Insight 40

Evaluation of Skills for Work Pilot Courses

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Evaluation of Skills for Work Pilot Courses

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Background

Skills for Work courses were introduced via a two year pilot to help young people to develop skills and knowledge in a broad vocational area, core skills, an understanding of the workplace, positive attitudes to learning, and employability skills. The courses are aimed at pupils of all abilities in S3 and above and intend to provide progression pathways to employment, training or further learning. The Skills for Work pilot involved approximately 40 delivery centres in the first year and 70 in the second year of the pilot, working in partnership with a total of 255 secondary schools.

The courses piloted from 2005-2006 onwards were:

- Construction Crafts (Intermediate 1);

- Sport and Recreation (Intermediate 1);

- Early Education and Childcare (Intermediate 1 and 2);

- Financial Services (Intermediate 2).

Additional courses piloted in Year 2 were:

- Practical Experiences: Construction and Engineering (Access 3);

- Hairdressing (Intermediate 1);

- Rural Skills (Intermediate 1);

- Construction Crafts (Intermediate 2)

- Sport and Recreation (Intermediate 2).

Although the main target group for Skills for Work courses were pupils in S3 and S4, some courses were also taken by older pupils and adult learners.

The results reported here are findings from research carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) examining the piloting of Skills for Work courses over two years. Sources of further information on Skills for Work courses are provided at the end of this document.

About the study

The overarching purpose of the research was to undertake a process evaluation of the Skills for Work pilot courses in order to inform the national roll-out of these courses. The evaluation of the Skills for Work pilot was based around a qualitative methodology in order to get to the heart of the implementation process. It consisted of four distinct, but interrelated, research methods. These included:

- **Strategic interviews**: face-to-face meetings with key stakeholders from the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), Scottish Executive, HMIE (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education), Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) and the Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU) during September and November 2005.

- **Telephone survey**: of a representative sample of 20 delivery centres and their partners, including 29 schools, 15 colleges and one training provider at two time points (around November 2005 and May 2007), as well as a survey of a sample of ten delivery centres (interviews with 14 schools, six colleges and two employers) who only started delivering Skills for Work courses in the second year of the pilot (June 2007).

- **Case study visits**: to six partnerships involving interviews with 16 course lecturers, teachers or trainers, 22 school staff (including headteachers, deputes and guidance teachers), six college senior managers and/or programme coordinators, three local authority staff, one employer working with a school and 41 Skills for Work students (between April 2006 and November 2006).

- **Analysis of SQA data**: from all pilot delivery centres in order to determine student pass rates overall and across courses.

Delivery models

> **What delivery model would work best in your school or college?**

The evaluation provided an insight into a variety of delivery models for Skills for Work courses and highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of each of them, although the evaluation did not identify a preferred model. Instead, it is clear that different models are more suited to different courses, partnerships or geographical areas.

The four main delivery models identified were:

- College or training provider delivery off-site (not in schools);

- College or training provider delivery in school;

- Joint delivery by college/provider and school staff;

- School-only delivery.

The most common delivery model was the college or training provider delivering courses off site (see Case Study School A). Its main strengths were the motivating and maturing effect on students of attending courses in an alternative environment, the potential of easing their transition to post-16 college courses and that colleges and providers can use existing facilities to deliver courses. The main challenges of this model were the monetary and time cost of transporting students between some schools and college, and that this approach can sometimes lead to a more detached experience for students if teachers are not aware of the content of courses.

CASE STUDY SCHOOL A – IN-COLLEGE DELIVERY

School A is a denominational school that serves a socio-economically mixed community, but is generally an academically focused school. According to the headteacher, the school is changing to meet students' needs and the changing agendas within education.

The school had eight S3 students doing the Construction Crafts and the Early Education and Childcare course (four on each course) at Intermediate 1 in the first year of the pilot. The courses were presented as a free option to all students, which meant a range of ability-levels were represented. Students replaced one Standard Grade to go to college, but also sacrificed some of their free time on the afternoon they attended college.

Timetabling was reported to be a challenge for this school. The SfW coordinator said that they had chosen to replace a Standard Grade rather than expecting students to miss core subjects like other schools were doing, because *"we feel the core curriculum and RE in particular are central to what we do. No one subject is more important than the other – they are all important and it is hard to timetable for that reason".*

However, the school was very positive about their involvement in the pilot and reported that students had got a lot out of their experience at college: *"It has been very successful this year and we have increased numbers applying for next year".*

The in-school delivery model by college or training provider staff (see Case Study School B) was found to overcome most of the challenges associated with the off-site delivery model. However, it meant that students missed out on the potentially beneficial effects of attending college and some courses were reliant on the funding of purpose-built facilities in schools.

