

The
College
of the
Future

**Sheffield
Hallam
University**



**Civic University
Network**

Going further and higher:

how collaboration
between colleges and
universities can transform
lives and places



Overview

The Independent Commission on the College of the Future and Sheffield Hallam University, on behalf of the Civic University Network, have come together to explore how college-university relationships can be further developed across the four nations of the UK to better support individuals, employers and communities.

This report assesses the current opportunities and challenges for building more integrated education and skills systems across further education (FE) and higher education (HE) so that together they can transform lives and communities. It sets out a vision for this with recommendations for both sector leaders and policy makers to realise it. These recommendations apply in different ways and to varying degrees across the four nations, but in all cases, seek to strengthen ways of working, incentivise collaboration rather than competition, and drive changes in institutional behaviour and culture. Learning has been drawn from, and informed by, existing and emerging policies and partnerships across the four nations.



About us

This report is jointly written by the Independent Commission on the College of the Future and Sheffield Hallam University, on behalf of the Civic University Network. The analysis and recommendations within this report represent the views of the authors. We are grateful for all the input and ideas, as well as the constructive challenge we have received from both sector and policy leaders across the four nations which has been instrumental in shaping this report.



The Independent Commission on the College of the Future was established in 2019, and commissioned by the Four Nations College Alliance, a network of college leaders and government officials from across the four nations of the UK. Chaired by Sir Ian Diamond, commissioners include a range of college, trade union, student and business leaders, academics and policy experts. The Commission has published a [UK-wide report and four nations-specific reports](#) which seek to answer two central questions: what do we need from colleges from 2030 onwards, and how do we get there? The Commission has produced [additional reports](#) on the civic role of colleges and the relationship between colleges and the NHS in England. The Commission is now using its vision for the College of the Future to explore timely themes, often in partnership with other organisations.



Sheffield Hallam University is committed to transforming lives and is a university formed from, and committed to, its place. It has hosted the [Civic University Network](#) since its formation in March 2020, alongside its partners; the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, the Institute for Community Studies, University of Glasgow, Queen Mary University London, University of Birmingham and Newcastle University. With funding from the UPP Foundation, the Department for Education, Arts Council England and Carnegie UK Trust, the Network was established in response to the 2019 report of the [UPP Foundation Civic University Commission](#), which challenged universities to re-shape their role and responsibility to their communities to realise their potential as drivers of a new civic agenda. The Network supports universities to drive positive social and economic change in their local communities, and over 150 universities have joined the Network since its establishment.



