



PLANNING AND PRIORITISING FUTURE SKILLS, TRAINING & BUSINESS SUPPORT NEEDS FOR RURAL BUSINESSES ACROSS THE SELEP REGION

Talent is evenly spread – opportunity is not. Creating more opportunities relies on the ambitions and skills of all ages. Success requires close collaboration.

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This Executive Summary was drafted initially based on the findings from the period before Covid-19 and reflected an ambition for businesses to develop and grow and access new markets using new approaches and technologies. This presented a greater need for skills at Level 3 and above (A level and Degree level), the demand for practical skills at lower levels was low. During the consultation phase within the period July to September, the Covid-19 impacts in businesses has been significant and sourcing suitable labour has been a real challenge, continually exacerbated by Brexit. Therefore, in the latter stages of the consultation, we are conscious that the demand for retraining in basic technical skills at Level 2 has grown significantly, as Covid impacted redundant workers seek new areas of work, particularly within horticulture and viticulture. This version now reflects the higher priority for basic technical skills in the next 5 years alongside the demand for higher level skills for the longer term.

The full text for this report will be included in the full report available at the end of October 2020.

Funding from SELEP is gratefully acknowledged to allow this work to take place.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The SELEP region is characterised by a skills profile, which is too low at all levels. Too few people have level 4 and higher skills and this is exacerbated by the relatively low proportions who have the basic skills (Level 2 and below) in place to fuel the skills escalator to create the higher skills supply.

This project is a contribution to solving the SELEP conundrum of insufficient skills availability and focusses on the land based sectors and hence shortages in high and low skills, and in careers pipelines.

This review has been informed through the evaluation and prioritisation of the potential approaches to creating more skills to meet the future needs to the key land based sectors. The review draws heavily on the partnerships across the four organisations and is specifically informed by the increasing number of skills related reviews produced in the last two years,

mainly at national level. Covid-19 has impacted negatively on wider consultation but the review is presented as a continuing discussion document to inform the debate on future strategies for skills support. Many rural businesses are facing significant uncertainty coming from the impacts of COVID-19 (the UK has just experienced the biggest economic downturn for over 300 years), Brexit, the implications of the first detailed review of the UK food system for 75 years, technological change, climate change and a growing population. But one must also remember that these challenges should also be seen as opportunity.

SELEP is in a unique position to lead a response that puts rural businesses and skills at the heart of raising productivity of the region – and therefore improve the quality of life and opportunities for those living and working in our rural areas. The recommendations here focus on the skills needed, but as importantly, the need to develop wider partnerships across the sectors from employers, to representative bodies, to colleges/universities/schools.

Only with such a cooperative approach can we continue to safeguard and develop the early stage training of those skills held by younger and unemployed people, and the retraining for workers from other backgrounds.

The current dearth of training taken up by many employers reflects a continuing trend in reduced funding to support the training in practical skills with a growing focus on larger qualifications, which has largely eliminated the bite size packages of training hitherto valued by employers. It is clear to us that there is also a lot of uncertainty from businesses over what training and funding is available.

We advocate an urgent specialist post-Covid recruitment and upskilling initiative to raise productivity, growth and opportunities in rural areas. These innovations will require new ideas, talent, and support networks and we suggest how this might be achieved. Each initiative championed should address three questions:

- 1. Does it meet our rural skills needs?**
- 2. Does it help the disadvantaged to climb the skills/education ladder of opportunity?**
- 3. Does it ensure skilled and decently paid employment for those who undertake it?**

Ultimately, will the training increase rural human capital and therefore productivity. Further education establishments will have a role to play as rural skills providers. Businesses in rural areas face an acute skills shortage at every level. Success will require the right incentives for all involved – so to make it worthwhile for businesses to invest the time and money, for students and employees to want to train and for providers to ensure that the infrastructure and trainers/teachers are in place to deliver this skills training.

As the Economist stated on 29-8-20, ***“Changing cultures and institutions – to decentralise power, for instance, and to raise the status of technical education – will require a degree of patience, steadiness and co-operation which the people currently in charge in Britain lack.”***

Thus, SELEP have the opportunity to lead this change. This report considers some ways in which this might be achieved.

