

# Supplementary written evidence from Skills Development Scotland

Dear Convener,

Thank you for the invitation to appear before the Economy and Fair Work Committee on 26 March. We welcomed the opportunity to speak directly to members on the questions they had about industry demand for skills. We hope our insight has helped members as they consider this topic over recent weeks.

We are, of course, available to respond to any further questions members may have but would like to take this opportunity to follow up with the information we agreed to send following our appearance – as well as some other points which we feel will benefit members.

## Apprentice Voice

Throughout our appearance before the Committee, the subject of the ‘apprentice voice’ was raised by Committee members, who advocated strongly the importance of understanding the lived experience of apprentices.

We are committed to ensuring that the apprentice voice plays a critical role in shaping the delivery of Scottish Apprenticeships – and as Mr Withers said in his evidence, *“Good systems are in place in the apprenticeship programme to capture the voice of apprentices”*.

To support this aim of embedding the apprentice voice, we have ensured that the views of apprenticeship participants are routinely gathered within our wider SDS programme of research and evaluation, which informs continuous improvement and apprenticeship delivery in Scotland.

In February 2022, SDS launched [Apprentice Voice](#)<sup>1</sup>, an enhanced approach to gathering individual views on the learning, experiences, and outcomes of apprentices. This research was developed to put the voice of apprentices at the heart of the Scottish apprenticeship system with around 35,000 responses received to date.

All apprentices whose details are on SDS’s Funding and Information Processing System (FIPS) are encouraged to provide feedback at three key stages of their apprenticeship:

- In-training (6 months after starting)
- Leavers (3 months after leaving, including non-completers)
- Short-term outcomes (15 months after leaving, including non-completers)

Artificial intelligence research tools are used to support analysis. Headline results from Apprentice Voice are already available on the SDS website, with a fuller suite of publications scheduled throughout 2025.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/what-we-do/evaluation-and-research/apprentice-voice>

The Apprentice Voice research underpins our quality assurance monitoring arrangements for apprenticeships. The research provides our Skills Investment Advisors with a rich, real-time dataset of apprentice feedback which informs the areas of focus for their work with employers and training providers.

Quality monitoring involves additional interviewing of a sample of apprentices and employers from all of our contracted learning providers. We identify strengths and areas for improvement and monitor progress against the continuous improvement actions we ask providers to take in order to enhance their performance.

Examples of how apprentice feedback has been used is shared in the Appendix, and more detailed information can be found in the [annually published quality assurance arrangements document](#). Where feedback shared by apprentices indicates a breach of the apprenticeship conditions, this is acted upon immediately through SDS contract management processes.

Beyond this, apprentices are core to the development of all apprenticeships through the framework development process.

The first stage of this development process involves a workshop with 12-15 current or former apprentices in a relevant occupation. The workshops draw upon the apprentices' insight into what activities are required within their jobs, and ensure these experiences are accurately reflected within our understanding of the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed by employers from the apprenticeship being developed.

Finally, we would highlight that SDS has worked in close partnership with the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board's Apprentice Engagement Group - a group of current and past apprentices which has been consulted on a range of apprenticeship products, services, policy and delivery matters.

The group also raises awareness of apprenticeships, acting as ambassadors with young people, parents, carers, teachers and influencers. SDS has worked with members to support a wide range of activities, including live sessions for parents and carers, the National Apprenticeship Show, DYW Live, the Scottish Apprenticeship Awards and parliamentary receptions.

## **Modern Apprenticeships and the economic benefits of apprenticeships**

The SDS Chair explained to members during the session that "apprentices are unique in that they have jobs to start with, which makes them slightly different from the broader learner community".

To expand on this point, a Modern Apprenticeship is a job which enables people to earn a wage, whilst developing competence for the role and gain an industry-recognised qualification.

Through Skills Development Scotland, Scottish Government makes a contribution towards the costs of the Modern Apprenticeship training, assessment and

certification. These services are provided through a training provider who works with the business and apprentice.

SDS captures data on the performance of learning providers and by framework - please find a link to the most recently published [Achievement Rates](#).

During our discussion on apprenticeships, we discussed the importance of maximising the return on investment for public investment in apprenticeships. We hope it will be useful to members for us to provide some data about the return on investment.

Research carried out on the economic impact of apprenticeships shows that:

- For every £1 of public investment, the exchequer gets up to £4-5 in return (predominantly on tax paid by apprentices).
- Employers invest £10 for every publicly funded £1 through apprentice wages, mentoring, learning provision and other investment.
- Individuals who complete their MA earn up to 52% more than non-completers. Over their lifetime, the net benefit to individuals completing an apprenticeship at SCQF level 6/7 is £65,000 to £84,000 on earnings compared to non-completers.
- Modern Apprenticeships play an important role in enterprise productivity, in that employers with a higher proportion of MAs in training relative to their total workforce tended to be more productive. For employers who have MAs, this indicates that an increase in apprenticeship employment intensity is associated with an increase in productivity.