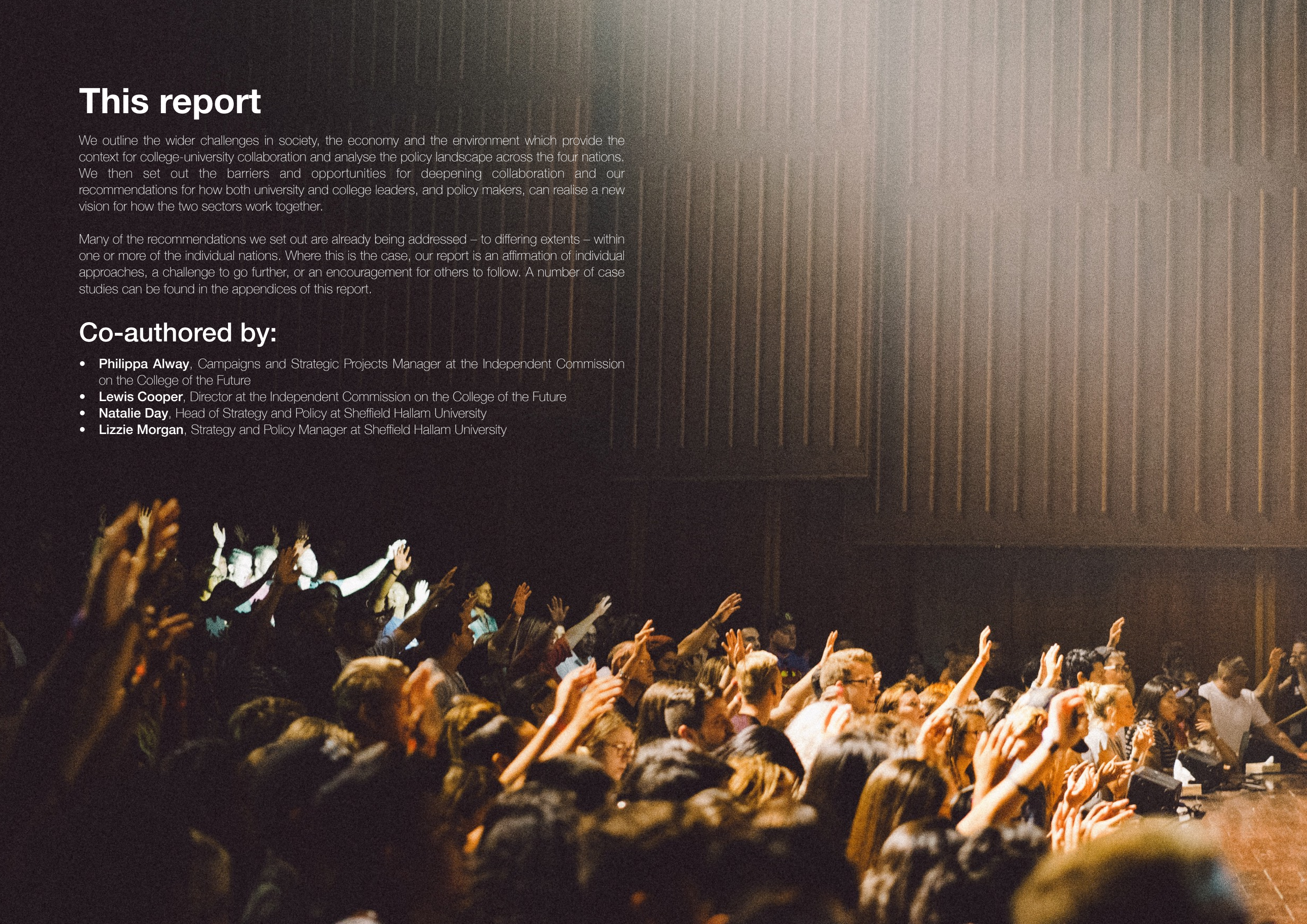
This report

We outline the wider challenges in society, the economy and the environment which provide the context for college-university collaboration and analyse the policy landscape across the four nations. We then set out the barriers and opportunities for deepening collaboration and our recommendations for how both university and college leaders, and policy makers, can realise a new vision for how the two sectors work together.

Many of the recommendations we set out are already being addressed – to differing extents – within one or more of the individual nations. Where this is the case, our report is an affirmation of individual approaches, a challenge to go further, or an encouragement for others to follow. A number of case studies can be found in the appendices of this report.

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A better system for all: our shared vision