PROJECT PARTNERS

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BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE TO THE PROJECT

This pan-Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) project scoped, planned and prioritised the future rural skills and training and business support needs to upskill a new land based generation. It encompasses the four SELEP Federated Areas of Success Essex; Kent and Medway Economic Partnership; Opportunity South Essex; and Team East Sussex[1]. The project has been informed by the SELEP Rural Working Group[2], the SELEP Employment Task Force, and industry supported and linked to representative bodies such as the Farming and Rural Issues Group South East (FRIGSE)[3], the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB)[4] including the new Institute of Agriculture and Horticulture. All developments have been linked to and compliant with the SELEP Assurance Framework[5] and support the strategic objectives within the SELEP's SEP, skills and rural strategies, and the Government's Industrial Strategy[6].

[1] <https://www.southeastlep.com/app/uploads/2019/07/Assurance-Framework-2019-FINAL.pdf>

[2] <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/the-uks-industrial-strategy>

[3] <https://www.southeastlep.com/good-governance/working-groups/>

[4] <http://johnhallconsulting.co.uk/client-case-study-farming-and-rural-issues-group-south-east/>

[5] <https://ahdb.org.uk/>

[6] <https://www.southeastlep.com/good-governance/our-boards/federated-boards/>

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This project is a **skills evaluation to formulate recommendations for targeting future skills delivery** across the SELEP Federated Areas, setting out priorities for the main rural sectors:

- a) Agriculture
- b) Food and drink - production and manufacture
- c) Horticulture production – vegetable crops, fruit and viticulture
- d) Forestry and Arboriculture/trees/forestry

For each sector, we cover four key themes:

1. Technical skills across the full range available, with a focus on stand-alone technical/vocational short courses for younger people and anyone seeking re-training (perhaps post-furlough), but also with the option for smaller numbers to pursue deeper training through to degree level. Degree training is more exclusive but for example in horticulture this might cover topics such as new technologies (biotechnology etc.) and data management ([7]big data, internet of things[8] etc.) – see Figure 1 for an ongoing review of emerging skills areas;
2. Business skills - including time management; team-building; negotiation; problem- solving; sales and marketing; and financial management;
3. Life skills - supporting people into employment, helping them to gain basic skills of personal organisation, communication etc;
4. Environmental sustainability for businesses – including resource use, pollution, energy, water, and biodiversity.

Our recommendations focus on partnership working, leading to the development of plans to raise productivity, growth and opportunities in rural areas. Innovations will require new ideas and talent, and supportive business networks – pan sector collaboration will be key.

[7] Big data – the management of massive data bases accumulated as part of precision crop growth.

[8] Internet of things – remote infrastructures (perhaps glasshouse probes or field machinery sensors) which can communicate automatically via the internet with computers, to provide managers with live and ongoing monitoring of growing conditions to optimize efficiency of production.



Key Recommendations:

- That SELEP take a lead role in the pursuit of rural skills support and development by establishing itself as a hub for regional collaboration and become a conduit between businesses, educational establishments, governmental and charitable bodies to stimulate skills development and lifelong learning. SELEP already has a number of related interest groups (such as the SELEP Skills Working Group, Digital Skills Partnership[9], Growth Hubs, Skills Advisory Panel, etc.). These groups should be linked into including how best practice that can be learnt from other similar initiatives in the UK and abroad and applied to rural skills development here. Linking the region into the newly developing national initiatives will be key – eg the skills competencies and careers development programmes being developed by the Skills Leadership Group, part of the Food and Drink sector Council, supported by the NFU and the AHDB, the Tutor Bursary Programme, apprenticeships, Local Industrial Strategy, etc.

[9] SELEP DSP is one of 6 nationally, funded through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and involving joint working with them.

