Scotland's Skills Delivery Landscape – Call for Evidence

Analysis of responses to the consultation exercise

Analysis report

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Contents

Summary

This summary sets out key themes from the analysis of responses to a call for evidence on the Review of Scotland's skills delivery landscape.

An independent review of the skills delivery landscape in Scotland was announced in September 2022, led by James Withers, and focused on ensuring that the skills system is fit for purpose and can respond to future challenges including a just transition to net zero. The overall purpose of the call for evidence is to ensure the Review can consider evidence from all interest parties around the future of the public body and advisory landscape for skills delivery in Scotland.

The call for evidence opened on 28 October and closed on 23 December 2022 and asked 23 open questions. In total, 164 respondents made a submission – a breakdown of the number of responses by respondent type is set out below.

Respondent type	Total
Organisations	**145**
Further education (FE) and higher education (HE)	25
Skills focused public agencies	6
Skills delivery other	26
Other public bodies	23
Business and employer representative groups	39
Businesses and employers	11
Third sector and campaign organisations	15
Individuals	**19**
ALL RESPONDENTS	**164**

As well as inviting members of the public and stakeholders to respond to the call for evidence, online events were held to provide stakeholders with an opportunity to share their views on the skills delivery landscape. A series of 11 events took place with stakeholders including businesses and employers, colleges, universities, independent training providers, local authorities, other public bodies, third sector organisations, and apprentices.

The main body of the report sets out a question-by-question analysis of written responses to the call for evidence and feedback through stakeholder events. This summary focuses on a number of recurring themes to emerge across the analysis at those individual questions.

Overall views on the skills delivery landscape

Respondents identified a range of positives for the current skills delivery landscape in Scotland, with some using the call for evidence as an opportunity to highlight current initiatives and approaches that were seen as having a positive impact. This included a number of respondents, especially skills focused public agencies and FE/HE institutions, providing significant detail on examples of current practice as potential models for reform of skills delivery.

Specific positives included: the benefits of apprenticeships for learners and employers, and their role in addressing skills gaps; National Occupational Standards as a means of ensuring consistency of professional standards and competency-based qualifications; the current range of upskilling and reskilling activity; and the role of partnership working across FE/HE institutions, skills focused agencies and employers in ensuring provision is responsive to skills requirements.

However, there was also a widespread view that change is necessary to ensure the skills delivery landscape is more responsive to industry needs, including the skills required to deliver net zero targets. There was a perceived need for a more flexible and adaptable skills delivery system, using a place-based approach to identify and respond to local and regional skills requirements, with more effective planning for future requirements, and stronger collaboration across all stakeholder groups. These priorities are reflected in the key themes discussed below.

A complex, 'cluttered' landscape

Issues associated with the current complexity of the skills landscape underpinned many of the proposals for change highlighted through the call for evidence. The number of agencies involved in skills planning, funding and delivery, and a perceived lack of clarity around their roles and responsibilities, was seen as having contributed to unnecessary competition and duplication of work between agencies. It was suggested that this complexity has been compounded by a lack of effective joint working across key agencies.

In addition to concerns around inefficiency associated with competition and duplication, the complexity of the skills landscape was also highlighted as a potential barrier for learners and employers seeking to access skills provision. Respondents noted difficulties for employers and learners seeking to engage with the current skills landscape, for example in determining which of the numerous frameworks and providers can meet their skills requirements, and navigating the different eligibility criteria and rules across multiple funding streams. In this context, there were calls for a focus on ensuring clearer pathways and progression routes.

Clarity of purpose, role and remits

Clarity of roles and responsibilities for skills delivery agencies was identified as a key factor in relation to concerns around the 'cluttered' skills landscape. This lack of clarity was linked to overlap in the remit of key agencies, such as Skills Development Scotland (SDS), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). Discussion of clarity of roles and remits also highlighted a need for clarity around the overall strategic direction for skills delivery in Scotland. There were calls for a clearer vision to be aligned with economic priorities, and reflecting the attributes needed for a modern workforce.

Proposals for change to provide greater clarity of purpose and a more coherent skills landscape included a particular focus on addressing current overlap in the remits of key agencies. This was highlighted in relation to key national skills agencies, for example with reference to closer working between SDS, SFC and SQA on skills planning and development. Respondents also referred more widely to

a need for greater clarity in the specific roles and responsibilities for all agencies involved in the planning, development, delivery and funding of skills provision.

Concerns around clarity of purpose and remits were also linked to proposals for a more streamlined skills landscape. Respondents suggested a range of potential changes to deliver a more streamlined approach, address unnecessary bureaucracy, competition and duplication, and to limit fragmentation of skills provision and standards. In addition to better delineated roles for key agencies, some suggested rationalisation of agencies; for example, a single body with overall responsibility for skills delivery was recommended. A 'colleges and universities first' approach was also proposed, based on development and delivery of post-school skills provision being devolved to the FE and HE sectors (within a clear assurance framework).

An agile and responsive skills system

The extent to which the skills delivery system is able to respond to skills requirements was a key theme for many respondents. Indeed, some of the proposals around ensuring clarity of purpose and roles were linked to a view that a more coherent approach to skills delivery is required to ensure the system can respond to skills requirements.

Discussion of the agility and responsiveness of the skills system included a particular focus on the extent to which skills requirements can vary – geographically over time. For example, a more place-based approach was recommended on the basis of evidence of variation in skills priorities at a local, regional and national level. Specific concerns were also raised around capacity for the system to respond to changing skills priorities over time, especially in relation to emerging industries and the scale of the challenge in delivering skills required for the transition to net zero. The importance of effective planning for short, medium and longer-term skills requirements, based on closer joint working between stakeholders and supported by a robust evidence base, was highlighted here.

Respondents proposed a number of specific changes to deliver a more agile and responsive skills system:

- Ensuring skills delivery reflects the needs of employers, learners and wider economic priorities through more person-centred and responsive qualifications and assessment, access to robust labour force data, a clear role for a more diverse range of employers in skills planning and development (including micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) and rural businesses), and close working between FE/HE institutions, employers and learners.

- Improving the flexibility of skills programmes through wider use of short course options and micro-credentials, access to part-time programmes, and digital technologies.

- A stronger role for the FE and HE sectors, reflecting their role as anchors for local communities and expertise in development of skills provision that meets local and regional skills requirements.

- More support for lifelong learning, for example through increased flexibility of entry/exit points, Recognition of Prior Learning for equity of pathways, and a more equitable funding approach.

Access to information and support to navigate the skills landscape

In addition to addressing barriers to access through a more streamlined, flexible and responsive skills system, respondents also identified a need for improved access to information and support to help learners and employers navigating the skills delivery landscape.

This included reference to the potential for more effective communication around the purpose and value of skills delivery in Scotland, and to raise awareness of available skills programmes. Ensuring wider access to information and advice was also seen as necessary to enable learners and employers to navigate the skills landscape, and crucially to match their specific requirements to available provision.

Discussion of access to information included reference to the importance of high quality, personalised Careers Information, Advice and Guidance (CIAG) to ensure individuals are aware of and can access the range of options and pathways available to them. This included specific concern that CIAG should be available to individuals of all ages. There was also a perceived need for more tailored additional CIAG and support, especially for marginalised groups and more vulnerable learners.

In terms of ensuring CIAG is part of a coherent and connected wider education and skills system, there was support for the Careers by Design Collaborative as a means of enabling more joint-working in design and delivery of CIAG. This reflected a perceived need for CIAG to draw on a wider range of stakeholders including HE/FE institutions, public agencies, parents/carers, and employers.

A streamlined, equitable funding approach

Underpinning calls for a more coordinated and responsive approach to skills delivery in Scotland, respondents wished to see a streamlined approach to funding that reduces current complexity, improves flexibility, and ensures equity of access.

As noted earlier in relation to the skills landscape as a whole, the current complexity of funding provision was seen as limiting access to skills provision for learners and employers. This included reference to the number of agencies involved in funding (and how this relates to the development of skills programmes), and to the diversity of rules and eligibility criteria. It was suggested that a more coordinated and streamlined funding approach should minimise bureaucracy, and address 'silo working' and competition between agencies.

Respondents also saw a need for greater equity of access to funding across skills providers, qualifications, regions and age groups. This included specific reference to the importance of access to funding for those aged 25+ to support upskilling and reskilling of the existing workforce. More flexible funding approaches were also suggested to enable skills providers to develop provision that is responsive to changing skills requirements. This included calls for longer-term funding

commitments to allow more strategic skills planning and delivery, and more flexible short-term funding to respond to specific industry needs.

1. Introduction

This report presents analysis of responses to a call for evidence on the Review of Scotland's skills delivery landscape.

Background

An independent review of the skills delivery landscape in Scotland was announced in September 2022, led by James Withers as independent advisor, and focused on ensuring that the skills system is fit for purpose and can respond to future challenges including a just transition to net zero. The independent review sits alongside a wider ongoing programme of work to reform education and skills in Scotland. This work involves substantial changes to the education and skills landscape including review of qualifications and assessment, and the creation of three new education bodies.

Of particular relevance to the Review, the education reform programme has also involved development of a Purpose and Principles for post-school education and skills development, setting out evidence-led outcomes to inform the future strategic direction of education and skills in Scotland. The Review is also embedded within the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET), which sets out a vision for a skills and education system that can deliver the skilled workforce required to support sustainable economic growth.[1]

The independent review will consider how the skills delivery landscape can be adapted to support Scottish Government ambitions for skills, and will make specific recommendations for the roles and responsibilities of skills delivery public bodies and advisory groups.

The call for evidence

The call for evidence opened on 28 October and closed on 23 December 2022. The consultation paper is available here on the Scottish Government's website.

The overall purpose of the call for evidence is to ensure the Review report and recommendations can consider evidence from all interest parties around the future of the public body and advisory landscape for skills delivery in Scotland. The call for evidence was divided into seven parts, each considering a specific aspect of the skills delivery landscape. A total of 23 open questions were asked across the seven sections.

Some of these questions focused on the overall structure and functioning of skills delivery in Scotland, while others sought evidence in relation to specific aspects of the skills landscape such as apprenticeships, National Occupational Standards (NOS) and upskilling. Generally, questions sought evidence around the current functioning of skills delivery in Scotland, or in relation to where change is required to better support Scottish Government ambitions. This included questions focused

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[1] As the Purpose and Principles was yet to be published at the time of the consultation period opening, the call for evidence focuses on the ambitions and commitments articulated in the NSET.

specifically on the role and remit of public bodies across the skills delivery landscape, that will be used to inform recommendations for the future remit and status of skills delivery public bodies and advisory groups, including Skills Development Scotland (SDS).

Profile of respondents

A total of 164 standard responses were received, of which 145 were from groups or organisations and 19 from individual members of the public. Where consent has been given to publish the response, it may be found at the Citizen Space consultation hub.

Respondents were asked to identify whether they were responding as an individual or on behalf of a group or organisation. Organisational respondents were then allocated to one of seven categories by the analysis team and the independent Skills Delivery Review secretariat.

A breakdown of the number of responses received by respondent type is set out below, and a full list of group respondents who provided consent to publication appended to this report at Annex 1.

Table 1 – Respondents by type

Respondent type	Total
Organisations	**145**
Further education (FE) and higher education (HE)	25
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ALL RESPONDENTS	164

Nature of responses

Most responses were submitted directly through the Citizen Space consultation hub. These respondents tended to focus on answering specific questions. A number of respondents did not respond to the individual consultation questions, but submitted their comments in a statement or report-style format. This content was analysed under the most directly relevant question or theme.

Submissions were highly diverse in terms of their focus, structure and length. This was reflected in variation in the response rate to each consultation question, ranging from nearly 9 in 10 answering questions on the skills delivery landscape, to a little more than 1 in 3 respondents answering questions on NOS.

Variation in the focus and detail of responses appeared to be linked to respondent type. Unsurprisingly, respondents involved in the skills system (including public agencies, FE/HE institutions and others) typically provided longer, more detailed submissions. These responses also tended to be more focused on the current skills delivery system, including evidence around positive impacts being delivered, and suggestions for change. Some businesses and employers (and their representative groups) also provided highly detailed responses, although these were typically more focused on evidence around skills requirements and gaps, and the extent to which skills provision is meeting these.

Stakeholder events

As well as inviting members of the public and stakeholders to respond to the call for evidence, James Withers and his independent review secretariat also held a number of online events to generate discussion and provide stakeholders with an opportunity to inform the Review's recommendations.

A series of 11 public webinars took place with key stakeholder groups: businesses and employers, colleges, universities, independent training providers, local authorities, other public bodies, third sector organisations, and apprentices. A number of those who participated in stakeholder events also went on to provide a written response to the call for evidence. This overlap is reflected in commonality in the points raised through stakeholder events and the call for evidence. Feedback from stakeholder events has been analysed under the main call for evidence themes and is highlighted in the relevant sections of this report, alongside findings from written responses.

Analysis and reporting

The remainder of this report presents a question-by-question analysis of the comments made to the main call for evidence consultation and at consultation events. The report is structured around the seven main themes listed below:

- Skills Delivery Landscape
- Apprenticeships
- National Occupational Standards
- Upskilling and Retraining
- Sector and regional skills planning
- Careers and young people
- Employer engagement

The analysis presented across these sections is intended to give an overview of the type and range of views expressed, and evidence cited. **The language used within the report reflects that used by respondents**. Direct quotes have been included from written call for evidence responses – these may have been lightly edited for brevity.

As with any public consultation exercise, those responding generally have a particular interest in the subject area. As noted above, this includes a number of

respondents with a key role in the current skills delivery landscape, and who may be directly impacted by some of the issues under consideration.

We also note that there was some repetition in the issues being raised by respondents across individual consultation questions. To minimise repetition in the report, the most detailed analysis of common themes is presented at the most directly relevant section or question. However, issues such as the complexity of the skills landscape, overlapping remits of key agencies, duplication of work and associated administrative burden, and a fragmented funding approach were identified by respondents as having an impact across many aspects of skills delivery in Scotland. As such, these issues are referenced across multiple sections of the report.

2: Skills delivery landscape

The first section of the Call for Evidence paper considered the current skills delivery landscape, including how it is structured, roles and responsibilities, and how these are delivering against the vision set out in the NSET.

The NSET sets out a vision for a skills and education system that supplies individuals with the skills they need to have rewarding careers, and businesses with the skilled workforce needed to enable the economy to flourish. Together with the Purpose and Principles for post-school education and skills (which has been published since the call for evidence[2]), the NSET articulates Scottish Government ambitions for an integrated post-school education and skills system. The consultation paper notes that the Review is considering how the skills delivery landscape should be adapted to deliver those ambitions and related outcomes, including consideration of the roles and remits of the national agencies that support skills delivery.

Stakeholder events

The 11 public webinars conducted in addition to the call for evidence included feedback specifically focused on the skills delivery landscape. Stakeholder feedback highlighted the following key points.

> **Stakeholder event feedback**
>
> Local and regional partnership working is effective for some areas through engagement with a range of stakeholders and knowledge exchange to identify and respond to skills priorities.
>
> The variety of skills programmes and pathways is essential - including the suite of apprenticeship qualifications and effective regional skills pathways.
>
> Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) has had some positive impact on developing pathways and linking employers into a national framework, but there is also some lack of clarity around the role of DYW and how this aligns with other agencies.
>
> There is a need for a clearer strategic vision for the skills delivery landscape in Scotland, supported by a more responsive and agile approach to delivery and a streamlined funding landscape. This should include longer-term funding commitments to enable more strategic planning.
>
> Specific areas for improvement include minimising bureaucracy in relation to monitoring and reporting, reducing 'clutter', providing greater clarity on roles and responsibilities to minimise duplication and competition (including specifically between SDS and DYW), improving transparency of processes,

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[2] https://www.gov.scot/publications/post-school-education-research-and-skills-interim-purpose-and-principles/

clarifying terminology, and ensuring delivery and funding can respond to changing skills requirements.

Call for evidence responses

Written responses in relation to the skills delivery landscape are summarised over the following pages.

Question 1 – If there was one thing you would like to see change in how our skills landscape is structured and delivering, what would it be?

Around 130 respondents provided a comment at Question 1.

Some respondents, including skills focused public agencies and FE/HE institutions, highlighted ongoing initiatives as having a positive impact on Scotland's skills delivery landscape. This included respondents citing recent research and policy papers as valuable resources for the current review in terms of identifying where current approaches are making a positive contribution.

However, respondents also referred to a need for change in the skills landscape, with some calling for significant reform. As noted below, proposals for change to the structure and delivery approach of the skills landscape in Scotland were made by a mix of respondents, including skills focused public agencies, FE/HE respondents, business and employer representative groups, and other public bodies.

The need for change

A range of respondents raised concerns around what was described as a 'fragmented' and 'cluttered' skills landscape. These respondents pointed to the number of organisations involved in skills delivery, and a perceived lack of alignment of remits and priorities across these organisations. This was seen as contributing to unnecessary competition between organisations, and there was concern that organisations are wasting time and resources protecting their roles and funding, rather than focusing on collaboration with other stakeholders. It was also suggested that the complexity of skills provision and funding, and the number of agencies involved, can be a barrier to individuals and organisations seeking to access skills, with potential to undermine the effectiveness of skills delivery initiatives. This was reflected in concerns that skills shortages have been a significant constraint on economic growth in Scotland.

There was also reference to a lack of alignment of roles and responsibilities, and to unnecessary competition between agencies, compounded by limited collaboration across the skills delivery landscape. It was suggested that more effective collaboration is required to support more effective skills delivery initiatives – including specifically between Scottish Government, skills focused public agencies, the FE/HE sectors and other skills providers. There was also reference to a lack of clarity or shared approach to skills terminology.

A fragmented funding approach was also seen as adding to confusion associated with the 'cluttered' skills landscape. This was linked to a view that the current funding approach lacks sufficient flexibility to respond to changing needs, and that the predominance of short-term funding can limit the effectiveness of skills delivery initiatives. There were also concerns regarding the financial sustainability of skills delivery in the context of wider constraints on public finances.

In the context of concerns around fragmentation and duplication across the skills delivery landscape, some respondents suggested that a single shared vision is required for skills delivery in Scotland. There was also a perceived need for more effective leadership to support a single, shared vision and to ensure clarity around roles and responsibilities. While some respondents pointed to local and regional partnerships, it was also suggested that an overall, cohesive approach or common purpose to coordinate local and regional activity is lacking:

> *'We lack leadership - who is in charge of the plan? ... And who is responsible if the plan is not being delivered?'*
>
> *Businesses and employer representative group*

Proposed changes

Respondents proposed a range of specific changes to address the issues noted above. Suggestions typically focused on ensuring a more streamlined skills delivery and funding landscape, based on a shared overall vision and with greater clarity around roles and responsibilities. This included several skills focused public agencies, FE/HE and business & employer respondents setting out their preferred vision and approach to skills delivery, including recommendations for change.

Shared vision and improved collaboration

Proposals included establishing a shared vision and set of priorities across the skills landscape, including apprenticeships, FE/HE provision, and continuing professional development. Respondents wished to see the Review ensure that the shared vision is aligned with economic priorities set out in the NSET and reflect the attributes needed for a modern workforce. This included specific reference to emerging industries, green skills required to support a just transition to net zero, and 'meta-skills' such as self-management, innovation and collaboration.

Other suggestions included a shared vocabulary and common approach to interpretation of skills, a need for alignment in skills provision across schools and the FE/HE sectors, and a revised approach to monitoring and assessment focused on impact and outcomes achieved for individuals.

Respondents suggested there is a need for more meaningful and productive collaboration between the Scottish Government and key stakeholders. This was seen as essential to ensure alignment between skills delivery, economic strategy and workforce requirements, and that a clear vision and priorities are shared across the skills delivery landscape.

'Scotland already has very strong individual components of [a skills system]. However, there is no current coordination across these entities, losing opportunities for economies of scale, sharing best practices, and delivering innovation and creativity in our skills landscape.'

Business/employer representative group

The perceived need for better joint working included specific reference to skills focused public agencies, FE/HE sectors, schools, Community Learning and Development (CLD), work-based learning and businesses. It was suggested that national, sectoral and regional workforce development boards should have a role in supporting a more effective collaborative approach to skills planning and delivery. Reference was also made to potential for the approach to be informed by validated, international best practice.

Streamlining of approach and funding

There were calls for a more streamlined skills delivery landscape to address unnecessary bureaucracy and duplication, ensure efficient use of resources, and focus on maximising accessibility. This included calls for clearer and better coordinated skills pathways for learners of all ages. Some proposed changes to specific roles to minimise duplication, while others argued for a single organisation with overall responsibility for skills delivery in Scotland. The latter group included respondents who proposed merging of the public agencies currently involved in skills planning.

'The Review can play a very important role in articulating the…interdependency of Scotland's skills delivery landscape so that the elements are better understood. The Review should specifically consider the coherence of the ecosystem, so roles and responsibilities are clear in order to maximise the efficient use of resource.'

Further/Higher Education institution

Respondents also sought a more streamlined and coordinated approach to funding, including a focus on ensuring consistency and equity across provider types, sectors and qualifications. This included calls for a single funding structure and/or single reporting approach for skills delivery. Respondents also wished to see a rebalancing of the approach to funding of skills delivery programmes, including longer-term funding commitments to allow more strategic skills planning and delivery, alongside more flexible short-term funding to respond to specific industry needs and to support lifelong learning.

Some wished to see a change to the current focus on funding for younger people aged 16-24, to better support upskilling and reskilling of adults aged 25+, including the 'non-working workforce'. Specific suggestions for funding approaches included a 'skills wallet' individual allowance to fund lifelong education and training, and more flexibility for local authorities around the level of apprenticeship levies to enable a more diverse range of skills development.

Other proposals

Other specific proposals for change included:

- Calls for skills delivery to take more account of emerging industries and technologies, including those identified through Regional Skills Assessments (RSAs). It was also suggested that skills delivery should be informed by localised employability and skills planning to better support regional economic priorities, and that skills providers should be given the autonomy to respond flexibly to changing skills requirements.

- A stronger role for the FE/HE sectors, recognising their experience in working with industry to identify and respond to skills requirements. This included a perceived role for FE/HE institutions in supporting delivery of regional skills and economic priorities. There was reference to colleges in particular as 'regional anchor institutions' with a key role to play in regional skills provision.

- More flexible support for lifelong learning opportunities to ensure equity and equality of access to skills, regardless of age or industry sector.

- Ensuring parity of esteem across skills, competencies, and academic attainment.

- Ensuring skills provision recognises the needs of Gaelic-speaking communities.

- Revision of the Outcome Agreement process.

