



Lifelong
Education
Institute

Partners in Progress: *Colleges at the Forefront of Technical Education*



In partnership with:



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Jon Ridley’s Image courtesy of Newcastle College / NCG

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FOREWORD FROM THE CHAIR OF THE MIXED ECONOMY GROUP

Collaborative partnerships are central to the strategic and operational goals of all colleges: with schools and universities; with employers; local authorities; policymakers; and, perhaps most importantly, with our students, helping them to build careers and prosper.

The recent Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper spells out the central role of colleges in meeting, even exceeding, the needs of our economy. As anchor institutions within local and regional economies, and with recognised expertise in developing and delivering high-quality higher-level skills development, colleges are crucial to the success of England's higher technical education and skills landscape. However, to move forward from an HE system built on competition to one which rewards collaboration presents significant challenges, especially when providers' institutional autonomy, even viability, is threatened. To create a landscape which requires employers, training providers, colleges, and universities to work collaboratively, as equal partners, to deliver what our economy needs is highly challenging and demands a collective shift in mindset.

In line with the vision set out in the White Paper, we are calling for a step-change in the level of collaboration between further and higher education providers and one where colleges' expertise in delivering higher level skills is recognised and rewarded. We need partnership models that are more flexible, responsive and attuned to the needs of students and employers, especially within higher technical education. Central to this is the recognition that colleges are not junior contributors within a hierarchy of provision; they are full partners, expert in designing, delivering and shaping higher education, particularly higher technical education.

Colleges' expertise in delivering higher level skills is recognised and complements what is delivered in universities. While the bedrock of university education remains the young, full-time undergraduate fresh from school or college, the typical College-Based Higher Education (CBHE) student is older, often balancing study with full-time work and family commitments. While the expansion of higher education has brought the benefits of higher skill to many more young people, it has also led to a steep decline in adult participation and has not resolved the skills shortages faced by many sectors. Here, colleges play an indispensable role. As anchor institutions deeply involved with working adults and their employers, colleges provide responsive, place-based higher education that meets immediate and emerging workforce needs. College higher technical education complements typical university provision; both institutions are partners in progress for the benefit of their place and the country as a whole.

Many leaders in Mixed Economy Colleges have developed productive and mutually beneficial relationships with university partners; others face local contexts where competitive pressures make collaboration more difficult. Nevertheless, we believe that collaboration throughout the education system should not be optional but expected—from Schools through to FE and HE providers. Colleges and universities must engage not in transactional relationships but in equal partnerships that draw on their respective strengths to meet economic and social needs.

Studying higher education at a local college must not be seen as a stepping stone to university. As the White Paper acknowledges, this perception must shift. To strengthen regional economies and widen participation, we need to revitalise part-time and flexible pathways leading to higher qualifications at all levels. For this reason, the Mixed Economy Group views College-Based Higher Education not simply as a pipeline to university, but as a destination in its own right—a high-quality, valued, and necessary strand of England’s higher education system.

Any change is challenging and may require providers to rethink business models, curriculum development, design, and delivery. But with the right policy framework in place, and with colleges and universities working together as equal partners, it is a challenge we can, and must, face together.

Only through true partnership can we shape a higher education system that genuinely serves students, employers, and communities.



Jon Ridley

Chair of the Mixed Economy Group of Colleges

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the publication of the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper with its strong emphasis on collaboration, this report explores in depth the issues involved, and argues that FE and HE providers should be moving beyond relationships based solely on validation and franchise agreements towards more strategic and long-term forms of partnership.

In future, the development of FE/HE partnerships should not depend on the attitudes of institutional leaders, or on short-term financial considerations, but should be the default model for Post-18 education. Closer FE/HE collaboration has a vital role to play in closing skills shortages and gaps, and thus raising economic growth and productivity across the country, because of the complementary expertise each sector brings to the table. The report makes recommendations to policy makers about how this should be practically encouraged and facilitated.

From an FE perspective, it will enable colleges to build on their ability to deliver to disadvantaged communities and working adults, filling the many HE “cold spots” across the country. As part of this it will provide a stronger platform for growing standalone Level 4 and 5 courses – Higher Technical Qualifications – and more flexible, step-by-step higher skills development through the Lifelong Learning Entitlement and the Growth and Skills Levy. It will reinforce the role of colleges as an integral component of the higher education system.

For HE institutions, FE/HE partnership will provide renewed energy and expertise in widening access, and a practical way of reaching under-represented communities in areas where the benefits of higher education – both for individuals and the local economy – are not as yet being realised. It will enhance the Civic University movement and help build the public profile of universities as active contributors to community prosperity and wellbeing.

For devolved authorities, strategic FE/HE partnerships will provide a stronger platform for addressing the full range of skills challenges in regional economies. Closer collaboration will enable them to support employers of all shapes and sizes, by brokering solutions to their skills needs suited to all levels of their workforce, without having to have separate conversations with multiple providers. This will simplify the process of matching skills demand with supply.

The report provides a critical review of the available forms of FE/HE partnership and analyses the advantages and disadvantages of validation and franchise agreements, formal consortium arrangements, the Institutes of Technology model, institutional mergers, and the small but growing number of Tertiary institutions that are now offering a full spectrum of provision.

This review has been informed by recent interviews with leaders and managers from the Mixed Economy Group which represents Colleges with a strong strategic commitment to College Based Higher Education. While a growing number of FE Colleges have gained Degree Awarding powers, almost all deliver HE in partnership with universities and therefore see the strengthening of collaborative relationships as crucial to their endeavour. In parallel, a growing number of universities are making this a cornerstone of their development strategies.

Recognising the variety of contexts in which colleges and universities operate and the organic development of productive relationships in different regions, the report warns against a top-down, “one size fits all” approach, and instead advocates the creation of a strong policy framework for providers to develop forms of collaboration tailored to their specific geographies and starting points. Making FE/HE partnerships the norm will unlock the full potential of our higher education system, to everyone’s benefit.

Recommendations for Government

1. Progressively move towards a lifelong learning vision as the guiding principle for Post-16 policy development.
2. Encourage greater strategic collaboration through supporting mixed models which respond to local circumstances and include all stakeholders: students, employers and providers.
3. Streamline the process for FE Colleges to gain HTQ awarding powers and make modules and full Higher Technical Qualifications eligible for funding through the Growth & Skills Levy.
4. Include a specific higher education focus in the next round of Local Skills Improvement Plans, through requiring them to include HE Access Improvement plans.
5. Give the Office for Students more responsibility for encouraging FE/HE collaboration through introducing a requirement to make explicit reference to collaborative relationships in future Access and Participation agreements.
6. Include a regulatory requirement for HE governing bodies to include FE expertise and for FE governing bodies to include HE expertise.
7. Provide practical support for developing strategic and structural FE/HE collaboration by providing stronger financial incentives for institutions at local level to develop multi-agency partnership work.

