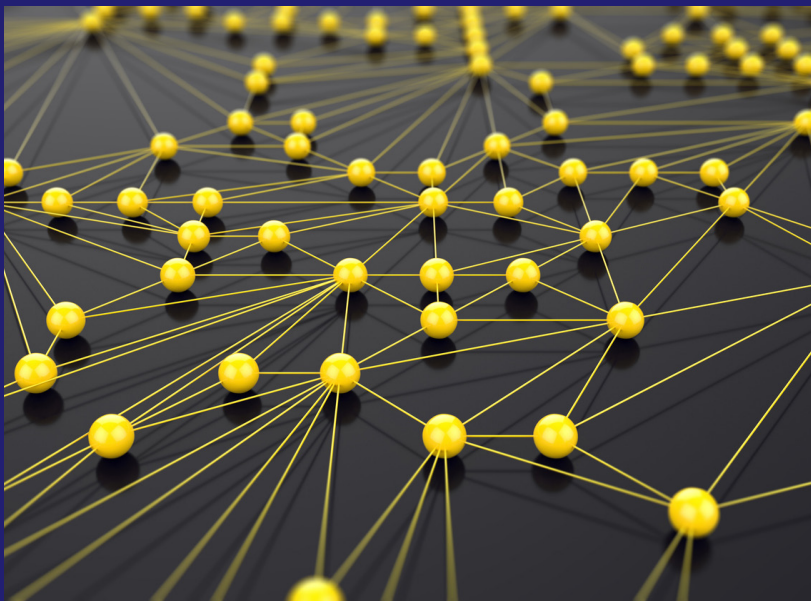


# Connecting the Dots: The Need for an Effective Skills System in England

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Higher Education Policy Institute

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## **About the author**

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## Foreword

**Dr Diana Beech, Chief Executive Officer of London Higher and former adviser to three Ministers of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation**

The world around us is made up of a series of complex and interconnected systems: from weather patterns and living organisms to man-made energy, transportation and communication systems. The post-18, or tertiary, education system is no different, with multiple, non-linear routes available to learners throughout their lifetimes, ranging from work-related, or vocational, qualifications through to highly specialised, research-focused doctoral degrees.

To date, Whitehall has approached tertiary education policy in England by treating the further education aspects of post-18 study separately from higher education and, more recently, even disconnecting both policy portfolios from science and research. This is largely due to the different types of institutions involved in the delivery of provision and the distinct funding, regulatory and quality assurance systems that have developed around them.

Over recent years, however, the boundaries between further and higher education have become increasingly blurred as universities and colleges have stepped up to meet pressing skills needs, both nationally and within their local areas. Many universities are now offering first-rate vocational qualifications which sit between A Levels (and their equivalents) and undergraduate degrees, as well as developing new forms of provision such as degree apprenticeships. Similarly, a growing number of further education colleges are offering degree-level courses validated by universities, meaning that providers of all types are finding themselves wading through an alphabet soup of regulatory returns, quality requirements and funding regimes.

What is clear is that the old binary approach to tertiary education policy is no longer sufficient for England's rapidly evolving post-18 educational landscape. And if the current or a future government is serious about promoting skills to improve national productivity and local economic growth, then a comprehensive framework is urgently needed which facilitates, not hinders, more tertiary partnerships and innovations.

As a complex ecosystem itself, with a patchwork of 32 boroughs plus the City of London – all subject to multiple layers of hyper-local, sub-regional, pan-London and national policy initiatives – London and its institutions are well-versed in navigating complexity and are ideally placed to advise on the challenges and opportunities in adopting a whole system-approach to policy design. It is no surprise, therefore, to see this blueprint for a future skills system emerging from the leader of one of London’s most innovative universities and educational groups, which has not only developed regional skills pathways through schools, a college and a university, but has built bridges with business by cultivating research and innovation to address civic challenges and transform local communities.

There is much in this report to reassure policymakers. When it comes to creating a skills framework that is fit for the future, much of the fundamental elements already exist – such as the 29 Uni Connect hubs that can be harnessed to provide information, advice and guidance on tertiary education bespoke to their regions. The task ahead, then, lies in bringing these policy instruments together, removing duplication and ‘connecting the dots’, so that further and higher education institutions can work together more effectively within and across regions and also strengthen links to research, facilitating specialisation and nurturing excellence across the whole post-18 talent pipeline.

For a long time, universities and higher education providers have been emerging as anchor institutions in towns and cities across the country. The skills framework outlined in this report will now allow them to become anchors in a wider and all-encompassing vision for tertiary education, and importantly connecting skills of all levels to research, development and innovation.

## Executive summary

England's post-16 education system suffers from multiple and overlapping dysfunctions to the point that it is a misnomer to call it a *system* at all.

The lack of a strategic framework for post-16 education provision, coupled with an increasingly difficult financial environment, are driving non-strategic competition for learners that discourages the development of specialisms and, in turn, further undermines the ability to cultivate the effective partnerships required for a functioning and integrated system.

While such competition discourages collaboration between institutions, so too does the regulatory quagmire involved in tertiary education with Ofqual, Ofsted, the Office for Students, the Institute for Apprenticeship and Technical Education, plus multiple Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies all vying for influence and setting different expectations. This has resulted in an incoherent and difficult to navigate offer for learners of all ages, as well as employers.

To meet England's ever more pressing skills needs and realise the country's potential, we need to support the development of a range of appropriately funded specialist educational institutions.

This will require a joined up post-16 education system with roles for sixth forms, colleges and universities clearly defined in a national framework with regional accountability and delivery. Such a framework would enable regions to rationalise their education provision while both encouraging appropriately funded specialisation and promoting collaboration between institutions. This would encourage the creation of clear local learning pathways that support both employer and learner skill needs and help to tackle inequality and stagnant productivity.

Within secondary education, sixth forms could prioritise between a focus on higher education progression through the teaching of A Level or BTECs or through technical provision via T Levels and employer sponsorship.

Within further education, depending on local need, colleges could specialise: on gateway provision such as adult education, remedial further education and SEND; specialist provision such as art and design;

or technical provision through applied qualifications, including T Levels and Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs), which are aligned to Level 5 and 6 qualifications within local universities.

Within higher education, while some universities would continue to deliver comprehensive course portfolios others could be supported to focus on technical education complemented by innovation driven by employer partnerships to boost economic growth and job creation.

Even if it is not possible for all our educational institutions to achieve such purely defined roles, our tertiary education providers nevertheless need significantly more focus if we are to break down the pervasive silos within our education provision.

## Introduction

Commentators and policymakers within the education sector often refer to England's skills system but this is a misnomer.

A system is a set of things working together as parts of a mechanism or an interconnecting network. Far from working together however, our education institutions are forced to compete for learners and funding which, rather than leading to efficiencies and clarity of choice, creates inefficiencies and lost opportunities.

Schools make efforts to hold on to their 'highest achieving' pupils into sixth form, pushing them towards pre-defined routes (such as Bachelor's degrees at university) and away from apprenticeships and standalone Level 4 qualifications. They do this partly to do well in government quality measures which reinforce the message that success means progression to certain institutions. This will always reflect a minority of learners however, and at the same time the Department for Education is expending considerable resources to promote apprenticeships and Level 4 qualifications.

