
Skills Alignment – Thematic Discussion

Purpose

1. The content of this paper builds on discussion at the inaugural National Advisory Board meeting which focused on some of the challenges associated with effective skills alignment. In particular, it discusses the themes of **engaging the whole system** and **employers as partners**. The highlights the approach to the Pathfinders projects across these two themes and asks members to consider future opportunities to explore.

Background – Strategic context

2. The 4th October meeting of the National Advisory Board included discussion arising from Professor Ewart Keep's paper on skills alignment, particularly relating to opportunities and challenges to effective planning. Board members proposed that, across the breadth of its activity, SFC should be mindful of the importance of engaging the whole system, as well as of engaging with employers as partners (both public and private sector).
3. In addition to SFC's statutory obligations, the [Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability](#) and [Strategic Plan 2022-27](#) reiterate the organisation's commitment to conducting appropriate and meaningful engagement with stakeholders across the tertiary system. These provide important framing for SFC's operating context and underpin a wide-ranging portfolio of activity. The Strategic Plan asserts the organisation's purpose, and includes several relevant priorities and guiding principles:
 - Our **purpose** is to sustain a world-leading system of tertiary education, research and innovation that enables students to flourish; changes lives for the better; and supports social, economic and environmental wellbeing and prosperity.
 - We will **incentivise collaboration** between institutions and key partners, supporting the development of partnerships that secure better outcomes and public value, and enhance sustainability (*priority 3.4*)
 - We will **ensure students are supported** to participate in tertiary education, and have their voices heard and valued (*priority 1.4*)
 - We will **support coherent provision**, skills and qualification planning and alignment, with institutions, employers and partners, for example building on our Regional Tertiary Provision Pathfinders, to ensure provision adapts to changing needs, opportunity and the Scottish Government's priorities for the sector (*priority 3.2*)

- Responding to the **economic, social and cultural needs of Scotland** will be key to our approach to system change and strategic planning, in partnership with institutions, employers, governments and funders (*themes that underpin our work*)
4. Further, the independent review of the skills delivery landscape being led by James Withers and the recommendations it poses will also be an important influence on our activities.

Engaging the whole system

5. As Scotland's tertiary education authority, SFC is committed to sustaining a world-leading system of tertiary education, research, and innovation. While we use 'tertiary' to describe post-16 or post-secondary education that is typically undertaken at a college or university, we hold a whole-system view of coherence that goes beyond these institutions. In addition to working with colleges and universities, we are acutely aware of the wider networks of which our institutions form part, including their surrounding regions and communities, schools, employers, and learners.
6. SFC's investment supports the provision of skills and education across the full spectrum of academic and vocational qualifications from access level programmes for those furthest away from the workplace right through to post-graduate qualifications and cutting-edge research. This investment supports high quality, impactful, provision to meet the needs of learners and employers and contribute to Scotland's collective social, economic and environmental wellbeing and prosperity.
7. Respondents to the Review of Coherence and Sustainability in 2021 highlighted the need for strategic planning for provision and change to including planning at an institutional and regional level, with institutions collaborating and having the capacity to engage with employers and other partners.
8. The two Tertiary Provision Pathfinders, in the North-East and South of Scotland are a central part of this refreshed approach. Building on the strong foundations of existing partnerships, they aim to assess demand and secure skills provision that balances the needs of students, employers, their local economy and society.
9. To support this system improvement at a regional level, SFC has facilitated governance fora which have underpinned the development of these initiatives. A Regional Delivery Board in each of the Pathfinders regions has been established, bring together institutional representatives, Skills Development Scotland, local authorities and enterprise agencies. These Boards provide a collaborative forum and an open channel of communication between key regional stakeholders.
10. As outlined in the updates and reflections paper, representatives on these Boards are taking forward seven collaborative skills pilots, aimed at addressing regional skills priorities. As well as testing new approaches to provision planning, SFC has worked with

partners to develop pilots which specifically advance new collaboration and deepen strategic connections. As a result, the pilots in development each involve multiple stakeholders and are being co-created with institutional and/or local authority expertise and input. These pilot projects are discussed in greater detail in the updates and reflections paper NAB/02/02.

11. At the NAB meeting of 4th October, members discussed the importance of coherence across the whole education system, in particular supporting school pupils in their transitions from school and with effective information, advice and guidance. Careers information, advice and guidance is a key focus of the independent review of the skills delivery landscape.
12. An example of a whole-system approach to engaging and supporting school-leavers in their post-school transitions as part of the Pathfinders regional pilots is outlined below.

