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Dealing with the gaps: how  
can Scotland address regional  
skill issues?

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Joe Robinson

## **Abstract**

The findings presented in this paper were collected through a placement-based dissertation project with the Scottish think tank, Enlighten. This dissertation investigates Scotland's regional skills approach and questions how it can effectively address regional skill issues. Skills is an area that the Scottish government has put a lot of emphasis on in the last 20 years. As Scottish policy has moved toward a regional focus, skills have become a key component of the governments mission for inclusive growth. The dissertation examines how a place-based approach to skill has become a popular solution to help align the supply and demand of skills. I show how these ideas have influenced the Scottish approach and highlight the tensions that are present. The research and analysis show that despite the rhetoric there are still a number of 'gaps' in Scotland's approach. My work suggests that there are significant structural, institutional and cultural barriers that are hindering this approach and finishes by reflecting on some changes that can be made to move forward.

## Contents

|                                                            |           |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Introduction.....</b>                                   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Understanding of skill and how it has changed .....</b> | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>Scotland’s approach to skills.....</b>                  | <b>12</b> |
| <b>Methodology .....</b>                                   | <b>16</b> |
| <b>Findings .....</b>                                      | <b>20</b> |
| <b>Reflections .....</b>                                   | <b>27</b> |
| <b>References.....</b>                                     | <b>31</b> |
| <b>Appendix .....</b>                                      | <b>38</b> |

## **Introduction**

Scotland is a diverse country, and its regions have their own different economic concerns and needs. The economic landscape of Glasgow and its surrounding areas for example, are vastly different from that of the Highlands and Islands. Given this, it is only natural that concerns of regional disparities are never too far away from policy discussions. However, issues with regional productivity persist and do not appear to have improved since the advent of Scottish devolution. In 1998 GVA (gross value added) per head in the highest performing area – Edinburgh - was 2.77 times greater than it was in the lowest performing – East and West Dunbartonshire. In 2023, Edinburgh's GVA was 3.06 times greater than East and West Dunbartonshire (ONS, 2025). Skills are a crucial part of the productivity puzzle and help meet both current and future business demands (Weston, 2024). They can help regions and a nation become more economically prosperous, but they also have a marked impact on people and provide them with opportunities to better their lives.

Skill shortages or skill gaps - a mismatch between the skills a worker has, and the ones required for a job or task - are therefore a large concern for productivity and regional growth. Scotland as whole has one of the most educated workforces in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development) but simultaneously has a higher percentage of adults without any qualification (8.2%), compared to England (6.2%) (Williams, et al., 2025, p. 4). This is reflected in Scotland's productivity, which traditionally struggles compared to the UK average (Williams, et al., 2025). There is a clear spatial dimension to these skill gaps, with Edinburgh having the highest 'high skill' percentage with 73.2%, whereas areas like North Lanarkshire continue to lag the UK average at 38.2% (2025, p. 9).

Responsibility for regional policy is split between the UK and Scottish governments. The former has control over macro elements such as labour market regulation and industrial strategy, whilst the latter has more micro tools – skills, education and small business support. Skills is thus a devolved issue and is an area that Scotland has been active in with several reports and strategies over the years. Concerns over skill gaps and regional disparities are far from new. Most notably in 2007, the Skills for Scotland report launched the idea of skill utilisation (Scottish Government, 2007). This challenged the previous supply-side focus on skill policy. It called for an approach that engaged with the demand side and encouraged cooperation between the actors involved.

Across policy in Scotland the concept of 'place' has also become more prominent. The impact of place and regions has been well researched and there is an expanding evidence base that shows that certain regions struggle in several ways – even in terms of life satisfaction of their population (Panori, et al., 2025). Discussions of place have become particularly prominent in UK policy. There is evidence that, in the UK, more so than other developed countries, small geographical changes can have a large impact on social and economic outcomes (McCann, 2020) (HMG, 2022). This is no different in Scotland. Place has therefore found its way into skills policy. Many hope that skill policies

can help address the multifaceted challenge that local economies face (OECD/ILO, 2017). The idea being that moving skill policy to a regional level and closer to local actors and expertise can help integrate skills into “combined and coordinated models of economic development and business improvement” (Keep, 2015). Scotland’s skill policy and broader economic development strategy have adopted this more regional focus. A more prominent regional landscape has also emerged with regional growth deals, city specific regional growth deals and regional economic partnerships (Scottish Government, accessed 2025).

Despite developments in both skills and regional policy, there are still substantial challenges for Scotland in these areas. Concerns have been noted that in Scotland (and the UK) a “policy chum” has emerged in skills, where a number of reports are published without pausing to evaluate or consider practical problems (Green, 2022, p. 6). Given the complex nature of skills, a detailed policy discussion is perhaps understandable—how skills are understood results in very different approaches to skill policy. This complexity tends to struggle to be translated into policy. Our understanding of skills and how to organise it has changed over time, with new ideas developing and resurfacing. However, there are also concerns that Scotland suffers from an ‘implementation gap’ (Gollings, 2023). That for a number of reasons, Scotland is good at developing ideas and strategies but struggle to put policy into practice. A place-based approach to skills has emerged in Scotland at the regional level. But several questions persist around how this approach developed, what is happening at the regional level, and whether this skills approach shows any promise in tackling Scotland’s regional issues.

This dissertation will explore this, using document analysis and interviews from actors within the skill system and regional landscape. This research was completed as part of a placement-based dissertation with the Scottish think tank, Enlighten. The aim of the project was to help contribute to policy discussion around local and regional economic growth in Scotland. The initial research question was ‘how can Scotland best address regional economic disparity?’, but as this was quite broad, I chose to focus on skill policy.

The focus is to examine the gaps in this apparent regional skills approach. The rhetoric and the strategies from the Scottish government at the national level, suggests a skills approach with a broader focus that engages with the economic needs of the regions. The interviews allow the research to explore the realities for the actors at the regional level, and to question if there is a policy gap and where (Pak Tee, 2008)? Is it in the rhetoric and the strategies that the government publish at the national level? Is it in the implementation of the policies at the ground level? Or is it even in the understanding of what an appropriate regional skill approach for Scotland needs to be?

This dissertation is split into five main sections. First, it will review how skills are understood and how this has changed over time. How the momentum has shifted toward a skill alignment, place-based approach, and what possible tensions could arise from this. This leads into the next section

which covers what Scotland has already done in terms of regional skills, how has policy understood skills and how has this changed the approach and focus. This section focuses on what has happened at the national level, in terms of strategies and rhetoric. Next, is a section on the methodology which discusses why and how the research was formulated and notes any concerns. This sets up the research section which delves into the interview findings on what is happening at the regional level. This section examines how the regional skills approach is playing out in practice and identifies the key obstacles and gaps. The final section brings together the findings and offers some reflections on why these gaps have persisted, what can be done to deal with them, and what this means for addressing regional skill issues in Scotland.

## **Understanding of skill and how it has changed**

How one understands skills and how they should be organised, has in turn a key influence on what sort of policy approach is taken. There is a recognised consensus around the importance of skills, and they are often targeted as a policy solution for national economic productivity concerns. However, the focus of skill policy in recent years has also turned to the regional level. This section examines how our understanding of skills has changed, the ideas that have shaped this movement, and most importantly what could this mean in practice for regional skill policy.

In a basic sense, skills can be described as an individual's ability to carry out a certain job or task. But skills are not just for an individual, they are located in a job, sector or region. Therefore, the actors and institutions involved in the formation, utilisation and valuation of skills must be considered. Skills are also complex and there is "no clearcut definition" (Lundgren & Meijer, 2025, p. 2). The multifaceted nature of skills has long been recognised and yet academics have often criticised the ability of skill policy to reflect the complex nature of skills. There is a tendency to assume that a high level of education means a high skill level. Academics have pushed back on this and argued that education is just one part of a skills package (Bacolod, et al., 2010). But identifying a skill or a skill gap is difficult. It may be argued that a skill can be measured by a qualification or educational achievement, although this is not a perfect measure (Lundgren & Meijer, 2025).

Our understanding of skills depends on the context. Ideas of skills are influenced by prominent contemporary theoretical perspectives - skills is a cross-cutting discipline, and there are competing views proffered by economists, political scientists and social scientists (Bryson, 2017). Ideas and policy are constantly changing as new knowledge is acquired and new understandings developed.

