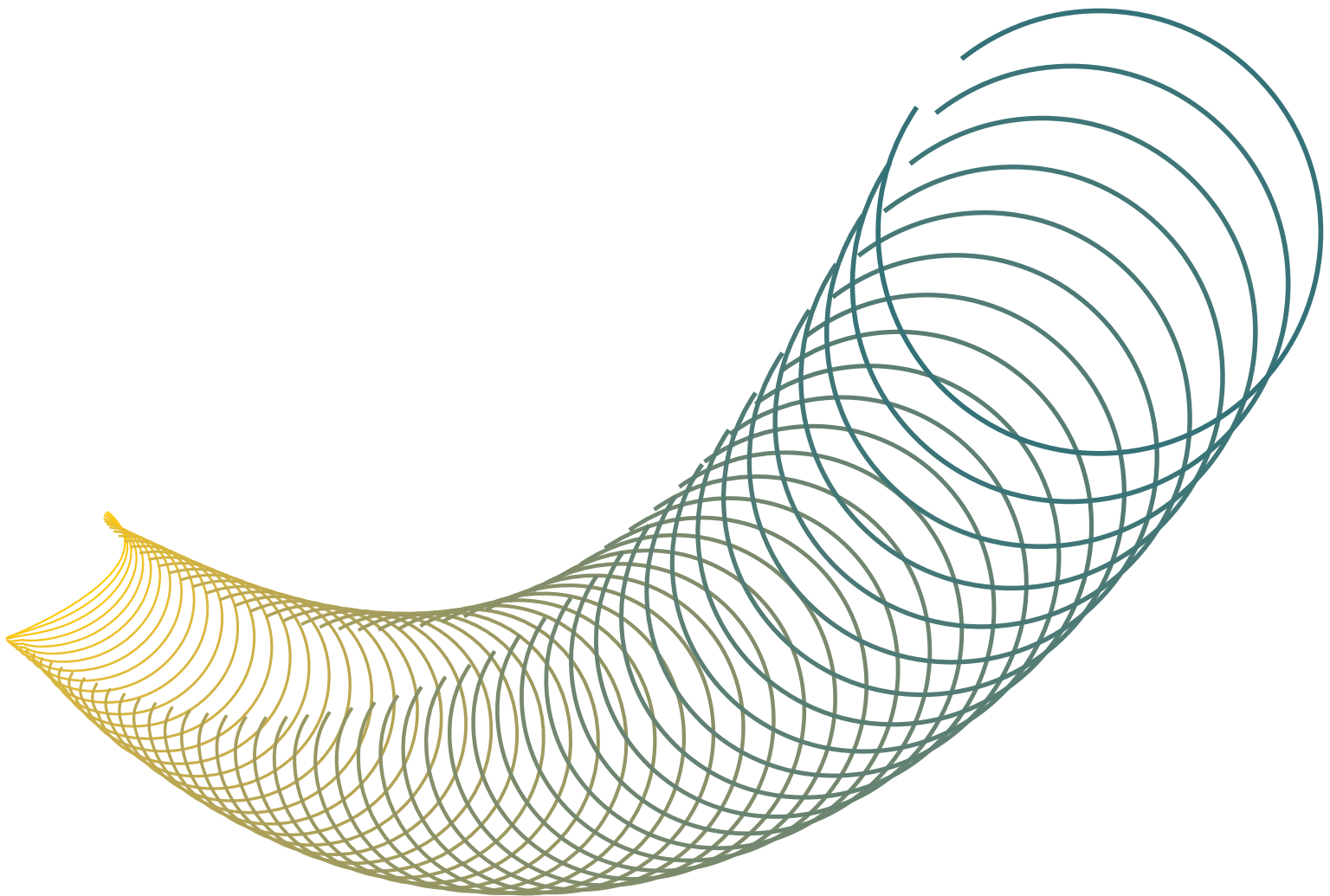


ROUTES TO HIGH-LEVEL SKILLS



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK has a world-class university system that plays a crucial role in producing a highly skilled workforce that can meet the rapidly shifting needs of the country. To remain responsive, the sector is developing new models and approaches. Partnerships between higher education, further education, employers and other parts of the tertiary education system are one such approach. Alongside traditional routes and provision, these have a growing role to play in addressing the UK's skills challenges by providing integrated pathways to higher level skills for learners on vocational and technical, as well as traditional academic routes. These are new and emerging areas and this report explores the extent and nature of these partnerships, offers insights into the key drivers of collaboration and the benefits for students as well as for the partners involved.

We undertook eight detailed case studies (see the accompanying case study report) and gathered evidence from other stakeholders. The case studies illustrate how this type of collaboration can grow and work in practice. There is growing and diverse collaboration between HE, FE and employers. Partners are taking innovative approaches to ensure that their collaborations are effective and that pathways and courses developed are industry-relevant, meet defined skills needs, provide coherent progression and flexible opportunities to engage in learning. This is vital for developing new talent to ensure a future skills pipeline but also for upskilling and reskilling the current workforce in response to changing skills needs.

This type of collaboration is unlikely to develop spontaneously between partners with no history of working together, but tend to emerge from pre-existing relationships. Key drivers for collaboration are economic (addressing skills needs and improving graduate employability), social (enhancing the accessibility of provision to attract a broader range of potential learners and support social mobility) and in response to policy developments (such as the apprenticeship levy). Additional benefits of collaboration include shared learning and staff development, enhanced financial sustainability, stronger relationships and opportunities to develop new partnership projects.

Developing collaborations is not without challenges. Different institutions and employer partners can bring competing interests, demands and expectations, as well as different terminology and perspectives, which need to be managed. Educational institutions are increasingly competing for students, and ways to overcome or set this aside are needed for effective collaboration. Developing partnerships can require a significant time and resource input, particularly if creating a new programme, model of working or flexible learning opportunities. For collaborations undertaking innovative projects and breaking new ground, there is unlikely to be established practice or learning to work from.

Developing collaborations is not without challenges. Different institutions and employer partners can bring competing interests, demands and expectations.

The case studies overcame these challenges to create strong collaborations.

Key ingredients for success include: finding spaces (subject, level or target student) for collaboration where institutions do not see themselves in competition; early identification of a shared goal or vision; recognising and respecting the strengths of partners; identifying and mapping progression routes; and focusing on the specific skills needs of the locality, identified through substantial employer engagement and working with other stakeholders such as Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and other sector bodies.

Partnership working of this type is still emerging and developing, particularly in response to shifting and diverse educational policy agendas across the UK, such as an increase in new apprenticeship standards and reviews of post-16 and post-18 education in England. Yet there are clear potential benefits and opportunities to expand and extend such approaches alongside more traditional routes and modes of study. Below we set out issues to consider further to help support and grow these types of important collaborations between tertiary education and employers to meet needs for higher level skills.

This report contains case studies from across the UK, recognising the diversity of initiatives and settings, and that higher education institutions across the whole country are developing innovative approaches and looking beyond traditional models. In terms of the issues for consideration set out below, much of this area is devolved and specific recommendations made refer largely to an English policy context.

ISSUES FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

- **Identifying regional skills needs:** A clearly identified skills need is one of the main springboards to collaborative working. Therefore, it is important that partnerships have access to granular data that pinpoints the issues in their locality. Gathering intelligence on skills gaps and shortages is, however, resource intensive and individual employers and providers are unlikely to have the resources in place to undertake the necessary research. The government should ensure that this issue is the principal focus of Skills Advisory Panels in England as they are developed. Panels should be enabled to work with FE-HE-employer partnerships to share intelligence and ensure that appropriate pathways are developed in response.
- **Identifying a local focal point for collaboration:** A key strength of some of the models examined is the presence of a 'one stop shop' or single point of contact for employers with a skills need and/or learning providers with expertise in a particular skill area. Identifying who, locally, can help to broker introductions between employers and education providers could help co-ordinate and facilitate partnership development and would streamline the process and ensure that appropriate partners were connected. LEPs in England have a role to play in supporting such collaborations and ensuring that employers are signposted to focal points where they exist.
- **Raising awareness of the opportunities and pathways to HE:** The HE and FE partnerships highlighted here provide important benefits to students, giving them better access to information on the options open to them across a range of providers. Further encouraging these types of partnerships could play a key role in enabling students to make choices across different levels of education to best suit their needs. This is particularly important for students from non-traditional backgrounds. As set out in the latest UK government's

careers strategy for England *Making the most of everyone's skills and talents*,¹ the National Careers Service must also proactively raise awareness of new routes to HE and career and skills development – among young people in schools and colleges, and adults in the workplace. It must provide appropriate information, advice and guidance to enable individuals to make informed choices about the best route for them. Partnerships developing pathways to higher level skills should work with widening participation teams and programmes such as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme, which is targeting young people with the potential to progress to HE, and their parents, to raise awareness of alternative routes into HE being developed. This could help partnerships understand barriers to participation better and design tailored provision accordingly.