Taking a whole-system approach: Senior Phase pilot

13. As part of the Pathfinders regional pilots workstream, North-East Scotland College (NESCol) along with The Robert Gordon University, The University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council are working collaboratively to enhance the Senior Phase (S4-S6) offering in the region. The project will deliver across three objectives:
 14. Improve prospects for the small number of winter leavers¹, developing a more engaging offering in the winter term which supports progression to positive destinations
 15. Make HNC (SCQF Level 7) opportunities more accessible to S6 learners
 16. Convene a strategic working group of all key partners to identify further opportunities to enhance the senior phase, such as co-location for particular activities, sharing good practice, collaborating to meet local and region needs.
17. The proposed benefits to stakeholders and the wider system are as follows:
 18. Improving the outcomes of winter leavers, with the aim of promoting positive destinations and enhancing their school-leaver portfolio
 19. Enhancing opportunities for S6 pupils, including clear pathways to further education, higher education and employment
 20. Enhanced partnership working to improve the senior phase offering in the region
 21. This work involves schools and local authorities identifying target learners and

¹ School pupils who turn 16 between October and February of their S4 year can choose to leave at the end of the winter term of S4.

supporting their transition into tailored qualifications, collaboration with SDS to adjust the delivery timetable of foundation apprenticeship qualifications that will support positive outcomes, wraparound support from school and college to promote learners' engagement with the provision, and a commitment from all partners to identify future opportunities for enhancement. This is a particularly interesting example of whole-system engagement across a wide range of key partners to identify and address local and regional needs.

22. The Pathfinders Regional Delivery Boards establish a forum of shared commitment and accountability across the partners, with seed funding from SFC to support the activity. In this way, the programme support and governance arrangements of the Pathfinders projects are designed to reduce barriers to collaboration and to scaffold a collaboration that will ultimately be self-sustaining.
23. Members are invited to **reflect on the approach taken** to engaging the whole education system in support of learners and with reference to local and regional skills needs; to provide input on the **potential to learn** from the approach; and to share any relevant **good practice** in this area that SFC and partners should be aware of.

EMPLOYERS AS PARTNERS

24. Colleges and universities have a key role as anchor institutions, at the heart of towns, cities, islands and regions. Their connectedness across the local and regional area makes them uniquely well-placed to build connections with employers and industry.
25. SFC engages directly with employers through a number of channels, including a range of Industry Leadership Groups (e.g. Life Sciences and Creative Industries), specific and targeted workforce planning activity (e.g. Early Learning and Childcare and Trading Standards Officers) and implementation of key strategies (e.g. the Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan Implementation Steering Group).
26. However, SFC's greatest impact in engaging employers as partners in provision planning and delivery is through a range of targeted and enabling funding streams. This includes the Innovation Centre programme, Interface, and the Energy Skills Partnership which are focused on skills and talent development; the Flexible Workforce Development Fund (FWDF) which supports bespoke upskilling activity for employers; the funding of Foundation and Graduate Apprenticeships which are key collaborations between colleges, universities and employers; and the Upskilling Fund for Universities which builds capacity for universities to deliver short, sharp programmes aligned to current and emerging economic need.
27. More generally, the funding provided to colleges and universities supports a broad spectrum of embedded employer engagements, for example through work-based learning opportunities for learners on a range of programmes and engagement with the accreditation of courses through regulatory bodies.

28. At the NAB meeting of 4th October, members discussed the importance of positioning employers as partners in addressing economic needs and delivering effective skills alignment. SFC is most active as an enabling force in scaffolding partnership between institutions and employers through its funding streams.
29. An example of this employers-as-partners approach as part of the Pathfinders regional pilots is outlined below.

Working with employers – South of Scotland Digital Skills Hub

30. Pathfinders partners in the South of Scotland are developing a pilot project which builds upon the existing infrastructure of the South of Scotland Digital Skills Hub and will help align provision, programmes and curriculum offerings to the current and emerging needs of students and employers in the region.
31. The project will deliver activity across the following areas:
 32. Providing digital upskilling to college students to enhance their transition into employment
 33. Promoting the digital education pipeline to underrepresented groups
 34. Increasing the availability of places on digital programmes
 35. Delivering targeted recruitment activity rolled out to the region's schools
 36. Identifying employer skills needs across the region and using this to inform provision
 37. Creating a digital skills map to promote the range of provision available across the region.
38. This project engages a range of partners including CENSIS; Developing the Young Workforce Dumfries & Galloway; Digital Health & Care Innovation Centre; Dumfries & Galloway Council; Edinburgh Napier University, SCDI; Scotland IS; Scottish Borders Chamber of Commerce; Scottish Borders Council; Skills Development Scotland; South of Scotland Enterprise; The Data Lab; University of Edinburgh and the University of the West of Scotland. It builds on existing partnerships across enterprise agencies, institutions and employers to target delivery to have the greatest impact.
39. Members are invited to **reflect on the approach taken** to engaging employers as partners both within the Pathfinders pilot and more broadly through SFC's work; to provide input on the **potential to learn** from the approach; and to share any relevant **good practice** in this area that SFC and partners should be aware of.

Further information

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