The [Apprenticeship Performance Report](#) and [Profile of Modern Apprenticeship Employers](#) publications provide further detail on the economic benefits of apprenticeships.

### **Morgan Stanley Apprenticeship Case Study**

Our Chief Executive spoke of how financial services companies in Glasgow have embraced apprenticeships to meet their industry needs.

He referred specifically of Morgan Stanley and how they have grown their apprenticeship cohort via both Modern and Graduate Apprenticeships whilst also supporting females into STEM and successfully boosting recruitment from lower SIMD. There are many such examples as members of the committee will have experienced during Scottish Apprenticeship Week. We would encourage members to view the case study of the company which we have published on our website:

<https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/news-events/2024/february/morgan-stanley>

### **Youth unemployment**

We had some discussion with members on the youth unemployment rate in Scotland. Scotland's youth unemployment rate for 16 – 24 year olds was estimated

at 10.4% in the period covering October to December 2024 (ONS Labour Force Survey) and was the figure referenced during the evidence session.

The latest LFS updated data (April 2025) for the period covering December 2024 to February 2025 estimates Scotland's youth unemployment rate was 11.4%. This is higher than the same period of the previous year (1.9 pp increase). But as discussed it is important to note the declassification of LFS data and the small sample sizes that youth unemployment is based on.<sup>2</sup>

SDS produces a monthly [Economy, People and Skills report](#) that includes timely data on a range of economic and labour market indicators and insight that the committee may find useful. In addition, the full suite of SDS labour market intelligence and skills evidence, including a data matrix for indicators at local authority level can be found [here](#).

### **College Destinations**

As noted on page 19 of the official report, during the session SDS referenced a figure of c. 20% of college leavers going into the workplace. We would clarify that this figure specifically refers to successful full-time college completers whose destination was known.

The published data shows that where destinations are known 57.0% continue study within the further education sector, 21.3% enter employment, 15.7% enrol with a higher education institution and 6% were unemployed or unavailable for work.

The information published does not provide detail on the destinations of completers who remain within the further education sector. This means it is not possible to know if they are progressing to a higher level of learning or continuing in the sector at the same level.

These figures are taken from College Leaver Destinations 2021/22, produced by the Scottish Funding Council, which was the latest data available at the time of the session<sup>3</sup>. We hope this clarification is helpful for members.

### **Workforce North**

Our Chief Executive referenced the 'Workforce North' activity during the session. We are delighted to update on this activity.

SDS, together with Highland Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, University of Highlands and Islands, Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport and other regional partners are working at pace to follow up an action taken at the most recent Convention of the Highlands and Islands (COHI) "*to share proposals outlining co-investment opportunities between skills and workforce*".

Projections, detailed in the Regional Transformational Opportunities research undertaken by HIE and the Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership

---

<sup>2</sup> Youth Unemployment should only be compared to the previous year

<sup>3</sup> The SFC have since published College Leaver Destinations 2022/23 (16<sup>th</sup> April 2025).

(HIREP), into the scale of transformational regional investment over the next 10-15 years, show that the Highlands and Islands region stands to benefit from a generational investment of over £100 bn, driven by the generation, transmission and distribution of renewable energy.

The Workforce North Mission seeks to address an urgent need to expand the region's workforce in order to unlock the economic & social benefits from this planned c.£100 bn investment in the region.

Recognising the enormous pressures on public finances this mission seeks to enable a new model of co-investment, combining employer investment in workforce development with publicly funded skills provision to build the workforce needed to drive economic growth.

SDS delivered a programme of structured engagement with c. 50 employers, investors, providers and stakeholders, to develop a greater understanding of skills linked to the emerging co-investment propositions.

Following this engagement, a Workforce Summit was held on Friday 4th April 2025 in Inverness. The summit was shaped around the feedback from stakeholder engagement and brought together over 70 key strategic players to agree practical, collaborative actions that would enable the region to take full advantage of the potential inward investment opportunities.

The summit explored urgent employer-led co-investment strategies required to bridge skills gaps and retain and attract talent to create a future-ready workforce. It highlighted the transformational regional opportunities, focusing on **current and future economic investments**; the urgent need for action to address the **scale of current and future workforce challenges**; and **opportunities for public and private sector co-investment and collaboration**.

A set of strategic actions for collaborative investment in skills and demand-led provision across the region was identified, based on priorities during the earlier research phase. These are summarised below:

- **Investing in our schools and communities:** Promote area attractiveness, highlight the scale of future opportunities in the region and routes to employment through work-based learning pathways.
- **Investing to develop our workforce:** Provide industry-informed and focused training to address specific technical skills needs promptly and utilising technology to enhance skills delivery.
- **Attracting working-age families to the region:** Promote regional opportunities within and out with the region to retain and attract the working age population in line with job creation in both opportunity sectors and wider enabling sectors.