- Role of regulatory bodies in encouraging partnership development:** Partnerships developing pathways to higher level skills can contribute to wider strategic objectives, such as widening participation in HE, improved graduate outcomes and social mobility. Ways to recognise the value and contribution of such partnerships within performance measures – such as the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) – and other regulatory mechanisms (such as access and participation plans for English institutions) should be investigated. At the least, regulators and funders should be alert to barriers that may stifle innovation or the flexibility for partners to work together where an opportunity has been identified.
- Funding to support development and increase reach:** Most of the collaborations identified in this report have grown out of pre-existing partnerships. But they require considerable investment in terms of time and resource to develop. The ability to deliver learning provision in flexible ways is paramount if learners from a range of backgrounds, including those in the workplace, are to be engaged. This can also require considerable investment to create the necessary infrastructure, such as capital funding for industry-embedded delivery centres and/or satellite sites within local communities. Both of these factors mean there is a significant opportunity for national funders to catalyse the development of more such partnerships. The Office for Students (OfS) in England and other UK funding bodies should consider how best their investments in skills development can support partnership approaches that build on pre-existing relationships where real opportunities can be realised. Investment in specific models, such as Institutes of Technology in England, is significant and welcome. Further investment in a range of models has the potential to unlock a diversity of important and innovative approaches across the country.
- Funding for learners:** Current funding mechanisms are tailored in favour of study for full qualifications. This leaves a gap for funding that encourages flexible/progressive learning, where learners can study in bite-sized chunks, with the opportunity to step-on and step-off programmes. There appears to be scope to use some of the collaborative arrangements that we have identified as potential test-beds to pilot targeted financial incentives. This might include preferential loan repayment terms (as recommended by UUK in response to the Post-18 Funding Review), testing modular funding arrangements and/or more flexible use of the apprenticeship levy. The joint UUK and CBI project on the economic case for flexible learning is due to report, with specific recommendations aimed at encouraging more flexible approaches to learning by autumn 2018. The report will set out how this particular recommendation can be further progressed.

¹ See www.gov.uk/government/publications/careers-strategy-making-the-most-of-everyones-skills-and-talents

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



Partnerships between higher education, other educational providers and employers have a vital role to play in addressing the UK's skills challenges by providing integrated pathways to high-level skills for learners. By collaborating with employers, providers can develop flexible provision that equips learners with the skills and ability to adapt to the rapidly changing world of work.

This report by CFE Research on behalf of UUK follows *Forging Futures*,² which examined the ways in which universities and employers were working together to improve higher level skills.

This research sets out to understand the current role that HEIs fulfil in providing technical and vocational skills pathways and the extent to which these are developed in partnership with businesses and other parts of the tertiary education system.

It explores the extent and nature of partnerships, offering insights into the key drivers of collaboration and the benefits for students as well as for the partners involved. Drawing on case studies of current and emerging good practice, the research explores how partnerships evolve and are subsequently supported and sustained. The report has a strong English focus, but it also examines the issues across the nations of the UK, identifying common challenges and motivating factors and highlighting the different ways that institutions are responding within different political contexts.

A series of recommendations are made to stimulate further debate on the role of collaboration in addressing the UK's skills needs in the context of reforms to technical education, the review of post-18 education and funding in England and the focus on enhancing the skills base within each of the nations in the UK.

CASE STUDIES

The findings in this report are based on a rapid review of relevant research and policy evidence, a survey of higher education institutions and interviews with key stakeholders and learners. Eight detailed case studies were undertaken to give an insight into the type of collaborations either currently established or under development between universities, the further education sector and employers. You can read a summary of each case study in the accompanying case study report.

1. **Bangor University and Grŵp Llandrillo Menai.** A partnership between the University and the largest FE institution in Wales that is enabling closer working with employers on regional economic development programmes and widening participation in higher education.
2. **Birmingham Higher Level Skills in Engineering Programme.** A unique collaboration between the FE sector, a Russell Group university and industry, creating a single system to develop higher level skills in engineering.
3. **Lincolnshire Institute of Technology (LIT).** A joint bid to establish an LIT that involves the university, all seven further education colleges (FECs) in the county and two major employers.
4. **Middlesex University Centre for Apprenticeships and Skills.** A new, employer-focused university centre to establish progression routes to higher level skills and widen access to professional careers.
5. **MIRA Technology Institute (MTI).** A bespoke automotive skills training centre sited on the MIRA Technology Park, with industry-relevant courses delivered by an FEC, three universities and HORIBA MIRA.

² *Forging Futures: Building higher level skills through university and employer collaboration* was produced by CFE Research and jointly published by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and UUK.

6. **Staffordshire University Creative Arts Partnerships.** Partnership working between university, colleges, private providers and industry equips students with up-to-date skills and offers live design projects to work on.
7. **University of Strathclyde Engineering Academy.** An alternative route into engineering at the University of Strathclyde, with a strong focus on widening access and creating work-ready graduates.
8. **University Campus St Albans.** A joint venture between the University of Hertfordshire and Oaklands College to provide flexible, part-time and employer-driven HE provision.

Interviews were conducted with representatives from each university and at least one of the partners for all case studies. Where available, learners were also interviewed (case studies 2, 3 and 5 have yet to recruit students to these specific programmes).

These eight case studies are supplemented with other innovative examples of collaboration: The University of Portsmouth Forensic Innovation Centre, The Open University working in partnership with the Collab Group and the Worcestershire LEP Technical Skills Partnership Programme.

THIS REPORT

The following chapter gives an overview of recent and current policy developments that relate to HE-FE-employer collaborations. Chapters three and four examine the drivers and benefits of collaboration when considering *why* universities, the FE sector and employers might collaborate and then *how* they might collaborate more closely, with a particular emphasis on overcoming potential barriers. These two chapters are based on the thoughts and experiences of interviewees from each of the case studies as well as additional participants from three universities, one college, two LEPs and one regional apprenticeship support agency. Chapter five concludes with some broad messages and considers potential implications for funding, regulation and policy, based on education and employer interviews and the thoughts of key stakeholders gained through a workshop held for them to discuss their thoughts on this type of collaboration.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT



Much has changed since Forging Futures was published in 2014. The coalition government has been replaced by a minority Conservative government and the UK has voted to leave the EU. While the implications of Brexit are still unknown, it is certain that the education and skills sector will play a crucial role in upskilling the current workforce, as well as equipping the workforce of the future with the requisite skills to enable the UK to compete and thrive.

The important role that vocational and technical education will play in assuring the UK's economic future is recognised in the latest Industrial Strategy.³ However, the vocational and technical education system is complex and characterised by a proliferation of providers and qualifications of varying quality and value in the labour market. Building on earlier recommendations of the Wolf Review,⁴ the Independent Panel on Technical Education chaired by Lord Sainsbury⁵ and The Richard Review of Apprenticeships⁶ suggested radical changes designed to simplify the system and deliver the skills most needed for the 21st century. These included re-defining apprenticeship *frameworks* into a series of clear, industry-backed *standards* at Levels 2 to 8 and the development of 15 new technical routes to complement existing academic and vocational pathways, with clear progression to higher education. These recommendations were accepted by the government and their plans to cultivate progression routes to higher-earning technical roles, while addressing the intermediate and higher skills needs of the economy, were set out in the Post-16 Skills Plan.⁷ The Department for Education (DfE) subsequently commissioned a review of how Level 4 and 5 classroom-based education meets the needs of learners and employers, with a view to ensuring that there is excellent provision in place to support student social mobility as well as meeting future skills needs. The first colleges and post-16 providers to deliver the new T Levels⁸ in 2020 have recently been announced, representing another step towards the ambition to transform technical education and offer young people a broader choice of progression options post-16.

