

**University of the West of  
Scotland  
and  
Dumfries and Galloway College**

**South West Educational  
Pathways  
Pathfinder Project Final Report**

**April 2024**

## **1: The concerns and challenges about the education and skill system that we were responding to via our pilot project**

Within Dumfries and Galloway region the partners in the West of Scotland Educational pathway – UWS, Dumfries and Galloway Council and DGC – have been working in partnership for a number of years. Over that period there has been a number of different, and sometimes not particularly joined up, fora where discussion on regional skills planning and skill training takes place.

Thus, the most significant challenge the partners sought to address was a somewhat fragmented approach to regional skills planning and delivery, which had a tendency to slow collaborative developments. The pilot approach was to formalise joint academic programme planning and delivery – working closely with the Local Authority and others to identify both student demand and employer needs; and to then rapidly develop pilot programmes to address those needs.

It was recognised by the partners that a theme in a number of strategic regional meetings was the perceived need for a wider range of degrees locally and a pathway that supports students to enter study at SCQF level 7 and beyond. Thus, the purpose of the project was to strengthen the partnership working model between UWS and DGC in the Dumfries and Galloway region, through delivering a fresh approach to joint regional portfolio planning leading to an extended portfolio and efficient operation through appropriate sharing of resources.

Through this, to agree and achieve critical thinking to inform the establishment and delivery of new degree pathways across a range of regionally relevant subjects in Dumfries and to launch the first of those pathways in Academic Year 2022/23. Dumfries and Galloway College, through their local employer networks and engagement with various schools across the region identified two subject areas for development – cyber security and business.

## **2: What was already working well and what features did we want to build on / maintain.**

DGC and UWS already had formal articulation arrangements in place – however it was acknowledged that those arrangements could be somewhat challenging and that whilst colleagues worked together to assist students transition from college to university, it was a fragmented and sometime inefficient system.

The partners already worked well together in provision of shared services, like the campus library and at the point of project inception the executive teams had been discussing wider collaboration – thus, the new approach sought to build on the foundations put in place through articulation and joint service delivery, and take it to a new level of collaboration through more seamless academic planning to meet regional skills needs and demands.

Each partner also already attended key forums in D&G, at the forums there were some key themes around –

- young people leaving the region to study beyond SCQF level 7
- that there was not equitable degree access to all young people
- pathways were limited and disjointed.

Due to shared awareness of these discussions, an acceptance of some of that narrative and emerging executive discussion across the partner institutions, the partners were confident that they could work together to create a pathway from senior phase to degree.

### **3: New ways of working that emerged via the pilot**

The most significant shift was through a complete re-set of collaborative academic planning and delivery. This meant the teams working together from concept stage to look at areas of mutual understanding and expertise with a focus on how the teams could work collaboratively to deliver a truly shared programme.

The joint development of curriculum took place between partners looking at the offer in the senior phase, college and UWS, considering:

- An assessment of demand.
- Evidence of demand
- Resources required.
- Approval of offer.
- Promotion
- Implementation for 2023/24

During each of the stages we tested with partners that the offer would match the aims of study beyond SCQF level 7, would provide access to all and that the pathways were seamless.

In developing curriculum, we continually challenged existing norms, however we recognised at points we were bound by some of the current conventions in design of curriculum.

A key consideration in the development was that existing barriers to progression, such as re-applying at various points of articulation, were removed or minimised – this is more complex than it sounds, however the teams are actively engaged to deliver against this objective.

Academic and professional service teams met regularly to monitor and manage progress on development of all aspects of the pathfinder programmes. This involved colleagues from the executive teams of both institution, academic leads for the respective subject areas, and senior professional services staff with responsibility for school and applicant engagement. The team met regularly throughout the development stage, with academic approval being taken through the standard UWS quality assurance process by the respective schools in which the degree programmes sat. Senior level colleagues supported that process by dealing with any resource issues or challenges that arose during the process. Dumfries and Galloway College academic staff, as appropriate, became recognised teachers of

UWS as part of that development process. Thus, the partners sought to efficiently use existing process where it existed, but supplemented those processes with strategic oversight which allowed the institutions to appropriately adapt historic models to meet the desired outputs of the pathfinder project.

