling or undermining ability to deliver on a region's economic plan.
- Establishing a clear and coherent approach to accountability, so that everyone is clear on their roles and responsibilities in developing and delivering regional skills priorities and associated provision. This approach will involve employers reflecting on how their role needs to change too.



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