1 INTRODUCTION

Encouraging closer collaboration between the Further Education and Higher Education sectors is high on the Government's agenda. The Labour Party's 2024 general election manifesto made a commitment "to better integrate further and higher education", and this is a key theme of the recent Post-16 White Paper¹. However, while the document strongly endorses the direction of travel from competition to collaboration, it doesn't go into much detail on the practicalities of how this goal should be achieved. A joint report by the Association of Colleges and Universities UK² published just before the White Paper, is similarly positive about FE/HE partnership and makes a number of high-level strategic recommendations but also stops short of making detailed proposals.

Of course, FE and HE have always had a close relationship, and since 2012, when student loans became the main mechanism for funding HE-teaching, the two sectors have become intertwined in increasingly complex ways. On the one hand, FE colleges provide a route to university for a significant proportion of students – each year around a third of the 18-year-olds progressing to university have studied at FECs. On the other, many colleges are directly involved in the delivery of HE courses, contributing about 10% of all Level 4 and above enrolments in England each year.

There are four major trends behind the renewed policy interest in FE/HE partnership. Firstly, the student loan system has had the unintended consequence of eroding pathways to higher education for adult part-time students, leading to a steep decline in the numbers studying higher skills at sub-degree level. Secondly, the slow progress of widening access efforts, with the proportion of students getting in to university from low-income backgrounds still well below target, has renewed concerns that the benefits of higher education are not being evenly distributed across society. Thirdly, the FE sector now contains many large, multi-campus institutions of comparable size to small universities, some of which offer a significant range of HE courses in "cold spots" of low participation, and several of which have gained Degree Awarding powers. Fourthly, we are in the middle of a distinct ideological shift since Labour won the 2024 general election, from a paradigm of higher education as a competitive market to an approach based on cooperation within a shared ecosystem.

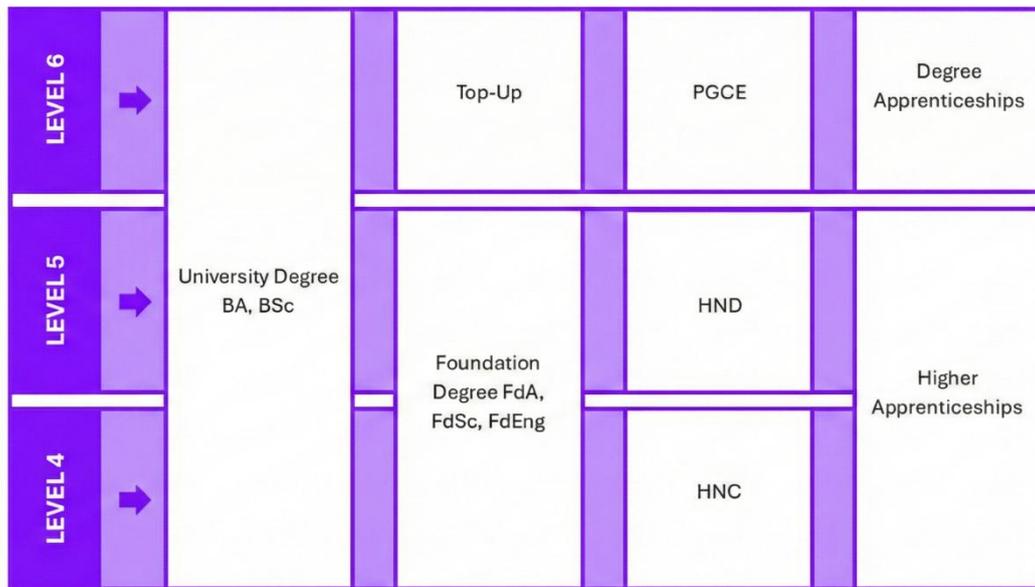
¹ Post-16 Education and Skills, HM Government, October 2025

² "Delivering a joined-up post-16 skills system", AoC/UUK October 2025

This report aims to do two things. The first is to provide a critical review of the existing forms of collaboration between FE Colleges and universities, building on the themes developed in our March 2025 report [Taking Higher Education Further: Widening Opportunity through College Based Higher Education](#). The second aim is to make policy recommendations that build on the Post-16 White Paper and focus on how the goal of closer collaboration can be achieved in practice, through making recommendations designed to work with the grain of Government policy.

The report is informed by the expertise of college leaders who are part of the Mixed Economy Group (MEG), which represents the more than forty FE colleges that have made delivering higher education a key part of their overall strategy. While HE is important to all of them, they represent a wide range, from those that have thousands of higher-level students, deliver full degrees and have Degree Awarding powers, to those that have hundreds of students, focus primarily on Higher Technical Qualifications and high-level professional programmes, and have no ambition to award their own degrees. This means that the report reflects the reality of working in partnership on the ground in a variety of geographies and contexts.

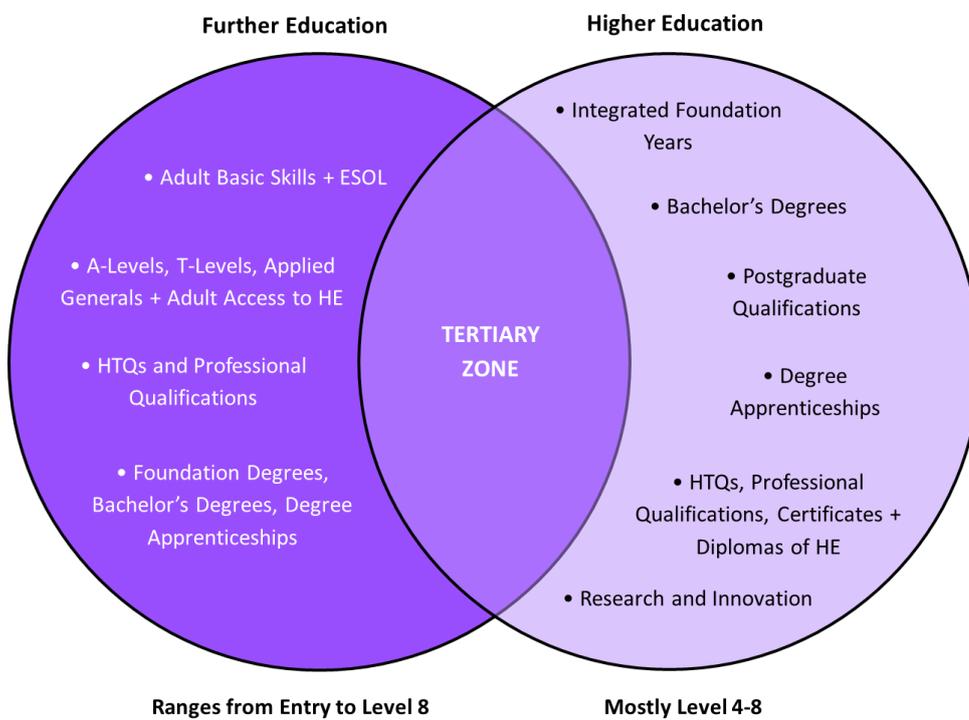
Figure 1: Higher Education Qualifications Level 4 – 6



2 THE RATIONALE FOR FE/HE COLLABORATION

The boundaries between FE and HE in the UK have never been sharply defined; they have evolved over time and over the past twenty years have become increasingly blurred. As diagram 1 illustrates, there are many variations in what individual providers offer and many overlaps in provision. This reflects the fact that the Higher Education ecosystem has been allowed to grow organically, rather than being designed according to any centrally determined master plan, and has responded in many different ways to particular features of the local context, such as economic geography, civic ambition and institutional leadership. This diversity is widely seen as a strength of the UK’s HE system.

