Lifelong Education Institute

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MAPPING THE COURSE:

Education Partnerships for Continuous Skills Development

A Report by the Lifelong Education Institute

Newcastle University

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FOREWORD

by Mayor Kim McGuiness

I want to make the North East a region of opportunity for everyone. Therefore, this research is key in exploring how collaboration among education providers, businesses, and local governments could advance skills development. It also echoes my own ambition for all organisations and employers to come together across the North East to make sure we're delivering the best skills programmes for our residents and businesses.

This is particularly important to our aim to make the region the home of green energy. We have plans in the pipeline for a Green Energy and Engineering Super Academy, training a minimum of 1,000 people a year to take on the jobs of the future. That will mean young people from the region breaking into careers they thought were out of reach.

Later this year, we will publish A New Deal for North East Workers – our vision for North East employment and skills. This research will provide a valuable insight into how we could transform the vision into delivery for the region.

Photography by Mike Sreenan

FOREWORD

by Lord David Blunkett

In an era marked by rapid technological advancements and evolving economic landscapes, the synergy between education providers and industry is more crucial than ever. This report by the Lifelong Education Institute underscores the importance of forging robust partnerships between employers and educational institutions to drive continuous skills development and regional growth.

Drawing on the insights from the Labour Skills Council's report, we recognize the transformative potential of devolved powers, which interlink with the proposed concept of Regional Education Partnerships (REPs). These partnerships serve as a cornerstone for aligning educational strategies with local economic needs, ensuring that learners and workers can seamlessly navigate Lifelong Learning Pathways. By fostering collaboration across schools, colleges, universities, and private and public stakeholders, such partnerships can create a cohesive framework for skills progression and competence standards.

Newcastle University exemplifies the power of such partnerships through its initiatives like the Institute of Electrification and Sustainable Advanced Manufacturing (IESAM), the Northern Accelerator and as the higher education partner in the North East Institute of Technology. These initiatives highlight how higher education institutions can act as catalysts for local economic development, leveraging their expertise to enhance regional skills growth. The alignment of local skills strategy via devolved authorities further minimizes duplication and enhances the effectiveness of these collaborations.

As Skills England becomes fully operational and promotes a more integrated approach to skills

House of Lords / Photography by Roger Harris

development, it is imperative that we embrace the concept of Regional Education Partnerships. These partnerships not only provide a unified voice for education providers but also facilitate holistic co-development of regional education strategies. This will lead to more employer-informed education offerings and pathways. By working closely with Mayoral Combined Authorities and Employer Representative Bodies, REPs can ensure that skills improvement plans are tailored to the unique needs of each region, driving productivity growth and fostering innovation.

This report sets out a visionary path for education and industry collaboration, one that promises to position the UK as a global leader in skills development and regional-sectoral knowledge exchange. Together, we can build a future where continuous learning and adaptability are the hallmarks of our workforce, ensuring sustainable economic growth and social cohesion.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This report examines the challenges and emerging opportunities in the evolving policy landscape for collaboration among education providers, businesses, and local governments. It presents a model for Regional Education Partnerships to guide cooperation between schools, colleges, universities, and private and public stakeholders in advancing skills development. Additionally, it explores how higher education institutions aiming to establish new regional partnerships can draw on the place-based initiatives pioneered by Newcastle University to position the UK as a global leader in education, research, and regional-sectoral knowledge exchange.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Regional policy in England has been subject to continuous change over the past 50 years or more, with spatial definitions for governance and public administration evolving during this time. However, there is now a sense of continuity with the new government's adoption of the Mayoral Combined Authority as the highest tier of sub-national Government. For the region this means two distinct jurisdictions for devolved government. For universities in the North East this will require civic engagement at the local, sub-regional and regional level. Much of this will be on an informal basis, although ties could be strengthened. Newcastle University will clearly have stronger relations with its city-region, but this does not preclude association with other institutions in the North East. In terms of labour market challenges and industrial strengths there are clear advantages for the sector to collaborate more formally across administrative boundaries and with multiple authorities.

THE EVOLUTION OF EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS

The last four decades of education and skills policy have been characterised by alternating shifts between local and regional geographies for place-based partnership strategies. This has seen a proliferation of various 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' models of partnership engagement that have impacted education–business–local government collaboration.

The policy landscape has included Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), Education Business Partnerships (EBPs) under the Thatcher and Major Governments, Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) under the Blair Government, and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) under the Coalition, place-based devolution and Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) under the Cameron-May-Johnson–Truss–Sunak Governments. The discontinuity of policy and governance have presented partners with a series of issues and challenges in navigating the misalignment of geography, funding and policy intent, making the balance between collaboration with competition more difficult. At no point during this period has there been a single point of strategic oversight and control at the sub-national level.

COLLABORATION IN NEWCASTLE AND THE NORTH EAST

Newcastle University's education partnerships encompass its cooperations with other higher education institutions including Universities for North East England (UNEE) a collaboration between the Universities of Durham, Newcastle, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside, further education providers, regional business partners and the Tees Valley and North East Combined Authorities.

The ambition for partnership working is set out in its Vision and Strategy report. This highlights the unique characteristics of initiatives in which the University has been involved over the last 10–15 years. Some of these were developed in response to UK government policy, others have been developed autonomously by Newcastle University and its North East partners. These include the Northern Accelerator, the North East Institute of Technology (NEIoT), the Collaborative Newcastle Universities Agreement (CNUA) with Northumbria University, and the pathbreaking Institute of Electrification and Sustainable Advanced Manufacturing (IESAM).

These initiatives highlight how Newcastle exercises its role as a 'civic university' to ensure that its global professional and academic endeavours actively benefit the local economy. There are many facets to this but the explicit orientation of Higher Education towards business creation as a path to local economic development is a critical contribution to the UK's ambitions for growth. This is something which wider education partnerships, including Further Education, can focus on, to generate the skills needed to meet demand, but also to reshape the local business ecosystem by concentrating on regional specialisms in tradable sectors, in line with the Government's Modern Industrial Strategy. This should be the longer-term mission for education partners in the region.

The coterminous organisation of local skills strategy via the two devolved authorities will help minimise unnecessary duplication across the region. The Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) should be the primary vehicle at the sub-regional level, absorbing the functions of the Local Skills Improvement Plan and the now defunct Local Enterprise Partnership. As the Devolution White Paper outlines, MCAs which will gain greater powers including Integrated settlement which could give greater flexibility for education and skills.[1] This suggests a more proactive role for universities in place-based devolution, to embed their expertise at the centre of these governance structures, maximising their economic impact and civic agenda, as outlined by the Secretary of State in her letter to university Vice-Chancellors.[2]

REGIONAL EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS: A NEW MODEL FOR PLACE-BASED SKILLS IMPROVEMENT

The experience of Newcastle University and partnership working in the North East provides insight for improved collaboration between education providers, businesses, and government. There is a strong case for education providers and businesses to adopt a shared language of 'skills progress' based on the achievement of 'competence standards' across all areas of education. A new model for regional skills should be developed to allow individual learners and workers to pursue 'step-on, step-off' Lifelong Learning Pathways (LLPs) accessible via specific education providers and businesses in the region.

The report argues that these LLPs should be overseen by Regional Education Partnerships (REPs) that include representatives of post-16 education within the region. These REPs should take on the role of regional 'chambers of learning' that enables holistic co-development of regional education strategy, which includes offering quality assurance 'badging' for courses at their member education institutions and creating regional 'skills passports' and 'skills portals' to help learners navigate the education landscape. While operating across the whole region the REP should seek to establish a formal relationship with both MCAs advising on skills strategy.

The REP should be the primary 'education provider representative body', acting as unified 'spokesperson' for engaging with representatives of business and government in questions of sub-national skills improvement. Along with Employer Representative Bodies (ERBs) and local authorities, REPs must be key stakeholders in a new generation of Skills Improvement Plans, which can overcome the geographical and sectoral limitations of the current LSIP system. These must put productivity growth at the centre of their strategic mission and pursue a 'place–sector' approach in their strategic priorities, focused on new models of place-based collaboration. It recommends the creation of a regional skills observatory to inform this development and improve skills matching in the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT:

1. Encourage the formation of **'Regional' Education Partnerships (REP)** to align with Mayoral Combined Authorities, to act as a 'chamber of learning' that can represent the tertiary sector (colleges, universities, and private training providers) with a single unified voice. The creation of a REP would foster collaborative decision-making around sub-national skills development and guarantee long-term stakeholder partnership commitments. This should:
    - Act as a conduit between Skills England and MCAs to advise on holistic skills strategy.
    - Work with MCAs to strengthen careers guidance and develop **Lifelong Learning Pathways (LLPs)** in anticipation of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement now scheduled for 2026/7.
    - Map-out routes for how learners/workers can upskill by progressing within a place-based or sectoral network of education institutions.
    - Develop a quality assured **'skills passport and badging'** scheme for courses offered by North East education providers, to enable lifelong learners to have their qualifications recognised in the region.
2. Progressively **move away from LSIPs** by supporting Skills England, in partnership with Mayoral Combined Authorities to develop place-based skills strategies in devolved areas as part of the national drive towards greater devolution.
3. Give a representative voice to individuals as members of the labour force, learner pool, and residents by **including trade unions, students' and learners' associations, and community organisations in regional skill improvement strategy.**
4. Develop a transparent process for allocating resources to regions through negotiation between national government and Mayoral Combined Authorities, using the evidence-based mechanisms under development by Skills England to identify priorities.
5. Encourage the co-development of **'regional skills observatories'**, in collaboration with Skills England and Insight North East, to be managed by devolved authorities and regional education partners. This would generate place-based intelligence about regional skills supply and demand, helping to map Lifelong Learning Pathways and helping learners and workers navigate the skills system in terms of sector and subject-relevance.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY:

1. Newcastle University in collaboration with **UNEE partners should play a pivotal role the development of regional education partnerships**, with a specific remit to align Post-16 strategy with both devolved authorities in the North East. If Newcastle University was to operationalise the ambition of UNEE with the other four universities for the region this could be transformational for the region.

2. **Newcastle should lead on the development of a regional credit transfer framework**, in preparation for the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, to be implemented in 2026/7.

3. Build on the achievements of the North East Raising Aspiration Partnership to **widen engagement with schools**, and expand Newcastle's existing skills partnerships with other universities, FE colleges and community-based centres like 'IntoUniversity' to improve educational outcomes and **develop specific skills pipelines in strategic sectors.**

4. Introduce **new 'industry placements', 'learning placements', and 'on-campus' and 'on-the-job' arrangements** within the framework of Newcastle University's education–business partnerships, to let learners/workers move seamlessly in any direction between place-based study/training and employment.

5. Promote Newcastle University as a **sector leader in education partnership innovation,** focusing on its experience at developing models of place-based skills improvement: **spaces and zones, hubs and marketplaces, policy and evidence centres, and skills institutes.**

1. INTRODUCTION

This report from the Lifelong Education Institute examines the evolution of regional education partnerships in the UK, specifically highlighting the experiences of Newcastle University and the North East of England. It aims to present and promote innovative strategies that enhance collaboration among education providers, businesses, and local governments, ultimately increasing access to skills and training opportunities.

Kindly supported by Newcastle University—an institution known for its commitment to lifelong learning and collaboration with further and higher education partners in the North East—the research also engages with community projects in fields such as science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM), and the creative and health sectors.

The report's primary goal is to analyse the opportunities and challenges that tertiary education providers, like Newcastle University and its partners, face in forming regional collaborations focused on skills improvement. It provides an in-depth overview of the policy landscape influencing partnerships among education providers and business stakeholders, examining how various policy approaches have allocated responsibilities for skills and training strategies among local governments, educational institutions, and businesses.

By identifying shortcomings in past cooperative efforts, the report outlines a framework for a transformative approach to skills improvement. This new model aims to guide institutional strategies that promote lifelong learning and address the long-standing mismatch between workforce skills and industry needs.

The report draws on evidence from Newcastle University and the broader education and skills landscape in the North East, highlighting key projects that reflect Newcastle's commitment to local and regional skills innovation—particularly in culture and the creative sectors, electrification, green energy, and health and social care. The report critically appraises these initiatives and offers recommendations for Newcastle University and its partners to build on their successes and explore new collaborative opportunities.

Finally, the report outlines the structures necessary to embed effective regional collaboration into future place-based and sectoral skills improvement strategies. It proposes mechanisms to ensure that skills and education development align with regional and sectoral priorities. Drawing lessons from past and current policies, this report advocates for an integrated model of Regional Education Partnerships that informs further policy recommendations, emphasizing the importance of collaboration for lifelong learning and skills development as key elements of future regional autonomy and devolution strategies. In particular, it underscores the urgent need for a new model that consolidates resources and secures adequate funding to address the rapidly evolving skills and training needs of regions like the North East.

2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The development of Regional Education Partnerships must be considered within the context of England's constantly changing spatial policy agenda. Since the 1940s, successive UK governments have sought to tackle widening regional inequality with a range of initiatives and interventions that have been implemented, abolished and subsequently resurrected. This process has been described as "hyper-active incrementalism," reflecting how constant policy adjustments have led to minimal substantive change.[3]

In the midst of this policy churn local and regional partners have sought to bond more lasting ties that can withstand the buffeting of government, and which can operate with purpose across sensible economic geographies. Sometimes these arrangements have been enforced by legislated governance structures. Other times they have been the result of informal arrangements.

2.1 THE CHANGING NATURE OF REGIONAL POLICY

While the North East has a distinct historical and cultural identity, its current administrative boundary was established with the creation of England's nine regions by the UK government in the early 1990s. The regions were primarily designed for administrative and statistical purposes, aligning with the 1974–96 county boundaries and forming the top level of sub-national division in England – now termed International Territorial Level (ITL 1) regions.[4] Previously, England was divided into eight "standard regions" based on the 1889–1974 county borders, with the "Northern" region encompassing the current North East geography and Cumbria. This illustrates that defining the region for governance and public policy has itself been an evolving process.

In 1998 the New Labour Government established the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and Regional Assemblies as part of wider constitutional reforms in the UK. These new regional structures represented a significant shift in spatial thinking and governance. The primary focus was to address deeply entrenched regional disparities and promote sustainable economic growth, including planning for transport, housing and skills development, particularly in areas of high unemployment. Although the UK had by this time passed the high point of structural unemployment, the North East had been particularly impacted by economic shocks and the decline of traditional industries like manufacturing, coal mining, and shipbuilding, facing economic stagnation and a lack of private investment. RDAs aimed to drive regeneration through targeted investment, infrastructure development, and support for new industries.

This ambition – to tackle regional economic performance – was not new. The post-war governments had persisted with spatial policies up until the late 1970s with Keynesian state interventions that subsidised economic activity in targeted 'Development Areas'. However. the Thatcher and Major Governments (1979-97) departed from this approach, withdrawing the state from regional and redistributive policies while focusing on market economies and private sector investment, particularly in underperforming cities.

The RDAs represented a 'third way', once again focusing on the regional dimension, while seeking to attract public-private investment in strategic sites within regions. What distinguished the RDAs from previous iterations of regional policy, at least in the beginning, was the intention to 'devolve' or 'decentre' functions of economic development, including skills, from Whitehall and to the regions. The rejection of Regional Assemblies in the North East referendum effectively put paid to this. When the RDAs were finally abolished by the Coalition Government (2010-15) the focus again reverted back to cities and particularly England's underperforming second tier cities, like Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Birmingham, Bristol, Nottingham and Newcastle.

The subsequent place-based devolution agenda, which evolved out of 'City Deals', set the template for Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCA), designed to boost lagging productivity levels and growing inequalities in England core city-regions. This model and geographical focus, at the sub-regional level (ITL 2) has resulted in two separate jurisdictions for devolved government in the North East – the North East Mayoral Combined Authority, and the Tees Valley Mayoral Combined Authority.

Policies to redevelop less prosperous places, including towns and coastal communities, were introduced as part of the Johnson Government's levelling up agenda, although the rapid rise and fall of this plan is symptomatic of a broader pattern of top-down and short-term interventions. Since the election earlier this year, which Labour won with a large majority, the new government has set out its policy framework for the country based on its five-missions.

2.2 THE NEW POLICY AGENDA FOR THE 'REGIONS'

The priority for the new Government is to kick start economic growth and reverse the countries poor productivity rate. The success of this mission depends upon rebalancing the national economy. To this end, Labour has committed to deepening place-based devolution in England by empowering local leaders. In this sense previous debates about regions versus city-regions seem settled. At least for the current parliament.

As the Devolution White Paper outlines, the Government's Take Back Control Bill will extend devolution to other parts of the country that have not yet agreed a deal while existing MCAs are set to gain greater powers including Integrated settlements, which could give greater flexibility for adult education and skills.[5] This suggests a more proactive role for universities in place-based devolution, to embed their expertise at the centre of these governance structures, maximising their economic impact and civic agenda, as outlined by the Secretary of State in her letter to university Vice-Chancellors.[6] The White also provides scope for MCAs to collaborate on a pan-regional basis which will facilitate cooperation across the North East.

MCAs have control of adult skills budgets but even this is partial with some funding still held centrally (e.g. for the Multiply programme to improve maths literacy amongst adults). Moreover, the majority of the 16-19 budget is still held centrally by the Department for Education (DfE). Devolving this funding would give MCAs far more leverage to develop local skills strategies. It would also give them a route into building relationships with FE Colleges, schools and sixth forms. The first integrated settlements, announced in the Autumn Budget, will start with Greater Manchester and the West Midlands Combined Authorities from 2025-26, with other areas eligible to receive them from 2026-27.[7] This will give mayors meaningful control over funding in a single flexible pot.

Skills England is the Government's flagship policy intended to drive productive growth through raising skills among the working age population to better meet employer demand.[8] It will be an 'arms-length' body that will work across government departments to establish what skills needs the country requires over the next decade. A core function will be to establish ensure that national and sub-national skills systems work together effectively by providing labour market intelligence and skills forecasting for post-16 vocational and technical skills.