<https://www.southeastlep.com/our-delivery/digital-skills-partnership/>

- That SELEP work with rural stakeholders and facilitate business engagement to develop a long-term vision that will stimulate greater co-investment by employers in the skills supply pipeline. Skills training cannot just focus on new entrants through colleges and universities but must be more sustainable within the business itself. For example, many rural business are micro businesses and are capacity and time restricted, limiting the potential to coordinate training.
- That SELEP foster more cross LEP working to support the prioritisation of rural skills and the joint support for programmes where rural employment sectors cross LEP boundaries, for example linking approaches to skills programs to Coast to Capital and to Enterprise M3.
- New approaches: we are facing the greatest economic downturn in over 300 years and it is vital that people can gain the training and support to be able to re-skill and upskill. To facilitate this upskilling in rural areas, SELEP should be the key enabler of the changes and novel strategies that will be needed. This is especially important for rural SMEs where resourcing pressures, capabilities, size or location might preclude traditional training routes. Apprenticeships are a possible route for school leavers. However, most of this group will have studied mainly academic subjects at school and will not have the practical and technical skills such as teamwork, digital design, problem-solving and the ability to make things.
- Support a skills based programme at the basic technical level to assist Covid impacted redundant workers to gain the basic technical skills (level 1 and 2) to secure and engage effectively in rural businesses, especially horticulture, viticulture and forestry and arboriculture.



Deliverables:

1. Fund a coordinated programme of rural business development courses:

Aims:

- Develop the existing workforce to better meet future challenges, upskilling for resilience and flexibility
- To improve potential recruits' workplace readiness and employability
- Focus on business management, technology, sustainability and ecology to better articulate the environmental implications of the businesses' activities to an increasingly environmentally conscious public
- Improve understanding of finances, innovation entrepreneurship and in so doing, creating employees who are more innovative and able to challenge the status quo
- Develop resilience and better ability to manage change rather than being driven by it
- Create a focus to review this review in the light of the new Agriculture and Environment Bill to stimulate support for skills training

Focus on:

Employers have told us clearly that their future and current employees would be more impactful if exposed to training:

- That arose from more systematic liaison between rural businesses and education providers. Employers and academic institutions should work much more closely together to upskill, reskill and keep aware of the opportunities from emerging technologies
- That is based around project-based problem solving activities; to develop real time problem solving abilities
- Stimulates behaviours to create more confident proponents of 'different thinking; and able to express this through clear articulation
- Provides more appropriate skills development landscape for the current workforce; in particular, those that are 3 – 5 years out of college or who have come out of furlough and seek to retrain
- Immediately available, appropriate, off-the-shelf courses need to be adapted for onsite training across a wide range of sites convenient for employers and new recruits;
- Is part funded by Government with co-investment from employers, especially micro businesses to partly support the costs of upskilling, until at least the end of 2022
- Is receptive to the view from employers that much of the current government support for training is invested relatively few individuals who consume a relatively large proportion of the training effort, eg through large and long qualifications. Whilst this is important, it is clear that employers need co-investment for small bite size courses, which can be spread across a larger proportion of the workforce. Ie the focus on bite size provision would help fill the gap which won't be funded by central government.

2. Develop approaches / mentoring / coaching to support changing the culture of the workforce. Set out a communications process to raise awareness and support the development of a more innovation culture amongst employees:

- Create a perspective which is longer-term to foster engagement in innovation and technology;
- Develop better business acumen and the understanding of the financials driving business to create confidence in changing the 'model;'
- Increase the understanding of the nature, complexity and stakeholders involved in supply chains to better improve the returns through better contracting or shorter supply chains;
- Build capacity to do many tasks very well, many of which are not 'physical production' but office related;
- Develop a confidence for trainees to be more self-critical, working to their strengths but planning changes to improve on weaknesses;
- Develop business plans to support the earlier transition from the older to the younger generation, freeing up more innovative thinking;
- Exploit the knowledge base by developing the wider personal skills to be more creative;
- Empower individuals to gain technical skills more autonomously through user guides and technology enabled equipment;
- Develop minds for better resilience and management of change (to drive change rather than be driven by it).

Figure 1 demonstrates the interrelationship between the skills and emphasises what employers tell us that they want skills, which span more than one technical subject. This illustrates the complexity of developing a coherent strategy for rural skills across all age groups and districts.