The reforms to tertiary education and skills have important implications for the HE sector, which has also been subject to reform and landmark changes to the way it is funded. Current policy in England places a greater emphasis on competition, choice and value for money for students and the tax payer⁹ and has led to the creation of a new regulator, the OFS, and the introduction of new performance measures, such as the TEF, which assesses teaching quality and the ways in which HEIs ensure positive outcomes for their students.¹⁰ In Wales, the Diamond review of HE funding¹¹ recommended greater financial support for students attending university, with upcoming changes seeing an increase in financial support – a mix of loans and grants – available to all Welsh students and, crucially, equivalent support for part-time and postgraduate students. Scotland has a policy of free tuition for Scottish domiciled and EU students studying at Scottish HEIs. An independent review of student support¹² recommended a minimum student income for all HE and FE students, delivered through a mix of bursaries and student loans.

3 www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf

4 Wolf, A. (2011) *Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report*.

5 www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/536046/Report_of_the_Independent_Panel_on_Technical_Education.pdf

6 Richard, D (2012) *The Richard Review of Apprenticeships*. London: School for Start-ups.

7 www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-skills-plan-and-independent-report-on-technical-education

8 www.gov.uk/government/publications/introduction-of-t-levels/introduction-of-t-levels

9 Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2016) *Success as a knowledge economy: Teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*. White Paper. London: BIS.

10 Universities UK (2017) *Implementation of the Higher Education Research Act 2017* UUK www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/briefing-implementation-higher-education-research-act-2017.aspx

11 Diamond, I (2016) *Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance Arrangements in Wales: Final Report*. Welsh Government.

12 Independent review into student support in Scotland (2017) *A New Social Contract for Students: Fairness, Parity and Clarity* The Scottish Government <https://beta.gov.scot/publications/independent-review-student-financial-support-scotland/>

The HE sector has also been affected by the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017. However, as skills policy is a devolved matter, the way the funds raised are allocated differs between the UK countries and thus has different implications for employers and education and training providers. As large employers, many HEIs are subject to the levy, as well as fulfilling a key role in the development and delivery of higher and degree apprenticeships. In the context of these wider reforms, fundamental changes may be required to facilitate access to HE for students on the new technical and vocational pathways, including the development of new application processes and entry requirements, a broader offer that responds to demand for other forms of HE (such as degree apprenticeships), and tailored support for those seeking to transition from technical to more academic pathways (and vice versa).

PARTNERSHIPS AND PATHWAYS TO HIGH LEVEL SKILLS

Each part of the tertiary education system has and will continue to have an important role to play in its own right in creating a highly skilled workforce. The underlying aim of all of these policy developments, however, is achieving the ambition of a more joined-up tertiary education system: one which provides integrated pathways to higher level skills that work for both individuals and businesses. To be successful, this system must deliver the advanced technical skills that the UK economy needs. This is where partnerships between HEIs, businesses and other parts of the tertiary education system have a vital role to play, ensuring that provision equips students with industry-relevant knowledge and skills and facilitates smooth transitions between levels of study and into the workplace.

The underlying aim of all of these policy developments is achieving the ambition of a more joined-up tertiary education system.

The role and importance of partnership in the context of education and skills is not new, however. As far back as 2006, The Leitch Review of Skills advocated for closer partnerships between government, employers and individuals to facilitate the development of a more employer-led skills system capable of delivering ‘*relevant, flexible and responsive provision that meets the high skills needs of employers and their staff.*’¹³ Six years later, business-university collaboration provided the focus of the Wilson Review,¹⁴ which started from the premise that the UK’s future economic prosperity depended, in large part, on connecting universities’ world-class research with an enterprising workforce that could attract investment and turn knowledge into productivity through innovation and entrepreneurship. The importance of further education and business collaboration has also been documented.¹⁵

¹³ Leitch, S. (2006). *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills*. Norwich: The Stationery Office. p.68.

¹⁴ Wilson, T. (2012) *A review of business-university collaboration*. London: BIS, Preface.

¹⁵ UKCES (2016). *A new conversation: employer and college engagement*. London: UKCES.

The mutual benefits of collaboration between employers and the HE and FE sectors are reflected in developments such as the creation of new Institutes of Technology (IoTs), National Colleges and National Skills Academies. The Institute of Coding is a consortium of more than 60 universities, businesses and industry experts developed to engage industry leaders in HE curriculum development for specialist digital skills. In addition, the government is promoting Local Digital Skills Partnerships to increase collaboration between public, private and third sector organisations and help to address local digital skills needs in more targeted and innovative ways. It is still very early days for many of these industry-facing collaborative initiatives.

HEIs have a long-established tradition of collaboration with employers, for example, through Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, research and development and consultancy. The HE and FE sectors have also been working in partnership to deliver franchising arrangements and other joint activities such as collaborative outreach. There are emerging examples of partnerships built on pre-existing joint activities, such as the development of higher and degree apprenticeships in universities¹⁶ and the focus on flexible progression pathways for students who do not take a traditional A Level route to university, such as London South Bank University's *Families of Learning* model.¹⁷ However, there is little published evidence of partnerships involving all three stakeholders (employers, FE and HE) and the ways in which they have evolved for the purposes of creating pathways to higher level skills. Similarly, there is a paucity of evidence on the impact these partnerships have on employability, skills gaps and shortages, or productivity and growth. Given the developments underway to encourage increased collaboration between the education sector and industry to address current and future skills needs, the research reported here contributes to filling an important gap in current understanding.

16 Moss, C. (2016). *Sheffield Hallam University: An Institution Wide Approach to Higher and Degree Apprenticeship based on Regional Skills Needs and Employer Demand*. London: UVAC.

17 London South Bank University (2017). *Families of Learning: Co-creating local solutions to education system failings*. London: PA Consulting.

CHAPTER 3

WHY COLLABORATE?



To encourage collaboration between the tertiary education sector and employers, it is important to understand the drivers behind such collaborations. Although universities, colleges and employers might achieve different outcomes from working in partnership, the main motivations are often the same.

KEY DRIVERS OF COLLABORATION

The case studies carried out for this report suggest that there are three major drivers that have led to the establishment of partnerships between these three stakeholders (employers, FE and HE):

- **Economic:** the need to address skills gaps and shortages so that individual businesses as well as regional economies can adapt and grow by taking advantage of new opportunities in rapidly changing industries.
- **Social:** meeting civic responsibilities through widening participation in higher education and supporting social mobility through enhanced employability.
- **Policy:** in particular, education and skills policy developments, reforms to technical and vocational education and the introduction of the apprenticeship levy.

Economic drivers

Key economic drivers include addressing local and regional skills needs, both in terms of developing new talent and upskilling the current workforce, and ensuring graduate employability.

Addressing skills needs – attracting and developing new talent

Many areas of the UK have experienced the decline of traditional industries such as coal mining and steel and the emergence of new industries in a more knowledge-driven economy. Advances in technology are also impacting on traditional sectors, such as the automotive industry, changing the way they operate as well as the products and services they produce and deliver. Ensuring employers have access to the skills they need to respond to these changes is imperative if business are to survive and the UK is to remain competitive in a global economy. However, skills needs vary by region and are strongly influenced by the industries present in a particular area, as well as socio-demographic factors and levels of employment. All the case studies in this report demonstrate that collaboration between HE, FE and employers is an effective mechanism for first identifying and then addressing local skills needs:

There's quite a strong software cluster in North West Wales based just outside of Bangor and there's always a struggle, no matter how many graduates we produce as a university and the FE sector as well, there's always a struggle to get a good quality workforce ... We should be providing skills for the region and the Grŵp Llandrillo Menai link enables us to do that in an increasingly effective way.

Interviewee, Bangor University

While addressing current skills gaps and shortages is the impetus for many of the case study partnerships, meeting future skills needs is also a key driver. Developments in technology are advancing rapidly, fundamentally changing the nature of some roles as well as creating new ones. Employers at the cutting edge of these developments are motivated to work in partnership with providers of technical and vocational education to ensure that the talent pipeline is equipped with the industry-relevant knowledge and skills they will need for the jobs of the future:

It's about future-proofing the workforce. The skills that are needed today are almost certainly different from the skills that will be needed in three or four years' time. It's absolutely essential to have deep employer engagement in order to ensure that skills training remains industry relevant.

Interviewee, University of Lincoln

In providing vocational and technical courses from Level 3 (and occasionally Level 2), colleges play a vital role in assuring the pipeline of new talent, supporting progression into the workforce and/or further study. The partnership between FE and HE ensures a coherent pathway for those who want to continue to learn beyond Level 4.

The college is the partner who's bringing new talent into the engineering, basically. They will be covering pretty much all the up to Level 4 provision, it's what they do, it's what FE does, and it does it very well.