Further education colleges, meanwhile, are forced to seek new revenue opportunities through higher education provision, in some cases neglecting their vital and inadequately funded role in helping those who have been failed by our schools to qualify in English and Mathematics, as well as their provision of intermediate and higher technical qualifications. Universities with clear civic roles and the opportunity to work with business on innovation and job creation are increasingly moving into areas such as foundation year degrees and Level 4 as the higher education funding landscape gets tougher.

It is clear that while the education system serves the type of learner that follows the standard route through A Levels to higher education well, it does so at the expense of all others. By making every part of our post-16 education system secondary to the learners that follow the A Levels to university route, and encouraging our institutions to compete for these learners, there are few clear pathways at a local level for individuals who are not able or do not wish to follow this path.

To compound these challenges, our generic approach to funding means



many institutions seek to compete on multiple fronts, which hampers the creation of specialist providers. Indeed, the impact of the need to diversify to survive can be seen at every level of the English educational system, from schools creating sixth forms to retain students; to colleges becoming general further education institutions; to a range of universities seeking to expand foundation entry to capture students requiring additional support.

This generalist approach is often an unintended consequence of government policies and initiatives and can lead, in some cases, to students not receiving the experience they should expect. It can be seen, for example, in the rollout of T Levels, where a focus on volume has resulted in engagement with multiple organisations bidding to access associated capital funding. In fact, the requirement of these qualifications to include high-quality placements means they would be far better served if delivered by a limited number of specialist technical institutions with the infrastructure to manage these links.

To give some further examples, it seems unlikely that there would be an estimated nine million adults in England with low basic skills if some colleges were supported to specialise in gateway provision without being financially punished for doing so, and if the specialist nature of this work was recognised and celebrated.<sup>1</sup> Equally, England would probably not have only around 10 per cent of adults aged 18 to 65 and 4 per cent of 25-year olds holding a Level 4 or 5 qualification as their highest qualification if other colleges were to specialise in these areas of delivery.<sup>2</sup>

Within its *Levelling Up* White Paper, published last year, the Government made a commitment to:

*Take the radical steps needed to make us more prosperous and more united by tackling the regional and local inequalities that unfairly hold back communities.*<sup>3</sup>

One of the first steps they must take to achieve this aim is to reform the funding and regulation landscape of post-16 education, to allow a true education system to flourish by enabling networks of differentiated providers to develop and break down the barriers that are holding so many learners back. This will require a clear skills strategy that underpins an educational ecosystem designed for the twenty-first century rather than the nineteenth century.

## 1. Competition over collaboration

Of all the various types of education institutions within England, it is probably further education colleges that have been most affected by the lack of oversight and coordination in skills provision. While filling in gaps created by a system defined by competition on the one hand and diversifying their provision to make up for funding shortfalls on the other, it is no surprise that further education has sometimes been characterised as the ‘everything else’ sector.<sup>4</sup>

The Independent Review Panel Report on *Professionalism in Further Education*, led by Lord Lingfield, identified no fewer than five main functions of further education:

1. Remedial FE – to help school leavers achieve their Level 2 English and Mathematics;
2. Community FE – to offer adult education opportunities to local people;
3. Vocational FE;
4. Academic courses up to Level 3; and
5. Higher education.<sup>5</sup>

It is not for this paper to dictate *what* colleges should be providing. However, it is questionable *whether* any but the largest colleges could fulfil all of these roles adequately. It is also clear, as the following pages will illustrate, that competition within the system is harming colleges’ ability to deliver some aspects of this provision, while a need for funding could arguably be driving them to deliver other aspects that may be outside their natural focus.

The mistakes created from decades of poor funding for colleges are now being repeated in other parts of the education sector. Universities are rushing to create access routes via foundation year degrees and Level 4 courses when in some cases there may be better placed colleges within the vicinity. The release of capital linked to T Levels has also seen a rush of academies without the appropriate employer links seeking approval to run these courses and broaden their offer – especially in areas of demographic-driven falling student demand.

## **Competition between schools, sixth form colleges, further education colleges and universities for Level 3 courses**

Since 2007, the Department for Education has approved the creation of more than 200 school sixth forms.<sup>6</sup> This is despite the fact that the proportion of young people (aged less than 15) making up the population has stayed more or less the same during this period.<sup>7</sup>

Funding for 16 to 19 education is provided by the Education Skills and Funding Agency, which uses a national funding formula to calculate the allocation received by qualifying institutions each academic year. The formula reflects numerous elements of programme and learner support costs, but it is also affected by student retention, meaning a provider will receive no funding for a student who leaves before completing the qualifying period and only 50 per cent if they leave after this period but are not recorded as having completed their course. In addition to this, pupils that have required an additional year in their educational journey are funded at a lower rate. Pupils aged 18 on 1 September (the approximate start of the academic year) receive 17.15 per cent less funding than pupils aged 16 and 17, while those aged 19 receive even less. Furthermore, if a student lacks their GCSE grade 4 or above in English or Mathematics, the school or college must include this in their programme of study even though, for Level 2 courses, there is currently no supplementary funding provided for the additional teaching this necessitates (although the Government has recently announced that it will invest £150 million per year to help fund these particular learners).<sup>8</sup> Finally, pupil premium grant funding, which is designed to improve education outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, also ends at age 16.<sup>9</sup>

In short, the combined effect of these different funding rules means that those learners who require the most support receive the least resource.

The financial penalties attached to recruiting students with higher support costs provide a clear financial incentive for schools to make efforts to retain their pupils with the highest Level 2 attainment into sixth form and not accept weaker students.

In 2020, the Association of Colleges (AoC) released a report examining the effects of competition for 16 to 19 learners. Its findings show that, in areas with high competition, general further education colleges are often in worse

financial health and have lower Ofsted Grades for Overall Effectiveness. The report suggests that this is a result of school sixth forms recruiting students with higher prior achievement.<sup>10</sup> Given that further education colleges serve three times more catch-up students (those without GCSE English and Mathematics by age 16) than schools and 10 times more than sixth form colleges there would seem to be some merit to this claim.<sup>11</sup> This places a significant additional burden on colleges which, combined with the increasingly ill-defined scope of their provision, is no doubt contributing to the 25 per cent of young people still not achieving their Level 2 Mathematics and English by age 19.<sup>12</sup>

The AoC report further notes that, since 2014, competition has caused an 11 per cent fall in student numbers (from 1.29 million to 1.15 million) at further education colleges and that this has had a knock-on effect on class sizes, which prevents institutions from taking advantage of economies of scale and makes specialist and technical courses more challenging to deliver.<sup>13</sup> The Department for Education's further education area reviews noted the need to increase class sizes to improve efficiency and financial sustainability in areas including: Birmingham and Solihull; Cheshire and Warrington; and The Marches and Worcestershire.<sup>14</sup>