There is a need to clarify the relationship of Skills England to the wider skills landscape and the role of higher education (beyond degree apprenticeships) and R&D institutions. Relationships with the devolved Mayoral Combined Authorities will also need to be confirmed. It is in this space that partnership working around education and skills will now take place. Further Education Colleges already have strong links to MCAs, which will be strengthened with further devolution. However, universities have been somewhat remote

to the devolution agenda.[9] There is certainly greater scope for a more embedded partnership with MCAs, at a representational and practical level in terms of driving local innovation and growth, identifying and capitalising on opportunities. The Universities for North East England (UNEE) a collaboration between the Universities of Durham, Newcastle, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside; further education providers, regional business partners and the Tees Valley and North East Combined Authorities, has been formed for this purpose.[10]

There is, however, an asymmetry in the current governance arrangements, with four universities in the North East Mayoral Combined Authority, and one in Tees Valley. Partnership working is therefore required at the local, sub-regional and regional level to deepen civic relations, co-create and co-own place-based visions and genuinely co-produce local economic development.

The Government's **Modern Industrial Strategy** will also prove to be an important driver of regional policy with a focus on key tradable sectors for growth and the role that different places play in the national economy.[11] This will serve to identify what the region is good at and where the opportunities will be to develop competitive advantage vis-à-vis other regions and internationally. The White Paper invites regional partners to challenge and define what is meant by growth (output growth or employment growth) and how growth can benefit all communities. There is considerable scope for universities to articulate how place and industrial sector knit together to raise the complexity of local economies with new knowledge-intensive firms and the cross pollination of ideas across sectors to forge a world-class economy that can compete globally. Universities have a critical role in understanding innovative activities and future trends as well as curating skills development to meet emerging needs.

Government is still formulating its regional agenda, although there is currently much less of an emphasis on the regional geographies that formed the basis of policy during Labour's previous period in power.

2.3 SUMMARY

Regional policy in England has been subject to continuous change over the past 50 years or more. However, there is now a sense of continuity with the new Government's adoption of the Mayoral Combined Authority as the highest tier of sub-regional government. For Universities in the North East this will require civic engagement at the local, sub-regional and regional level. Much of this will be on an informal basis, although ties could be strengthened. Newcastle University will clearly have stronger relations with the city-region, but this does not preclude association with other institutions in the North East. In terms of labour market challenges and industrial strengths there are clear advantages for the sector to collaborate across administrative boundaries and with multiple authorities.

3. THE EVOLUTION OF EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS

This chapter examines the evolution of two types of education partnerships in the UK from the late 1980s to the present day:

1. **Education–education partnerships**, involving collaboration among various educational providers.
2. **Education–business partnerships**, where education providers work with commercial, financial, or industry organizations.

It examines the role of national and local governments in supporting these partnerships and demonstrates that, despite challenges, these collaborations have fostered strategic innovations. The chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the policies shaping these partnerships, including the rise of place-based initiatives at regional and local levels, aligned with government priorities. It also identifies key challenges faced in both intra-education collaboration and "tripartite" partnerships between education providers, businesses, and local authorities.

3.1 EDUCATION PROVIDER COLLABORATION

Collaboration initiatives for place-based skills improvement are far from a new feature of the UK's education policy landscape. The Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) partnerships introduced in 2022 are certainly one of the most comprehensive attempts to foster alignment and coordination in place-based skills strategies, but they build on an array of previous programmes that sought to set up either regional or localised

education collaborations. This section considers the longer background to the current generation of policy developments surrounding education–education and education–business partnerships in the UK. It examines their long-range context in the political economy of skills under the Conservative and Labour Governments before 2010, and their short-range context in the reforms to education, skill training, and local empowerment under the Conservative-led Governments up to 2024. These predecessor initiatives were not all equally successful and effective, and the analysis takes a synoptic view of the main factors that determined the extent of their policy impact.

3.1.1 EARLY MODELS OF EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP (1988–2010)

The late 1980s heralded a period of major change for education partnerships in the UK. This was driven by two major forces: (1) pressure within the education sector for structural and curricular reforms, above all in the school sector; and (2) a further-reaching and more fundamental aim to bring the logic of business and the market to bear on a wide range of public policy areas. In that light, developing synergies between businesses and education providers presented an obvious and potentially highly effective tool to better prepare a growing and diverse learning population for higher order thinking and reasoning skills. At the same time, the ability to input more closely and directly into the learning process allowed businesses to take proactive steps to avert the potential threat of an inadequately trained and underqualified workforce, boosting their competitiveness both within the UK market and towards their global rivals.

As a result, businesses and (especially but not exclusively) schools were encouraged to join forces in forming new collaborations and partnerships. In the first instance, what emerged was a somewhat rudimentary partnership model premised on a 'financial benefice' or investment commitment, involving two main parties: a business as the 'benefactor', and an education provider (school, FE or HE institution) as the 'beneficiary'. The intention was that the education provider would benefit from its connection with the business by securing valuable contributions in areas such as obtaining better learning equipment and infrastructure, scholarships and bursaries, or opportunities (placements, secondments) for learners to experience the real-world applications of their acquired knowledge and skills. The business would also benefit by fulfilling philanthropic obligations, by strengthening their local community ties and boosting their public image, or by shaping the curriculum to meet more medium-to-long-term goals of crafting a better-prepared entry-level workforce.

Yet apart from meeting the institutional needs of individual businesses and education providers, this partnership model also laid the foundations for a deeper integration of education and the economy in the UK. This integration cut both ways. First, reaping the return on investment in advancing learners' skills and training development required an aggregate shift towards higher-skilled, more knowledge-intensive industries, and an increasingly information-based, service-driven economy. Second, the idea that learner cohorts are not just future citizens but future members of the workforce, and need to be trained as such, introduced an instrumental logic to education, giving the social purpose of schools and FE/HE institutions a stronger orientation towards business needs.

Together, these gave an impetus to develop more comprehensive collaborative initiatives, broad-based and with multiple organisations involved, with the aim of embedding longer-term inter-institutional commitments. They also established the basic outline of the stakeholders who would need to be involved in future partnerships: businesses, education providers, learners, workers and local communities. Key to this was **moving beyond a uni- or bidirectional 'closed-system' understanding of benefit**, where business investment fosters improved learning/training, which gives businesses a higher-calibre workforce to draw on. Instead, **the larger the roster of stakeholders, the greater the need for a strong and complex sense of interconnection and reciprocity in the rewards and value of the partnership programme.** This included not only establishing a framework to develop commonly shared visions and goals among partnership members but also putting in place the necessary governance structures to provide shared authority and decision-making oversight.

These larger challenges were first addressed in the 1988 *Employment for the 1990s* white paper, which had as its main theme the need to tackle barriers to employment growth.[12] This proposed establishing a network of local employer-led Training and Enterprise Councils. These Councils, designed to facilitate the planning and provision of training to confront skills shortages at a local level, with the lead role delegated to local employers, especially small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Noting a clear correlation between pay and employment, the white paper presented Training and Enterprise Councils as a way to monitor conditions surrounding place-based pay arrangements and link them more tightly to local labour market conditions, performance variations, and individual businesses' continued profitability—essentially, with a view to eventually replacing the equivalent function of local wage councils.

However, this highly localised approach met with significant criticism, especially from opposition MPs, who argued that a more centralised approach would allow for larger-scale, more 'joined-up' government investment to be continued at a national level. Among these more centralised counterproposals was the idea of a national Skills Audit, designed to determine the needs of UK industry as a whole.[13]

This created one of the central dividing lines in UK skills strategy that has persisted into contemporary debates—namely, who exactly holds decisive authority in questions of industrial or skills strategy, business or government (national or local). The clear intention in the white paper was for Training and Enterprise Councils to depart from the then-current training framework in some important respects. The Councils would be executive bodies, not merely advisory groups, which would mean firmly vesting employers with the leadership of the national training system. The primary argument for this was much the same as that for the earlier 'benefice' partnerships: employers were the principal *customers for* training and also the main *providers of* training once individuals left education and entered the workforce. The local labour market would therefore be best placed to make sure that training needs were correctly evaluated, and to take the clear practical steps required to meet them. **This tension between political and economic control remains fundamentally unresolved, and the scales have tipped from one to the other inconclusively over the last 40 years of skills policy.**

Under the auspices of these Training and Enterprise Councils, education–business partnerships (EBPs) emerged as a systematised way of providing a localised interface between schools and employers.[14] Developed to support work experience, offer work-related learning, and provide careers education, information, advice, and guidance, the purpose of EBPs was primarily to offer learners an introduction to the world of work, and smooth their transition from the supply to the demand side of the local skills market. This, in turn, also allowed for the development of more formalised and committed partnerships between education and business, along with more clearly defined and refined objectives. These centred above all on finding new ways to integrate work experience prospects and more business-oriented activities into the national curriculum, in order to help younger learners develop more targeted professional skills and aspirations.

This approach was further enhanced in 1991 by the *Education and Training for the 21st Century* white paper, which set out ways to delegate to business representatives further responsibilities for exercising leadership over local training programmes, with the aim of finding local solutions for local skills needs. It also put forward plans to remove sixth form and FE colleges from local authority control, as a way to encourage and steer technical and vocational education provision more firmly towards working directly with local business partners. At the same time, to underline this aim, the UK Government established a new regional network of EBPs, targeted at school pupils aged 5–19, but especially focusing on Key Stage 4 students aged 14–17.

However, in 1995 the UK Government withdrew core funding for the development of new partnerships. This left EBPs reliant on other sources of funding, including the Government's Single Regeneration Budget, and when the position of available funding was reviewed by the merged Departments of Education and Employment in 1996, dedicated funds for EBPs were not reintroduced. In 1997, the Department's Quality Performance Improvement Division conducted a further evaluation following the previous withdrawal of core funding. Together, these set the tone for several key elements of the successor initiatives to EBPs that have been introduced over the subsequent four decades: plans to (1) **distribute autonomy** away from Westminster and Whitehall to (2) **smaller geographies**, defined according to different criteria of desirability and need, albeit without necessarily (3) making available the levels of **government funding** required to establish these decentralised structures on a sustainable basis, yet also (4) retaining variously thick levels of **central oversight and regulation** that (5) issue an ever-evolving set of **strategic expectations and objectives** for education partnerships to pursue.

This period also saw an increasing **realisation that a 'one size fits all' approach was not the right way to approach place-based strategic empowerment**, as this would risk creating structures that were ineffectual and unresponsive to the needs of their respective localities. As a result, the first systematic understandings emerged of the different forms and degrees of intensity that partnerships could take, including business-led models. One prominent case was the Confederation of British Industry (CBI)'s vision for how the curriculums of schools participating in EBPs should integrate the activities of the EBP's business stakeholders.[15] Although

this was initially intended to cover all levels of schooling, in practice it soon became much more focused on pupils in the latter stages of secondary school. The new degree of formalisation of these partnerships would be set out in five levels, with funding provided by the Department of Employment, to generate a national network of partnerships:

- Level 1: *ad hoc*, fragmented partnerships;
- Level 2: a simple partnership developing common goals;
- Level 3: a 'Compact' formal agreement with more than one school and a specific list of partnership targets;
- Level 4: an expanded 'Compact' involving more organisations and targets; and
- Level 5: a full EBP involving a committed partnership with business-facing activities integrated into the learning process.

With the Labour Party's entry into power in 1997, regional development also became a more pressing and growing concern for UK policymakers. In 1998, the passing of the Regional Development Agencies Act added a new regional dimension to questions of decentralisation and devolution, both for strategic planning and the funding needed to support it. The division of England into nine political-economic geographies in line with its International Territorial Level (ITL) 1 regions—North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, East Midlands, West Midlands, East of England, South East, South West, and Greater London—had the aim of furthering industrial development, business efficiency, and sustainability, promoting employment, and improving the cultivation and application of skills relevant to employment in their respective larger areas. Consultations on the membership of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were designed to involve a number of key stakeholders from within the RDA area:

- Representatives of local authorities covered fully or partly by the RDA geography;
- Representatives of employers;
- Representatives of employees;
- Representatives of rural residents, workers, or businesses;
- Other appropriate stakeholder representatives.[16]

Strictly speaking, given the limited role they envisaged for schools and FE/HE institutions, the business-led RDAs offered more a model for political–economic collaboration than an example of education-based partnerships. All the same, **they introduced new voices to the debate around driving forward place-based skills strategy: workers, community residents, and local government.** In addition, RDAs acted as a useful case-study in how to advance regional development without losing sight of the vital contributions

of local actors. In this respect, the prominent involvement of local authorities became a 'Plan B' for political input and oversight, in the wake of the failure to convert the indirectly elected 'regional chambers' or Regional Assemblies created under the Regional Development Agencies Act into directly elected governmental bodies.[17]

The introduction of a regional logic into learning and skills policy was followed in the early 2000s by a further shift in the underlying policy logic, centred on the EBP schools pilot. In June 2000, the nine English Regional Assemblies invited bids from EBPs in their geographic areas to put together clusters of schools as pilots. The anticipated benefits would include:

- 'Best practice' exchange, with the schools chosen in part because they had a particularly impressive record of working with business;
- Joint learning provision, including sharing ideas, activities, and resources;
- Offering a smooth transition from primary to secondary education; and
- Providing dedicated expert advice and brokerage support on a full-time basis.

This marked the first occasion that partnership projects were systematically designed with several of these benefits in view. Rather than fostering individualised collaborations between particular schools and businesses, the 'cluster' logic of these bids steered them in a more collective direction, **laying the foundations for the more sectoral and place-based approach of subsequent partnership initiatives.** At the same time, the focus on 'joining-up' learning provision, both in terms of the resources available to learners across institutions, and the transition from one to the next, **put in place the building-blocks for the frameworks of 'pathways' and 'pipelines'** that have emerged in more recent understandings of how school-age, further, and higher education levels relate to one another.

In September 2000, several groups of schools were invited, with the support of a specially appointed broker, to work together in partnership to develop joint pilot approaches to Education–Business Link (EBL) activity. This involved establishing a pilot cluster in each of the nine regions in England, with initial funding of £32,000 per pilot up to July 2001, extended at the same level until July 2002. The funding was channelled through to the EBPs through Government offices against an agreed workplan, after the model of regional allocation and distribution of funds that are determined and raised by central government, which still remains the predominant model of devolved skills funding in the UK today. The intention was to test the impact of a broker working with a specific cluster of schools as well as the leadership capacity of local business partners, and in most instances the EBP managed the pilots.

The impetus for policy innovation on education partnerships faded slightly towards the later years of the previous Labour Government. Nevertheless, two interventions helped to **expand the focus of the**

partnership model from primary and secondary to tertiary education and set the tone for a number of more recent reforms. The first was the launch of Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) in 2003, which replaced the Teaching Company Scheme that had been in place since 1975. KTPs were designed to foster collaboration between businesses and HE providers (especially universities), involving three partners:

- A company (private enterprise, public body, voluntary agency) on the 'demand side' for transfers of knowledge and technology as well as technical and business skills, responsible for covering 33–50% of the programme cost;
- A 'knowledge base' (university, HEI, research organisation, FE college) on the 'supply side', conducting business-relevant research and training; and
- An 'associate' (recently qualified graduate) in need of business-facing or specialist upskilling.

Government acted as a fourth stakeholder, by contributing the remainder of the costs not covered by the company in question. KTPs reframed the relationship between stakeholders in the partnership to give learners equal status alongside businesses and education providers. At the same time, they also refined the policy understanding of the demand and supply for skills to **identify specific 'consumers' and 'producers' for skills provision**, casting learners in the role of 'conduits' to bring about this knowledge transfer in practice.

The second intervention, and Labour's final policy contribution on education partnerships, came in 2006 with the white paper *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances*.[18] This underlined the principle that the primary contribution that the UK's skills system could make to the economy as a whole is by boosting the productivity of the UK's labour force, and gave central place to reforms that sought to raise the quality of learning provision by tailoring education services to the needs and interests of individual learners and employers. Its main intended mechanism for this was the Train to Gain programme, which was designed to deliver workplace-based training for all the skills employers need *in situ*, from basic literacy and employability skills up to degree-level subject specialisms. With this programme, the white paper **extended the brokerage model for the first time into post-16 learning space**, as the proposed reforms sought to revitalise the mission of FE colleges, training providers, and eventually HE institutions by focusing on the skills needed to support long-term employment for both young people and adults.

3.1.2 PARTNERSHIPS AT THE CENTRE OF THE EDUCATION AGENDA (SINCE 2010)

The entry into office of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in 2010 brought about several new approaches and major changes of direction in the development of place-based education and skills development partnerships. The first of these, conditioned by the pervasive logic of government austerity in the wake of the 2007–8 financial crisis, was a severe downgrading of government support for partnership schemes. Education–business partnerships were among the primary casualties, with all

dedicated central sponsorship for EBP programmes withdrawn in 2011, leaving the basic EBP framework in place as a 'shell concept', while individual EBP initiatives turned for financial support to other funding sources and streams. Even though the Coalition Government continued to use its existing initiatives and mechanisms to monitor employer and education training needs, the onus for innovation in this space moved firmly away from the central government agenda into the remit of arm's-length and non-governmental organisations.

Perhaps the most significant change under the Coalition was the abolition of the RDAs in March 2012. In their place, from 2011 the Coalition phased in a new category of partnerships, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), designed to help determine economic priorities and lead coordinated approaches to fostering growth and job creation over a larger number of smaller geographies—which settled at 38 in total after March 2017. Since the primary stakeholders in LEPs were local businesses and local authorities, they were not strictly education partnerships, although the importance of LEPs for securing allocations of central government funding meant that education providers faced strong incentives to engage closely with LEPs, formally or informally.

From the start, however, these lacked the systematic political impetus of the RDAs and other skills initiatives with a strong local authority presence. This was especially hampered by the fact that LEP areas did not align with any of England's established political subdivisions: smaller than the ITL 1 regions of the RDAs, but larger than (and in some cases cutting across) local authority areas. Most significantly of all, LEPs were wholly voluntary, and in the first instance were not supported by any dedicated public funding. Later efforts sought to channel local 'growth deals', 'city deals', and even EU Structural and Investment Funds to the LEPs in alignment with their local growth plans. Yet none of these successfully galvanised LEPs into playing a dominant role in local education and skills strategy, and the functions were steadily transferred to local authorities in April 2024, when the LEPs were finally wound down.