Figure 2: Spheres of Activity



There are over 120 FECs on the Office for Students register of HE providers, many delivering full bachelor’s degree programmes alongside Foundation Degrees and Degree Apprenticeships, with a small but steadily growing number having been granted Degree Awarding powers. Around 10% of all Level 4-6 provision in the UK is delivered by FE colleges, including 61% of Foundation Degrees, 53% of Higher National Diplomas and 80% of Higher National Certificates³. Teaching is to a generally high standard; five FE providers were awarded Gold in the 2023 Teaching Excellence Framework ratings.

³ Taking Higher Education Further”, LEI March 2025, p5

The typical FE College enrolls less than a thousand higher education students per year, most on courses which are not bachelor's degrees. At the same time there are many universities offering Integrated Foundation Year programmes, which are pre-degree Level 3 courses, and many whose apprenticeship offers start at Level 3. This means that universities have stepped into territory traditionally defined as FE, while many colleges are operating in higher education territory, reinforcing concerns over unnecessary duplication and inefficient competition.

A key policy objective behind improving FE/HE collaboration is to increase the participation of adults in higher education, through reviving part-time courses which are accessible to working adults. This will require an expansion of courses leading to Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) – including Higher Nationals, Foundation Degrees and Higher Apprenticeships – and a widening of access through the introduction of new funding systems such as the Lifelong Learning Entitlement due to be launched in 2026/27.

From the Post-16 Education & Skills White Paper (2025)

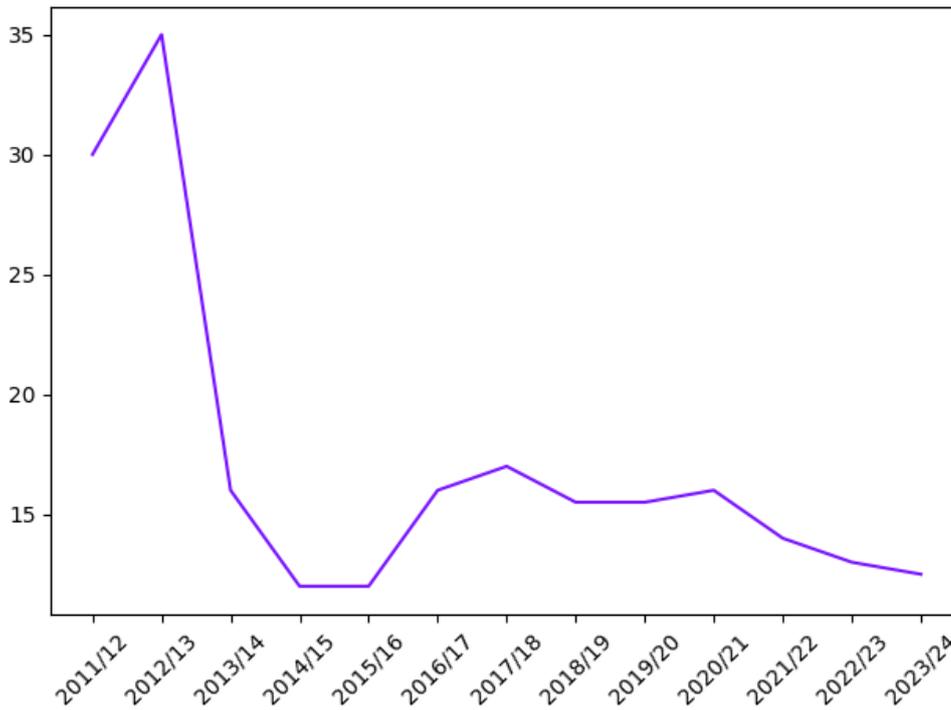
Our further education sector is made of FE colleges that serve as anchor institutions in their communities and collaborate with partners to deliver the skills systems and innovative provision that meet the needs of learners and the economy, and Independent Training Providers that form a dynamic part of our education and training market and have a track record of responding innovatively to employer skills needs.

The decline in adult participation in HE has been well documented. There has been an estimated fall of 37% in part-time sub-degree enrolments since the full student loan system was introduced in 2012, and since 2017/18 Foundation Degree enrolments have fallen by 19% and Higher National enrolments by 30%⁴. In 2023/24 degrees represented 87% of total enrolments, while Higher Nationals and Foundation Degrees combined were only 4%⁵. There was a 12% decrease in applications for Level 4 and 5 standalone qualifications from 2019 to 2023. Already at a low level nationally, enrolments fell from 46,725 to 40,920.⁶

⁴ A Spotlight on College-based Higher Education”, LEI October 2024, p8-9

⁵ “The Lifelong Learning Entitlement, House of Commons Research Briefing, Lewis, J & Bolton, P, 9th Sept 2025

⁶ “Where Next? Who applies to Level 4 and 5 qualifications?” Gatsby Foundation & UCAS, December 2024

Figure 3: Adult participation in education and training at level 4+, England

Source: DfE, Further education and skills 2011-2024, Learner Volumes (thousands)

This has had two negative impacts. The first is economic: there are now very few government-subsidised options available for working adults who need to upskill to keep pace with industry developments, or to reskill to switch careers from declining industry sectors to growth sectors. The rapid rise of higher and degree apprenticeships since 2015 reflects this gap; almost half of apprenticeships are now taken by those aged 25 or more, the majority of which are at higher or degree level⁷. But apprenticeships are not suited to all industry sectors, and many adults have been left without any clear pathway to gain qualifications to enhance their skills.

This in turn has contributed to the widespread skills shortages that are holding back economic growth and productivity in many industries. Having identified eight high-growth sectors – the IS-8 – the Government’s recent Industrial Strategy is very clear that the skills system “is not working for the IS-8. There are significant skills shortages across our frontier and foundational industries”⁸. This concern is echoed in the White Paper, which acknowledges a significant degree of misalignment between our education system and the needs of the labour market.

⁷ “Saving Apprenticeships,” Baroness Alison Wolf, Social Market Foundation, Jan 2025, p21-22)

⁸ “The UK’s Modern Industrial Strategy”, HMSO, June 2025, p65

The second impact of the decline in adult participation in HE is social. The benefits of higher education qualifications for individuals – in terms of increased earnings and enhanced career progression – continue to be unevenly distributed across the country, both geographically and in relation to socio-economic class. The decline of alternative entry pathways into HE for adults has made it far more difficult for working people to escape from a low skill/low-income cul-de-sac.

18-year-olds from the most deprived areas of the UK made up only 9% of the total cohort of school leavers going to university in 2025⁹. One of the key reasons is that those from low-income households view going to university as financially unattractive. The potential boost to lifetime income from the graduate earnings premium is far from certain, as it depends on what subjects you choose and whether there are graduate jobs readily available in your area.