Question 2 – Thinking about the vision in the Terms of Reference for a system that is simple, people-focused and built on collaboration, how well are we doing against that vision just now? Can you provide specific examples of:

a. success in the work of public agencies or the private/third sector; or

b. elements that don't work, are confusing or need to be improved?

Around 110 respondents provided a comment at Question 2.

These respondents typically focused on specific positives for the current skills system, and/or aspects that require improvements.

In terms of the vision set out in the Terms of Reference, there was some commonality in the issues highlighted by respondents. For example, a range of respondents suggested that the current system is neither simple nor sufficiently people focused. Some also felt that collaboration has been limited by the complexity of the skills landscape, a lack of alignment of priorities across key agencies, and a lack of leadership and direction.

However, many of those commenting also cited positive examples of skills provision that is people-focused, built on collaboration and responsive to industry needs. These are summarised below.

Successes

Respondents' commentary around successes in the work of public agencies and/or the private/third sectors was focused on the extent to which this work has been responsive to workforce needs, and has been supported by effective collaboration. This included some respondents providing a detailed account of ongoing skills development and delivery programmes.

Adaptability and breadth

It was suggested that the skills delivery system has demonstrated flexibility and adaptability in recent years, for example in response to challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the UK's exit from the EU. This included description of specific initiatives that were seen as demonstrating the willingness of stakeholders to collaborate effectively to ensure skills delivery is responsive to national and local needs.

Respondents also referred more widely to successes in delivering the range of skills required by a modern workforce, highlighting skills delivery programmes that were considered to be simple and people-focused, using a collaborative approach to meet workforce needs. Reference to specific skills delivery programmes included a particular focus on evidence of positives in FE/HE skills delivery, particularly from FE/HE respondents. This includes a suggestion that FE/HE institutions should take a lead role in skills delivery.

While it was acknowledged that the skills delivery system could be simpler, it was also suggested that some degree of complexity is required to meet the diversity of workforce needs. Use of local and regional evidence on workforce skills requirements, such as through RSAs, was identified as a particular strength of FE/HE provision. Discussion around the role of the FE/HE sectors also included reference to course accreditation and the esteem in which FE/HE skills delivery is held by stakeholders, and to evidence of FE/HE skills delivery enhancing access to employment (including through Graduate Apprenticeship (GA) programmes and upskilling and reskilling courses).

Collaborative approaches

Positive examples of collaboration and partnership working were identified by several respondents. Although this included examples of effective partnerships at a local/regional and national level, some suggested that collaboration has been more limited at a national level.

Respondents cited a range of specific examples of successful local and regional partnerships, such as Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs), FE/HE partnerships, CLD collaboratives, and sector-focused partnerships such as the Energy Skills Partnership. This included a particular focus on the value of locally-led collaboration in securing 'buy-in' from skills providers, employers and professional bodies to support development of skills delivery in specific curriculum areas, such as through civil engineering graduate apprenticeships. Local collaboration was also highlighted as helping to ensure skills delivery is aligned with local requirements.

Elements requiring improvement

Respondents identified elements requiring improvement across multiple aspects of the skills delivery landscape. These included strategic and policy considerations around leadership and direction, and structural changes to ensure a more streamlined delivery landscape and funding approach.

Leadership, clarity and alignment

A number of respondents – including skills focused public agencies, other skills delivery bodies, other public bodies and businesses/employers - saw a need for clearer leadership and direction to support a more systematic approach to skills delivery. This reflected a view that too many competing strategies are having a negative impact on the skills landscape, particularly in terms of duplication of roles and responsibilities and overlapping priorities across strategic and operational agencies.

These respondents saw a need for greater clarity around roles and responsibilities in order to reduce duplication – both between national agencies and between national and local/regional agencies – to address inefficiency and ensure the skills landscape is simpler to navigate. There were also calls for a clearer national policy direction to ensure better alignment of priorities across agencies, and to ensure a more consistent approach to skills planning and delivery that supports both the NSET and the Purpose and Principles for tertiary education and research. It was also suggested that clearer direction is required to ensure a shared understanding around skills terminology, noting that use of terminology currently varies by sector, provider and purpose.

Collaboration and practice sharing

More effective collaboration and sharing of practice was also identified as a priority to support the overall strategic direction and ensure that skills delivery is responsive to industry needs. This reflected a view that collaboration at the national level is currently an area of weakness. It was suggested that collaboration has been hampered by a lack of clarity in the national strategic direction, and around the roles and responsibilities of key agencies.

> *'The local level partnerships and collaboration are stronger than at a national level, and this is where the strength in the skills systems lies.'*
>
> *Other public body*

While respondents referred to specific examples of collaboration, it was suggested that these can be 'top down' and not always driven by evidence of need. There was also some concern that collaboration can be limited by a tendency to silo working and competition between agencies – also seen as being linked to the number of organisations involved in skills delivery and a lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities. Although some referred to specific examples of local and regional collaboration, there was also concern that agencies can lack the capacity to ensure effective implementation of partnership delivery plans.

Streamlined, responsive approaches

Concerns around the complexity of the skills landscape were also reflected in a perceived need for a more streamlined approach to skills delivery. It was suggested that a more streamlined, easier to navigate system could deliver multiple benefits such as improving access to the system, ensuring smoother learner pathways, and supporting more effective quality control. This reflected concern that the current skills system is difficult to navigate for individuals and employers; respondents noted that multiple skills providers and/or funding bodies are often required to access the skills that employers and employees need.

Although it was suggested that some complexity is required to meet the diversity of workforce needs, there was also a view that this complexity currently acts as a barrier to access. Specific concerns were raised in relation to complexity in the approach to development, delivery, funding and accreditation of apprenticeships, and there was thought to be a need for a simplified approach that provides greater clarity on responsibilities and remits.

The extent to which the skills delivery landscape is responsive to workforce requirements was identified by some as a key consideration where improvements could be made. It was suggested that skills delivery programmes can be too closely linked to specific pipelines and programmes, rather than the needs of a modern workforce. There was also a view that skills delivery must reflect a broader understanding of skills, including meta-skills and those required by green and other emerging industries. In this context, respondents identified a need for clearer communication and messaging around current and future skills requirements. There was also a call for a focus on collaborative regional skills planning, to ensure that skills delivery is based on a genuine understanding of current and developing skills requirements.

In addition to support for a focus on responsiveness to industry needs, respondents also suggested that there is scope for skills delivery to be more people-focused. This included specific calls for provision that is attractive to prospective learners, and that supports multiple styles of learning.

Funding arrangements

In addition to a streamlined skills delivery landscape, there were also calls for a more streamlined approach to funding. This was identified as a key area where there is a need to reduce bureaucracy (including reporting requirements associated with funding), increase flexibility, support more collaborative working and reduce competition between agencies. As noted earlier, there was concern that the number of agencies involved in funding and delivery can lead to silo working, with agencies seeking to protect their own outcomes rather than working collaboratively. It was also suggested that fragmented funding arrangements contribute to the complexity of the skills delivery landscape, with this seen as a particular issue for funding of Modern Apprenticeships (MAs).

'Complex or bureaucratic funding environments with short-term timescales and heavy reporting burdens can soak up limited resources. There need to be simpler governance, funding and reporting structures.'

Further/Higher Education institution

Some respondents wished to see a move to a single funding stream to address these issues, including proposals for this to be linked to a single impact framework. Other specific suggestions for reform of funding for skills delivery included calls for longer-term funding commitments to support more strategic skills planning, better collaboration between funding bodies and skills providers to support improved forward planning, and better support for lifelong learning through more dedicated funding for those aged 25+.

Other suggestions

Other areas for improvement identified by respondents included:

- Improving transparency and accountability. Specific proposals included calls for regular evidence-based reporting on the impact of actions across key agencies, and for the approach to monitoring and evaluation to encourage collaboration and support accountability across the skills delivery landscape.

- Ensuring parity between skills and competencies, and academic qualifications, for example through accreditation of vocational, professional and/or technical competencies.

- Establishing a single approach to monitoring and reporting that addresses duplication associated with the current fragmented funding landscape.

- Improving use of labour market and other relevant evidence to ensure skills planning and delivery is based on an accurate and up to date understanding of workforce requirements. This reflected a perceived need for provision to better reflect local and regional variation in skills requirements, and to be sensitive to emerging industries and associated workforce needs.

Question 3 – Thinking about the different national agencies and partners involved in skills delivery, are there areas where more clarity is required about roles and responsibilities or where you think the balance of responsibilities should be changed?

Around 110 respondents provided a comment at Question 3.

A number of these respondents suggested that there is a widespread lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities across skills sectors and providers. It was suggested that, even where strategic responsibilities seem clear, there may be a lack of clarity around operational delivery. Some linked these issues to the number of agencies involved in skills planning, delivery and funding, and to issues noted at Question 2 around unnecessary bureaucracy, competition and duplication of work.

'The agency landscape remains quite complex and so it can be unclear…who does what. Various partners develop initiatives with the best of intentions, however this adds to the complexity which at times can be counter-productive.'

Business/employer

This lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities, and associated bureaucracy, competition and duplication of work were seen as contributing to a number of difficulties across the skills landscape. This included reference to confusion for learners and employers, and potential for this to be a barrier to access. Respondents also referred to the inefficiency associated with overlapping roles and duplication of work, especially in the implementation of multiple, inconsistent reporting frameworks.

Respondents identified a range of specific areas where they thought clarity is required around roles and responsibilities and/or where a rebalancing of responsibilities is needed. It was noted that the Auditor General's report identified a need for improvement at the strategic level in how the Scottish Government works with other agencies to provide a coherent vision for skills and education. In this context, the current consultation was welcomed as a positive step, although it was also noted that offering a clear view on the future structure of the skills landscape is a challenge while the overall purpose and principles of post-school education are still being developed.

Most specific areas of concern highlighted by respondents related to more practical considerations around the current structure of the skills landscape, and relative roles of specific agencies. They included:

- Apparent overlap between the work of SDS and other agencies, particularly with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and with agencies providing business support. Concerns were also raised that there is a more general lack of clarity around SDS's role, including whether SDS should be responsible for development work to address skills gaps, and what employers and other stakeholders can expect from SDS. It was suggested that there can be limited visibility around SDS's work, including how this links with other agencies and parts of the skills system.

- Concerns around alignment in the work of SDS and SFC specifically in relation to development, delivery and funding of apprenticeship programmes. It was noted that responsibility for apprenticeships is split between SDS (in relation to development of apprenticeship frameworks, and funding of FAs and MAs) and SFC (in relation to funding of FAs and GAs) and it was suggested that this can add unnecessary bureaucracy to the process and limit effective oversight. There was also a view that the new SDS model of apprenticeship development represents unnecessary duplication of work, and will not address workforce concerns regarding existing apprenticeship programmes.

- A lack of clarity for learners and employers around the role of awarding organisations as creators of the qualification that sits within apprenticeships. This included specific calls for clarity around the relationship between the new model of apprenticeship development, and development of other qualifications such as NOS and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs).

- A lack of clarity around the role of Developing the Young Workforce (DYW). It was noted that DYW are in a key position to enable better engagement with schools, and it was suggested that DYW could have a more prominent role in the skills system.

- The role of the various agencies supporting skills delivery in schools, including how the remit of DYW officers in schools fits with other in-school provision by teaching staff and employability services. There was concern that this can lead to duplication of activity. It was also suggested that there is a lack of clarity around DYW performance indicators, and how these fit with other reporting measures.

- Fragmentation of skills delivery for specific sectors including construction, life sciences, and tourism and hospitality. This included reference to the number of agencies involved in skills planning and delivery for specific sectors, and a lack of clarity around remits and hierarchies.

- The number of agencies involved in funding of skills provision across schools, FE/HE and private sectors. It was suggested that different funding streams operating across these sectors can become an issue where vocational qualifications are delivered through partnership between schools and colleges and/or private training providers.

- Quality assurance, monitoring and reporting associated with skills delivery programmes. This was linked to overlap in the roles of SDS and other key agencies, with suggestions that this has added unnecessary bureaucracy and duplication, and undermined alignment with data on other FE/HE provision. It was also suggested that there is an emerging gap in reporting requirements for development of apprenticeships (managed by SDS), and delivery and funding (managed by SFC). It was noted that colleges are variously examined by Education Scotland, SDS, SFC, awarding bodies and internal and external auditors, and it was suggested that there is significant overlap and duplication of work across these agencies.

- A lack of alignment between LEP and CLD skills development to ensure these support delivery of individualised learning profiles and adapted curriculums.

Proposed changes

Reflecting the range of issues noted above, respondents made a number of specific suggestions for change around the roles and responsibilities of key agencies involved in skills planning, development and delivery. These ranged from proposals to ensure a clearer strategic direction, to proposals for roles to be assigned to specific agencies.

Some saw a need for change to ensure clarity of purpose, and a more coherent strategic approach to skills provision. This included proposals for an oversight

group or body that is accountable for delivery of the strategic vision, that can facilitate and coordinate effective collaboration, and provide clarity around future skills requirements.

> *'The system requires a more strategic approach that brings relevant interests and needs together with Government ambitions and analysis. An oversight group focused in this way and accountable for relevant outcomes seems necessary for a system which is distributed by design.'*
>
> *Further/Higher Education institution*

There was also a view that change is required to create a more streamlined skills delivery landscape with clear lines of accountability, again reflecting points raised at Questions 1 and 2. Respondents referred to the number of public bodies involved in development, delivery and funding of skills delivery. It was also noted that establishment of the new public body responsible for education will add to the importance of clarity around roles and responsibilities.

A range of skills focused public agencies, other agencies involved in skills delivery, FE/HE institutions, other public bodies, and businesses and employers raised concerns around a perceived lack of alignment in the work of SDS and SFC. While it was noted that the Shared Outcomes Framework has resulted in better alignment between these agencies specifically in relation to Regional Pathfinders, it was argued that reform is needed to ensure a coherent and consistent approach to development and delivery of apprenticeship frameworks in particular.

Some respondents wished to see change to address overlapping roles and responsibilities, unnecessary bureaucracy, competition and duplication of work. It was also suggested that a more streamlined approach would increase alignment of reporting requirements across skills programmes and funding streams, ensuring monitoring and reporting requirements are proportionate. Similar suggestions were made in relation to funding of skills provision: it was suggested that a streamlined funding system with centralised funding agencies and a simpler process for access to funding, would improve efficiency of the skills system and reduce duplication of work.

The continuing importance of effective collaboration was also highlighted, with respondents seeking specific support for collaboration and partnership working alongside any realignment of roles.

Respondents also wished to ensure that any realignment of roles and responsibilities takes account of existing specialisms and expertise across key agencies. It was suggested that any changes should take account of other relevant strategies to ensure alignment of approach – with the Adult Learning Strategy, Youth Work Strategy and Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy all referenced. There was also concern that any substantive change to roles and responsibilities should be based on evidence that they will deliver tangible benefits.

In terms of specific changes to roles and responsibilities, some respondents proposed a single agency responsible for the delivery, funding, accountability and

assurance of post-school education, skills, research and innovation. These respondents suggested that fragmentation of responsibility across the skills delivery landscape (including specific reference to the roles of SDS and SFC) means that no one organisation currently has full control of the system. There was concern that this has potential to lead to gaps in provision. A single agency with overall responsibility was seen as offering benefits in terms of clarity of purpose and ensuring a coherent skills delivery system, consistency of quality control, and better outcomes for learners and employers, while reducing duplication of work and maximising public sector investment. It was also suggested that a 'one stop shop approach' could be beneficial for queries around apprenticeships and funding. However, it was noted that a single organisation would require effective collaboration with and support from other stakeholders to ensure skills delivery can respond flexibly to local and regional needs.

A 'colleges and universities first' approach was also suggested, whereby the FE/HE sector would take the lead in development and delivery of post-school skills provision, within a clear assurance framework. This was linked to a view that FE/HE institutions are best placed to respond to Scotland's skills requirements, particularly in the context of public finance constraints. Respondents referred to educational institutions as anchors for local communities, as having established links with employers to support effective collaborative working, and as having experience across a range of learners and employer needs. A specific view was that colleges should take on the role of lead agency for delivery of regional skills needs, including management of apprenticeships. It was suggested that this would both provide value for money and enable a more coherent approach to skills planning and delivery.

Other proposals, including for specific roles across the skills landscape are summarised below.

- Rationalising the number of agencies involved in development, design and funding of apprenticeships. Specific suggestions for the lead agency included SDS and SFC although, as noted above, others suggested that colleges should take on management of apprenticeships. There was also reference to potential for better joint working between SDS and SFC, such as ensuring SDS has representation on the SFC Skills, Enhancement, Access and Learning committee.

- A more streamlined and consistent approach to reporting requirements, with some calling for this to align with reporting for other HE programmes through the SFC and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). This was highlighted specifically in relation to GAs.

- A role for the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and its successor in design and delivery of new qualifications, both as the awarding body for skills programmes, and as the quality assurance body for NOS and apprenticeships. It was also suggested that the SQA and its successor should have roles in streamlining qualifications, in providing a Competence Management System (CMS) framework, and in independent assessment of CMS.

- A more expansive role for DYW in facilitating engagement with schools, including connections with third sector and private sector partners.

- DYW skills provision in schools to be driven – and potentially delivered – by local authorities rather than an external agency.

- Greater clarity around the role of LEPs, including more consistent approach and practice across local authority areas.

- Identification of sector-specific bodies or forums to lead skills planning and delivery for these sectors.

- Alignment with other approaches across the UK in terms of the role of employer professional bodies in supporting the development and quality assurance of skills provision.

- Clarity around an agreed set of terminology and definitions of skills.

Question 4 – Thinking about how our economy and society is changing and the Scottish Government's ambitions for a skilled workforce as set out in NSET, do you have any evidence on where the current skills and education landscape needs to adapt or change and how it could be improved?

Around 120 respondents provided a comment at Question 4.

A number of these respondents cited positive examples of existing skills provision, and wished to see an approach that builds on these existing strengths. This included reference to:

- The strengths of FE/HE institutions, and calls for the sector to be further empowered to continue to innovate and respond to needs.

- Positives associated with ongoing SDS programmes such as the Skilled Workforce Programme and Entrepreneurial People and Culture, and the contribution these programmes have made in delivering against the NSET. This included some detailed accounts of activities currently being delivered under these and other programmes, with a particular focus on how these can support a more agile skills landscape and support investment in skills and training.

- The effectiveness of joint working between the Scottish Government, skills delivery bodies and other key partners to better respond to current and future skills requirements. Respondents also referred to the importance of local and regional programmes and partnership working to ensure skills delivery is more responsive to skills needs.

However, there were also calls for a more agile and adaptable skills landscape, that is more responsive to current and future workforce requirements. This included a stronger focus on how skills and education provision is planned in response to current and anticipated future need, and for consideration of how the skills system is delivering for specific industry needs.

There was reference to reform of the skills delivery landscape to recognise the wider social, economic and environmental challenges that will inform future workforce needs. This included domestic and international policy issues associated with delivering net zero, tackling inequality and growing an inclusive and sustainable economy.

Proposals for change

Respondents suggested a range of specific proposals to adapt or change the skills delivery landscape. These were primarily focused on ensuring there is better alignment across skills delivery frameworks, that skills delivery is more responsive to current and emerging industry needs, and that it is supported by a more effective approach to funding.

Better alignment of the skills framework

Better alignment of the skills frameworks used across all parts of the skills and education landscape was suggested. This included discussion around how skills should be defined, prioritised and assessed to develop an effective skills framework that can inform the approach to skills delivery. A greater focus on 'higher order' capacities – such as verbal and written communication skills, skills for learning, problem solving, motivational intelligence, digital skills, and meta-skills, – was proposed. However, it was also suggested that this focus should not be to the exclusion of core technical skills, since these will be essential for emerging NSET priorities. A single skills and competences framework for Scotland was also proposed to simplify the current set of frameworks.

Discussion of skills frameworks also reflected a perceived need for consideration of whether there is parity of esteem for academic and vocational qualifications and skills. There were calls for wider use of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and credit-rated qualifications and learning programmes which, it was suggested, could enhance the quality assurance of publicly-funded qualifications. It was also suggested that a more joined up approach to recognition of prior learning (RPL) is required, and that parity of esteem should be reflected in greater equity of funding for vocational and academic skills provision.

Delivery models

In terms of skills delivery, there was reference to the role of apprenticeship provision and the need to ensure that this continues to meet the needs of learners and employers. This included some who wished to see additional FAs at SCQF 4 and 5, and a review of GAs in light of changing skills requirements.

There were also calls for change in how skills are delivered, for example though modern models of learning, development of transferable attributes through experiential learning work-related practices, and upskilling of managers and development of entrepreneurial skills. There was also reference to a role for meta-skills such as collaboration and coordination, alongside 'core' technical skills.

Meeting industry and employer needs

The extent to which the skills delivery system is responsive to industry needs was also a key concern for some. There were calls for action to address what was seen as a lack of alignment between skills delivery and industry needs.

There were also calls for action to target specific skills gaps – both sectoral and geographical – with respondents citing a range of evidence around skills requirements across specific sectors. This included a perceived need to ensure that skills provision meets industry requirements and reflects changing technologies, that there are clear entry and progression pathways, and is supported by clear, comprehensive and inclusive careers information and guidance. More inclusive and effective engagement with industry was seen as an essential element in ensuring skills delivery is better aligned with industry needs.

It was suggested that leadership by sector-specific bodies could help to coordinate the approach to specific skills gaps, pooling resources and ensuring more strategic use of funding. The role of CITB Wales in informing development of the Construction Apprenticeship Framework was cited as a positive example.

Discussion around the responsiveness of the skills delivery system was also linked to suggestions for how the system can be more flexible to better meet the needs of individuals and employers. Respondents wished to see more 'flexible and buildable' programmes that enable individuals and employers to adapt and combine provision to meet their needs. This was highlighted as especially important in enabling better support for lifelong learning, rather than limiting learners to defined pathways. Micro-credentials were seen as having an important role, enabling an individual to stack and connect learning to address knowledge gaps, and to upskill or reskill throughout their life.

Emerging technologies

In terms of responsiveness to future needs, some respondents wished to see better planning for emerging technologies, supported by improved evidence on the likely profile of future skills requirements for green jobs, STEM[3] and anticipated growth in high-skill jobs. It was suggested that delivery of the upskilling required to delivery net zero targets will be a 'massive task'. In addition to the scale of the upskilling task to support green and emerging industries, respondents highlighted a lack of alignment between skills delivery and skills requirements (both current and future).