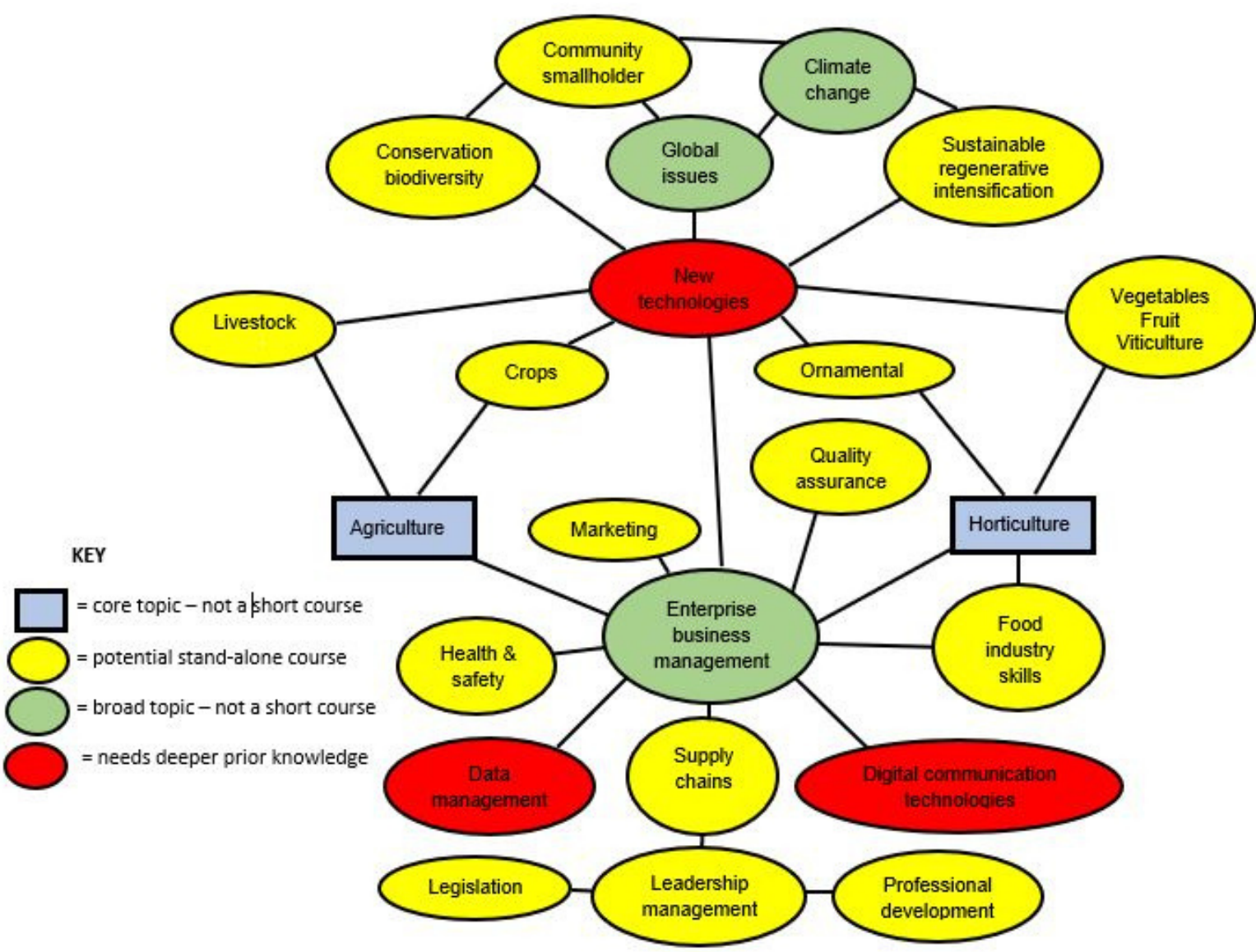


Figure 1. Potential topics for training/re-training and their suitability as short courses



3. Support new, more flexible approaches to learning, using project based themes

- Lobby government for flexible use of existing funding streams, to create better training solutions which businesses can more effectively engage with (develop the business as well as the individual);
- On line access - self-access, open source outlines of topic content;
- External coaching and mentoring to identify successful solution(s) to business problems;
- Preparation and presentation of business development plans – review of scenarios for unit and whole business development proposals by industry experts;
- Individual research projects – in depth analysis and evaluation of topics requiring research and development;
- Group research projects – in depth analysis and evaluation of topics requiring research and development, including team working;
- Work placements / experiences – at a range of levels to experience change management / innovations;
- Work shadowing – for potential new managers to experience the culture of change management and introduction of new approaches / systems;
- Coaching – in work development skills and techniques for staff management and motivation;
- Mentoring – in work support and guidance to facilitate the leading of change management;
- Seminars – discussion groups / forums for sharing ideas e.g. developing approaches to change management.