As a result, despite more and more effort being put into widening HE access over decades, the gap between students from lower and higher income backgrounds has remained stubbornly large. Despite the large rise in young people going to university from 2006-2022, the entry rate for those from low participation areas increased to only 24%, with the gap between higher and lower areas decreasing by only 3% over the period, from 29% to 26%¹⁰. On the Government's preferred measure – the entry rate of those previously eligible for Free School Meals – the latest data shows an entry rate of just under 29% – over 20% below non-FSM applicants.¹¹

There is an alternative to the traditional three-year degree, better suited to people from low-income backgrounds. This would mean moving from the current “single shot” model of education to a Lifelong Learning model where individuals progress through a step-by-step accumulation of skills and qualifications over a period of years. From this perspective, the proposal in the White Paper to consult on introducing “break points” in three-year degree courses that would enable students to leave with a standalone Level 4 or 5 qualification, is a potential game-changer.

It's an approach which FE colleges have championed for years and attempted with some success to implement, despite having to face an unfavourable funding and regulatory environment, as our previous report on College Based Higher Education sets out in detail. To revive and expand it will require the sort of reform to traditional taught degrees the White Paper advocates, and a far more strategic approach to collaborative relationships between FE and HE providers.

⁹ “Elite universities grow intakes as more students get first choice” Patrick Jack, THES, 14th Aug 2025

¹⁰ “25 Years of University Access”, R. Montacute & C. Cullinane, Sutton Trust, Oct 2023

¹¹ “Widening participation in higher education Academic Year 2023/24”, www.explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk, 31st July 2025

3 EXISTING MODELS OF FE/HE COLLABORATION

A range of models for FE/HE collaboration has evolved over time, with only one – the Institutes of Technology model – coming about as a direct result of government policy. The spectrum includes transactional models focused around joint delivery of specific courses, strategic models based on formal agreements between parties, and structural models involving organisational integration, usually through merger.

Figure 4: The scope of HE/FE collaboration



3.1 Transactional Models

3.1.1 Validation and Franchise Agreements

Validation and franchise agreements are the oldest and most widespread means through which FE Colleges have entered into partnership with Higher Education Institutes. Validation agreements enable Colleges to design and deliver their own HE courses, with the resulting qualification awarded by the validating partner, usually a university, while franchise agreements enable Colleges to deliver a university's existing courses under supervision. In both cases, the HEI remains ultimately responsible for the academic standards of a programme delivered in their name.

Under the loan-based funding system, which incentivises HEIs to engage in direct competition for students, franchising and validation has boomed, partly as a response to the Office for Students' regulatory requirement for institutional Access and Participation plans, but mainly as a way of HE providers expanding their customer base and growing their income in a highly competitive environment. Between 2018/19 and 2022/23 the number of students taught through franchise agreements in England more than doubled from 50,430 to 135,850 and franchising now involves 96 HE providers contracting with 341 delivery partners¹².

¹² "Strengthening Oversight of partnership delivery in higher education" Government consultation, DfE 30th January 2025

Although the number of partnerships has increased, the overall number of HE enrolments to FE providers has not grown. The sharp fall in adults directly enrolled on part time courses delivered by FE Colleges has outweighed any increase in enrolments through partnership agreements, and universities have a strong financial incentive to directly recruit students who previously might have enrolled at FE Colleges.

In 2017 there were over 600 franchise and validation arrangements in place, and out of 139 English institutions with Degree Awarding powers, 47 had active validation arrangements¹³. Research in 2021 found that 89% of FE Colleges had HE partnerships, and 95 UK universities – over 50% - were involved in formal FE partnerships¹⁴.

For over 30 years this has been a significant and pervasive feature of the UK's Higher Education landscape, and despite recurrent concerns over abuse of the system – primarily around franchising agreements – they are a stable and mature aspect of higher education provision, and the main means by which FE Colleges deliver HE to their local communities.

Despite this, they have been subject to persistent criticism, mostly due to the perceived power imbalance between HE and FE; as one report reflected, “with a stronger financial position, more prestige and the power to award degrees, universities are sometimes seen as dominant over colleges”¹⁵. College managers have often complained at how slow and inflexible the validation process often is, and at the level of fees charged by HEIs for their services. In the words of one manager, validation is “protracted, long, complicated and demanding, with little flexibility. We’re at their mercy.”¹⁶

There have also been persistent complaints over instances where universities have unilaterally withdrawn from agreements, sometimes at short notice, with little or no consultation. This can be due to changes in the competitive environment or in strategic direction, often associated with changes in senior leadership within the partner university. It has led the majority of institutions offering College Based Higher Education (CBHE) to spread the risk by entering into multiple agreements with more than one partner, with research in 2021 finding that each FE College had an average of 2.81 formal HEI partnerships¹⁷. Despite the advantages of this approach, it has the unfortunate side-effect of multiplying the number of quality processes with which staff have to engage and increasing all the associated bureaucracy that goes with maintaining an agreement.

¹³ “Higher Education and Research Bill: Factsheet on validation”, DFE, Jan 2017

¹⁴ Intersectoral relationships in higher education: the FE/HE interface in the UK”, Shattock M & Hunt S, Centre for Global Higher Education Working Paper no.70, June 2021

¹⁵ Study Buddies? Competition and collaboration between higher education and further education”, Bhattacharya, A & Norman, A, Social Market Foundation, March 2021, p9).

¹⁶ “In their own words – FEC managers’ perspectives on university partnerships”, Whitehouse N, Mixed Economy Group 2020

¹⁷ “Intersectoral relationships within higher education”, Ibid p10

3.1.2 Articulation Agreements

Articulation agreements are a key feature of Scotland's higher education system, and there has been interest over the years in whether this could be a good model for England and the rest of the UK. Through this arrangement, FE Colleges deliver the first part of an HE course – typically a Higher National qualification – and students who complete this are automatically eligible to progress on to the final part of a bachelor's degree. While it is seen as having made a positive contribution to widening participation, it has been criticised for having too narrow a focus and not encouraging diversity in provision to suit different student needs¹⁸. Whatever its merits, England's student loan system, which has not been adopted in Scotland, has militated against the articulation model becoming widespread, by moving the HE sector away from collaboration towards competition. In a new climate where collaboration is seen as preferable to competition there could be renewed interest in articulation.

3.2 Strategic Models

Despite most commentators recommending a more strategic and less transactional approach to FE/HE partnership, there are remarkably few successful models. Universities across England have formed regional strategic partnerships – there are more than 12 in existence – and at the same time most FE colleges are members of active regional groupings, but there have been few examples of cross-sector partnerships until recently.

The decision not to include HEIs in the development of Local Skills Improvement Plans when the policy was launched in 2022 reflected this historic separation, but in practice many universities have engaged in regional cross-sector partnerships. While predominantly driven by Combined Local Authorities, they have also been encouraged through the Civic University movement, which received grant funding in 2020 to greatly extend its activities following the report of the UPP Civic University Commission in 2019¹⁹. There are now nearly thirty Civic University Agreements in place, most of which include FE Colleges as partners, alongside local authorities, NHS Trusts, and a range of other civic organisations.