A number of respondents wished to see a clearer statement from the Scottish Government on what the move to greener jobs will look like in practice, including more detail on anticipated skills requirements. There were also calls for development of skills hubs to support skills development in response to changing industry needs (for example, green skills and skills to support net zero), and to deliver social impact in deprived areas. Respondents also highlighted the importance of the Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan and Digital Economy Skills

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[3] Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

Action Plan in terms of setting out how 'whole systems actions' can address changing needs.

It was also noted that the opportunities identified in the NSET will increase demand for young people with STEM skills, and it was suggested that meeting this demand will be a key test for the responsiveness of the skills delivery landscape. In this context, there were calls for the Review to consider the lessons that can be learnt from previous STEM initiatives. There were also concerns that STEM provision is too cluttered, and a view that a more coordinated approach is required to ensure the system is providing the industry-relevant courses and activities required, including provision that better reflects current and emerging technologies.

Collaboration and partnership working

Stronger collaboration and partnership working – local and regional – were identified as critically important in ensuring skills delivery can take advantage of new opportunities identified in the NSET. This included a specific focus on collaboration between industry and skills providers to ensure that provision reflects current and developing industry needs, and concern that skills provision needs to be more accessible to industry, especially micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). It was suggested that current industry engagement is too focused on a subset of employers who are willing to engage with skills providers.

FE/HE institutions, especially colleges, were identified as having a key role to play in ensuring skills delivery responds to local and regional needs, and it was suggested that, through joint working with FE/HE institutions, Innovation Centres can contribute to development of practical courses to address skills gaps. Discussion of the need for partnership working also reflected concern that skills delivery should be able to respond to specific local and regional skills requirements, and to adapt as these requirements change over time. There were calls for skills providers to be given greater autonomy to respond to skills requirements, including a suggestion that revisions to the Outcome Agreement process could support a more flexible approach for skills providers. A need for better national coordination of local and regional collaboration, and for national programmes to incorporate greater flexibility to respond to local needs was also suggested.

Funding arrangements

The approach to funding of skills delivery was also highlighted as an area requiring change. For example, some suggested that single-year funding can limit more strategic approaches to skills delivery, including long-term planning, and there were calls for longer-term funding commitments. Some also saw a need for significant additional funding and investment to deliver the required change in skills delivery, both in terms of improving existing programmes and developing new provision to address skills gaps and respond to changing needs. This included proposals for skills academies and centres of excellence for skills development, calls for more funding to be made available for individuals and employers to take up short courses and continuing professional development (CPD) courses, and calls for a review of modern apprenticeship funding to target skills shortage industries. It was also

suggested that the Review should consider the parity of funding across education and skills sectors, including between colleges and universities.

Lifelong skills development

Some respondents expressed a view that skills delivery should have a stronger focus on lifelong skills development, and on upskilling or reskilling of those aged 25+, for example through adult apprenticeships. It was argued that supporting these groups to adapt to changing economic requirements and emerging industries will be critical in meeting the ambitions set out in the NSET, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) review of apprenticeship provision was cited as important evidence of the need to rebalance provision towards adults.

There were also calls for an increase in funding specifically for older age groups, and removal of age-related barriers to specific skills programmes, as well as for a specific focus on upskilling and reskilling of those experiencing in-work poverty. Cross-sector efforts to address the issue of long-term and multi-generational economic inactivity, and to reduce the share of people who are not active in the labour market, were also proposed.

Other proposals

Other changes proposed by respondents included:

- Building a more robust evidence and intelligence base around the skills requirements for NSET priorities, and informing skills providers work in scaling up existing programmes and developing new provision.

- A more coordinated approach to addressing gaps in data on skills needs, and joint working to ensure access to robust labour market information. There was specific concern that further work is required to ensure that national and regional data sets can support more localised skills planning.

- Using external evaluation and monitoring to place a premium on effective analysis, planning and collaboration.

- Supporting entrepreneurship and enterprise, including proposals for specific schemes to attract leaders and senior managers to live and work in Scotland, and support businesses to access international graduates. It was also suggested that employers should be encouraged to retain graduates from Scottish universities, and to attract the population surge in England to Scottish universities.

> **Question 5 – Can you provide any evidence of skills structures in other places that are delivering outcomes in line with Scotland's ambitions which Scottish Government should look to in achieving its ambitions?**

Around 85 respondents provided a comment at Question 5.

Many of those providing a response recognised the potential value of alternative skills structures used in other places to inform the Review, and some highlighted

localised skills delivery approaches in Scotland that they wished to see adopted more widely. It was also suggested that dissemination of these and other positive examples to public bodies and skills delivery partners could be useful.

Respondents' discussion of specific examples of skills structures tended to focus on their flexibility, responsiveness to needs, deeper partnership working and the diversity of funding approaches. This included references to specific research and benchmarking reports as potential resources for the Review. Respondents noted the diversity of approaches across other skills structures with respect to the availability of subsidies and incentives for employers supporting apprenticeships, and the support available to address potential barriers such as travel and equipment costs. Some also highlighted the importance of embedding apprentices and learners in decision-making around vocational education.

> *'These international skills systems have two commonalities…they embed the apprentice/learner voice within local and national decision making about vocational education…and they acknowledge that education is only part of our lives as apprentices and that wider social policy has an impact on whether we succeed in our education.'*
>
> *Skills delivery other*

However, it was also noted that skills structures in other countries may not transfer effectively to Scotland. Respondents highlighted the importance of the historical, cultural, economic and education context for skills systems, and suggested that any approach to incorporate practices from other skills structures must take these factors into account.

> *'Learning from international best practice is important, although their skills structures may be based within significantly different economic and/or education landscapes from Scotland's.'*
>
> *Business/employer representative group*

Specific examples of skills structures in other countries included:

- Australia. A national fund providing grants to universities for engagement with industry and strengthen industry partnerships, with a focus on increasing the number of internships and other work-based learning and addressing skills shortages, including through increasing supply of STEM graduates.

- Austria. Collective training alliances to enable smaller businesses that are considered too small or specialised to support apprenticeships.

- Denmark. Recognition of the importance of local, regional, national and sectoral development of apprenticeships, involving employers at different levels. A collaborative approach to development of vocational education and training provision, via local training committees working with colleges to develop skills provision in response to local labour market needs, while ensuring alignment with national ambitions.

- England. The levy Digital Account funding model provides more direct influence for employers and is a catalyst for employer engagement. The Construction Leadership Council was also highlighted as an example of a sector-specific approach to ensuring skills delivery is more responsive to employers needs by bringing together industry and skills providers.

- Estonia. A positive example with respect to digital skills, including reference to a facility for transfer of up to 50% of apprenticeship costs to employers.

- Finland. A positive example of an approach that connects skills development with long-term economic opportunities. It was noted that this includes a more flexible approach to skills delivery, reducing bureaucracy and allowing learners to access courses and training at any point in the year.

- France. Suggested as a positive example in terms of the diversity of the HE sector.

- Germany. Referenced as 'the exemplar' in terms of vocational and work-based learning systems, with a clear, well-established structure that ensures parity of esteem for apprenticeships and other work-based learning, and ensures that programmes properly aligned with economic needs. The German education system also incorporates a broader range of education and skills, exposing learners to employment-related skills from an early stage.

- Ireland. A positive example of skills delivery supporting a specific growth sector, establishing the National Institute for Bioprocessing Research and Training (NIBRT). This uses a collaborative model involving government, academia and industry to deliver the skilled workforce required to attract inward investment.

- Norway. The Nordic Leadership Model as an example of successfully aligning flexible skills delivery with long-term economic opportunities. Norway also has successful collaborative approaches to development of skills provision, for example through use of local training agencies with local employers to encourage more employers to participate in apprenticeship programmes. The BlueEDU aquaculture sector project provides a specific example of a successful collaborative skills system.

- Singapore. A system that encourages individuals to take ownership of their skills development and lifelong learning. This includes more effective information and advice provision to enable informed learning and career choices, and a personal skills and education fund for all individuals aged 25+.

- Spain. Success in increasing uptake of tertiary education in the Basque country through regional Vocational Education and Training (VET) system being established as an anchor institution for skills matching. This included building closer ties with enterprise, a focus on innovation and entrepreneurship, and development of specialised programmes to meet business needs.

- Switzerland. Referenced as a 'gold standard' for vocational and apprenticeship provision, that gives significant value to vocational learning and ensures the skills and education system is aligned with economic needs.

This has included a key role for local training agencies in development of apprenticeship programmes, similar to the approach used in Norway to engage local employers.

- United States. The Public Education Needs Community Involvement and Leadership (PENCIL) model, promoting a relational approach to skills delivery, building strong connections between schools and enterprise through a strategic and relationship-based approach.

- Wales. Referenced by a range of respondents, particularly with respect to the establishment of a single commission with overall responsibility for all tertiary education and training, providing innovation support and enabling better alignment of outcomes, funding and workforce requirements – for example, including Personal Learning Accounts. This has also involved moving all apprenticeship provision into the FE sector. There was also reference to a change to student financing in Wales, enabling part-time students to receive maintenance support that is equivalent to that available to full-time students.

Key messages

Written responses to the call for evidence and feedback via stakeholder events highlighted the following key messages in relation to the skills delivery landscape in Scotland.

Key messages: the skills delivery landscape

Some highlighted positives, but there was a perceived need for change to deliver a more streamlined skills delivery landscape based on a shared vision for skills in Scotland:

- A clear vision for skills should align with economic priorities, and reflect the attributes needed for a modern workforce. This should be supported by stronger leadership, providing clear strategic direction.

- A more streamlined skills landscape should address unnecessary bureaucracy, competition and duplication associated with the number of agencies involved, and a lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities. Some proposed a single body with overall responsibility for skills delivery.

- A more coordinated and streamlined funding approach should ensure consistency and equity across providers and qualifications, minimise bureaucracy, increase flexibility, and address 'silo working' and competition between agencies.

- The skills delivery system should be more flexible and adaptable, and more responsive to industry needs. There should be greater clarity on current and future skills requirements, better planning for emerging skills needs, better alignment across skills frameworks, and stronger collaboration to identify and respond to local and regional skills needs.

- Other proposals included a stronger role for the FE and HE sectors, more support for lifelong learning, and ensuring parity of esteem across skills, competencies, and academic attainment.

3: Apprenticeships

Three apprenticeship programmes operate in Scotland, Modern Apprenticeships (MAs), Foundation Apprenticeships (FAs) and Graduate Apprenticeships (GAs):

- MAs are available to anyone in Scotland aged 16 or over and offer industry-recognised qualifications at various SCQF levels.[4] SDS is responsible for the funding and operation of the MA programme.

- FAs provide work-based learning opportunities for secondary school pupils in S4-S6 and, through pilots, at level 4/5. Funding and delivery of FAs is jointly managed by SDS (through local authorities and independent training providers) and SFC (through colleges).

- GAs offer work-based learning at SCQF level 9 to 11, equivalent to undergraduate and postgraduate degree level. GAs are currently funded by SFC, and jointly delivered by SFC and SDS.

A Review of FA provision by Education Scotland HM Inspector of Education (HMIE) published in March 2022[5] noted the complexity of the current funding and delivery model and presented some challenging messages about the FA programme in relation to design, delivery and impact. The Scottish Government has committed to a phased approach to improvement of the FA programme which will be aligned to the findings of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment, due to report to Ministers in Spring 2023.

Stakeholder events

The 11 public webinars conducted in addition to the call for evidence provided stakeholder feedback focused on apprenticeships, including a public webinar specifically with apprentices. Feedback in relation to apprenticeships highlighted the following key points.

Stakeholder events

Communication and engagement with businesses is key to embedding apprenticeships within education. Embedded apprenticeships will also require alignment with industry needs, and parity of esteem and funding between 'vocational' and 'academic' qualifications.

A lack of alignment across school curricula, apprenticeship frameworks and employer requirements is a potential barrier to embedding apprenticeships. The time taken to develop and revise apprenticeship frameworks is also an issue, and there is a need for a more place-based approach that recognises local and regional contexts.

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[4] SCQF is the national qualifications framework for Scotland, and provides a way of comparing different qualifications by assigning each a level and a number of credit points.

[5] Available at https://education.gov.scot/education-scotland/what-we-do/inspection-and-review/chief-inspector-report/evaluation-of-foundation-apprenticeships-march-2022/

Clarity is required around roles and responsibilities in development of apprenticeship frameworks, and there is a need to further expand the range of stakeholders involved – especially smaller employers and skills providers.

The focus of apprenticeship frameworks and funding should be expanded to ensure equity of access across ages and to better support lifelong upskilling and reskilling – demand from older demographics is not being met.

The range of available frameworks is a positive (less so for GAs) but some are out of date and sectoral gaps remain. Access can also be an issue for some – for example due to physical location for those in rural and remote areas, and funding/wages can be a barrier especially for care experienced young people and others who face additional barriers.

Call for evidence responses

Written responses in relation to apprenticeships are summarised over the following pages.

Question 6 – Do you have any evidence relating to the outcomes of the current funding and delivery of apprenticeship programmes (Modern Apprenticeships, Foundation Apprenticeships and Graduate Apprenticeships) in terms of either outcomes for learners and/or the needs of employers?

Around 105 respondents provided a comment at Question 6, referring to a range of evidence sources including skills provider records, a number of reviews and commissioned reports, and HMIE inspection reports. It was noted that HMIE inspections were paused in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and suggested that there is now a need to consider the most appropriate inspection approach given the increase in apprenticeship activity in 2022 and the diversity of providers.

Outcomes for learners

Overall, discussion reflected support for the role of apprenticeships as part of the skills and education landscape, and the value they offer learners. Specific evidence cited in relation to the three apprenticeship programmes is summarised below.

Modern Apprenticeships

Points raised in relation to MAs included one FE/HE respondent reporting that they have increased the scale of their MA provision in response to demand. However, in relation to demand it was also suggested that:

- There is evidence to suggest a need to increase uptake from under-represented groups.

- There is feedback that the wage element for MAs is reducing their attractiveness as a career opportunity.

In terms of the teaching and learning experience for MAs, evidence was cited in support of the effectiveness of existing arrangements to assure the quality of delivery of individual programmes, the suitability of current teaching staff in terms of experience and effective Career Long Professional Learning, and current skills delivery meeting the needs of awarding bodies.

However, areas for improvement were also identified including in relation to: the level of employer engagement; delivery of core skills; self-evaluation arrangements; and involving apprentices and employers in both planning of learning and assessments, and in progress monitoring.

In terms of outcomes for learners, there was reference to evidence of high attainment rates, especially for learners supported by some Independent Training Providers (ITPs). In these providers, quality assurance arrangements were described as effective, with reference to strong leadership for quality and a culture of continuous improvement. However, there was also reference to:

- A need to address variability in attainment rates across providers and frameworks. One FE/HE respondent noted varying trends in attainment across specific occupational groups.

Respondents cited a range of evidence around positive progression for MAs, including to employment and other pathways. However, it was also suggested that further promotion of learning pathways is required to support more progressions from MAs to GAs, in addition to progression to employment.

Foundation Apprenticeship

Comments on FA outcomes included concerns regarding the design of FA programmes and a view that, in their current form, these are not practical to deliver, assess or quality assure. The inclusion of multiple qualification product types was highlighted as creating difficulties, with the work-based components of FAs seen as a particular challenge.

In relation to the operation and impact of FAs, there was reference to uptake having increased over time through promotion and enhanced partnership working, although it was noted that promotion of FAs is variable across schools. Evidence was also cited that awareness and understanding of FA frameworks, and what they require of learners, varies significantly.

While there was reference to evidence of an increasing proportion of female learners and those from ethnic minority backgrounds taking on an FA, it was suggested that current efforts were not having sufficient impact in reducing bias and improving uptake for those with other protected characteristics. This included specific reference to continuing gender bias in choices. There was a perceived need for better data analysis to monitor equality of access and take-up across protected characteristics.

Evidence of positive experiences of FA programmes was cited, especially around the blend of theory and workplace experience. This highlighted the importance of access to high quality work placements and industry-standard equipment. There

was also positive evidence on the development of strong and purposeful relationships between learners and staff delivering programmes.

In terms of challenges and areas for improvement, the breadth and quality of work-based components of FAs was raised, with these being compared unfavourably to MAs. It was also reported that:

- Challenges coordinating activities between schools and FA providers can result in significant numbers of learner experiencing disruption to their FA programme.

- There is insufficient linkage of learning between FA programmes and other senior phase programmes.

- There have been challenges for FA programmes in competing with Higher qualifications, and apprentices choosing to prioritise other senior phase programmes.

Concerns were also raised about withdrawal rates for FAs; they were described as generally high, with rates of 50-100% in many schools. The degree of variation across Scotland was also noted, and it was suggested that schools' approach to exploring reasons for withdrawal could be improved to support improvement planning. An associated suggestion was that a lack of awareness from the outset around the level of input required from learners may contribute to the proportion failing to complete programmes.

Despite concerns around withdrawal rates, respondents cited examples of positive outcomes for FA learners. This included positive outcomes in terms of learners acquiring relevant workplace skills, and an understanding of the skills and attitudes required by employers. There was also reference to learners being supported to make career choices and plan for next steps, noting that most progress to further study at college or university.

In relation to attainment rates, respondents cited evidence of some improvement in overall attainment rates, and FAs were identified as an opportunity to support work to close the poverty-related attainment gap. However, it was noted that attainment continues to vary significantly across local authorities, providers and subject frameworks, and that there remains a gap in attainment between learners from the most and least deprived backgrounds.

Concerns were also raised around the proportion of learners progressing to MAs. It was suggested that this can be negatively impacted by a lack of MA pathways in some areas, and there were calls for better careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG), and promotion of MA and GA pathways to support learner progression.

It was also suggested that more effective evaluation of FA programmes is required, including better partnership approaches to evaluation to support improvement. It was reported that currently this process often has little or no input from schools.

Graduate Apprenticeships

Key points in relation to the operation and impact of GAs included that there is imbalance in access to GAs, both in terms of the number of GA programmes available in rural areas, and more generally in the number of GA frameworks that meet the needs of rural employers. It was suggested that this is linked to the profile of employers that typically offer GAs, which were seen as being dominated by medium or larger enterprises.

It was also suggested that there have been limited opportunities for school-leavers to access GAs, and that employers are using the programmes to upskill existing employees. It was argued that one consequence of the move to embed GAs in core funding, has been displacement of other undergraduate provision, thereby reducing other opportunities for school leavers.

In terms of areas for improvement, there were calls for GA frameworks to allow delivery on a part-time or flexible basis, reflecting concern that being limited to full-time delivery can limit access for those who would require to work part-time or who have caregiving responsibilities. Some FE/HE respondents noted that they have ceased or chosen not to expand their GA provision, in part due to the lack of flexibility in GA frameworks, together with insecurity of funding and other complexities around delivery. There was also a call for clarification around apprenticeship eligibility for non-Scottish domiciled apprentices.

In terms of learner outcomes, it was noted that completion rates have improved in recent years. There was also reference to positive outcomes in terms of accessing work-based routes that better fit learners' skills and circumstances, and in supporting career change and/or career progression, with associated improvement in circumstances and prospects.

Outcomes for employers

Comments on outcomes for employers, including from a number of business and employer representative groups, were supportive of the role of apprenticeship programmes. These respondents focused on the contribution that apprenticeship programmes make in addressing skills gaps, and the value of the practical skills delivered to apprentices. The role of apprenticeships in addressing skills shortages was highlighted as especially important in the context of delivering Scottish Government ambitions for economic transformation.

Respondents referred to positive feedback (especially around MA programmes) in terms of the extent to which apprenticeship programmes meet the needs of industry and supply workers who are reliable, focused and understand what is required of them in the modern workplace. Current examples of effective use of labour market data to inform planning and delivery were cited in this context. There was also reference to the proportion of apprentices that are retained and establish career pathways within the employer organisation. Other specific positives for employers included that apprenticeship programmes can support staff recruitment and retention and succession planning.

However, some highlighted difficulties for employers looking to access apprenticeship programmes. This included reference to a range of issues around awareness of available programmes, lack of flexibility in terms of eligibility and delivery requirements, and the complexity of the funding landscape. Targeted awareness raising for MSMEs was suggested in particular, and it was reported that many smaller employers do not know how to access the apprenticeship system.

> *'Feedback from employers…is that they don't find apprenticeships easy to access and the eligibility and rules of delivery and engagement often make it difficult for employers to access them as much as they would like.'*
>
> *Business/employer representative group*

Respondents also noted gaps in availability of apprenticeship programmes. This included in terms of sectors and occupational groups (including town planning, forestry and farriery) and regions. Several of those based in rural areas noted the limited range of apprenticeship programmes available, including a suggestion that the structure of FAs in particular may not suit rural areas where transport infrastructure does not match employer locations. There was also reference to feedback from employers in relation to MA programmes, expressing concern around young employees being required to stay overnight in unfamiliar areas to access college-based learning.

Other concerns for employers included that:

- Frameworks lack flexibility with respect to part-time delivery.
- Lack of regional input for apprenticeship programmes means that they can fail to reflect local and regional industry needs.
- The timing of final funding allocations does not allow sufficient time for employers to forward plan for apprenticeships.
- Some apprenticeship frameworks have not been updated to reflect current employer skills requirements.

Question 7 – The Terms of Reference sets out an ambition for apprenticeship programmes to be an embedded part of the wider education system to ensure that there are a range of different pathways available to learners. Do you have any views or evidence on how changes to the operation of apprenticeship programmes could support this ambition?

Around 110 respondents provided a comment at Question 7, with some expressing support for the principle of embedding apprenticeships in the wider education system. This was linked to a view that the apprenticeship landscape is cluttered and confusing, such that both learners and employers can find it difficult to navigate. There was also a concern that management of the apprenticeship system deters employers from engaging with apprenticeship frameworks, and that this can be a particular issue for MSMEs.

There were also concerns that centralised control of apprenticeship programmes has contributed to programmes that are not sufficiently responsive to regional employer needs and do not work for all businesses. Respondents saw a need for greater flexibility across apprenticeship programmes. This reflected wider concerns around ensuring equity of access, and there were calls for equity of funding across apprenticeships and other provision.

> *'The current model is controlled at a national level which means that it is not responsive to regional employer need.'*
>
> *Further/Higher Education institution*

Respondents also highlighted a number of issues and concerns relating to particular apprenticeship programmes.

- In relation to MAs, there was concern that competence-based qualifications being developed for the new apprenticeship model do not meet requirements. It was suggested that NOS should underpin apprenticeships. The administrative process around MA contract arrangements was also seen as excessive, including the requirements of the SDS Funding Information and Processing System.