CASE STUDY SCHOOL B – COLLEGE IN-SCHOOL DELIVERY

School B is a comprehensive school with a high proportion of less able students. The school has a history of offering a more flexible curriculum and has offered vocational courses for a number of years. While such provision was in the past seen as targeted at disengaged pupils only, it was now seen as relevant to all pupils.

In Year 1 of the pilot, there were 15 boys in S3 doing the Construction Crafts course in a specially-designed construction area in the schools, financed by the local authority. The students had replaced a Standard Grade and the SfW course appeared on the options list: *"Listed in the same way as any other subject, so the students make an open choice. We then look at those who have chosen it and if there is space they will get to do it."*

The school was very satisfied with the delivery model. Communication with the lecturers coming into the school was said to be good and they were glad not to have to contend with any travel issues. School staff felt that there were major advantages to in-school delivery and said that they had not really experienced any challenges. The school was planning to expand provision in Year 2 of the pilot, offering two classes in the following year in construction and hairdressing.

The joint-delivery model, involving school and college or training provider staff (see Case Study School C), and the school-only delivery model (see Case Study School D) enabled the Skills for Work courses to be more integrated into school timetables, while also

benefiting from greater school staff awareness of the course. The main challenges of these two models included in some cases funding for the additional costs associated with the resourcing and teaching of some of these courses, e.g. for consumables on certain courses, and the ability of school staff to deliver elements of Skills for Work courses to the same level as college or training provider staff. Furthermore, schools are usually not able to offer the same range of Skills for Work courses as colleges and there may not be enough demand for courses within individual schools.

CASE STUDY SCHOOL C – JOINT–DELIVERY MODEL

School C was delivering the Early Education and Childcare course using an accelerated model of delivery in partnership with a private training provider – students complete the course at Intermediate 1 in the first year in S3 and at Intermediate 2 in S4. The school is a state comprehensive school with a catchment area encompassing advantaged areas and a more deprived area.

There were 12 S3 girls on the course in the first year of the pilot, all at general/credit level. The course was presented within the course options booklet against two column options and the school replaced two Standard Grades in order to accommodate the course on their timetable. A trainer comes into the school to teach the majority of the course, although she has the assistance of the Home Economics Principal Teacher (PT). The students have eight 40-minute periods a week and are covering the Intermediate 1 course in one year, and will move onto Intermediate 2 next year.

The PT Home Economics said the whole experience had been very positive. She felt the course had helped to boost students' confidence and they had really matured.

CASE STUDY SCHOOL D – SCHOOL ONLY DELIVERY

This island school is many miles away from its local college and serves a socio-economically mixed, largely rural community. It decided to deliver the Construction Crafts course on its own, because of its geographical location. They are supported by a local business man, who runs a DIY store and building supplies firm. The SfW coordinator pointed out that *"on a day-to-day basis he isn't part of the course, but it's his overall assistance and the advice and the support and his knowledge of the building trade that are so useful".*

The course is delivered over six periods per week and students have the opportunity to complete the course either at Intermediate 1 or 2, depending on their ability and progress over the year.

In the first year of the pilot 14 S5 students started the course and seven completed it (most of those not completing it left to get jobs before the end of the academic year). Of the seven students that finished the course at the end of the first year of the pilot, two stayed on at school, one had got a job, and four were working in the construction industry doing an apprenticeship. In the second year, 36 S5 students had chosen the course. It was offered as a free option and included all types of students: *"Some really want to go into construction, but others just enjoy it. We have some very able pupils and we have some girls doing the course which is great...".*

The evaluation found that in response to some of the challenges encountered during the pilot, delivery centres were increasingly moving towards adopting more diversified and flexible delivery models towards the end of the second year of the pilot. Several colleges were, for example, using different models for different schools and/or different courses. For example, one school was planning to use varied delivery approaches best suited to each of the Skills for Work courses they were offering to their pupils. The Early

Education and Childcare course would be delivered jointly by teachers and college staff in the school; one unit of the Financial Services course would be delivered by teachers in school, the rest in college; while the Construction Crafts course would be continued to be delivered in college alone. Other colleges already had or were planning to start delivering courses in schools or in vocational centres shared between schools as a way of overcoming transport barriers and lack of college accommodation. In some cases, school staff were delivering courses, but with college staff providing a mentoring and quality assurance role.