The challenge here is that we need to start getting Level 4 skills inculcated into those who are studying at L2 and L3 (see Figure 2 for explanation) – the return of technical based training. This mirrors the suggestion from the Baker Dearing Educational Trust[10] that in the current economic situation school leavers should be encouraged to take a one-year training programme, free of charge, to gain a practical qualification in some of the skills that the country desperately needs – basically an HNC. Those gaining such skills will be very well placed to develop them further linked into the skills needs in rural areas around the 4th agricultural revolution.

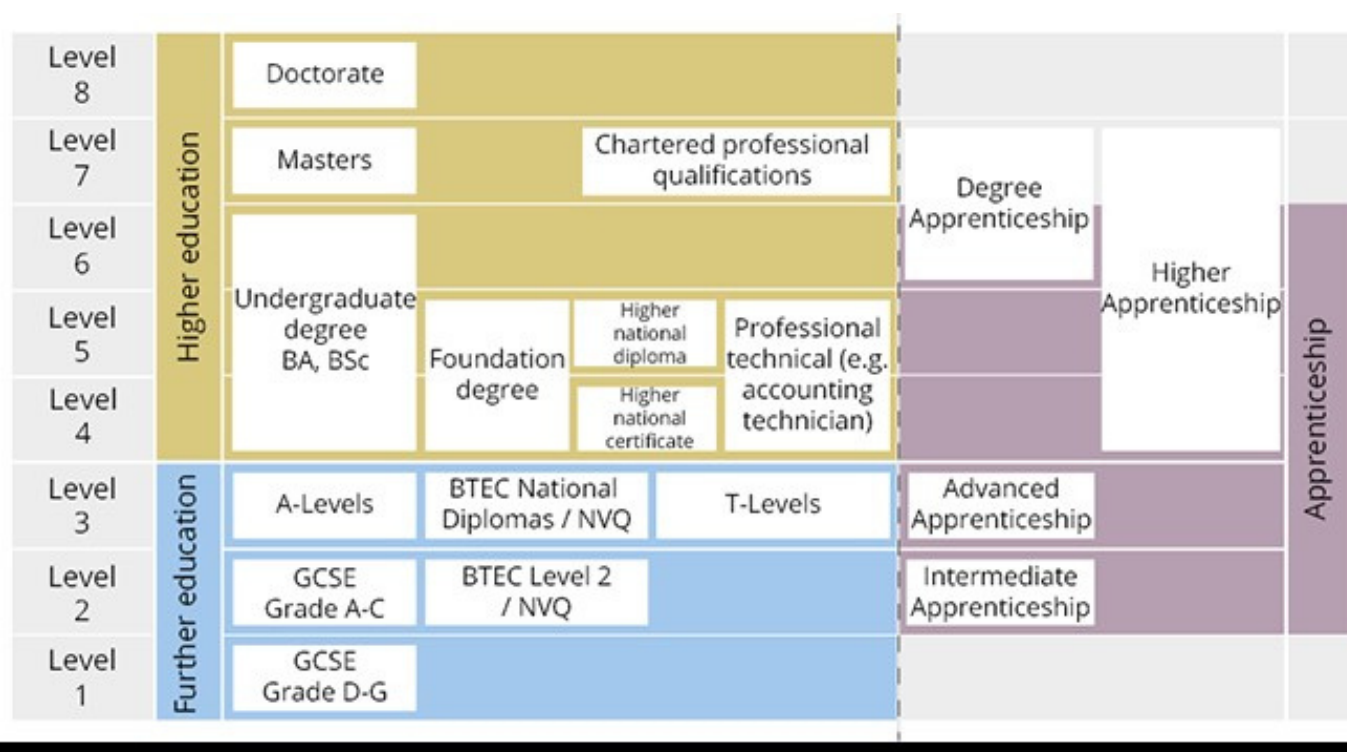


Figure 2. UK qualification framework

Source: www.parliament.uk[11]