### **A 'people' versus 'place' approach to skills**

In general, there is a distinction between two approaches for how skills can assist economic development. On the one hand, a supply-side and space neutral perspective, and on the other a more interventionist and place-based perspective. These two policy ideas are often conceptualised as a dichotomy between 'people prosperity' and 'place prosperity' (Winnick, 1966). Two approaches of either focusing on improving the wellbeing of people and connecting them to economic opportunities or focusing on improving specific places and bringing the economic opportunities to the people in that area.

A supply focused, space neutral approach states that boosting the supply of skills (through raising education levels), will in turn encourage demand for high skilled jobs. It rests heavily on the assumption that market forces will efficiently align the supply and demand side of skills. This approach is also space-neutral (has no specific spatial consideration), as it is believed that the market will decide geographically where demand will be met. This is often in large urban agglomerations,

where economies of scale can be utilised. This policy idea stems from the human capital theory – that emphasises the importance of enhancing human capital through investment, just like with physical capital (Becker, 1964). Becker’s paper at the time reencouraged economic interest in issues of labour supply, education, and skill development. It was further argued that due to technological advancements, economic growth was more dependent on human capital than physical (Becker, 2008).

This supply side interest has often resulted in policies that focus heavily on boosting education rates. In part this can explain why the assumption has persisted that education is synonymous with skill. This was certainly the approach taken by many countries in the 1990s and 2000s, including Scotland and the rest of the UK (Felstead, 2007). It was once dubbed the ‘supply-push’ effect (H M Treasury, 2002). This fostered the view that it is a necessity to raise education levels or “lose out in the modern globalised world” (Buchanan, et al., 2017, p. 444). Many economies hoped that by building a high-level skills base, they could transition to a knowledge-based economy (Anderson & Warhurst, 2012).

However, assumptions of this approach have come under challenge. Despite this supply side focus, evidence has persisted of skills gaps and in turn lower productivity and growth (London Economics, 2019). Research has also shown that there is a spatial dimension to where these gaps have emerged (OECD, 2019). It became apparent that “more skills are not necessarily better skills, and the mere existence of skills does not automatically lead to improved economic performance” (OECD, 2011, p. 19). From this an alternative arose – an interventionist and place-based approach. This perspective is based on the idea that as skills are derived from demand, it is insufficient to focus solely on the supply side (Keep, 2016). A more interventionist approach is needed, that can ensure that skills are properly utilised and align the supply and demand side of skills where the market has failed. This approach also recognises the skill needs and demands of a certain place or region.

Ideas of interventionist skill alignment have become more prominent over the last 20 years and built on literature that had been present for several years before that. In 1988 Finegold and Soskice explored ideas of meeting the skills equilibria (Finegold & Soskice, 1988). This influential paper discussed this in the UK context with its issues of areas of low productivity and low wages. Finegold later changed focus, arguing that his previous discussions of equilibria had been too static (Finegold, 1999). He had considered whole national economies as either in high or low skilled equilibrium, instead of having a mix of high and low skilled clusters. These ideas encouraged an approach that considered the context and everchanging nature of the economy. Solely focusing on static equilibria forgoes the “complexity of the issue and neglects contextual demographic, socioeconomic, and institutional factors” (Lundgren & Meijer, 2025, p. 2). From Finegold’s discussions came another tradition that stressed the importance of institutional structures and governance to help align skills. Finegold’s proposed solution was to build skill ecosystems - “regional or sectoral social formations in which human capability is developed and deployed for productive purposes” (Buchanan, et al., 2017,

p. 444). Despite not strictly focusing on regional skills, the literature on ecosystems lends itself to place-based approaches and the importance of regions and institutions.

This led to a returning focus on skills alignment and an emergence of place-based approaches. The literature on skills alignment has expanded slowly since then, with a particular interest on ecosystems. It has moved beyond Finegold's initial discussion of ecosystems – which focused on clusters of high skilled jobs in Californian biotech. Papers on ecosystem projects in Australia, Scandinavia and indeed Scotland, showed that there was interest in a broader focus on middle and lower-level skills (Anderson & Warhurst, 2012). There has also been a growing interest in breaking out of low skill equilibriums, which was initially highlighted by Finegold and Soskice as a particular issue for the UK (Sissons, 2020). A low skill equilibrium being when an economy is trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of “low value added, low skills and low wages” (Wilson & Hogarth, 2003, p. vii). This results in a lack of productivity and little incentive for employers to upskill their workers. In terms of creating the right jobs for the future, these ‘lower-skilled’ jobs will still be required but there are concerns for productivity and workers livelihoods (OECD/ILO, 2017).

The concept of ‘place’ has become more prevalent in skill policy, and discussions of skill alignment have been joined by questions on where to focus skill policy. This in turn has placed a regional focus on skills. Amongst others, Corradini et al. called for a “place-based perspective for skills policy where intervention is shifted from a static supply-side approach towards a more dynamic viewpoint targeting both skills demand and utilization” (2022, p. 1044). The argument being that skills policy should be based at the regional level, and that to align skills you need local knowledge, cooperation and institutions.

### A solution for inclusive growth?

With this broader focus emerging, skill alignment has begun to be considered as a key policy to help achieve inclusive growth. This idea is prominent in several countries and fundamentally challenges the focus on growth and productivity. Instead, it aims to focus on the nature of growth (Waite & Roy, 2022). Academics and policy actors have promoted the idea of creating a skill system that “would engage the whole of the population in meaningful learning, education and training throughout their careers to maximise and realise their potential” (IPPR Scotland, 2018). Several have argued that the key to this is an approach to skills that goes beyond supply and demand – a “more integrated perspective of enhancing the skills ecosystem” (Sakamoto, 2019, p. 69). One that looks at improving the quality of skills and the ability of people to access them, but also at how those skills can be best utilised. The desired outcome is that a skills alignment, place-based approach can help move towards inclusive growth.

Place-based approaches have often been seen as ineffective. In fact, the World Bank in 2009 was explicit in its recommendation in favour of space-neutral approaches to economic development

(World Bank, 2009). Based on the idea that economic activity will naturally concentrate in certain agglomerations (large-urban areas), it was therefore deemed inefficient to have a specific place focus. Rather than trying to bring economic activity to lagging areas, the focus should be on improving mobility for people to move to where jobs are.

But again, this has been challenged and a stronger economic case for place-based approaches has emerged. The space-neutral argument that whilst there may be initial regional divergence, it would eventually lead to convergence was found to have “no empirical basis” (McCann, 2023, p. 10). Furthermore, concerns arose that spatial inefficiencies would actually increase if cities got too large. These agglomerations may also have damaging effects elsewhere (Haughton, et al., 2014). For example, there are also political and social costs to a space-neutral approach that would leave economically vulnerable areas to market forces. Lack of economic opportunity can lead to social and political instability. Over the last decade across OECD countries, a new discourse around ‘left-behind places’ has emerged, and the political momentum this has given some groups has not gone unnoticed (Fiorentino, et al., 2024). This concern has been a key factor in pushing place to the forefront of policy agendas. But questions remain about to what extent is it “politicised regional development” (Gray, et al., 2018, p. 157) There may be more of a need for a place focus in policy, but that does not necessarily mean all places will be able to receive the same treatment.

### How to implement?

Place-based approaches have their nuances, however. Discussions of space-neutral versus place-based and people versus place can encourage unhelpful dichotomies. As argued by advocates of place-based policies, it oversimplifies the realities of how people and place interact (Davidson, 2009). Place-based approaches may have the momentum behind them, but there are still questions over what exactly they entail and how they can be effective. For instance, what type of place-based approach is best to achieve spatial economic cohesion? Suedekum discusses different types for different geographical areas – for example, an approach that avoids deglomeration in declining cities or one to foster agglomeration in rural areas (Suedekum, 2025). A consideration of place does not necessarily mean a disregard of agglomeration. Literature on the importance of city regions is not without its critics, but equally new economic structures cannot begin from scratch. The geographical space and how they fit together is important – it needs to be a “functional economic area” that is meaningful to the residents (Healey, 2002, p. 1780). The spatial level must also be appropriate for its purpose, for instance it has been suggested that a more local level is appropriate for place-based policies aimed at helping those at the “greatest labour market disadvantage”, while a regional focus is likely to be more appropriate for the delivery of higher level skills (Green, 2023, p. 6).

