

## **EVALUATION OF SKILLS FOR WORK PILOT PROGRAMME**

### **Key Findings from the Initial Phase of the Evaluation being undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research**

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## **SKILLS FOR WORK**

In the ministerial response to *A Curriculum for Excellence*, the Scottish Executive made a commitment to deliver a new programme and qualifications in learning about skills for work for 14-16 year olds by 2007. It announced that Skills for Work (SfW) courses were going to be developed by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) in conjunction with the Scottish Further Education Unit, Learning and Teaching Scotland, the Scottish Executive and a range of stakeholders through a programme of national consultation seminars.

SfW courses have been designed 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 intended to provide progression pathways to employment, training or further learning for pupils of **all** abilities.

There are a number of possible models of delivery of Skills for Work courses, although the Scottish Executive has no preferred model. However, all approaches are likely to involve some form of close partnership arrangements, whether school-college, school-employer, or school-private training provider.

A SfW pilot programme is currently underway, involving the piloting of SfW courses in approximately 40 centres through predominantly school-college delivery partnerships. The five courses piloted from 2005-06 onwards are Construction Crafts (Intermediate Level 1), Sport and Recreation (Intermediate Level 1), Early Education and Childcare (Intermediate Levels 1 and 2), and Financial Services (Intermediate Level 2). Additional levels will be developed for some of these subjects and additional subjects will also be made available for piloting in 2006-07. Although the main target group for these first SfW courses are pupils in S3 and S4, it is anticipated that the courses may perhaps also be taken by older pupils and some school leavers.

## **EVALUATION OF THE PILOT**

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has been commissioned by the Scottish Executive Education Department to carry out an evaluation of the SfW pilot between September 2005 and October 2007.

The main aims of the evaluation are to examine key aspects of SfW course design, including course rationale and purposes, design principles, assessment regimes, timetabling and delivery issues and to obtain the views and experiences of key stakeholders, including pupils and teaching staff involved in the pilots.

More specifically, the key objectives of the study are:

- To collate and analyse monitoring information relating to pupil characteristics, retention rates and achievement of qualifications
- To evaluate course content, materials and design in the light of policy intentions and official guidance
- To collect and explore the views of key stakeholders on the design, implementation, and piloting of the SfW courses.

The initial phase of the evaluation has been completed by NFER, and consisted of strategic interviews and the first round of telephone interviews with 20 partnerships. In addition, NFER has analysed basic data provided by SQA relating to the characteristics of pupils involved in the pilot.

#### *Strategic interviews*

Interviews were carried out with eight key representatives from SQA, Scottish Executive, HMIE, Learning and Teaching Scotland and the Scottish Further Education Unit. The interviews were conducted during September and November 2005.

#### *Telephone Survey*

A telephone survey of 20 partnerships was carried out between November 2005 and February 2006. Interviews were conducted by telephone with representatives from the lead partner organisation and up to two partners, across 20 partnerships. The sample included: 16 colleges, 28 schools and three training providers. Interviews were conducted with 50 members of staff from these organisations.

*The remainder of this paper summarises key findings from the initial phase of the evaluation. These findings therefore relate to the early stage of the pilot, and should be read with that caveat in mind.*

## **FINDINGS FROM THE INITIAL PHASE OF THE EVALUATION**

### **Aims and objectives of the Skills for Work pilot**

Interviews with key representatives at a strategic level revealed a variety of perceived aims and objectives of the SfW pilot in general and the SfW courses more specifically. Those referred to most frequently included:

- Delivering qualifications that develop young people's general employability skills. For example, one key representative stated:

*“We are looking at quite young pupils taking this qualification and (...) we don't want to turn out mini-construction workers, but to give them the whole concept of what it means to be employed.”*

- Introducing vocational qualifications into the curriculum that are accepted on a par with academic courses.
- Developing courses for young people of all abilities. As one key representative said:

*“It should be a type of course which young people of all abilities should be able to benefit from.”*

- Testing and developing schools' and colleges' abilities to work together in partnership to deliver vocational options for pupils in S3 and S4.
- Testing out the design of the new SfW qualifications (including the concept of non-graded qualifications).