However, although a welcome development which has accelerated thinking about the shared agendas of colleges and universities at local level, Civic Agreements are not designed to draw partners into binding agreements or to focus primarily on FE/HE relationships. Most have very broad aims and most could be characterised as a general agreement to cooperate rather than a commitment to active collaboration around any specific area. They have helped to improve dialogue between FE and HE leaders at regional level and several Principals active in the Mixed Economy Group have

¹⁸ National Articulation Forum Final Report, Universities Scotland & Colleges Scotland, 2020

¹⁹ www.civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/about-us

commented on their impact in developing stronger personal relationships with university vice chancellors and senior leaders which complement the transactional agreements they have in place.

CASE STUDY

The DN Colleges Group

The DN Colleges Group is a major Further Education provider serving South Yorkshire, Greater Lincolnshire, and the Humber region.

The Group has two University Centres, the University Campus Doncaster and the University Campus North Lincolnshire, based in Scunthorpe, both “cold spots” for HE participation. From these centres and across the college DN deliver a wide range of higher education programmes, including Foundation Degrees, top-up Degrees, Higher Apprenticeships, Higher Technical Qualifications, and professional qualifications.

Their HE students are predominantly mature adults, many with additional support needs, most with no prior higher level qualifications. The average age of Doncaster Campus students is 25; for North Lincoln campus students it's 31.

They are involved in multiple FE/HE partnerships. They have validation agreements with the Universities of Hull, Lincoln, Huddersfield, and Sheffield Hallam. They are also involved in two Institutes of Technology, being the lead partner for the South Yorkshire IoT and also involved in the Lincolnshire IoT.

Student recruitment to HE courses is buoyant and DN's offer is growing. Future plans include development of Degree Apprenticeships, and of a selection of courses designed to meet the criteria for the Lifelong Learning Entitlement.

DN is working hard with university partners to fill regional gaps in HE access and raise attainment of higher qualifications relevant to regional industries and career pathways.

3.2.1 The Hertfordshire Higher Education Consortium

The only formal FE/HE consortium is the Hertfordshire Higher Education Consortium, which comprises the University of Hertfordshire and all four Hertfordshire FE Colleges. This has been in existence for 25 years, withstanding all the many changes to funding and regulation of both the FE and HE sector, which have led over time to most FE/HE consortia collapsing.

The Consortium operates in a similar way to the articulation model in Scotland. Students based at FE colleges study a Foundation Degree or take a Foundation Year as part of what is badged as an Extended Degree. They enrol with both the college and the university and have access to university facilities and services from the start, before progressing on to complete their degree at the university. Several hundred a year follow this route, and over 15,000 students have studied as part of the Consortium since 2000²⁰.

There are specific local factors which have kept the HHEC model in place despite all countervailing pressures: a helpful geography where the five partners are close enough to be neighbours but far enough from each other not to be competitors; the clarity and strength of the university's mission; and the fact that it has maintained a reasonable level of financial health throughout the recent period of intense competition for students. Where similar factors are in play, or where they could be relatively easily replicated, similar consortium models could be created in other parts of the country, and there are already several areas where less formal but similarly constituted partnerships are in existence.

3.2.2 Institutes of Technology

The Institutes of Technology (IoT) network was launched by the Government in 2019 as a flagship initiative to increase the uptake of higher technical education courses. Funded by the DfE and actively supported by the Gatsby Foundation, it is in effect the only government-endorsed framework for FE/HE collaboration. Each is led by an FE partner and operates under a licence granted by the DfE and is subject to a rolling programme of licence extension based on achieving enrolment targets based mainly on numbers of Level 4 and 5 students recruited. The government has recently confirmed that the programme will continue to be funded until at least 2028 and so will remain a salient feature of the Post-16 partnership landscape.

There are currently 21 IoTs in England, involving 36 universities, 87 FE Colleges, and over 100 employer partners. They have formed a well-organised national network whose representatives meet regularly and since 2023 have held annual conferences.

²⁰ <https://www.unialliance.ac.uk/topics/teaching-and-skills/the-university-of-hertfordshire-upskilling-students-through-technical-education-partnerships>

Each IoT has a focus on specific industry sectors which determines the types of employer partners they engage with and the range of courses they offer.

In essence IoTs are a form of joint venture through which legally separate organisations agree to deliver a specified set of outcomes. As an FE/HE partnership model, they have a number of unique features. They are the only model in which FE Colleges are designated as the lead partner, and receive grant funding in return for signing up to a formal agreement with the DfE. The insistence on the involvement of anchor employers is also unique, as is the exclusive focus on Higher Technical Qualifications rather than any other type of HE qualification.

The jury is out on how successful IoTs will prove to be. While some appear to have had a positive impact, overall demand for HTQs is still relatively weak and the declining trend in enrolments at Levels 4 and 5 identified by UCAS and discussed earlier has not been halted. It's also unclear how the IoT network will interact with the newly emerging network of Technical Excellence colleges.

However, the IoTs focus on HTQs is welcome, and the White Paper proposes several measures to grow HTQ delivery, including the idea of developing specific HTQ awarding powers for FE providers. A powerful additional step would be to make HTQs and component modules of HTQs eligible for direct funding through the Growth and Skills Levy, enabling employers to use their levy allocations to upskill employees through Level 4 and 5 courses as well as apprenticeships. This would work well with the recent statutory guidance for the next iteration of Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs), which includes an expectation they should cover level 4-8 technical skills.

The IS-8 Industrial Strategy Growth-driving Sectors

- Advanced Manufacturing
- Clean Energy Industries
- Creative Industries
- Defence
- Digital and Technologies
- Financial Services
- Life Sciences
- Professional and Business Services

The new Technical Excellence Colleges and the IoTs both focus on particular industry sector, in line with the skills dimension of the Modern Industrial Strategy²¹. But there is a risk of duplication and overlap; in its most recent impact report, the IoT network highlighted Clean Energy, Advanced Manufacturing, and Health & Life Sciences, as sectors in which they are having an impact²². There may well be a need soon to consider how the TEC and IoT networks could be fully aligned in future to provide more comprehensive coverage across England to meet priority skills needs.

CASE STUDY

Askham Bryan College

Askham Bryan College is a major Further Education College and University Centre based in York, which specialises in agricultural and land-based education.

Their HE offer includes Foundation Degrees, Top-up Degrees and full bachelor's degrees in a wide range of subjects including Arboriculture, Agriculture, Environmental Conservation, Animal Management, and Veterinary Nursing.

The college has long-standing and valued FE/HE partnerships, including validation agreements with Harper Adams University and the Royal Agricultural College, and is a partner in the Yorkshire and Humberside Institute of Technology. Askham Bryan is also part of Higher York, an FE/HE partnership with City of York Council, through which the Vice Chancellors and Principals of the University of York, York St John University, and York College meet regularly, often joined by senior Council executives.

Unusually for FE, the college is also research active, for example through involvement in the BioYorkshire initiative, a ten-year project to apply research discoveries to biotechnology, along with the University of York, Fera Science and private sector partners.

HE student numbers have held steady despite intense competition, and the college has ambitions to develop Higher Technical Qualifications, as part of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, working with HE partners willing to develop more flexible, modular study options.