The first true advance in education partnerships came with the introduction of Science and Innovation Audits (SIAs) in autumn 2015 under the last Conservative Government. SIAs are the first of a new generation of education partnerships that seeks to integrate an element of sectoral specialism alongside criteria of place into their collaboration framework, specifically for education–business partnerships. Their aim is to form consortia, based on geographic and technological criteria, to help local areas and regions map their research and innovation strengths, and develop strategies to build on their existing and potential future areas of global competitive advantage. The membership of consortia is not strictly determined, but broadly comprises:

- Businesses;
- Universities;
- Research and innovation organisations;
- LEPs;

- Equivalent organisations in the devolved administrations; and/or
- Other private- or public-sector collaborating institutions.

SIAs were selected in three successive waves between 2015 and 2017, covering areas that broadly aligned with geographic and technological themes.

- Wave 1: Edinburgh and the South East Scotland City region; Greater Manchester and East Cheshire; East and West Midlands; Sheffield City Region and Lancashire; South West England and South East Wales.
- Wave 2: Bioeconomy of the North of England; East of England; Glasgow Economic Leadership; Innovation South; Leeds City Region; Liverpool City Region Plus; Offshore Renewable Energy consortium; Oxfordshire Transformative Technologies Alliance.
- Wave 3: Applied Digital Technologies in Advanced Manufacturing; Cyber Resilience Alliance; Innovation for Sustainable Airports; Knowledge Quarter London; MAXiMAR: Maximising The Marine Economy in The Highlands and Islands; North West Coastal Arc Partnership for Clean and Sustainable Growth; North West Nuclear Arc; Northern Powerhouse Chemicals and Process Sector; Northern Powerhouse in Health Research; Precision Medicine Innovation in Scotland; The South Wales Crucible; Upstream Space.

While SIAs have proven a **useful inaugural source of place-based information and intelligence about knowledge and skills generation** in some of the UK's key research areas, they **lack the political 'bite' to convert their findings into binding place-based or sectoral strategies**. As a result, the SIA process has fallen into abeyance since the third wave of audits was completed.

SIAs were rapidly followed in 2015 by the creation of a series of Local Cultural Education Partnerships (LCEPs) through Arts Council England (ACE), in partnership with the newly reformed Department for Education (DfE). LCEPs extended the logic of combining sectoral specialism with place-based focus to education–business–local government 'tripartite' partnerships focused specifically on culture and the arts, with stakeholders comprising cultural providers, educational institutions, and local authorities. The stated aim of LCEPs is to achieve greater coordination in the cultural offerings available to children and young people across England at a local community level, with the involvement of cultural providers, schools, and a range of other service providers.

Despite the limiting effects of funding cuts disproportionately targeting cultural provisions and continuing downwards trends in the numbers of young people studying creative subjects, LCEPs have proven among the most successful recent partnership initiatives. From their initial launch as three pilots in Great Yarmouth, Bristol, and Barking & Dagenham, they have grown to now 151 LCEPs across England. Deliberately constructed in such a way as to allow for flexibility and variation between and within local contexts in their governance and operations, the most recent LCEP initiatives, such as their Youth Performance Partnerships

Programme and National Leadership and Peer Learning Programme, have grown to include a wide range of collaborative partners, including from the cultural, education, youth, health, criminal justice, voluntary, and commercial creative sectors, as well as local authorities.

LCEPs were supported by a network of ten regional Bridge Organisations, ranging from Arts Connect in the West Midlands and Norfolk & Norwich Festival in the East of England to Curious Minds in the North West and the Royal Opera House in London and the South East, which exercised a form of regional oversight over several LCEPs at the same time. These independent organisations were first introduced in April 2012 as part of the UK's cultural education infrastructure, chosen through a competitive bidding process, with the Bridge network co-funded by ACE and DfE to the value of £10m per year. Within the LCEP framework, they were intended to provide developmental and strategic support relevant to each specific LCEP's stage of development and need, from brokering and convening LCEPs in their early stages, to setting their goals and aims, to defining their internal governance structures.

However, in March 2023, ACE terminated the funding for the Bridge network, removing one of the key pillars of infrastructure support for cultural partnership, collaboration, and fostering 'best practice' across the UK, and leaving the Bridge Organisations to continue delivering their work on cultural education and upskilling 'under their own steam'. What stands out perhaps the most from the example of LCEPs and Bridge Organisations is the **capacity they show for civil society organisations to take on leadership roles** in developing relatively autonomous frameworks for skills-facing collaboration and help to **fill the 'responsibility gap' left by Government**. At the same time, however, their later decline underlines one of the consistent challenges of such 'civil society-led' initiatives—the l**ack of consistent strategic funding to accompany the Bridge Organisations' strategic overview role**, which would allow these initiatives to 'bed in' as permanent transformative fixtures of the local skills improvement landscape.

The 'civil society-led' aspect of the LCEP framework reached its highpoint with the launch of Cities of Learning (CoLs) by the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) in 2017. CoLs were intended as a means of promoting lifelong learning, and connecting learning across towns, cities, and regions so as to support new means of regenerating the economy. Their key innovation, however, was an explicit intention to definitively move past the need to rely on central government to find new ways to develop place-based and sectoral skills strategies—relying on local businesses and education providers to take the lead instead. Though they were rarely if ever presented in this way, CoLs offered a route to providing precisely the strategic leadership that SIAs (and EBPs before them) had badly lacked. Their primary aims were to pioneer new ways to map the learning and skills requirement of more granular geographies (specifically at the city level), to recognise the calibre of unaccredited learning, especially where this takes place outside traditional classroom or workplace settings, and to use Big Data and cutting-edge technology to tackle gaps in skills communication within the labour market.

The CoL programme led to the rollout of a data-driven, digitally enriched skills strategy for urban skills ecosystems, with the aim of better connecting business with education providers in city-level skills development. In the first instance, the use of Big Data saw the adoption of the Lightcast global skills classification, which drew on analysis of over 300 million career profiles, 10 billion government data sources, and more than 1 billion job postings to create a common skills taxonomy. But the central plank of how CoLs sought to meet these aims was the concept of 'digital badges', or 'e-badges': validated markers of learning and skills to certify achievement at particular levels of quality, which are increasingly becoming part of a global standard for recognising learning digitally, and which are used by organisations such as City and Guilds, IBM, LinkedIn, and the Open University.

CoLs set out to work with specific educational technology partners, including Badge Nation, Future Creators, Navigatr, and Real Ideas, to issue digital badges that help respond to employer skill needs. Quality-assured by the RSA, these digital badges were designed to connect together learners and qualifications across several different places, career trajectories, and education pathways. Starting in 2017, seven pilot CoL areas were launched: Belfast, Bradford, Brighton, Cambridge and Peterborough, Plymouth, Southampton, and Tees Valley. To date, over 600 businesses and education providers from these seven cities co-participated in designing the digital badges for their local areas, leading to over 35,000 badging awards issued to try and bridge the gap in learning and accreditation.

The late 2010s saw the introduction of a flurry of new collaboration initiatives that sought to build on, and extend, the logic of existing institutional and partnership programmes. On the education–business partnership side, these were:

- The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF, 2017–18): Building on the format of the Research Excellence (REF, 2007, introduced to replace the Research Assessment Exercise created in 1986) and Teaching Excellence Frameworks (TEF, 2016–17), the KEF is an effective upgrade of the principle of KTPs. The KEF provides structured guidelines and assessable criteria for how universities and other HE institutions can collaborate with a wide range of economic and social partners to share information, research, and other knowledge insights.
- Institutes of Technology (IoTs, 2019): partnerships between schools, FE colleges, universities, and businesses, specialising in the provision of technical education and training. IoTs often have a specific sectoral focus, which so far includes aerospace, agri-tech, construction, digital, energy, engineering, health, logistics, manufacturing, media, pharmaceuticals, and transport.

Accompanying these was the creation of the Civic University Network in 2019, another 'civil society-led' initiative developed with the support of ACE, Carnegie UK, DfE, Sheffield Hallam University, and the UPP Foundation. This introduced Civic University Agreements (CUAs) as a new category of (primarily) education–

business–local government 'tripartite' partnerships focused on expanding the civic role of universities in co-leading strategies based on robust analysis of localised needs and opportunities, shared and co-created with local partners. These partners vary extensively between different place-based CUAs, but include councils, LEPs, school and FE college federations, as well as all the HE institutions within the relevant geography. Again, what stands out especially strongly is the attempt by CUAs to (at least in part) **'outsource' leadership on skills strategy development to non-governmental stakeholders**—this time leaning towards the 'skills supply' side of education providers rather than the 'skills demand' side of local business.

Yet the most significant development in partnership policy under the Conservative Government was the introduction of the Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) in 2021. Announced in the white paper *Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth*, and formally introduced in the 2022 Skills and Post-16 Education Act, LSIPs are the central pillar to deliver the Government's five key aims on skills improvement:

- Give businesses a greater say in skills development;
- Foster higher-level technical skills provision;
- Provide a flexible lifetime skills guarantee;
- Simply and reform funding and accountability for education providers; and
- Boost teacher training.

In that context, LSIPs are designed to provide the most up-to-date model of 'tripartite' education–business–local government partnership, with business again cast in the leading role. As with several of their predecessor initiatives, LSIPs are intended to strengthen the connections between education providers and businesses, to ensure that skills development in the area covered by the LSIP—which in many cases maps fairly precisely onto the 'intermediate-level' geographies covered by LEPs—matches local and regional labour demands. The main innovation of LSIPs, following the example of employer-led skills development systems in Germany and the Netherlands, is to provide **a unified voice for local business in the guise of designated Employer Representative Bodies (ERBs)**, who are tasked with boosting business engagement, helping businesses navigate their local skills ecosystem, and lead the formation of stronger education–business bilateral relationships. In 32 of the 38 LSIP areas, the role of ERB has been taken up by one of the country chambers of commerce captured by the area, with three granted to the Federation for Small Businesses (FSB) (Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, and Greater Lincolnshire LSIPs), and three to local sectoral employers' groups, BusinessLDN (Greater London LSIP), Buckinghamshire Business First (Buckinghamshire LSIP), and the North East Automotive Association (North East LSIP).

One of the key lessons from earlier iterations of education–business partnership development, such as LEPs, has been the **importance of pairing place-based empowerment initiatives with the funding necessary to implement their strategic recommendations** (1) at a larger scale, and (2) with a greater degree of longevity.

To help education providers update their facilities, equipment, and curriculum in preparation for the rollout of LSIPs, the *Skills for jobs* white paper also opened up the Strategic Development Fund (SDF) to place-based bids around upgrading education delivery infrastructure, and boosting education provider capacity through better coordination, workforce training, peer-to-peer support, 'best practice' sharing, and bilateral education–business exchanges.

Each prospective LSIP area was able to apply for up to £1.5m of capital funding and £1.25m of programme funding, and in its final round in 2022 the SDF awarded 41 tranches of funding, totalling £92m. From 2023 onwards, the SDF was replaced by the Local Skills Improvement Fund (LSIF), which was designed to specifically help FE providers within each LSIP area to respond collectively to the technical skills development priorities set by their respective LSIP stakeholders. The remit of the LSIF similarly focuses on:

1. Facilities and equipment investment,
2. New course and curriculum development and delivery, and
3. Boosting FE leadership, governance, and teaching delivery, but increased the funds available to £165m spread over the period 2023–25.

3.2 ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Overall, the last 40 years have seen successive waves of efforts to foster skills development at a subnational level, and a growing proliferation of bodies and initiatives tasked with particular aspects of collaboration and exchange. The sheer complexity of skills development bodies that has emerged, first at the level of England's nine ITL 1 regions, and then for various subregional and local geographies, has also left a landscape marked by half-completed missions, cross-initiative overlaps, misalignments, and even outright contradictions, often poor advertising, and 'reinventing the wheel'. ERBs are essentially a rebrand of LEPs, with only a few redrawn borders and refreshed management. LSIPs are, in both their purpose and their composition, a relaunch of RDAs and SIA consortia over smaller geographic areas. And, tellingly, the language around productivity and technical skills in the 2006 *Further Education* White Paper could just as easily have come from its 2021 successor *Skills for Jobs*.

What this amounts to is a situation of high energy yet diffuse focus and fragmentary outcomes in the skills development agenda since the late 1980s. Any effort to rectify this has to learn the specific lessons of this policy legacy, identifying its key deficits and failures, and prioritising the most pressing challenges where the need for change is at its most urgent. There are two overarching areas where issues have especially arisen, where a targeted policy intervention can help supplement what has been missing from the agenda up to now: (1) the collaboration within the education sector between education providers; (2) the 'tripartite' collaboration of (local, national) government with (regional, sectoral) business and (secondary, further, higher) education providers. This section provides a detailed breakdown of the major issues that face collaboration among skills stakeholders, highlighting where these have hindered their ability to work together effectively.

3.2.1 PROBLEMS OF EDUCATION PROVIDER COLLABORATION

To start with, there is an unhelpful dissonance between the proliferation of skills development initiatives put forward by central government, and the existing work that has been carried out 'in the background' at a more bottom-up and grassroots level. It has been rare to find cases where the government agenda was directly informed by the success of collaborative projects piloted at a smaller scale by *ad hoc* business, education provider, or local authority partners. For instance, neither CoLs nor CUAs have been taken up into the LSIP process but instead co-exist with them uneasily in local stakeholder planning. The same is true of bilateral knowledge exchange and investment 'deals', which universities across the UK have agreed with local and national businesses relevant to their subject specialisms. Where these agreements are locally-rooted, they may happen to align with the LSIP strategic process—but they have not been formally grandfathered in, and in cases of national partnerships may actively conflict with the government's localist priorities.

The top-down imposition of government initiatives has had a levelling effect on place-based skills development across the UK. Before they were introduced, especially before the 'wave' of the late 1990s, valuable collaborative work was taking place in a diffuse, unsystematic way across the UK, with clear collaboration 'hot' and 'cold spots' that tracked regional asymmetries in GVA and wider economic development. In that respect, the underlying logic from RDAs to LSIPs has been sound: the aim to have a similar process of skills development strategy in every part of the UK, delivered in a way that is sensitive to place-based differences in conditions and needs. However, the main issue in the most recent LSIP iteration has been that the process has failed to take into account and build on what has gone before—which even includes government-supported initiatives like LCEPs and LEPs. Essentially, it has just created a confusing new framework that education providers have to manage alongside what they were doing already. Government has effectively presented education providers with an uncomfortable choice between sticking with their previous *ad hoc* projects and engaging only minimally with the LSIP process or abandoning their accumulated work in favour of an as-yet barely established partnership framework.

The effect of these initiatives on skills improvement across the UK has been highly variable. In principle, their aim was to raise the intensity and calibre of skills development partnerships, by putting in place statutory and financial incentives to create processes and structures of collaboration that did not previously exist. But whether they served to enhance or, in actuality, flatten existing partnership arrangements depended to a large degree on the approach taken by the individual ERBs. The deciding factor was how inclusively the ERBs organised the process of developing LSIPs, in the sense of how far they drew impetus and insights from what had already happened locally in that space. At one end, ERBs could involve stakeholders as genuine participating partners at the scoping, planning, and drafting stages of the LSIP process. At the other extreme, they could be far less consultative, and more inclined to unidirectionally inform stakeholders of the interim outcomes at each stage.

A major factor in this dissonance has been the geography of education provider collaboration. LSIP areas have often cross-cut areas of existing collaboration between universities, colleges, and schools (in various combinations), as well as 'natural' educational geographies:

- Urban centres: education providers who operate within the same local populations, and deal with the same local authorities and community organisations.
- Campus: the specific place-based community that exists in and around education provider buildings and learner accommodation, especially in cases where larger institutions have multiple campuses in different locations.
- 'Travel-to-learn' areas: the catchment areas for their local learner pool, including commuting and residential students, which can be very large for 'magnet' institutions like research-intensive global universities.
- Sectoral alignments: specific partnerships based on similar industry-facing specialisms.

Instead, LSIPs have corralled education providers into relatively arbitrarily geographies based on groups of adjacent counties, which have no meaningful policy precedent aside from partial overlaps with LEP areas. LSIP areas suffer from being simultaneously too large and too small for education partnership needs. They are larger than the immediate proximities dictated by education providers' locations, and smaller than the place-based and sectoral partnerships that reach further afield, at the regional, national, and global level. Just as it did for businesses with branches in multiple LSIP areas too, the LSIP process has forced local education providers to make *ad hoc* yet necessary choices about which geography to prioritise when deciding to commit their scarce resources.

There is also little consistency between the categories of education provider that each of these skills development initiatives includes: schools and their more recent federations into Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), FE colleges and other vocational training providers, universities and specialist HE institutions, and other private or nonstandard providers. Some have remained focused on one category alone, such as EBPs (schools) or SIAs (universities). Others have actively sought to bridge what are sometimes overengineered and unhelpful divides between institutions at the policymaking level, such as LSIPs (colleges, universities) and in particular IoTs (colleges, universities, with schools as 'adjacent' stakeholders). There are good reasons to maintain the flexibility in the system that allows education providers to engage in partnership projects in each of these permutations, or indeed 'go it alone' entirely. But what is also needed is a **holistic treatment of all aspects of education sector collaboration activity at a more granular level than only the centralised oversight of the DfE** and other skills-relevant Whitehall departments.

As it stands, there is no agreed model on how holistic education provider collaboration along these lines should take place. The IoT framework offers a useful precedent, but the remit for truly holistic oversight must

extend well beyond only partnerships for technical education and training provision. In principle, it can also extend to include other areas where inter-institutional coordination and 'best practice' exchange can benefit from common frameworks to streamline and facilitate decision-making: research, teaching/training and assessment, public impact and knowledge exchange, administration, finance and funding (fees, grants, and so on). In all of these cases, any frameworks or bodies that aim to provide holistic oversight have to tread a careful line between advocating for collaboration and a harmonisation/universality of institutional approaches and allowing for a healthy dose of competition and a differentiation/plurality of approaches. Exactly where this balance lies is highly dependent on the context in question, and has attracted extensive analysis under the terminology of 'collabetition' or 'coopetition': institutions working together to promote joint interests (e.g., maximising aggregate shares of available funding and resources, learner pool, high-quality personnel) due to acknowledging the destructive effects of taking purely selfish approaches to mutual rivalry.

