Meeting the Future Skills Challenge

Discussion Paper – Increased system agility and employer responsiveness

Host: Ivan McKee, MSP, Minister for Trade, Investment and Innovation
Facilitator: Ewart Keep, SKOPE / University of Oxford

Background

Scotland's Future Skills Action Plan (FSAP) recognises that Scotland's skills system is among the world's most successful and that we benefit from more people with high level qualifications than any other OECD country. However, in a changing world, we need to build upon our success and develop the system to deliver for the future.

Socio-economic trends, ranging from the global climate emergency to demographic changes (including the ageing workforce and rural/island community depopulation), and the uncertain impact of technological advance mean that our skills system must evolve and become more adaptable.

The Plan provides a vision for our development of skills policies and programmes in the years ahead:

Scotland's highly skilled workforce ensures we are an ambitious, productive and competitive nation. Scotland's skills system will be the foundation on which we will deliver these ambitions, supporting our people through-out their working lives, and empowering our business to take advantage of future opportunities. A culture of shared investment in Scotland's future workforce will unlock the potential of our people and businesses and deliver inclusive growth.

The Plan has four themes aligned to the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board's Future Skills Mission's recommendations. These are:

- Increasing system agility and employer responsiveness;
- Enhancing access to upskilling and retraining opportunities;
- Ensuring sustainability across the skill system; and
- Accelerating the implementation of the learner journey review.

It sets out the actions that are already underway to meet the challenges and opportunities we face. These include:

- With Skills Development Scotland, the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the Scottish Funding Council developing and promoting a clear definition of meta-skills, and begin to embed them within the education and skills system and in support for our future workforce.

- Addressing skills gaps and shortages will be a central part of the Scottish Government's economic and labour market response to the UK's departure from the European Union.
- Developing a distinct Scottish approach to retaining and attracting talent to address skills gaps and labour market shortages.

The Plan also considers how the Scottish Government can work with system stakeholders, including employers and their representative bodies, to develop proposals for longer term change to re-orientate the skills system and to develop a culture of collective investment in skills training across Scotland.

Increasing system agility and employer responsiveness

Crucial to achieving our ambitions, Scotland's skills system needs to be flexible, agile and responsive. These attributes will enable it to continue delivering strong results in an uncertain future, and continue to support Scotland's workforce and employers.

To meet future skills challenges, workers should be able to access upskilling, retraining and learning opportunities that meet their needs and circumstances.

At the same time, the skills system must understand and reflect employer needs so that it is able to respond most effectively, with the right interventions, supporting individual organisations and Scotland's economy as a whole.

We believe that work based learning, greater access to learning that is both modular and provides opportunity for practical experience in the workplace, should be delivered in conjunction with employers across Scotland.

Engagement with stakeholders from across the skills system has demonstrated a keen awareness of the necessity for reform. A number of employers, while recognising the strength of Scotland's education and training institutions, have suggested that current models focus heavily on long-term interventions and that short courses and expanded modular learning could enhance flexibility and access to in-work training.

It was noted that expanded employer engagement could help to enhance the design and delivery of education frameworks. For example, there is an emerging consensus that the current modern apprenticeship programme requires refinement to broaden its skills offer, particularly in regard to the balance between technical and meta-skills training.

However, it is recognised that engagement cannot solely be the preserve of those larger employers with a track record of working with Government. Instead, new mechanisms should be introduced to reach out to SMEs and challenger organisations and ensure that their voices are heard. The expansion of Developing the Young Workforce groups, employer bodies and colleges was identified as one potential means of achieving this.

Discussion

The actions currently being undertaken will lay the foundations for change across the skills system, but it's important to better understand the work employers across all sectors have instigated to consider their future skills need; whether the existing system can meet those needs; and where they feel change is required.

In terms of system agility and our ability to respond quickly, we must consider the mechanism required for understanding and being able to react quickly and effectively to changing skills needs. Employers clearly will have an important role in this – how can we ensure the system develops the right strategic partnerships so that they feel able to influence?

Finally, if supporting people to increase their skills throughout their working lives, how do we better recognise their existing learning and skills?

Questions for discussion

- How do you identify and address the changing skills needs of your organisation?
- What impact is technological advance having on your organisation's skills needs and how are you addressing those?
- Is existing skills provision in Scotland meeting your needs (considering schools, colleges, universities and other funded training provision) and do you feel able to influence it/tailor it to your organisation's needs?
- If not, what changes do you think should be made, and who (employers, government, providers, trade unions, etc) should be responsible for delivering these changes?
- What role do qualifications and accreditation have in upskilling and retraining the workforce and how do we recognise existing skills and learning?