Partnership working

The evaluation showed that successful delivery of Skills for Work courses relied upon good partnership working between organisations. A lot of the good practice identified mirrored the recommendations of the Scottish Executive's *Lifelong Partners: A Strategy for Partnership* guide.

Most schools said they were working with a range of partners to deliver Skills for Work courses, including colleges, training providers, local authorities or other partner schools. Respondents in both schools and colleges felt that the pilot had led to stronger partnerships between their organisations. Significant progress had been made in collecting and sharing attendance data between colleges and schools.

One college, for example, had put a system in place in which SfW course tutors take a register of pupils at the beginning of each lesson. This data is sent to a coordinator in the colleges who passes it on to all partner schools electronically (via e-mail) within minutes of students arriving at the college.

Several schools and colleges commented on the advantage of attending working or steering groups to discuss strategic issues, including the overall organisation of the partnership, challenges encountered, plans for the future and evaluating the success of courses. This was seen as a good way of overcoming issues but also forging closer links between organisations. Schools and colleges believed that partnership working was also facilitated by:

What are the characteristics of good Skills for Work partnerships?

• Having named contacts within schools and colleges;

• Agreeing procedures for day-to-day contact and the exchange of information;

• Ensuring all partner organisations (including schools, colleges, local authorities and employers) were represented on any working groups that had been established;

• Developing a year planner so that all partner organisations could work towards agreed milestones (for example, exams or reports).

Issues or challenges were identified, though, by some schools or colleges, in relation to:

• Cultural barriers – that some schools did not understand how colleges worked and vice versa;

• Lack of effective reporting procedures especially in relation to students' progress on the courses;

• Insufficient links being made between what students were doing in college and the rest of the curriculum.

Employer involvement was also variable across courses and delivery centres, even though several employer organisations were active in the design of Skills for Work courses.

Timetabling and teaching Skills for Work courses

Most delivery centres believed that the pilot had helped them to develop teaching approaches to better suit the needs of younger students. This included making lessons as practical as possible, keeping students busy and breaking topics into small chunks. Delivery centres had also made considerable progress in embedding the teaching of employability skills into courses since the beginning of the pilot. Most said that they were now a theme that ran through all of their teaching and that they were explicitly built into lesson plans. Interviews with students showed that they liked this approach and especially appreciated being taught by lecturers with direct experience of working in the vocational area.

> *"I think learning how you would work in the proper site and not as a student but as a work man and learning it from teachers who have worked there themselves has been good. They've done it by making it fun but also helping us by showing a lot of patience towards us – they are always helping us to get faster and more accurate at what we do."*
>
> *(S4 student on Construction Crafts course)*

Schools and colleges identified the timetabling of Skills for Work courses as a considerable challenge throughout the pilot.

Timetabling approaches adopted included:

• Replacing one Standard Grade with a Skills for Work course;

• Students missing core subjects without replacing a Standard Grade to enable them to do a Skills for Work course;

• Students missing a mixture of Standard Grade and other subjects to enable them to do a Skills for Work course;

• Replacing two Standard Grades to enable students to complete an Intermediate 1 and Intermediate 2 course over two years.

How should Skills for Work courses be timetabled?

Schools reported on timetabling and other problems regardless of the approach adopted. Those replacing a Standard Grade found it harder to integrate *"drop-outs"* back into the normal timetable, and there was some evidence that higher ability students were less likely to choose Skills for Work courses if it meant replacing a Standard Grade. However, the alternative approach of expecting students to complete a Skills for Work course on top of their eight Standard Grades further strengthened the perception that they are not equivalent in value to a Standard Grade and that they are just of additional, rather than equal, value. In addition, the evaluation suggested that schools adopting this approach were more likely to report timetabling problems and higher levels of drop-out. This was particularly the case in those schools in which students missed lessons for Standard Grade subjects, which led to various catch-up issues. Other schools had timetabled it in such a way that students only missed core subjects – however, this approach is not sustainable in the long term as it means that schools are not meeting their statutory obligations. Overall, the evaluation concluded that given the objectives of Skills for Work courses, replacing a Standard Grade should be regarded as ideal.

Student selection

Schools and colleges had made considerable progress in developing more robust student selection processes by the end of the pilot. The most common selection approach was for schools to offer the courses to students as a free option choice and then for either schools, colleges or a combination of the two to select the most suitable students to participate in the courses. There was evidence that colleges were increasingly being involved in this process.