Interviewee, HORIBA MIRA

It is essential for the educational partners to work closely with employers to ensure that the curriculum is relevant to the needs of their industry, particularly with respect to addressing future skills needs. This works most effectively when employers are consulted before and during the design of new curricula:

What we've done at the university is very much based on all of our programme development consultation with employers. Very positively here, we're working closely with employer partners that we already have to explore programme needs. Also, the study mode. What should the qualifications be underneath it? So, I think what we've developed is meeting the needs locally.

Interviewee, University of Hertfordshire

It is also important to engage employers at regular intervals to ensure that the curriculum remains relevant and responsive to new developments in the industry.

The MTI in the Midlands is an example of an educational centre that is fully embedded in industry, in a region dominated by the automotive sector. The establishment of the MTI was driven by a need to address regional skills shortages as well as to meet the demand for skills from a growing and evolving industry.

There's a general shortage of engineering, there's another shortage of automotive engineering, and the industry is booming. We've also got electric autonomous disruptions happening within the industry as well. So, there are an awful lot of traditional engineers who don't have the current skills needed, either, for the world we're moving to.

Interviewee, HORIBA MIRA

The three-way partnership between HORIBA MIRA and the HE and FE sectors is critical to the success of the MTI. The collaborative approach ensures a broad range of provision, tailored to the needs of the industry, is available to learners at different levels.

Upskilling the current workforce

Universities and colleges have a significant role to play in helping businesses develop their workforce from within as well as the workforce of the future. The increased political focus on the apprenticeship agenda, and particularly the introduction of the apprenticeship levy and ambitious targets for the number of apprenticeships created, has encouraged employers to consider how they might use apprenticeships alongside traditional part-time study and short courses to upskill their current workforce.

Offering opportunities for employees to upskill and/or reskill can help employers to retain their talent. Although the risk of attrition is often given as a reason why employers, particularly small and medium enterprises, do not invest in training for their staff, the case studies suggest that the opposite is true. Investing in the skills of employees enables them to respond to change and evolve in their role so that they remain with their employer. This is particularly important in some regions of the UK, such as North Wales, where the local economy is not as dynamic as in other parts of the country.

We've got people who have been in post for a very long time in some organisations who are a bit trapped. They can't necessarily afford to take three years off to do a degree and then risk not being able to get back into an employer in the region. The novel route that this [partnership] gives is quite powerful.

Interviewee, Bangor University

Importantly, investing in staff also ensures they feel valued by the employer, which is said to engender loyalty and support retention.

Retaining people is important and we know it's not just about salaries, it's about training and development... [offering this] buys that loyalty that helps with staff retention... it demonstrates our commitment to them.

Interviewee, Jarvis Construction

Staff retention is important for employers as it is more cost-effective than recruitment, and by investing in training, employees can be upskilled in a way that meets the needs of the particular company. A key benefit of the partnership model is that employers are able to access training for staff at all levels, with clear progression routes for those seeking to advance in their roles.

Surely the most cost-effective way for industry is to actually train your own, promote from within, recruit at the bottom. You can't do that unless you've got something that delivers every level of training.

Interviewee, HORIBA MIRA

Workforce development is also important for the prosperity of regions, as it helps to attract other businesses to the area in industries that require the same skills. This was a key driver for the MTI and the LIT.

There are two parts, one, from the industry point of view it makes sense to have people that you've put in a lot of investment in stay, and two, we don't want [in meeting] these higher level skills, our local people to be overlooked. It's very much a case of 'grow local'.

Interviewee, North Lindsey College

Those seeking to upskill in the workplace have very different needs to young entrants to FE and HE. Their ability to engage in learning is likely to be constrained by a number of factors, including family or caring responsibilities and shift patterns. A key strength of the collaborative approach is that learning can be delivered in flexible ways that facilitate access for learners, irrespective of their circumstances.

Staff retention is important for employers as it is more cost-effective than recruitment, and by investing in training, employees can be upskilled in a way that meets the needs of the particular company.

Part-time, flexible provision is attractive to employers looking to upskill or reskill their employees. University Campus St Albans (UCSA), a joint venture between the University of Hertfordshire and Oaklands College, provides flexible, part-time degree courses designed to fit around employees' working hours. Similarly Middlesex University has designed their degree apprenticeships to fit around the work demands of their learners and their employers:

The whole 20 per cent off-the-job [study] comes from that traditional notion of going one day a week to college, but that's not the model we apply at all. We don't really think that's fit for purpose. Actually, part of the trick of 20 per cent is actually making it productive for the employer as well as productive from a learning point of view.

Interviewee, Middlesex University

Co-locating the MTI on the Technology Park ensures workforce development can be delivered to staff working for a range of employer partners on a single site. The MTI partners regard this 'one stop shop' as a major strength of their approach that benefits employers as well as employees by delivering learning at different levels through the partnership.

Working with the MTI, [employers] will be able to establish a path for their employees to increase their knowledge and skills and retain them within the business.... They can provide options in a single space... that's going to be really beneficial to the employers.

Interviewee, Coventry University

For employees, this flexibility can be vital in their decision to embark upon degree-level training – see the learner stories in the accompanying case study report.

Enhancing graduate employability

Employer engagement is also crucial for ensuring that students are work-ready when they graduate from higher level skills programmes. Contributing to curriculum development is a significant part of this. However, employers can be engaged in a variety of other ways to develop the work-readiness of graduates.

Through their collaboration with employer partners, the University of Strathclyde Engineering Academy is able to offer paid summer internships, workshops on employability skills such as CV writing, and presentations about different careers in industry to help prepare students for a career in engineering. This feature is a major benefit of the programme that sets it apart from traditional academic pathways to an engineering degree. As a result, graduates of the Academy are likely to have an advantage over graduates of traditional degree programmes.

This is something [employers have] been asking for, they've been asking for years, 'What can we do to get a young graduate, work-ready, quicker?' [The partnership] is addressing that. I think that the young person's a much more balanced person, they've got a broader outlook, and I think that's good for organisations.

Interviewee, City of Glasgow College

New performance measures, such as the TEF, increasingly include graduate outcomes. Ensuring graduates are work-ready and possess the skills they need to progress into high-level employment is a strategic priority for many institutions. This can be achieved through employer engagement and partnership working.

Our students have to get jobs and we need to ensure that the graduates who leave us are people who are skilled and who have got the skills that employers need... You can't do that without that two-way dialogue with employers.

Interviewee, Staffordshire University

Employer engagement is therefore crucial when developing vocational and technical progression pathways, as this can enable programmes to be matched to local and regional skills needs, and help to improve the work-readiness of graduates.

Social drivers – widening participation and social mobility

Although employers are concerned with ensuring the diversity of their workforce, widening participation in HE and social mobility is a more direct driver for the HE-FE dimension of the collaborations. This is in part because they are monitored on the proportion of their student populations who come from disadvantaged and under-represented groups, but also because of their role as 'anchor institutions' with civic responsibilities. Educational providers in both the FE and HE sectors are concerned to support people in their local communities, as well as nationally, to reach their full potential irrespective of their backgrounds. This is achieved by facilitating access to learning that enables students to develop the skills they need to progress into employment and/or advance in their current role.

Collaborations can help to strengthen the widening participation work that educational institutions do and ensure that they are engaging with as many potential learners as possible. Universities are increasingly working with colleges and other tertiary education providers to further their widening participation agenda. Colleges understand that they have a role to play in offering HE provision to students who would not consider moving out of their local area to attend university. Participants from all of the case studies alluded to the need for HE and FE to work together to increase access to higher level skills for as many people as possible; for several it was the main driver to working in this way.

As a socially responsible university, we also recognised that there were lots of students from within Scotland, that because of their own particular background, maybe widening access, coming from a care background, maybe because of their gender etc, found it more difficult to get those grades and to get into universities. So, the Engineering Academy was born out of that.

Interviewee, University of Strathclyde

This involves acknowledging the importance of alternative routes to higher level skills for students who might not follow the traditional academic route.

Just because the students who might come onto the programme don't have three A-Levels doesn't mean they haven't got the academic ability. It's about providing a different opportunity for capable students who have perhaps come via a more vocational route.

Interviewee, University College Birmingham

Interviewees from both the HE and FE sectors in the case studies felt that, if universities were serious about widening access to and participation in HE, they had to work in partnership with the FE sector to reach as many potential learners as possible.

We [university and colleges] are mutually working together in areas to support the development of that area. I don't see it as a conflict at all... When you're working in an area that I think is one of the top 10 for indices of deprivation, Stoke, in the UK, and has one of the highest rates of failure to proceed from post-16 education, if we don't work in collaboration with our FE partners, we're not doing the community and the region we live in any favours at all.