Universities have also begun to encroach into this space through the provision of foundation year degrees. Distinct from Level 5 foundation degrees, foundation *year* degrees integrate an additional year of preparatory teaching into three-year Bachelor's degrees for those applicants who lack the prior attainment to enter directly onto the first year of their chosen course, and so compete with Level 3 Access to HE Diplomas typically taught in colleges. Between 2012/13 and 2017/18, the number of learners enrolling on foundation year degrees nearly tripled, increasing from 10,430 to 30,030. In the same period, entrant numbers to Access to HE Diplomas declined by almost a fifth from 36,880 to 30,410.<sup>15</sup>

### **Competition for Level 4 and 5 students between colleges and universities**

With the exception of apprenticeships, universities' delivery at undergraduate level has become increasingly focused on full-time Bachelor's degrees, due to falling demand for part-time and sub-degree provision following the increase of tuition fees to £9,000 in 2012/13 and subsequently to £9,250 in 2017/18.<sup>16</sup> Despite this retreat, however, 88 per cent of universities were still offering some Level 4 or 5 provision (excluding apprenticeships) in 2016/17, which accounted for 32 per cent of learners

studying at this level. Within further education, 97 per cent of providers were delivering Level 4 and 5 qualifications to 53 per cent of these learners.<sup>17</sup>

A Policy Exchange paper written by Nottingham Trent University in 2020 explains the potential issues this creates:

*Whilst universities may validate FECs' [further education colleges'] level 4/5 courses and, indeed, sit cheek by jowl in the same town or city, it is rarer to find a coherent and connected portfolio of programmes which have been designed to facilitate learner progression. It is not unusual to find FECs' programmes validated by a geographically remote university, which presumably tells us something about the reasons behind the lack of such a portfolio.*<sup>18</sup>

Historically there has been a distinction between much of the Level 4 and 5 offers at universities and colleges. A notable proportion of delivery within further education has been made up of non-prescribed courses, which are regulated by Ofqual and sit outside the higher education qualification framework. As a result, they are not eligible for higher education loans or maintenance support and instead need to be funded by Advanced Learner Loans.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, even certain prescribed courses have not had full access to the student loans system. Those studying part-time Level 4 courses, for example, have not qualified for maintenance loans.

*Example of a non-prescribed qualification<sup>20</sup>*

**Award:** Human Resource Management Level 5 Diploma

**Credits:** 44

**Taught by:** City and Islington College

**Awarded by:** Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

*Example of a prescribed qualification*

**Award:** Higher National Certificate (HNC) Building Studies

**Credits:** 120

**Taught and awarded by:** University of Wolverhampton

*Example of prescribed qualification ineligible for maintenance support*

**Award:** HNC Mechanical Engineering (Part-time)

**Credits:** 120

**Taught by:** Lincoln College

**Awarded by:** Pearson

This parallel system has created two issues. First, the lack of maintenance for college sub-degree provision has (coupled with fee rises in higher education) reduced the attractiveness of Level 4 and 5 courses, pushing people towards Bachelor's degrees and making higher education more homogenous as a result. Secondly, the existence of 'non-prescribed' courses has damaged the coherence of local skills offers as their credits are typically not counted by universities, given they sit outside the higher education qualification framework.

As things stand however, this distinction could be swept away with the Government's introduction of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) and the role out of Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs).

HTQs are a government kitemark for Level 4 and 5 qualifications that conform with the requirements of the relevant Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) occupational standard. Those studying for full-time and part-time qualifications with HTQ status, whether they are delivered in further education colleges or universities, will receive full access to both tuition fee and maintenance loans with the introduction of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement from the 2025/26 academic year.

In addition to this, some non-prescribed Level 4 and 5 courses, currently funded by Advanced Learner Loans (such as the Human Resource Management Level 5 Diploma listed above), may also potentially be eligible for Lifelong Learning Entitlement funding. To qualify, a course must demonstrate evidence of learner demand, employer endorsement and clear progression aims as part of a review process to be undertaken by the Department for Education between December 2023 and April 2024.<sup>21</sup>

Looking at the examples above, this would enable a learner studying an HNC at Lincoln College to receive full access to tuition and maintenance support (so long as the qualification received HTQ status).

While providing this funding incentive carries a risk of exacerbating the problem of duplicated and incoherent provision at a local level, as described by Nottingham Trent, it also creates an important opportunity. With proper coordination, college provision at Level 4 in a local area could be aligned with the courses of its nearest university to enable advanced entry into the second year of relevant Bachelor's courses for those learners that successfully pass their Level 4 and wish to continue their learning.

Community colleges in the USA, which provide two-year 'associate degrees' and act as feeders to state colleges and other universities for students that want to top-up to a full Bachelor's, are one example of such a model working in practice. An example closer to home would be the articulation system in Scotland which, in 2017/18, saw 9,763 students matriculate to the second or third year of a Bachelor's degree at a university after achieving an HNC or HND qualification at a further education college.<sup>22</sup>

### **Competition for Level 6 and 7 students between colleges and universities**

The final area of overlap is at Bachelor's and, on occasion, Master's level. Perhaps in part because of funding pressures, increasing numbers of colleges have been taking advantage of the processes set out within the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, which enable them to apply for degree-awarding powers.<sup>23</sup> While five colleges had foundation degree-awarding powers in 2016, at the time of writing, five colleges and one college group (comprising two colleges) have foundation degree-awarding powers; one college and two college groups (comprising 10 colleges between them) have Bachelor's degree-awarding powers; and one college group (comprising seven colleges) has taught Master's degree-awarding powers.<sup>24</sup> In addition to this, a further 131 colleges deliver validated provision on behalf of a university.<sup>25</sup>

Given their wider geographical spread, some colleges will fill in cold spots within the country where there are no other higher education institutions within commutable distance. Others, even when operating in an area with multiple providers, may provide specialist courses not available elsewhere. A prospective student living in Leamington Spa, for example, may choose to apply to WCG (formerly Warwickshire College Group) instead of Coventry University or the University of Warwick because they are the only local institution that offers a Bachelor's in Equine Science.

However, given our current funding structure discourages specialisation, there is a distinct risk that financial pressures will encourage an ever-larger number of colleges to apply for degree-awarding powers simply to diversify their income. This will not only create inefficiency through duplicated and homogenous course portfolios designed for wide appeal but, by making the provision of further education colleges more diluted it will prevent them from focusing on a core offer which meets local skills gaps,

which will differ significantly from region to region. London, for example, faces particular shortages within the cultural and creative industries, the construction sector and health and social work. Skills shortages in Tees Valley, on the other hand, include teachers, sales and customer service staff, social workers and IT staff.<sup>26</sup>

### **The fight for employer involvement in the skills system**

Employer involvement in the English skills system is often a depressing picture. Training spend per employee has fallen 28 per cent in real terms since 2005 to £1,530 per year, half the EU average.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, English firms' track record of investing in skills is so bad that a Conservative government felt driven to introduce a hypothecated tax on all employers with an annual pay bill of over £3 million (at a rate of 0.5 per cent), which they could only reclaim by investing in apprenticeships. Despite this financial incentive, £2 billion of underspent levy funding was returned to the Treasury between 2017 and 2021, 23 per cent of the Department's total ringfenced budget for that period.<sup>28</sup> As of 2021, only 23 per cent of employers were offering apprenticeships.<sup>29</sup>