There are several other considerations for an effective place-based approach. It is well acknowledged that for any regional development, multi-level governance is key in order to bring local actors

together to cooperate horizontally and vertically (McCann, 2023). Also, effectiveness can depend on where funding comes from, where decision-making power sits, who sets policy objectives and the desired impact. Place-based policies can be a broad spectrum, and local actors can have varying roles and responsibilities. There is no single answer, and as expected from a place-based approach, it depends on the context. As noted by Corradini the focus on place-based skills does seem to currently be at the region (Corradini, et al., 2022). However, there are critiques that place-based approaches may be limited in neo-liberal economies (Payne, 2018). Studies from the UK, have shown how a regional approach to skills has developed in the context of English devolution. Concerns emerged that the skills ecosystems fostered by the regional institutions, simply reproduce “miniaturised versions of the same old target driven supply-side models”, rather than trying to engage with the demand side (Keep, 2016, p. 22). Also, that a narrow approach is taken, focusing on skills in “sexy high growth sectors” rather than considering the wider needs of the region (Payne, 2018, p. 497).

Ideas of how best to understand and organise skills have changed over the last twenty years and will continue to do so. Just as in the 1990s concerns on losing out on the ‘knowledge economy’ prompted a supply-side focus, concerns of skill gaps and leaving areas behind has encouraged a focus on place in contemporary policy. The momentum is now with ideas of skill alignment, skill ecosystems and place-based approaches. Questions persist over how realistic current thinking is and then how it can be put into practice. Perhaps, place-based approaches can allow for better skill alignment and a closing of regional disparities in Scotland. But skills are a complex topic and recent experience shows there is often a gap in how policymakers understand skills. There are also a lot of unknown factors around how to put the policy into practice. The next section will turn to look at how these ideas have played out in Scotland and engage with what Scotland has already done in terms of regional skill alignment.

### **Scotland's approach to skills**

Scotland was the first UK nation to challenge the view that the UK's skills problems were due to issue of low skills supply and weakness in the education and training system (Keep, 2009). More recently Scotland, like the rest of the UK, has also adopted a more regional focus, particularly in skills. This would suggest that Scotland's understanding of skills has broadened to accept a more regional focus. However, these developments have not been without tensions or issues.

### **Skill utilisation in Scotland**

Scotland have long been aware that despite a relatively strong supply of high-level skills; their productivity still lags behind several UK regions (Keep, et al., 2006). Skill issues and productivity concerns are not a new phenomenon in Scotland. The 2007 Skills for Scotland report was the first government document to challenge the way skill issues were seen – it is insufficient to just add “more skills to the workforce” (Scottish Government, 2007, p. 13). They were also the first UK nation to come up with a working definition for skill utilisation – “ensuring the most effective application of skills in the workplace to maximise performance through the interplay of a number of key agents” (Curriculum for Excellence, 2008). Out of this, a skill utilisation action group was created to support key delivery agencies and engage stakeholders in collaboration (Payne, 2012). Alongside this group, a number of projects were overseen by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the government agency responsible for funding further and higher education, and Skills Development Scotland (SDS), the national skills agency. The SFC pledged £2.9 million for 12 skill utilisation projects, which were run by universities and colleges in the local area (Payne, 2012). There were however several concerns about the ability and capacity of stakeholders to engage. The projects were often restricted by a lack of employer engagement, which raised concerns that the projects tended to “revert to skill supply/development solutions” (Buchanan, et al., 2017, p. 452). Ultimately, changing organisational culture proved difficult and these projects were particularly hard to sustain when “public funding ends” (Payne, 2012, p. 433).

The Skill Utilisation Action Group was disbanded in 2010, and yet that same year the Scottish government further cemented their approach to skills. The 2010 Skills for Scotland report emphasised again the need for “realigning the skills, learning and work system in Scotland” (Scottish Government, 2010, p. 28). The goal was to move toward a simplified skill system that helped empower people and linking them to opportunities. Two key themes of this were a better understanding and assessment of skills through improved data analysis, and stronger partnerships with collective responsibility between the actors involved in the skills system. In terms of partnerships, SDS were very much seen as the central pillar, but there was an emphasis on engaging with a wide range of actors at the “local, regional and national level” – universities, businesses, and in particular colleges (Scottish Government, 2010, p. 53). It was reported that colleges had had their funding

increased to enable them to “respond better to needs of individuals and employers.” (Scottish Government, 2010, p. 15). A few years on from this report, the colleges in Scotland were regionalised in 2012/13 (Education, Children and Young People Committee, 2023). The number of colleges were reduced from 41 to 26 and split into 13 different college regions. The aim was to stop any duplication and inefficiency, but also to give a larger regional platform to engage with partners.

As for a better understanding of skills, labour market data has been a prominent part of Scotland’s new approach to skills. In 2011, SDS began to develop Skill Investment Plans (SIP) for key sectors in Scotland, such as engineering, finance and tourism (McQuaid, 2017, p. 268). The aim of these were to help develop a better shared understanding of skill needs by employers and the educational community. In 2014, SDS also began to develop Regional Skill Assessments (RSAs) for all areas of Scotland. Since 2014, they have been published annually and presented to the regions. These are then used to formulate regional SIPs. For instance, in 2017 the partners of the Edinburgh City Region Deal came together to create their SIP for the region (SDS, 2017). This appears to be an impressive attempt at identifying the skill issues that are particular to the region. For instance, they are aware of how many employers are reporting skill gaps as well as the main sectors of projected employment increase (SDS, 2017, p. 10). The plan recognises the diverse nature of the regional economy, highlighting that there is both an “increasing demand for higher level technical and professional level skills” but also “persistent pockets” of in work poverty and underemployment (SDS, 2017, p. foreword). The report does admit that more data is needed and that regional working must continue to facilitate this. Equally, McQuaid raised concerns about skill information and it’s developing governance in Scotland. It is argued that within the governance arrangements, there are a number of competing logics and despite an encouraged regional focus it is often the community logics that are limited (McQuaid, 2017).

#### A more regional focus

As illustrated by the RSAs and SIPs, there has been a switch of focus in Scotland, toward a regional one. The regional landscape in Scotland has developed since 2014 when the Glasgow City Region Deal was signed (HM Treasury, 2014). Since then, 11 other growth deals have followed to cover the rest of Scotland, not just the major cities. The growth deals are in partnership with the UK and the Scottish government and provide funding for economic development projects. However, it should be noted that not all the growth deals have an explicit focus on skills. The Aberdeen City Region Deal for example, naturally discusses skills but its main concerns include innovation, transport and digital infrastructure (Office of the Secretary of State for Scotland, 2016). There are also the 8 Regional Economic Partnerships (REPs) across the country who work with the Scottish Government to map their regions and devise regional economic strategies. The REPs grew out of the governance arrangements of the growth deals with the aim of delivering “improved inclusive economic outcomes”

for their region (Scottish Government, 2017, p. 4). The fact that REPs were devised out of an Enterprise and Skills Review would suggest that skills is a key focus. The REPS were encouraged to work towards the inclusive growth indicators of economic performance and productivity, labour market access, fair work, and spreading economic benefits across people and place (Scottish Government, 2017, p. 8). How they do this, however, is up to them. There is no strict governance arrangement that has to be implemented. To gain support from the Scottish government, the REPs just have to provide evidence of leadership, strategy, evidence and purpose, but how this is done is not clear (2017, p. 9).

In general, Scottish policy, at least rhetorically has moved more toward a place-based and inclusive approach. They have followed a similar trajectory to the rest of the UK, for instance with the developments of English devolution that followed in the wake of the Brexit referendum (Bradbury, et al., 2023). Indeed, the year after the Scottish independence referendum, the government released their 2015 strategy with a new focus on inclusive growth (Scottish Government, 2015). These ideas have persisted in Scottish policy. In 2022, the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET) was released with a ten-year plan for Scotland's economy and a vision of a 'wellbeing economy' (Scottish Government, 2022). The NSET pledged to take "full account of regional circumstances" and to hold a bottom-up commitment as shown by initiatives such as community wealth building (Scottish Government, 2022, p. 52).