²¹ "The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy", *ibid*

²² "Boosting Opportunity, Skills & Growth through Collaboration", Gatsby Charitable Foundation, June 2025, www.institutesoftechnology.org.uk/assets

3.3 Structural Models

The closest form of partnership is merger, where two or more legally and constitutionally independent organisations agree to become one. Mergers have been much more common in FE, a sector which has been significantly reshaped through a nationally managed merger process.

The Area Review programme undertaken by Government between 2015-19 in response to Further Education's deteriorating financial health, triggered a cascade of around 60 mergers, including three FE/HE mergers²³. In contrast, mergers have been very uncommon in the HE sector, largely because of the much better financial health of HEIs over the past decade. The only significant examples are the merger in 2004 between the University of Manchester and UMIST, and between University College London and the Institute of Education in 2014, both driven primarily by wider strategic considerations rather than financial pressure. However, we are now beginning to see mergers which are motivated to a much greater extent by financial concerns, and interest in merger has certainly increased. KPMG and Mills & Reeve have recently issued a comprehensive review of possible models, commissioned as part of University UK's Transformation and Efficiency Taskforce, including detailed analysis of the legal and technical challenges involved in each variant²⁴.

In 2024/25 St George's, University of London dissolved and merged into City, University of London to create a new entity, City St George's University of London. In the same year, Anglia Ruskin University merged with a specialist land-based provider, Writtle University College, and in 2025/26 we've already had the announcement of a merger between the University of Greenwich and Kent University.

KPMG and Mills & Reeve acknowledge that mergers can't be imposed from outside, and that leaders and governing bodies are often reluctant to surrender their operational autonomy and lose their status as an independent body. Their report quotes Colin Booth, Chief Executive of the Luminare College Group who has extensive direct experience of mergers with FE and HE providers: "when it comes down to it, Principals and CEOs and boards of governors find it almost impossible to dissolve themselves and make themselves redundant before they're forced to."²⁵ This is an issue we'll return to when considering recommendations at the end of this report.

There have so far been only five examples of mergers between FE Colleges and HEIs:

- The University of Derby merged with High Peak College in 1998 and Leek College in 2012.
- Leeds Conservatoire (specialist music HEI) merged with Leeds City College (now the Luminare Education Group) in 2011.

²³ "Area review: end of programme report", DfE, Sept 2019

²⁴ "Radical Collaboration: A Playbook", KPMG LLP, July 2025

²⁵ KPMG, *Ibid*, p9

- Greater Manchester University (formerly the University of Bolton) merged with Bolton College in 2018.
- London South Bank University (LSBU) merged with Lambeth College in 2019.
- The University of West London merged with Ruskin College Oxford (an adult education college within the FE sector) in 2021.

Of these, only one - the merger of Leeds Conservatoire - involved an HEI merging into an FE College, reflecting the fact that until recently it has been FE institutions that have experienced the most difficult financial circumstances. But although financial problems have been the main motivation behind FE/HE mergers, there are strong arguments that the creation of Tertiary institutions has many educational advantages in addition to the financial benefits. The former Vice Chancellor of London South Bank University, Professor David Phoenix, has summarised the key benefits of the model as being the ability within a group structure to create clear learning pathways without competition for resources, a greater scope to share specialist teaching facilities and staffing across FE and HE, and to offer employer partners a comprehensive training offer ranging from Level 2 through to Level 7 courses²⁶.

The ability to be granted Degree Awarding powers by the Office for Students is creating a category of Tertiary institutions which have not been formed through merger. Consolidation within the FE sector has led to a new generation of much larger FE Colleges, some now with larger student numbers and higher annual income than many universities, which in turn has generated ambitious plans to grow the teaching offer and forge the sort of integrated learning pathways advocated by LSBU and others. The picture is constantly changing, but at the time of writing this report there are seven FE Colleges with Degree Awarding powers:

- Cornwall College Group
- Hull College
- Luminate Group (Leeds)
- NCG (HQ in Newcastle, with a national footprint)
- South Devon College
- TEC Partnership (Grimsby region)
- Warwickshire College

²⁶ “Connecting the Dots: The Need for an effective Skills System in England”, Phoenix D, HEPI Report 167, Nov 2023, p28

There are therefore a dozen or more Tertiary institutions in England, and this number is likely to grow, either organically or through merger, as the strategic focus on skills rises higher up the national policy agenda. If the culture of general FE Colleges, which have always been place-based and highly attuned to the needs of adult part-time students, is blended with the expertise of HE providers in delivering training at higher skills levels, it is far more likely that the objective of reviving adult participation in higher education, which is at the heart of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement and of initiatives to expand access to HTQs, will be met.

But this does not mean that merger is automatically the best option. There is always a risk the leaders of the post-merger institution may step away from an inclusive approach and wind down parts of their offer seen as peripheral. It's important to keep an open mind about which of the available partnership models best suits the individual circumstances of FECs and HEIs, and not be tempted to introduce a "one model fits all" approach.

4 DISCUSSION

In a shifting Post-18 policy landscape, what needs to be done to strengthen collaboration between FE and HE providers and revitalise access to higher skills, particularly for working adults? Given the intricate pattern of existing relationships, many of them nurtured over long periods and many of them working well for learners and providers, it's important for policymakers not to introduce measures that would unnecessarily damage partnerships that are operating successfully. However, the status quo is not a sustainable option. There are powerful social and economic reasons for rebalancing the tertiary sector towards greater lifelong access and participation.

4.1 Future Partnership Models

Franchising and validation agreements are almost certain to continue as the basic mechanism for collaboration, and many will remain in place alongside strategic and even structural partnerships.

There will soon be tighter restrictions on the franchising model, which has become the subject of growing concerns over the failure in a handful of cases to exercise proper oversight and ensure quality standards are maintained. Following an alarm raised by the Student Loans Company in 2022, the National Audit Office conducted an investigation and issued a highly critical report, which was followed up and echoed by the Public Accounts Committee during 2023/24²⁷. This has resulted in DfE proposals to make it obligatory for franchise partners to register with the OfS while at the same time exempting a selection of providers who are already closely regulated, including FE Colleges, from the requirement to register²⁸. If these proposals are implemented it will consolidate and strengthen the position of FE Colleges as reliable and good quality franchising partners.

Just as universities' appetite for collaboration with FE Colleges varies considerably depending on their mission and strategy, the approach taken to HE partnerships by FE Leaders and managers depends on their strategic rationale for involvement in Higher Education. As Diagram 4 illustrates, there are broadly two sets of reasons for delivering College Based Higher Education (CBHE), although neither are mutually exclusive and in practice many colleges embrace elements of each approach.

²⁷ ("Investigation into student finance for study at franchised higher education providers", NAO, Jan 2024; "Student loans issues for those studying at franchised higher education providers", PAC, Apr 2024).

²⁸ ("Strengthening Oversight of Partnership Delivery in Higher Education", Government Consultation, DfE, Jan 2025).