[10] <https://www.utcolleges.org/our-mission/utc-aims/>

[11] <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldeconaf/139/13903.htm>

4. Supporting people into employment – establish a regional skills platform, for rural business, linked into national development and programmes

- Web based platform freely available to interested stakeholders for reference and support;
- Content maintained and validated by a college and therefore ‘trusted;’
- Three main interlinked sections

a. Employer supported:

- i. Searchable job advertisements
- ii. Real business examples of career structures, job profiles, progression prospects, remuneration packages
- iii. Vocational and personal skills attributes and requirements
- iv. Testimonials from employees
- v. Testimonials from employers
- vi. Work experience opportunities
- vii. Contact details for registered employers

b. College supported:

- i. Access to information, advice and guidance, careers information
- ii. Programmes and opportunities to develop the skills for a. iii above
- iii. Facilitated and managed work experience to get a ‘foothold in the door’
- iv. Supported recruitment processes for employers
- v. Employer-based Continuous Professional Development to continue to support new entrants after leaving college
- vi. Careers materials based on employers’ needs, made available to schools and parents
- vii. College and work place based visits to support teachers to understand careers in rural businesses and support them to embed the opportunities through a more dynamic school curriculum
- viii. Development of entrepreneurial skills and talents

c. School, supported:

- i. Material to foster interest in rural businesses to dispel the false perceptions
- ii. Confidence to develop curriculum structures which generate interest and enthusiasm for rural subjects
- iii. Scope to be more confident to utilise college based activities and work place visits to bring the curriculum to life
- iv. Access to employers visits to schools to bring the pipeline materials to life
- v. Careers teachers confident to direct parents / guardians to use materials and make contacts with employers to explore the land based careers opportunities available.