It should come as a no surprise then, that employers have also not shown a great deal of interest in offering T Level support. An *Employer Pulse Survey* of 5,000 employers, published by the Department for Education in April 2022, found that 63 per cent of businesses were 'not very interested' or 'not at all interested' in offering T Level placements.<sup>30</sup> In an attempt to reverse this trend, the DfE recently announced that it would be making £12 million available to support employers offering placements during the 2023/24 financial year.<sup>31</sup>

But T Levels and apprenticeships are not the only areas where employers are asked to get involved in the skills system. In developing a careers programme providing independent careers advice (a legal requirement), secondary schools are encouraged to follow the Gatsby Benchmarks, a framework developed by Sir John Holman, which encourages schools to seek work experience places and careers talks from employers.<sup>32</sup>



### *The Gatsby Benchmarks*<sup>33</sup>

|   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. A stable careers programme                   | 2. Learning from career and labour market information |
| 3. Addressing the needs of each pupil           | 4. Linking curriculum learning to careers             |
| 5. Encounters with employer and employees       | 6. Experiences of workplaces                          |
| 7. Encounters with further and higher education | 8. Personal guidance                                  |

Taken all together, a lack of local coordination means that an employer that *has* indicated that they are willing to fund training or otherwise support their local skills system, could see themselves receiving requests from their local schools, colleges and universities (as well as elements of government) requesting any combination of the following:

- Taking on apprentices, which includes a commitment to provide 'on-the-job' training and facilitate 20 per cent 'off-the-job' training;
- becoming involved in a trailblazer group to develop and revise occupational standards;
- inputting into other qualifications such as university degrees and City and Guilds qualifications through employer advisory boards;
- offering T Level industry placements at all levels;
- offering general work experience placements;
- providing career talks in schools and taking part in careers fairs; and
- engaging with the development of Local Skills Improvement Plans.

In the face of such competing demands, it is unsurprising that so many employers are turned off engaging in our skills system – especially as shorter lower level placements generally add more burden than benefit. It is also worth noting that despite the bleak state of affairs suggested by the statistics above, there are many thousands of exemplary employers that invest heavily in training and are active partners in our skills system.

In 2021, the Government proposed the introduction of Local Skills Improvement Plans as a way to align further education provision to local employer need. While this might have offered one potential solution to introducing some rationalisation into the system, the final policy appears to fall far short of what is required. Rather than creating frameworks for secondary schools, colleges and universities to collaborate and coordinate their provision in line with employer demand in a local area, Local Skills Improvement Plans will focus solely on ensuring that further education college curricula meet local employer requirements.<sup>34</sup> Many colleges already ensure much of their provision is directly aligned to employer standards (such as T Levels, HTQs and apprenticeships) or informed by employer panels (such as many BTECs and City and Guilds qualifications). Encouraging employers to hand a shopping list of qualifications to colleges will do little to solve local skills issues if there are not clear local pathways into higher education for the companies that require degree-level candidates, or indeed focused gateway provision for those companies that require candidates with English and Mathematics qualifications.

## 2. Qualifications morass

In addition to the increasingly blurred and duplicated offer between different post-16 skills providers, qualification reform carried out by the Government since the 2016 publication of the *Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education* (The Sainsbury Review) has unintentionally compounded the dysfunction within England's skills system.

As policymakers have introduced new qualifications to address perceived skills gaps they have, at the same time, created new issues including regulatory inconsistency and blockages within learning pathways.

### **The diffusion of provision at Level 3**

If a learner is interested in pursuing a technical qualification at Level 3, there are now three main qualifications available to them:

- T Levels
- Advanced (Level 3) Apprenticeships
- Applied Generals (such as BTECs and OCR Cambridge Technicals)

The first T Level subjects began being taught from September 2020, with further subjects being rolled out each year until 2025. T Levels are two-year courses designed to be broadly the equivalent in size to three A Levels (as determined by Universities and Colleges Admissions Service [UCAS] points) with content aligned with employer and industry needs (as determined by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education [IfATE] employer standards). Apart from the fact they are aligned to specific occupations (such as Hairdressing, Barbering and Beauty Therapy or Design, Surveying and Planning for Construction), what makes T Levels distinctive from other technical Level 3 qualifications such as BTECs is that they include a 45-day industry placement.<sup>35</sup>

They are less clearly defined, however, from Advanced (Level 3) Apprenticeships, which, although typically worth only two A Levels, provide the learner with significantly more workplace experience – a minimum of 30 hours a week for the duration of the apprenticeship, which is generally one or two years, as opposed to nine weeks.<sup>36</sup> On this basis, it would seem that, from the perspective of gaining experience of employment, a T Level is an inferior choice to an advanced apprenticeship.

It could also be argued however, that from the perspective of progressing to higher education, a T Level is also an inferior choice to an Extended BTEC Diploma or a BTEC A Level combination. Around 60 per cent of BTEC students matriculate to higher education each year but the suitability of T Levels as a progression qualification into higher education, which is examined at the end of this chapter, currently remains unclear.<sup>37</sup> The requirement of the 45-day industry placement also makes them unsuitable for mature learners seeking to fit their studies around work or those who do not live within commutable distance of a suitable placement provider.<sup>1</sup>

*Comparison Table*<sup>38</sup>

|                                       | <b>T Level in Building Service Engineering for Construction</b>  | <b>Level 3 Building Services Design Technician Apprenticeship</b>  | <b>BTEC Level 3 National Extended Diploma in Building Services Engineering</b>   |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| <b>A Level Size Equivalent</b>        | 3  | Typically 2  | 3  |
| <b>Workplace / classroom balance</b>  | Classroom based with 45-day placement  | Workplace based with 20 per cent off-the-job training  | Fully classroom based  |
| <b>Aligned to IfATE Standard?</b>     | Yes  | Yes  | No   |
| <b>Duration</b>                       | Two years  | 32 months  | Two years  |
| <b>Potential Progression Pathways</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher education courses such as building services engineering and facilities management;</li> <li>• employment in technician level roles such as a services technician; and</li> <li>• advanced, higher and degree apprenticeships in building services engineering</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher education courses such as building services engineering and facilities management;</li> <li>• employment in technician level roles such as a services technician; and</li> <li>• advanced, higher and degree apprenticeships in building services engineering</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher education courses in building services areas before entering employment;</li> <li>• employment as a building services engineering technician, or in a professional construction role; and</li> <li>• advanced and higher apprenticeships in building services engineering</li> </ul> |

i The Department for Education is, however, currently undertaking a pilot for a potential Adult T Level for rollout from 2025.

However, for some learners, a T Level *will* provide an ideal balance between academic classroom-based learning and technical workplace-based learning. The real issue then is less about choice and more about coordination of provision – particular with regards to the involvement of employers and progression to other institutions.

