



Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity



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# **AN OVERVIEW OF THE POLICY AND DELIVERY BASE FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT SCOTLAND**

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## Introduction

In Spring 2008, the Scottish Government Employability and Skills Division commissioned the Moray House School of Education to review a selection of evaluations, policy reviews and other documents, in order to inform the development of policy outcomes and measures for government, as well as potential delivery from Skills Development Scotland (SDS). This briefing includes findings from the review, with the discussion of the overarching themes identified, and key messages presented.

## Summary of main findings

### *What is working well*

Initiatives evaluated as working effectively include programmes enabling 'at risk' groups, such as school leavers with few educational qualifications or adults with limited literacy skills, to increase their self-confidence and 'soft' skills to help them move to further education, training or employment. In addition, by offering a diversity of provision, including access to vocationally oriented courses, current programmes have helped school-leavers to overcome barriers they face in accessing education, employment and training. Finally, programmes designed to prepare participants with skills for the workplace were positively evaluated by both trainees and employers, particularly participants in Skillseekers and Modern Apprenticeships. The current programmes give policy levers to the Scottish Government to provide necessary skills for employment and thus have an impact on the supply side of the employment equation. They do not, however, typically aim to stimulate demand for skills from employers or to improve utilisation of skills in the workplace and elsewhere. It is argued that a change of emphasis is needed to meet new policy priorities.

### *Where is there scope for improvement?*

Some areas were felt not to be working so well. Some programmes engage with 'at risk' groups and 'hard to reach' employers, but others do not seek to include those groups. Tensions between economic and social imperatives driving programmes were noted. Also, the evaluation of programme outcomes on the basis of numbers diverts attention from the more resource-intensive needs of clients who are 'at risk' and need extra support; and those who are not in employment, particularly those on 'incapacity benefit', are not yet fully included in the currently available programmes.

Seven overarching themes emerged. Six relate to areas for improvement: the cluttered landscape of initiatives, confusing learners and employers; coordinating delivery of services and maintaining the balance between national standards and local flexibility; tensions between meeting labour market needs and the needs of individuals; skills development, social inclusion and equality; skills utilisation and demand, including the need to support employers to improve their utilisation of skills; and the difficulty of achieving parity of esteem between academic and vocational learning. The seventh theme discussed centres on gaps in the evidence base. The report ends with seven key messages distilled from the analysis.

## Background

Skills Development Scotland (SDS) was created in April 2008 from a merger of Careers Scotland, the Scottish University for Industry and the skills and learning functions of Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Scottish Enterprise. The creation of the new organisation provided opportunities:

- to exploit synergies;
- to provide more streamlined services to individuals and employers;
- to review existing strengths and weaknesses;
- to identify priorities for development; and
- to consider how activities may be better focused on the Skills Strategy outlined in *Skills for Scotland* (Scottish Government, 2007a)

The *Operating Plan 2008-09* (SDS, 2008) describes the vision of SDS as follows:

*Skills Development Scotland will be a catalyst for real and positive change in Scotland's skills performance. We will help individuals to realise their full potential, we will help employers be more successful through skills development, and we will work in meaningful partnership to enhance Scotland's sustainable economic development.* (SDS, 2008, p.7)

This vision statement identifies two main customer groups for SDS: individuals and employers. It aims to support the Scottish Government's Economic Strategy, and specifically to create 'a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth' (Scottish Government, 2007b, p.1). While the administration which took office in 2007 retained and supported many programmes introduced by its predecessors, its focus has shifted from programme delivery to performance and outcomes.

*Skills for Scotland* signals a further shift in the focus of policy, to increased concern with skill utilisation and demand (rather than supply) and increased policy interest in the contribution of skills to productivity, value-added and quality of employment. *Skills for Scotland* also emphasises the need for a cohesive, responsive and transparent learning system, opportunities for all learners, parity of esteem for vocational and academic learning, well-designed, well-signalled progression pathways and clear lines of responsibility and accountability. This emphasis is reflected in the creation of SDS itself, and the expectation that it should develop more integrated patterns of service delivery, not only across functional areas but also across local, regional and national levels.

Scottish Government Employability and Skills Division commissioned the Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh to review a selection of evaluations, policy reviews and other relevant documents to inform the development of policy outcomes and measures for government, as well as potential delivery from SDS. The objectives of the review of documents were:

- to identify what is working well and what could be improved in current programmes, policy and delivery within the current remit and service delivery ambit of SDS.
- to provide an overview of the evidence base relating to these areas of policy and delivery, identifying recurring themes across different areas of activity.
- to identify gaps in the evidence base for further research.

Scottish Government and SDS provided a selection of studies, in three areas: Information, Advice and Guidance; Skills Interventions; and Employer Engagement. Documents were reviewed individually and in groups, with crosscutting themes identified in each subject area. Members of the team then drew on their own knowledge of policy fields as well as the documents to identify overarching themes.