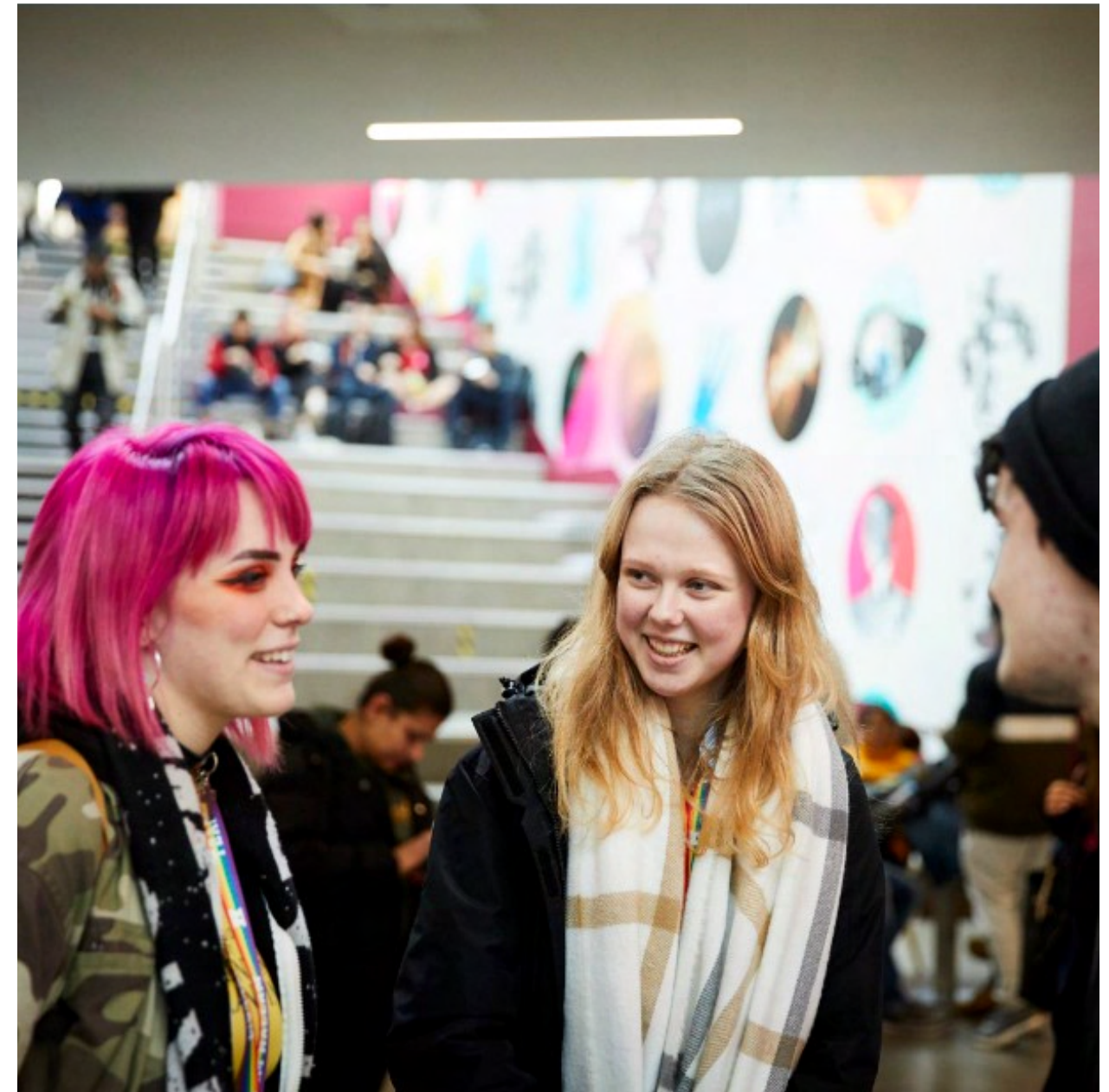
Education has the power to be transformative; for individuals, for businesses, for places and for society as a whole. Colleges and universities sit at the heart of their communities and share a common purpose: to ensure that all people, no matter their background or past experiences, and no matter where in the UK they live and work, can access high-quality and relevant education and skills, and the opportunities that these bring.

Yet too often we present learners and employers with a system which is driven by institutional perspectives and interests, rather than focusing on the wider benefits which could be achieved through a more connected, more collaborative and more ambitious approach to what can be achieved together. This paper is a call to action for leaders of colleges and universities, and for the policy makers who can help or hinder them, to step up and to work together to ensure that the transformative power of FE and HE extends to every corner of the UK.

Where are we now: incentivising competition over collaboration

Despite a clear shared responsibility, colleges and universities can too often be seen – and see themselves – as sitting within distinct and separate systems, rather than as part of a wider educational landscape. Yet, at the same time, both FE and HE provision are delivered in both colleges and universities to varying degrees across the four nations. Both within and between sectors, institutions can be pitted against each other, locked in unproductive competition, whether as a result of government policy or funding choices, or as a result of institutional cultures and behaviours.

There are exceptions, where local leadership – both political and institutional – is driving more collaborative approaches. This is often driven by “systems leaders” who see the importance of their role beyond the walls of their institution, and are committed to their civic obligations to the broader skills ecosystem of their region. And there are good examples of both policy development and changing institutional practices across the four nations. However, it is still more common to find local relationships which feel limited, unbalanced, inhibited by a lack of trust and struggling to attract leadership time and resources alongside other pressures and priorities.