In practice, projects of 'collabetition' and 'coopetition' are confronted with a number of existential as well as definitional challenges, which the participating stakeholders may struggle to overcome. One is a simple boundary problem for 'true' partnership:

- Whether stakeholders want to collaborate at all;
- Whether collaboration should be carefully delineated or open-ended;
- What the agreed balance should be between collaboration and competition, and in which areas.

A second level of considerations, once the broad parameters of collaboration are agreed, relate to how precisely 'collabetition' and 'coopetition' should be cashed out: what the participating partners can and cannot do, individually and collectively, within and beyond the framework of their agreement.

These formal concerns only become exacerbated when other procedural factors are introduced to the equation, which can make the superficially appealing 'collabetition' concept a hard needle to thread. These include:

- The rapid turnover of funding rounds, which incentivise stakeholders to make short-term 'snap' decisions on who to partner with to be eligible for funding, rather than aligning these with a longer-term strategy;
- Strong commitments among senior stakeholder management to preserve the independence and uniqueness of institutional missions, which often incentivises pushing for 'leadership' over 'team-player' institutional profiles;
- Institutional-level concerns over financial viability, especially in a context of scarce resources and long-term financial challenges (especially among FE and latterly HE providers);

- Difficulties in ensuring buy-in from industry both (1) at the start and (2) during all stages of the partnership development and delivery;
- Strategic mismatches between the needs and priorities of different geographies: e.g., central government emphasis on IoTs and Level 3–5 qualifications, compared with local deficits in Level 2 employment skills;
- Overreliance on industry leadership in programme design and delivery, in the face of (1) lack of engagement by industry advisory groups, and (2) business incentives to remain selective in their involvements based on institutional expectations of strategic advantage;
- Staffing and recruitment problems, leading to delivery challenges as a result of (1) siloisation in the labour market, and (2) insufficient labour reserves to hire at the right level in relevant positions.

The demands of education provider collaboration show a clear requirement to establish some form of **permanent mechanism of coordination at a level above the localisation of LSIPs and below the national perspective of Whitehall**. In other words, what is needed is a way to **restore a regional logic to collaboration between schools, colleges, and universities**, building on the first steps in this direction taken by the EBPs and RDAs in the 1990s and early 2000s. The key question becomes how the dynamic between regional education providers should be managed, and in particular which of these should lead these coordination efforts. Many of the government skills development initiatives up to now have prioritised (in descending order) universities, then schools, then colleges, with little focus on providers who fall outside these broad-brush categories. Meanwhile, the UK's chronic dearth of higher technical skills suggest that it is FE that carries the main burden of upskilling its population, as the key (but all too often neglected) point of continuity on the trajectory from secondary to tertiary education, and from learning to work.

Yet it is not obvious that any of these are uniquely well-positioned to lead skills improvement strategy development from the education provider side—in large part because none of them will be involved in every partnership, given a collaboration system that leaves room for flexible partnership creation. Instead, what is needed is a form of **equal tripartism between pre-16 (primary, secondary), further (tertiary), and higher (tertiary) education** in the collaborative decision-making and visioning outlined above. There is a clear tertiary or post-16 'skew' in this model of education provider tripartism, on the grounds that skills improvement carries an inherent orientation towards the world of work, which is the defining mark of 'adulthood' in the shift from mandatory to optional education. Meanwhile, the involvement of schools is there to reflect the vital role that primary and secondary education plays in giving learners their later capacity for both labour and advanced learning (and the choice between them, as well as their potential to coexist and reinforce one another). The North East Ambition programme (see Chapter 4, below) was established to serve this need by bringing education and businesses closer together by providing good career pathways for school leavers, via work placements, career events and embedded careers education.

In turn, this logic of equality and tripartism has to be carried through into the institutions that 'own' and embody this permanent coordination between education providers. Many of the initiatives outlined in the previous section either created or repurposed specially-designated boards (LEPs' skills boards), chambers (ERBs), councils, forums, or other similar bodies. Depending on the precise aim of the initiative, the membership of these bodies was chosen to give inclusive representation to all relevant project partners: individual businesses, education providers, local authorities, or bodies acting on their behalf. After the same model, a **tripartite regional institution to oversee education provider collaboration would need to have equal representation for schools, colleges, and universities, as well as private training providers** in its composition.

Given the likely disparity in the sheer numbers of each of these types of institution present in each region, the membership of this body could also make use of existing place-based 'federal' structures within the regional education sector. These should in the first instance use the statutory institutions especially designed for collaborative and oversight purposes, such as IoTs or (where relevant) Local Education Authorities (LEAs), as well as 'grassroots' consolidating groupings that have emerged in response to the changing education policy landscape, ranging from college groups and MATs to place-based university collaborations and regional representative bodies for schools. The main considerations here are to ensure that the structures chosen do not create any additional risks of dysfunction in their local education geography, and to stipulate carefully how the informational flows in the relationship between 'representatives' and stakeholders is intended to work.

3.2.2 PROBLEMS OF 'TRIPARTITE' EDUCATION–BUSINESS–GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION

Creating a regional body to oversee education collaboration along these lines also addresses an unresolved asymmetry within the existing structures of collaboration between education providers, businesses, and local government. In the LSIP process, businesses have been given a single 'spokesperson' in the form of ERBs, who act as a concentrated voice to represent and advance their interests. In most cases, this has built on fairly well-established structures in the form of county chambers of commerce, with a few LSIPs outsourced to national or regional employers' groups (e.g., Federation of Small Businesses, North East Automotive Alliance). The ERB status was awarded through a process of competitive tender, which led to a number of chambers and other local groups 'losing out' in having their strategic plans taken into account.

The problem is that the LSIP structure did not put in place any such 'spokesperson' entity for education providers, which in the first instance relegated colleges and universities to a more passive role in the bilateral discussions between ERBs and local authorities. The result has been a high degree of variation in how ERBs have engaged the education providers in their designated areas. Some have sought to involve a wide range of providers in the LSIP drafting process, while others have restricted their engagement to a smaller cross-

section of 'indicative' or 'preferred' institutions. But even in the more expansive engagement processes, education providers have struggled to achieve 'cut-through' for both the unique challenges and opportunities the LSIP process represents, including problems with staff capacity and recruitment, the lead-time for course development, and asymmetries in the pre-existing series of education–business collaborations.

Part of the reason for these struggles is that none of the skills development initiatives to date has created a collaborative institution along the lines outlined above, which means that including a concentrated voice for education providers as well would have meant creating a more-or-less entirely new entity. The closest equivalents that exist currently are:

- IoTs, which include a fairly full balance of college and university partners, alongside schools as less formal participants, but lack the trust that comes with a more firmly embedded 'representative body', and are in any case more designed to offer sectorally-targeted coordination for technical training and vocational education among members than to act as external voices.
- LCEPs, which are highly sectorally-targeted, cover very small geographies, and have not played a major role in skills development policy up to now.
- LEAs, which only cover schools and also exist over a smaller geography, and which in many cases have seen systematic 'opt-outs' by MATs discontinuous their service agreements.

In this light, any future mechanism for skills development collaboration between education providers, businesses, and government must include an **explicit framework for an 'education provider representative body' or a 'chamber of learning' that can give schools, colleges, and universities parity in regional skills matching discussions**.

However, this is not the only stakeholder reform needed to advance skills development collaboration beyond the LSIP *status quo*. As it stands, rebalancing the relationship between education providers, businesses, and local government is only a partial intervention in what we can call the *regional political economy of education*. It focuses above all on the formulation and delivery side of strategic plans for skills improvement, putting in place the infrastructure to ensure a more exact and streamlined joining up of skills demand (business) with skills supply (education provider) in a given area (local authority). But it does not leave any place for the subject of these strategic plans, the individual worker, learner, or resident who is meant to acquire these skills and act as a conduit for them into the actual production process.

To put it a different way, skills development initiatives up to now have talked a lot about structure and not enough about agency—a lot about policy delivery and implementation, and not enough about policy effect or 'receipt'. **Future collaborative mechanisms for skills improvement must find clear ways of giving representative voice to individuals, in their capacity as members of the labour force, learner pool, or local communities.**

Another problem that has plagued skills improvement strategy since the abolition of RDAs in 2012, exacerbated by the phasing-out of LEPs from 2024, is a lack of clear ownership over the subnational skills development agenda. Responsibility for LSIPs notionally lies with ERBs, who are explicitly tasked with drawing up LSIPs in consultation with local authorities and education providers for each of the 38 LSIP geographies. But beyond the LSIP drafting process the overall coordination mechanism for the LSIP areas becomes less clear: the content of each plan is essentially devised under the auspices of ERBs, but the implementation stage is a far more open-ended process, in which both ERBs and local authorities have a relevant stake, with the remit of leadership varying between different LSIP areas. The gap between aspiration and realisation is exacerbated further by the comparatively low levels of investment available for LSIP implementation, with only £4.3m of LSIF resources available on average per area to support the first two years of each devised plan (2023–25), mainly in the form of capital investment.

This offers very little fundamental improvement on the logic of the local Training and Enterprise Councils envisaged in the late 1980s, which were employer-led to the point of being almost employer-dominated, centring on the interests of local SMEs. Yet even these councils offered a clearer ownership mechanism than LSIP structures, since they were designed to give local businesses explicit executive leadership on skills development within their local labour markets. Skills development policy needs to restore clarity to frameworks of business–education provider–local government collaboration by introducing a **single point of ownership that can act as a command-and-control centre overseeing the relationships between these stakeholders, and which can provide the long-term infrastructural support needed to safeguard and future-proof inter-stakeholder partnership commitments.**

What needs to be strengthened in particular is the link between this single point of ownership and education providers. This is above all to avoid situations where individual providers assert their diverging institutional agendas and strategic priorities to the point of undermining the efficacy of their strategic collaboration or 'collabetition/coopetition', especially if these assertions come with the (explicit or tacit) endorsement of the relevant local authorities.

As with collaboration among education providers, there is no real continuity in government views on the 'right' geography over which business–education provider–local government collaboration should take place. The dominant heuristic in devolution and decentralisation has oscillated from localism in the 1980s–90s to regionalism in the 1990s–2000s, and back to localism in the 2010s, with a constant drumbeat of centralist 'reining in' (e.g., through the close control DfE exercised over SDF and LSIF awards).

This has tracked partisan differences in successive UK governments' approaches. Under Labour, the primary theme was 'nations and regions', through devolution to Greater London, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, along with the failed Regional Assemblies and then RDAs. Under the Conservatives, the focus switched to the local tier, through elected mayors, combined authorities, 'county deals', and of course LEPs

and LSIPs. Along with the **tendency for incoming governments to pursue deliberate changes of direction** from their predecessors, this has **exacerbated 'stop-start' indecision and lack of progress** with either level of subnational empowerment.

The specific cost for skills development is that there is no clear consensus on the priority of place-based or sectoral logic in formulating collaborative partnerships for skills improvement. The LSIP process has *de facto* prioritised place, which has led to a number of inefficiencies. In particular, several situations have arisen in which the stakeholder groups developing LSIPs for adjacent areas within the same overarching regions have informally coordinated in drawing up their strategies, on the grounds that their respective sectoral focuses are extremely similar. More generally, a place-first approach within small local geographies has potentially damaging implications for the relationship between large and small institutions—large corporations versus SMEs, large universities versus colleges versus schools/MATs—which can dominate the labour markets or learner pools at a local level, and hence skew skills development strategy in their favour.

Meanwhile, LCEPs, CoLs, and IoTs have all prioritised industry sectors, which has led to a partial or even total decoupling of skills improvement strategy from the UK's subnational boundary divisions. They have often explicitly sacrificed any defined notion of 'place' beyond the general proximity of their members' locations, in favour of achieving as complete and well-rounded as possible a roster of involved stakeholders. This has serious implications for the governance of these schemes, as they do not necessarily map onto any of the past or present geographies of skills improvement, in particular community or local authority boundaries. Instead, these initiatives create a complicated 'residue' of *ad hoc* and informal partnerships, which a future skills development strategy will need to find a way to integrate.

To an extent, this lack of consensus can be traced back to the underlying precepts of UK industrial strategy, which has so far attempted to tread a difficult middle path between national, regional, local, and sectoral priorities. This is particularly in evidence in the proliferation of different 'pots' of funding intended to support different aspects of the overall upskilling agenda. Some of these 'pots' are national, some locally accessible, some sectorally-targeted, and some a combination of these, yet they do not 'add up to' a 'joined-up' funding strategy that can support a clear and coherent industrial policy with national, regional, and local levels of detail in its intended operations.

This system needs extensive rationalisation, in order to **remove wasteful overlap and reduplication as well as gaps of coverage between these sources of skills development finance, and to build them up into a substantial resource that can be used to make large-scale investments in skills** where they are most urgently needed. At the same time, a clear decision needs to be reached about **which levels of governance (national or otherwise) have lead responsibility over how these funds are distributed across the UK, as well as how much autonomy and oversight they have in setting priorities for how these funds are spent.** Ultimately this comes back to the higher-level need to rationalise the formulation and implementation of UK industrial strategy in a way that resolves the place–sector tension.

3.3 SUMMARY

This chapter has provided a critical overview of the development of education partnerships in the UK over the last four decades. It traces the origin of current approaches in the education–business partnerships and Training and Enterprise Councils of the 1980s, as well as the Regional Development Agencies of the late 1990s and early 2000s. These were followed by an uptick in local, industry-led collaboration models under the previous Conservative Government, in particular Local Enterprise Partnerships and more recently Local Skills Improvement Plans. The chapter then explored the key issues and challenges that have characterised education partnership policy up to now, in particular the continuing lack of a systematic place-based coordination mechanism for education providers that can (1) give structure to the relations between institutions and (2) act as a common voice to represent education providers to local authorities and local business.

4. COLLABORATION IN NEWCASTLE AND THE NORTH EAST

Newcastle University is a leading higher education institution in North East England and has been instrumental in various local and regional skills initiatives supported by successive governments. This chapter explores the partnerships between local education providers, businesses, and government in Newcastle and the North East. It examines both general frameworks and specific collaborative projects, evaluating successes and identifying challenges in these partnerships.

The focus is on three main areas of place-based skills development:

1. Science, technology, engineering, and manufacturing, highlighting electrification and the Institute of Electrification and Sustainable Advanced Manufacturing (IESAM);
2. Culture and the creative industries, featuring the NewBridge project and the Cultural and Creative Zone (CCZ); and
3. Health, specifically the North East Health Innovation Neighbourhood (HIN).

The analysis emphasises how regional partnerships in Newcastle and the North East often exceed the collaborative solutions provided by national or sector-based strategies.

4.1 EDUCATION PROVIDER COLLABORATION IN THE NORTH EAST

Newcastle University has actively participated in collaborative initiatives across various sectors and geographical areas, both within and beyond the North East region. These efforts are guided by a consistent set of principles outlined in the latest version of its strategic framework. This section explores the importance of lifelong learning and skills in these principles and presents an overview of four notable examples. These examples highlight key aspects of Newcastle's approach to education partnerships and their impact on skills development in the North East.

4.1.1 THE GENERAL FRAMEWORK UNDERPINNING NEWCASTLE'S COLLABORATION APPROACH

Newcastle University's main strategic commitments to the North East in terms of education partnerships and collaboration with businesses and government are detailed in its new Education for Life 2030+ Strategy.[19] The delivery plan outlines the University's four key objectives:

- *Leading edge curriculum:* A new universal curriculum framework for Newcastle that speaks to the Universities values, is inclusive by design, supports disciplines with pedagogic innovation, reflects the expectations of our employers, and simplifies and harmonises structures across the University;
- *Educator accelerator:* A step change in support of educational excellence to transform the way the University attracts, develops, and recognises educators, professional colleagues and academic leaders to ensure that they have the time, skills and knowledge to power educational development and innovation and deliver an excellent experience for our students;
- *Student launchpad:* A transformed model of academic support enabling all students to explore and achieve their potential, recognising that every student arrives at university from a different starting point and takes a different journey through their educational experience. The launchpad will offer tailored support where needed, within Schools and connecting with central skills, wellbeing and careers to provide a coherent academic support journey into, through and from Newcastle;
- *Newcastle beyond the curriculum:* A new articulation of a core offer beyond the curriculum – mobility, placements, enterprise, sports, societies, volunteering, part time work and beyond –and help for students to navigate and record what their experiences beyond the curriculum bring to their learning experience.

Newcastle's *Education for Life 2030+ strategy* presents a vision for education and skills, aiming to be a global leader in inclusive, future-focused higher education. The University is dedicated to serving students locally and globally and will implement a new curriculum framework, tailored to the needs of the city region.

In the first instance, this universal curriculum framework is designed to reflects the University's aspirational values of creativity, excellence, and impact, as well as its core values of academic freedom, social and

environmental justice, and equality, diversity, and inclusion. In addition, the framework responds to the steer set by the national skills agenda to orient course development more explicitly towards place-based economic needs, with reforms designed to shape the curriculum in a way that is inclusive, employer-focused, and supports the University's full roster of teaching and research disciplines with pedagogic innovation.

Lifelong learning and skills feature as a key implementation priority for the University's place-based collaboration strategy, and play a prominent role in the University's contribution to partnership activities and initiatives, not only across the North East region but also internationally. As part of this strategy, the University co-leads or is participating in several of the key place-based initiatives geared towards enhancing lifelong learning and skills development that have emerged over recent decades:

- KEF partnerships with Newcastle Health Innovation Partners and Procter & Gamble, as well as Newcastle University Business School's involvement with the Newcastle Helix global centre for urban innovation;
- KTPs with Northern Stage (theatre located on university premises), Northumbrian Water Group, and Siemens;
- Work with the N8 Research Partnership (the collaboration body of the universities of Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and York) to develop the Northern Innovation Forum into a potential Northern Innovation SIA consortium.