## Partnership formation and management

Interviews with college, school and training provider representatives highlighted their reasons for participation in the SfW pilot, partnership characteristics and formation, and local authority involvement and support. The key findings were that:

- Colleges and schools had quite different reasons for getting involved in the pilot which were based on their different perceptions about the aims and objectives of the courses. For example, one interviewee from a college commented:

*“ . . . whether their future is in education or in employment we’re catching them at this early age and we’re trying to build up their experiences.”*

- Five different partnership models were identified across the 20 partnerships; the most common of which was a college working with several schools.
- The majority of partnerships had formal partnership agreements in place detailing each partner’s role and responsibilities.
- Most colleges had a schools liaison coordinator and all schools had nominated a member of staff to coordinate their involvement in the pilot.
- Across the 20 partnerships there were different practices in place to promote effective partnership working. These ranged from simply ensuring that there was regular communication by telephone or e-mail, to drawing up joint policies and having more formal face-to-face meetings for staff. The following example of partnership working was described by a college interviewee:

*“We have six-weekly meetings with a steering group. This group consists of senior managers from the schools, council staff and college staff. We have meetings altogether and we have focus groups that meet separately - they meet to discuss issues that we have highlighted as concerns. We are looking at student selection, retention, attainment and achievement and also student conduct. We are using these working groups to try and plan for how to take these things forward for next year.”*

- There was some variation in the level of involvement from local authorities in the SfW pilot – although in most cases the local authority education departments had provided support for partnerships. As one headteacher commented:

*“There has been a lot of central support from the education department within the local authority. There is a coordinator at local authority level and they have run support meetings for all the school coordinators each term. These meetings have given us opportunities to discuss general issues and to share ideas.”*

## Skills for Work course participants

Information was collected on the approaches schools and colleges used to identify and, in most cases, select students for involvement in SfW courses. The main characteristics of those selected were also gathered through interviews and analysis of SQA data. Key findings were that:

- Partnerships had adopted a variety of approaches to identify students for SfW courses. In all except two cases, it involved some form of selection.
- The most common method used in nine partnerships consisted of offering the courses as free options to students and in seven of them then selecting the most appropriate ones for participation in SfW pilot courses.
- The main criteria used for selecting students included a good attendance record, good behaviour in school, an interest in the vocational area, and their academic ability.
- All ability levels were represented amongst participating pupils. In less than half of partnerships, course participants tended to be those of average or lower ability. In the other partnerships, schools selected students with a mixed range of attainment levels or, in the case of Intermediate 2 courses, selected higher ability students for participation.
- Respondents' comments revealed a very marked gender bias in relation to demand for Construction Crafts and Early Education and Childcare courses – with the former taken up almost exclusively by males and the latter by females.

### **Delivering the Skills for Work courses**

Interviews with college, school and training provider representatives provided information on course delivery, staff training and development, course materials and employability skills. The key findings were that:

- Four different delivery models were identified across the 20 partnerships involved in the survey. The most common approach adopted in half the partnerships involved colleges or training providers delivering the course on their premises, and many saw this as beneficial to students. As one school interviewee commented:

*“The students find that there is a different atmosphere in the college and I think a lot of them appreciate that.”*

- However, each of the four delivery approaches were found to have their own strengths and weaknesses. Delivery in college was seen to give students access to a new learning environment, while in-school delivery enabled school staff to be more involved in the courses and ensured that students' experiences of SfW were less detached from the rest of the curriculum. Commenting on the in-school delivery approach that had been adopted in their partnership, one school interviewee said:

*“I think the local authority have made a really good decision in trying to have the courses delivered in school because it means that we can support delivery”.*

- Most of the college lecturers had little or no experience of working with S3 and S4 students and not all of them had received any additional training or support in relation to SfW. Where training did take place it was usually focused on child protection issues, although some sessions focussed on teaching approaches and behaviour management.
- The majority of interviewees were extremely positive about the support materials provided, although suggestions were made for improving these for the Early Education and Childcare and Financial Services courses.
- Employability skills had so far not been delivered by all partnerships, although most recognised the need for them to be embedded into the general course delivery.

- Very few partnerships had established strong links with employers so far, although most were planning to increase their involvement in Year 2 of the pilot. One school interviewee explained that work experience should be seen as essential:

*“I think what you need is good role models in the workplace - seeing people who are professional. For me the employability skills are developed through that.”*

### **Overall conclusion**

The initial stage of the evaluation has found that the 20 partnerships contacted have made considerable progress towards implementing the Skills for Work pilot courses and have shown a genuine commitment to developing vocational provision within the pre-16, and in some cases, the post-16, curriculum. There was also evidence that schools and colleges were taking steps to overcome some of the challenges associated with the tight timescale of the pilot and were planning changes in their delivery of courses, selection of students and collaboration with other partners to improve provision.

### **NEXT STEPS OF THE EVALUATION**

The evaluation will continue with in-depth case studies, for a more detailed understanding of how the SfW courses are being implemented, and a further round of telephone interviews to assess how stakeholders' views and experiences change over time. A full report of the evaluation will be published after completion of all phases in October 2007.

### Acknowledgements

This is a summary of the findings of the initial phase of the evaluation of the Skills for Work pilot, reported to the Scottish Executive by Thomas Spielhofer and Gabrielle White, National Foundation for Educational Research, in March 2006.

Scottish Executive Education Department

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