The language has changed to reflect an inclusive approach, and yet there are concerns surrounding potential trade-offs in practice. For instance, two key pillars of the NSET are 'productive businesses and regions' and a 'fairer and more equal society'. But are the two necessarily compatible? A prominent concern when tackling spatial inequalities is how to manage the tension between productivity growth and ensuring that growth actually benefits the wider region (Keep, 2022, p. 34). The topic of inclusive growth has not been without its criticisms, mainly revolving around the abstract nature of the concept and how to put it into practice (Waite & Roy, 2022). These issues have limited the impact of inclusive growth ideas. This trade-off can impact how regional skills are approached. Promoting a high-growth sector with higher skilled jobs in a region may benefit economic growth at the national level but do little to address the economic issues of the region. Indeed, concerns have been raised that previous attempts in the UK to devolve elements of skill policy have left local actors restricted and resulted in "local delivery of national targets" (Keep, 2022, p. 11). There are similar concerns for economic development as a whole in Scotland. That despite Scottish economic development policies showing an increasing concern for regional inequality and looking beyond GDP, there is still just 'one central purpose' of increasing growth at the national level (Clelland, 2024).

#### A lack of movement?

Despite the discussions around skills, regional inequality and more inclusive growth, there is evidence that there has been a lack of progress in skill policy. Across the UK there are concerns that a supply focused, one size fits all approach to skills, is still the norm (Keep, 2022). Even in Scotland, who pioneered a skill utilisation approach. In 2023, an Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape was provided to the Scottish government by James Withers. The ‘Withers review’ highlighted that the Scottish skill system had not progressed in the ways it had set out to and was arguably not fit for purpose (Withers, 2023). Withers evaluated the national skills delivery landscape and found there to be a “lack of strategic direction” in a complex and fragmented environment (2023, p. 11). He highlighted a number of tensions between agencies and institutions and between the “needs and demands” of the system (2023, p. 11). Whilst the focus of the report was on the national level, it was noted that this lack of clarity filters down to the local and regional actors, who are often the ones delivering the skills.

On paper it may appear that Scotland is moving towards a regional skill approach. But there is a level of ambiguity and inconsistency in the reports and discussions at the national level. This may not be specific to skills. There are suggestions that despite developing an “increasingly distinct Scottish policy narrative” since devolution, nearly 30 years of economic development policy has been more ‘style over substance’ (Goudie, et al., 2024, p. 381). In the case of local and regional concerns, frustrations have been raised that the Scottish government may be reluctant to decentralise further. Some have gone as far to describe the Scottish government as ‘one big local authority’, that despite power having been transferred to the Scottish government, they are reluctant for further devolution to the regions (Dickson & Barnes, 2024). This could factor into an ‘implementation gap’ which is something that has been widely discussed in Scottish policymaking (Gollings, 2023). If this is the case, then there may be a gap between what Scotland’s regional skill approach says on paper and what it does in practice.

This section focused on the ideas behind skills and how these translated into national policy. But key to my research is what is happening at the regional level. Exploring this should allow for a full picture of a regional skills approach in Scotland and where the gaps are. The following chapter sets out the methodology for my research.

## **Methodology**

This chapter gives a summary of the approach and design of my research. My research was conducted as part of a placement with Enlighten, a Scottish think tank. The following sections provide an overview of how the research question was formulated and how this developed into a research design. Then how the data was collected - identifying appropriate interviewees, organising meetings and ensuring the interviews followed the ethical process. Finally, how the data from the interviews was analysed and brought together through thematic analysis. I will also discuss the research limitations and ethical considerations of my study.

### **Research design**

When I first met with Enlighten, the initial research question that was proposed was ‘how can Scotland best address regional economic disparity?’. With a Scottish parliamentary election coming up next year, the aim was to help contribute to policy discussion around local and regional economic growth in Scotland.

As the initial research question was quite broad, I was given flexibility to focus on an area, and I chose skill policy. Firstly, because skills is a devolved matter and is an area that the Scottish government has put a lot of emphasis on in recent years. As Scottish policy has moved toward a regional focus, skills have become a key component. In their mission for inclusive growth, a place-based approach to skill has become a popular solution to help align the supply and demand of skills.

However, in both skills and regional policy, discussions at the national level seem to be stagnating. There appears to be a disconnect – a policy gap between rhetoric and implementation reality. This may be for several reasons - issues with policy rhetoric, issues with the implementation process, or issues with examining reality (Pak Tee, 2008). The purpose of the research was therefore to find out what is happening at the regional level on the implementation side. The proposed method was to utilise document-based analysis and interviews with regional experts. The interviews are the focus of the research as they help us understand what is happening at the regional level and where the gaps are. The interviews are complemented by document analysis, which primarily helps build the picture at the national level and explore the strategies and rhetoric.

### **Data collection**

I began by identifying potential interviewees. I aimed to gather people who have experience at the local and regional level as it is often their voices that are not heard. I was however, also keen to speak to people from national government agencies and third sector organisations to help bring some balance.

With the help of Enlighten I collected a number of contacts and sent out an initial email inviting them to participate. Each interview took between 30 minutes to an hour. Some were in person, but the majority were on Teams.

I completed 15 interviews in total with 17 interviewees. These were mainly local actors but also representatives from national agencies, third-sector organisations and independent economic advisors. A number of questions were asked. Broadly they covered the themes of: what is happening at the regional level; what are the obstacles; what can improve? An interview template was created which formed the basis of the interviews (see appendix). Once the interviews were completed, I used a thematic analysis framework to find themes and patterns within working on skills at the regional level (Naeem, et al., 2023). This included familiarisation with the transcripts, selection of quotations and key words, which were then coded and developed into themes. These key themes were then organised and conceptualised. It is these findings on which the discussion section of this dissertation is based.

### Limitations

Given the time scale I was operating under there were limits to how many participants I could speak to. I tried to gather a mix of people, from different regions of Scotland. Although satisfied with the number and range of people I spoke to, I would have liked to have more of a regional spread. For instance, after interviewing one person from the Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal, they helped me recruit two more of their colleges to be interviewed. It also helped that I am based in Edinburgh. It was more difficult however to get in touch with representatives from other regions -for instance I did not manage to speak to anyone involved in regional work in Aberdeenshire. For ease, most of my interviews took place virtually. This was useful as most participants had busy schedules, and this made it easier to conduct interviews. However, because of time pressures some interviews were shorter than expected.

### Ethical considerations

This project was approved by the University of Edinburgh as a Level 1 research project. My main ethical concerns were around the interviews and ensuring that the participants felt well informed and comfortable being involved in this process. I sent out an initial email describing my project and asking if they would be interested in speaking with me. I informed them how long each interview would approximately last and that I was happy to meet online or in person at a time suitable for them. If they agreed to speak, I sent them participant information sheets and ethics consent forms to be signed and returned. In these documents I informed them that I planned to record and transcribe the interview and that all data collected would be stored in secure files to be permanently deleted by September 2025. They also had the option to remain anonymous in the final piece and any further output. At the start of each interview, I told them that they were able to stop or pause the interview at any time. I also

reiterated that the interview would be recorded and transcribed which they agreed to by oral consent. There were no concerns from myself or the participants about the topics that were discussed. As an interviewer and researcher my questions were impartial, and I did not note any imbalance in power dynamics which would cause interviewees to alter their responses.

| <b>No.</b> | <b>Interviewee</b>                                                                                                            |
|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1          | Integrated Regional Employability & Skills (IRES) Programme Lead<br><i>Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal</i> |
| 2          | Head of Project Management Office<br><i>Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal</i>                                |
| <b>3*</b>  | <b>Programme officer</b><br><b><i>Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal</i></b>                                  |
| 4          | Board member<br>Economic Development Agency Scotland (EDAS)                                                                   |
| 5          | CEO<br><i>Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce</i>                                                                                    |
| 6          | Learning and Skills - Strategy and Development Manager<br><i>South of Scotland Enterprise</i>                                 |
| 7          | Former CEO<br><i>South Ayrshire Council</i>                                                                                   |
| <b>8*</b>  | <b>Policy officer</b><br><b><i>Skills Development Scotland</i></b>                                                            |
| <b>9*</b>  | <b>Board member</b><br><b><i>Scottish Local Authorities Economic Development (SLAED)</i></b>                                  |
| <b>10*</b> | <b>Economic Development Advisor</b><br><b><i>Independent</i></b>                                                              |
| <b>11*</b> | <b>Policy officer</b><br><b><i>Universities Scotland</i></b>                                                                  |
| 12         | Director of Strategy and Regional Economy<br><i>Highlands and Islands Enterprise</i>                                          |
| 13         | Advisor on Regional Economies<br>Independent                                                                                  |
| 14         | Assistant Director of Coherent Learning Provision<br><i>Scottish Funding Council</i>                                          |
| 15         | Director<br><i>IPPR Scotland</i>                                                                                              |
| 16         | Senior Policy Officer<br><i>Colleges Scotland</i>                                                                             |
| 17         | Senior Policy Officer<br><i>Colleges Scotland</i>                                                                             |

\*Those in bold chose to stay anonymous.