- In relation to FAs, there was concern regarding low take-up and a view that this is linked to a lack of understanding around the role of FAs, high barriers to entry, a lack of lower-level FAs and a view that FAs do not meet needs of learners and schools. It was also suggested that FAs are not well embedded in some areas, and have not achieved parity with senior phase qualifications, including reference to pupils and families prioritising Highers if needed.

- In relation to GAs, it was suggested that most support learners returning to education, many being existing employees working towards a full-funded degree. There was concern that the current GA model does not allow for the flexibility required by some employers – for example, to package learning from different subject areas to meet their specific needs – and hence is less responsive to employer needs. Reference was also made to the uncertainty caused by funding only being guaranteed for one year; together with limits on the number of GAs for each provider, this was seen as affecting the economic viability of GAs for HE institutions.

A more streamlined approach to apprenticeships

Reflecting some of the above concerns, achieving a simpler and more streamlined approach was a key theme for respondents suggesting how apprenticeships could be better embedded as part of the wider education system. It was hoped that embedding apprenticeships would bring a range of benefits, such as integration of work-based learning within the core school curriculum, smoother learner pathways, and alignment of course provision and academic timelines.

Specific suggestions for change under this theme included:

- Greater clarity on the purpose of GAs and ensuring certainty and clarity of provision of apprenticeships more widely. This included calls for parity around skills, competencies and knowledge.

- Streamlining the approach to apprenticeships by reducing the number of agencies involved, including proposals for a single body responsible for development and funding of apprenticeship programmes.

- A streamlined approach to funding and quality assurance for apprenticeships – for example, a single funding body for all tertiary education, and/or a single agency with responsibility for assurance and evaluation of apprenticeship frameworks.

- Broader changes to strengthen the approach to quality assurance for apprenticeships, and to improve the consistency of approach across programmes. This included targeted support and professional learning to ensure quality of provision by private providers.

Ensuring apprenticeship frameworks are fit for purpose

Proposals for change also reflected a focus on ensuring apprenticeship frameworks are fit for purpose. In this context, respondents referred to the development process for apprenticeship frameworks, the flexibility of provision, quality assurance, access to information, and funding arrangements.

The development process

Proposed changes to the development process for apprenticeships were primarily concerned with ensuring apprenticeship frameworks better reflect industry need. There were calls for the development of apprenticeship programmes to be devolved to, and embedded within the further education system. It was hoped by some respondents that colleges taking the lead in planning and delivery of apprenticeships would ensure programmes address regional skills requirements.

> *'Devolving apprenticeships and embedding them within the further education system via colleges will validate the apprenticeship route as a learning pathway of equal status to college or university particularly in the less "traditional" apprenticeship areas such as digital, care and hospitality.'*
>
> *Further/Higher Education institution*

There were also calls for a more collaborative approach, including closer collaboration between key national agencies, and for earlier involvement for colleges and universities in development of new apprenticeship frameworks. A greater role for employers in shaping the development of apprenticeship frameworks was also suggested, with a broader range of employers to be involved. This included specific suggestions to expand membership of the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board (SAAB) beyond levy payers, including greater involvement for MSMEs.

Other suggestions for the approach to development included that more frequent review of apprenticeship frameworks would enable apprenticeships to respond more quickly to changing labour market needs. There was also thought to be a need for parity of esteem between apprenticeships and other learning pathways, including FE and HE qualifications. Associated with this was a reference to terminology use, and examples of moving away from the distinction between academic and vocational qualifications.

More flexible provision

Respondents made a range of suggestions for delivery of more flexible apprenticeship programmes. Specific proposals included:

- Expanding the number and range of apprenticeship frameworks, particularly for MAs and FAs.

- More diverse apprenticeship programmes incorporating smaller, work-based modular learning options, micro-credentials, shared apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeship programmes, part-time options, and flexibility around length of programmes.

- Enabling easier transition between apprenticeships. This included calls for clearer FA to MA and MA to GA pathways, for example through closer alignment of subject areas.

- Ensuring equity of access across age groups, including calls for more all-age apprenticeships.

- Reconsideration of the 'quota' approach for regions and occupational sectors.

Quality assurance

It was reported that the current division of quality assurance between FE/HE institutions and SDS can lead to inconsistency of approach. A more integrated approach to quality assurance and enhancement of apprenticeships was suggested, including through closer integration of SDS as part of the future tertiary education quality framework.

Access to information

As was highlighted previously in relation to the wider skills delivery landscape, respondents identified a need to increase awareness of and access to information on apprenticeship programmes. This included suggestions for apprenticeships to be given greater prominence in schools with promotion through CIAG, and at university Open Days. A particular focus on increasing the prominence of GAs as an option for school leavers was suggested, along with improving understanding of the role and content of FAs and potential progression routes.

Other suggestions included creating a single point of contact for information around apprenticeship programmes for prospective learners, and more targeted information and support to help employers to establish apprenticeship places. This included reference to the importance of information and advice around terms and conditions, pay, mentoring and best practice.

Funding

Funding was identified as a critical factor in the success or otherwise of apprenticeship programmes. Respondents highlighted a need for sustainable funding to ensure embedding apprenticeships does not come at the expense of other provision. This was linked to concern that embedding FA and GA funding into SFC funding might result to reduction in overall funding. It was also suggested that funding per head of population is significantly lower than in England and Wales.

A review of funding across apprenticeship frameworks was suggested, including to bring greater clarity around how funding rates are determined for apprenticeship frameworks. Respondents also wished to see a specific review of the funding approach for GAs, with a focus on providing HE institutions with greater certainty around funding. It was proposed that this should seek to provide certainty of funding least 6-12 months in advance of GA programmes starting.

Proposals for specific apprenticeship programmes

Respondents also made a number of suggestions relating to specific apprenticeship programmes. Key proposals in relation to MAs were:

- Closer working with schools and DYW teams to promote careers through apprenticeships.

- Improving awareness and understanding of MA options earlier in schools, for example after entry into secondary school.

- Ensuring that the new apprenticeship development process draws on available expertise in development of NOS.

- Streamlining the contracting process to focus resources on development and delivery, rather than administration and reporting. This included calls for review of the role of 'Managing Agents' in the funding and delivery of MAs, to ensure equity of contracting and delivery opportunities across providers.

Key proposals in relation to FAs were:

- Reviewing their role in relation to other qualifications and progression routes, including the senior school phase. It was noted that while FAs were originally positioned as leading mainly to MA options, learners generally undertake FAs alongside school qualifications to progress to FE or HE study.

- Considering the complexity of the FA qualification and the commitment required in terms of time and workload, particularly noting that school pupils are not apprentices and do not benefit from the same level of workplace experience. Flexibility around the balance between theory and work-based aspects was also suggested.

- Targeting and segmenting audiences, including more FAs at SCQF 4/5 in S3 to S5 as a means of enhancing choices for young people.

- Integrating earlier in schools' provision, for example after entry into secondary school, including in-school delivery of FAs. Respondents also suggested better alignment of FA programmes with school course structures and timings.

- Developing broader and more sustainable progression pathways, including into MAs.

- Better alignment with labour market opportunities.

- Consideration of the impact of the recent change in funding model for FAs at Level 6, particularly in relation to travel costs and access to public transport in rural areas.

Key proposals in relation to GAs were:

- A clear statement setting out the vision for GAs.

- A more flexible delivery system as a means of engaging with a wider industry base. This included calls for greater autonomy for universities to develop provision that responds to industry needs, and for longer lead times. It was also suggested that learners should have the option to transition from a GA to an alternative qualification.

- Development of more university-industry partnerships to support GA provision.

Question 8 – Apprenticeships are often described as being 'demand-led'. Do you have any evidence about how process for developing and approving apprenticeship frameworks responds to skills priorities?

Around 95 respondents provided a comment at Question 8, with some highlighting the importance of apprenticeship development and approval being led by employer demand in particular. There was reference to the current scale of skills and labour shortages as illustrating the particular importance that skills provision responds effectively to need and demand.

Respondents provided a number of instances where practice has ensured that apprenticeship frameworks are demand-led and where employer engagement plays a role. There was also reference to:

- The new Technical Expert Group (TEG) approach to apprenticeship development as ensuring a focus on labour market and employer needs.

- Employer engagement at the programme development and validation, and curriculum design stages.

However, a number of those commenting raised concerns about the extent to which the current approach to development and approval of apprenticeship frameworks is truly demand-led.

Determining demand

Some of the concerns raised by respondents echoed those covered at previous questions, including around the extent to which apprenticeship development engages with a sufficiently diverse range of employers and, in particular, whether it addresses the specific needs of MSMEs. It was also suggested that there is a lack of clarity around how SDS identifies the employers and experts to contribute to

specific frameworks, and that employers may not be clear around how to highlight skills gaps and, by extension, inform the apprenticeship development process.

> *'Membership of the SAAB Group Board and…Employer Engagement sub-group does appear to be dominated by larger employers, which is not unexpected. There is a risk this means that it represents the views of a relatively small group of existing employers of apprentices, when a priority is stimulating participation by a wide range of small employers.'*
>
> *Business/Employer representative group*

It was suggested that specific frameworks have been impacted negatively by insufficient engagement with relevant employers. Examples were also cited of a lack of follow-up where employers have identified demand for new frameworks; respondents were unclear whether this was due to demand failing to meet selection criteria, or a lack of resources to respond to employer demand. It was suggested that there is a lack of clarity around the process of innovating and identifying new areas for apprenticeship frameworks. There was also a concern about under-resourcing leading to over reliance on SAAB volunteers.

Respondents wished to see a more rigorous approach to assessment of employer demand, including specifically in relation to the production of demand statements. Use of national targets for apprenticeship numbers was also a concern, with a suggestion that they can hinder the allocation of resources in areas of greatest demand, as total resource needs to be spread across a specific number of opportunities. There was a suggestion that an overly narrow focus on the requirements of specific employers or sectors can produce apprenticeship frameworks that do not take account of future skills requirements.

In addition to being employer demand-led, respondents also highlighted the importance of apprenticeship frameworks taking account of learners' needs and wider economic priorities, alongside engagement with employers. It was suggested that the vision for a simpler, people-focused skills system requires engagement with a wider range of demand - including learners, employers and wider economic needs. There was reference to the importance of apprenticeship development giving sufficient consideration to progression routes and career pathways for learners.

New or updated frameworks

Other concerns about the extent to which apprenticeship frameworks respond to skills priorities included that new frameworks are needed to reflect employer needs and new working practices. There was reference to specific skills requirements including net zero skills such as energy assessors and training coordinators, social media, policing, social work and nursing. In relation to meeting demand for the skills required to meet net zero targets, it was suggested that wholesale revision to apprenticeship frameworks and structures will be necessary. There was also reference to the skills requirements of smaller employers and those in rural and remote areas.

The speed of the development and approval process was also highlighted as an issue by a number of respondents. It was suggested that this can undermine demand-led provision, and the value that employers and learners attach to qualifications. There was reference to having to 'bolt on' qualifications needed to ensure apprentices are employable as a result of the time taken to update frameworks.

> *'The process can be slow, and there can be a lag between locally identified priorities and national actions.'*
>
> *Other public body*

Proposals for improvement

Reflecting the issues noted above, respondents proposed a number of potential improvements to ensure apprenticeship frameworks respond to skills priorities. Proposals relating to the approach to development and approval of apprenticeship frameworks included:

- Developing a longer-term vision for and commitment to apprenticeships. This was seen as important in enabling necessary investment from skills providers, and to give employers confidence around the capacity of the apprenticeship landscape to support their investment in recruitment and upskilling.

- Greater transparency and accountability around development, approval and quality assurance of apprenticeship frameworks. There were calls for clear and agreed evidence-based criteria for prioritisation of apprenticeship development and review. It was also suggested that greater clarity is required around the balance of roles and responsibilities across agencies, and how employers and others involved in the development process are selected.

- A move to regular or continuous (rather than reactive) review of apprenticeship frameworks.

- Establishing a joint planning group to coordinate development and approval of apprenticeship frameworks.

- Allocating Apprenticeship Managers to major employers, or groups of employers, to streamline the development process.

- Greater autonomy for FE/HE institutions to develop qualifications that respond to local industry need. A more regional element to apprenticeship planning, including scope for institutions to collaborate and engage with employers and other partners at a regional level. Current SFC Regional Provision Pathfinders were noted as testing an approach to regional planning that could be applied to apprenticeships.

- Providing better access to data that informs prioritisation of apprenticeship frameworks for development or review, and the level and profile of demand for apprenticeships, to inform skills providers' investment.

Respondents also made reference to approaches and content that may support flexibility, for example in relation to delivery of transferable skills, micro-credentials and adaptability across sectors. Suggestions included:

- Use of micro-credentials to increase the flexibility of apprenticeship frameworks, and potentially speed up the development and approval process. It was also suggested that the use of micro-credentials can help with engaging those furthest from the labour market, and those at risk of unemployment who need to reskill.

- A modular approach to better support reskilling, including specifically as a means to 'fast track' the frameworks required to support the transition to net zero.

- A stronger focus on higher order, meta skills and interdisciplinary approaches that can be adapted across sectors.

- Shared Apprenticeships opportunities across employers as an option to deliver a wider skill set, and to better meet the needs of smaller employers.

Respondents also highlighted specific frameworks or models as examples of 'demand-led' approaches that could be reflected in Scotland's skills delivery landscape:

- The UK Government's 'flexi-job' apprenticeship model, that may offer benefits for sectors with flexible employment patterns and short-term roles, where individual employers have struggled to offer full apprenticeships.

- The Welsh Government's approach, where development and funding of apprenticeships is informed by regularly updated Skills Plans produced by Regional Skills Partnerships.

- Other UK awarding organisations that are industry recognised and more directly aligned with sectors, such as IMI for the automotive industry.

> **Question 9 – SAAB and AAG are described as employer-led groups. Do you have evidence on the benefits or risks of employer leadership in apprenticeship development or the impact it has on outcomes for apprentices and/or employers?**

Around 75 respondents provided a comment at Question 9.

Benefits of employer leadership

A number of respondents highlighted the critical role that employers have played in Scotland's apprenticeship system. It was reported that partnership working – between universities/colleges, employers and learners – is fundamental to the development and delivery of apprenticeship programmes to ensure they reflect current and future labour market needs.

Respondents also referred to a number of positives associated with employer leadership of apprenticeship development. These were primarily related to ensuring apprenticeship frameworks reflect current and future industry needs. Respondents

noted that employers enable the development process to ensure apprenticeship frameworks are fit-for-purpose in terms of meeting industry skills requirements and aligning with employment opportunities. This was seen as a particular strength when combined with input from skills providers around delivery and assessment of vocational content.

Employer leadership was seen as having the potential to add significant value across all aspects of the apprenticeship system, including governance. It was noted that the BSI Review of Apprenticeship Governance identified a need for employers to be involved in all aspects of apprenticeship governance.

> *'Employers provide excellent lived experience information and case studies. They are also very clear on urgency for outcomes they need to see that are specific to their situation…Having employer champions on relevant boards is an important enabler and, in that context, representative organisations that are actively engaged with employers can also be effective.'*

> *Further/Higher education institution*

Risks associated with employer leadership

Respondents also referred to a range of issues and concerns associated with employer leadership of apprenticeship development. These primarily related to collaboration and joint working, the diversity of employers contributing to apprenticeship development, and employers' limited understanding of the wider skills landscape.

In relation to collaboration, respondents identified a need for more effective partnership working across stakeholders involved in the development of apprenticeship frameworks. Associated concerns included the breadth of membership of the SAAB and Apprenticeship Approvals Group (AAG). It was suggested that the voice of larger organisations dominates, and that the application of the agreed approaches are not workable for MSMEs. There was also thought to be insufficient representation of islands and rural regions in employer-led groups. In terms of possible changes, it was suggested that:

- SAAB and AAG should be positioned to draw on the expertise held by employer-led Sector Skills Councils and Bodies.

- There should be greater transparency around decision-making across SAAB and AAG, including calls for decisions taken by these groups to be shared with stakeholders.

Some highlighted the important contribution of universities/colleges and other skills bodies, working alongside employers, to ensure frameworks are balanced and robust. Respondents suggested there is a need for careful management of the apprenticeship design process to ensure this reflects industry requirements, without becoming too sector-specific. This included reference to the importance of avoiding proliferation of similar apprenticeship frameworks, and maintaining a focus on shared common elements that support transferability of skills and transition between industry sectors. It was suggested that experience in England has

highlighted the danger of developing apprenticeship frameworks that are too focused on a single, large employer or sector. In this context, it was proposed that employers and skills providers should 'co-lead' development work.

Some also highlighted issues around the diversity of employers contributing to the apprenticeship system, in terms of the size of employer and sectors (including public sector employers). It was noted that this can exclude the experience of MSMEs that lack the resources required to contribute to development of apprenticeships. This was highlighted as a significant issue in the context of MSMEs accounting for the majority of employers in Scotland, especially in rural areas. There were calls for a review of membership of boards and groups involved in the apprenticeship system (such as TEGs, Qualification Design Groups and Provider Advice Groups) to ensure they include the right mix of employers and skills providers, and are representative of employers.

Key messages

Written responses to the call for evidence and feedback via stakeholder events highlighted the following key messages in relation to apprenticeships.

> **Key messages: apprenticeships**
>
> There was overall support for the role of apprenticeships as part of the skills and education landscape, and the benefits they offer learners and employers:
>
> - Apprenticeships provide high quality experiences that deliver skilled employees with an understanding of the workplace, and will have a key role in addressing skills shortages across sectors.
>
> - There is evidence of strong demand from learners and employers, although there remains scope to improve uptake of FAs and GAs.
>
> - Evidence indicates strong attainment across some programmes, especially for MAs, and clear progression routes into employment.
>
> Several issues and areas for improvement were also identified:
>
> - Delivery of core skills and responsiveness to local and regional variation in skills requirements could be improved - more effective engagement with a more diverse range of employers would support this.
>
> - A lack of flexibility in apprenticeship frameworks and the complexity of the funding landscape can contribute to difficulties for employers in accessing apprenticeship programmes.
>
> - Apprenticeship withdrawal rates are high for some programmes, especially for FAs, and vary significantly across Scotland.
>
> Changes proposed to improve the approach to apprenticeships included:
>
> - Embedding apprenticeships in education to streamline the landscape, align skills and education provision, and provide clearer progression pathways.

- Greater clarity around how apprenticeship programmes contribute to the shared vision for skills and education, including parity of esteem across apprenticeships and other work-related qualifications.

- Ensuring apprenticeships reflect the needs of employers, learners and wider economic priorities. This will require robust labour force data, a clear role for employers in the development process, and close working between FE/HE institutions, employers and learners.

- More flexible apprenticeship programmes are required to better meet the needs of learners and employers, such as part-time and remote options, and shorter courses including micro-credentials.

- Sustainable funding should ensure that embedding apprenticeships is not at the expense of other provision.

4: National Occupational Standards

NOS are statements of the standard of performance that an individual must achieve when carrying out functions of their occupation in the workplace. They are the central industry benchmark for measuring competency and responding to the skills needs of industry, and underpin professional standards and vocational qualifications in many sectors. For example, they are the mandatory component of SVQs and Competency Based Qualifications (CBQs), and the underpinning standard for the qualifications contained in Foundation and Modern Apprenticeship frameworks.

In 2016, the UK Government withdrew from the funding and formal use of NOS, while the three devolved administrations have remained committed to the strategic direction as described in the NOS Strategy '2022 and Beyond'.[6] This sets out ambitions for the development and promotion of NOS within the skills and education system. SDS has been the managing agent for NOS on behalf of the devolved administrations, undertaking development of NOS and related SVQs, and maintaining NOS operations including management of the NOS Database.

Call for evidence responses

Written responses in relation to NOS are summarised over the following pages.

> **Question 10 – Do you have any evidence on how the current arrangements for NOS are delivering against the intended ambitions of the NOS Strategy?**

Around 50 respondents provided a comment at Question 10.

There was support for the focus on vocational training, skills and lifelong learning in the NOS Strategy, and the importance of transferability of skills, including multi-sector skills and meta skills such as such as enterprise, sustainability, leadership, communication and self-management, was highlighted.

A number of respondents saw NOS as an important element of the vocational skills landscape, particularly in relation to professional standards and competency-based qualifications. There was also reference to NOS being a key requirement for a range of vocational qualifications, such as SVQs, MAs, FAs, HNC/D. NOS were seen as supporting consistent standards across the skills landscape, and it was suggested that that they help to reduce fragmentation and duplication. It was also noted that they:

- Have been designed to meet professional standards and confer licences to practice. This was seen as important in ensuring alignment across qualification types, and providing clear and effective progression routes.

- Are importance for specific projects such as the current redesign of SQA Higher National Qualifications.

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[6] https://www.ukstandards.org.uk/NewsUpdates/Lists/Posts/Post.aspx?ID=33

In terms of fit with employer requirements, NOS were described as having been 'developed by employers for employers'. Specific sectors such as engineering, and health and social care, were cited as examples of where there is a good fit between NOS and industry requirements. There was reference to the importance of collaborative development of NOS, and the role of Skills Sector Councils in embedding NOS within specific curriculum areas and ensuring they meet industry standards.

> *'A [positive] example is Health & Social Care and Engineering where the NOS is relevant and meets industry standards. This works well as they have fully engaged sector skills bodies.'*

> *Further/Higher Education institution*

Need for flexibility and responsiveness

Respondents also identified some issues around NOS and were looking for changes to better deliver against the NOS Strategy. This included a concern about the extent to which NOS arrangements are sufficiently flexible. Specific issues raised included that:

- Some NOS as too complex and detailed to be useful for employers.
- Current development/review processes are inefficient and making changes to existing NOS, and developing new NOS, can be difficult and resource intensive.

This latter issue was said to have slowed progress and resulted in NOS struggling to respond to changing industry needs. There was an associated concern that some NOS are no longer fit for purpose due to evolving roles, difficulties around engaging with employers, and the time taken to update NOS. Specific concerns included that, due to a lack of resources to support effective follow-up to qualification review, updates to NOS are not applied across all relevant qualifications.

> *'In the future we would like to see NOS that are more dynamic and flexible…qualifications need to be flexible and able to adapt to the changing needs and expectations of service providers and people who are supported. A more agile NOS and NOS review procedure could make it easier to make required changes nationally.'*

> *Other public body*

Respondents also highlighted sector-specific inconsistencies in the relevance of NOS and raised concerns that the impact of out-of-date NOS will worsen as industrial and technological changes accelerate; the importance of NOS being updated in response to changing industry practices was emphasised. Sector-specific concerns included whether NOS reflect the range of skills and activities required to restore nature and tackle climate change, and there were also references to the NOS for social service and healthcare, children and young people, maritime hospitality, rail engineering, mechanical manufacturing, and forestry being out-of-date and/or not fit for purpose.