The University's strategy has also focused on achieving closer integration between research and education, as well as bringing together world-class research clusters including both institutionally affiliated and independent scholars.

In its *Vision and Strategy*, Newcastle has also emphasised the ways the University is collaborating with:

1. **Local schools:** to enhance educational outcomes and broadening student opportunities. Key partnerships include:

- *The North East Raising Aspiration Partnership* a collaboration of the five universities in the North East of England. This aims to widen participation and increase higher education access for underrepresented groups by collaborating with schools and further education colleges across the region.
- The *Realising Opportunities* programme, a collaboration of leading research-intensive universities, which is designed to prepare students for university applications and student life.
- *North East Teaching Schools Partnership (NETSP)*, a collaboration with UCL, Tees Valley Teaching School Hub, and Sacred Heart Catholic High School, NETSP delivers the Early Career Framework. This programme supports early career teachers during their initial two years and offers professional development for their mentors.

- *IntoUniversity Newcastle East, a collaboration* with Northumbria University, this community-based centre provides academic support, skill development, and work experience for young people aged 7-18, fostering aspirations toward higher education.
- *Research Buddies,* an initiative that establishes long-term, mutually beneficial research partnerships between the university and local schools, engaging teachers, parents, and students in scientific discovery projects.

Through these collaborations, Newcastle University demonstrates its commitment to supporting local schools and enhancing educational opportunities in the North East.

2. **Local businesses:** to meet their needs, especially around Research and Development (R&D). This is a central part of the University's approach to tackling skills gaps in the North East workforce and laying the foundations to develop future cohorts of graduates with the necessary training to address medium- and long-term training needs.

Through the establishment of its global partnerships, including with partners in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Tanzania, supported by a dedicated Global Partnerships Fund, the University is working to create both national and international networks in order to promote new areas of subject expertise and specialist innovation, and at the same time advance the North and North East of England's international connectivity. This reflects a unique aspect of Newcastle's approach to partnership-building, which seeks to join up its 'responsible citizenship' at a local or regional level with its ambitions to act as a global-facing hub for knowledge-production. One of the significant common threads in how the University exercises its role as a 'civic university' is its **consistent efforts to ensure that its global professional and academic endeavours actively benefit the local economy, culture, and community.**

4.1.2 NEWCASTLE AS A TERTIARY EDUCATION COLLABORATION PARTNER IN THE NORTH EAST

During the last decade, Newcastle has pursued several education partnerships, which have included both:

- Initiatives developed and led by 'grassroots' coalitions of local partners, and
- Projects formulated in response to specific calls and strategic imperatives from central government.

There are four in particular that offer powerful illustrations of the distinctive approach taken to collaboration among education providers by Newcastle and its co-stakeholders in the North East skills ecosystem. These are: the Northern Accelerator, launched in 2016; the North East Institute of Technology (NEIoT), open since September 2020; the Collaborative Newcastle Universities Agreement (CNUA), formalised in July 2021; and

the Innovate UK co-funded Institute of Electrification and Sustainable Advanced Manufacturing (IESAM), housing its Power Electronics, Machines and Drives (PEMD) and battery centre partnerships, which became operational in November 2022.

The first of these projects, the **Northern Accelerator**, is a cross-regional strategic collaboration among six Higher Education partners, five in the North East ITL 1 region, and one in Yorkshire and the Humber. Aside from Newcastle University, the contributing partners are: Durham University, Northumbria University, Teesside University, the University of Sunderland, and the University of York. Modelled after the European concept of a Regional Accelerator, this partnership is primarily designed to foster research commercialisation, specifically by increasing the number of university research projects that are spun out as new businesses. It is designed to respond to a peculiar asymmetry within the North East:

- R&D spending levels among North East universities that lie well above the UK average
- Below-average levels of private-sector R&D investment, and
- The lowest business density in the UK.

With financial support of £4.9m from Research England's Connecting Capability Fund and a tranche of Shared Prosperity Fund resources, allocated by the UK Government and co-administered by the North of Tyne Combined Authority and Durham County Council, the Northern Accelerator has raised the number of spinouts from 1.8 per year on average (2011–16) to 6.8 per year (2016–21). It has created a Seed Investment Fund as a stepping-stone to developing an ongoing venture capital fund for university spinouts, which has so far invested £1.8m in a total of 122 pre-incorporation projects, employing over 900 people and supporting the delivery of 22 new training courses.

What stands out in the Accelerator model is the **explicit orientation of HE towards business creation as a path to local economic development**. Government policy around place-based skills improvement has so far paid relatively little attention to research commercialisation, and the **role that the tertiary education sector can play in not just generating the skills supply to meet pre-existing skills demand, but also reshaping the local business landscape and labour market on the demand-side as well.**

The success of the Northern Accelerator suggests that there is scope for education–business–government partnerships to be conceived as more than just collaborations between *existing* education providers and *existing* businesses, sitting in separate silos. Instead, **more focus is needed on what local education providers can do to cross the divide from one 'side' to the other and become more direct participants in the local economy beyond the strict boundaries of the knowledge and information sector**. Unlike the Accelerator, however, this strategic move should be opened up not just to research-intensive HE institutions but should also include learning- and training-intensive education providers across the post-16 and tertiary sector—specifically FE colleges, but also sixth-form colleges and private training providers.

The **North East Institute of Technology** (NEIoT), by comparison, is an indicative example of the more familiar pattern of education–business collaboration, which casts education providers in the 'supplier' or 'underlabourer' role of feeding skills into the local labour market. Newcastle is the sole HE partner in the NEIoT, whose centre of gravity lies with its FE partners: East Durham College, Middlesborough College, New College Durham, and Tyne Coast College. The two lead employer partners are the ESH Group, one of the largest construction businesses in the North East, and Nissan Motor Manufacturing UK, part of the car manufacturer Nissan's European division.

The NEIoT focuses on **shoring up and modernising the local skills availability** above all in industries that are central to the UK's, and the North East's, **existing areas of comparative advantage**: advanced manufacturing and engineering, especially motor vehicles, and construction and the built environment. In particular, it aims to boost skills in cross-cutting areas of higher technical proficiency and professional capacity—digital, business, and management. For these, it provides full- and part-time courses ranging from Level 3 up to Level 7, in particular apprenticeships and higher apprenticeships, in order to raise the equilibrium level of skills in these industries across the North East.

The NEIoT's objectives to deliver higher technical skills training across the North East's key sectors have been supported by targeted investments in cutting-edge facilities, located at the participating institutions' campuses. These include specific IoT-designated centres and learning environments, such as the STEM Centre and University Centre Middlesbrough at Middlesbrough College, which are designed to bring the latest technologies to bear on the industries the NEIoT has chosen to prioritise.

However, **what is missing from the NEIoT's mission, and from its sectoral priorities, is any sense of a longer view of developing the North East's regional specialisations**. Despite having both the ambition and the autonomy to carve out a path for innovative skills development, the NEIoT's vision is limited by the government's targets and the re-licencing process that tends towards a three-year rather than a longer-term plan. This means that it presently cannot go much beyond the UK Government's aspirations for sectoral specialisation laid out in its modern industrial strategy. This leaves considerable untapped potential for the North East to carve out a genuinely pathbreaking new direction for place-based industrial and skills strategy, not least by **developing the fiscal and strategic capacity to foster 'startup' ventures as a way of hothousing future-facing industries across the region**. In this respect, partnerships like the NEIoT can learn from projects like the Northern Accelerator, and **'fast-track' the conversion of research innovations into new business opportunities**.

Newcastle University has also played a central role in recent projects across the North East that have been supported through the Strategic Development Fund (SDF) and the Local Skills Improvement Fund (LSIF). In 2022–23, three projects endorsed by the North East England Chamber of Commerce as ERB secured SDF resources:

1. A project on health and health science co-led by the University of Sunderland and eight FE colleges (£2.68m);
2. A project in Tees Valley on engineering and advanced manufacturing for electric vehicles and green energy, co-led by Teesside University and a coalition of eight FE and sixth-form colleges (£2.55m); and
3. A project in the North of Tyne on electric vehicles and green energy, co-led by Newcastle University, four FE colleges, and three private-sectors stakeholders (£2.38m).

A similar set of projects covering digital, engineering and manufacturing, green construction, and health and social care secured LSIF resources for 2023–25: two sponsored by the NE England Chamber of Commerce, led by Northumberland College (including Newcastle University as well as Northumbria University, £2.5m) and Darlington College (also £2.5m), and one sponsored by the North East Automotive Alliance as ERB, led by East Durham College (including the University of Sunderland, £3.64m).

Of these projects, what has proven especially impactful is Newcastle University's work on green skills development and training with the Newcastle College Group, now NCG, the largest FE college in the North East and increasingly positioned as one of the major providers of HE learning in the FE space across the whole UK. The fundamental impetus of this collaboration has been to work with industry leaders to create new jobs in green energy in the North East, and ensure that they can be filled by skilled people with the right knowledge and experience from within the local labour market. By developing a range of new energy and engineering courses open to adults and post-16 students, this collaboration seeks to meet the evolving needs of the region's green industry.

There are two aims with this:

1. Train the next generation of engineering workers, but also
2. Reskill and upskill workers currently employed in the energy sector, specifically to allow engineers in the oil and gas sectors to move into new roles in renewable and clean energy development.

This is a classic case of targeting skills at those who are already in the industry, who carry the primary responsibility for bringing new knowledge and training to bear on industry practice, and thereby moving the North East (and the UK as a whole) towards achieving its Net Zero targets.

Newcastle University and NCG have expanded their collaboration into a regional partnership with Education Partnerships North East and ORE Catapult. This partnership focuses on developing courses to meet the North East's growing demand for skills in green power and transport. Local colleges, training providers, and industry groups like the NE England Chamber of Commerce, North East Automotive Alliance, and Energi Coast are also involved. New courses are being created in areas like battery manufacturing, vehicle

electrification, micro renewables, and offshore wind. The success of this initiative relies on close coordination between partners, not only in course development but also in sharing investment in specialized equipment to ensure access for learners across the region.

These multi-level partnerships, involving various stakeholders, highlight two key priorities:

1. Integrating education-to-education and education-to-business-to-local government collaborations into a cohesive program, and
2. Ensuring a continuous flow of targeted funding.

Both are essential for these partnerships to progress through different stages of development. Without them, the partnerships will struggle to achieve the institutional stability and maturity required to evolve from their early, "embryonic" phase into a permanent, self-sustaining part of the regional skills ecosystem.

In addition to regional-sectoral projects, Newcastle University has strengthened its local ties through education partnerships within urban Newcastle. Central to this effort is the Civic University Agreement (CNUA) with Northumbria University, outlining how both institutions will collaborate to positively impact the city and its communities. The latest version of this agreement focuses on partnerships in areas such as health, innovation, international connections, the regional and city skills agenda, social mobility, "Students as Partners," and the role of universities as "anchor institutions" for future projects.

The agreement builds on long-standing collaboration between the two universities to enhance the health, wealth, and wellbeing of the North East. A significant milestone in this partnership was the joint appointment of the Collaborative Newcastle Universities Programme Lead in February 2024. This step is aimed at establishing a permanent "bridging" body or joint steering group to embed the collaboration into each university's strategic plan.

Some of the key collaborative projects under the CNUA include:

- IntoUniversity Centre: a jointly funded learning centre based in Walker that aims to encourage local young people to achieve their aspirations, including FE and HE learning, employment, and work-based training.[20]
- City and regional skills agenda: collaborating to understand the current 'city offer' within Newcastle in key sectors from Level 3–7, to identify where there is complementarity or duplication, and to understand if the universities' offer is effectively meeting the needs of the city.
- Health: linking Newcastle's Health Innovation Neighbourhood (HIN, see more below) and Northumbria's Centre for Health and Social Equity (CHASE), and considering areas where collaboration can add value, including on skills and workforce development.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the value of place-based collaborations in Newcastle, bringing together the NHS, local government, higher education, and the voluntary and community sectors. These partnerships not only boosted local capacity in healthcare but also contributed to the city's economic, cultural, and social recovery, and helping build a more sustainable and inclusive future. Key partners include Newcastle and Northumbria Universities, two NHS Foundation Trusts (Newcastle-upon-Tyne Hospitals and Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear), the North East and North Cumbria NHS Integrated Care Board, and Newcastle City Council. Collaboration is also strong with Newcastle GP Services, the city's GP Federation, and local Primary Care Networks.

With a multi-institution partnership like this one, **well-defined coordinating structures become all the more important, to ensure that their collective expertise is targeted in the most effective way** to solve the critical needs of their local population. Accordingly, the CNUA is overseen by the city's statutory Health and Wellbeing Board, comprising representatives from several anchor institutions, including Newcastle and Northumbria Universities, Newcastle College, Northumbria Police, and representatives of local integrated care boards and NHS trusts, as well as the commercial, community, and volunteer sectors. CEOs from the partner organisations form a Joint Executive Group (JEG), which is responsible for monitoring delivery of strategic priorities.

Newcastle University has leveraged its position as a leading research and knowledge exchange institution in the North East to advance regional partnerships focused on improving place-based skills. A key example is IESAM, a program designed to address the growing need for training in electrification and power electronics, machines, and drives (PEMD). As the first initiative in the region to target PEMD industry skills, IESAM is co-funded by Newcastle University and UKRI/Innovate UK through the Driving the Electric Revolution Challenge. It brings together the North East Institute of Technology (NEIoT) with a broad network of regional further and higher education providers. The program is expected to benefit 7,500 students through curriculum development for PEMD, offering comprehensive content for T-levels, BTECs, Higher Technical Qualifications, and apprenticeships in fields such as automation, control, digital manufacturing, and robotics.

What sets IESAM apart is its innovative approach to creating a flexible, high-quality educational pipeline for regional PEMD (Power Electronics, Machines, and Drives) training. Since its launch, IESAM has mapped out all PEMD courses available in the North East, developed short continuing professional development (CPD) courses and tailored modules in electrification, and introduced outreach programs for local secondary schools, with a special focus on engaging girls. Recently, IESAM launched a Level 6 Degree Apprenticeship in Product Design and Development Engineering. Additionally, a toolkit is being created to help career advisors showcase opportunities in electrification and inspire students to pursue careers in the field.

At the heart of IESAM's educational pipeline is a focus on continuity and interoperability, where each level of curriculum builds on the previous one. Support resources, such as career advice and guidance, are designed to align seamlessly with the skills needed at various levels of industry experience.

Since autumn 2023, IESAM has also been home to the National Battery and Training Skills Academy (NBTSA), a UKRI/Innovate UK-funded project in partnership with New College Durham. NBTSA aims to address the growing demand for a skilled battery workforce by offering industry-aligned training at Levels 2 and 3, featuring innovative methods like virtual reality. Its goal is to strengthen the North East's expertise in this field and ensure operators and engineers have the skills required to meet future market demands. The academy plans to engage 320,000 schoolchildren through STEM initiatives, including a two-year exhibition and public engagement program, "STEM – Steam to Green," which promotes awareness of renewable energy advancements through exhibitions, school programs, family events, and career fairs.

Bringing both co-funded projects (IESAM and NBTSA) under one umbrella has fostered close collaboration, enhancing Newcastle University's education offerings. In partnership with industry, the university will launch the Level 6 BEng Product Design and Development Engineer Degree Apprenticeship in September 2024. This program will equip apprentices with the engineering skills needed for innovation in electrification and advanced manufacturing. After a two-year foundational program, apprentices will specialize in one of three areas: Batteries, PEMD, or Advanced Manufacturing. The program is designed to accommodate work commitments by offering a blend of online learning and hands-on technical sessions in state-of-the-art facilities.

This programme is seen as a trial model for future course development, with plans to explore specialised pathways such as high voltage and power systems, and potential co-delivery with industry partners.

4.2 TRIPARTITE COLLABORATION IN THE NORTH EAST

Collaboration among education providers in the North East has created a dynamic environment of exchange, joint steering, and resource-sharing. While some of these efforts respond to UK Government initiatives, many have emerged locally through the creativity and persistence of grassroots stakeholder coalitions. As noted earlier, it is challenging to separate purely education-based partnerships from the more complex, intertwined structures that also involve businesses and local government in "tripartite" collaborations. These integrated partnerships reflect the broader, interconnected nature of regional development.

This section broadens the focus on education partnerships in the North East by providing a detailed overview of Newcastle University's experience with tripartite collaborations at local and regional levels. It examines the collaborative frameworks that drive education–business–local government partnerships, highlighting how the University has operated within, and often surpassed, the 'top-down' mandates of statutory place-based skills development initiatives. The section explores how these collaborations have evolved to address both strategic objectives and locally driven innovation.

4.2.1 ALIGNMENT AND DIVERGENCE IN NORTH EAST SKILL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORKS

The recent context for tripartite collaboration in the North East has been shaped by the region's experience with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), the evolving devolution agenda, and subsequent focus on skills development through the introduction of Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs). Established in 2011 as part of the Coalition Government's initiative, the North East LEP—England's fourth largest—brought together leaders from the public, private, voluntary, and education sectors. Its oversight body, the North East Leadership Board, included 18 elected members representing local authority areas across County Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside, and Sunderland.

Each of the seven council leaders served on the North East LEP, along with key representatives from other bodies. In 2014, the chair of the newly formed North East Combined Authority (NECA) joined the board, representing Durham, Gateshead, South Tyneside, and Sunderland. In 2018, the Mayor of the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA), which covers Newcastle, North Tyneside, and Northumberland, also became a member, reflecting the evolving governance landscape in the region.

After the announcement of a further North East devolution deal in December 2022, NECA and NTCA were folded into the new enlarged North East Combined Authority (NECA). This formally took over the role and responsibilities of the North East LEP in May 2024.