## **Findings**

Amongst the interviewees, there was a strong sense that a regional approach to skills is evolving in Scotland – “I think if you'd asked me this question a year ago, I would have said probably not... but I think there is now momentum towards developing that” (interviewee 6). There have been several successful projects and developments at the regional level, as discussed by the interviewees. The more mature regional growth deals, Edinburgh & South East Scotland City Region (ESESCR) and Glasgow City Region (GCR), both have skill programmes (ESES CRD, 2024) (GCR, 2021). Others are just emerging, with Falkirk and Grangemouth announcing a £4m Skills Transition Centre as part of their 2024 growth deal (HM Treasury et al., 2024). Perhaps the most well-established is Edinburgh’s IRES (Integrated Regional Employability and Skills) programme which began in 2019 and is funded until 2027. The programme, with its skills gateways model, has been praised for its integrated approach between skills and employability and has exceeded all its key targets with over 2 years left of funding (ESES CRD Joint Committee, 2024). The more mature partnerships, such as ESESCR and GCR have developed promising governance structures which manage to bring different partners together. GCR’s cabinet brings together representatives from all local authorities in their regions (GCR, 2025). ESESCR’s joint committee also has representatives from higher and further education, and local businesses (Edinburgh City Council, 2025). However, several barriers persist at the regional level and in the wider system. For regional actors, there were a number of obstacles discussed around the ability to engage with demand and address skill gaps. Predominantly these were focused on having the correct understanding of regional issues, having the means to act, but also being able to come together and work as a region.

### **Joined up working**

The success of regional working varies across the country. It appears to be becoming less siloed, but difficulties remain with cooperation and working “horizontally” (interviewee 12). A recurring frustration was with the REPs and their impact – “they could be viewed as a bit toothless” (interviewee 8). REPs are one of the main regional institutions and work to bring together the key regional actors. However, it seems they can be limited as they are not a constituted body and are therefore often bypassed. In terms of directing activity, one interviewee noted that colleges and universities are more likely to respond to actual funding bodies, such as SFC, rather than the REPs (interviewee 8). Overall, the ability to include certain regional partners and to have some form of joined-up governance was a common barrier. There is evidence for example that some colleges have felt “excluded” from the decision-making process of growth deals and the corresponding REPs (Colleges Scotland, 2024, p. 1).

Another partner that often struggles to be involved are the employers - in particular small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) which are “99% of Scotland’s business base” (Williams, et al., 2025, p. 19).

Amongst the interviewees it was well regarded that SMEs need to have a larger role and that this is key for engaging with demand. Although it was also accepted that SMEs have a history of struggling to engage with skill projects. It is an “unending task...that’s probably never complete” (interviewee 14). Larger employers have more time and resources to coordinate and plan whereas smaller enterprises are “just literally trying to get through day-to-day” (interviewee 5). There are a number of fora for employers to engage, such as the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board, but again it is the larger employers who are “more active in that space” (interviewee 5).

The consensus that employers need to play a key part is nothing new, and yet there has been little progress in this area. Scotland lacks a tradition or culture of engaging with employers, particularly SMEs. For example, Edinburgh City Region has a regional enterprise council who are represented on their joint committee. However, the council was set up by the programme management office - “I think you could argue that that's the wrong way around” (interviewee 2). Ideally these structures would pre-date such mechanisms as city deals, and would have a strong role in developing these regional deals. Furthermore, in 2023 the Wither’s review recommended to replace SAAB with a network of regional employer boards and national employer forum (Withers, 2023, p. 57). The Scottish government accepted the basis of the Withers review (Scottish Government, 2023). However, it still is “not obvious how the employer voice will be raised in the new structure” (Economy and Fair Work Committee, 2025, p. 6). Despite the perceived importance of employers, they still do not have a sufficient platform.

#### Collaboration depends on funding

To help form sustainable partnerships, it was clear from the interviews that they are much easier to form when time and resources are available – in particular, funding. There are several funding streams from both UK and Scottish government. The two most prominent being the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) from the UK government and the Flexible Workforce Development Fund from the Scottish government. The UKSPF is designed to succeed the European Union structural funds in supplying funds to local authorities for regional and local economic development. The FWDF also provided funds to employers for workforce development training opportunities. But there are still frustrations at lack of consistent funding which has restricted actors’ ability for collaboration and long-term planning. Several interviewees reminisced fondly on the “visibility” of the European funding - it was clear where the money was coming from, how long for, and what it could be used for (interviewee 1). Meanwhile, the FWDF from the Scottish government has not had any funding allocated since 2023 (Education Children and Young People Committee, 2024, p. 4). Concerns were also noted by interviewees that the UKSPF allocations to councils are set to be cut by “40% for 2025/26”, but the allocation for capital spending is higher meaning that the ‘real cut’ is in revenue spending (Scottish Local Authorities Economic Development Group, 2025). There was some

frustration that the funding from the UK government (particularly from regional growth deals) is focused on capital spending rather than revenue, which makes it difficult to allocate some for skills projects (interviewee 9). This is perhaps a reason why there are limited opportunities for “colleges and other community stakeholders who could have been involved” (Colleges Scotland, 2024, p. 2). More reliable funding with a more appropriate understanding of skill issues could benefit joined up working across the regional level.

### Understanding of regional issues

Aside from the governance structure and the attached funding, there were also concerns around having the correct information. In terms of data that can help identify skill gaps and priorities for a region, there is a “wealth of information that is available” at the local level as well as the national (interviewee 14). Many, including interviewees, have praised the Intelligence Hub that runs as part of the Glasgow City Region and provides in-house labour market analysis for the region. It produces “extensive work on sectoral trends in the regional economy as well as complementary regional skills analysis.” (OECD, 2024, p. 80). The GCR therefore have a tradition of sharing data between regional partners and can use the hub to complement the work done at the national level through SDS. But not all areas have this, which puts them at a disadvantage. Further issues remain around sharing data, engaging with it and ensuring people agree on what it is saying and what the priority should be. Again, this highlights issues with working ‘horizontally’ at the regional level.

SDS’s regional skill assessments (RSAs) were seen as useful but limited in several ways – one interviewee noted that the data does not “come down to a granular level and a lot of sectors are missed” (interviewee 5). A representative from SDS admitted that some sectors do tend to be missed out – “we do virtually nothing in the skill system around retail” (interviewee 8). Retail is a big sector in each RSA, but they argued that most retail workers may not need to take a retail course or an upskilling course, and that is not “necessarily a huge issue” (interviewee 8).

The RSAs are a “good starting point for discussion” but they need to be supplemented by local actors’ own evidence and insight (interviewee 8). Not all areas benefit from a regional intelligence hub like the GCR do. Ultimately this dissuades some actors from engaging with the RSAs – “some don’t agree with the forecasts and then are quite turned off for them” (interviewee 8). However, more can be done on the part of SDS to explain the RSAs. The quality of evidence seems to be there, but what is lacking is appropriate utilisation of the data for the regions. In the past SDS, have tended to “put them out and just left people to interpret them” (interviewee 8). More recently SDS have attempted to help engagement and since November 2024 have been creating a series of webinars to help explain the data (SDS, 2024). This interaction between regional actors and SDS, could be mutually beneficial for developing understanding and building a connection between national and regional needs.

### Skills for who and where?

There are obstacles for regional partners, although the focus of skill policy at the national level is also an important consideration. A common perception from the interviewees was that skills policy often struggled to reflect the broader focus needed for a regional approach.

There was concern around the lack of strategy and direction from the government at the national level. The REPs were designed to work in tandem with the NSET, to balance the regional goals with the national ones. However, several interviewees showed annoyance at the lack of clarity in the strategy. Rather than showing their priorities they had “prioritised everything... to keep everyone a little bit happy” (interviewee 10). There was a sense that the government had still not established “what are the things you want to get done as a government?” (interviewee 7). Without these there were concerns about the ability to properly tackle the skill issue. Likewise, the central agencies, SFC and SDS, were also criticised for not properly responding to regional needs – they “have been in flux” for the last few years (interviewee 9).