## Findings

### Information, Advice and Guidance

In the reports, evaluations and academic papers considered in this section, we found positive messages relating, for example, to services of Careers Scotland, LearnDirect Scotland, all-age guidance projects and other initiatives designed to help learners overcome barriers to learning. Spielhofer *et al.* (2006) also demonstrate the need for flexible and diverse provision for 'at risk' groups, involving organisations with different professional skills and expertise. The evidence confirms there is no simple 'one size fits all' solution awaiting discovery.

Looking for areas where there was scope for improvement, we found evidence that the impact of differentiated service delivery models of careers guidance needs to be monitored; that better information about funding for learning and better training for advisors is needed; and that there are tensions arising from the lack of a common approach, in terms both of training and of perceptions of clients' need, within the workforce providing information, advice and guidance. Resource allocation remains a problem, especially for supporting hard to reach clients. More work is needed in developing effective approaches for identifying, monitoring and providing for *More Choices, More Chances* groups before and after leaving school. We also identified a need for clearer information and/or personal support for learners; and challenges, both in relationships between Careers Scotland and other guidance providers, and in the need to work in tandem with the Department of Work and Pensions.

### Skills interventions

The documents in this section fall into two groups: those on programmes designed to prepare participants with skills for the workplace, and others on programmes for literacy, numeracy and Community Learning and Development (CLD).

In the studies relating to preparation for the workplace, positive outcomes were reported for all programmes. In particular, *Skills for Work* was seen to be raising the status of vocational learning (Spielhofer and Walker, 2008); *Skillseekers* and *Modern Apprenticeships* were highly regarded by both trainees and participating employers (Cambridge Policy Consultants, 2006); and *Individual Learning Accounts* were being welcomed by participants and other stakeholders as opportunities to gain qualifications, skills and knowledge and to help find employment or change of career (Gallacher *et al.*, 2007; BMRB, 2008). Students participating in literacy and numeracy provision reported experience of high quality learning and teaching (Tett *et al.*, 2006). Hall *et al.* (2008) report generic success factors identified by practitioners, including developing trusting personal relationships and regular monitoring of the small steps of individual progress.

Scope for improvement appeared to lie in the need for closer partnerships between schools and colleges involved in *Skills for Work* courses; in dealing with tensions around whether *Get Ready for Work* is a supply or demand side intervention; in improving communications, clarifying partners' roles and responsibilities; and in dealing with the highly gendered participation, and the under-representation of ethnic minority groups and disabled people, in *Skillseekers* and *Modern Apprenticeships*. Studies on literacy, numeracy and CLD indicated scope for improvement in guidance to enable progression, in staff development opportunities, in management information systems, and in strategies for attracting hard-to-reach learners.

## **Employer Engagement**

This section included reports examining attempts made in schools to develop vocational learning; and reports examining attitudes of employers and attempts at encouraging employers to train their workforce. Some evidence was found that pupils were benefiting from more vocationally oriented courses and also from learning at college instead of school. However, parity of esteem between vocational and academic programmes appeared very difficult to achieve as higher achieving children, generally from more socially advantaged backgrounds, tended to opt for predominantly academic programmes of study. Employers surveyed by TNS System Three (2005) were positive about providing work experience for pupils and the use of the same survey in *Skills in Scotland 2006* (Futureskills Scotland, 2007) over a period of time allows for tracking of trends and employers' current demand for skills.

In looking for scope for improvement, we noted that the lack of baseline measures creates difficulties in measuring the impact of strategies, and that there are challenges in engaging with 'hard to reach' businesses. We found little evidence that vocational learning is gaining parity of esteem with academic learning, and the suggestion that pressures of achieving targets (related to performance culture) tend to lead to the exclusion of hard to reach groups. Employers perspectives were missing from some reports, while the Futureskills Scotland (2005) report on their views of school leavers' preparedness for work identifies a lack of understanding of work and a lack of core skills as problematic areas.

## **Seven overarching themes**

### *The cluttered landscape of initiatives*

The documents reviewed clearly demonstrate how difficult it is for individuals and employers to discover and consider all options open to them. If learners and prospective trainees are confused by the choices, there is also some evidence that employers may be confused too. For example, Cambridge Policy Consultants (2006) found that 30% of non-participating employers had not even heard of Modern Apprenticeships, and that typically organisations participated in only one programme, despite potential synergies if they participated in several.

### *Coordinating the delivery of services*

The cluttered landscape of initiatives is one aspect of the need for more cohesive structures, signalled in *Skills for Scotland*. The creation of SDS is itself an expression of this policy commitment. SDS is expected to exploit synergies among the skills functions it brings together, and to provide better coordinated, more streamlined services to individuals and employers. The documents reveal continuing concerns about links between providers of information, advice and guidance, and about the extent to which different guidance professionals share

common values, perceptions and priorities. They also reveal concerns about the extent to which different programmes have clear and complementary missions, so that together they provide a comprehensive and coherent range of opportunities to meet client needs.