Systems leadership

“Systems leadership is a set of skills and capacities that any individual or organization can use to catalyze, enable and support the process of systems-level change. It combines collaborative leadership, coalition building and systems insight to mobilize innovation and action across a large, decentralized network.”¹

¹ Lisa Dreier, David Nabarro, and Jane Nelson, Systems leadership can change the world - but what exactly is it? (2019), World Economic Forum <<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/09/systems-leadership-can-change-the-world-but-what-does-it-mean/>> [accessed 19 January 2022].

Why collaboration matters

Current systems across the UK undoubtedly work well for many learners. We have one of the strongest higher education sectors in the world and many outstanding colleges. Many are also anchors in their local communities, and support not only education and training, but also business knowledge generation and sharing, community engagement and infrastructure. Yet pathways into and through our systems are often narrow, and shaped by wider social or economic factors, geographical location, and age.

Local engagement is often disjointed too. And as a society and economy, we are facing huge changes in what we need from our education and skills system, driven by transformational shifts that are happening locally, nationally and globally: from the climate emergency and entrenched inequalities, to an ageing population and the fourth industrial revolution. Modelling from CBI has found that nine in ten employees will need to reskill by 2030 as new technologies and the economy are changing the skills needed for many jobs, with some roles being lost entirely². If we are to succeed, our whole education and skills system needs to respond to this challenge.

Colleges and universities have a shared role in creating the change needed to deliver lifelong learning; supporting businesses and communities and the people and places they serve. Working together on a genuinely strategic and collaborative footing gives us all the best opportunity to deliver the effective and transformative change that is required.

Taking a ‘whole systems’ approach

Fundamentally, we believe that a ‘whole systems’ approach must be taken to education and skills, and that universities and colleges should sit within a joined-up, holistic tertiary education and skills system within each of the four nations. We use “tertiary education and skills system” throughout the report to refer to FE and HE, which comprises all levels of study and is generally post-16, although colleges at times work with students younger than 16.

The focus of this report is the need for deeper collaboration between universities and colleges within a tertiary education and skills system. Other institutions and providers are also important elements of this system, including schools offering post-16 provision, adult and community learning institutes, independent training providers, and prison education. As part of a move to more joined-up systems across the four nations and within localities, it is important that these providers are an important part of local, regional and national strategies.

By viewing colleges and universities in this way, a strong and shared vision becomes clear.



² A radical new strategy for lifetime reskilling must be the bedrock of UK economic recovery (2020), CBI <<https://www.cbi.org.uk/media-centre/articles/a-radical-new-strategy-for-lifetime-reskilling-must-be-the-bedrock-of-uk-economic-recovery-cbi/>> [accessed 19 January 2022].



Our shared vision

A successful education and skills system needs colleges and universities to work in an integrated way. This is vital to create a world where:

- People are empowered with the learning they need to thrive, with:
 - High quality education and training accessible to all.
 - Every adult having access to lifelong learning that enables them to upskill and retrain.
 - Young people who otherwise risk not engaging with education and training being properly supported with the journey that is right for them.
- Productivity is accelerated through strategic business and workforce support for employers and knowledge sharing.
- Places across the UK become more prosperous, sustainable, healthy and fair, redressing regional inequalities and supporting left-behind communities and places.
- Partnerships drive a more connected and coherent tertiary education and skills system, so that all institutions can maximise their impact across people, productivity and place.

A four nations approach

How can colleges, universities and policy makers work together to realise this vision through the collaborative relationships and the tertiary education and skills systems that the UK needs? This is the task we seek to address through this report.

We take a 'four nations' approach – looking across the distinct systems and contexts that exist in the UK to provide a richer, more diverse picture. There is great variance across systems, cultures and approaches to college-university relationships. This has allowed us to draw from a plurality of voices, perspectives and good practice. Through this report we draw significantly on policies and practices that are working well, from which other nations and institutions can learn. Alongside local case studies, we highlight systemic strengths within each nation, which also offer instructive lessons.

Across all four nations, there remain tensions and an enormous untapped potential for deeper integration of systems and collaborative working between institutions. The fact that these challenges exist across the four nations is a reminder that these are difficult and deep-seated issues, and require ongoing strategic attention.

There is undoubtedly a great deal more to do – at the same time as championing the best of what already exists. This report is intended to help shape the future of college-university relationships, and of the wider systems which underpin them – affirming the ongoing commitment of sector leaders working in partnership with governments to deliver on this agenda.