Several interviewees felt there was tendency to focus on “transformational sectors” with high skilled jobs and attractive growth opportunities (interviewee 5), despite, these not necessarily helping to deal with the main concerns of a region. It was felt that funding was also often skewed toward ‘projects of scale’, particularly in areas close to one of the larger cities. Actors from more rural areas argued that the “multiplier effect” is often larger in rural areas, and yet this is often not considered (interviewee 9). Other interviewees pushed back on this slightly. Whilst there may be this focus, it must be remembered that “there’s always an opportunity cost” to the government’s investments (interviewee 12). Limited funding means they must prioritise and therefore often will choose the projects that they believe will get them the highest return and quickly. Whilst the practicalities must be considered, this raises questions about how Scotland values certain projects and skills and how they are measured or assessed. A number of Scottish reports have highlighted the importance of ‘lower-skilled’ jobs or less glamorous sectors such as social care, to the future of the regions and the national economy (SDS, 2017). Investment in these areas may not see a quick return on investment but could be vital in the long term. Yet it seems that further re-evaluation is needed.

Often, the interviewees felt that skill policy failed to reflect the regional nuances of Scotland’s skill issues. In many rural areas, the issue is not actually a skill gaps one but rather a labour shortage. Interviews stressed the key importance of population decline and workforce planning. Scotland needs to consider if the focus for a region is strategic skill policy or workforce challenges – “the youth flight issue is a big, big concern for us” (interviewee 6). Another regional issue is economic inactivity. For people aged 16-64 in 2023, the rate of economic inactivity for Argyll & Bute (29.5%) and South Ayrshire (30.6%) is significantly higher than the Scottish average (22.5%) (Office for National Statistics, 2024). There was agreement that employability needs to play a bigger role – many people are just trying to gain steady employment, not a job in a new ‘transformational’ industry. A balance

needs to be struck between providing opportunities at the regional level for “higher skill, better paid” jobs, and linking in the local employability partnerships (interviewee 1). There was agreement that employability is best placed at the local level. Hopefully, those coming through the employability provision can “then have the opportunity to go into something that's funded more regionally” (1). However, again this depends on the ability to have joined up governance in a region - the local authorities need to be able to coordinate at the regional level. For instance, the Edinburgh City Region Deal’s IRES programme attempts to have an integrated approach with employability and skills. But unlike other regions, they benefit from stronger regional governance with their joint committee that brings together the six local authorities. Areas with less mature growth deals or less engaged REPs may struggle with this.

Finally, whilst there could be a shift in focus, there are limitations to what a skills or employability approach can do. Often lower skilled jobs face workforce shortages not due to lack of training but issues such as unattractive conditions – “sometimes it's about terms and conditions, sometimes it's about people not knowing what the opportunities are” (interviewee 11).

### Cultural biases

This suggestion of a narrow focus to regional skills is in part impacted by the longstanding cultural biases in Scottish policy. A key bias, that arguably skews our wider view on skills, is one towards certain educational pathways. The university route is still seen as the gold standard, whilst anything else is seen as “second best” (interview 17). Interviews covered the role that universities, colleges and apprenticeships can play in the skill system, particularly at the regional level. Apprenticeships are naturally more tuned into employer demand and have a clear demand assessment in each region. Colleges, likewise, were considered to be key as they are “rooted” in the local communities and regions (interviewee 10). Universities often have “bigger horizons” so can struggle to engage with their region, particularly the ‘ancient universities’ such as Edinburgh and St Andrews (interviewee 8). There is a lacking parity of esteem between the different educational pathways - as reflected in the Withers review (Withers, 2023, p. 14). Colleges and apprenticeships are often seen as lesser than universities, but they can prove to be more effective regional partners. Universities are key institutions and for the size of Scotland it is incredibly fortunate to have more world-class universities than any other country by head of population (Universities Scotland, accessed 2025). Again, the role of universities in regional structures can vary. The Edinburgh City Region deal has the vice chancellor of University of Edinburgh on their joint committee. Whereas Glasgow’s cabinet does not have any official higher education representation, nor does Tay Cities joint committee. Smaller universities, such as University of Highlands and Islands, may not have such issues with horizons and could prove to be a key regional partner.

### “National control freakery”

Overall, the interviewees showed concern at the lack of progress on regional skills. Many of the issues raised in the Withers review seem to remain. The wider skill system was seen as complex and fragmented which in turn filtered down to the regional level. One interviewee even went as far to say that there was no clear “overarching” skills policy - “there is a series of initiatives and programmes, but they're all fighting for space” (interviewee 8). There was frustration with the pace of reform particularly around skill gaps – they are “not just a new thing”, discussions of skill and skill gaps had been prominent for years (interview 5). Yet perceptions were that it was unclear whether “it really led to much change” (interviewee 15). The rhetoric of regional skill policy is not necessarily translating into action. There was agreement that there was not a particular lack of commitment from the Scottish government but rather structural issues stemming from concerns about letting go of power whilst keeping accountability, were hindering progress. A lack of understanding remained from both local and national government about why some things should be placed at the regional level, which has led to concerns that their “toes are being stepped on” (interviewee 1). Scotland has often been criticised for its tendency to centralise – “still too much sort of national control freakery going on. I would say, probably in government and in the main agencies” (interviewee 10).

### Moving forward

Despite frustrations, there was strong agreement amongst interviewees that place-based approaches are part of the solution to fixing skill issues across the country. Also, that the region is the correct level for skills to be placed at – large enough to have a strong presence, but not too big to disregard local differences. The regional landscape can be seen as messy, and some partnerships were viewed as more logical than others. The GCR for instance is regarded as a “functional urban area” with people working and commuting within the region (OECD, 2024, p. 36). On the other hand, some areas may be seen as less economically functional. For example, the Highlands and Islands REP covers a vast area of Scotland. Highland and Islands Enterprise has served the area since 1965, so there is a long-standing tradition of regional working. Although, it was noted that the REP has a few growth deals within it to try balance (interviewee 9). A recurring theme from the interviewees was that too much time can be spent focusing on the geographical split of the regional landscape. It was recognised that Scotland has been stuck in cycles of centralisation and decentralisation – either regarded as too small to be split up or too diverse to have one-size fits all. Policy can often get bogged down in these discussions, and there was agreement that Scotland should work with the regional landscape it has.

Overall, the regional skill approach is developing but progress is slow and there is still a significant gap in implementation and understanding. A number of structural and cultural obstacles stand in the way of effective regional working and skill planning. Joined up working is limited by weak governance structures, lack of funding, and a general lack of tradition and culture of working together. There are some elements that will arguably never be perfected – it is unlikely that regional partners

will be able to engage with every small business or that regional data will be able to precisely predict the future economic landscape. But there is still a broad lack of understanding of regional issues, at all levels. This understanding can be developed by encouraging cooperative working.

Place-based approaches cannot work on their own - regional flexibility is needed but it must be balanced with strong national leadership to bring the regions together. There are further cultural barriers that alter the understanding of skills and what they should be for, at the national level. Skills policy still struggles to recognise regional nuances and skills can still be viewed in a narrow sense. A reconsideration of values is needed. This is perhaps epitomised by the underpinning bias towards certain pathways, sectors and institutions. What's more these barriers have persisted and the issues being discussed do not appear to be vastly different from those set out in the 2010 Skills for Scotland strategy (Scottish Government, 2010).

## **Reflections**

Overall, in Scotland regional skills face several structural, institutional and cultural barriers. Issues with funding and utilising evidence, show there is a lack of tradition of joined up working. At the national level, there is still a sense of ‘control freakery’, in part stemming from a lack of understanding around why a regional presence is needed and what skills approach is needed for the regions. The power of certain institutions and a cultural bias towards certain educational pathways and procedures restricts any progress. There does appear to be a gap with implementation, but also perhaps a gap with how the regional reality is understood and what an effective regional skill approach means.

To engage with demand properly, a more flexible approach to skills and learning is needed. For this Scotland needs to reconsider how it values certain skills, sectors, careers and educational pathways. There is still too much focus on the higher skilled occupations and the school to university pathway. A greater acceptance of concepts such as lifelong learning and upskilling will allow people to retrain and encourage a more flexible and responsive skill system. One that engages with demand and considers what jobs can benefit a region and its people. There are promising examples of this at the regional level. A programme coordinated by the SFC, Regional Tertiary Pathfinders shows a good example of bottom-up development that focused less on qualifications and more on “pathways and how learners can move through and jump in and jump off at different points, get into employment or take an apprenticeship route” (interviewee 14). This involved two Tertiary Provision Pathfinders, in the South of Scotland and the North East of Scotland, which aimed to test “how a more integrated tertiary model might work in practice” (Scottish Parliament, 2023, p. 14). However, the real concern is that due to structural and cultural obstacles the system does not allow these to be scaled up to the national level.