Additionally, it was suggested that out-of-date and inflexible NOS can be a particular issue for MSMEs in rural areas, and more generally that the divergence between the four nations' approach to NOS can be a challenge for employers working across the UK.

Some saw a review of NOS as providing the opportunity to develop a more dynamic and flexible approach that better reflects and responds to the skills required by a modern workforce. The NOS Strategic Development Plan, to be commissioned by the NOS Governance Group, was highlighted as a significant step in identifying how NOS Strategy principles and priorities can be delivered.

A consistent approach to standards

Proliferation of NOS over the recent years was seen by some as having led to a significant number of multiple standards, including overlapping NOS. There was a perceived need for a process of rationalising and updating of NOS to establish a solid foundation for ongoing improvement. This included reference to the formal review of progress scheduled for 2027 as an opportunity for rationalisation to support the ongoing continuous improvement cycle.

Respondents also commented on the exclusion of NOS from the new TEG approach to the development of apprenticeship frameworks and standards by SDS and SAAB. There was a concern that this has weakened the position of NOS, and that the relationship between NOS and that the new model of apprenticeships remains unclear. Further concerns included that:

- There is a lack of evidence that new apprenticeships will align with NOS.

- The new model of apprenticeships is not consistent with the Scottish Government's commitment to NOS and does not contribute to ambitions of the NOS Strategy, including around transferability of skills across the UK.

- There could be further proliferation and fragmentation of standards, adding to confusion for employers and individuals. For example, there was said to be a lack of clarity around whether development of next generation HNC/Ds should continue to embed NOS. There was a view that development of new NOS to support new apprenticeships would fit better with the NOS Strategy, rather than the development of new standards.

Other issues

Respondents also identified a number of issues that were seen as having limited progress in delivering the intended ambitions of the NOS Strategy. These included:

- A lack of awareness of NOS, and a lack of understanding of how NOS can benefit employers and employees. There was concern that, together with the perceived inflexibility of NOS, a lack of awareness has contributed to difficulties engaging with employers. For example, it was suggested that Sector Skills Councils often struggle to secure employer input to development of new Standards.

- Constraints on funding were seen as having undermined the effectiveness of current NOS arrangements in delivering against the NOS Strategy. This included that a lack of resources has undermined regular updating of NOS.

- It was suggested that language used in NOS can be out of date and may not align with SVQ frameworks.

- NOS were seen as having potential to limit access to some sectors, where individuals may be put off by the requirement for higher level qualifications.

Question 11 – The NOS Strategy positions NOS as the foundation of vocational training and learning in Scotland. Do you have any evidence to support how changes to the delivery landscape for developing and championing NOS could support this ambition?

Around 45 respondents provided a comment at Question 11.

While some respondents cited specific examples of the important role of NOS in vocational training and learning, there was also thought to be a need for change to ensure NOS are foundational to vocational training and learning in Scotland. This reflected specific concerns around the implications of the new TEG model of apprenticeship development produced by SDS, which does not include NOS. It was suggested that this has raised questions around the continuing foundational role of NOS. The role of NOS in relation to apprenticeship frameworks, including specifically for the TEG model, was identified as a key point requiring clarification.

Respondents also highlighted several other points for clarification around the role of NOS, including suggesting that there is limited understanding of NOS across some industry sectors. There were also calls for greater clarity around the distinction between NOS and teaching units.

Communication

There were also calls for a more effective overall communication approach, to reinforce the foundational role of NOS for vocational training and learning in Scotland. This reflected concerns around the effectiveness of SDS in developing and championing NOS, and that – as noted above – introduction of the TEG model for apprenticeship development has raised questions around the continued foundational role of NOS. There were calls for clarification of the relationship between NOS and the TEG model and for a clear commitment to the continuing role of NOS and the maintenance and development of SVQs.

There was also concern that there has been less effective industry engagement in NOS development over recent years, and calls for more effective communication and engagement to support a more employer-driven approach.

Development and use of NOS

In terms of the development and delivery of NOS, there was thought to be a need for updating of existing Standards where these are out of date and/or do not reflect changing industry needs and practice. This was linked to a view that the

foundational status of NOS is dependent on their being suitable to underpin essential competences and skills, and concern that this is no longer the case across some sectors. It was suggested that the extent of the challenge in updating NOS may have been underestimated, and there was reference to the need for sufficient resources including calls for continued support for the NOS Governance Group. This included specific concerns that industry engagement in the development process must be properly resourced to ensure a diversity of needs and views.

> *'The Strategy relies on NOS being suitable to underpin essential competence in skills. Today, many NOS are not suitable for this purpose…out-of-date SVQs are in danger of losing relevance and no longer reflecting actual workplace practices, new technologies, and current approaches to sustainability and net zero.'*
>
> *Skills delivery other*

Some respondents wished to see a more flexible and responsive approach to NOS, including a focus on facilitating access to training and development for a wider range of individuals. It was also suggested that using NOS as the only route into vocational delivery is too restrictive. Calls for greater flexibility at a local level within the NOS framework included suggestions that aspects of NOS development could be devolved to regional partnerships and college structures in order to leverage colleges' existing engagement with, and knowledge of, local and regional industry. It was also suggested that any change to NOS development should include a focus on addressing skills shortages in specific sectors and regions.

In addition to ensuring NOS reflected the skills and competences required by industry, there was also reference to potential benefits of easing the regulatory burden on employers.

Several respondents saw a need for standardisation of NOS and employer standards. This included calls for further work to align NOS with professional bodies and HE benchmarks, such as Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Subject Benchmark Statements. There was also reference to the desirability of standardisation across the UK to avoid fragmentation of vocational skills frameworks – a particular issue for multi-national employers. It was suggested that the approach to NOS should ensure parity of esteem across NOS frameworks; for example, it was noted that the requirement for a Skills Test is not applied consistently across NOS.

Respondents highlighted the importance of a collaborative and forward-looking approach to NOS development in terms of ensuring clear progression opportunities for learners. There were calls for co-design of NOS between skills providers and employers, including around green jobs, and for specific stakeholders – including employers, delivery partners, trade unions and awarding bodies – to have a role in the development of NOS. There was also a call for English stakeholders to be included to ensure consistency of standards, noting that NOS are still regularly used in England.

Other specific changes to NOS suggested by respondents included:

- Adopting the approach taken during the COVID-19 pandemic, based on 80% completion across the NOS framework. It was noted that transferable skills developed by learners could cover the remaining 20%.

- Improving the usability of the NOS database to better support development and championing of NOS.

Governance

There was thought to be a need for governance changes to ensure a more transparent and streamlined approach to development of NOS and apprenticeship frameworks. This was highlighted partly in response to a perceived lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities in relation to NOS, and specific concern around what was described as SDS's 'unilateral' change to development of apprenticeship frameworks, and a view that this is indicative of a lack of clarity around roles and remits. Calls for greater transparency were also linked to a need for standardisation of the quality of NOS, as noted above.

Specific proposals for strengthening governance around NOS included an apprenticeship advisory board to lead or inform development of apprenticeship frameworks, ensuring these are based on Scottish Government priorities, workforce development plans and sector skills plans. A dedicated body with responsibility for quality assurance and accreditation of NOS was also suggested.

Key messages

Written responses to the call for evidence highlighted the following key messages in relation to National Occupational Standards.

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Key messages: National Occupational Standards

NOS were seen as an important element of the skills landscape for professional standards and competency-based qualifications, supporting consistent standards and helping to reduce fragmentation.

The extent to which NOS reflect employer requirements was also seen as a strength, although some NOS were seen as failing to reflect current needs.

The complexity of NOS development, the time taken to revise existing Standards and limited resources were identified as contributing to the number of NOS that are no longer fit for purpose.

Proposals for change to ensure NOS are foundational to vocational training and skills provision included:

- A more streamlined approach to NOS development, based on greater transparency and improved standardisation to avoid fragmentation and ensure parity of esteem across frameworks.

- Clarification of the relationship between NOS and the new TEG model of apprenticeship development.

</div>

- More effective collaboration, using a co-design approach with greater input from a wider range of employers and other partners.

- Consideration of options to ensure NOS are more flexible and responsive to skills requirements, including potential to devolve NOS development to a regional level.

- Effective communication to reinforce the foundational role of NOS.

5: Upskilling and retraining

NSET recognises the importance of lifelong upskilling and reskilling as key to helping people progress to more fulfilling, secure, well-paid and fair work and to navigate changes in the economy.

The Scottish Government currently provides investment to support upskilling and reskilling through two core programmes: Individual Training Accounts (ITAs) delivered by SDS through independent training providers and colleges, and the Flexible Workforce Development Fund (FWDF), delivered primarily by SFC through colleges, the Open University in Scotland, and private training providers. Evaluations of both programmes were commissioned to consider how the programmes can be adapted to maximise impact.[7]

SDS and SFC also have standalone upskilling interventions. SDS delivers a workforce planning service *Skills for Growth* which supports MSMEs that need to develop their workforce, while SFC supports upskilling and reskilling opportunities in colleges through core provision, and manages the Upskilling Fund delivered through universities which provides shorter, more flexible provision focused on meeting the needs of employers and the economy.

The Terms of Reference for the Review include consideration of how the existing education and skills system can be 'optimised' to better support upskilling and reskilling throughout life, alongside a key commitment to development of a lifetime skills offer which makes it easier for individuals and employers to navigate existing careers and skills support.

Stakeholder events

The 11 public webinars conducted in addition to the call for evidence included a specify focus on upskilling and reskilling. Stakeholder feedback highlighted the following key points.

> **Stakeholder events**
>
> LEPs have had a positive impact in supporting place-based approaches that are responsive to local industry need.
>
> Identifying specific priorities for upskilling and reskilling remains a challenge – there is a need for closer working between skills providers and employers to determine skills priorities.
>
> How funding can best support upskilling and reskilling is a key question, especially in the context of an ageing workforce. Issues to be addressed include a lack of flexibility in some funding streams and the current age imbalance in access to funding.

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[7] Evaluation of FWDF is available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/evaluation-flexible-workforce-development-fund-fwdf. Evaluation of ITAs is due to be published shortly.

Other issues for the approach to upskilling and reskilling include a need for more flexible provision (e.g. short courses, micro-credentials), the extent to which apprenticeships are being used to accredit existing skills rather than develop new skills, flexibility in use of Apprenticeship Levy funds, and a stronger focus for CIAG on transferability of skills.

Call for evidence responses

Written responses in relation to upskilling and retraining are summarised over the following pages.

Question 12 – Do you have any evidence to demonstrate how the existing delivery arrangements for upskilling and reskilling, including the specific funding programmes, are impacting on intended outcomes for learners and/or industry and sectors?

Around 95 respondents provided a comment at Question 12, with some referring to positives around recent upskilling and reskilling programmes. This included comments highlighting positive relationships between skills providers, employers and professional regulatory bodies across industry sectors where continuous upskilling is required. The importance of these programmes – and associated funding – in incentivising employers to undertake upskilling and reskilling was also noted.

The long-standing role of the FE/HE sectors in delivery of upskilling and reskilling was also highlighted, including reference to university programmes supporting ongoing collaboration between skills providers and employers and the importance of this in ensuring provision continues to meet employer needs.

FE/HE institutions were among those highlighting the strength of the demand they have seen in response to upskilling and reskilling provision, particularly for funded provision that is offered to learners at a reduced fee or no fee. Respondents referred to a diverse range of funded provision, including small qualifications and micro-credentials.

> *'Demand for fee waiver places has been high with interest well exceeding available places…almost six applications for every one funded place. Courses have aligned with identified skills needs locally and nationally with areas such as renewables, digital skills, leadership, management, and mental health and wellbeing being particularly popular.'*
>
> *Further/Higher Education institution*

Respondents also provided evidence relating to ongoing activity to support upskilling and reskilling, and the positive outcomes being delivered. This included references to improvements in productivity and business development, and to

addressing local and regional skills shortages, through upskilling and reskilling programmes.

With respect to existing provision, the FWDF was the most-frequently referenced. Other funding and provision programmes referenced by respondents included:

- Partnership Action for Continuing Employment (PACE)
- University Upskilling Fund
- National Transition Training Fund (NTTF)
- The Young Person's Guarantee (YPG)
- No One Left Behind (NOLB)

Positives identified in terms of the FWDF included its impact in targeting skills shortages and in reaching employers who would otherwise not have been able to provide training at the scale required. The latter point was made in relation to MSMEs and rural businesses in particular. More generally, the responsiveness of some programmes was highlighted as a positive, for example in revising content annually to ensure provision is adapted in response to local and national priorities.

Challenges and areas for improvement

Respondents also highlighted a number of challenges or areas where they thought that existing delivery arrangements for upskilling and reskilling could be improved, with a number of these relating to funding arrangements.

For example, it was suggested that multiple funding providers, each with specific eligibility criteria and reporting requirements, can cause confusion for employers and employees and result in duplication and inefficiency across the skills landscape. For example, it was reported that NTTF and YPG funding was provided to local authorities as a grant allocation, to colleges as a credit target, and to universities as micro-credential funding, despite all three sectors targeting the same group of individuals.

There were also concerns around whether current funding is sufficient to meet demand and deliver the scale of upskilling and reskilling required. There were references to demand in 2022/23 being likely to outstrip available funding, including for SFC Upskilling. There was also reference to:

- Colleges having waiting lists of employers ready to access funding.
- FWDF funding allocations being too small.
- The potential scale of upskilling and reskilling required to achieve net zero targets, and the challenges around funding this work.

Issues were identified in relation to the administration of funding, including a report that the time taken to process applications has an impact on programming of training provision. It was also suggested that funding arrangements fail to recognise the time required to assess the training needs of MSMEs, and that time-limited funding can constrain the ability of providers and employers to make best use of

available funds. A specific concern related to delays and uncertainties in the announcement of FWDF funding for 2022/23.

There were also calls for:

- An overall increase in the levels of upskilling funding.

- Long-term funding streams that support lifelong upskilling and reskilling. There was reference to multi-year funding arrangements to support more strategic development and delivery, along with stronger partnership arrangements.

- Funding to be balanced in terms of the under and over-25s.

- Balance of funding across FE/HE sector to reflect levels of demand rather than the size of institutions.

- More targeted funding to better address individual needs and industry demand, including sector-specific skills gaps.

- An alternative funding approach for micro-credentials and small qualifications. Funding that follows the learner was suggested as a better fit for this kind of provision.

It was suggested that more work is required to stimulate further business investment in training and upskilling; there was a view that the FWDF has not yet achieved this. It was suggested that some employers and sectors have struggled to access the FWDF due to its criteria or because they are non-levy paying employers, and that some businesses feel the potential costs of accessing the FWDF can outweigh the expected benefits.

There were wider concerns around the accessibility of current upskilling and reskilling provision for employers. It was suggested that the current arrangements are too complicated and confusing for employers, including around the number of short-term funding initiatives and the frequency with which the funding landscape changes. There was also reference to the lack of alignment between approaches to the Apprenticeship Levy across the UK.

> *'There are lots of short-term funding initiatives including FWDF, Business Gateway funds, leading to employers having to catch-up to what is available. The funding landscape changes regularly leading to confusion and less participation.'*
>
> *Other public body*

The focus on delivery through the college network, and a perception that this is unfairly preferential to colleges, was also raised, and it was suggested that it can be difficult for private and third sector skills providers to access funds under current arrangements. There was a call for the FWDF to be streamlined so that colleges, training providers and employer training departments can all offer the same service to employers. Other suggestions for improving the diversity and flexibility of provision included:

- More provision of micro-credentials and short learning units in target skills areas and sectors. There were also calls for equal value to be placed on part-time (work-based) learning and courses.

- Core funding for FE/HE institutions to provide flexibility to support development costs to enable more flexible and tailored upskilling and reskilling provision.

- Funding to support RPL and better enable bridging of gaps in qualifications or learning.

Respondents also highlighted the importance of ensuring that coherent progression routes are available for all levels, including to support a transition from introductory programmes to higher-level courses. This included reference to adults with limited literacy and confidence as being in need of additional information and support, and to the prevalence of mental health needs across those seeking upskilling/reskilling.

Some confusion around terminology was noted by respondents – for example that many individuals will not recognise or understand 'upskilling' and 'reskilling' – and a need for more accessible communication across the skills landscape more generally was identified. This included reference to the potential value of sharing good practice across skills providers to support greater consistency.

> **Question 13 – Do you have any evidence about what measures, if any, should be in place to understand the quality of national skills programme delivery funded by public investment through independent training providers?**

Around 65 respondents provided a comment at Question 13.

Some respondents acknowledged the importance of understanding the quality of skills provision, especially for publicly funded provision provided by independent training providers. This included reference to the role of quality assurance in delivering value for public investment, and ensuring stakeholders across the skills landscape can be confident in the quality of skills provision. Ensuring quality of delivery was seen as important to support equity of access to good quality skills provision, and to enable employers to make more informed decisions on their choice of skills provider. Some concerns were expressed around the quality of delivery by some independent training providers.

Current quality assurance arrangements

It was noted that some independent training providers are subject to compliance and quality assurance measures through both the SDS Apprenticeship quality framework and awarding body quality assurance arrangements. The role of contracting arrangements in assuring the quality of provision was also highlighted.

Some FE/HE respondents noted the range of quality assurance and enhancement arrangements currently in place for FE/HE institutions and it was suggested that these measures could provide a model for the approach to assuring the quality of independent training providers.

Respondents also highlighted the role of the SFC and the SQA in assuring the quality of skills provision, and the role of awarding body verification for all accredited skills provision. It was suggested that non-accredited provision should be subject to the same quality measures.

Proposed approach to assurance of independent providers

A consistent approach across FE/HE institutions and independent training providers was identified as a key principle in understanding quality of independent training provision. This reflected a view that learners should expect comparable quality and standards of provision irrespective of the skills provider. It was also suggested that independent providers should be subject to inspection and the same level of performance reporting as public sector providers.

Consideration of how monitoring of provision by independent training providers will align with other monitoring and evaluation frameworks. This included references to NSET progress monitoring, the Shared Measurement Framework for NOLB developments, the National Performance Framework, awarding body verification of accredited skills provision, and the work of the new independent inspectorate of education. It was suggested that fit with other monitoring frameworks should be considered both in terms of preventing duplication of effort, and as a means of measuring wider impact.

The potential benefits of developing a common approach to quality assessment across colleges and universities was also referenced as providing an opportunity to consider quality arrangements across the whole range of provision.

Other suggestions in relation to measuring the quality of independent training providers included that:

- External evaluation of new programmes should be undertaken before they are fully implemented, to identify strengths and address any issues.

- Universities should undertake evaluations of independent providers.

- Better coordination and collaboration between SQA external verification and SDS audits could help to avoid overlap and that training providers have indicated that they can feel overwhelmed by both audit activities.

- Exploration of alternative approaches to assessment and other innovations to reduce resource requirements.

Respondents also referred to specific indicators and evidence that they thought should be collected in relation to publicly-funded courses delivered by independent training providers. The need for consistency across sectors was noted, including in relation to:

- Accreditation and certification of provision.

- Level of provision, length and number of credits.

- Curriculum content, benchmarked against suitable frameworks.

- Attainment levels.

- Intended learning outcomes.

- Assessment and marking criteria.

- Teaching qualifications.

- Measures of the teaching and learning experience, including student satisfaction.

- Learner starts and completions – although it was also suggested that reasons for non-completion should be considered.

- Learner destinations and outcomes. This included calls for follow-up with learners to assess longer-term employment outcomes, and for Scottish Government to provide a clear statement of expected outcomes.

- Assessment of economic and social impact relative to cost.

Question 14 – Thinking about the government's ambition to optimise the existing system for upskilling and reskilling throughout life, do you have any evidence to support how changes to the delivery landscape could help to achieve this ambition?

Around 105 respondents provided a comment at Question 14, with some expressing support for the focus on supporting upskilling and reskilling throughout life. This reflected a view that Scotland should aspire to wider participation in lifelong learning, including reference to evidence of participation rates in other countries. The importance of upskilling and reskilling in meeting ambitions set out in the NSET, such as reducing economic inactivity and increasing productivity, was also highlighted.

A more streamlined approach

In terms of the overall approach to lifelong upskilling and reskilling, there was thought to be a need for a more coordinated and streamlined system that is more easily accessible and person-focused to support lifelong access.

There was reference to the number of agencies involved in the planning, development and delivery of training, and concern that this creates confusion for businesses and learners. Comments on the importance of coordinated working across sectors included reference to key agencies (such as SQA, SDS and SFC), FE/HE sectors, employers and skills providers. Connected to this were calls to create a continuum of skills development by improving connections between school and FE/HE; it was suggested that the ongoing work by the SFC to develop a Tertiary Quality Framework will be an important first step in this direction.

'There are multiple agencies and organisations involved in skills training and business development support which causes confusion in the marketplace and across the business sector…Businesses need simpler process/approaches…especially those SMEs who are not fully factoring skills requirements into business processes.'

Further/Higher Education institution

There were also calls for the college sector to take ownership of all post-school education and skills planning and delivery, as local and regional 'one-stop-shops' for upskilling and reskilling. This was suggested as a means of building on the important role of colleges in local communities, and leveraging their understanding of upskilling and reskilling needs.

There was also thought to be a need for increased adult learning opportunities, and it was suggested that this should be demand-led to better reflect evolving workforce requirements and individual needs. It was suggested that systems which support the development of accredited, bespoke course provision in response to industry needs and skills gaps are valuable. Other suggestions included:

- A focus on identifying sectoral gaps in the access to upskilling and reskilling. It was noted that this will require joint working with employers to develop provision across specific subject areas and sectors, and it was suggested that the formation of sector-specific organisations to support this work could be considered.

- The use of skills bootcamps, as in England, as a potential approach to addressing skills shortages for specific sectors.

- Improved access to skills provision for over 25s as a key priority, including a suggested focus on those aged over 50. There was reference to Scotland's ageing workforce and population, and it was noted that reskilling the existing workforce will become increasingly important for the transition to net zero. The adult learning sector was referenced as being well placed to deliver more opportunities for over 25s.

- Strengthening links between education/skills providers and employers, including to increase the number and diversity of work-based learning opportunities.

- Developing a comprehensive approach to upskilling and reskilling standards, certifying modular courses across sectors and skills providers. The recommendation for piloting of a National Micro-credential Framework was noted, and there was thought to be a need for a collaborative approach between providers and businesses to ensure micro-credentials meet local and national needs.

