

SGSSS-SDS Collaborative PhD Programme: 6 Research Topics Topic Descriptions 2019

SDS presents the following themes as important areas of research in relation to skills development in Scotland. The topic outlines below provide the broad context for each theme and pose a number of key questions of interest to policy-makers and practitioners. Applicants are encouraged to design innovative PhD proposals based on these themes.

The PhD proposals will identify an appropriate starting title, frame the research objectives to align with both academic and policy interests and identify clear research questions that fit within the broad topic outline. There is also scope for fresh thinking in designing innovative and robust methodological approaches to answering the research questions.

For all of the PhD topics it is anticipated that a strong Scottish focus will be incorporated in the PhD (for example through case studies or fieldwork).

The research findings from these topics will contribute to a new, collaborative body of knowledge which adds to the strategic and cross-cutting evidence base on skills. PhD students will join an emerging cohort of doctoral candidates engaged in collaborative, policy-relevant research around important skills-related issues, as well as becoming part of a thriving research community within the host university.

For further information on topics please contact Lynne Robson (Lynne.Robson@sds.co.uk – 0300 013 2144)

1. Young people's response to new opportunities – have decision making behaviours changed over time?

Young people today have a vast array of learning choices and career pathways to navigate due to changing career landscapes and the introduction of new learning opportunities. This includes the continuing rise of [Modern](#) Apprenticeships along with the introduction of new work-based learning opportunities in [Foundation](#) and [Graduate](#) Apprenticeships. Furthermore, there has been increased discussion and evidence around the benefits of academic, compared with vocational, routes to employment.

In order to effectively design, deliver and communicate the new learning landscape to young people, further information is required into how young people respond to, and make decisions about, these new opportunities.

A key focus of this research will be on decision making behaviours of young people in secondary school, from S2 through to S6. The research will examine if decision making processes have changed over time – in response to changes in the labour market. Also important to this research are differences in decision making across genders and the role that different sources of information play in this decision making.

There are a number of existing data sources that could underpin this research and provide context, including:

- SDS research with young people and apprentices
- SDS administrative data
- Longitudinal datasets (including Understanding Society)

Key Questions

In particular the research may address the following questions:

- How do young people respond to information about new learning opportunities (such as more work-based learning) – have behaviours changed over time?
- Has decision making about career pathways changed over time?
- ‘What works’ in ensuring individuals are well equipped to make these decisions – what information is most effective?
- How do decision making behaviours vary by gender?

2. The wider benefits of Career Management Skills to individuals

Research has shown that there is link between career management skills and subjective wellbeing¹. Career Management Skills (CMS) can be defined as skills that “best enable individuals to plan and pursue life, learning and work opportunities”² and make effective career decisions. Additionally, in recent years there has been a growing interest in the wider benefits and ‘soft’ outcomes of learning to individuals. This includes measuring the impact on subjective wellbeing, career progression and personal development outcomes.

This research will explore the relationship between CMS, learning and soft outcomes for learners. The learning can be in any setting including workplace learning and academic environments.

Initially, this will be done by creating a framework to identify and measure the wider benefits of learning to individuals. Alongside aspects of subjective wellbeing, career and personal development outcomes, the research should also consider decision making skills as a possible wider benefit. Following this, the relationship between learning, CMS and wider benefits will be explored, investigating how these relate and interact with each other to promote soft outcomes. The research should also consider best practice in the promotion and development of wider benefits in a learning setting.

Key Questions

In particular the research may address the following questions:

- How do we effectively measure the wider benefits of learning?
- Does CMS have a role in promoting the wider benefits of learning?
- Do strong career management skills lead to strong decision-making skills for life beyond the workplace?

¹ SDS Internal Research

² [SDS Career Management Skills Framework](#)

3. The impact of business models and innovative leadership practices on organisational performance

The proposition that leadership practice matters isn't new. In recent years however, there has been the development and greater use of datasets that link information on management practices with data on organisational performance³. This has permitted the relationship between leadership practices and various performance measures to be examined in more detail.

This research will investigate whether organisations that have above average commitment to skills investment (such as skills development, employee engagement and [people centred] leadership practices) outperform those with below average. Furthermore, it will examine if these organisations witness increased productivity and competitiveness. There should be a particular focus on Scottish businesses, and comparisons with the UK where data permits.