### **Regulatory scramble**

The Government’s introduction of new qualifications, coupled with the increasing overlap in delivery between schools, colleges and universities without any harmonisation of their regulatory systems, has seen the regulatory burden increase significantly for many providers in recent years. The qualification landscape at Levels 4 and 5 is the best example of this.

Levels 4 and 5 form the first two years of a Bachelor’s degree and are regulated by the Office for Students (OfS) and, formerly, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).<sup>ii</sup> Standalone Level 4 and 5 qualifications – such as HNCs – taught in universities and colleges are also quality assured by the Office for Students, unless a college is not on the register of higher education providers, in which case the provision is not subject to quality assurance. A Level 4 apprenticeship however, is quality assured by Ofsted regardless of whether it is delivered in a college or a university (although the qualification element within universities is still subject to the Office for Students’ regulation).<sup>39</sup> A Level 4 HTQ (which is based on the same employer standards as an apprenticeship), on the other hand, will be quality assured by the Office for Students in higher education and the Office for Students or Ofqual in further education.

#### *Level 4 and 5 Regulation Summary*

| <b>Qualification</b>        | <b>Quality Assurance Regulator</b>                      | <b>Aligned to an IfATE Standard?</b> |
|-----------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| Apprenticeship taught in FE | Ofsted  | Yes                                  |
| Apprenticeship taught in HE | Ofsted and Office for Students                          | Yes                                  |
| HNC taught in FE            | Office for Students (if institution is on the register) | No                                   |
| HNC taught in HE            | Office for Students                                     | No <sup>iii</sup>                    |

ii Since April 2023, the Office for Students has taken over the assessment activities of the Designated Quality Body role on an ‘interim’ basis.

iii However, all HNC/Ds will eventually need to receive HTQ Status to receive funding, which will require them to align to the IfATE standard.

|                                |                               |     |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----|
| Foundation Degree taught in HE | Office for Students           | No  |
| Foundation Degree taught in FE | Office for Students           | No  |
| HTQ taught in FE               | Ofqual or Office for Students | Yes |
| HTQ taught in HE               | Office for Students           | Yes |
| Non-prescribed Diploma         | Ofqual                        | No  |

The overlaps and tensions between post-16 regulators provide a disincentive for collaboration between the different education providers working within this space by creating competing expectations. It also serves as a potential disincentive for education institutions to offer qualifications that bring them into contact with a secondary regulator. As Lord Johnson of Marylebone has argued regarding apprenticeships:

*The real risk at the moment ... in the delivery of degree apprenticeships [is that the] combined bureaucracy of QAA [now OfS] quality assurance in the degree component and Ofsted quality assurance in the apprenticeship component is paralysing. Degree apprenticeships will not be delivered in the volume and of the quality the Government want unless that double jeopardy of dual regulation is sorted out.<sup>40</sup>*

The Office for Students was set up explicitly to minimise regulatory burden through light touch monitoring.<sup>41</sup> This has demonstratively not occurred. Additionally, concerns have been raised by a number of figures across the higher education sector about the Office for Students' ability to perform the quality assurance function without the expertise and independence of the QAA.<sup>42</sup> While complete regulatory harmony across all post-16 provision might not be feasible, one answer could be the reduction of regulatory burden for certain providers seeking to collaborate. The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education could, for example, introduce a new kitemark for providers with a proven track record of technical education provision, which, in a similar fashion to degree-awarding powers, frees them up from certain monitoring and central validation requirements, allowing them to focus on delivery and collaboration, so increasing their ability to respond to local need.

## **Blockages in progression pathways**

One of the biggest issues created by England's disjointed skills system is the lack of clear learning pathways for the 50 per cent of students that do not follow the route from GCSE to A Level to university.<sup>43</sup> This manifests most prominently in a lack of choice; a large gap in pathways between Level 3 and Level 4; and hence a lack of adults qualified to Levels 4 and 5.

Unfortunately, rather than filling in these gaps, the complexities created by introducing new qualifications are actually leading to new potential blockages within progression pathways.

For example, while 38 per cent of the first T Level cohort applied to university (compared to around 50 per cent of Level 3 BTEC graduates), many higher education providers have proven hesitant about accepting them. Two weeks before the UCAS deadline for 2022 admissions, less than half of UK universities had confirmed they would accept T Levels. Although the majority have now confirmed they will accept T Levels for 'at least one' course, some universities – notably, Cambridge, Imperial and Queen Mary – have stated unequivocally that they will not be accepting them.<sup>44</sup>

Why is there this reluctance? One possible explanation could be that the requirement of a T Level to meet the workplace 'Knowledge Skills and Behaviours' set out in the IfATE standard means there is an insufficient focus on academic content.

For example, applying for a Surveying degree typically requires A Level Mathematics from applicants. Where the AQA A Level Mathematics contains 21 different elements – ranging from trigonometry to forces and Newton's law – the Design, Surveying and Planning for Construction T Level contains only one element of maths in its course content – mathematical techniques to solve construction problems.<sup>45</sup>

Although it is too early to say for certain, there is a risk that a similar issue will affect HTQs. In order to qualify for HTQ status a Level 4 qualification needs to meet the 'Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours' set out within the relevant IfATE standard. There is no requirement however, that they include at least 120 credits of content (the equivalent of one year of a degree) or that they pay regard to the typical course content required for successful progression through the equivalent Bachelor's degree.<sup>46</sup> This

could potentially create a situation where a graduate with a Level 4 HTQ is trained for a specific occupation, but not able to undertake a Level 5 qualification or enter into the second year of a relevant degree without further learning. In such a situation it is unclear how the additional learning would be provided or funded given there is no equivalent of the T Level transition year for HTQs. In the absence of a well-functioning information advice and guidance system, there is also a real risk that many students may only learn of such issues after they have completed their course. As the economy becomes increasingly knowledge-based and technology continues to impact the workplace, the importance of lifelong learning will only continue to increase. Leaving educational underpinnings missing will, therefore, generate issues for individuals and society in the medium-term. Given we should not have any qualifications which constitute educational dead-ends, there is a clear need in these cases that progression pathways – possibly via specialist providers – are developed.



### **3. The need for co-working and specialisation**

Many of the problems presented in the above pages could be ameliorated if there was greater collaboration at a local level between secondary, further and higher education institutions. This would help to ensure that competition and dead-end pathways were replaced with a cohesive offer meeting the needs of both local learners and employers.

Despite the fact that England's funding and regulatory systems frequently do not support collaboration between institutions at present, such partnerships *do* exist, and examples of some of the main forms they take are given below.

#### **University and college mergers**

There have been a number of instances over the years of universities taking over colleges. While the principle of such mergers is positive, there are few (if any) examples of them working successfully to support regional skills needs by growing both higher education and further education and recognising the distinct and specialist roles of the two sectors. This is because – in addition to issues of clashes between the differing institutional cultures in the two sectors – such mergers have generally been driven by financial problems within the college, which incentivises the university to absorb the college assets while failing to maintain further education delivery.