Following the Summit, priority actions, opportunities, potential blockages and timelines for delivery were collated in a proposed draft '[Workforce North: A Shared Mission to grow and expand our workforce](#)'. This draft has been circulated to Summit attendees for their endorsement and feedback and will be refined in the weeks ahead.

## Career Information, Advice and Guidance

Following the discussion on carers guidance at the session we hope it is helpful to provide some further insight to committee.

In relation to the committee's interest in understanding how the 'voice' of young people and services users is heard, we would highlight a range of approaches within SDS to capture customer voice:

- Pupil Voice (S4-S6), which captures the views of senior phase secondary pupils in Scotland. In 2024, almost 11,000 pupils responded to this survey.
- Young People's Career Ambitions (YPCA), which captures the views of young people a year after leaving school. In 2024, almost 3,000 young people responded to this survey.
- Parents and Carers, which achieved over 4,000 responses in 2024
- School customer feedback, collected on an ongoing basis from secondary school pupils who access careers advice in school, with over 3,500 responses in 2024/25
- Centre customer feedback, collected on an ongoing basis, with over 300 responses in 2024/25

More detailed findings from this research can be found on the SDS website at this link: <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/news-events/2023/june/what-drives-young-people-s-career-ambitions>

We hope this further information is useful to members. We are available to assist with any further questions members may have.

Yours sincerely,

James Prentice  
Director of Corporate Affairs, Skills Development Scotland

## **Appendix 1**

### **Apprentice Voice**

Please find some further background on how our approach to apprentice voice works. Questionnaires are automatically distributed by email to apprentices at these key stages, a reminder is also sent by email a week later. Each questionnaire has an embedded identifier, which enables characteristics such as age, sex, framework, and training provider to be matched to individual apprentice responses, whilst maintaining respondent anonymity.

Apprentices who complete an Apprentice Voice questionnaire are also given the opportunity to consent to participate in further research. This provides a ready-made source of contacts for future follow-up, qualitative research to develop deeper customer insight.

An annual cycle has been developed to support the continuous improvement of Apprentice Voice, including the annual refresh of the questionnaires used in the approach.

### **Examples of how Apprentice Feedback is used.**

#### Example 1

An apprentice raised concerns with their Skills Investment Advisor (SIA) that they felt they were not getting the enough support from an assessor. The SIA fed this back to the provider and as a result the provider swapped out assessor and the apprentice started to progress better.

#### Example 2

Through interviewing a number of apprentices, the Skills Investment Advisor (SIA) found consistent feedback that the 3rd year college programme where they practiced for their skills test was not sufficient at just a week. The SIA raised this with the provider and as result the provider is now in the process of agreeing with the college for them to increase the time for practising skills to two weeks.

#### Example 3

Through interviews an SIA found an apprentice to be very anxious and worried due to the pathway selected for their apprenticeship. The SIA supported the apprentice to raise this with the assessor which resulted in a new pathway being agreed which maximised the opportunity for this apprentice to complete their apprenticeship.

### **Pupil Voice Findings**

Below are some key findings from the research.

From Pupil Voice, young people rated the support provided by careers advisers at one-to-one sessions highly. They felt that careers advisers<sup>[1]</sup>:



- listened to them and valued their ideas (MPS 8.2)
- supported them to make their own decisions (MPS 8.1)
- encouraged them to aim high for their future career (MPS 8.0)
- understood them and the support they needed (MPS 7.8)
- encouraged them to explore a wide range of career and learning options (MPS 7.6).

Almost 60% of young people felt that their careers adviser was a key influencer on their career decisions. For those young people who had accessed the targeted service offer, this rose to 74%.

From the Young People's Career Ambitions research, we found that 63% of young people from the most deprived areas<sup>[2]</sup> regarded their careers adviser as a key influencer on their career decisions.

Those parents and carers who use SDS services rate them highly.

- Overall satisfaction with Parents and Carers webinars (MPS 8.1)
- Overall satisfaction with Apprenticeships.scot website (MPS 8.0)
- Overall satisfaction with SDS Results Helpline (MPS 7.6)
- Overall satisfaction with My World of Work website (MPS 7.5)
- Overall satisfaction with careers appointment attended with child (MPS 6.8)

Feedback from school pupils , shows that they.

- felt that their careers conversations were effective (MPS 8.2).
- were also likely to recommend the careers conversation to others (MPS 8.3)
- were satisfied with their careers conversation (MPS 8.8).

<sup>[1]</sup> Mean Point Scores (MPS) on a 1 to 10 scale

<sup>[2]</sup> Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation quintile 1 (SIMD 1)