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Case Studies of Equality Data Collection in the Scottish Public Sector: Skills Development Scotland



Equality, Poverty and Social Security



A good practice case study of the collection and use of equality data: Skills Development Scotland

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The Scottish Government is committed to addressing inequality in Scotland. [Scotland's Equality Evidence Strategy 2017–21](#) set out a vision for a more wide-ranging and robust equality evidence base, to enable policy makers to develop sound, inclusive policy.

There are many costs and challenges to collecting, analysing and reporting equality data and, despite improvements in recent years, significant gaps remain in Scotland's equality evidence base. To address this, the Scottish Government launched the [Equality Data Improvement Programme](#) in April 2021. This programme builds on [research](#) which explored the collection of equality and socio-economic disadvantage data by Scottish public sector bodies.¹ The 27 organisations who took part in this research faced various barriers and challenges in this area of work, but they also identified factors that helped support the collection and use of high-quality equality data.

This document presents one of a series of six case studies produced to complement this research. The case studies aim to support the sharing of good practice by showing how different organisations have approached collecting and using equality data to provide better services and better outcomes for their 'customers'. Each of the case studies illustrates different aspects of practice across the public sector in Scotland. They do not provide a comprehensive picture of the work undertaken by organisations; rather they illustrate some of their positive actions in collecting, using and improving equality data.

Skills Development Scotland...

- Has made it mandatory for apprenticeship applicants to complete an equality monitoring form, but provides information (through contracted training providers) about how the information will be used, and also provides a 'prefer not to say' option at each question.
- Has invested time and resources in training its contracted providers to collect equality data on their behalf, and has linked the completion of equality monitoring forms to the financial reimbursements which providers receive for apprenticeships, as no claim for funding can be made unless this information is provided.
- Uses equality data to inform a range of targeted activities and training for apprentices.
- Sets targets for reducing inequality in apprenticeships (particularly in relation to care-experience, disability, ethnicity and gender) and uses the equality data it collects to monitor progress in line with [Scottish Government targets](#).
- Works with partners (internal and external) to explore how to make better use of the information it collects, and to better address its targets to reduce inequality in its apprenticeship programme, and in the Scottish workforce.

¹ Note: 'equality data' refers to 'equality and socio-economic disadvantage data' and covers the protected characteristics defined by the Equality Act 2010 (age, religion and belief, race, disability, sex, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, and gender reassignment) and (any) indicators of socio-economic disadvantage.

About Skills Development Scotland

Skills Development Scotland (SDS) is Scotland's national skills body. The organisation supports people and businesses to develop and apply their skills. It does this by funding and facilitating the delivery of different types of apprenticeships and by offering careers information, advice and guidance to people of all ages.

Equality, diversity and inclusion are key priorities for SDS. Its [website states](#) that: 'Our goal is to ensure our services are accessible to all, whoever they are, wherever they live, whatever their needs. We also aim to be an employer of choice and exemplar of fair work'. Equality Impact Assessments inform all areas of the organisation's work.

SDS delivers a range of services including apprenticeships and careers information, advice and guidance. This case study focuses on the apprenticeship programme.

There are three types of apprenticeships: (i) Foundation Apprenticeships, for young people who are still at school, (ii) Modern Apprenticeships, for people who want to earn and work towards a qualification, and (iii) Graduate Apprenticeships, for people who want to work, earn, and get a degree at the same time. SDS does not deliver apprenticeships directly but has contractual relationships with a range of external training or learning providers (or, in a few cases, with employers) who deliver the apprenticeships on their behalf.

The data collections

SDS requires equality data to be collected from people aged 16+ registered for apprenticeships or who are receiving training through [Employability Fund](#) funding.²

Equality monitoring data are collected on paper from an apprenticeship participant, then entered into a database by a training provider (i.e., a contracted third party). Anonymised information about the participant's equality characteristics is then passed to SDS.

Information is collected on age, religion and belief, race, disability, sex, sexual orientation, and gender reassignment. Information is also collected on care-experience, which is viewed by the organisation as a wider equality characteristic.