#### **Articulation and franchise agreements**

The use of agreements that enable colleges to deliver Levels 4 to 7 provision under the oversight of a registered higher education institution have been used for many years and there are currently 131 colleges delivering validated provision on behalf of a university.<sup>47</sup>

Positively, such agreements are relatively easy to set up, provide local opportunity and, if delivering the initial two years (up to Foundation degree or HND), can provide clear progression routes to Level 6 and beyond at the host higher education institution. They also enable colleges to generate additional income while universities provide regional engagement.

However, the relative ease with which these agreements can be drawn up means that if funding becomes a challenge, higher education institutions can simply withdraw from them at short notice and seek to deliver the

qualifications themselves in order to receive 100 per cent of the tuition fee. Such agreements are also prone to being undermined by changes in institutional leadership and strategy. The Office for Students' decision to include outcomes data for students taught through validated and subcontracted provision in the B3 ongoing condition of registration may also lead to reluctance by universities to enter into such partnerships in the future.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, as indicated previously, the ability of universities from outside a region to set up such agreements within the area can contribute to unproductive local competition.

As already referenced, the Scottish system provides a more established model of collaboration in the form of college students matriculating to universities via advanced entry (known as articulation). Such transfers are underpinned by the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and the National Articulation Forum, comprising Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland and supported by the Scottish Funding Council, which works to further embed articulation across the nation as a means to further widen access to university.<sup>49</sup>

### **Institutes of Technology**

Institutes of Technology (IoTs) are a government-funded initiative designed to support collaborations between further and higher education and employer partnerships to deliver Level 4 and 5 Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) skills within a local area. As such, the partnerships are more robustly formulated than simple franchise agreements. There are currently 12 operational IoTs, with a further nine in development.<sup>50</sup>

As an illustrative example, London City Institute of Technology is a collaboration between Queen Mary University of London, Newham College and employers including Siemens, Port of London Authority and CBRE (Global Commercial Real Estate). Course delivery, which includes T Levels, Level 4 and 5 courses and apprenticeships in subjects including Construction, Built Environment, Rail Engineering and Cloud Computing, is co-located in a dedicated building in Poplar.<sup>51</sup> This co-location enables an holistic approach to curriculum development and educational progression while recognising the role of the different providers and supporting educational innovation.

Having the IoT acting as a central hub therefore encourages the institutions to harmonise and coordinate their course offer and avoid excessive duplication but, where these are not as holistic as the example above, there remains a risk they become more shallow in their ambition. The lack of formal integration also makes the IoTs susceptible to changes of institutional leadership or government policy, especially if there is no clear physical manifestation of the ambition. It is questionable, for example, whether they would all be self-sustaining should the Department for Education phase out their pump priming.

### **Higher Education Centres**

Higher Education Centres are a model developed by Nottingham Trent University, where the higher education institution takes ownership of the staff and delivery at a Higher Education Centre based within a college. This provides an interesting model for mixed economy work in cold spots where there may not be a local university but there is a need for a dedicated further education environment and a higher education offer. While these are likely to have limited breadth, such centres could have significant ability to recognise the need for specialist oversight balanced against local opportunity and – if the higher education institution can resource them and the college provides the space – would be quick to develop.

### **Group structures**

Group structures are slower to develop than the examples listed above as they require ministerial approval to create wholly owned further education or higher education subsidiaries under Section 28 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. However, this model recognises the need to have one organisation that aligns educational pathways across wholly owned separate specialist bodies each with their own distinct further education or higher education environment. It is sustainable long-term and can support innovation through joint leadership across the group structure. The complexity of overlapping regulatory regimes within the tertiary education space can create many operational challenges though.

Bolton College, for example, is a wholly owned subsidiary of the University of Bolton while retaining its own principal and governing board. As part of the merger, the university is bound to an asset deed, which protects the college's assets, while also agreeing to underwrite its finances.<sup>52</sup> The

merger has enabled the two institutions to map their curricula against each other while also allowing for cross-institutional initiatives such as university academics visiting the college to give masterclasses and college students using technical facilities at the university to help foster aspiration.<sup>53</sup>

In 2019, LSBU Group was created when Lambeth College was transferred into South Bank Colleges, a wholly owned subsidiary of London South Bank University. The Chief Executive (the Vice Chancellor) acts as the principal accounting officer for both entities which has also supported the integration of the professional service functions. The Group model has promoted specialisation by enabling the College to focus on gateway provision at Lambeth while developing a new technical college in Nine Elms. The Group, which also includes South Bank Academies, enables coordination of the course offer across the three institutions, creating clear learning pathways without any competition for resources. It can also provide an 'all-through' training offer for its employer partners ranging from Levels 2 to 7.<sup>54</sup>

It is worth noting that such Group structures can also be initiated by colleges, as occurred when Hartpury College attained university status in 2018 (changing its name to Hartpury University and Hartpury College) and created a subsidiary through which to continue its further education provision.<sup>55</sup>

### **The need for specialisation**

Collaboration between different education providers reduces the pressure on individual institutions to have a comprehensive course portfolio which meets all potential local demands and spreads internal expertise thinly.

As discussed above, this issue acutely affects colleges who are required to fill in the gaps of the education system – potentially teaching everything from entry-level community further education all the way up to Master's degrees. But it also affects universities who, due to funding pressures and the high-cost of technical education, have typically diluted their offer to provide a comprehensive course portfolio even if they were originally founded as a specialist institution.

One potential model of specialisation at post-secondary / further education level that could provide inspiration for the UK is the use of

vocational schools and technical colleges in Germany. While there are four main types of secondary school within Germany, teaching within two of them (*Hauptschule* and *Realschule*) only extends up to the age of 14 or 15. In addition to directly entering employment, the primary educational routes for these learners is to enter a Vocational School (*Berufsschule*) or a Technical College (*Fachoberschule*).<sup>56</sup>

In the *Berufsschule*, learners undertake apprenticeships, known in Germany as the 'Dual System', with around 70 per cent of their time spent undertaking on-the-job training and 30 per cent of it learning within the classroom.<sup>57</sup> In the *Fachoberschule*, pupils focus on Business and Administration; Technology; Health and Social Work; Design; Nutrition and Home Economics; and Agriculture or Bio and Environmental Technology, predominantly as preparation for entering a University of Applied Sciences (*Fachhochschule*). Work experience can also serve as a substitute for the first year of study in the *Fachoberschule*.<sup>58</sup>

Our corporate landscape and that in Germany are very different and the idea of replicating the German system is not practical. It also comes with its own drawbacks, such as the difficulty young people face in shifting pathways if their interests / understanding of their abilities change as they grow older, which can hamper social mobility (a risk that is also presented by T Levels is they do not ultimately prove a suitable route into higher education).

However, there are things we can consider. It is easy to see the benefits where, in an area served well by further education colleges, some institutions are allowed to focus on gateway provision (Adult Education, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), etc) to tackle the Levels 2 and 3 pipeline blockages, while others can focus on Levels 3 to 5 technical provision. In addition to reducing local duplication, specialisation also helps to rationalise employer engagement in a local area.