The current understanding and perceived value of skills are in part cultural. Other countries, such as Germany have a longer tradition of vocational education, whereas Scotland has had “at least two generations being told that university equals success.” (interviewee 10). These cultural aspects can be hard to shift, but they are reinforced by the structures and funding in place. Even slight changes to these could help improve the parity of esteem between the different skill providers – universities, colleges, apprenticeships. Scotland does have the upcoming Tertiary Education and Training Bill which is currently being discussed in parliament (Scottish Parliament, 2025). If passed this promises to establish a single funding body for tertiary education. This could potentially help shift the cultural bias.

Greater parity of esteem would help rebalance the institutional power held by some regional partners (e.g. universities) and help give a larger role to colleges and apprenticeships, which arguably are more in tune with the regional needs. A theme from the interviews was that both colleges and apprenticeships were limited – colleges by credit allocations, and apprenticeships by the ambiguity of

the apprenticeship levy (interviewee 1,14,16). Colleges in Scotland are funded by the SFC through credit allocations, and they have seen a ‘real term cut’ in funding (Colleges Scotland, 2025). Funding through credits rather than cash means that the colleges are less flexible and agile than they could be (interviewee 17). Likewise with the apprenticeship levy, employers are keen to have “more transparency with the levy and how it is utilised” (Scottish Parliament, 2025). UK employers with an annual salary bill of over £3 million, pay 0.5% of that into the levy scheme. In Scotland, the money from the levy comes back to the Scottish government who then passed it onto employers through the FWDF. This also came through as cash, which benefited colleges as they had more freedom with it. Since FWDF stopped being funded, there has been a sense of ambiguity. To have a bigger role in their regions both colleges and apprenticeships need more transparent and flexible funding.

SMEs and employers generally need to play a larger role in regional partnerships. One interview questioned if skills should be solely the responsibility of the state and not employers (interviewee 15). History shows that engaging SMEs in Scotland is not an easy task and probably not one that can ever be fully achieved. But their role needs to be recognised, and they need a clearer platform. For example, one interviewee suggested mandated business organisations (interviewee 13). Changing a culture to encourage collaboration is not simple. But institutional and structural changes could be a starting point, by giving these partners a platform and a recognised role in the system. The Withers report highlighted the need for employers to have a stronger national and regional platform. Naturally it will take time to move forward with this, but the lack of action currently is concerning.

More engaged and joined up working across and within regions will benefit from a clearer governance framework. Several interviewees discussed the move towards mayoral combined authorities in England, particularly with the skills remit they are set to receive (interviewee 1,2,7). Overall, there was scepticism about having a similar move in Scotland, but agreement that at least the combined authorities have a clear structure with a clear leader. The leader doesn’t necessarily have to be the same for each region. Although a common theme in the interviews was on the important role that colleges can play in a region. This is something that the Scottish government recognised in their strategies back in 2010. Perhaps they could take more of a central role. The representatives from Colleges Scotland noted that colleges are in a good position regionally as “they can help deliver both the skills planning, but then actually join up the skills planning with skills delivery” (interview 16). An interesting comparison, noted by one interviewee (16), is with Northern Ireland who have their colleges answer to their Department for the Economy, rather than a separate higher and further education funding body (NI Department for the Economy, n.d.). This dissertation is not focused on policy transfer, and admittedly Northern Ireland only has six further education colleges which is far fewer than Scotland. But it shows that even a small organisational change could potentially encourage joined up working and give a key regional partner a more prominent role.

Once the regional institutes are in place, they need actual power and decision-making control. An interviewee questioned if Scotland actually had appropriate ‘levers’ to address the regional skill issues (interviewee 8). This concern has been repeated - the risk is “that if we do not have that function, we simply reinforce some of the things that are already happening in the system” (Scottish Parliament, 2025, p. 34). The regional institutes currently are limited in power and ultimately rely on the central agencies who control the funding. But even the central agencies, like the SFC, can only use ‘soft power’ and recommend how institutions use their funding. Therefore, concerns have arisen that it is difficult to link funding to a framework and make sure they correspond to regional skill needs.

Alongside this, there needs to be a greater recognition that some things are done best at the regional level. This can be encouraged by stronger institutions and governance. But also, there need to be some realistic expectations. Place-based approaches do not mean the same for everywhere and it is unrealistic to expect everywhere to benefit equally. Take for example, work done by the Resolution Foundation on what levelling up meant to people in Yorkshire – they found that people had realistic views of how their local area could be improved and appreciated that not everywhere could be the same (Resolution Foundation, 2022). Instead, what people wanted was to feel like they are connected to those opportunities but also to retain a sense of pride in their local area (Resolution Foundation, 2022). It seems there may often be a tendency to overplay the ‘place’ aspect. As discussed in the earlier sections, the dichotomy of people versus place is too simple and does not represent the policy reality. What is best is a balance of people and place prosperity.

Likewise, a clearer balance is needed between the regional and the national elements. There has been a strong consensus that the NSET lacks clarity as a strategy – “on the regional point, what success looks like for different regions does not come through overly clearly” (Scottish Parliament, 2025, p. 37). It needs to be considered what the role of each region is in the national plan. A committee meeting made a comparison to the UK government and their “six headline missions” (Scottish Parliament, 2025, p. 37). The accompanying measures of success helped bring clarity to the approach, unlike the NSET where it was more ambiguous what success looked like. Likewise, Skills England (the skills agency for England) have their key sectors within their strategy to focus on (Department for Education, 2025). A more regional focus does not necessarily diminish a sector focus. A place-based approach can focus on the key sectors that will help push national aims but also consider how to benefit regions and play to their strengths. It can be useful but must be accompanied by a reconsideration of which sectors to value and which will have the most impact on regions and the people who live there. This may not necessarily be attractive or transformational sectors.

To conclude, there are substantial gaps in Scotland’s approach to regional skills. Ideas around skills have moved toward skill alignment and place-based perspectives, and whilst these ideas show promise there are still several unknowns and unresolved tensions surrounding these approaches. These

tensions are apparent in Scotland's regional skills approach. Despite the rhetoric and the desire to move beyond a supply side, one-size fits all focus, progress has been limited. Gaps are therefore not only present in the ideas of place-based policies, skill utilisation and inclusive growth. But also, between the policy rhetoric and the implementation reality. There are even gaps in the shared understanding of what a regional approach to skills in Scotland needs to address. These are enforced by large structural, institutional and cultural barriers, that are ingrained in Scottish policy. These will not be easy to address, but even small changes or reconsiderations of values could benefit greatly. One thing that is certain from my research is that there is a strong appetite for regional working, and a desire to tackle skill issues and regional disparities. The regions would benefit greatly from more control and flexibility, but this must be accompanied by clear and decisive action from the national level.

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## Appendix

### Interview template

*\*Start recording\**

*For the record I will be audio recording this interview, transcribing it and once transcribed the audio file will be deleted. If you'd like me to stop the recording at any point let me know.*

*Can I confirm that you have received the participant information sheet, and have agreed to and signed the ethics consent form?*

*Do you have any questions before we begin?*

1. What role do you think skills have in solutions for growth/regional equality?
2. What has Scotland done recently with skill policy? Are current policy instruments delivering effectively?
  - Are they addressing skill gaps? Are they helping close regional disparities?
  - (OPTIONAL) What is your/your organisations role in skills policy?
3. Does Scotland's current skills policy have an effective regional aspect?
  - Are actors aware of the skill issues in certain regions? What are they doing to deal with them?
  - Are they place-based or space-neutral? Are they focused on local or national priorities?
4. Which skills are the focus and for what purpose?
  - Focus on high skilled jobs or also low-skilled?
  - Clusters or sharing the benefits?
  - Helping those on low wages?
  - Growth first or growth shaping strategies for job creation and inclusivity?
5. What does this tell us about Scotland's understanding of skills?
  - How do the SG see skills, and should this change? Skills for who and what for?
6. What can be done to improve? What are the obstacles? Are there new ideas?
  - What are the challenges in aligning skill provision with local economic needs?
  - What can we do to deal with demand side challenges?
  - How can it be more inclusive?
7. Are place-based approaches the solution?
  - How can place-based approaches work effectively in Scotland?
  - Are there limits to a place-based approach in countries like Scotland?
  - Is skill devolution the answer?
  - What is the appropriate geographical/spatial level for skill policy? And for what purpose?
  - Is there anything that isn't being discussed that you think should be?



## PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

***Project title: How can Scotland best address regional skills issues?***

### INVITATION

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything is not clear or you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not to take part.

### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT?

The purpose of this project is to explore how addressing skills issues can help Scotland's regional economic disparities. For several years, Scotland has been dealing with skill gaps. Despite having a relatively well-educated population, there are also large proportions of workers either overqualified for a job, or with no qualifications. This has led to issues of low skills traps and in work poverty. These issues have a strong spatial dimension and result in large differences in regional productivity. There is promise in a more regional and skill utilisation focus to help regions become more productive, inclusive and resilient. But can Scotland move toward this and what barriers are there?

This research, as well as focusing on skills, will also focus on the governance arrangements. The skills landscape in Scotland is known to be cluttered, and in recent years both the UK and Scottish governments have introduced regional structures to deal with skills – City Regions and Regional Economic Partnerships. Questions remain as to whether these have been effective, and what could be done to improve?

The project will aim to interview actors that are involved at both the national and local level. Interviews will take place over the months of June and July. The dissertation will be submitted in mid-August.

### WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

The project is focused on the regional skills landscape in Scotland and how it is governed. The project will aim to interview actors that are involved at both the national and local level. You have been invited to participate in this study because of your insight and experience in the area.

### DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this Participant Information Sheet to keep and be asked to sign an Informed Consent Form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw from the study at a later date, without giving a reason and without any impact on any services you are using. Only the project team will have access to the research data until 30 September 2025.

## **WHAT DOES TAKING PART INVOLVE?**

You will be asked a number of questions regarding skills and regional policy in Scotland. The interview will take place on video call or in person, at a time that it is convenient for you and will last approximately an hour. The interview will be audio-recorded.

## **ARE THERE ANY POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISADVANTAGES IN TAKING PART?**

There are no significant risks anticipated from participation in this research project.

## **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?**

By sharing your experiences with us, you will be helping Joseph Robinson, Enlighten and the University to better understand regional skills issues in Scotland.

## **WILL I BE REIMBURSED FOR ANY EXPENSES OR FOR MY TIME?**

No.

## **WHAT IF I WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THE PROJECT?**

Agreeing to participate in this project does not oblige you to remain in the study or to have any further obligations to the research project or team. If at any stage you no longer want to be part of the study, you can withdraw from the project by contacting Joseph Robinson - [j.p.robinson-3@sms.ed.ac.uk](mailto:j.p.robinson-3@sms.ed.ac.uk) . You should note that your data may be used in the production of formal research outputs (e.g. journal articles, conference papers, reports) prior to your withdrawal and so you are advised to contact the research team at the earliest opportunity should you wish to withdraw from the study.

You can withdraw from the project up until the 25<sup>th</sup> of July 2025.

If you withdraw from the project all the information and data collected from you, to date, will be destroyed and your name removed from all the project files.

## **HOW WILL MY DATA BE LOOKED AFTER DURING THE PROJECT?**

All your data will be processed and stored in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) along with the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA). The project will be also be guided by and adhere to the University of Edinburgh's data protection guidance and regulations, see <http://www.recordsmanagement.ed.ac.uk/InfoStaff/DPstaff/DataProtectionGuidance.htm>

All personal details, including contact details, addresses, phone numbers etc, will be kept strictly confidential within the research team, stored on password-protected and encrypted devices and/or University secure servers, in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation, and the latest University of Edinburgh data security protocols.

Electronic project data will be uploaded as soon as possible to a secure University of Edinburgh server and stored there for the duration of the project, only accessible to the project team.

After the end of the project (by 30<sup>th</sup> September 2025), all data will be deleted using the latest University of Edinburgh protocol for secure data deletion.

## **WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I WANT TO TAKE PART?**

If you wish to opt in, please contact Joseph Robinson to organise a meeting that is suitable for you.

## **WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT?**

The results of this study will be used in a master's dissertation. This dissertation will also be shared with the think tank Enlighten. The research will also be used for a secondary piece of work - a simplified version of the dissertation aimed at a lay audience. This will most likely be a blog post published on Enlighten's website.

Quotes from your interview may be used in these outputs, and these will be anonymous unless you give permission for your real name to be used in the Consent Form.

### **WHO IS ORGANISING AND FUNDING THE RESEARCH?**

Joseph Robinson is conducting the research as a postgraduate master's student in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Edinburgh. Joseph is taking part in a placement-based dissertation project with the think tank Enlighten. Alison Payne is their research director and is supporting Joseph Robinson in their research. All interviews will be conducted by Joseph Robinson.

### **WHO HAS APPROVED THIS PROJECT?**

This research project has been approved through the ethical review process in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Edinburgh.

### **CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION**

If you have any further questions about this project, please contact:

The student researcher Joseph Robinson - [j.p.robinson-3@sms.ed.ac.uk](mailto:j.p.robinson-3@sms.ed.ac.uk)

The project supervisor Alison Payne (Enlighten) - [Alison.Payne@enlighten.scot](mailto:Alison.Payne@enlighten.scot)

The academic supervisor Daniel Kenealy - [daniel.kenealy@ed.ac.uk](mailto:daniel.kenealy@ed.ac.uk)

If you have any concerns about the way in which the project has been conducted, or you wish to make a complaint, you can contact the Deputy Director of Research (Ethics and Integrity) in the School of Social and Political Sciences:

Deputy Director of Research (Ethics and Integrity)

School of Social and Political Sciences

University of Edinburgh

Edinburgh EH8 8LN

e-mail: [ethics-ssps@ed.ac.uk](mailto:ethics-ssps@ed.ac.uk)

For general information about how the University of Edinburgh looks after research data go to:

<https://data-protection.ed.ac.uk/privacy-notice-research>

If you have any queries about how the project data is managed, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer, Dr Rena Gertz, at [dpo@ed.ac.uk](mailto:dpo@ed.ac.uk). See <https://www.ed.ac.uk/records-management/about/data-protection-officer>

### **THANK YOU**

Thank you for taking time to read this Participant Information Sheet.

DATE

\_\_\_\_\_ 2025



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH  
School of Social and  
Political Science

*Project Title –*

*How can Scotland best address regional skills issues?*

**CONSENT FORM**

**Please initial each box**

If you are happy to participate in the research, please initial each box as appropriate (leave blank any box for which you prefer not to give consent) and then sign this form at the end:

1. The researcher has given me my own copy of the Participant Information Sheet, and I have had the opportunity to read and consider the information.

☐

- 
2. I have been given the opportunity to ask any further questions and have had these questions answered to my satisfaction.

☐

- 
3. I understand that participating in the research involves an approximately 1 hour long interview at an agreed upon time and location.

☐

- 
4. I have been given information about how my data will be stored and used during and after the end of the research, and I have read and understood this.

☐

- 
5. I understand that my words may be quoted in a postgraduate dissertation and a secondary piece of output which will be shared with the think tank Enlighten.

☐

6. Please choose one of the following two options: ☐

- I am happy for my real name to use in publications and outputs

**OR** ☐

- I would not like my real name to be used in the above [participants will be identified with a descriptor of their role e.g. local council member].

---

7. I understand that the research team may ask if they can audio record the interview and I give my consent for these recordings to be taken, transcribed and used in the dissertation and piece of secondary output. ☐

---

8. I agree for the data I provide to be retained by the research team in secure storage for the duration stated on the participant information sheet. ☐

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9. I agree that members of the project team can re-contact me at a future date should they wish to follow up on this research. ☐

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10. I understand that my taking part is voluntary; I can withdraw from the project later, and I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part (*and this will be without any impact on any related services I am using*). I have read and understood the Participation Information Sheet about the implications of withdrawing at different points during the life of the project. ☐

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11. I understand I can ask for specific quotes or statements not to be used (or to be redacted from the data) if I wish. ☐

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12. I understand that if I want to withdraw from the project, I can contact Joseph Robinson - [j.p.robinson-3@sms.ed.ac.uk](mailto:j.p.robinson-3@sms.ed.ac.uk), who will discuss with me how existing data will be managed, as outlined in the Participant Information Sheet. ☐

I agree to take part in this research project

Name of research participant

Date

Signature

---

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Name of researcher recording  
consent

---

Date

---

Signature

---

Joe Robinson

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