The research may seek to address the following:

- Do employers that support innovative business models observe increased organisational performance?
- What are the key factors determining high organisational performance
- What elements of the business model in particular have an impact on increased (improved) organisational performance?
- How have approaches to leadership in organisations changed over the last few decades and what are the main drivers for this change?
- Can we develop a robust model or framework for measuring the returns to innovative business models and its impact on organisational performance?

This PhD should identify suitable official datasets to support the analysis. In particular, the research could review the opportunities afforded by existing large-scale data sets and surveys or the linking of these. Research in this area may be well suited to a sectoral approach.

4. Skills for the 4th industrial revolution: implications for pedagogy in learning and skills provision

There is a vast body of writing suggesting that the skills needed in the workplaces of tomorrow will be higher order, timeless and transferable skills; these have been described as “meta-skills”. From an existing body of evidence and primary research⁴, a model has been developed that describes these skills under three headings, “Self management”, “Social intelligence” and “Innovation”. Although some research exists on how such skills could be measured and how neurodiversity affects the development of these skills, more evidence is required to develop an understanding of the ways in which these skills are developed in different settings.

The research seeks to explore how the current underpinning pedagogy in education and skills provision is positioned to teach these skills and draw out any implications. The target group should be young people, those preparing for and entering post school opportunities for example. Particular focus should be made to Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), vocational learning in schools and the interplay with Career Management

³ See for example: Robinson, H (2017) [Management practices and productivity among manufacturing businesses in Great Britain: Experimental Estimates for 2015, Newport](#): Office for National Statistics.

Bryson A, <http://ftp.iza.org/dp11399.pdf>

⁴ https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/44684/skills-40_a-skills-model.pdf

Skills⁵ (CMS). The research should lend itself to developing case studies from which wider connections can be drawn in terms of a systems of pedagogy to support the development of meta-skills.

In particular the research may address the following questions:

- To what extent is meta-skills learning embedded in CfE?
- Does CfE and CMS support the development of meta-skills? And what are the relationships between these?
- Are there differences in the teaching of meta-skills across gender?
- What impact can the type of learning experience (formal or informal) have on developing meta-skills?

5. Promoting entrepreneurialism in the workplace

Many organisations today place increased emphasis on autonomy and self-direction in the workplace, creating scope for employees to be more entrepreneurial in their job roles. Entrepreneurship is commonly thought of as a set of character traits of entrepreneurial individuals and is often associated with the drive to innovative, create value and take risks. In many respects, these are some of the key attributes now required by individuals in managing their career development and their progress within the workplace.

This research will examine the skills required to enable individuals to become more entrepreneurial in the workplace and will explore the organisational factors that support innovative and enterprising behaviour by employees. It will consider the enterprising skills and behaviours that can help individuals progress in their jobs and support their mobility into higher quality, better paid positions.

It will also identify the critical organisational factors required to promote workplace entrepreneurialism and outline the range of workplace settings in which employee enterprise is more likely to occur.

In addition, the research will outline the benefits to both individuals and firms of enabling the development of entrepreneurial skills within the workplace from the perspective of employers and employees.

- How does the concept of entrepreneurialism apply in the workplace?
- Which skills are associated with entrepreneurialism in the workplace?
- In which organisational settings are entrepreneurial skills more likely develop?
- How can entrepreneurialism in the workplace best be promoted and supported?
- What are the key benefits for individuals and employers?

⁵ [SDS Career Management Skills Framework](#)

6. Work-Based-Learning (WBL) and Firm Performance

Work-based learning (WBL) is increasingly viewed as a powerful vehicle for developing workplace skills and improving the overall performance of a company. Through work-based learning trainees become better at performing skilled tasks in particular occupations and are more able to contribute to increased competitiveness.

Learning in the workplace takes a variety of forms. For example, it can take place through a structured long-term programme such as apprenticeships for new and existing employees, short-term in-house technical training for existing staff, more organic learning on the job, or internships and other work placements provided for external trainees.

The overall aim of this research is to review the benefits of WBL in terms of its contribution to improving firm performance taking into account a range of variables, such as developing higher quality products and services, increasing output to meet demand, reducing labour turnover and increasing worker satisfaction.

The research will also take into account the spillover effects of WBL investment, i.e. the benefits that extend beyond participating trainees and accrue to the firm or sector as a whole, such as increased training skills for those providing the training, enhancing a firm's reputation in the local community, and addressing skills gaps and shortages.

- How does employer investment in WBL contribute to firm competitiveness?
- What are the benefits to employers of supporting different kinds of WBL
- How does the impact of WBL vary across sectors and occupations?
- How does the mix of WBL vary across sectors and firm characteristics?