During its tenure, the North East LEP launched several business-led strategic partnership projects aimed at fostering economic growth in the region. These initiatives focused on enhancing tourism, supporting the creative economy, advancing decarbonization, improving digital connectivity, and optimizing transport and travel. The LEP also managed the 21 sites of the North East Enterprise Zone, oversaw the North East Investment Fund (which has allocated £58 million for capital projects since 2012), and co-designed the North East Investment Zone, which received £160 million in funding for 2023-33.

Additionally, the North East LEP implemented various ongoing programs to provide businesses with the support and logistical assistance they need to capitalize on available opportunities. This included the North East Growth Hub, an online resource for accessing investment funding, and the North East Evidence Hub, which compiled essential data on apprenticeships, business creation, labour market trends, and sectoral imports and exports. This information served as a strategic evidence base for stakeholders across the region. For employer-led partnerships, the LEP ran North East Ambition, a framework that provided career information, advice, and guidance (CIAG) tools for educators and employability resources for businesses to help meet eight benchmarks for CIAG best practices.

At the core of the North East LEP's efforts was the North East Strategic Economic Plan (NESEP), the primary local strategy document developed in response to the long-term economic challenges and opportunities

identified in the 2013 North East Independent Economic Review. Initially published for the ten-year period from 2014 to 2024, the plan was regularly updated to reflect changes in the regional economy. It aimed to achieve key targets:

- Create 100,000 new jobs in the North East, with 70% in "better" managerial, professional, and technical roles;
- Close the employment rate gap between the North East and the rest of England (excluding London);
- Reduce the working age economic activity rate gap;
- Decrease the private sector employment density gap;
- Narrow the productivity gap (Gross Value Added per hour worked) by 50%.

By 2021–23, however, progress towards these targets was limited. By 2023, employment had increased by 82,900, reaching 83% of the 100,000 target. Notably, jobs in "better" occupations rose by 104,400, exceeding the 70% goal and indicating a shift away from other types of employment. However, the employment rate gap had only narrowed by 38%, falling short of the target for complete closure, while the economic activity rate gap decreased by just 5%, also below the 50% target. Additionally, the private sector employment density gap rose by 18%, and the productivity gap increased by 43%, rather than decreasing as intended.

Overall, the NESEP had limited success in improving the North East's economic position within the broader UK context. The region's GDP rose by £3.3 billion to £45.2 billion, with GDP per capita increasing by £1,505 to £22,980. Productivity (GVA per hour) also grew by £4.45 to £31.82. Despite these gains, the performance gap between the North East and the rest of England remained constant or worsened across all measures, although a positive development was a 5.2 percentage point drop in unemployment to 4.4% in 2023.

Where the NESEP did find some success was in identifying key industry sectors in the North East that were poised for significant growth. These sectors included advanced manufacturing, business services, digital and technology services, and education. The plan emphasized the region's leadership in "smart data" initiatives in both industry and public services, highlighting its strong asset base, which has the potential to enhance digital delivery across the entire economy. A significant factor in this was the UK Government's 2016 decision to establish the National Innovation Centre for Data (NICD) at Newcastle University's Science Central site, which is expected to create regional opportunities to capture a share of the growing digital market worth £216 billion and generate 58,000 new jobs. Additionally, Newcastle University hosts one of the UK's three National Centres of Excellence in Dementia Care Research, solidifying its status as a European leader in mental health, neurodegeneration, healthy aging, and patient outcomes.

The introduction of Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) led to a restructuring of local development and partnership geographies into three parts across the wider region. The North East LEP's area was divided into two LSIP regions: aligning with the jurisdictions of the North East Combined Authority (NECA) and North of

Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA). Complicating matters, these LSIPs were awarded to different Employer Representative Bodies (ERBs): the North East LSIP to the North East Automotive Alliance (NEAA), a non-profit automotive industry cluster based in Sunderland, and the North of Tyne LSIP to the North East England Chamber of Commerce, which also took on ERB responsibilities for the third LSIP in Tees Valley.

The intention behind these LSIPs was to identify the specific challenges and strengths of their respective regions, consulting with local employers to define their skills needs. This would provide education providers—such as further education colleges, private training organizations, and universities—with clearer guidance when commissioning future courses. However, the final LSIPs published in August and September 2023 reveal significant overlap among the areas, raising questions about the effectiveness of dividing the North East into separate LSIPs.

LSIP Priorities	North East LSIP	North of Tyne LSIP	Tees Valley LSIP
Advanced manufacturing	X		
Business and professional services		X	X
Construction	X	X	X
Culture, creative, hospitality, and tourism		X	
Digital	X	X	X
Employability		X	
Green energy and net zero		X	X
Health and social care	X	X	X
Professional skills		X	X
Transport and logistics	X		

This alignment already became apparent at the drafting stage for the three LSIPs, especially those for the North East and North of Tyne. With the help of the emergent NECA infrastructure and the ad hoc facilitation of existing education–business–local government partnerships that bridged and cross-cut the designated LSIP areas, the ERBs and their business affiliates developed informal channels to 'compare notes' and exchange 'best practice' recommendations across the obstructing (and to some extent arbitrary) LSIP area boundaries.

The main lesson here is that the **subregional geographies created by and for LEPs and LSIPs to replace the larger ITL 1 area covered by the RDAs are simply too artificial to be meaningful.** They may have their origins in more local administrative subdivisions, often associated with counties or metropolitan districts,

but **their boundaries do not reflect the economic or cultural geography of (e.g.) travel-to-work areas, educational catchment areas, or legacy education partnerships within and between regions** such as the North East. In that sense, they do not function in a way that emancipates the distinctiveness of individual localities but instead act as a **systemic brake on joined-up, transformative thinking** that could offer concerted new visions for regional skills ecosystems.

4.2.2 NEWCASTLE AS A BUSINESS, COMMUNITY, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION PARTNER IN THE NORTH EAST

The strategic priorities identified by the cluster of LEPs and LSIPs in the North East since 2011 have provided a powerful framing context and steer for the 'tripartite' partnerships that Newcastle University has participated in alongside the education–education partnerships outlined above. What stands out immediately is that neither Newcastle nor its usual partners have tried to add *all of* these strategic priorities to their local collaboration 'roster'. Instead, they have chosen a few key themes where developing new collaborative projects made sense as a way of 'leaning into' either (1) their existing areas of sectoral/subject specialisation, or (2) areas in which they wanted to intensify their activities in line with their own institutional strategic objectives.

There are five projects that give a good indication of the range of Newcastle's activities in this space, covering culture, digital, (green) energy, and health skills improvement priorities: the Digital Academy developed in September 2019 in partnership with Siemens; the Energy Central Campus, launched in 2021; the NewBridge artist-led community, founded in 2010 and boosted by significant investment in 2022; the Cultural and Creative Zone, developed as an expansion of NewBridge in 2022–23; and the Health Innovation Neighbourhood, in development since March 2022 and finally approved in April 2024.

The German multinational technology company Siemens is one of Newcastle University's longest-running R&I collaborators, especially its spin-off Siemens Energy. This collaboration has included co-funding for innovation and knowledge exchange around: novel battery technologies and performance optimisation, power electronics, energy security, rail signalling verification, and materials and mechanical component testing for the rail and energy sectors. These programmes have centred above all on establishing strategic initiatives such as:

- The National Centre for Energy Systems Integration (2016–22), supported by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council and Siemens alongside a coalition of energy providers, global HE institutions (Nanyang Technological University, Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology, Technical University of Denmark, and University College Dublin), and local government (Durham County Council and Newcastle City Council).

- The Integrated Transport Electricity Gas Research Laboratory (InTEGReL, launched 2017): an integrated energy systems development and demonstration facility co-locating an electricity distribution system, a gas distribution hub, and a gas distribution system control room. Designed to foster collaboration between industry, academia, and government for innovation in energy technologies, strategies, and processes, and break down sectoral barriers between electricity, gas, transport, and water supply. Supported by Northern Gas Networks, Northern Powergrid, and Northumbrian Water alongside Newcastle University and Siemens.

Building on a growing intensity of work-facing opportunities for Newcastle students, in the form of placements, careers fairs, and employer talks, Newcastle partnered with Siemens and the University of Sheffield to create a Digital Academy. This Academy offers a sponsorship programme targeted at selected promising undergraduate students, subsidising their tuition fees from their second year of study (at the level of £3,000 p.a.), awarding them a 12-week paid summer placement within a Siemens business during their studies, and giving them the opportunity to join Siemens' Graduate Scheme at the end of their degree. Together with the joint strategic initiatives, this scheme shows the **value of building up consistent and continuous partnerships over time between the same businesses and education providers** within particular local government geographies. Only with a high degree of cross-institutional integration does it become possible to align skills supply and skill demand between them in a way that can help smooth the transition from subject-specialised learning to sector-specialised employment.

The importance of place to making this transition as effective as possible is what underlies the similar development of the Energy Central Campus in Blyth. The Campus was created as part of the Energising Blyth place-based regeneration programme, which aims to create 7,500 jobs and 5,000 learning opportunities anchored in Blyth's culture and renewable energy industry cluster at the Quayside and the Port of Blyth, with a range of associated housing, security, and transport investments. It exists in two phases, which are intended to boost skills in clean growth technologies among local young people and adults, in order to develop a skilled local clean energy workforce.

The first phase, completed in winter 2023 and due to open in September 2024, is the Energy Central Learning Hub, a co-location of state-of-the-art industrial training, education, and STEM-related skills facilities, designed to promote sector-led training and higher-level skills as well as R&I. This phase enjoys a mixture of national and local government support, drawing on funding from HM Government's Towns Fund as well as NTCA and Northumberland County Council, and includes a range of post-16 education providers alongside Newcastle University, in particular Bede Academy and Northumberland Skills. The aim is for the Hub to deliver industry-led T-levels in digital and engineering that will set local learners on the path to further and higher upskilling in STEM sectors, with a goal of at least 800 learners taking qualifications such as apprenticeships, short courses, T-levels, or traineeships every year.

The second phase, the Energy Central Institute, is due to be completed in late 2026, and will expand the skills offering at the Campus to degree- and doctoral-level subject expertise and sector skills, aiming for over 200 learners achieving Level 4+ qualifications each year. The clear intention is to provide an **infrastructure that gives local learners continuity and obvious 'follow-ons**' in their choice of upskilling pathways, and **gives physical meaning to the idea of a 'talent pipeline'**, in order to hothouse local skills supply in one of the North East's key strategic sectors.

Meanwhile, the strategic priority around culture has relied on harnessing and updating significant pre-existing collaborative work, most strongly associated with the NewBridge project. This project is a Newcastle-based artist-led community originally established by two Newcastle University graduates, which provides space for creative practice, curatorial opportunities, and an artist-driven programme of commissions, development opportunities, events, and exhibitions, targeted above all at recent graduates and early-career artists. Initially conceived as a temporary pop-up space on New Bridge Street West, it took on more permanent form during 2013–18 when it gained Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation status and developed a long-term partnership with Newcastle University to support the graduate development programme 'The Collective Studio', which seeks to bridge the transition from University studios to the workplace.

This growth also allowed the NewBridge Project to relocate to new sites on Gateshead High Street and Market Street, and then to the Shieldfield Centre, and develop additional facilities, including a bookshop, co-workspaces, gallery, and several studios. In spring 2022, the Project successfully applied to the NTCA's 'Skills for Growth: Creative People' fund, supported logistically during the drafting process by Newcastle University, and secured a major award for a three-year programme of continuing professional development (CPD), skills development work, bursaries, and mentoring opportunities.

Since the award, the backing from the 'Skills for Growth' fund has enabled the NewBridge Project to enhance the support they offer to the region's creative sector by strengthening their links not just with Newcastle University but with other FE and HE institutions and skills providers as well In line with NewBridge Project Business Plan 2023–24, NewBridge and Newcastle University co-developed an annual 12-month creative development programme for recent graduates and early-career creatives, and worked together on several CPD programmes for up-and-coming artists. These include the 'Create Disrupt' programme, which seeks to support pathways into the creative sector for under-represented groups, as well as a number of research projects including 'More than Meanwhile Spaces', which has informed 'offshoot' creative sector developments in neighbouring Gateshead.

The NewBridge Project also provided a vital blueprint for the development of the Cultural and Creative Zone (CCZ), which is located within Newcastle's city centre conservation area. The NTCA, in partnership with Newcastle City Council, North Tyneside Council, Northumberland County Council, and the North of Tyne elected Mayor, has provided £1.7 million to deliver a programme of activity over five years. One of the CCZ's

primary goals is to increase the amount of physical space available for cultural and creative practitioners and businesses to work, collaborate, rehearse, and perform. They hope to encourage potential workspace providers and property-owners to submit plans that will result in a net increase in workspace, primarily for use by the culture and creative sectors, through their CCZ Workspace Small Grants scheme.

In a similar vein, in 2021 the local government authorities in Newcastle launched the Skills for the Culture, Creative, and Tourism Sector Call, with the aim of delivering better outcomes for young people, as well as promoting investment in skills to support the local economy and help people further progress into work. Alongside this, the North of Tyne Culture and Creative Investment Programme, funded by the NTCA and delivered by Creative UK, offers a combined package of financial and business support through specialised investment in the form of loans, equity, grants, a challenged fund, and a tailored programme of business support, up to £8,000 per applicant. This package is open to freelancers and business active in the culture and creative industries in areas covering North Tyneside, Northumberland, and Newcastle, and is designed to encourage diversification, experimentation with business models, fostering current and new partnerships, green and sustainability adaptation, importing short-term expertise, making small capital purchases, personnel expansion, or upskilling.

Newcastle has also acted as an anchor for policy-facing interventions designed to raise the profile of the culture industry in the North East. Newcastle University and the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) are collaborating as new hosts of the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (Creative PEC). Nine bids were considered, leading to the formation of a 'twin hub' structure, with a Northern Hub in Newcastle and a Southern Hub in London. The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funds Creative PEC to conduct independent research and make policy recommendations for the UK's creative industries, with £11m of funding confirmed for the Creative PEC to continue its work for another five years up to 2029. During this period, Creative PEC is introducing 'State of the Nations' reports in four high-level priority thematic areas, each of which will be led by the four organisations that make up the research consortium: R&D, Innovation and Clusters (University of Sussex); Creative Education, Skills, Talent (Work Advance); Internationalisation (Newcastle University) and the Arts, Cultural & Heritage sectors (University of Sheffield).

Creative PEC also aims to improve the quality of evidence for their three main stakeholders—industry, policymakers, and the broader research community—in the creative industries. They consult with industry on the many challenges that the sector faces, such as dealing with limited diversity and skill gaps within the available labour force, as well as trade barriers and pressures impacting local growth. By posing these questions to their UK-wide network of researchers, who then provide evidence and policy advice to policymakers, they work to ensure that the research and policy recommendations they produce are pertinent to the needs and priorities of those working in the sector.

Newcastle has also supported the local cultural and creative sector through the involvement of Newcastle University Business School in programmes like 'Captured', the University's internationally recognised leadership programme for small business owners. The programme, which is fully funded and delivered at no cost to participants, allows small and micro- business owners to develop their professional skills, including in areas such as leadership and management, through a series of workshops over a two-month period. Each small business-owner is also paired with a manager from one of the region's larger businesses, within or beyond their sector or supply-chain, who can provide a sounding-board and fresh perspective on the ambitions of the small business. Through the programme, owners learn to identify key business needs, develop advanced leadership, management, and analytical skills, and leave the programme with a personalised business plan. Several of the region's small cultural and creative businesses have benefitted from participation in 'Captured', further contributing to and growing the region's creative industries.

In this respect, Newcastle offers a **model of how tertiary education providers, especially universities, can act as facilitators for P2P 'best practice' and knowledge exchange *without* having to take on a 'conduit' or 'middleman' role themselves**. It plays to the strengths of a research-intensive university model geared towards identifying and understanding the needs of the local labour market, without imposing an undue logistical burden on them to meet all these needs themselves.

Finally, the lessons learned from these partnership experiences in energy and culture, coupled with Newcastle University's existing expertise in ageing, digital science, health, and sustainability, have informed the planned development of the UK's first Health Innovation Neighbourhood (HIN) on the brownfield site of the former Newcastle General Hospital. The aim of the HIN is to identify, investigate, and implement solutions that aid healthier and more sustainable living for people, society, and the planet, underpinned by 4 priority areas: (1) education for all, (2) research for impact, (3) inclusive and sustainable development, and (4) economic empowerment.

The impetus is local as well as global: people who live in deprived areas, particularly within the North East of England, have significantly lower life expectancies, lower expected health outcomes, and lower economic productivity. At the same time, the effects of climate change and intensifying natural disasters are exacerbating global health and social inequalities, with a complexity that cannot be tackled merely through 'broad-brush' or one-dimensional solutions. In this context, the HIN is intended as a space for R&D co-led by HE institutions, business, and government to study and shape the future of aging and health, focusing on living, leisure, learning, and employment. This collaboration is intended to inform policy decisions and the development of neighbourhoods and holistic care that drive material changes in healthy and sustainable living across the globe for future generations.

The HIN is a useful example that shows the potential **versatility of place-based, sectoral thinking in education partnerships, with impacts that benefit the local, regional, national, and global levels** at the same time. Through its location in Newcastle's West End, one of the city's most ethnically diverse and deprived areas, the HIN aims to act as a 'living laboratory' to develop new medicines and technologies that can subsequently be rolled out at far greater scales. At the same time, it will represent not just a physical space, but also a community-centric initiative, where the housing, green spaces, healthcare, and educational facilities will sit alongside research and innovation to drive forward 'cradle-to-grave' healthcare improvements. The University has appointed a HIN Community Engagement Manager to lead, design and coordinate a range of diverse initiatives that deliver community engagement.

In particular, the HIN will be a valuable case-study for the capacity of the UK Government to undertake long-term planning to improve health outcomes and increase economic productivity. Reinforced by strong industry and research partnerships and local authority backing (especially Newcastle City Council), the HIN will generate new lines of enquiry for how a neighbourhood approach can rewire policy approaches to addressing systemic inequalities in the UK and further afield.