The academy sponsorship model also offers an opportunity for universities to support specialist 16 to 19 provision that may not otherwise be financially viable in the current environment. One of the best known examples of this is The King's Maths School, a sixth form, sponsored by King's College London, with a specialist curriculum combining Mathematics with Physics and Computing to prepare students for the study of Mathematical courses

at university.<sup>59</sup> Another example is South Bank University Technical Sixth Form – a 16 to 19 school sponsored by employers and LSBU, which offers a technical curriculum in Health and Engineering up to Level 4 as well as undertaking outreach work with local schools to promote the potential of transferring to technical education pathways at age 16.

There is also an argument to be made that universities, too, would benefit from greater specialisation. The desire to emulate the prestige of the comprehensive Oxbridge model, coupled with underfunding of technical education via subject band funding has seen numerous universities which were set up as technical institutions – such as former polytechnics and Colleges of Advanced Technology – drift from their original missions. However, as shown by the success of the Swiss Government's decision to set up a tranche of Universities of Applied Sciences in the mid-1990s, institutions that are able to focus their research and teaching on applied knowledge and science while collaborating with businesses via translational research can make significant contributions to regional innovation and economic growth.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusions

This paper has outlined in some detail the inherent disconnections and contradictions that currently exist within English education and skills provision.

What, then, might a working skills system look like?

Above all, it would be defined by collaboration and co-ordination.

While some universities would continue to follow a comprehensive model, other more technically focused institutions (universities of technology) would be supported to focus on applied research and innovation, coupled with employer-informed curricula, in order to boost local economic growth and job creation (as evidenced by measures such as the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes).

These universities of technology would additionally collaborate with their closest further education colleges to provide clear learning pathways and advanced entry routes for local learners. These partnerships would be underpinned by robust agreements to provide a degree of permanence and protect the assets of each institution. With the greater stability this provides, the colleges could then be supported to focus on a particular aspect of provision – such as gateway qualifications or higher technical qualifications, depending on the needs of the region. This could be further encouraged by the removal of funding penalties for older and catch-up learners.

Where there are higher education cold spots, these can be filled either by a large comprehensive further education college with its own degree-awarding powers or through a Higher Education Centre sponsored by a university and hosted on college premises.

While many traditional sixth forms would remain, providing academic pathways into comprehensive universities, others would be supported to focus solely on technical provision, including T Levels. This would help to rationalise employer engagement locally while also helping to build the esteem of technical education by making it a positive destination for learners through outreach work with local academies to provide extramural experience of applied learning styles.

These collaborations could potentially be deepened to create clearer technical learning pathways through the development of a new holistic 14 to 18 technical qualification. A Technical Baccalaureate could provide a range of Level 2 skills including English and Mathematics functional skills coupled with both a range of experiences built around civic volunteering and an element of formal Level 3 technical study. (An October 2023 post on London Higher's website explores this idea in more detail).<sup>61</sup>

The Government has recently announced plans to create a similar qualification – the Advanced British Standard – which would involve a student taking a range of around five subjects at major and minor levels including English and Mathematics, with either a technical or academic focus.<sup>62</sup>

Taken together, these elements would add up to a true skills system. In place of the homogenous morass that prevents learners from excelling and the country from making the productivity gains it needs, specialist institutions would provide a clear local educational offer with easily navigable routes. This would make it easier for both prospective learners to understand which course is right for them and for employers to see where their needs are best served in terms of their collaborations with institutions.

If such specialisation helps ensure higher variability and understanding of technical education this, in turn, could hopefully contribute to countering the inherent class biases against it in the longer term. Indeed, the increased visibility of the apprenticeship offer and its growing attractiveness is an example of where this can work.



## Recommendations

Creating a skills system as outlined above requires both recognising the importance of specialisms and creating the infrastructure to join it up.

Although the majority of this work would take place at a regional level, a national framework to set the direction will still be needed. To support regional economic growth, any skills strategy will also need to be developed in tandem with an innovation strategy – ensuring that local SMEs are able to work with local universities of technology to design new processes, products and services that drive demand locally for higher level skills. It would also need to give consideration to other aspects of national innovation priorities such as aligned infrastructure investment and consideration of skills incentives to attract inward investment and industrial development.

The Labour Party has recently announced their intention, if they win the next general election, to establish an expert body called Skills England, to oversee the development of a skills offer to meet national need over the coming decade.<sup>63</sup> Regardless of which party is in government over the next few years, there is a clear requirement to establish a new Skills Council to oversee the entirety of post-16 provision in order to help rationalise the regulatory quagmire and support both specialisation and robust collaboration agreements.

Therefore, in order to break down barriers and create a true education system within England that both provides clear pathways for learners and meets employer demand, the Government should:

- 1. Create a cross-departmental Post-16 Skills Council** involving secondary, further and higher education bodies to create a national skills strategy and to oversee its delivery. In addition to the Department for Education and the Treasury, this would require cross-departmental participation and as such should be considered more akin to Cabinet Office advisory groups such as the Science and Technology Council.
- 2. Ensure that the funding regime supports differentiation** and allows universities, colleges and sixth forms to specialise, thus facilitating collaboration.

- 3. Ensure the skills strategy sets clear ambitions**, such as a target for 75 per cent participation in Level 4+ education, underpinned by local networks.
- 4. Support the development of a new Technical Baccalaureate (TBacc)** to provide a clear and aspirational route to advanced and higher technical qualifications, balanced against conventional A Level progression pathways.
- 5. Introduce a new regional Information, Advice and Guidance service**, which builds on the work currently undertaken by the 29 Uni Connect hubs, and helps learners to navigate the available learning pathways within their locality.

## Afterword

### David Hughes, Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges

A system 'defined by collaboration and coordination' does not sound like a lot to be asking for, and in a tight fiscal environment has the bonus of not requiring additional funds. So why are we not there yet in the post-16 system? What have we got now and how could it be changed? Thankfully this publication helps answer those questions and sets out some ambitious but achievable recommendations which need to be taken seriously.

Having worked in the further education sector since the late 1990s, I have a particular viewpoint on those questions. I start with a belief that a major underlying driver for the current institutional, policy and funding arrangements, which have greatly favoured universities and higher education students over the last 20 years, is a snobbery against technical and practical learning and against what are often dismissed as lower levels of learning as well as the institutions serving those learners. The result is that policymakers and politicians all too often, almost instinctively, value someone achieving a degree more than a literacy or numeracy certificate; the former is viewed as somehow 'better'. Universities are also somehow deemed to be 'better' than colleges. Think about that for a moment in terms of the life-changing potential, and you can see why that needs to change.

As well as that difference in perceived value, too often I see a presumption that so-called academic learning is more important than technical, and also a bit harder and for people who are 'clever'. Even more bewildering is the belief that technical learning is for people who are 'good with their hands' and implicitly not quite so clever.

I say all of this, because the collaboration that Dave Phoenix is advocating does happen and can happen within the current rules, but it just does not happen in enough places and for enough learners. The core mission of universities, colleges and schools are not aligned at their heart, in their values and in the culture of beliefs and values. Changing that will take a generation and would be the most enduring route to a proper system, baked into the DNA of every institution and its staff. In the meantime, this paper sets out some important recommendations which need to be debated and discussed urgently and then acted upon immediately.