Data on age, race, disability, sex and care-experience are published as official statistics, and these data also provide the basis for a wide range of other reports published by the organisation. Data on religion and belief, sexual orientation, and gender reassignment are reported on internally only, for planning purposes.

Good practice in the collection and use of equality data

SDS is a data-driven organisation and equality data are collected at every opportunity – not only as part of the administration of the apprenticeship programme, but also in surveys carried out by the organisation.

All participants in apprenticeship programmes must complete an [equality monitoring form](#). The questions in the form have been developed through advice from expert groups, including [Advance HE](#) and the [Equality and Human Rights Commission \(EHRC\)](#). Training

² The Employability Fund supports services which have been developed to address the specific needs of local areas. SDS administers and manages the Employability Fund on behalf of the Scottish Government.

providers cannot make a financial claim for a new apprentice on a programme without this form being completed and the information being uploaded onto a database.

SDS has invested time and resources in training its contracted providers to collect equality data on their behalf. There is a [formal protocol and a guidance document](#) which sets out how to collect the data (on paper, by email and over the phone). Training providers are instructed to take the time to explain to apprenticeship participants why they are asking for this information and what it will be used for, and to reassure them that the data will be anonymised for reporting purposes, and that it will be kept confidential – specifically, it will **not** be passed on to their prospective employer (although it may be used to help tailor apprenticeships to the needs of individuals).

In addition, the equality monitoring form includes text to explain why SDS collects this information. In particular, it states that SDS is required by the Equality Act 2010 to ensure equality of access to its services and so, to do this, the organisation monitors participation in its training and work-based learning programmes by ‘protected characteristics’. The form also explains that SDS is listed as a corporate parent under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, and so is required to assess the needs of people who are from a care-experienced background and to use this information to understand (i) how their services are reaching these individuals and (ii) how to improve their services for this group.

Participants have the option to select ‘prefer not to say’ in response to all of the equality questions in the equality monitoring form. However, SDS ensures that its training providers clearly communicate that (i) it is important for SDS to understand who is using their services so that their services can be tailored to the needs of participants, and (ii) it is ultimately beneficial to their customers if SDS can identify any groups who are under-represented or face additional barriers to accessing their services and programmes so that steps can be taken to address this.

As a result of all these processes – mandatory completion backed up by effective communication **and** ongoing training for training providers – there has been a 100% response rate for the equality monitoring questions over the past (nearly) two decades.³ Moreover, only a small proportion of apprenticeship participants answer ‘prefer not to say’ to any of the questions.

Impacts of equality data collection

SDS monitors the equality characteristics of its apprenticeship participants to inform [a range of targeted activities and training](#). The information is used to support individuals to access and successfully complete apprenticeships and to identify and remove barriers to individuals, training providers and employers in achieving their goals for the apprenticeship.

Analysis of the equality data also allows the organisation to see whether there are any groups who are under-represented in their various apprenticeship programmes – and to think about ways of reaching those people (for example, through the use of translated material, or better / clearer communications about what an apprenticeship is and what it involves for those taking part, etc.).

The equality data collected by the organisation are reported in a [range of statistical publications](#) (quarterly and annually) and in the organisation’s [Equality and Diversity](#)

³ The questions asked on the equality monitoring form during this period have changed over time in line with best practice.

[Mainstreaming Report](#) (an EHRC requirement). The latter report is published alongside an [Equality Evidence Review](#), which provides a review of recent evidence on educational and employment outcomes for people with protected characteristics and care-experienced people. The Equality Evidence Review is a key document which helps to inform Equality Impact Assessment across SDS's different areas of work.

Equality data are also used by SDS to set targets and monitor progress towards these targets. SDS published its first [Apprenticeship Equality Action Plan](#) in 2015 and this has been a key driver for the organisation in collecting better and more accurate equality data. The action plan sets specific targets in relation to care-experience, disability, ethnicity and gender. For example, the gender target aims to improve the balance between male and female apprentices in certain occupational sectors (engineering, caring professions, etc.), whilst the disability target seeks to increase the employment rate for younger disabled people. SDS publishes an annual report each year which reviews its progress towards these targets.⁴

Equality considerations are built into the contracts that SDS has with each of its training providers. In addition to providing support to them in collecting equality data, SDS also provides reports to training providers, to enable them to monitor their own progress against [Scottish Government targets](#).