4.3 SUMMARY

This chapter has explored Newcastle University's extensive experience in building and developing regional education partnerships, both in the form of intra-education provider collaboration, and 'tripartite' collaboration with businesses and local government stakeholders. It has considered the particular strengths of the frameworks and models Newcastle has applied to grow its collaborative presence within and beyond Tyneside and the North East, as well as identifying some of the key challenges that have emerged and the lessons that can be gleaned from them for what makes partnerships in different areas of subject and sector specialism successful, above all in the area of stimulating skills development. The chapter has also tracked how far the areas in which Newcastle University has specialised have aligned with the strategic priorities named by local and national skills improvement initiatives, above all in STEM, the creative and culture industries, and health and social care.

5. REGIONAL EDUATION PARTNERSHIPS: A NEW MODEL FOR PLACE-BASED SKILLS IMPROVEMENT

This chapter responds to the issues and challenges that affect collaboration among stakeholders in skills development, outlining a model that overcomes the problems of the current policy landscape around intra-education provider and business–education provider–local government partnerships. It draws on Newcastle University's experience with both forms of partnerships to inform a new approach to regional skills development, rooted in the need for a single shared understanding of 'skills progress'. Key to this is a structure of regional skills pipelines that allow learners and workers to move seamlessly between training and employment, and a new generation of regional oversight and governance bodies that can implement a 'regional–sectoral' industrial strategy designed to uplift productivity in every part of the UK.

5.1 A REGIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT COLLABORATION

There are identifiable gaps in the current policy agenda for skills improvement which limit the opportunity for engagement by institutions like Newcastle University. Across the UK, stakeholders have often had to advance initiatives where government funding, legislation, or regulation have fallen short. This experience is not unique to Newcastle: similar partnerships have emerged at the University of Derby's Nuclear Skills Academy, Harper Adams University's lifelong skills for the agri-food sector, Staffordshire University's microcredential courses, and the University of Salford's higher technical qualifications.

However, Newcastle's partnership model offers specific insights for re-establishing coherence in the skills development agenda—particularly by aligning it with upskilling and productivity as central goals for both national and regional policy.

5.1.1 REGIONAL PIPELINES FOR CONTINUOUS SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

In the first instance, bringing skills closer together with productivity means dissolving a longstanding hermetic divide between supply-led and demand-led understandings of 'skills progress'. Within the education system, especially formal school, college, and university-based learning, the trajectory of 'progress' is defined by 'graduating' from one level of qualification achievement to the next: from A-levels or T-levels to apprenticeships, degrees, and HTQs, then to master's and doctoral programmes. Within the economy, specifically formal employment, the same trajectory is defined by 'training up' through successive levels of in-work and work-related upskilling, often in the form of CPD or professional registration and accreditation.

In both cases, upskilling is generally credentialled, measured by testing, and driven towards demonstrating certifiable results. But the actual evaluation criteria and metrics of 'skills progress' on the supply and demand side exist almost entirely in parallel, or even in mutual isolation. This means that **one of the most important priorities for achieving better business–education provider collaboration on skills development is reducing the distance between the requirements that must be satisfied to 'level up' skills** on the business and education provider side.

In particular, business–education provider collaboration should focus on delivering what is needed to put in place a **holistic conceptual replacement understanding of 'skills progress'** that unites both the educational and economic strands into **a single shared model of a skills matching trajectory**. On the education system side, this means increasing the incidence of courses and qualifications that have clearly structured competence standards attached to them, rather than just relying on 'test results' (whether for classroom-based or practical teaching). On the economic side, it means promoting the availability of work-related training that is formally accredited (i.e., has credit-bearing value) within the Level 1–8 framework, rather than only existing as sectoral or even bespoke company-badged tiers of competence achievement.

This is essentially the aim of business–education provider collaboration on curriculum design: achieving a sufficient **rapprochement between 'skills supply' and 'skills demand' understandings of 'skills progress'** that both can be translated into a **common language**, which both the learning side and the work side can understand.

The model that achieves this is a system of Lifelong Learning Pathways (LLPs), as outlined in our report *Hungry to Learn*.[21] These are a joined-up trajectory for upskilling progression from the bottom to the top of

the competence and qualifications 'climbing frame', differentiated according to subject-area (supply-side) and industrial (demand-side) specialism. They take the form of a continuous series of modular courses running from Level 1 to Level 8, which can act as standalone 'units' of knowledge and skills acquisition but can also be 'stacked' into cumulative qualifications.

LLPs are designed to be offered through a mixture of place-based and sectoral partnerships between tertiary (and where relevant secondary) education providers, including universities, colleges, and private training providers, and industry bodies active in the relevant sector(s) for which these Lifelong Learning Pathways deliver specialised skills. These LLPs align closely with the underpinning concept behind Newcastle's tertiary education partnership strategy, exemplified in particular by the region-wide course mapping and bespoke CPD and modular learning offered by IESAM.

LLPs are intended to provide an easily comprehensible at-a-glance 'map' of the available upskilling options in any area of learning or work that learners/workers, education providers, and businesses are able to navigate:

- Learners: LLPs help learners clarify the career options that lie open to them after completing their current courses, and the additional course requirements they would need to fulfil to undertake their future career moves.
- Workers: LLPs outline for workers the possible study options they can pursue at their current career stage, and the additional course requirements they would need to fulfil to reach the next stages in their future career progression.
- Education providers: LLPs support education providers in refining careers information, advice, and guidance (CIAG) for their current students, and help them better assess the readiness of external course applicants.
- Businesses: LLPs let businesses refine their target-setting within the HR process for regular reviews of their current employees and help them better assess the capabilities and 'fit' of external job applicants.

The basis for the LLPs model is the system of 'occupational standards', which has been defined for apprenticeships and other vocational qualifications at Levels 3–6 by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE).[22] LLPs take the underlying logic of these competence standards and expand them 'upwards' to capture Levels 7 and 8, 'downwards' to capture Levels 1 and 2, and 'across' to cover not just vocational but academic and all other forms of learning and training as well. In effect, by expanding to cover the full Level 1–8 spectrum, LLPs **elevate the terminology of the 'competence standard' as the common language of 'progress' for both the learning and the work sides of the skills matching trajectory** across the board. At the same time, they also shift this terminology away from what is currently largely FE space into the (upper) secondary school and HE/university sectors.

LLPs foster a logic of integration that is designed to bridge the divides between secondary, further, and higher education as either 'stages' or 'branches' of the wider education system. Specifically, they introduce a much stronger sense of 'continuation' into the options for the route out of secondary (school) education into either (1) entering the labour force with secondary-level skills, (2) carrying on learning to gain tertiary-level skills at either college or university (or an alternative provider), or especially (3) pursuing a deliberate mixture of both.

The point of this 'continuationism', and the core aim of LLPs conceived as 'pathways', is to help learners and workers get an awareness of the 'path forward' for either acquiring or applying their skills competences. They need a well-defined sense of which forward 'routes' are possible at every point in the pathway, and the points at which learners face 'forks in the road' that require them to exercise a conscious choice over their 'next step'. At the same time, the idea of 'continuation' is also to minimise the finality of their 'route' choices at each 'fork', by reducing the hurdles that preventing learners and workers from (re)joining one 'route' from a different one at a later stage.

This is partly the aim of IoTs: to create a predefined network of partner institutions across business and the education sector between which learners and workers can 'step on' and 'step off' in seamless succession. But for this learning–work reciprocity to be entirely seamless, both the educational and economic sides must have a **dedicated 'open door' or 'gateway' capability**. This is necessary to allow learners and workers to not just 'step on' and 'step off' the learning and working sides of the upskilling trajectory, but to **directly 'step through' from study/training into employment and back again**. This can involve:

- A set amount of time as a 'learning placement', as part of contracted employment arrangements: (e.g.) a weekly day or half-day dedicated to upskilling courses; 1 week of training every 2 months; a multi-month or term of sabbatical.
- A set amount of time as an 'industry placement', as part of scheduled course provision: (e.g.) a placement year for multi-year courses; a placement term for year-long courses; a residential 'bootcamp' as part of short courses
- Hybrid arrangements that combine elements of both of these into a model of fully integrated 'on-campus' or 'on-the-job' parallel training and work.

This is where it becomes crucial to have something more concrete than just a conceptual holistic LLP framework, which allows learners and workers to move between *any* qualification and *any* occupation within a certain subject-area or sectoral specialism. What is needed is a mechanism that lets them go from *a specific* qualification that supplies *specific skills at a specific* education provider to *a specific* occupation that demands *specific* skills at a *specific* business. Of course, especially when it comes to reskilling the labour force, there is a degree of flexibility and openness in (1) the expected employment destinations after any given qualification,

and (2) the expected qualification background assumed by any given employment. But the more specialised the skills gaps that businesses in a particular sector are trying to fill, the more refined and targeted the subject qualifications designed to fill them have to be.

This is the aim of a **skills pipeline**, which provides **ready-made place-based infrastructure on both the learning and the work side to support a range of subject- and sector-specific Lifelong Learning Pathway routes among a network of education provider and business partners within a defined geographical area**. A learner at one of the schools, colleges, or universities in this partnership is 'set up' to transition directly into one of the employers in this partnership when they embark on their next career step. In the same way, a worker at one of these employers is 'set up' to transition directly into one of these education providers for their next course of study. Setting up this pipeline as a regional arrangement is a way of giving LLPs as an upskilling 'route' a clear spatial presence, and at the same time ensuring that learners and workers have a sizeable number of places of study and employment they can choose from.

If we draw this back to the idea of 'occupational standards' and 'occupational maps' pioneered by IfATE, the regional skills pipeline is a way to make competence-based frameworks of 'skills progress' regionally specific. The standards for each qualification level are no longer just based on general skills competences but, as a result of careful and targeted curriculum co-design, tied to the specific learning outcomes and work expectations of specific, identifiable institutions. In a similar vein, these standards are no longer just subject- or sector-specific, but place-specific too. A place-based **pipeline model allows us to sketch out a full 'skills progress' trajectory for a hypothetical learner/worker within a given 'region' of the UK**, not just as a concrete barometer for their own individual opportunity, but also as a specific way to ensure that the skills they gain at the specific schools, colleges, and universities are sector, occupation and place relevant.

Decentering the otherwise national framework of LLPs through a pipeline model imposes certain key requirements on the partner institutions involved. One is the need for **full credit interoperability and portability** between the education providers offering qualifications at successive levels in the LLP 'climbing frame', or at successive 'junctions' in the pipeline. Learners must be able to take every course they complete forward to *any* business if they want to stay in or move into employment afterwards, or to *any* education provider if they want to pursue additional study, and have it recognised and taken automatically into consideration as a valid part of their skills competence 'portfolio'. This has to be the case for all courses offered within the pipeline, from microcredentials and short courses to year-long or multi-year degrees and apprenticeships.

Keeping this form of interoperability and portability 'regionally focused' sidesteps the problem of having to iron out the overlapping jurisdictions between the array of national-level quality assurance and regulatory bodies, which is a more complex task. All that is required is for **mutual credit recognition between partner institutions** to be an explicit part of the agreement that underpins regional pipeline partnerships. Here, one

of the historical challenges has been to achieve inter-institutional agreement on the amount of value of credits the 'receiving' institution is prepared to accept from the 'sending' institution. It is rare to find examples of (e.g.) HE providers willing to recognise more than 60 credits 'transferred in' out of a total of 180 required to complete a master's degree (Level 7). It is even less common to find colleges and universities who accept learners onto their programmes 'mid-way through' at Levels 4–6, having completed large fractions of the qualifications they are aiming for elsewhere.

The extension of this is that partner institutions need to agree on the precise connections between skills supply and skills demand at different points along the upskilling trajectory, or at the different 'junctions' in the pipeline. Specifically, if individuals need to fulfil particular 'competence standards' in order to meet the requirements of particular occupations then **the connection between different qualification levels and different career levels has to be made more explicit**. The aim of LLPs is to feed smoothly into career development, and help learners get exactly the skills they need for their career development as efficiently as possible, without running the risk of underutilising their skills. A sub-national skills pipeline, means linking the roster of upskilling, training, and learning provision delivered through courses that individuals can take at education provider partners alongside work, in-work, or during a 'step-off' hiatus from work to the requirements for career progression at business partners.

5.1.2 REGIONAL EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP FOR HOLISTIC PLACE-BASED SKILLS POLICY

Implementing a skills pathway across different subject and sector-specific routes raises the need for an overarching framework. This requires oversight from a single 'institution' or 'partnership' that can cover the range of education providers in a single place, and which can facilitate the various partnership agreements that make an integrated skills system possible.

As discussed, the North East is now covered by two devolved jurisdictions – Mayoral Combined Authorities - with a policy lead for adult education and skills. The creation of an education partnership for the wider region would therefore need to do three things.

1. Provide a holistic vehicle for all education including secondary, further and higher education, building on and integrating existing arrangements like Education Partnership North East (EPNE)[23] in the college sector and Universities for North East England (UNEE).
2. Align with the strategic and policy directives of two distinct Mayoral Combined Authorities in relation to adult skills.
3. Enable collaboration across the whole region (LTI 1) with particular relevance to higher education and credit transfer.

A Regional Education Partnership (REP) can act as a **forum to facilitate and streamline collaborative decision-making around the creation of the regional skills pipelines**, and act as a validating **guarantor for the long-term inter-institutional commitments between schools, colleges, and universities** that are needed to put them in place. It would be helpful for national policy to **pilot this approach in the North East** where there is already the educational and industry infrastructure in place to support such a pipeline—(e.g.) in advanced manufacturing (including electrification), culture, energy, and healthcare sectors.

It is vital to foster continuity and alignment between the different stages of LLPs and pipelines that fall within the remits of different types of education provider: schools (entry level to Level 3), colleges (Levels 1–6), universities (Levels 5–8), as well as other providers. This means that the **REP must embody the principle of equal tripartism between pre-16, further, and higher education**, with clear equal representation for *at least* the school, college, and university sectors, as well as joint input into the strategic process for formulating LLPs and 'installing' skills pipelines. To achieve this, **the REP should create a Board made up of equal parts representatives of schools (e.g., LEAs, MATs), colleges (e.g., college groups), and universities**, and the Board's **membership should be explicitly chosen to reflect the diverse geographical distribution, range of sizes, and series of specialisms that exist among the region's education providers**.

Given the increase in uptake of specialist courses (especially microcredentials, short courses, and non-accredited learning) taken outside formal school–college–university structures, it is important that private and nonstandard providers are also given a voice within the REP. Since they have yet to be given a place-based presence beyond national representative bodies like the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), it may be easier to include them either through informal consultation or through the membership diversity criteria for (especially) FE and HE representatives.

Supporting the creation of pipelines is only one of several key areas of education provider coordination that the REP can support within their respective regions. The overall purpose should be to **act as a 'chamber of learning' that enables strategy co-development for all aspects of education sector activity treated as an integrated whole**, rather than hiving it off to different groups of education institutions or even individual providers based on outdated policy boundaries between primary/secondary, further, and higher education. The REP, led by its Board, should be responsible for proactive common visioning around: curriculum development, educational administration, finance and funding (including fees and grants), industry-facing research priorities (including regional and inter-institutional divisions of labour), knowledge exchange and industry impact, qualification assessment and progression, and teaching and training.

It is important to define the role of the REP carefully to ensure that they foster, and do not inhibit, the development of innovative approaches to skills improvement collaboration within the region. In the first instance, the REP should be designed to act as a 'policy sponsor' to bring about and elevate cases of bilateral

and multilateral collaboration between school, college, and university members. They are not meant to replace (e.g.) CUAs or IoTs, but instead to act as a regional broker to facilitate their creation, helping REP member institutions find ready-made place-based and sectoral partners they can work with and across a larger geography. Of course, this requires a high degree of clarity in the definition and demarcation of the REP's remit at the outset, to ensure that they do not become simply another bureaucratic bottleneck or onerous layer of accountability for the education providers who fall within their jurisdiction.

The REP is also **not intended as a device for either 'market creation' or 'market replacement' among regional education providers**. Education providers will still be able to pursue their independent strategies to 'win over' learners. What the REP should do is make available the full learning- and working-age population of their region as a potential learner pool, by helping create many more points of entry and 'throughflow' into and between education providers. This evidently requires a greater measure of coordination between education providers than a purely competitive system, but it does not remove the key element of 'consumer (i.e., prospective learner) choice' in the selection of (e.g.) which LLPs and pipelines they want to pursue. In that respect, the REP will not be a mechanism to enforce either competition or collaboration, but to foster a healthy balance of 'collabetition' or 'coopetition'.

The most significant way that the REP can help this process is to **offer region-specific quality assurance 'badging'** for qualifications offered by their member institutions, scaling up the process put in place by CoL partnerships. This 'badge' would act as a way of validating that the 'competence standards' that these qualifications provide is universally acknowledged across the region's entire skills system—removing any 'translation difficulties' in assessing learning effects between education providers (and businesses). This is the simplest way to bring about mutual recognition and interoperability between the accredited learning options available within the region and puts in place a key infrastructural component to facilitate the creation of LLPs and regional skills pipelines.

This 'badging' process also helps the REP create **a regional 'skills passport'**, which is a mechanism to give learners and workers confidence that any 'REP-badged' unit of upskilling they take is guaranteed to be portable into any other education provider or business within the region. They become able to demonstrate their 'skills progress' in an instantly recognisable way, significantly easing the burden of proof at both later course and job applications. As part of this, the REP needs to provide a resource that allows learners and workers within the region to see an at-a-glance visual of where within the overall regional area they can take each form and level of qualification. This should take the form of **a 'skills portal' that outlines the subject-area and sectoral LLPs and pipelines available within the region**, along with a coordinated infrastructure for CIAG delivery and course application 'throughput' across all the regional education options. The model for this is the IfATE 'occupational map' online resource, combined with the course choice and application functions of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) online system.