#### *Tensions between meeting labour market needs and the needs of individuals*

A recurrent theme is the tension between demand and supply perspectives. Is the paramount consideration to meet the current needs of the Scottish labour market, or to equip individuals with skills and training opportunities to enable them to follow careers of their choice? Professionals in the careers service appear to take the client-centred approach, while others may be more concerned with achieving short-term labour market outcomes, especially if their initiative is under pressure to demonstrate “value for money” outcomes. There are references to tensions between professional groups and lack of clarity about their roles and purposes in several reports, including the *Get Ready for Work* evaluations. Howieson and Semple (2006) also draw attention to pressure to justify Careers Scotland activities in terms of contribution to the economy; to diversity of backgrounds and training of those offering guidance; and to the widening gap between the professional discipline of careers guidance in Scotland and in other parts of the UK. Maintaining – and ensuring continuing debate about – standards of professionalism about information, advice and guidance are complicated by these circumstances.

#### *Skills development, social inclusion and equality*

The Scottish Government wishes to promote equity and efficiency in the labour market. Unemployment rates vary greatly by geographical region and social group. For example, whilst unemployment rates overall have dropped, the number of economically inactive men has risen (Faggio, 2006). For school leavers, the OECD report (OECD, 2007) drew attention to low levels of participation in post-school vocational training, higher education and the labour market in areas where poverty is concentrated. Raising skills levels across the Scottish population is therefore a means of increasing social cohesion and driving forward the economy. A criticism levelled at Scottish and UK employment and training is that their primary concern is moving people into work, and they pay less attention to the quality of jobs obtained (Roulstone and Barnes, 2005). They also tend to measure success of programmes soon after the end of courses, disregarding issues of long-term sustainability of employment. There is now greater focus on skills development and job sustainability, avoiding the ‘revolving door’ of a training programme, followed by a low paid, insecure entry level job, followed by further training or economic inactivity.

#### *Skills utilisation and demand*

The strong focus on skills utilisation and demand is a recent development and, perhaps unsurprisingly, this issue receives little attention in the documents reviewed, most of which reflect earlier policy priorities. The overwhelming emphasis of service provision described in these documents is supply and acquisition of skills, not demand for skills or their utilisation. This imbalance is most conspicuous in documents relating to employer engagement, dealing primarily with supply of skills to the labour market and measures by which schools can enhance that supply, secondarily with efforts to stimulate investment in skills by employers, and hardly at all with measures to support employers to improve their utilisation of skills or raise the level or quality of skills that they demand. We therefore conclude that an urgent challenge for SDS is to develop a strategy for promoting skill utilisation and demand, working especially (but not only) with employers.

### *Parity of esteem*

In its Lifelong Skills Strategy, the Scottish Government states its commitment to achieving parity of esteem between academic and vocational learning, but to achieve this, an information and awareness raising campaign on vocational routes is needed, to target young people and parents. Further research is also needed to provide a better understanding of the different economic and social benefits of different types of courses undertaken in diverse institutions and settings.

### *Gaps in the evidence base*

Our review points to a need for both more in-depth qualitative studies of the impact of programmes on their target audience and better regular data sources that are not programme-specific and which therefore provide baseline data as well as information on non-participants. In particular, we suggest there is a need for better data to support an overview of the different pathways followed by young people at the end of compulsory education, with details of the backgrounds and characteristics of young people following each pathway and of the destinations to which they lead.

## **Key messages from the review**

Seven messages for SDS and the Scottish Government emerged:

- To build on the identified strengths of existing programmes
- To develop a strategy to reflect the new policy emphasis on utilisation of, and demand for, skills
- To clarify priorities among the individual, social and economic imperatives driving the services and programmes of SDS
- To ensure programmes engage with ‘at risk’ groups, ‘hard to reach’ employers, and clients with resource-intensive needs, including those not in employment
- To develop a more co-ordinated, coherent and transparent range of services for individuals and employers, and strengthen links with other guidance and support services, including the DWP and Jobcentre Plus
- To promote parity of esteem between academic and vocational learning by collecting and disseminating information on the different types of benefits that flow from different learning pathways, including their labour market returns
- To address gaps in the evidence base, in particular the need for both in-depth qualitative studies of the impact of programmes and regular data sources that are not programme-specific, and for data on the pathways followed by young people beyond compulsory education.

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## Further information

The full research report, entitled *Skills Development Scotland: an overview of the policy and delivery evidence base* is published by the Scottish Government and available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/920/0075645.doc>

Further information about the project is available from Sheila Edward, CREID, Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ [sheila.edward@ed.ac.uk](mailto:sheila.edward@ed.ac.uk)

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