Even though there was virtually no evidence that schools were using Skills for Work courses just for disengaged or problem students, especially in the second year of the pilot, some colleges felt that higher ability students were often dissuaded from participating in courses. Students' course choices also continued to conform largely to traditional gender stereotypes in the second year of the pilot, with only a minority of schools and providers making specific efforts to address this issue.

> *One college contacted as part of the final survey reported that they had actively tried to address the gender unbalance on SfW courses by offering a Construction Crafts course for girls only. However, schools had objected to this approach and they had only had one applicant for it.*

Impact on students and course completion

Respondents in almost all schools and colleges agreed that the Skills for Work courses had had a positive impact on students' vocational skills and knowledge, motivation and behaviour. Most also thought that they had helped students to make better and more informed decisions about their post-school transitions. Similarly, all of the 41 students interviewed were able to identify positive impacts of participating in Skills for Work courses. Almost three-quarters said that they thought that participating in the courses had improved their chances of finding work in the future.

What impact did skills for work courses have on students?

> *"My mind has changed about how it would be out working – it's helped to know how to get the job done, working out a schedule and then getting it done. I've learnt to run on time and to get myself organised."*
>
> *(S4 student on Early Education and Childcare course)*

Student retention on Skills for Work courses was good in most of the schools surveyed. Analysis of SQA data showed that overall 85.6 per cent of the Skills for Work candidates who had been entered to complete their courses in July 2007 had achieved a full Skills for Work qualification. Of those not achieving a full award, more than four-fifths had completed at least one course unit.

Conclusions and Key Messages

Conclusions

The evaluation has shown that the Skills for Work pilot has been successful in achieving most of its objectives. Schools, colleges and providers are committed to the value of Skills for Work courses and see them as having raised the status of vocational learning in schools; providers have developed and tested out different approaches to delivering courses and overcome various obstacles and challenges; schools and colleges are increasingly recognising the need to work more closely together and have started to implement strategies to strengthen their partnerships; colleges and schools are positive

about the impact of courses on students' attitudes and skills relevant to employment, their motivation to learn, and their ability to work with and relate to adults; finally, more than four-fifths of students had passed their courses by the end of the second year of the pilot.

Key messages

The evaluation has provided an insight into a variety of delivery models and highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of each of them, although the evaluation has not identified a preferred model. The study has shown that schools and colleges are increasingly adopting more diversified and flexible models of delivery in order to overcome capacity issues and travel distances in rural areas. These alternative models do, however, have their own issues and challenges and The Scottish Government, local authorities, the SQA and HMIe may need to consider ways to overcome some of them, including:

- Providing continuous training and development opportunities for school staff teaching Skills for Work courses;

- Supporting the approach planned by some colleges of providing a mentoring and quality assurance role to schools delivering Skills for Work courses.

The evaluation has shown that both schools and colleges believed that the pilot had really helped to make a positive contribution to improved partnership working. Even schools which had previously had strong links with providers were able to identify ways in which it had further improved links. However, there was still some evidence of a need for schools and colleges to work more closely together to overcome some remaining barriers. These included issues related to the timing of the selection of students, college involvement in providing pre-course guidance to students and the recording and reporting of progress on courses. There was also evidence that very little progress had so far been made by schools to make links between students' learning on Skills for Work courses and the rest of the curriculum. Furthermore, even though almost all delivery centres surveyed had carried out some form of evaluation or review of the pilot, joint working between partners on quality assurance and improvement had not been sufficiently developed. The Scottish Government, local authorities, the SQA and HMIE should encourage this to happen more often.

Timetabling of courses is an issue in several partnerships – approaches adopted vary considerably across schools. On balance the evaluation suggests that replacing a Standard Grade with a Skills for Work course should be regarded as the ideal approach. The Scottish Government, local authorities, the SQA and HMIE should consider ways in which the awareness and status of courses can be further raised among teachers, parents, employers and universities, which may encourage more schools to adopt this approach. They should also consider providing more guidance to schools on the delivery of vocational learning, including Skills for Work courses, within the curriculum.

The Scottish Government, local authorities, the SQA and HMIE also should make sure that new providers and new staff benefit from the lessons learnt from the first two years of the pilot and that staff teaching the courses in schools and college benefit from relevant continuing professional development opportunities. School and college partners could also be encouraged to work more closely together to share ideas on teaching and learning approaches – such links were currently being used mainly to focus on managing groups of young learners.

For further information on Skills for Work courses please visit the Scottish Qualifications Authority Skills for Work website: http://www.sqa.org.uk/skillsforwork

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