Overall, the REP should be the primary locus of accountability and responsibility for overseeing education collaboration and coordination in their regions. This includes not only overseeing the partnerships *between* schools, colleges, universities, and other providers within the region, but also being the 'sponsor' and 'first port of call' for partnerships between education providers and other stakeholders in the skills matching agenda. Specifically, the REP should operate a number of parallel 'streams' of partnership activity:

- Education–education: tertiary sector collaboration, 'collabetition/coopetition', and integration among FE colleges, among universities and HE institutions, and across the FE–HE divide, as well as between tertiary providers and schools (especially secondary education providers), through (e.g.) regional accelerator partnerships or course co-delivery;
- Education–business: co-development of sector- and subject-specific academies, campuses, hubs, research parks, and other learning infrastructure, as well as coordination of industry placements, CPD and workforce development, curriculum co-design, and industry-expert teaching.
- Education–government: coordination, distribution, and integration of public funding, both the 'pots' allocated by central government and (where relevant) devolved budgeting and revenue-raising strategy.
- Other: civic and 'placemaking' community regeneration projects, learners' and residents' feedback mechanisms.

These 'streams' allow the REP to bring together all the various existing place-based and sectoral skills initiatives 'under one roof', from CUAs, IoTs, and KEF partnerships/SIA consortia to (what is left of) EBPs, and most recently LSIPs. Again, the aim here is not to erode the autonomy of education providers in deciding which different forms of skills development partnerships they want to embark on. Instead, the REP's role is limited to aligning, facilitating, streamlining, and ensuring maximum 'best practice' exchange, in order to allow as many of these partnerships to emerge across the region as possible.

5.2 A REGIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

As conceived, the REP offers a way to solve the coordination problems that characterises collaborative partnerships between education providers, especially at different skills levels and across entrenched boundaries within the education sector. They are also a means of ensuring 'buy-in' to LLPs and skills pipelines by at least a representative sample of the key educational institutions needed to make these operational from Level 1 up to Level 8. The question now arises of how the REP can convert this largely 'inward-facing' role in overseeing the regional education sector into an 'outward-facing' responsibility to represent and advocate for the sector towards other stakeholders invested in skills development—business and government across the region. This is particularly a question of how the REP can bring the voices of schools, colleges, and universities to bear in a unified way on future policy initiatives around skills improvement.

5.2.1 FROM LOCAL TO REGIONAL SKILLS STRATEGY

The priority for improving skills strategy must be to strengthen the relationship between place-based and sectoral interests while limiting the *ad hoc* arrangements of multiple stakeholders across different administrative boundaries. The devolution agreement for the new North East Mayoral Combined Authority settles the debate over geography and provides the region with two distinct governance structures for the formulation of future skills. In the longer term this must mean a progressive move away from current LSIP arrangements.

The next 'generation' of the LSIP process will be coterminous with the new geography of MCAs. These areas, particularly NEMCA, contain multiple local economies with their own tightly bound travel to work areas. The challenge for economic growth in the North East, and an indicator of success, will be the degree to which these footprints are enlarged and integrated over the coming years. For example, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority is a single Travel to Work Area, with the exception of Wigan. NEMCA by comparison contains six self-contained travel-to-work areas. While the Tees Valley MCA has three.[24]

Skills strategy needs to understand how local labour markets work – this is the vital importance of place – but also how different sectors cluster in place for economic gain. But while the priority for MCAs will be the strategic oversight of skills within their territories there is some need to consider the wider region given the degree of overlap between south Durham, Darlington, Hartlepool and Middlesborough. This suggests scope for a regional (ITL 1 level) dimension for skills planning and industrial strategy.

The overarching aim is to iron out the asymmetries between 'hot' and 'cold' spots for skills development and to mitigate duplication as well as gaps and misalignments, integrating all strategies, plans and projects among regional partners. Ultimately this will be more efficient, effective and economic.

The underlying principle of LSIPs that skills development should be a shared social concern for politics, economics, and education, is fundamentally accurate. But so too is the principle of subsidiarity. Skills strategy should operate from the local to the regional tier, where appropriate, focusing on top level concerns for the wider region. The proposal for a Regional Education Partnership can provide the vehicle for this level of integration and oversight. Whilst primarily an instrument of the education sector it will need to engage with wider stakeholders including ERBs, trade unions, student associations, education charities, as well as local and combined authorities.

The guiding principle should always be how this strategy serves, and helps to further, the wider region. In the first instance, any regional consideration should be made on assessing the 'value add' of additional interventions—to boost productivity. Any new proposals at the regional level should be subjected to this

assessment criterion. This should consider the comparative advantage of one place over another in terms of sector specialisms so as to concentrate resource and expertise in specific areas and avoiding unnecessary competition in the innovation ecosystem. This would provide a level of strategic organisation that was lost with abolition of the Regional Development Agency.

Upscaling the criteria of strategic priority from the local to the regional tier allows for decentralised industrial and skills improvement strategy to remain more closely aligned to the overall national picture, while retaining leeway for place-sensitive variation.

For this 'regional–sectoral' approach, it is vital to pursue the full available range of ways to foster skills matching partnerships in a place-based way. The experience of Newcastle and the wider North East suggests at least four models of implementing bilateral or multilateral partnerships through projects that fall within the broad remit of skills improvement, which are tied to specific locations within a particular region:

- Spaces and zones: parts of urban or suburban areas designated as 'receptive environments' for specific sectoral or subject specialisms, such as the NewBridge Project or the Culture and Creative Zone.
- Hubs and marketplaces: parts of urban areas designated as 'campuses' for sectoral clusters, such as the Energy Central Campus.
- Policy and evidence centres: specific institutions targeted at developing stakeholder-led, practice-informed policy recommendations around sectoral growth, productivity, or skills improvement, for implementation at either regional or national level, such as Creative PEC.
- Skills institutes: specific institutions co-funded and co-managed by regional education providers and businesses, geared towards co-development and delivery of subject-specialist qualifications, such as IESAM.

Each of these place-based project models offers a different way of responding to the overarching logic of boosting regional productivity by filling sectoral skills gaps. **Future processes should actively seek to implement examples of each of these place-based partnerships for their strategic priority sectors**, spread across sectors in which the region holds a comparative advantage, has a particular legacy, or foresees future expected growth.

5.2.2 A SINGLE CENTRE FOR REGIONAL SKILLS MATCHING OVERSIGHT

The final element of this model for regional skills development is to develop a regional intelligence service for labour market information and skills matching oversight. This function currently rests at the national level, with the Unit for Future Skills (UFS), which is now part of Skills England. A key aim for Skills England is to form a coherent national picture of existing skills gaps and unify the skills landscape by bringing together Mayoral Combined Authorities and other key local partners.

The evidence to date suggests that a centralised approach to skills oversight has significant limitations in understanding local labour markets. The process of developing LSIPs involved rigorous local research which went beyond the current capability of the UFS.[25] There are limits to what the UFS dashboards, which utilises standard secondary data[26] sources, can reveal about the supply and demand for skills. One of the ERBs, the East Midlands Chamber of Commerce, resorted to developing its own online skills observatory, **Insight Unlocked**, drawing on local learner and vacancy data. If regions are to better understand and respond to their challenges, then they will need to exercise far greater autonomy over data and analysis of the skills system.

There is a clear need for better evidence to identify gaps in provision and inform targeted policy interventions. Significant data gaps need to be addressed to better analyse and assess demand (in emerging sectors and growth clusters) and the balance of provision at the local level. This will help to identify whether the current local and global supply of skills training is meeting identified need, and whether there are obvious mismatches – where both duplication and gaps in provision can occur.

The creation of a regional Skills Observatory developed in close cooperation with Skills England and the MCAs will allow real time access to all registered users in the region, including learners, providers, businesses. This could lead to a regional 'clearing house' or brokerage system to ensure effective skills matching, enabling learners to find the courses they need to access higher skilled opportunities. Respectively, these functions are now carried out by 'clearing' processes (e.g., operated by UCAS or individual education providers) and jobs agencies, including flexi-job apprenticeship agencies (launched 2021–23). A regional intelligence function could help to shape and direct more effective **'clearing' and recruitment agency processes within their region**, as a way to smooth residents' pathway along the skills pipeline through education to work.

The success of Skills England will be measured by how effectively it closes the gap between 'skills supply' and 'skills demand' in the most important sectors and places. Introducing regional observatories is a straightforward way for policymakers to provide a tangible solution to the UK's longstanding underinvestment in productive capital, especially human capital. The hypothesis on which they rest is that doing so at a regional level hits a 'Goldilocks zone' that neither national nor local-led skills improvement models can adequately address.

5.3 SUMMARY

This chapter has outlined a blueprint for a new approach to regional skills development partnerships, and the structures needed to foster effective education provider and business–education provider–local government collaboration. It puts forward a system of Regional Education Partnerships (REPs) that bring together schools, colleges, universities, and other private or nonstandard providers across an entire region into a shared mechanism of coordination and oversight. It proposes that these REPs act as a unified voice on behalf of regional education providers in the development of a new series of Skills Improvement Plans, which expand tripartite collaboration on skills development from the local to the regional tier. It recommends the introduction of integrated Lifelong Learning Pathways to make clear the route to higher skilled employment in the region and the creation of a regional skills observatory to inform this development.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has examined the policy landscape around education partnerships in the UK, including not just cooperation between education providers (education–education collaboration), but also between education providers, business, and government at various tiers ('tripartite' collaboration). It traces the origins of the current landscape back to the Training and Enterprise Councils and education–business partnerships of the 1980s–90s and the Regional Development Agencies of the 2000s. It argues that the devolution and skills improvement reforms of the 2010s–20s contributed to specific problems of fragmentation, geographical confusion, a lack of oversight and 'ownership', and wasteful gaps and overlaps that jeopardise the formulation of effective skills development policy.

It examines the case of Newcastle University, as a major education provider participating in a range of education partnerships and collaborative initiatives across the North East region, to illustrate where *ad hoc* and informal cooperation has moved to fill the space left by the most recent government-led interventions in skills development policy. Thes include: its place-based commitment to the North East as part of its *Vision and Strategy*; the innovative role of its Institute of Electrification and Sustainable Advanced Manufacturing (IESAM) in developing a regional and sectoral 'training pipeline'; its mixed experience with the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) process in the North East, North of Tyne, and Tees Valley; and a roster of place-based skills development projects at local and regional scales.

The report uses the insights from the Newcastle case-study to inform a new approach for education partnership working in the for region. It outlines a framework of Regional Education Partnerships (REPs) to oversee collaboration between education providers and other regional stakeholders in skills development. Specifically, it recommends greater involvement and alignment with the Mayoral Combined Authorities in the region, in relation to adult skills. It proposes a framework of regional skills pipelines that allows learners and workers to move seamlessly between courses at specific education providers and employment at specific businesses within a regional area. Finally, it proposes that REPs should act as the unified voices for regional education sectors in a new generation of regional Skills Improvement Plans representing education providers, businesses, local authorities, learners, workers, and local communities across the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT:

1. Encourage the formation of **'Regional' Education Partnerships (REP)** to align with Mayoral Combined Authorities, to act as a 'chamber of learning' that can represent the tertiary sector (colleges, universities, and private training providers) with a single unified voice. The creation of a REP would foster collaborative decision-making around sub-national skills development and guarantee long-term stakeholder partnership commitments. This should:
   - Act as a conduit between Skills England and MCAs to advise on holistic skills strategy.
   - Work with MCAs to strengthen careers guidance and develop **Lifelong Learning Pathways (LLPs)** in anticipation of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement now scheduled for 2026/7.
   - Map-out routes for how learners/workers can upskill by progressing within a place-based or sectoral network of education institutions.
   - Develop a quality assured **'skills passport and badging'** scheme for courses offered by North East education providers, to enable lifelong learners to have their qualifications recognised in the region.
2. Progressively **move away from LSIPs** by supporting Skills England, in partnership with Mayoral Combined Authorities to develop place-based skills strategies in devolved areas as part of the national drive towards greater devolution.
3. Give a representative voice to individuals as members of the labour force, learner pool, and residents by **including trade unions, students' and learners' associations, and community organisations in regional skill improvement strategy**.
4. Develop a transparent process for allocating resources to regions through negotiation between national government and Mayoral Combined Authorities, using the evidence-based mechanisms under development by Skills England to identify priorities.
5. Encourage the co-development of **'regional skills observatories'**, in collaboration with Skills England, to be managed by devolved authorities and regional education partners. This would generate place-based intelligence about regional skills supply and demand, helping to map Lifelong Learning Pathways and helping learners and workers navigate the skills system in terms of sector and subject-relevance.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY:

6. Newcastle University in collaboration with **UNEE partners should play a pivotal role the development of regional education partnerships**, with a specific remit to align Post-16 strategy with both devolved authorities in the North East. If Newcastle University was to operationalise the ambition of UNEE with the other four universities for the region this could be transformational for the region.
7. **Newcastle should lead on the development of a regional credit transfer framework**, in preparation for the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, to be implemented in 2026/7.
8. Building on the achievements of the North East Raising Aspiration Partnership to **widen engagement with schools**, and expand Newcastle's existing skills partnerships with other universities, FE colleges and community-based centres like 'IntoUniversity' to improve educational outcomes and **develop specific skills pipelines in strategic sectors**.
9. Introduce **new 'industry placements', 'learning placements', and 'on-campus' and 'on-the-job' arrangements** within the framework of Newcastle's education–business partnerships, to let learners/workers move seamlessly in any direction between place-based study/training and employment.
10. Promote Newcastle as a **sector leader in education partnership innovation**, focusing on its experience at developing models of place-based skills improvement: **spaces and zones, hubs and marketplaces, policy and evidence centres, and skills institutes**.

ENDNOTES

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22 Note that IfATE's functions will transfer Skills England - IfATE (Transfer of Functions etc) Bill – and the apprenticeship system will be reformed by the new Labour Government.
23 https://educationpartnershipne.ac.uk/
24 United Kingdom: Travel to Work Areas, ONS
25 https://feweek.co.uk/unit-for-future-skills-useful-to-a-point-2-5m-spend-in-15-months/
26 This includes open access data available via sources such as ONS and NOMIS, including data sets such as the Labour Force Survey, official census and labour market statistics (DWP/JCP), Business Register and Employment Survey, HESA learner data.

ABBREVIATIONS

- Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)
- Arts Council England (ACE)
- Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC)
- Career information, advice, and guidance (CIAG)
- Centre for Health and Social Equity (CHASE)
- Cities of Learning (CoLs)
- Civic University Agreements (CUAs)
- Collaborative Newcastle Universities Agreement (CNUA)
- Confederation of British Industry (CBI)
- Continuing professional development (CPD)
- Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (Creative PEC)
- Cultural and Creative Zone (CCZ)
- Department for Education (DfE)
- Education Business Partnerships (EBPs)
- Education–Business Link (EBL)
- Employer Representative Bodies (ERBs)
- European Union (EU)
- Federation for Small Businesses (FSB)
- Further Education (FE)
- Health Innovation Neighbourhood (HIN)
- Higher Education Institution (Hei)
- Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs)
- Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE)
- Institute of Electrification and Sustainable Advanced Manufacturing (IESAM)
- Institutes of Technology (IoTs)
- Integrated Transport Electricity Gas Research Laboratory (InTEGReL)
- International Territorial Level (ITL 1)
- Joint Executive Group (JEG)
- Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF)
- Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs)
- Lifelong Learning Pathways (LLPs)

ABBREVIATIONS

- Local Education Authority (LEA)
- Local Cultural Education Partnerships (LCEPs)
- Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)
- Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs)
- Local Skills Improvement Fund (LSIF)
- Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs)
- Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs)
- National Battery and Training Skills Academy (NBTSA)
- North East Automotive Alliance (NEAA)
- North East Combined Authority (NECA)
- North East Institute of Technology (NEIoT)
- North East Mayoral Combined Authority (NEMCA)
- North East Teaching Schools Partnership (NETSP
- North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA)
- Power Electronics, Machines and Drives (PEMD)
- Regional Development Agencies (RDAs)
- Regional Education Partnerships (REPs)
- Research and Development (R&D)
- Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)
- Research Excellence Framework (REF)
- Royal Society of Arts (RSA)
- Royal Society of Arts (RSA)
- Science and Innovation Audits (SIAs)
- Science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM)
- Strategic Development Fund (SDF)
- Teaching Excellence Frameworks (TEF)
- Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs)
- Unit for Future Skills (UFS)
- Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)
- Universities for North East England (UNEE)

ABOUT THE LIFELONG EDUCATION INSTITUTE

Britain faces deep social fractures, entrenched inequalities and a decade of stagnating productivity, while far too many adults find the pathways to reskilling and personal development blocked. To reverse this trend, advanced education beyond the school years must be central to our national strategy. The Lifelong Education Institute proposes a bold, learner-centred model that seamlessly integrates formal and informal learning, academic and vocational routes, with comprehensive wrap-around support—equipping individuals with the skills, knowledge and resilience required to flourish in an era of rapid technological and economic change.

Our approach is built on four interdependent pillars: placing the lifelong learner at the heart of policy design; architecting a truly integrated tertiary education system; forging robust partnerships between government, industry and education providers; and harnessing best practice from across the UK and internationally. By championing universally accessible, flexible and high-quality learning opportunities for school leavers, mid-career professionals, parents returning to work, retirees and everyone in between, we can open new pathways out of disadvantage, ignite innovation and secure a more inclusive, prosperous society. Lifelong education is not a privilege—it is a right we must legislate and protect if the UK is to thrive in the twenty-first century.

Learn more about us and our work: lifelongeducation.uk

Lifelong
Education
Institute

A Report for the Lifelong Education Institute

This report from the Lifelong Education Institute examines the evolution of regional education partnerships in the UK, specifically highlighting the experiences of Newcastle University and the North East of England. It aims to present and promote innovative strategies that enhance collaboration among education providers, businesses, and local governments, ultimately increasing access to skills and training opportunities.

Kindly supported by Newcastle University—an institution known for its commitment to lifelong learning and collaboration with further and higher education partners in the North East—the research also engages with community projects in fields such as science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM), and the creative and health sectors.

The report's primary goal is to analyse the opportunities and challenges that tertiary education providers, like Newcastle University and its partners, face in forming regional collaborations focused on skills improvement. It provides an in-depth overview of the policy landscape influencing partnerships among education providers and business stakeholders, examining how various policy approaches have allocated responsibilities for skills and training strategies among local governments, educational institutions, and businesses.

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