Figure 5: Two approaches to delivering college based higher education

| | Specific Vocational HE | General Access to HE |
|-----------------|---|--|
| Rationale | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> L4 extension of technical vocational progression pathways | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> L4 + a response to being in a local/regional HE “cold spot” |
| Responding to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employer/sector demand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Widening access concerns |
| Profile | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low profile – not separately branded | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> High profile – “university centre” |
| Academic offer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific subject areas, mostly part-time | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broader range of subjects, with a mix of part-time and full-time |
| Student numbers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Typically 200-500 enrolments per year | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Typically 500+ enrolments per year |
| HE relationship | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transactional partnership(s) Delivery partner status | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic partnership(s) Degree Awarding Powers |

For those institutions who are primarily pursuing a specific vocational HE offer, the focus will be on developments within particular industry sectors where technological change is throwing up new training needs. This is where transactional FE/HE relationships can work well, providing the flexibility and agility to adapt quickly to new developments and linking those HEIs with research expertise in innovative technologies to those FECs with strong local employer engagement.

4.2 Supporting Strategic Partnerships

The role of College Based Higher Education in widening general access to HE has largely been the result of a permissive policy environment, rather than any coordinated national development strategy²⁹. The ability of colleges to create University Centres, along with the option of applying for Degree Awarding powers, has seen the FE sector, in partnership with universities, filling gaps in the HE market in areas where students are not willing or able to travel long distances to university. There are now over thirty college-managed University Centres across England, in towns and cities such as Barnsley, Blackpool, Bury St Edmunds, Doncaster, Oldham, Solihull, Taunton, and Weston-super-Mare.

Their success is based on offering a convenient and accessible alternative to traditional campus-based higher education. Colleges with university centres have moved beyond the transactional FE/HE partnership model, and are strategic players with long-term ambitions to be a permanent feature of the HE ecosystem. Success in widening access to higher education generally, and to increase adult participation

²⁹ “A Spotlight on College-based Higher Education”, Ibid, p12-13

specifically, will depend to a large extent on maintaining and expanding their presence across the country.

The White Paper makes two recommendations that will strengthen the CBHE network of University Centres; to make the Office for Students the primary regulator for all providers delivering at Level 4 and above, and to introduce specific HTQ awarding powers for colleges. Streamlining and accelerating HTQ awarding powers will be an important way of enabling more colleges to deliver Level 4 and 5 qualifications without being held back by the need to go through lengthy validation processes with HE partners. A further step would be to require Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) to include a specific focus on access to higher skills - a Higher Education Access Improvement Plan – which would be a separately identifiable element of the main LSIP. This would have the dual benefit of ensuring that HEIs are actively involved in the next round of LSIPs while increasing employers’ attention to HE access issues.

But universities – rightly – are autonomous bodies, not directly controlled by government, and therefore can’t be compelled to collaborate. Instead, as the proposals in the White Paper reflect, they can be encouraged and incentivised to embrace a collaborative strategy, and the only policy levers available are funding and regulation. This is where the Office for Students is set to play a pivotal role.

The proposals in the White Paper to consult on reforming the HE regulatory system so that it doesn’t treat FE Colleges as if they were the same as universities, is very welcome. Definitions of the HE student experience based on school leavers studying three-year residential degrees are simply not appropriate for FE providers of HE, as are current regulations on graduate outcomes and teaching quality. Colleges need regulation tailored to the high proportion of part-time, adult, roll on/roll off HE students they teach. Along with the proposals for the OfS to take a much more flexible approach to higher education awarding powers, this will lead to a significant reduction in the unnecessary regulatory barriers FE Colleges have faced as they develop their higher education provision.

There are two further practical measures that would specifically encourage closer FE/HE collaboration. The first would be for the OfS to introduce an explicit requirement for Access and Participation agreements to include specific commitments to FE/HE partnership, in the context of widening participation in HE. This would make active HE/FE collaboration no longer just an option, but an expectation.

The second would be to take a coordinated approach to institutional governance across the FE and HE sectors. The focus on higher education governing bodies in the White Paper is welcome, as are the recommendations to strengthen management and governance. This should include a clear expectation that college governing bodies include at least one governor with substantial knowledge and experience at senior level of higher education, and that university governing bodies should include at least one person with significant FE leadership expertise. This would build on existing best practice and be part of the revised higher education code of governance being

developed by the Committee of University Chairs and the updated regulatory guidance from the OfS.

But the OfS, even with additional powers, is still a regulator, which can only intervene when there is evidence of institutions failing to adhere to regulatory conditions. Its primary focus is on protecting defined standards for students and addressing institutional shortcomings, not on developing and improving the overall HE system. A more developmental approach is needed, which requires something more than the kind of reactive intervention central to the role of the OfS.

At a strategic level, government policy is undoubtedly providing a stronger platform for FE/HE partnership. The priority being given to expanding Level 4 and 5 provision, and the new target announced by the Prime Minister of getting two thirds of young people participating in higher-level learning, whether academic, technical, or apprenticeship, will push FE and HE institutions to deepen their level of joint activity.

However, as the Post-16 White Paper acknowledges, there is a lack of practical incentives to develop Level 4 and 5, despite the stronger policy encouragement. A series of funding rounds from 2021 to 2024, culminating in the Higher Technical Education Skills Injection Fund, enabled providers to bid for money to support expansion, predominantly for capital expenditure. But out of 63 successful bids for the 2022/23 fund, only 11 (17%) were from FE/HE consortia, mostly Institutes of Technology, with the vast majority coming from individual colleges or universities. A new version of the Injection fund is needed, but this time with a requirement that only joint FE/HE bids will be eligible.

The only prospect of additional funding for collaborative work in the White Paper, is a commitment to reform the HE Strategic Priorities Grant to align it more closely to priority sectors and courses. Here again, it will be important that one of the criteria for receiving SPG for this purpose will be evidence of active HE/FE partnership.

While additional funding through bids for grants would be useful and welcome, it's unlikely to be sufficient in itself to incentivise FE and HE leaders to place collaborative working at the centre of their strategy. The current business model of colleges and universities, driven by student loans and therefore dependent on achieving viable cohort and class sizes, provides a permanent financial incentive to maximise student recruitment; in short to compete. This is where the current model of funding, based on the number of students each institution enrolls, needs to be supplemented by some form of programme funding to incentivise and reward collaboration. This could be done through the introduction of revenue funding uplifts for joint delivery of specific priority subjects at higher levels, for example a 20% per-student premium for enrolments onto courses co-designed and co-delivered by FE and HE partners.

To incentivise wider multi-agency partnerships at local level – for example, involving the NHS, school sixth forms, housing, or transport organisations – consideration should be given to the introduction of a block grant to encourage collaboration at local level, administered through Strategic Local Authorities or local consortia of providers. This kind of alternative funding would encourage innovation as well as collaboration.

It would also mitigate the incentive to compete that is intrinsic to the student funding system. For FE/HE collaboration to be embedded in the Post-16 system, it needs to be explicitly funded.

4.3 Partnership and the Lifelong Learning Entitlement

The arrival of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) from 2026/27 will provide another major focus for FE/HE collaboration. The DfE's most recent policy guidance, echoed in the White Paper, has clarified that the LLE will be quite sharply focused on specific areas, in particular Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) and modules in selected subjects, aligned to the Industrial Strategy and other designated priority skills needs (for example, computing, engineering, nursing, health and social care)³⁰.