And we do need change. The current arrangements are simply not working for the challenges we face as a country. We spend a lot of tax revenue on education post-18 but the labour market is lacking in people with the skills, particularly at Levels 3, 4 and 5, to meet employer demand. Productivity is flat-lining and regional inequalities and disadvantage gaps in educational achievement persist with no signs of improvement. Polling is telling the political parties that large numbers of people want more investment in technical education, delivered locally and flexibly, and focused on helping people get better jobs which will pay enough to stand up to the cost-of-living crisis.

That is not to say that we do not have world-class colleges and universities doing brilliant work. We do, but with the prospect of little additional funding for the next few years, we need to find ways to prioritise and make the system work more efficiently and effectively. Collaboration and coordination to make pathways for learners more straightforward and clear routes into good jobs with employers as partners in education will all help. A simple and effective first step forwards at a national level would be a statement of priorities to include key areas like net zero, the NHS and digital. At a local level, the colleges and universities working with employers would be challenged with delivering on these priorities. I am optimistic that we have turned a corner on this. There is far more recognition of the need for change and for the dysfunction of the current arrangements. This paper helps draw out the issues and some of the potential ways forward. I am looking forward to the discussions we need to have to make sure the change happens.

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- Foundation:
  - Askham Bryan College
  - Cornwall College
  - Hull College
  - Luminare Education Group (comprising Keighley College and Harrogate College)
  - New College, Durham
  - South Devon College
- Bachelor's:
  - Blackpool and Fylde College
  - Warwickshire College Group (comprising: Royal Leamington Spa College, Moreton Morrell College, Rugby College, Pershore College, Warwick Trident College, Evesham College and Malvern Hills College)
  - TEC Partnership (comprising: East Riding College, Scarborough TEC and Grimsby

Institute of Further and Higher Education)

- Taught Master's:
  - NCG (comprising: Newcastle College, Kidderminster College, Newcastle Sixth Form College, West Lancashire College, Carlisle College, Lewisham College and Southwark College)

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## About LSBU Group

The UK has the second-highest rate of inequality in the G7, behind only the US. A major driver of this is the entrenched disparities in productivity across the country. Small businesses, which are more likely to employ local people, struggle to access research and innovation support that can drive productivity gains through the development of new products and processes. At the same time, a lack of clear pathways for local learners, driven by institutional competition, prevents companies from accessing the skills they need while also hampering social mobility.

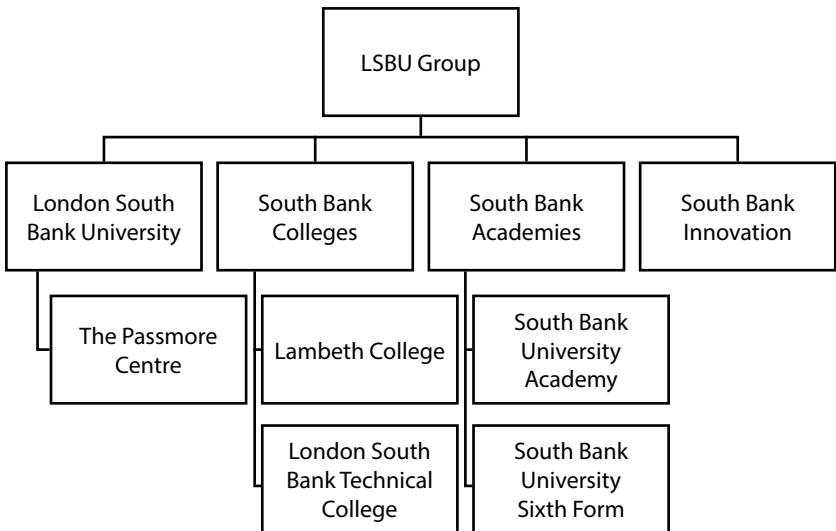
LSBU Group offers an alternative to institutional competition by bringing together a collection of like-minded but distinct organisations, which work together under one academic framework and one leadership team. The model recognises the importance of different learning environments by expecting each academic unit to specialise in its own field and then linking them through the co-creation of learning pathways. These pathways create a scramble net of linked qualifications, enabling individuals to access their skills needs at any point in their career with the simple principle that no qualification can become an academic dead-end. By bringing together integrated professional services it also enables academic units to focus entirely on delivering outstanding academic outcomes.

The Group further differentiates by specialising in professional and technical education, enabling employers to access talent across the educational spectrum and exploiting the opportunity for cross group enterprise and innovation. LSBU Group includes:

- **London South Bank University:** a civic university providing high-quality professional and technical education.
- **The Passmore Centre:** a pan-Group institute of professional and technical education with a focus on apprenticeships and work-based education providing a one-stop-shop for employers' skills needs.
- **South Bank Academies**, comprising:
  - *South Bank University Sixth Form* – the first dedicated 16 to 19 technical academy with employer sponsors including Skanska and

Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust. Focused on technical qualifications, it also uses a hub and spoke model to support local schools that wish to deliver more applied options from Year 10.

- *South Bank University Academy* – an 11 to 19 secondary school and sixth form with a STEAM-based curriculum.
- **South Bank Colleges**, comprising:
  - *Lambeth College* – a new dedicated gateway college with Adult Education, ESOL, SEND and Entry-Level qualification provision.
  - *London South Bank Technical College* – the first comprehensive technical college for a generation, focusing on provision from Levels 2 to 4.
- **South Bank Innovation:** the Group's commercial and enterprise arm.



Early indicators of success of LSBU Group's approach include:

- South Bank Academies recording no NEETS (not in education, employment or training) despite over half of pupils being free school meal eligible.

- Lambeth College achieving Ofsted 'Good' for the first time in a decade and surpassing national achievement rates in spite of significant numbers of adult (87 per cent), free school meal eligible (25 per cent) and looked after (10 per cent) students.
- The opening of London South Bank Technical College increasing 16 to 19 applications to South Bank Colleges by 100 per cent in its first year.
- London South Bank University being ranked 12<sup>th</sup> among UK universities for graduate starting salaries one year after graduation (*Longitudinal Educational Outcomes Data 2020/21*).
- London South Bank University being ranked 8<sup>th</sup> worldwide for its contribution to Sustainable Development Goal 8 – Reduced Inequalities (*THE Global Impact Rankings 2023*).

*LSBU Group has contributed to the cost of producing and distributing this report.*



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**The lack of a strategic framework for post-16 education provision, combined with a confusing regulatory regime, is resulting in an incoherent and difficult to navigate offer for learners of all ages, as well as employers.**

**In this HEPI report, Professor David Phoenix emphasises that to meet England's ever more pressing skills needs and realise the country's potential, we need to support the development of a range of appropriately funded specialist educational institutions. He argues this will require a joined up post-16 education system with roles for sixth forms, colleges and universities clearly defined in a national framework, to encourage the creation of clear local learning pathways that support both employer and learner skills needs and help to tackle inequality and stagnant productivity.**



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