A more flexible approach

In addition to a more streamlined approach, respondents also highlighted a need for greater flexibility in upskilling and reskilling provision. For example, there was reference to the importance of considering the diversity of learners, of learners being able to access education and skills training at any age, and of addressing

potential barriers to uptake such as existing employment and family/caring responsibilities.

> *'Many programmes are currently aimed at young people, but we need to widen provision for other age groups, particularly if we are asking people to transition to more 'nature positive' jobs or more 'nature positive' ways of doing existing jobs.'*

> <div align="right">*Third sector/campaign organisation*</div>

A range of specific changes were suggested to improve the flexibility of upskilling and reskilling provision. These included: greater use of blended and remote learning; short course formats; use of more diverse venues such as mobile skills centres; provision outside of working hours; and part-time and in-work opportunities. In the context of in-work opportunities, it was suggested that more engagement with industry partners, such as professional bodies, could help ensure that a broader range of in-work training options could be supported.

Other proposals for a more flexible approach to upskilling and reskilling included:

- Calls for more diverse entry and exit points at different levels for upskilling and reskilling provision.
- Greater local and regional flexibility of provision, including a proposed role for Sector Skills Councils.
- An improved system for RPL that actively encourages RPL for learners of all ages, and ensures the equitable value of all upskilling and reskilling pathways.
- Extending support to include private and third sector skills providers.

However, it was also suggested that simplification of the delivery landscape could make flexible provision more challenging, and that the streamlining of provision referenced earlier must be balanced against the need for flexibility.

Funding and investment

The approach to funding and financial support was seen as a key factor in optimising the system for upskilling and reskilling. There were concerns that the current funding approach can constrain flexibility of delivery, and there was thought to be a need for a simpler, streamlined funding approach that is more accessible to employers. This included reference to specific challenges for MSMEs in accessing funding for skills training. The importance of efficient use of funding was noted, particularly in the context of current fiscal constraints.

Proposals for funding of upskilling and reskilling included that it should be more focused on learners rather than on providers, to better support lifelong upskilling or reskilling at point of need for individuals. Other suggestions included:

- Introducing a single source of funding to simplify the system and address duplication.
- Greater continuity and certainty around funding, for example through longer-term funding commitments. This was seen as important in enabling skills providers to plan provision and staff retention, and to incentivise employers to

invest. There were particular concerns that current funding arrangements do not do enough to enable skills providers to invest in developing new provision.

- Additional funding and support for individuals, including reference to the positive impact of ITAs and fee waivers, particularly for those who may not have the financial means to access provision. Further suggestions for personalised financial support included reform of ITAs, a 'Skills Wallet' providing a learning account to every citizen, and calls for the lifelong loan entitlement in England to be extended to Scotland. It was suggested that giving individuals more control over funding can encourage people to think more carefully about their own skills development.

- Greater flexibility in how employers can use apprenticeship funding, and reconsideration of the apprenticeship levy framework to allow direct management of resources by those who are closest to the business needs.

- Greater recognition across funding of the resources required to effectively engage with those furthest from the labour market.

- Reconsideration of age-based payments to better support those aged 25+, with some noting that current arrangements are not consistent with the balance of demand for upskilling and reskilling. There were specific calls for funded adult MAs for over 29s.

- Funding to incentivise employers to invest in upskilling, especially for MSMEs. This included proposals for use of co-funding arrangements.

- Calls for further streamlining of funding reporting requirements to ensure this is more proportionate to the scale of funding, and avoids duplication and inefficiency.

Information and advice

The final key theme in respondents' comments on the approach to upskilling and reskilling focused on ensuring better access to information on available provision and funding. This included reference to experience of individuals and employers struggling to navigate the landscape. There were also calls for a focus on improving understanding of the value of lifelong learning, and raising awareness of available opportunities.

Specific proposals for the approach to improving access to information to support access to upskilling and reskilling included:

- Tasking Scotland's National Retraining Partnership with drawing up a consultation on proposals to improve understanding of, and demand for, upskilling/reskilling.

- A single central source of information and/or better signposting to existing information sources – suggested in relation to individuals and businesses. Dedicated resources to support awareness raising around specific funding and delivery programmes.

- Sharing of good practice examples as an approach to raising awareness of the potential benefits of upskilling and reskilling for employers.

Key messages

Written responses to the call for evidence and feedback via stakeholder events highlighted the following key messages in relation to upskilling and retraining.

Key messages: upskilling and retraining

The current range of upskilling and reskilling activity was described as delivering positive outcomes for individuals and employers.

Positive comments on current approaches to upskilling and reskilling included reference to responsiveness to changing skills requirements, the important role of FE/HE sectors, and support for ongoing collaboration.

However, issues were raised around the range of opportunities, flexibility and the funding approach:

- A more joined up approach to upskilling and reskilling standards is required, including closer collaboration across key agencies and sectors.

- More flexible provision is required to meet local, national and sectoral needs – for example through flexibility in entry/exit points, use of remote learning, more short courses and micro-credentials, and RPL for equity of pathways.

- The approach to upskilling and reskilling must address barriers to access linked to affordability, digital exclusion, and transport.

- There is a need for a simpler funding approach and increased public and private investment in upskilling and reskilling. This should include longer-term funding commitments, more equitable funding across age groups, and additional support for fees.

- More effective communication and wider access to better information and advice is required to improve understanding of available upskilling and reskilling provision.

6: Sector and regional skills planning

The Call for Evidence paper notes that SDS has undertaken skills planning activities since 2011 and has led on skills action planning to support Scottish Government ambitions including in relation to Climate Emergency Skills. SDS also supports the development of Regional Skills Investment Plans (RSIPs).

The Enterprise and Skills Review: Report on Phase 2 set out a vision to *'align the relevant functions of the Scottish Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland to ensure that Scotland's people and businesses are equipped with the right skills to succeed in the economy'.*[8] The Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board was subsequently established and set out a programme of work, involving SDS and the SFC, to deliver improved skills alignment.

In the report 'Planning for Skills' published in January 2022[9], the Auditor General reviewed progress and was critical of the collaborative relationships between all partners and recommended urgent action. The Scottish Government has established the Shared Outcomes Assurance Group (SOAG) and Shared Outcomes Framework to oversee the work that SDS and SFC are jointly progressing on skills planning. This includes a series of Pathfinder projects led by SDS and SFC.

Stakeholder events

The 11 public webinars conducted in addition to the call for evidence included some limited consideration of sector and regional skills planning. Feedback through the webinars highlighted the following key points.

Stakeholder events

Skills planning should make better use of evidence and intelligence across industry sectors, including representative bodies. However, future skills planning remains an area for improvement for some employers.

Skills planning should ensure that provision is closely aligned with Regional Economic Strategies and funding.

Positive aspects of SDS's work in relation to skills planning include engagement with industry, identification of skills requirements and development of the evidence base for skills planning, and support for peer learning. However, there is some concern around the recent expansion in SDS's remit, and calls for a more focused and limited role.

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[8] https://www.gov.scot/publications/enterprise-skills-review-report-phase-2/

[9] https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/uploads/docs/report/2022/nr_220120_planning_skills.pdf

Call for evidence responses

Written responses in relation to sector and regional skills planning are summarised over the following pages.

> **Question 15 – Thinking about the overall ambition to ensure that the skills and education system is aligned to local, regional and national skills priorities, what aspects of the current delivery landscape are working well to support this ambition?**

Around 90 respondents provided a comment at Question 15, with respondents identifying a number of ways in which the current skills delivery landscape is supporting local, regional and national skills priorities. An associated suggestion was that key stakeholder agencies are committed to ensuring that skills provision reflects skills priorities, allowing Scotland's local areas and regions to succeed.

Role of universities and colleges

General points included that universities and colleges are playing a key role, both in terms of skills provision and through the research and innovation activities being delivered across the FE and HE sectors. At a national level, the importance of the work of universities and colleges in responding to Scottish Government policies requiring workforce expansion, upskilling and reskilling, was highlighted.

Joint working was described as essential to identifying and responding to skills needs and priorities, including through the co-design and joint planning of skills provision. There was reference to engagement both across and between FE and HE institutions: for example, a FE/HE respondent noted that they work collaboratively with businesses, industry bodies, local and regional economic development agencies and public bodies.

> *'The University regularly reviews its curriculum and portfolio to ensure that they continue to meet the changing needs of society and future workforce. This has included extensive engagement with business and industry bodies, economic development agencies, local councils, the Chamber of Commerce, Scottish Enterprise and SDS among others.'*
>
> *Further/Higher Education institution*

There was also reference to the particular role that colleges can play and to the related evidence base that is provided by Education Scotland and SFC reporting.

It was suggested that:

- Colleges are playing a key role in meeting the needs of local communities and employers, and as anchor institutions. They can work in close collaboration with the regional industry base through LEPs.

- Investment in training centres has enabled colleges to better respond to local skills requirements.

It was also reported that colleges and universities play a vital role in attracting international investment. This included reference to good alignment between their work and the Inward Investment Plan, clear roles and ownership of work streams, and cross-organisational account teams delivering projects.

Role of other agencies or sectors

In terms of other agencies and sectors seen as supporting alignment with skills priorities, respondents again gave examples of how effective partnership working supports cohesive skills planning. These included LEPs, STEM partnerships and joint working around City Region Deals as examples of how collaborative approaches are ensuring that skills provision is focused on local and regional need. In relation to LEPs, it was also noted that this includes a focus on ensuring funding programmes address skills priorities.

> *'The LEP formally brings together representatives from schools, college, employability, SDS, DYW, and DWP, amongst others. While the focus is on local activity, the nature of the partnership brings regional and national knowledge so that this can be factored into the work and planning of the LEP.'*
>
> *Other public body*

Other examples of skills provision being aligned to local, regional and national skills priorities included:

- Sector Investment Plans (SIPs), RSAs, and Enterprise Agency intelligence providing important and useful information on future sector needs and their expected skills demand.

- The work of DYW teams enabling local employer leadership and helping employers to shape skills and education provision in response to local need.

- The CLD workforce engaging the hardest to reach communities, including some of the most vulnerable learners across all ages.

Respondents also reported that employer engagement has proven especially important in some sectors. These included data-driven technologies, construction, energy, aquaculture, health and care, and food and drink.

Policy approaches or delivery mechanisms

In terms of policy approaches or delivery mechanisms which were thought to work well in aligning the skills and education systems to local, regional and national skills priorities there was reference to:

- The role of the No-one Left Behind (NOLB) policy agenda in shaping approaches to addressing the needs of local communities.

- The systematic approach to pathway design for qualifications, for example the progression between HNC/HND provision and degree-level courses, enabling learners to navigate a complex skills landscape.

- An example of successful FA programmes in secondary schools with a particular focus on ensuring alignment with learner aspirations and labour market opportunities.

- The work of the SAAB in advising on demand and reflecting the needs of employers.

- The value of the SFC Pathfinder approach in ensuring alignment of skills provision with societal and employer needs, improving coherence and sustainability across skills provision, and providing learners with simpler pathways and improved outcomes.

- Building on the development of remote and virtual access to skills provision, and employer insight and experience. Initiatives such as CodeClan were cited as examples of how the rapid learning of essential skills can be facilitated to fill labour gaps, providing a delivery structure which can quickly be revised according to industry needs. Digital Skills Hubs were seen as a means of ensuring skills provision is aligned with current and emerging digital skills requirements at a regional level.

Improving alignment with skills priorities

Respondents also made a number of suggestions about how skills delivery could be better aligned with local, regional and national skills priorities. Some comments or suggestions focused on joint working arrangements and included that the delivery landscape would benefit from:

- More constructive cooperation and partnership working between SDS and SFC.

- Building on positive examples to ensure better collaboration and greater coordination across FE and HE institutions, skills agencies and employers.

- More liaison between SQA and SFC around regional skills planning, including in relation to the tertiary pilot programme to fund colleges and universities to design and deliver micro-credential courses.

Other comments related to the regulation of the delivery landscape included a perceived need to ensure there is effective evaluation and accountability for skills delivery provision at local, regional and national levels. There was also a call for clarity around the future role of the regulator in strengthening the regulatory framework for all publicly-funded vocational qualifications.

Suggestions relating to funding arrangements included that there should be:

- Clearer funding and information sharing processes to support development of skills provision in response to local and regional need, including by colleges.

- Revised Outcome Agreement processes to increase flexibility and consolidate broader funding pots.

There were also calls to improve the evidence base around current and likely future skills demand, including through a skills mapping exercise, the development of more localised evidence, and the production of specific reports focused on Green Skills.

Finally, there was a call to consider rural skills needs and transport access, building on trials of models such as the Lantra Rural Skills Programme with Balfron High.

> **Question 16 – The Auditor General recommended that the Scottish Government take urgent action to deliver improved governance on skills alignment. Do you have any evidence to support whether the current arrangements are likely to deliver progress?**

Around 55 respondents provided a comment at Question 16.

There was a view that that SDS and SFC have demonstrated better joint working in response to the Auditor General's report, with the production of interlinked Strategic Delivery Plans cited as evidence of better alignment of approach. This was seen as a key element in ensuring a more coherent approach to skills alignment in the context of concerns around what was seen as continued duplication of work and conflicting priorities across the agencies.

However, it was also suggested that there continues to be a lack of sufficient alignment between the roles and responsibilities of SDS and SFC, and that this is linked to ongoing local and regional skills gaps. There was a view that current arrangements are unlikely to deliver progress without significant change in line with Audit Scotland's recommendations.

> *'The 2017 Enterprise and Skills Review concluded that there needed to be better alignment between the two key skills agencies, SDS and SFC. Given that we are aware of significant skills gaps across all our communities, we can only conclude that this alignment is not working.'*
>
> *Skills delivery other*

There were also comments and suggestions relating to the Pathfinder projects and other existing arrangements, and the extent to which these may deliver progress towards skills alignment. In relation to Pathfinders and the Shared Outcomes Framework, some were of the view that it is too early to draw significant learning from current projects. It was noted that organisations can require time and space to develop the relationships and joint working required by Pathfinder projects.

However, others referred to what was seen as positive progress through Pathfinder projects, and highlighted specific improvements around alignment of priorities, joint working and funding. It was also suggested that reporting to the SOAG enables agencies to demonstrate their cumulative impacts and learning, and the collaborative approach to alignment.

There was also a view that LEPs will support improved governance on skills alignment through the implementation of a place-based approach. The work being carried out under the NOLB agenda was also identified as a starting point, with each local authority reporting back to the Scottish Government.

Further governance-related proposals

Respondents made a number of suggestions for further governance-related improvements, with some focused on the relationship between different organisations and roles, and in particular between SDS and SFC. Suggestions included:

- Further alignment of the priorities and strategic goals of SDS and SFC.

- Further clarification and transparency around the relative roles of SDS and SFC, and how these relate to the Scottish Government's role in relation to the skills delivery landscape.

- Simplification of governance, funding and reporting structures – including specifically in relation to the roles of SDS and SFC. Addressing bureaucracy around MA funding and contracting arrangements was identified as a priority.

Other proposals or suggestions included:

- Greater alignment of skills provision across schools and FE/HE sectors to address areas of duplication.

- Undertaking impact analysis of any proposed new developments to fully understand the benefits and costs across the system.

- Considering how reporting through SOAG can be streamlined with reporting through NSET delivery boards.

- Involving all key partners in early discussions to ensure the new apprenticeship development model can be shared and achieved collaboratively.

There was also a call for specific reference to Gaelic Medium Education (GME) and the needs of the Gaelic labour market.

> **Question 17 – The NSET sets out a vision for a system which is agile and responsive to future needs, where labour market insights can inform strategic provision planning. Do you have any evidence to indicate how changes to the delivery landscape could better deliver this vision?**

Around 85 respondents provided a comment at Question 17, with a number of these comments focused on what is needed to support delivery of the NSET, the barriers to be addressed, and the role of key sectors and agencies in delivering a more agile and responsive system.

General comments included that supporting the delivery of the NSET will require skills, innovation, an entrepreneurial mindset and greater flexibility in funding. There was also a call to address skills shortages, including through improvements in labour market intelligence, and to take a collaborative, place-based approach that involves key players. Specific reference was made to the role of housing, planning, the regeneration sector and business forums. There was also a perceived need to strengthen links between education and employability through an economic development lens.

'A collaborative place-based approach amongst the key players - particularly SDS, local authorities, and DWP - with input from sector representatives, along with multi-year funding would help to better deliver this vision.'

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Other public body

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Creating an agile and responsive system

Respondents highlighted several specific areas as critical to development of a more agile and responsive skills system.

Sectors and skill-sets

There were calls for an approach which looks at sectors, skills sets and talent attraction and retention.

'Sectoral growth will be constrained by the weakest link across the talent chain, so it is important to understand the detail.'

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Skills delivery other

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In terms of particular sectors, there were references to 'green' skills and the transition to a green economy. However, it was also suggested that this should be balanced with support for the existing core sectors that will remain important for regional economies.

In addition to priority sectors, discussion around future skills requirements also highlighted the importance of 'sector-agnostic' skills, such as entrepreneurial skills. These were seen as enabling individuals to move more easily between sectors, and to respond to future changes in employment opportunities. It was also suggested that sector plans should recognise that people entering a sector with qualifications that are not directly relevant can still bring strengths, such as diversity of thinking. There was reference to an interest from employers in attracting graduates from a wider range of disciplines, including those that may not directly relate to their own sector.

Other suggestions included that it will be important to recognise:

- The bilingual skills of young people and consider the needs of the Gaelic labour market.
- A potential need for skills and talents to be accessed from outwith Scotland, to meet skills requirements and take advantage of growth opportunities.

Respondents also highlighted the need for consideration of short, medium and longer-term skills requirements, with appropriate delivery mechanisms identified for each. In terms of short-term skills requirements, it was suggested that the focus should be on retraining and transferable skills. Reference to medium-term requirements included ensuring that FE and HE courses are delivering the right content and required numbers. Discussion of longer-term skills requirements included ensuring that those in schools are aware of the relevance of subject choices to future opportunities.

Collaborative approaches

Respondents highlighted the critical importance of effective collaboration with industry, including sectors of national and regional importance. Suggestions for changes to the delivery landscape included that:

- A 'connecting organisation' is required; it could centralise all current skills offerings and link academia with industry to understand the changing landscape.

- Connecting skills delivery to Scotland's economic development agencies would ensure better alignment with the NSET vision.

- There should be a role for partnerships and employer engagement forums, including Regional Economic Partnerships (REPs).

- Further development of employer engagement forums, as working groups of LEPs, should be considered. They could be added to the mandate of existing groups, with key partners such as DYW, Chambers of Commerce, trade bodies and sector membership groups.

Some also wished to see greater recognition of regional differences in skills needs and provision. In this context, it was noted that many colleges are not engaged in the RSIP process.

Information provision

Providing accurate, high-quality information was also highlighted as essential for a skills delivery system that is responsive to industry needs. Respondents noted the importance of the skills delivery system being agile and quick to respond to market driven change, incorporating medium to longer-term workforce planning (i.e. from 5-10 to 20-30 year periods) and securing buy-in from key sectors and employers. This included reference to the need for sufficient detail on what employers are looking for.

In terms of the current situation, it was suggested that there has been a distinct improvement in the quality of Labour Market Insights (LMI) over recent years, with the establishment of a strong systematic approach. There was also reference to soon to be published update to the SDS Digital Economy Skills Action Plan which has been produced in consultation with the SDS Digital Economy Skills Group. The SDS sector specialist approach was cited as a positive example of how more evidence gathering could support more fine-grained skills planning, including by covering small and micro-businesses.

However, concerns were also raised, including that there is a limited supply of primary evidence providing insight into employers' future plans, and that there are issues about how LMI is currently produced; there was reference to waste within the system and concerns about the accuracy of some of the analysis. More generally, there was said to be a need for improvement to existing skills intelligence tools to provide the required detail to support future planning.

Suggestions for improvement included more regional and local level intelligence to support future skills planning. A blended approach to information provision was

suggested, linking national data with local insights such as Pathfinder learning. This included specific reference to Pathfinder projects focused on improving our understanding of education and skills demand, and supporting better matching of supply and demand. There were also calls for regular qualitative feedback from employers, with reference to the Skilled Workforce Programme Board as a new mechanism that can support better partnership working and employer engagement.

In terms of the overall approach to information provision, there were calls for consideration of potential for a single agency being responsible for dissemination of national LMI, including quality assurance of data.

Qualifications and assessment

Reforming qualifications and assessment, with a focus on ensuring a person-centred approach that is responsive to the rapidly changing socio-economic landscape, was another theme raised. There were concerns about the complexity and inflexibility of some of the current delivery models, including for GAs, and calls to expand the sectors covered and develop a more flexible and adaptable overall approach.

> *'At present, larger scale opportunities such as GAs offer a very inflexible delivery model that must follow set pathways and can be a challenge for universities to implement. Although some institutions have seen success with the current GA model, it has not been universal across all Scottish universities.'*
>
> *Further/Higher Education institution*

There were also calls for colleges to be given the autonomy to develop qualifications that respond to local industry needs within an assurance framework that reflects increasing demand for in-work, on-demand and short stackable credentials and qualifications, including micro-credentials.

It was also noted that demand has outstripped supply for smaller scale skills learning opportunities. For example, an FE/HE respondent reported that funding awarded to them in support of upskilling/reskilling has been many times oversubscribed. They called for an option to link smaller scale learning opportunities so they can be clustered into larger scale programmes of study, as in the Cities of Learning approach.

In terms of ensuring qualifications deliver the required balance of skills, a clearer focus on the higher-level skills required by industry was suggested. There were also calls for a move away from 'narrow' occupational profiles to consider broader skills profiles.

More effective delivery

Respondents suggested a number of changes to create a more effective delivery culture across the skills landscape. These included:

- Building on existing work to enable co-creation of delivery mechanisms, such as institutions working with FE/HE, employers and local authorities.

- A central role for colleges in delivering a skills system that is more responsive to local and regional skills planning.

- A single agency working with colleges to streamline the skills delivery landscape.

There were also calls for delivery to reflect key messages from 'A Culture of Delivery' in the NSET, including stronger accountability and transparency, and more effective tracking and monitoring of success. It was also suggested that sectors and agencies should be better held to account for the effectiveness of their responses.

Other proposed changes included:

- Improvement to referral approaches and systems, including scope to improve the process for seamless referrals between Scottish Enterprise, Interface and other partners.

- Reducing the compliance burden associated with national programmes.