The loan funding entitlement – currently just over £38,000 - for fully eligible individuals has the potential to make a big impact by providing a tangible mechanism for re-engaging working adults in learning, especially if it works in tandem with the short course provision promised through the Growth and Skills Levy. However, the key unknown is how individuals will respond to the idea of incurring student debt and therefore how strong the demand will be for LLE funded provision. This is where FE/HE collaboration has a vital role to play, because although the LLE will fund courses exclusively at higher education level, the sector that has the most contact on a regular basis with non-graduate working adults and with the kinds of small and medium employers that employ most of them, is the FE sector. In short, the FE and HE sectors bring complementary expertise to the table.

The introduction of the LLE will open up a new route to higher level skills which will run in parallel to the traditional full-time degree route but also generate new demand for continuing education well beyond the typical university graduation age of 21-22.

The Lifelong Learning model has a number of advantages, especially for those from low-income households where earning while learning is a priority. In this vision, a young person may begin work with no more than a Level 2 or 3 qualification – still the norm in many sectors, such as Hospitality, Adult Care, Construction, Engineering – and progress further up the career ladder later on, perhaps from their twenties onwards. Using mechanisms such as the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, they are able to afford to return to education, perhaps taking a Higher Technical Qualification at Level 4, and at a later stage, Level 5, then 6, and even beyond.

³⁰ “Lifelong learning entitlement: what it is and how it will work” DfE, July 2025

Supporting learners along this pathway will require close coordination between FE and HE providers in relation to advice and guidance, course selection and ease of progression between FE and HE options. It will provide a new stimulus to closer FE/HE collaboration, and from this perspective the DfE's intention to consult over ways of removing unnecessary barriers to FE Colleges involvement in delivering LLE courses is welcome. If the LLE is to be a catalyst for a radical expansion of lifelong learning, it will be because colleges and universities have worked closely together.

CASE STUDY

South Devon College

Based in Torbay, South Devon College has developed a University Centre and offers a wide range of higher education courses and higher and degree apprenticeships. Through their partnership with Specsavers, they have developed a unique specialist provision in Audiology which recruits students from across the country. They are also the only FE College in England directly accredited by the Nursing & Midwifery Council for their Health course delivery. Many of their courses are co-designed with local employers, including the high-tech cluster of companies specialising in photonics that are a key element of the local economy.

They have a long-standing and productive relationship with the University of Plymouth, but since 2019 have also gained Foundation Degree Awarding powers, so can now complement university validated degrees with their own Level 4 and 5 courses, most of which are Higher Technical Qualifications. While the partnership with Plymouth gives their students access to the university's top-quality library and learning facilities and enables staff to be part of a thriving academic opportunity, the ability to develop their own courses gives the college the agility and flexibility to respond to local needs quickly.

The College is preparing to engage with the Lifelong Learning Entitlement model and already offers Microcredentials and other high-level short courses.

The combination of a strong university partnership and Degree Awarding powers is proving to be a successful model. South Devon College is rated TEF Gold, and student enrolments are on a strong upward trend.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In a Post-18 sector conceived of as a market, the boundaries between FE and HE become a contested space, where institutions compete for student numbers, public status, and financial advantage. This has a number of detrimental effects on the shape of tertiary provision and the options available to learners. In the words of one expert commentator, it has led to “a fragmented series of quasi-markets, unable to take a strategic overview of FE, HE, and adult provision. Hierarchical homogenisation of provision dominates; narrow options and opportunities exist for students; and innovative approaches to skills formation in a way that might respond to changing economic needs are limited.”³¹

While this is undoubtedly the case, it will be a major challenge to move away from this competitive approach. The student loan funding system drives all providers to maximise student recruitment to secure their financial health, and the business incentives to compete against fellow providers are strongly embedded. To counteract this will require more than good will, and more tangible incentives than the public reputation or political benefits that might flow from being a good partner. Targeted financial levers will need to be introduced to motivate providers, and additional sources of funding, such as the Strategic Priorities Grant or the Higher Education Innovation fund will need to be deployed actively to reward collaboration.

A systems-based approach built around collaboration rather than competition is the philosophy behind the tertiary education institutions which have begun to take root in England. Such an approach will enable FE/HE collaboration at a more strategic level to thrive, based on a mutual recognition of the particular expertise each sector offers.

It would be a mistake to impose a simplistic, or top-down policy for FE/ HE collaboration. The importance of a place-based approach which takes into account the huge variations between local economies, and institutional histories and missions, means that local partnership needs to be given room to grow organically, within broad national policy parameters. A recent review of partnerships in the Newcastle region illustrates the extent to which this can generate a distinctive pattern of productive collaborative relationships on the ground which are tailored to local industry and community needs³². One way of consolidating FE/HE relationships would be to adopt the idea of “regional chambers of learning” envisaged in the Newcastle report.

³¹ “The Coordination Conundrum”, Robson, J, in “Making Equal: New Visions for Opportunity and Growth”, Atherton, G & John P, Emerald Publishing, 2025, p48

³² “Mapping the Course: Education Partnerships for continuous development”, Lifelong Education Institute, July 2025

In a new policy landscape with cooperation rather than competition at its heart, the prospects for long term and stable partnership between FE and HE – a partnership of equals rather than a hierarchy – have never been better. This is the time to move beyond encouragement and exhortation to developing a robust yet flexible regulatory and funding framework that places FE/HE collaboration at its heart.

Recommendations for Government

1. Progressively move towards a lifelong learning vision as the guiding principle for Post-16 policy development.
2. Encourage greater strategic collaboration through supporting mixed models which respond to local circumstances and include all stakeholders: students, employers, and providers.
3. Streamline the process for FE Colleges to gain HTQ awarding powers and make modules and full Higher Technical Qualifications eligible for funding through the Growth & Skills Levy.
4. Include a specific higher education focus in the next round of Local Skills Improvement Plans, through requiring them to include HE Access Improvement plans.
5. Give the Office for Students more responsibility for encouraging FE/HE collaboration through introducing a requirement to make explicit reference to collaborative relationships in future Access and Participation agreements.
6. Include a regulatory requirement for HE governing bodies to include FE expertise and for FE governing bodies to include HE expertise.
7. Provide practical support for developing strategic and structural FE/HE partnerships by providing stronger financial incentives for institutions at local level to develop multi-agency partnership work.

Partners in Progress: *Colleges at the Forefront of Technical Education*

As the UK transitions toward a collaborative tertiary ecosystem, this paper explores the evolving relationship between Further and Higher Education. Partners in Progress highlights how recognising colleges as full partners in technical education, and moving toward more strategic, long-term partnerships can enhance the collective impact of both sectors.

To better address national skills shortages, the report suggests practical reforms: streamlining awarding powers for Higher Technical Qualifications, encouraging cross-sector governance, and introducing funding uplifts for joint delivery. By uniting the place-based reach of colleges with the research strengths of universities, we can create a more cohesive lifelong learning system that benefits students, employers, and regional economies.



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