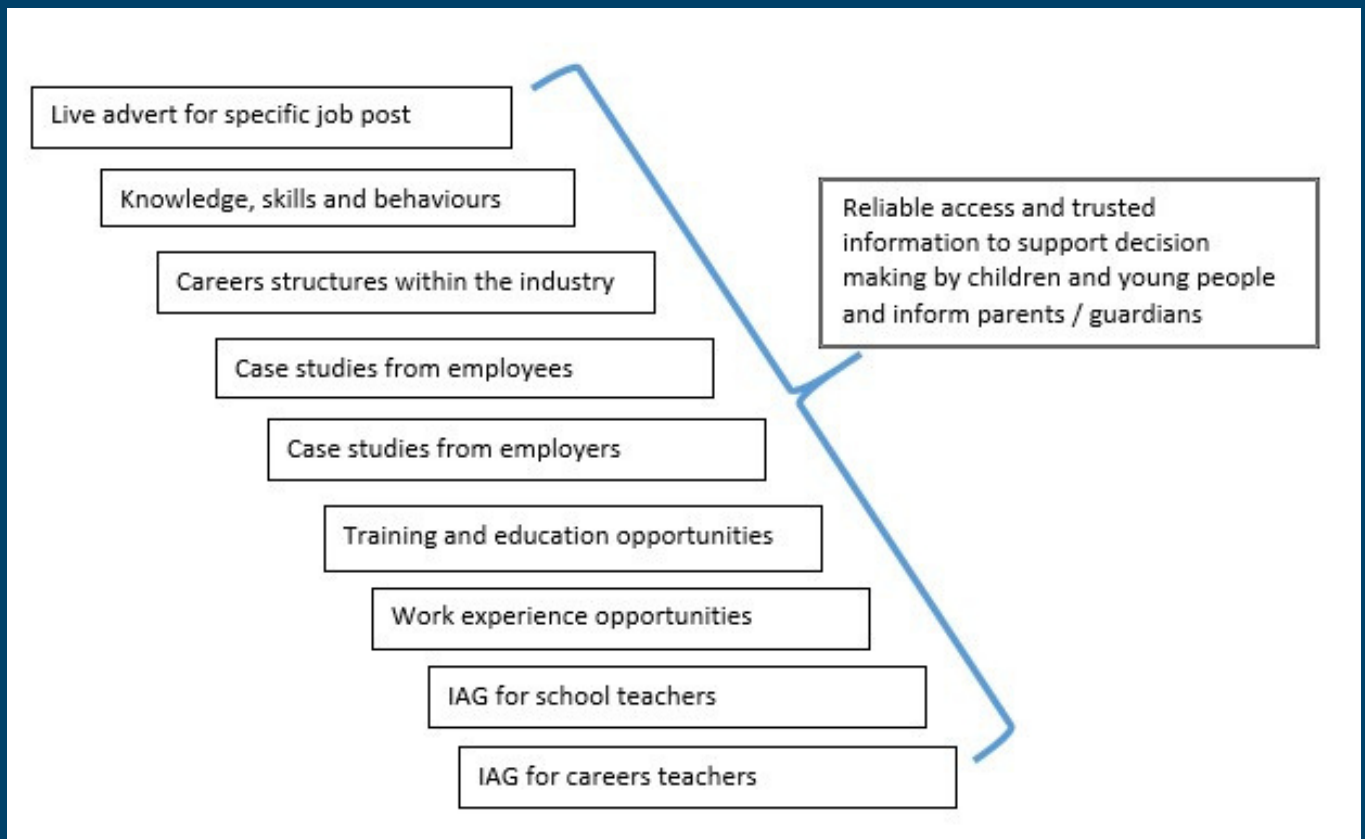


Figure 3. Regional/rural skills platform

Source: Developed from consultations along the skills pipeline



5. At the higher level skills required for some rural businesses, the volume of candidates progressively decreases as the skills level increases. Historically this has meant that the delivery of training and education is sometimes not efficient, especially where multiple organisations have a similar offer. Our recommendation is for the providers of rural skills to start a dialogue to agree where these skills are delivered and the referral mechanisms for candidates. This would safeguard the delivery of the higher level management and technical skills. This recommendation would be taken forward by the Colleges and Universities.

6. Promote rural businesses as a priority sector to raise their profile and aspirations and increase the likelihood of better access to central government funding

- Create the culture of 'importance' for rural business to respond to the challenges now faced;
- Support the rural strategy revision through the Rural Working Group
- Increase the focus on routes for minority ethnic entrants to the sector

7. Promote and encourage through use of showcases, the use and impact of robotics and machine learning technologies

- It is anticipated that adaptive robotic systems using machine learning will increasingly enter into everyday working environments;
- How do ordinary (i.e., non-technical) workers in manufacturing become effective practitioners in robotics, such that they can have confidence in their operation and gain skills in their use;
- Test the emerging field of machine learning to develop new tools for training and

evaluating people's skills in artificial intelligence and robotics;

- Test for a step-change in making smart yet affordable, collaborative robotic systems accessible and practical for businesses involved in all kinds of horticultural and agricultural production across scales from small to large;
- Support collaboration between educational establishments, research centres, businesses and venture capitalists to ensure that the SELEP region can become a centre of excellence in horticulture and agriculture
- Stimulate the use of virtual learning to create more interest in the skilled sectors, for example, simulator training for raising awareness and training in forest and tree machinery solutions

8. Develop the covid response strategy specifically for that business support activity which cannot be funded from central government.

- Support for sectors critically still short of skilled capacity but which could be met by retraining covid-19 impacted sector redundancies to increase the supply to:
 - o Vineyards and wineries
 - o Protected food crop producers
 - o Field scale vegetable growers
 - o Soft and top fruit growers

9. Centralised pilots of training offerings to build business aspiration and confidence for continued training and development of current staff. This should be focussed at all levels with a specific emphasis on those identified as disadvantaged. For example, joint development of L3 and L4 skills training and higher level technological skills training aligned to the 4th agricultural revolution.

10. Continue to invest in the technical skills still required – employers consistently tell us that whilst new skills, attributes and behaviours are required for the future, the demand for practical skills have not disappeared yet. The demand for technical skills at Level 1 and 2 (introductory and operator level) have risen sharply in the last 6 months due to Covid-19 and is now a key priority for the rural sector, especially horticulture, viticulture and forestry and arboriculture. Support the entry to the workplace to help gain the technical skills through focussed support initiatives to bolster careers advice and services, supporting employers to offer effective work placements and progression in employment.

11. Review progress against this report at 6 months and annually.