- Providing clearer and more coherent pathways for learners that reflect regional skills priorities, and ensure learners can be directed to pathways that fit their aspirations.

Funding arrangements

Some respondents suggested improvements to funding arrangements. This included considerations such as simplicity, fairness, flexibility and longer-term funding commitments. It was noted that giving the FE/HE sector a clearer line of sight over expected levels of public expenditure was a key recommendation of the SFC Review. Reform of the current funding model for the college sector was seen as a way of incentivising agility and speed of response to employer demand. This reflected a view that colleges must be enabled to plan for skills in a less bureaucratic and more agile way.

Specific proposals included removal of unnecessary bureaucracy and duplication within the existing system, especially repeated SCQF levels and use of existing funding/resources. Equity of funding across skills sectors was also raised; this was seen as necessary to facilitate the development of new upskilling and reskilling provision to support the STEM pipeline.

There were also calls for public-private partnerships to blend funding to address key national and regional priorities, and funding to enable earlier interventions with young people who are disengaging from education.

Around 70 respondents provided a comment at Question 18.

General comments

There were references to SIPs and RSIPs making a positive contribution in terms of guiding skills planning and identifying industry need. Respondents also noted that the information provided, especially around current and future skills gaps, is essential for skills providers in their forward planning, and in ensuring provision is contributing to local and regional skills requirements. However, there were contrasting views with respect to employer awareness of SIPs and RSIPs, both that awareness can be very limited, but also that awareness of RSIP findings is good in some areas.

The importance of the information provided was reflected in suggestions that SIPs or RSIPs, alongside LMI and other evidence sources, are widely used by skills and education providers in their planning and curriculum development. It was also suggested that local authorities use them as points of reference in order to determine industry need in conjunction with speaking to employers to analyse local needs.

Respondents also highlighted the importance of SIPs and RSIPs in supporting a collaborative approach to skills planning, and referenced the role of the information in helping skills delivery agencies work together.

> *'Information like this is key for colleges to be able to forward plan to assess future skills gaps etc and to work collaboratively with other colleges, employers or providers to ensure their curriculum offer helps meet local and regional skills gaps.'*

> *Further/Higher Education institution*

However, there were some concerns that the depth and robustness of the data generated through the SIP and RSIP process can vary, and that SIPs and RSIPs may not provide a comprehensive picture of skills needs and gaps across sectors or regions. The extent to which the businesses involved in the development of SIPs and RSIPs are larger organisations was seen as a potential issue and it was noted that the challenges facing MSMEs can differ significantly from those affecting larger businesses, even in the same region or sector. There were also some concerns around the lack of representation of specific sectors – including construction and the leisure and small commercial marine sectors – in SIPs and RSIPs.

It was suggested that, collectively, these issues can lead to SIPs and RSIPs failing to address the challenges facing specific sectors and/or businesses, and it was argued that:

- More granular detail could support more informed skills delivery.

- More effective engagement with MSMEs is important to ensure that skills strategies effectively address the needs of MSMEs. The knowledge held by industry trade bodies, chambers of commerce and training providers – bodies already engaged with MSMEs – should be utilised, avoiding the need for dedicated research projects that may still fail to accurately describe the specific challenges facing MSMEs.

It was also suggested that progress at both local and regional levels can be limited by a lack of clarity around 'ownership' of actions identified in SIPs and RSIPs, and that greater clarity around resource allocation and allocation of responsibility for delivery of actions would be beneficial.

Impact of SIPs

Specific comments on SIPs included several positive examples of where they have raised awareness of skills requirements, supported collaborative working and aligned activity, and informed development of skills frameworks and institutions.

The SIP for Life Sciences was described as having worked well, including through the development of the professional accreditation for Life Science degrees that is now being rolled out across Scotland. The impact of the original energy sector SIP was also highlighted, with reference to the value of evidence on skills requirements across renewables, the grid, carbon capture and storage, and energy efficiency in shaping skills provision. It was also reported that the SIP for the historic environment supported positive sector skills outcomes at a national and regional level, and that the development of a new Manufacturing Skills Academy has also been informed by SIP evidence.

However, it was also suggested that, while SIPs have had a positive impact on national priorities, they can lack the detail required to inform sector-specific activities at a local or regional level. There were also concerns about the time between publication of skills assessments and the production of the related SIP in some sectors; the unease was that evidence presented in SIPs can be outdated and that the gap between production of the skills assessment and the SIP can create uncertainty.

Concerns were also raised that sectoral plans can view people gaining employment in a sector not directly related to their qualification as a failure in the pipeline, rather than as a positive destination for the individual and employer.

Impact of RSIPs

It was reported that RSIPs have helped to identify clear priority actions and timescales for regions and have played a key role in supporting colleges' curriculum planning. It was also suggested that the co-production approach can support regional buy-in. The potential for RSIPs to inform the work of Regional Economic Partnerships and development of Regional Economic Strategies (RES), and then to support delivery of RES actions, was also highlighted.

Specific areas where positive impacts were highlighted included:

- The Glasgow and City Region RSIP, in supporting better access to training and skills development, and the attraction of new jobs.
- The work of the South of Scotland Regional Economic Partnership.

As noted earlier, some respondents raised concerns about the level of detail provided by SIPs and RSIPs. This was seen as a particular issue for RSIPs, and there was a view that RSIPs do not currently provide the detail required to support real progress at a local and regional level.

Other issues raised in relation to the impact of RSIPs included that they:

- May not adequately acknowledge the extent of movement of people between regions for learning and work, or that learners may opt for online learning delivered outside the region.
- Should give greater consideration to the core and transferable skills that can enable individuals to take advantage of the specific career opportunities within the region.

The role of Skills Development Scotland

There was specific reference to the value of SDS's work around the development of SIPs and RSIPs, including SDS engagement with skills providers to support their development and use. There was a view that this is a core aspect of SDS's role and should be maintained. There was also reference to their expertise in the field, which was described as 'extremely valuable', particularly for the energy industry in North East Scotland.

> *'[We] believe the RSIP is a key strength of SDS and they are able to articulate this to a whole range of partners. It is a core role for SDS and should be maintained.'*
>
> *Other public body*

Respondents also referred to the contribution of other agencies working alongside SDS. While it was noted that SDS leads regional partners to develop RSIPs, Scottish Enterprise and others were also seen as making important contributions. Alignment of regional skills plans, and Regional Economic Strategies was seen as important to address key ambitions, underpin skills requirements and consider regional variation.

However, there were also some concerns around the role of SDS in relation to SIPs and RSIPs. This included a suggestion that SDS is not engaging effectively enough with national and regional stakeholders to ensure that RSIPs have a meaningful impact. There was also reference to the time taken to produce and update SIPs in particular, and a perceived need for SDS to respond more effectively where specific sectors identify that a SIP is no longer effective.

Around 95 respondents provided a comment at Question 19, with respondents sometimes highlighting the importance of focusing on climate emergency skills, or noting the scale of change required.

> *'The net zero skills landscape should focus on economic transformation and equipping businesses and individuals with the right skills to support our just transition.'*
>
> *Skills delivery other*

Respondents identified a range of challenges in terms of the current landscape but also highlighted a number of positive developments in terms of how skills delivery is supporting the just transition to net zero.

Challenges to be addressed

A number of those commenting at Question 19 identified challenges to be addressed to deliver the skills required for a just transition, with some of the view that the current skills landscape is not well structured to support these ambitions.

Definitions and understanding

One concern raised was that there is a lack of shared understanding around what 'green' jobs and skills are, and where they will be required. It was suggested that green skills were not well defined until recently published work commissioned by the Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan.

However, there was also concern that the Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan frames a perception that only a subset of jobs are 'green jobs', rather than everyone understanding that to varying degrees, net zero is part of everyone's job.

It was also suggested that, while there is agreement around the scale of change required to deliver net zero, there is a lack of detail on the specific skills that will be required, and how this fits with current skills provision, and that work is needed to be able to benchmark the skills and expertise the workforce will need.

In relation to building a wider understanding around green jobs and skills, there was thought to have been insufficient consideration of the role of schools in developing young people's understanding of the net zero landscape, and the related employment opportunities.

Complexity of the current delivery landscape

Respondents also suggested that the complexity of the current skills landscape will present significant challenges to delivery of a coherent and coordinated transition to net zero. They emphasised the need for a clearer strategic approach and greater leadership around the skills required. This was linked to a view that delivery of net

zero requires a multi-sectoral, multi-tiered approach, which also considers workforce needs well into the future.

'A clear vision and route map is required to invest in the right net zero skills at the right time for the significant economic, environmental and lifestyle changes that need to be made.'

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Other public body

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It was also suggested that, to ensure that no area is left behind in access to green skills, achieving net zero will require an effective regional approach to skills planning and delivery. While it was acknowledged that there may already be structures in place at a regional level, there was a sense that national agencies sometimes treat joint working groups as reporting bodies rather than seeing them as true partners.

A place-based approach was seen as offering some flexibility in terms of energy transition skills, but there was some concern that place-based approaches are too focused on those furthest removed from the labour market and provide little support for those transitioning between roles.

Skills shortages

It was reported that there are skills shortages across the supply chain, but they were seen by some as especially acute in rural and remote areas. In this context, the establishment of the Commission for the Land-Based Learning Review was welcomed. The energy sector was seen as facing a particular challenge in building a stable supply of skills for low carbon sectors, alongside continuing support for oil and gas while they remain in the energy mix.

It was also noted that skills barriers are not always in new green industries themselves, but may be in complementary areas, such as planning or finance. Other sectors that were highlighted as facing challenges in delivering the required skills and capacity included construction, transport, and in particular the electrification of transport and the construction of major infrastructure, engineering, and chemical sciences.

Reflecting the issues noted above around the type and extent of skills required, respondents also highlighted challenges relating to the skills frameworks and the qualifications available to deliver the upskilling and reskilling required to meet net zero targets. There were calls for the reshaping of existing frameworks and qualifications, for example to support more use of micro-credentials. The issue of cross-industry recognition of qualifications was also highlighted. It was suggested a more nuanced and flexible approach to skills delivery will be required, including to respond to regional variations in net zero skills requirements.

Funding and investment

Respondents also highlighted a number of issues relating to funding and investment. These included that funding for net zero programmes and organisations is still not long term, potentially undermining the delivery of

meaningful change. Challenges were also identified around how interventions and new activity can be accommodated by combining core funding, and how businesses can be encouraged and incentivised to invest in the upskilling required to deliver net zero skills.

It was suggested that significant funding and investment will be required to deliver the scale and pace of change required, for example to support research and innovation, and to enable FE/HE providers to develop new markets and skills frameworks. There was also a call for funding and investment to integrate social and environmental sustainability objectives, alongside business for profit.

Key strengths

Respondents also identified a number of existing strengths that Scotland can build on in achieving a just transition to net zero.

Scotland's universities and colleges were seen as well placed to deliver net zero ambitions, in terms of their capacity and experience across skills sectors, and in research and knowledge exchange to support emerging industries. Respondents noted activity across the FE/HE sectors in key areas such as green skills, green manufacturing, sustainable construction and renewable energy. It was reported that education and skills programmes are being updated to incorporate sustainability and there was also reference to universities and colleges increasing the flexibility of skills provision, for example including full and part-time courses, CPD and short course training that is responsive to demand.

> *'Universities and colleges are extremely well placed to support emerging sectors in [the transition to net zero], in particular with regard to the crucial role of research and knowledge exchange in early research and development and evaluation, and in skills planning, development and delivery across a tertiary education landscape. This crucial role needs to be recognised and supported.'*
>
> *Further/Higher Education institution*

Core SFC funding for research and innovation was described as supporting broad capability in relation to net zero. This included reference to specific support for the Built Environment for Transformation Innovation Centre, the College Innovation Fund and a range of Pathfinder activities including the National Energy Skills Accelerator, the National Manufacturing Institute for Scotland and The Energy Skills Partnership. It was also reported that there are plans for a Skills Academy, which would be a national centre of excellence in the Tay City Region for skills development in renewable energy, sustainable mobility and decarbonisation.

Other developments or initiatives highlighted included:

- The National Energy Skills Accelerator supports employers in their response to energy transition opportunities.
- The forthcoming Energy Skills Passport will help existing qualifications, as well as matching skills and experience to potential roles, and providing access to training courses.

- Specific local and regional initiatives, such as the ABZ Works employability website, are effective mechanisms for showcasing local energy sector careers.

Proposed changes

Respondents made a number of suggestions around how the delivery landscape could be (re)structured to deliver the just transition to net zero ambition. These included that key actions from the SFC Review should be delivered. It was noted that this will require national investment and nationally-devised industry standard courses that all providers can use (rather than locally developed programmes).

It was also suggested that the implications of the definition of green skills should be considered, ensuring there is alignment between the SFC Net Zero and Sustainability Framework for Action, and the SDS Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan. There was a perceived need for clarity on what the new skills needs are, and what/where the demand is. It was suggested that close partnerships with employers will help ensure that interventions are demand-led.

> *'We need to be clear on what the new skills needs are and what the demand is. It is important that we match employer demand (which will depend on consumer demand) with [skills delivery] so as to develop the necessary infrastructure and supply chain at the pace required.'*
>
> *Further/Higher Education institution*

Other suggestions were that:
- A more joined-up and inclusive approach should include all agencies involved in education sectors. A single national agency for post-school education could support a coherent approach.

- Universities and colleges have a critical role to play, especially for highly-skilled green jobs. A more flexible skills system should enable universities to use their research and expertise and to scale up to meet requirements.

- A review of the FA in Engineering and relevant progression routes could help maximise uptake and sector relevance.

- There needs to be a review of language use around careers, especially for those who are not in work but who are ready for learning opportunities to grow and develop skills.

- A more flexible funding and regulatory model will be important, especially as many people accessing upskilling opportunities will not be recent school leavers.

- Investment needs to come to regional structures, consistent with the principle of the NSET, to enable the alignment of activity and maximise impact.

- Effective monitoring of progress, and use of emerging evidence around impact to inform ongoing policy development, is required.

Key messages

Written responses to the call for evidence and feedback via stakeholder events highlighted the following key messages in relation to sector and regional skills planning.

> **Key messages: sector and regional skills planning**
>
> Key positives around alignment of skills provision with skills priorities included the role of universities and colleges in ensuring provision is responsive, the role of CLD in engaging the most vulnerable and hard to reach learners, and the role of LEPs in supporting a more collaborative approach.
>
> Proposals for change to improve alignment with skills priorities included:
>
> - Closer working between SQA and SFC on regional skills planning, and greater clarity around the future role of the regulator.
>
> - Improved governance with reference to learning from Pathfinder projects and the role of LEPs, and more robust impact analysis and evaluation.
>
> Respondents also saw a need for change to ensure the skills delivery system is more agile and responsive. Specific proposals included:
>
> - An approach which considers sectors and skills-sets through more structured employer engagement.
>
> - A focus on short, medium and longer-term skills requirements.
>
> - A simpler, more flexible and more equitable funding approach.
>
> - More person-centred and responsive qualifications and assessment.
>
> SIPs and RSIPs were seen as positives that help in skills planning and the identification of industry need. This included reference to strong employer awareness, and alignment with Regional Economic Strategies.
>
> The expertise of SDS was described as 'extremely valuable', and respondents noted the important role of SDS in developing RSIPs – although the contribution of other agencies was also highlighted.
>
> Respondents referenced what was seen as positive work in supporting a just transition to net zero, but also highlighted challenges to be addressed:
>
> - A lack of understanding around what 'green' jobs and skills are, and where the demand will be.
>
> - A need for a more joined-up and collaborative approach that includes all agencies.
>
> - Challenges balancing a regional, place-based approach with support for those transitioning between sectors and roles.
>
> - A need for a more streamlined, flexible and long-term funding approach.
>
> - A need for additional public funding, and facilitation of private investment.

7: Careers and young people

The Scottish Government's *Careers Strategy: Moving Forward* (published in February 2020) set out a vision for the careers system in Scotland.[10]

In November 2020, the Scottish Government launched the Young Person's Guarantee (YPG), led by Sandy Begbie. As per one of the recommendations of the YPG report, SDS were tasked to bring together the views and experiences of young people, parents, employers, teachers and experts across the careers system to provide recommendations for how Scotland's careers services could better support career development from early years until a young person enters employment.[11]

The Career Review Programme Board published its initial report *Careers by Design* in February 2022. [12] It made ten recommendations intended to deliver the ambition of Scotland's Careers Strategy, all of which were accepted by the Scottish Government. Details on how these recommendations will be taken forward are set out in the *Career Review Final Report* .[13]

Stakeholder events

The 11 public webinars conducted in addition to the call for evidence did not specifically address careers and young people, - a separate engagement series was arranged for young people - but issues around careers pathways and provision of CIAG did emerge through discussion of other themes. Stakeholders highlighted the following key points.

> **Stakeholder events**
>
> CIAG has been strengthened through partnerships between schools and skills providers, including a greater awareness of the range of career pathways.
>
> There is a need to better embed CIAG across school curricula, and to further improve CIAG providers' understanding of current industry sectors and skills requirements, including green and net zero skills.
>
> Consideration should be given to the role of careers guidance provided through colleges and universities, in relation to SDS.
>
> Increased engagement with parents around careers and progression pathways would improve awareness and understanding of the current skills and education landscape – for example, including SCQF levels.

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[10] https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-careers-strategy-moving-forward/

[11] https://www.gov.scot/publications/youth-guarantee-no-one-left-behind-initial-report/

[12] https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/48884/career_review_main_report.pdf.

[13] The *Career Review: Final Report* was published in March 2023 – after the present call for evidence had closed. The report is available at https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/50139/career_review_final_report_230306_final.pdf.

Call for evidence responses

Written responses in relation to careers and young people are summarised over the following pages.

> **Question 20 – Do you have any evidence to inform how the new Careers by Design Collaborative could be embedded within the wider education and skills system and delivery landscape to enable the recommendations of the Careers Review to be taken forward to ensure people can access the advice, information and guidance that they need?**

Around 80 respondents provided a comment at Question 20.

There was reference to the importance of high-quality CIAG in developing a skilled modern workforce, and in supporting positive destinations. There was support for the recommendations made in the Careers Review, particularly around establishing broader pathways and creating a system that values skills and qualifications. A focus on ensuring provision of CIAG is integrated within the wider education and skills landscape was also welcomed, and there were calls for young people to have access to high quality CIAG from an early stage.

However, some respondents noted that the Careers Collaborative is at an early stage and suggested that evidence is not yet available on the specifics of how the Collaborative could be embedded, nor how to deliver on Career Review recommendations.

The role of the Collaborative

Further comments on the Collaborative addressed the role of the group, and the potential for the Collaborative to deliver improvements to the current CIAG landscape. It was hoped that the Collaborative will ensure equity of access to CIAG for individuals of all ages. This included reference to the importance of CIAG provision being tailored to an individual's circumstances and needs, raising aspirations, seeking to address inequalities, and supporting positive transitions and understanding of available qualifications and pathways into specific economic sectors.

> *'Equity of access to quality CIAG provision for college learners is required, in addition to adult learners and those returning to education from the workforce to ensure we are not just focused on the target groups of students and young people as per the Career Review.'*
>
> *Further/Higher Education institution*

There was also reference to the importance of the Collaborative incorporating representation from key agencies, and from across the skills and education landscape. This included calls for the Collaborative to draw on the range of best practice, evidence and career development theory that is available across sectors. It was also noted that the remit and operation of the Collaborative will be important in ensuring effective representation across sectors, including calls for the

Collaborative to ensure that the approach to engagement with stakeholder is designed to minimise any barriers to participation.

In terms of the role of the Collaborative, some respondents suggested that the overall primary focus should be on enabling a coherent and connected approach to delivery of CIAG. It was noted that delivering a more coherent and coordinated CIAG landscape was a key focus for *Careers by Design*, and it was suggested that this should be a priority for the Collaborative. This included calls for clear articulation across qualifications frameworks, CIAG and education/skills pathways, and for alignment of the approach to CIAG across different sectors and stages with reference to the new Career Development Model. It was also suggested that the Collaborative should have a role at earlier stages, including in relation to secondary schools.

It was also suggested that delivering a more coherent CIAG landscape should include a particular focus on ensuring disadvantaged and vulnerable learners have access to more intensive support when they need it. This included reference to the value of alignment with LEPs and employability pipeline support for the most disadvantaged learners.

The proposed focus on achieving a more coherent approach to CIAG appeared to be linked to a perceived need for simplification of the CIAG landscape. There was reference to the number of organisations involved in delivery of CIAG, and to overlapping remits and duplication of work.

Embedding the Collaborative

Reflecting the proposed focus on achieving a more coherent approach to CIAG, it was suggested that the Collaborative should be placed at the centre of the education and skills system.

There were calls for greater clarity about the roles of specific agencies and sectors, with respondents noting that a coherent CIAG landscape would require clear alignment of the Collaborative with key agencies across the skills landscape, including SDS, SFC and any new national bodies, and with the ongoing review work across education and skills. This was seen as essential to ensuring clear articulation of qualifications frameworks, advice and guidance, and pathways for learners. There was reference to examples such as the National Access Delivery Group and the newly established Mental Health Action Plan, which were seen as demonstrating the positive impact of an approach that brings together senior leaders from across the education system and policymaking. It was also suggested that outputs of the Careers Review must deliver tangible benefits and provide clarity on how the work of those delivering CIAG forms part of the wider careers landscape.

'There should be clear line of sight between the collaborative, the new national bodies and SDS. This will ensure qualifications frameworks, advice and guidance and pathways for young people can be clearly articulated. This will also support the development of the curriculum and building experiential career education into new qualifications and education reform.'

Other public body

Respondents also noted that alignment of approaches will require effective collaboration in design and delivery of CIAG and, as above, it was noted that the experience of a diverse set of stakeholders should be incorporated. There were calls to engage senior leaders and for a particular focus on engagement with FE/HE institutions, skills-focused public agencies, parents/carers, and employers.

Respondents also highlighted the importance of aligning the work of the Collaborative across the diverse range of ages and stages supported by FE/HE institutions, with some noting that a significant proportion of those involved will be aged 25+. There was reference to the value of careers content being delivered by college and university-based CIAG services, and calls for the Collaborative to build on this provision. It was noted that FE/HE institutions contributed to *Careers by Design*, and examples of how recommendations from that review are already being delivered by FE/HE institutions were cited.

However, there was also reference to the lack of a common CIAG infrastructure within colleges, and to inconsistencies in SDS CIAG provision across the sector. In this context, there were calls for clear and consistent career development leadership in colleges, and for funding to enable colleges to appoint qualified CIAG staff.