Interviewee, Staffordshire University

The social drivers of collaboration are not just about widening participation and access to university, but relate more broadly to social mobility and the need for all students to achieve positive outcomes. Employer engagement can also contribute significantly to this. Technical and vocational education can work for learners for whom a more academic route is less appealing. By collaborating with employers, both universities and colleges can strengthen this aspect of their curricula. Emphasising meaningful employer involvement can enhance the attractiveness of courses to students. Employer collaboration can also contribute to enhancing employability through the provision of work experience opportunities and other activities, such as interview workshops.

The social drivers of collaboration are not just about widening participation and access to university, but relate more broadly to social mobility and the need for all students to achieve positive outcomes.

We work and operate in a social economic area where there's a high-level of deprivation. Ever since I've worked in the area, I've been incredibly frustrated by the lack of aspiration. [...] So, having a physically very attractive, futuristic-looking building in which this learning takes place [...] and having it based at MIRA, where MIRA is regularly in the media for being the employer of the future in our area [...] I think, is a real aspiration raiser.

Interviewee, North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire College

Policy drivers

The apprenticeship levy has undoubtedly created a motivator for education institutions to engage more closely with businesses and develop provision that could meet their needs, particularly the large levy-paying employers. Within this, degree apprenticeships are attractive to universities as a potential funding stream.

Now degree apprenticeships have come about, or apprenticeships more generally come about, there's an opportunity to collaborate on much more equal terms, there's a strategic reason for people to collaborate that perhaps wasn't there after the introduction of the tuition fees. I think it opens up the space again.

Interviewee, Middlesex University

This does not just affect universities. Interviewees from HE and FE believed that the best way to engage with employers in the apprenticeship space was to develop a way to be able to meet their varying needs across different qualification levels. This cannot be done by either universities or colleges working alone and therefore requires partnerships.¹⁸ Middlesex University has recognised this and has formed a strategic partnership with Capital City College Group (CCCG) to work together to map where their current apprenticeship offers are aligned and where new provision could create progression pathways from Level 3 to 6+. Having one point of contact for employers across the partnership – in this case the Middlesex University Centre for Apprenticeships and Skills – will make it easier to approach employers, and for employers to approach them.

Current and potential future policy developments are particularly pertinent in Lincolnshire where a dominant agricultural industry is likely to be severely impacted on following the UK's exit from the European Union. While the impact of this on the local workforce is difficult to predict, technological changes in the agricultural industry are inevitable. Both education institutions and employers in the region are aware that the county needs to prepare for these changes, and that by working collaboratively they can ensure that their young people, and those who are already in the workplace, develop the skills needed to work in the industry as it evolves.

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION

In addition to the three key drivers outlined above, HE-FE-employer collaborations can have a number of additional benefits for the partners involved, which provide further motivation to work together. These include opportunities to access funding and resources, share learning and develop staff, strengthen existing partnerships, and expand networks.

Supporting financial sustainability

Most parts of the education sector have been subject to funding changes over recent years. HEIs have experienced a significant shift from central funding to fee income. Respondents frequently alluded to the fact that the FE sector has suffered from reductions in funding. While access to additional funding was not a major driver for collaboration, partnership working has resulted in financial benefits, particularly for educational providers. In addition to extra income generated from student fees, for some providers the partnership has helped to facilitate access to new funding streams and/or leveraged additional resources.

¹⁸ See also Moss, C. (2016). *Sheffield Hallam University: An Institution Wide Approach to Higher and Degree Apprenticeship based on Regional Skills Needs and Employer Demand*. London: UVAC.

Additional student numbers

Universities can benefit from new learners progressing through partnerships with local colleges. If students choose to continue in FE, colleges benefit by retaining vocational learners on their HE provision, which is validated or co-designed with university partners.

Working in partnership to create new provision does, however, require a significant time investment as it needs to be developed in association with industry experts. New courses are not simply 'cash cows' but need to be well thought through, planned and resourced to meet the needs of students and employers.

You can't just put a flyer out and say we're doing a degree next year. [...] I think there's a lot more passions got to drive it than just seeing it as a cash cow to introduce another course.

Interviewee, Liverpool Media Academy

Innovative responses to new funding opportunities

There are various examples of collaborations across the sector that have leveraged funding to address specific skills gaps or to enhance provision. The MTI, the LIT and the Birmingham Higher Level Skills in Engineering programme have applied for funding from the LEP Growth Deal Fund, DfE and Higher Education Funding Council for England¹⁹ respectively to enhance the provision offered to learners.

This was a funding opportunity, and we've used the funding to build a learning environment that's fit for the future because, like most colleges, our legacy buildings are now dated, frankly.

Interviewee, North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire College

The Institute of Coding,²⁰ led by the University of Bath, brings together universities, business, industry groups and providers to develop and deliver sector-focused education for the digital industries. The government is also seeking to further incentivise collaboration between HE, FE and industry to deliver the higher level technical skills through the Institute of Technology model.²¹ A total of £170 million capital funding is available to successful bidders to establish new IoTs, which must be employer-led and involve both FE and HE institutions. Bids led by a number of the case study providers have been shortlisted, including North Warwickshire and South Leicester College and the University of Lincoln. Access to this funding is only possible because of the collaboration.

Interestingly, any potential financial benefit was considered an additional benefit rather than a driver to work more closely with partners. Several of the institutions in this report have applied to more than one funding stream designed to incentivise collaboration, all of which have different eligibility requirements. There is no single model that partners can adopt to access such funding. Even with financial incentives, individual partners have had to work to ensure that collaborations have the required resources and are sustainable in the longer term.

¹⁹ The Higher Education Funding Council for England, along with the Office for Fair Access, was replaced by a new regulatory body, the OFS, in April 2018.

²⁰ The Institute of Coding has a £20 million government investment matched by £20 million from industry. www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-20-million-institute-of-coding

²¹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/institutes-of-technology-competition

Shared learning and staff development

Working in collaboration provides those working in different parts of the education sector, as well as in industry, with a better understanding of what each other does and where their strengths lie.

It's given a far greater understanding of what FE does for the universities, and what higher education does for us. I think it's breaking down a lot of preconceived ideas of what each of us did and didn't do.

Interviewee, City of Glasgow College

Staff within the partnership have the opportunity to learn from each other, developing their knowledge and skills as well as new ways of working through, for example, being involved in industry-led teaching.

For me, it's aspirational for staff. Some of our engineering staff will be able to have an industrial experience, simply by working on the MIRA site. That will upskill them, and help them develop their own teaching strategies and knowledge base of future technologies.

Interviewee, North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire College

Strengthening partnerships

All the collaborations featured in this report evolved from existing relationships between educational institutions and industry. Finding new ways to collaborate, including the development of pathways to higher level skills, further strengthens these partnerships. This can, in turn, bring about further opportunities to work together on other projects.

Anything that further strengthens our already deep engagement with employers is valuable. Bringing in employer organisations that include SMEs and micro businesses is really important for the Lincolnshire economy. Among the many benefits for the university are placement opportunities for our students and opportunities for collaborative research.

Interviewee, University of Lincoln

New opportunities can also arise as a result of strengthened educational collaborations. This is particularly relevant to pathway development, where colleges and universities are increasingly working together to meet intermediate and higher level skills needs. A successful collaboration forged in one subject area may be replicated in other areas, as is the hope for the Birmingham partnership.

[The collaboration] allows us to work with a wider range of partners and further develop the relationship with the University of Birmingham, and also, we would hope that some of the areas that we would look to develop in the future would allow us to develop our own curriculum.

Interviewee, University College Birmingham

Developing new partnerships

HE-FE-employer collaborations can also open the door to new partnerships. It is common for HEIs and institutions in the wider tertiary education sector to be working with different employers in different sectors. This is because HE and FE providers tend to engage with employers for different reasons. Universities have traditionally built links with employers around research and development; colleges are more likely to work with local employers to deliver vocational training such as apprenticeships. By coming together, university and college partners can broker introductions to employers in their respective networks to expand their reach and develop new partnerships and opportunities for collaborative working.

Two universities highlighted examples of where partner colleges had introduced them to an employer that had facilitated the development of a new collaboration. For example:

Burton [College] also has really good links with [employer], the design students have done some advertising set-up stuff, ideas generation for them. We've talked to their management team about coming and doing guest lectures for business because they run a huge business.