#### **4: Innovations delivered as a result of the pilot project and beneficiaries**

The major innovation was a new form of deeply collaborative working to understand regional requirements and taking the reflections of that joint work forward to collaborative development of the integrated pathway programme that provided the opportunity for senior phase school students to engage in tertiary education through a version of the UWS Foundation Academy – jointly delivered with Dumfries and Galloway College. The Foundation Academy allows pupils access to an extensive programme of higher educational transitional support, embedding aspiration into their educational journey and allowing them the possibility to extend their horizons. The 12-month programme includes a 10-week module delivered by academics in the school setting, together with a range of on-campus activities including subject taster sessions, mock lectures, interactive labs and workshops, and a range of online resources. This phase of the project is critical in signposting opportunities, in raising aspiration to engage in tertiary education and in preparing school students for the transition from school to the tertiary phase of the journey.

In terms of skills planning, Dumfries and Galloway College (DGC) plays a crucial role in understanding and meeting in understanding and regional skills requirements. The College has strong links with local businesses and industries which it exploited to understand their needs.

Through working with our regional employers, we have been able to design curriculum which meets industry current and future needs to ensure our student gain skills that are directly applicable to the local job market. In addition, as the college trains staff in employment this has helped in business and in computing identify gaps between the skills required by employers and those possessed by the workforce. This insight is critical in designing programs that address these gaps.

DGC has extensively scanned the environment within which it operates and through being embedded in the local community understands the socio-economic landscape, which helps in tailoring degree provision to the needs and aspirations of the local population.

The College within its portfolio has developed a number of pathways within the SCQF from lower levels of education to higher education, ensuring a smooth transition for students and aligning with regional workforce needs. DGC recognised in partnership with UWS that there were progression opportunities within the SCQF missing at HE level. This led to the development of the current degree pathways, and this has served as a model for new pathways.

DGC has employer partnerships which facilitate collaboration in business and computing through using guest lectures and real-world projects that enhance the learning experience and employability of graduates within the region. This

partnership approach has been further strengthened by the college through the development of employer skills reference groups in key sectoral areas.

With these solid foundations in place, development of the options in Dumfries and Galloway involved discussion and input from the local authority, schools across the region, the college and the university. The intelligence from those discussions was then considered in light of a number of tools and information sources to inform skills planning:

- *The Regional Skills Assessment (RSA)*

A key document was the use of the RSA for Dumfries and Galloway. Within D&G replacement and expansion demand for business is the highest category. The most identified knowledge and skills required are in customer service and management, both subject areas within business.

In terms of the RSA, it identifies digital skills gaps as being reported by employers, however it does not provide granular information for the region.

- *Lightcast*

Lightcast is a labour market prediction tool which can be tailored to any UK region. This source provides more granular information than the RSA.

In utilising Lightcast to forecast demand in business roles towards 2032 there is stable demand at circa 600 job openings per annum and that demand 3% which fractionally above the national average at 2.8%.

When examining computing roles, the predicted growth to 2032 is 6%. However, there are only predicted as 51 job openings per annum.

- *Digital Economy Business Survey & DESAP*

To further explore the need for computing skills we utilised the analysis from the DEBs survey for the South of Scotland. It was clear that there is considerable business demand for computing skills and in this region the skills gap at 24% was above that of Scotland.

The Digital Economy Skills Action Plan identifies the need for employers to ensure that employees have the correct digital skills to work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is recognised that the developments in computing and business can assist close the skills gap.

- *Employers*

Each partner spoke with key employers and employer groups to identify the requirement for the qualifications, and this was supported. The feedback matched the conclusions of the RSA there is a strong need for employers to have a pipeline of potential employees with appropriate education and skills at SCQF level 7+.

- *Existing Provision by UWS, DGC and D&G Council*

Each partner had existing provision with D&G which had strong demand, however there had not been deep enough discussion to examine how this might become a more coherent pathway with a clearer focus on developing higher level SCQF skills and pathways, as noted above.

This combined effort led to a new way of working together, that allowed more rapid development of the portfolio without over-reliance on third parties – in essence the institutions were able to move more quickly and collaboratively to meet emerging demand. It involved senior leadership teams, academic development teams, marketing teams and student recruitment teams collaborating to ensure join-up across the institutions, with shared costs and resource allocation. Examples of promotional materials jointly produced are attached at Appendix 1.

### **5: Ambition for our students and learners and future aspiration for the outcomes of the project**

The ambition remains to increase the number / percentage of young people in Dumfries and Galloway having access to degree pathways that are attractive to the applicant and that meet regional skills requirements. The success of the initial pathfinder approach has already led to discussion on other subjects being introduced – and has seen significant input from other regional employers to help shape that next stage.