Spotlight: Using equality data to monitor progress towards targets

SDS uses an off-the-shelf data visualisation system (i.e. a 'dashboard') which draws on data held in spreadsheets and allows an end-user to segment the data in different ways to produce personalised reports.

SDS then makes equality reports available to its training providers, who use this information to monitor their own performance against their contractual obligations in relation to the apprenticeships which they have supported.

The system can also be used to explore data on a wider geographical basis, allowing training providers to compare their own progress with that of all the providers in their own area, or of providers in other areas. This is important because there may be different expectations for training providers in different parts of Scotland since – for example – it would not make sense for training providers in urban and rural areas to meet the same expectations for getting young people from minority ethnic backgrounds into apprenticeships.

SDS is currently considering how to use this system to explore intersectionality in the uptake of apprenticeships. This is a challenging area because of the small numbers involved (e.g. minority ethnic women, or care-experienced young disabled people), and the need to ensure that no individual can be identified in reports of the data.

SDS has dedicated teams of analysts as well as more generalist staff. The organisation has invested heavily in upskilling its entire workforce (through in-house training, external training and recognised qualifications) to use data more effectively to make decisions, develop strategy and deliver services. Equality data held by SDS are also used to inform policy, service development and delivery by many other organisations. For example, over the past year, SDS has produced a series of short reports documenting the changing impact of

⁴ The most recent [annual review report](#) was published in June 2021.

COVID-19 on the labour market in Scotland.⁵ This information was intended to support the Scottish Government and local authorities to develop policy and make decisions about how best to target investment – to help Scotland’s labour market to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. The evidence in these reports of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on young people led to the creation of the [Young Person’s Guarantee](#), which aims to give every young person in Scotland, aged 16–24, the opportunity of a job, placement, training or volunteering experience based on their own goals and aspirations.

Next steps

Recently, SDS has been exploring with its partners whether there are additional sources of evidence which could be used by SDS to benchmark its own performance. It is also engaging with its stakeholders to improve the way it provides information. Feedback from stakeholders has suggested that some find the sheer volume of information available from SDS to be overwhelming. Thus, SDS is investigating the possibility of producing short descriptions (or abstracts) which might help people navigate more easily through the large volume of reports and statistical publications produced by the organisation each year.

In October 2019, SDS began working with the [Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board \(SAAB\)](#) to set up the [SAAB Gender Commission](#), which aims to address the organisation’s challenging target for reducing gender segregation in certain occupational groups. The SAAB Gender Commission is made up of key influencers, employers and equality experts, and representatives from education, complemented by expert policy advice. The remit of this group is to develop proposals and recommendations to redress occupational-related gender imbalance. The group’s work has been affected by COVID-19, but its preliminary conclusions are expected in 2021.

SDS is aware that, as an organisation, they hold a very rich source of high-quality equality data. There are discussions underway about creating a Community of Practice – a group of people drawn from within and outside the organisation, who work in equality or who have expertise in research and analysis – to consider whether more use could be made of the data they hold.

Contact for further information

Queries and further information in relation to this case study should be directed to: Equality.Apprenticeships@sds.co.uk

The Scottish Government Equality Data Improvement Programme

The Scottish Government launched its [Equality Data Improvement Programme](#) in April 2021. The first phase of the programme, which will run from April 2021 to December 2022, aims to raise awareness across the public sector of why equality data are needed, and how these data can be used to improve policy-making and outcomes.

Do you have an example of good practice in collecting and using equality data at your organisation that you would like to share?

Contact the Scottish Government at: social-justice-analysis@gov.scot

⁵ Go to the Skills Development Scotland [Publications](#) page, and enter ‘COVID’ into the keyword search, and select ‘Labour Market Intelligence’ from the Subject drop-down menu.



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The views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and do not necessarily represent those of the Scottish Government or Scottish Ministers.

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