Interviewee, Staffordshire University

A number of partners further suggested that these new relationships could have a greater reach by engaging with groups of educational institutions or employers. In the further education sector, colleges have increasingly come together to establish college groups that encompass a large number of students, partners and provision. Collaborating directly with these groups can be of benefit to all partners: universities have access to a larger number of colleges (and therefore students), colleges can utilise the resource of the group as a whole when engaging with employers and universities, and employers can have a single point of contact for their needs at various levels.

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY AND COLLAB GROUP

Collab Group and The Open University (OU) have recently announced a partnership which hopes to provide UK industry with a seamless progression route to degree level qualifications, smoothing the transition between further and higher education.

Collab Group is a national membership organisation of 37 colleges in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They have links with large levy-paying employers and aim to work collaboratively to address industry skills needs. The OU offers flexible, distance-learning provision and feel that this is a major benefit to large, national employers who are looking for a consistent learning experience across the country. The reach of the OU and Collab partnership is therefore extensive.

For the OU, partnering with Collab streamlines the engagement process with colleges and employers, requiring significantly less resource than making individual connections would. Degree apprenticeships are high on the college and employer agenda, so are the focus of much of their current collaborative work. The OU recognises that it can be challenging for employers to work out how they can get the best out of the apprenticeship levy, and hope that through working with Collab they can offer a clear, flexible and broad offer to employers.

Providers working together benefits employers – they aren't having to source everything themselves and can rely on a trusted provider to make considered recommendations [...] It means [employers] get the most out of their levies and minimise their own need to increase resource working on provider management.

Interviewee, The Open University

All of the case studies demonstrate that collaboration between HE, FE and employers is an effective mechanism for first identifying and then addressing local skills needs. The examples in this report demonstrate ways in which it is possible to deeply embed employer engagement. This is important to ensure that future skills needs are anticipated as accurately as possible and that partners maximise opportunities to future-proof the talent pipeline by ensuring that training remains industry relevant. The case studies we identified also offer insight into how collaborative working can give learners the opportunity to study more flexibly, important for upskilling the current workforce and widening participation. HE, FE and employer collaborations have grown as a response to policy changes, such as the apprenticeship levy, and have benefited from being able to access new funding sources. The collaborations have also contributed to stronger partnership working more generally, opened up new opportunities and facilitated the sharing of knowledge and understanding.

The discussion will now move on to examining *how* collaborations can be developed.

CHAPTER 4

HOW CAN COLLABORATIVE WORKING BE ENCOURAGED?



Universities and colleges are engaged in industry partnerships in a variety of spaces such as delivering apprenticeships, ensuring course content is up to date, exposing students to the workplace and collaborating on research and development projects. HE and FE institutions also work in partnership, be that for validation, outreach or other widening participation activities.

What is clear from the snapshot of established and emerging HE-FE-employer collaborations presented here, is that they all grew from pre-existing partnerships. This happened in a variety of ways – from the sharing of employer contacts between universities and their FE partners, to parties coming together to see how they might help address a regional skills need. Collaborations have also developed in response to a funding opportunity or emerging market, or simply as a result of a change in leadership or role at an institution or business. This makes it difficult to recommend a particular route for developing collaborations from, say, HE-FE validation to creating progression pathways, or from an employer delivering guest lectures to formulating a higher or degree apprenticeship course.

But while there may not be a single, or even preferred, way to grow partnerships, there are things that help smooth and support the process. Collaborative working is rarely straightforward or easy. Yet the collaborations featured in this report have developed a strong commitment to building and strengthening their partnerships and have not let barriers get in the way.

The collaborations featured in this report have developed a strong commitment to building and strengthening their partnerships and have not let barriers get in the way.

POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO COLLABORATION

Partnerships featured in this report felt that there are actually very few significant barriers to collaborations of this kind, particularly in building partnerships between education and industry. Employers want to develop the talents of their current employees as well as the future workforce, and recognise that they have a role to play in ensuring that educational provision is practical and relevant. However, it is important to be aware of factors that might influence collaborative working.

Challenges that collaborations encountered included:

- **Time:** working more closely with partners can require a significant time input – for meetings with partners, exploring options for working more closely together and developing formal agreements and governance frameworks.
- **Language:** HE and FE traditionally operate in different spaces and have developed their own terminology. For example, in one instance a foundation degree was understood differently by the university partner to the college.
- **Geography:** partnerships that cover large geographical areas, for example in North Wales and Lincolnshire, can be more challenging due to the sheer distance between partners.
- **Competing demands of multiple partners:** the more partners involved in a collaboration, the greater the need to manage differing demands and expectations.
- **A lack of established practice around non-traditional programmes:** developing new and innovative courses, programmes or study modes involves breaking new ground – this can be risky and there is often no precedent or good practice to follow.
- **A lack of awareness of how to successfully collaborate:** examples of successful collaborations involving multiple education partners and employers are limited.
- **Competition between institutions:** universities and colleges may be competing for students in particular areas or subjects, and may fear the effect of collaboration on intakes.

The most significant barrier to collaboration between education providers appears to relate to this final point – the competitive space that has become more marked with the increasing marketization of HE. This could be universities and colleges competing for HE students, or colleges in competition with each other for local FE or HE students.

We've had that in FE for a few years, where we used to work together much more closely, I think, and [then] we were encouraged to compete.

Interviewee, North Lindsey College

The importance of higher and degree apprenticeships has also arguably contributed to the competitive environment. Apprenticeships have traditionally been firmly situated within the FE sector. Universities moving into this space can sometimes be seen as a threat and be detrimental to the likelihood of collaboration.

The only barrier is that I think HE and FE are in a competitive space at the moment because the whole apprenticeship agenda has become quite attractive to HE, and that was traditionally the premise of FE. I think, in some places, the competition is greater than the recognition for collaboration. I think there's a real risk for that for both sectors.

Interviewee, North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire College

ENABLING SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION

All partnerships featured in this report had found ways to negotiate the barriers encountered to work collaboratively towards a shared purpose. In this section we summarise the facilitators of successful collaboration.

Find suitable areas for collaboration

Partners avoided concerns about working closely with competitors by focusing on areas where there was not a strong overlap, for example, a subject area where institutions are not in competition for the same students.

In reality, there's three of us, although there might be a little bit of competition between ourselves and South & City [College], not around this area of curriculum there isn't, and neither of us would compete with the University of Birmingham, either.

Interviewee, University College Birmingham

Apprenticeships can be an area that encourages collaboration where the aim is to extend and enhance current offers, rather than duplicate what other partners provide.

Recruitment may be a potential source of competition as universities work to attract students who might not otherwise consider studying somewhere other than their local college. Yet the collaborations featured here had identified clear benefits for all partners of widening participation and had shared goals for this.

If we have a proper partnership and are working collaboratively with our FE [partners], we are working on the widening participation agenda together. Those students who register on the FDAs are Staffordshire students. So, they contribute to our WP agenda. Equally, they help the college with their progression stats.

Interviewee, Staffordshire University

HE and FE representatives agreed that to truly commit to widening participation in the local area, this must be a collaborative ambition.

Maybe we do lose some [students] to each other but because of our broader regional aspiration, we don't worry too much about it. We're educating people collectively in that sense.

Interviewee, Bangor University

With respect to the education-industry dimension of the collaboration, it is also important to identify suitable areas for working in partnership. This involves identifying and emphasising the benefits for the employer and the educational partners. It could be around a specific skills need or another area of mutual interest, such as the example below.

FORENSIC INNOVATION CENTRE (FIC) – A COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH AND HAMPSHIRE CONSTABULARY

The Institute of Criminal Justice Studies at University of Portsmouth has been running a Forensic Studies course for more than 10 years, but without formal links to the police scientific services. Through working more closely with Hampshire Constabulary, the benefits of collaboration for both partners became clear and the police were offered a three-floored state-of-the-art building at the university for their Digital Forensics Group. This opened formally in 2015 as the FIC.

Austerity and a comprehensive spending review meant that the constabulary, along with others in the UK, had to consider alternative ways to reduce costs. Their motivation was, 'Right, we have reduced budgets. We need to find ways in which we can do more for less'. So, they were motivated to look for partnerships and new ways of working.

Interviewee, University of Portsmouth

The FIC is an innovative and unique partnership and the first operational police forensic research facility in the UK to be based on a University campus. It combines police investigators with an advanced learning facility for researchers, students and serving police staff. Local schools and colleges attend the FIC for open days as part of the University's outreach programme. This is reported to have a significant impact on recruitment to the Forensic Studies programme. The University recruits both A Level and BTEC students to their BSc courses.