There were also some concerns that implementation of the *Careers by Design* recommendations is being rushed. It was suggested that achieving effective change across sectors is likely to be challenging, and will take time. It was noted that adequate time and resources will be required for a fully collaborative approach.

Other comments

Other comments about delivering a more effective CIAG system included that there is a need to improve awareness of the value of skills and learning at all ages. There was also reference to ensuring those providing information and guidance have an up-to-date understanding of changing career and industry opportunities, including the full range of career pathways available.

It was also suggested that there should be consideration of whether aspects of CIAG could be better taken forward by the new national education agency, for example in relation to curriculum and careers learning. This reflected concerns around the size and scale of a national careers service that can be housed within a funding and skills agency.

Other suggestions included that:

- The approach to CIAG should allow for flexibility to ensure provision meets varying local and regional needs and recognises that individuals will be at difference stages in their career and skills development.

- The Collaborative must take account of the role of university-based career services in supporting learners who are outwith the standard scope because of age, stage or because they want to work outwith Scotland.

- Monitoring and reporting need to be considered, with calls for the Collaborative to develop clear measures of impact. This included measures to ensure that all providers of formal and informal CIAG are accountable for the impact of their provision. It was also suggested that reporting measures should be aligned with existing measures and reporting requirements where possible.

- There needs to be a more coherent approach to delivery of comprehensive CIAG in all GME.

Question 21 – Alongside Careers information, advice and guidance, do you have any evidence to demonstrate what additional support young people, including those from marginalised groups, might need to develop their skills and experience to prepare them for the world of work?

Around 110 respondents provided a comment at Question 21, including agreeing with the importance of a focus on preparing young people with additional support needs for the world of work. It was suggested that there is a range of evidence available on the need for additional support, particularly for marginalised groups. Nevertheless, there were also calls for better recognition of the economic and social challenges facing some learners, with the links between positive mental health and personal career development highlighted.

> *'There is a need for greater recognition of the broader economic and social challenges facing learners and the impacts of these on mental health, resilience and capacity for learning…and links between positive mental health and career development.'*

> *Further/Higher Education institution*

Other comments on the needs of disadvantaged young people included that they may be less likely to aspire to higher education, and have more limited access to CIAG and support (including expertise of parents and peers). Respondents also referred to challenges engaging the most vulnerable young people. This included higher incidence of young people who have not engaged with schools, and so have missed out on CIAG and other support. It was also suggested that engagement has become a particular issue following the COVID-19 pandemic, including reference to the mental health impacts of the pandemic for vulnerable young people.

There was reference to the importance of a person-centred approach to CIAG, but also concerns that current education and skills frameworks are not sufficiently

flexible to recognise the learning and 'distance travelled' by those with support needs. Discussion of the importance of a more tailored CIAG offer included reference to addressing aspirations, subject choices and role models and considering the range of capacities and skills that play an important role in preparing young people for work. These included dealing with money, social skills including how to work in a team, verbal communication skills, entrepreneurship, and digital skills. There was also reference to support with benefits and housing, good mental health, and building resilience to deal with setbacks.

Respondents cited various examples of existing provision that focuses on or works well for marginalised groups. The value of work-based learning and experience was highlighted, and there were calls for a greater focus on vocational learning across the education and skills landscape, including through more work placement opportunities. There was also reference to the potential value of volunteering. Other suggestions included:

- Flexibility in approach, including in relation to curriculum design, the use of financial support for more vulnerable learners, and support to overcome other barriers to access, such as through sustainable transport options.

- Ensuring we have a range of appropriate progression routes which support transition from introductory programmes to higher level courses, recognising the need for routes into skills and education for disadvantaged groups at any stage of their lives.

- Close working with counsellors or mentors, enabling learners to develop within their chosen subject area and become prepared for the world of work. This included reference to examples of working with third sector agencies to provide this kind of intensive support.

- Using simulated work environments to help develop learners' awareness of employer expectations.

- Targeted programmes focused on specific requirements, such as the Employ Autism programme and work with EmployAbility.

- Targeted engagement with schools serving disadvantaged areas and other under-represented groups, embedding FE/HE staff to build relationships with staff and learners and improve knowledge of FE/HE curriculum pathways.

- Engagement with employers to better understand current approaches to providing more opportunities for marginalised groups.

- Using inspiring speakers, mentors and coaches to build aspirations by demonstrating potential career pathways for their peer group.

- Developing mechanisms to gather and act on feedback from young people supported by specific approaches.

The potential value of sharing practice and materials across providers was also raised, and it was also suggested that the approach should draw on learning from previous initiatives such as 'More Choices, More Changes', and 'Opportunities for All'.

Key messages

Written responses to the call for evidence and feedback via stakeholder events highlighted the following key messages in relation to careers and young people.

Key messages: careers and young people

The importance of quality CIAG was highlighted in relation to developing a skilled modern workforce, and preparing young people for work.

There was also a perceived need for additional, tailored CIAG and support - especially for marginalised groups and vulnerable young people.

Respondents also highlighted a need to ensure all ages have access to relevant CIAG, including access for young people from an early stage.

Specific proposals for change included:

- Simplification of the CIAG landscape, reducing duplication and ensuring provision is more responsive to local and regional needs.

- Support for the Careers by Design Collaborative as a means of enabling more joint-working in design and delivery of CIAG, and ensuring a coherent, connected approach to CIAG.

- A need to draw on a wider range of stakeholders including HE/FE, public agencies, parents/carers, employers.

- Alignment of approach across qualifications frameworks, CIAG and education/skills pathways.

- More robust monitoring of the impact of CIAG.

8: Employer engagement

The Call for Evidence paper notes that employers play a critical role in skills delivery. In addition, SDS currently provides support to employers and industry with workforce planning and skills development including through its advisory services, administration and promotion of apprenticeship programmes, Skills for Growth programme, and Growth and Inward Investment Fund.

In 2014 the Scottish Government published Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy[14] and established the Developing the Young Workforce Network. The Network comprises 20 regional employer-led boards, based throughout the country, which play a role in connecting education and industry. More recently, DYW school coordinators were implemented across all mainstream secondary schools in Scotland. Both the regional boards and school coordinators help to facilitate engagement between employers and young people. This is supported by a National Team, and the Scottish Government provides funding for the groups and school coordinators.[15]

> **Question 22 – Do you have any evidence about how the current arrangements for employer engagement in skills and education are supporting delivery of Scottish Government's ambitions and outcomes?**

Around 95 respondents provided a comment at Question 22.

As highlighted in the Call for Evidence paper, some respondents noted that employers have an important role to play in shaping skills delivery in Scotland, with comments noting the range of ways in which employers are currently making a significant contribution across the skills delivery landscape. For example:

- A number of FE/HE institutions referred to the role of employer engagement in their current approach to skills and education, or referenced employer engagement being successfully embedded as part of the skills development process.

- Respondents also referred to examples of employer engagement in the work of SDS, SCQF, DYW and employer-led partnerships.

- It was suggested that employers' contribution to design and delivery of apprenticeships, and other work-based learning programmes, has been considerable. This included reference to the value of early employer involvement in the skills framework development process, such as through the TEG process.

- It was noted that employers can make a particularly important contribution in relation to development of work-based learning programmes, including by ensuring skills provision is responsive to industry needs. It was also noted that

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[14] https://www.gov.scot/publications/developing-young-workforce-scotlands-youth-employment-strategy/

[15] https://www.dyw.scot/ourbackgroundandperformance.html

this approach has the potential to deliver significant benefits for businesses. Specific examples cited included industry forums/boards being embedded within universities and colleges to ensure their provision can take account of current and likely future skills requirements.

In addition to work-based learning, respondents cited examples of employer engagement supporting curriculum development, skills planning, wider employability programmes, careers advice, and recruitment and workforce development. Examples of positive impacts of employer engagement included:

- Skills delivery bodies working with employers in recruitment and workforce development. This included work to encourage employers to consider a broader range of evidence in their recruitment decisions, and upskilling employers to support more people from disadvantaged groups into employment.

- Employer engagement focused on raising awareness of the range of available pathways, through close working with FE/HE institutions and schools at a local level.

- Specific pilots and programmes seen as delivering positive outcomes, and which could be rolled out more widely. Examples included FAs developed with a specific sector focus to address local skills shortages, and programmes focused on providing expert support to small businesses.

The role of regional DYW teams was referenced by some respondents, with a mix of views around the effectiveness of the teams. Some pointed to positive aspects of DYW coordinators' work, for example in facilitating employer engagement with the education and skills system, and supporting close collaboration with local colleges. However, concerns were also raised that DYW input should be better coordinated at a regional level, and with the work of other agencies such as SDS development teams, careers advisers and training providers. It was also suggested that, to date, not all DYW teams have been effective in expanding employer engagement and ensuring alignment between education and employment.

A more effective engagement approach

Although respondents cited examples of positive employer engagement contributing to a broad range of areas, it was also argued that employer engagement needs to have a more prominent role across the skills delivery landscape. It was suggested that bringing skills providers and employers together more closely and more frequently could bring a number of benefits. The potential for employer engagement to help to identify and address skills gaps; ensure curricula and skills frameworks reflect industry needs; improve access to work-based learning and other work-related activities; and improve understanding of modern industry and career pathways were all noted.

'When it comes to skills development, industry is keen to see more engagement around work-based learning opportunities…more resourcing would be welcome to support engagement with employers to develop and modernise core curricula to reflect government ambitions and outcomes.'

Skills delivery other

In some instances, calls for a stronger role for employer engagement were linked to a view that current apprenticeship frameworks do not always reflect employer requirements. Although positive examples of local apprenticeship programmes helping to address local skills shortages were described, it was also reported that there are difficulties addressing skills shortages through existing apprenticeship frameworks and that larger companies in some sectors have established their own skills academies. It was suggested that engagement with a wider range of employers from the outset of apprenticeship framework design is essential to ensuring frameworks meet industry needs.

Some respondents suggested that effective employer engagement will require a more agile approach that enables employers to help shape the education and skills offer, while recognising that most employers lack the resources and skills to undertake the development work. There was reference to experiences of limited flexibility in the current system, and the extent to which this can affect whether work-based learning provision meets skills requirements. It was suggested that increasing the role and quality of employer engagement will require a wider range of approaches, although it was also suggested that engaging employers in a co-design approach to skills development will be challenging. There were contrasting views on whether better results would be achieved by improved partnership working between employers, skills providers and other public bodies, or by more direct engagement between employers and the FE/HE sector.

Expanding the scope of employer engagement

It was noted that current approaches to employer engagement cover a diverse range of organisations in terms of size and sector, and support skills development in sectors – for example hospitality, hairdressing and logistics – that do not reflect specific Scottish Government priorities and ambitions. However, it was argued that employer engagement in these areas is a response to a demand for skills, and that it is important to recognise the range of employer engagement that is supporting employment and business growth.

However, concerns were expressed that current employer engagement can be dominated by the larger national and multi-national employers that are more likely to have the resources to support effective ongoing engagement, and who have much to gain in terms of addressing skills gaps. There were calls for more of a focus on engagement with MSMEs.

'There is too much focus on national employers, whereas most employment for young people is in small to medium sized enterprises. Get them engaged.'

Individual

Specific areas of activity which were seen as having potential to expand the scope of employer engagement included development of work-based learning pathways, for example to modernise core curricula to better reflect government ambitions and outcomes. There was reference to expanding the range of GA frameworks available to employers, extending the reach and scope of FAs, and refocusing the Skills for Growth Service to support employers around skills needs and MAs. Employer engagement was also referenced in the context of addressing the shortage of STEM skills. This was identified as a constraint on economic growth, with calls for more consistent employer engagement with FE/HE institutions and schools to address skills gaps.

Other proposals

Respondents also suggested a number of other ways in which more effective employer engagement could be encouraged. These included:

- Greater clarity around opportunities. This was connected to a view that where and how employers can engage may be a barrier to some employers.

- Improved resourcing of skills providers and others to support effective and ongoing employer engagement. Concerns were raised that some employers may disengage where there is insufficient follow through on initial engagement work.

- Greater focus on workplace skills for all, including employers' current workforce. It was noted that that most of those who will make up Scotland's workforce in 2030/40 are already in work today.

- Supporting inward investors to access the skills network. Concerns were expressed that overlap between SDS and Scottish Enterprise activities may cause confusion in this area.

- Improved monitoring and evaluation of current approaches to employer engagement, including more follow-up to enable employer feedback.

- Improved awareness within schools of the skills and employability landscape.

- More recognition for the role training providers can play in supporting employer engagement.

It was also suggested that any new skills body draw together social partners and apprentice representative groups to develop and embed apprentice voice as part of its governance structure.

Around 85 respondents provided a comment at Question 23.

There was agreement that partnership working is essential to enhancing the skills delivery landscape, reflecting a view that employers are best placed to identify their current future skills requirements. Respondents noted various policies and initiatives introduced by the Scottish Government and other public bodies to enable industry to inform skills delivery, including the contribution of employers to development of current apprenticeship frameworks.

However, some respondents identified a need to improve partnership working between the Scottish Government, public bodies and employers. There was a view that skills delivery and investment continue to be too 'supply driven', and that better partnership working is needed to ensure skills delivery is more demand-led. The potential for stronger partnership working to deliver greater skills alignment (including specifically in relation to green skills), enhanced knowledge exchange and improvements to curriculum and programme design were also highlighted.

It was noted that the SFC Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability[16] identified a desire across employers and institutions for more meaningful, long-term strategic partnerships, rather than transactional relationships built around specific programmes. This was identified as an opportunity for closer partnership working between Scottish Government, public bodies and employers.

Several factors were identified as limiting current capacity for deeper and more effective partnerships between public bodies, skills providers and employers, including the 'cluttered' landscape around employer engagement, and the number of different agencies involved. This complexity was seen as a barrier to engagement for some employers, who may lack time or experience to navigate the skills landscape.

> *'There is too much bureaucracy that hampers engagement and this could be cut out. We have too many individual parties involved in the skills landscape at present.'*
>
> *Business/employer representative group*

With respect to funding there was concern that current arrangements are not delivering the long-term, strategic relationships that would benefit employers and skills providers, and that uncertainty around longer-term funding may be a barrier to employer engagement.

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[16] SFC's Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability is available at
https://www.sfc.ac.uk/review/review.aspx

Improving partnership working

Proposals to improve employer engagement and partnership working focused on supporting more demand-led skills delivery and Skills Investment Plans. Respondents highlighted the importance of longer-term strategic partnerships between skills providers and industry to support curriculum and course development, and of a shared understanding of the purpose and value of employer engagement, supported by a stable policy and funding environment. It was suggested that consideration of alignment of remits and responsibilities should include how the NSET Skilled Workforce Planning Board aligns with other bodies.

In terms of specific approaches to enable more effective employer engagement, there were calls for more effective employer engagement with FE/HE sectors. Some FE/HE institutions highlighted the potential to strengthen the links they already have with employers and employer representative bodies, and it was suggested that this should be a priority. Reflecting a view that existing links that colleges have with local and regional employers are under-used in terms of supporting more effective partnership working, stronger roles for colleges were proposed, both at national level and as hubs for local and regional skills delivery and employer engagement.

It was also argued that existing employer-led networks could be better used to support engagement in the skills delivery system. This included a suggested role for bodies such as Chambers of Commerce, the Scottish Council for Development and Industry and the Federation of Small Businesses in ensuring that the interests of MSME are represented. Regional and Local Economic Partnerships were also referenced as providing mechanisms and opportunities for improving engagement between public bodies and employers.

There were also calls for a role for public bodies facilitating deeper partnerships between employers and skills providers, and coordinating engagement activity that is taking place at a local and regional level. This was highlighted with reference to industry feedback that the skills landscape can feel complex and fragmented. Specific proposals included:

- A national Employer and Industry Advisory Group to facilitate more effective employer engagement beyond programme-specific engagement.
- A Green Skills Leadership Group with a specific focus on supporting the transition to a green economy.

The need for a more flexible approach to employer engagement in curriculum and course design was also suggested, including specific calls for greater flexibility in the Outcome Agreement process to enable colleges to better respond to local needs as identified through partnership working. This, in part, reflected concerns noted above, that the time and resources required for employers to make a meaningful contribution to skills development may create a barrier to engagement. It was also suggested that both FE/HE institutions and public bodies can play a role in enabling employers to have input to skills development, within the time and resources they have available.

'Our experience is that it can be difficult for employers to identify, understand and/or articulate their needs within the context of designing education and skills provision. Colleges and universities have an extensive understanding of industry need and how this needs to translate into education and skills development. This expertise should be better utilised by skills agencies.'

Further/Higher education institution

Some respondents highlighted the importance of expanding the range of employers being engaged, both to include the knowledge and experience of a broader range of businesses, and to avoid the risk of saturating or exhausting the core group of currently engaged employers. This included specific calls for more engagement with MSMEs, reflecting concerns that current employer engagement is less effective in engaging smaller employers. MSMEs were described as 'woefully under-represented' by many current employer engagement mechanisms. It was also noted that national employer engagement mechanisms struggle to attract rural businesses, while specific sectors highlighted as poorly represented by current employer engagement mechanisms included both farming and chemical sciences.

Ensuring that the funding mechanisms provided support more effective employer engagement was also identified as important, with calls for a simpler and more cohesive approach to funding, longer-term funding commitments, and for the Scottish Government or public bodies to match investment from employers, or to support for smaller businesses around funding of apprenticeships.

Other proposals for achieving more meaningful partnership working with employers included:

- Providing a single point of contact for employers seeking advice and support around engagement in skills delivery.

- Development of a Scottish Micro-credential Framework helping to provide greater consistency in the approach to skills development.

- Creation of a 'clearing house' with employer buy-in, to support matching of young people with labour shortages.

- Drawing on international examples of good practice to support employer engagement, such as PENCIL.

Key messages

Written responses to the call for evidence and feedback via stakeholder events highlighted the following key messages in relation engagement with employers.

Key messages: employer engagement

Respondents highlighted the range of current employer engagement across the skills delivery landscape - including work-based learning pathways, apprenticeships, employability, careers advice and recruitment.

There were concerns around the flexibility of approach to employer engagement, and whether this is responsive to employer needs:

- Current apprenticeship frameworks do not always reflect employer needs.

- Engagement approaches do not always take account of employers' capacity to engage, especially for MSMEs.

There was a perceived need to employer engagement to ensure more demand-led skills delivery. Specific proposals for change included:

- A more streamlined and coordinated approach that is based on a shared understanding of the purpose and value of employer engagement - including support for longer-term strategic partnerships.

- Better national coordination of approaches to employer engagement.

- More effective employer engagement with FE/HE sectors, and a stronger role for colleges as hubs for skills delivery and employer engagement.

- A potential role for public bodies to facilitate employer engagement.

- Expanding the range of employers being engaged, especially MSMEs and those in rural areas.

Annex 1 - Organisational respondents

Respondent	Group type
Authors of Cumberford-Little Report and Principals of Edinburgh and City of Glasgow Colleges	Further & Higher Education
Colleges Scotland	Further & Higher Education
Dundee and Angus College	Further & Higher Education
Glasgow Colleges' Regional Board	Further & Higher Education
Robert Gordon University	Further & Higher Education
Scottish Universities Life Science Alliance (SULSA)	Further & Higher Education
St Andrew's University	Further & Higher Education
The Open University in Scotland	Further & Higher Education
University of Edinburgh	Further & Higher Education
University of Glasgow	Further & Higher Education
Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership	Skills focused public agencies
Skills Development Scotland	Skills focused public agencies
CLD Standards Council Scotland	Skills delivery other
CodeClan	Skills delivery other
Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) Scotland	Skills delivery other
DYW LED, Glasgow and West regions	Skills delivery other
Engineering Construction Industry Training Board (ECITB)	Skills delivery other
Enginuity	Skills delivery other
Highlands & Islands Enterprise	Skills delivery other
Institute of Physics	Skills delivery other
Jisc	Skills delivery other
Learning Link Scotland	Skills delivery other
National Society of Apprentices	Skills delivery other
Scottish Enterprise	Skills delivery other
Scottish Training Federation	Skills delivery other

Respondent	Group type
South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE)	Skills delivery other
Ufi VocTech Trust	Skills delivery other
Audit Scotland	Other public bodies
Bòrd na Gàidhlig	Other public bodies
Clyde Gateway URC	Other public bodies
Dumfries and Galloway Council - Skills, Education and Learning	Other public bodies
Dumfries and Galloway Economic Leadership Group	Other public bodies
Glasgow City Council	Other public bodies
sportscotland	Other public bodies
The Scottish Social Services Council	Other public bodies
VisitScotland	Other public bodies
Zero Waste Scotland	Other public bodies
Association of Accounting Technicians	Business & employer representative groups
Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) Scotland	Business & employer representative groups
Build Scotland	Business & employer representative groups
Catering equipment distributors association	Business & employer representative groups
Chartered Institute of Building	Business & employer representative groups
Chartered Management Institute	Business & employer representative groups
CIMSPA	Business & employer representative groups
FDF Scotland	Business & employer representative groups
Glasgow Chamber of Commerce	Business & employer representative groups
Highland Food & Drink Club	Business & employer representative groups
Historic Houses Scotland	Business & employer representative groups
Horticultural Trades Association	Business & employer representative groups
Logistics UK	Business & employer representative groups
Quality Meat Scotland	Business & employer representative groups
RTPI Scotland	Business & employer representative groups
Scotch Whisky Association	Business & employer representative groups
ScotCHEM	Business & employer representative groups

Respondent	Group type
Scotland for Employee Ownership ILG	Business & employer representative groups
Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board	Business & employer representative groups
Scottish Bakers	Business & employer representative groups
Scottish Chambers Of Commerce	Business & employer representative groups
Scottish Council for Development and Industry	Business & employer representative groups
Scottish Tourism Alliance	Business & employer representative groups
Stone Federation GB	Business & employer representative groups
The British Horse Society	Business & employer representative groups
UKHospitality Scotland	Business & employer representative groups
Phoenix Group	Businesses & employers
SELECT	Businesses & employers
The Challenges Group	Businesses & employers
The Real Food Cafe, Tyndrum	Businesses & employers
Barnardo's Scotland	Third sector & campaign organisations
Community Transport Association	Third sector & campaign organisations
Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Organisations (CEMVO) Scotland	Third sector & campaign organisations
Fair Work Convention	Third sector & campaign organisations
Lead Scotland	Third sector & campaign organisations
Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) Scotland	Third sector & campaign organisations
The Prince's Trust	Third sector & campaign organisations
USDAW	Third sector & campaign organisations
Volunteer Scotland	Third sector & campaign organisations