### **6: Final conclusions**

A key learning from this project is that if there are willing partners with a shared strategic ambition and approach it is more likely that a timeous response to changing market needs can be achieved.

However, annualised funding continues to present a challenge to longer term planning of the response to the region's skills requirements, as it is clear that stability of provision is a key requirement for new programmes. If new developments are perceived as being somewhat temporary or programmes that may not have a long-term place in the overall skills landscape, it is highly likely that they will not prove attractive to applicants. This was one of the key points the partners had to focus on in developing the current pathfinder – ensuring that applicants, and their influencers, understood the currency of the offer and why it had a place in the skills / tertiary landscape. It was not a surprise that the number of school students engaging in the initial exercise was modest – with 8 students formally enrolling in the first year senior phase element; however student numbers on the HNC stage are higher with 63 across both programmes, the HND stage has 35 students across both programmes and it is anticipated that from the previous programmes 18 will transfer to degree level study (noting that cohort has not been fully engaged in this new programme).

Finally, the role of the College as a conduit to understanding regional skills requirements has been key to the early success of this project. The College has one of the best developed regional networks with schools and employers and is able to bring the intelligence provided through that network to discussions on portfolio

development – this is invaluable to sit alongside the data sets and formal reports referenced earlier.

This pilot project has established a firm foundation from which the partners are already building – over 2024/25 we anticipate the launch of extended options into at least two new subject areas.



Appendix 1 – Examples of promotional material

**DGC**  
Dumfries and  
Galloway College

**UNIVERSITY OF THE  
WEST of SCOTLAND**  
**UWS**

**FIND YOUR  
PLACE ON  
THE PATH TO  
UNIVERSITY**

[DUMGAL.AC.UK/UWS-PATHWAYS](http://DUMGAL.AC.UK/UWS-PATHWAYS)

Supported by

Scottish Funding Council  
Comhairle Maoinreachaidh na h-Alba

The poster features a dark blue background with orange and white text and graphics. On the left, the DGC logo is in orange, with the college name below it. In the top right, the UWS logo is inside an orange circle. The central text 'FIND YOUR PLACE ON THE PATH TO UNIVERSITY' is in large white letters. Below it is the website URL. At the bottom left, the Scottish Funding Council logo and name are shown. On the right, a young woman in a brown beanie and a young man in a black and blue patterned hoodie are smiling. Hand-drawn orange arrows and a speech bubble are scattered around the central text and logos.

**DGC**

Dumfries and  
Galloway College

**START YOUR  
UNIVERSITY  
JOURNEY  
FROM S5**

[DUMGAL.AC.UK/UWS-PATHWAYS](http://DUMGAL.AC.UK/UWS-PATHWAYS)

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UNIVERSITY OF THE  
WEST of SCOTLAND  
**UWS**



**DGC**

Dumfries and  
Galloway College



UNIVERSITY OF THE  
WEST of SCOTLAND  
**UWS**

**STREAMLINE  
YOUR JOURNEY  
FROM SCHOOL  
TO UNIVERSITY**

[DUMGAL.AC.UK/UWS-PATHWAYS](http://DUMGAL.AC.UK/UWS-PATHWAYS)



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## Appendix 2 – some reflections from participants in Dumfries and Galloway

*“The Foundation Academy gave me the opportunity to explore the courses I can do when I leave school. The course leader was able to help me to understand that universities are interested not only in my qualifications but the things I am involved in at school, like representing my school at sports, the volunteering I take part in outside school and help me to structure my personal statement to highlight this. The action plan also helped me get organised for university too.”*

*“I feel more confident about leaving school and I know I have chosen the right course for me as I knew what information to look for and the types of questions I needed to ask.”*

*“The course was helpful as I had no clue what to expect. I am good at a lot of different subjects, but I know I want to do a course which will help me get a job after school. I was able to find out more about the courses available in computing and business and find out that there were courses at the college I could do and then go to uni.”*

*“I liked the help given to me as I had a lot of questions and didn’t know who to go to for help. At school, teachers tell you what to do, I was able to speak with the UWS teacher and other students about why I wanted to study a particular subject and there were others in the same position as me and that made me more confident. The teacher was friendly and always happy to help.”*