There was a definite need for us to improve the student experience, so that they could actually see what happens in the real world, in the policing arena. That was certainly a motivation, along with keeping our curriculum up to date, in the policing and investigation arena. Things are moving so quickly, almost on a weekly basis now, particularly in regards to the technology and the science.

Interviewee, University of Portsmouth

Hampshire Constabulary use the centre for some of their own research work and, in return, offer placement and intern opportunities to students. Through mutually beneficial projects in the FIC, students are gaining important, unparalleled experience of working on the frontline of police forensics, while police staff gain access to teaching support and University resources which can help with their own professional development.

Additionally, Hampshire Constabulary has instant access to a pool of potential future employees who have been fully vetted, trained to its own specifications and, in some cases, taught or mentored by police staff. The University is now starting to see some of their students achieving full-time employment with the police as a direct result of their immersive work experience during their studies.

Work towards a shared goal or vision

Collaborations that focused on developing a new product or model of working (MTI, Birmingham Higher Level Skills in Engineering Programme, Strathclyde Engineering Academy) all felt that this had been facilitated through having a clear and shared vision of what they were trying to achieve, agreeing on this in the very early stages and not losing sight of that.

I suppose the challenge has been how you hold steady a group of partners and you find a way of working. That's all been focused around shared ambition, shared purpose and shared values, to be honest.

Interviewee, North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire College

Often, what is needed to address skills gaps and provide progression pathways cannot be delivered by individual institutions working alone. Recognising the added-value of collaboration is important. The University Campus St Albans (UCSA) is a collaboration designed around the need for employer-focused, flexible, degree-level provision. There was a recognition by both the college and university partner that neither could effectively respond to this need individually, so they work collaboratively.

The majority of the collaborations featured here had a shared goal of enabling as many students as possible, regardless of their background, to access higher level skills. This encouraged partners to find ways to work together, even where there might be overlaps in their provision. For the Birmingham partners, this goal was particularly salient given the involvement of a Russell Group university.

I hope this is the case and in four years' time I hope we're celebrating it, that we will have students that will have come to us with no GCSEs, no exam results, who in six years, will have made it to getting a first, I hope, at a red brick university in engineering.

Interviewee, South & City College Birmingham

Shared goals should also involve addressing an identified skills need. To successfully engage employers in a partnership, it must be relevant to them. Partnerships need to be clear about the current or future skills needs they are seeking to address. Government policy has repeatedly highlighted the engineering, manufacturing and digital future skills gaps (among others) across the UK and so it is unsurprising that this is an area where the majority of the case studies have focused. The Birmingham Higher Level Skills in Engineering Programme is an example of this. All three partners already had links with each other, mostly through the awarding of degrees. They saw engineering as an opportunity where relationships could be developed into a collaboration to address a significant skills gap in the Midlands.

Recognise and respect the strengths of each partner

A vital ingredient for successful partnerships is the ability to identify where each partner's strengths lie and build the provision or offer around this. It is not always possible to avoid working in a space where there is no overlap or competing provision due to the breadth and amount of HE now being offered in FECs and other tertiary providers. Recognising and respecting where another partner has a greater strength or expertise may not be easy but can be essential for successful collaboration.

Partners might have particular subject expertise, be experienced in certain delivery models or be better at catering for a particular type of student. Even where institutions have similar subject offerings, the nature of provision can be very different. Identifying what is distinctive about each partner's contribution and how they can be complementary can be key to developing an effective partnership.

Initially, when we first started working with [Liverpool Media Academy], we did have precisely that, 'If they're offering BAs in acting, we've got acting here at Staffs, why aren't we just saying to them for their HE provision, send it all here.' When you actually go to LMA and you talk to the students and you talk to the staff there [...] the type of work that they do, the type of progression they have for their students is a really strong regional offering, and it's a very specific curriculum, a very specific way of working which is really beneficial for their students. It is complementary with what we do, absolutely.

Interviewee, Staffordshire University

Identify potential progression pathways

Mapping provision across a region can be an effective way to begin to identify the particular strengths and contributions of partners and where clear progression pathways can be established. This not only helps to strengthen collaborative working but encourages progression to higher level skills. For example, mapping apprenticeship offers in a particular subject between Middlesex University and CCCG has enabled partners to identify opportunities to progress students from Level 3 at college through to higher and degree apprenticeships at the university. Such progression pathways benefit both institutions – the college has progressed their learners on to higher level skills and the university has brought new students into their course. Being clear about these benefits can help to encourage collaboration. Middlesex University has created a website called Make Your Mark,²² which maps the different pathways to higher level skills and employment in different sectors. It is important that vocational and academic pathways are not treated as separate entities and there is significant potential for crossover.

Pathways are also important for contributing to the widening participation agenda. Where this is a particular focus of collaboration, identifying pathways to higher level skills for students from non-traditional backgrounds is particularly important.

One of the main things we wanted to try and do when we're thinking about how we develop the UCB partnership was to think about how we can strengthen pathways between, particularly FE and HE or from less traditional HE backgrounds into Russell Group.

Interviewee, University of Birmingham

Be clear about the time and resources required

Collaborations take time and resource to develop and this can be a barrier. Financial incentives can mean that this time is considered less of a risk and can encourage partners to invest the time in working more closely together. Centrally funded initiatives, such as the Institute of Technology (IoT) model, have incentivised collaboration and encouraged existing partnerships to consider how they might work more closely to develop a product in response to this.

²² <https://makeyourmark.mdx.ac.uk/>

Involve the LEP

LEPs and other skills bodies can help to identify skills needs and potential sources of funding. LEPs have been involved in the development of several of the case study collaborations. The MTI was developed following research by Leicestershire LEP that highlighted a gap in automotive skills in the area.

Working with a LEP not only ensures that educational provision is relevant to local needs but can also help to strengthen links with local and regional employers and bring further opportunities for working together.

We've got very strong links with our Local Enterprise Partnership. We have worked very closely with them and that's given us a lot of employer engagement so we've been able to set up meetings with joint leaders to discuss different apprenticeships and wider skills needs.

Interviewee, University of Hertfordshire

Employer engagement can also be strengthened by working with other skills bodies and agencies, either regionally or by sector. University Campus St Albans has close links with the Building Research Establishment to deliver their construction degrees; Middlesex University is collaborating with the West London Skills Alliance, which looks at the specifics of skills needs in that particular area and can link them with employers who have a specific need.

LEP EDUCATION-EMPLOYER COLLABORATION PILOT: WORCESTERSHIRE LEP TECHNICAL SKILLS PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMME

Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) have strong relationships with local employers and an in-depth understanding of the regional skills needs in the area. Building partnerships between LEPs and educational institutions can encourage education-employer collaborations and ensure that they are focused on a specific skills need.

Worcestershire LEP's current Employment and Skills Strategy stresses that addressing the skills challenges faced locally starts in schools, with business engagement being key to this. STEM is a key theme reflecting the current shortage in technical and digital skills, and the future demand as a result of fast-moving technological change. Objectives to meet this challenge include creating an entrepreneurial culture, STEM-themed competitions, offering internships for 16- to 18-year-olds and developing pathways for young people to encourage them into work with local STEM employers.

The Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership is developing a pilot Internship programme under the Worcestershire Technical Skills Partnership, linking two local 16–18 providers with a range of employers. An initial cohort of 20 students – 10 studying Level 3 vocational courses, and 10 studying A Levels – start in September 2018. All students will be given an employer mentor and have the opportunity to undertake work placements and complete real life projects over their two year studies. The internship will support young people to engage with local employers, consider the opportunities careers in STEM can bring, and support them to consider higher education or apprenticeship options.

Find out the specific needs of employers

As well as identifying skills needs, successful collaborations also need to understand employers' specific needs. This includes curriculum content, level of provision, delivery mode and whether the need is for training new talent and/or upskilling the current workforce.

In the case studies presented here, employers are engaged in the course development process.

To us as a university is, I guess, connecting with the sector, and making sure that the education provision that we are supplying is relevant and up to date. That's really important.

Interviewee, Coventry University

The MTI and LIT among others have designed their models around addressing the particular needs of employees, both in terms of their requirements for new talent and to upskill their workforce.

Universities and colleges need to devote time to communicating with employers to increase awareness of the opportunities available through collaborating with them.

Communicate the offer clearly

Universities and colleges need to devote time to communicating with employers to increase awareness of the opportunities available through collaborating with them.

...do I think every company out there knows that they can have that sort of relationship? Probably not... I've basically created this huge colourful map showing all the different levels of qualifications for each function, function by function, just so I can go to people and say 'Right, you want to do a Level 2, look at all these potential routes for you to get to Level 7.' You know, when you say that to people they're like, 'Wow, that's what I want to do,' so I'm like 'Well, that's what we'll do.'

Interviewee, Bakkavor

In this case, the employer has taken responsibility for mapping the varying qualifications and progression routes available to employees. MTI has produced a 'skills escalator' which demonstrates clearly to employers the levels of qualifications and progression on offer so that they can gauge which are most appropriate for their staff (see the accompanying case study report). HE-FE collaborations can offer employers provision across the levels of study, and helping employers to understand, navigate and communicate this is valuable.

Collaborations have developed locally and organically and it is often a combination of factors that drives these partnerships forward. While it is therefore not possible to recommend a blueprint for an effective route to such collaborations, there are things that help smooth and support the process. Collaborative working is rarely straightforward and there is scope for lessons to be learned and made available to encourage those embarking on such collaborations. Perceived barriers to collaborative working could be an issue for some organisations; there are very real challenges to be overcome for partners willing to strengthen their relationships, particularly the level of resource that this can require. However, it was encouraging to find that educational institutions and businesses had worked out how best to face these challenges and had a number of suggestions for others wishing to strengthen relationships.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS



The education and skills landscape in the UK has undergone a dramatic transformation over recent years. Far-reaching reforms to funding, qualifications, performance indicators and accountability measures have fundamentally altered the way the sector operates.

Current policy is underpinned by the principles of freedom, fairness and responsiveness and characterised by ambitious targets to improve attainment, widen participation in learning at higher levels, and address skills shortages in support of social mobility and economic growth. This has resulted in an enhanced role for employers in determining the supply of skills and greater emphasis on the importance of partnership between industry and the education sector in meeting the UK's skills needs.

Partnerships between HEIs, businesses and other parts of the tertiary education system have a vital role to play in addressing the UK's skills challenges by providing integrated pathways to higher level skills. This research has highlighted that, by collaborating with employers, educational providers can develop flexible, tailored provision that addresses current skills gaps and shortages as well as prepares the talent pipeline for the jobs of the future.

There is clearly an appetite among employers and education providers to work together to solve skills gaps, with a focus on the needs of a particular industry and/or region. Partnerships are starting to emerge in response to skills needs, with support and, in some instances, funding, from Local Enterprise Partnerships in England and sector bodies. All are evolving from pre-existing relationships and are contributing to the goal of a joined-up post-18 education and training sector. However, most partnerships are still in their infancy and their impact on the skills base is yet to be determined.

There are three overarching drivers for collaborative working: political, economic and social. These provide the mechanisms for policy makers to further support the expansion of the types of collaboration seen in this report. However, in driving forward this agenda, it is also important to acknowledge the potential barriers and the inherent risks involved in breaking new ground. Appropriate support, as well as incentives, need to be in place to enable collaborations to become established and flourish. There are also opportunities to build and strengthen existing partnerships and drive collaboration based on identified need. This research has identified the ways in which the early pioneers of collaborative approaches to developing pathways to higher level skills have overcome the challenges. These insights should be shared to help inform the work of others who are at the start of their collaborative journeys.

As noted at the beginning of this report, the case studies that have informed this work are drawn from across the UK, recognising the diversity of initiatives and settings, and that higher education institutions across the whole country are developing innovative approaches and looking beyond traditional models. In terms of the issues for consideration set out below, much of this area is devolved and specific recommendations made refer largely to an English policy context.

ISSUES FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

- Identifying regional skills needs:** A clearly identified skills need is one of the main springboards to collaborative working. Therefore, it is important that partnerships have access to granular data that pinpoints the issues in their locality. Gathering intelligence on skills gaps and shortages is, however, resource intensive and individual employers and providers are unlikely to have the resources in place to undertake the necessary research. The government should ensure that this issue is the principal focus of Skills Advisory Panels in England as they are developed. Panels should be enabled to work with FE-HE-employer partnerships to share intelligence and ensure that appropriate pathways are developed in response.
- Identifying a local focal point for collaboration:** A key strength of some of the models examined is the presence of a ‘one stop shop’ or single point of contact for employers with a skills need and/or learning providers with expertise in a particular skill area. Identifying who, locally, can help to broker introductions between employers and education providers could help co-ordinate and facilitate partnership development and would streamline the process and ensure that appropriate partners were connected. LEPs in England have a role to play in supporting such collaborations and ensuring that employers are signposted to focal points where they exist.
- Raising awareness of the opportunities and pathways to HE:**
The HE and FE partnerships highlighted here provide important benefits to students, giving them better access to information on the options open to them across a range of providers. Further encouraging these types of partnerships could play a key role in enabling students to make choices across different levels of education to best suit their needs. This is particularly important for students from non-traditional backgrounds. As set out in the latest UK government’s careers strategy for England *Making the most of everyone’s skills and talents*,²³ the National Careers Service must also proactively raise awareness of new routes to HE and career and skills development – among young people in schools and colleges, and adults in the workplace. It must provide appropriate information, advice and guidance to enable individuals to make informed choices about the best route for them. Partnerships developing pathways to higher level skills should work with widening participation teams and programmes such as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme, which is targeting young people with the potential to progress to HE, and their parents, to raise awareness of alternative routes into HE being developed. This could help partnerships understand barriers to participation better and so design tailored provision accordingly.
- Role of regulatory bodies in encouraging partnership development:**
Partnerships developing pathways to higher level skills can contribute to wider strategic objectives, such as widening participation in HE, improved graduate outcomes and social mobility. Ways to recognise the value and contribution of such partnerships within performance measures (such as the TEF) and other regulatory mechanisms (such as access and participation plans for English institutions) should be investigated. At the least, regulators and funders should be alert to barriers that may stifle innovation or the flexibility for partners to work together where an opportunity has been identified.

²³ See www.gov.uk/government/publications/careers-strategy-making-the-most-of-everyones-skills-and-talents

- **Funding to support development and increase reach:** Most of the collaborations identified in this report have grown out of pre-existing partnerships. But they require considerable investment in terms of time and resource to develop. The ability to deliver learning provision in flexible ways is paramount if learners from a range of backgrounds, including those in the workplace, are to be engaged. This can also require considerable investment to create the necessary infrastructure, such as capital funding for industry-embedded delivery centres and/or satellite sites within local communities. Both of these factors mean there is a significant opportunity for national funders to catalyse the development of more such partnerships. The OfS in England and other UK funding bodies should consider how best their investments in skills development can support partnership approaches that build on pre-existing relationships where real opportunities can be realised. Investment in specific models, such as Institutes of Technology in England, is significant and welcome. Further investment in a range of models has the potential to unlock a diversity of important and innovative approaches across the country.
- **Funding for learners:** Current funding mechanisms are tailored in favour of study for full qualifications. This leaves a gap for funding that encourages flexible/progressive learning, where learners can study in bite-sized chunks, with the opportunity to step-on and step-off programmes. There appears to be scope to use some of the collaborative arrangements that we have identified as potential test-beds to pilot targeted financial incentives. This might include preferential loan repayment terms (as recommended by UUK in response to the Post-18 Funding Review), testing modular funding arrangements and/or more flexible use of the apprenticeship levy. The joint UUK and CBI project on the economic case for flexible learning is due to report, with specific recommendations aimed at encouraging more flexible approaches to learning by autumn 2018. The report will set out how this particular recommendation can be further progressed.

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APPENDIX: PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

Association of Colleges
Association of Employment and Learning Providers
Bakkavor
Bangor University
Burton and South Derbyshire College
Capital City College Group
Centre for Vocational Education Research
City of Glasgow College
Collab College Group
Coventry University
Department for Education
Exeter University
GuildHE
HORIBA MIRA
Jarvis Construction
Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership
Liverpool Media Academy
Local Enterprise Partnership Network
Middlesex University
MillionPlus
National Centre for Universities and Business
North Lindsey College
North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire College
Office for Students
Open University
Reaseheath College
Royal Mail
South & City College Birmingham
Staffordshire University
The Education and Training Foundation
University Alliance
University of Birmingham
University Campus St Albans
University College Birmingham
University of Hertfordshire
University of Lincoln
University of Portsmouth
University of Strathclyde
University Vocational Awards Council
VINCI Construction
Worcestershire Apprenticeship Hub
Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership
[+1 employer who wished to remain anonymous]

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