Setting the context – the challenges of the future

Economic, social and environmental shifts across the four nations of the UK, and globally, underline the criticality of our education and skills systems in both responding to these challenges and seizing new opportunities. These trends will have a direct impact on how institutions function and also shape the labour market and social and economic trends that they are responding to. The ways in which colleges and universities work together will increasingly help or hinder the effectiveness of this response.

Key challenges will put significant pressures on our education and skills systems and the labour market:

- The impact of Covid-19 on the economy and the long-term consequences of lost learning will particularly hit the most vulnerable and marginalised and certain sectors. More people will need to retrain and upskill at a time when there are exacerbating budgetary pressures for governments.
- The climate crisis requires a concerted and coordinated effort to support people and employers to transition to a net zero economy. Alongside the transition to a net zero economy, reskilling and innovation support will be needed to drive mitigation and to adapt to a harsher and more unpredictable climate.
- Changes in the world of work mean that education and skills systems must be flexible and agile as jobs change at pace. Analysis shows that 60% of the people who will be in work in 2030 have already completed their formal education³, and 9 in 10 of the population will have to retrain and upskill over the coming decade⁴. This means lifelong learning must become a reality for all and puts significant pressures on colleges and universities. At the same time, Covid-19 has significantly impacted the world of work, as companies move to more agile working, with greater emphasis on digital skills and wellbeing.
- An ageing population and entrenched inequalities mean there is a growing demand for health and social care. Colleges and universities will have to demonstrate the role they play in population health and ensure that pathways into the health and social care workforces meet growing workforce demands.
- Changing expectations and aspirations of people in how they live and work, driven by digitalisation and the pandemic, is changing how people interact with learning. Reflecting and responding to how, where and when provision is offered and the pedagogical approach will become increasingly important.



³ CBI, Written evidence to Fourth Industrial Revolution inquiry (2018), UK Parliament <<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/education-committee/fourth-industrial-revolution/written/85882.html>> [accessed 19 January 2022].

⁴ Learning for Life: Funding world-class adult education system (2020), CBI <<https://www.cbi.org.uk/media/5723/learning-for-life-report.pdf>> [accessed 19 January 2022].

The policy landscape across the four nations

The policy landscape across the four nations differs markedly. And yet there are two crucial elements that all four systems have in common. Firstly, college-university relationships can be fraught, albeit to differing extents. Secondly, policy makers and sector leaders are seeking to develop more integrated and more cohesive post-16 education and skills systems. In this section we provide an overview of each nation's system and set out the current reform trajectory.

Wales

The Welsh post-16 education and skills system is currently going through a significant reform process focused on funding and governance changes, stronger leadership and a commitment to lifelong learning. The aim of the tertiary education reform is to deepen collaboration and coordination between post-16 education providers; and perhaps in doing so, it will offer an exemplar to the other nations across the UK.

The current system

FE is directly funded and governed by the Welsh government through the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), while the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) has responsibility regulating and funding HE.

Locally and regionally, the introduction of both Public Service Boards (PSBs) and Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) alongside existing other bodies and programmes, including crucially City and Growth Deals, has led to complex regional and local ecosystems, with often overlapping or indeed divergent geographies. A key question is where there is scope to explore deeper alignments or indeed rationalisation across the different bodies.

Partnership and collaboration between colleges and universities is a major theme of public policy in Wales – most evident in the Well-being of Future Generations Act's (WBFGA) stipulations on 'Ways of Working', but also seen throughout education and skills policy. However, whilst HEFCW itself is subject to the Act, HE institutions are not, as they are not public sector bodies.

HEFCW is required to take 'regional coherence' into account when funding Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), with an explicit instruction featuring in the annual remit letter from the Minister to the Funding Council each year. However, this applies to HE provision only, rather than all post-16 provision.



The reform agenda

“Overall, the (Welsh) view was that the post-secondary landscape was too complex, with overlapping organisations and duplication of resources and programming. FEIs and HEIs were too focused on their own agendas, with little evidence of genuine working relationships between them. There was too little discussion about the needs of learners or learner pathways or transitions between and across parts of the system. [...] Little reference was made to work-based learning or adult and community education.”

Towards 2030: A framework for building a world-class post-compulsory education system for Wales⁵

In Autumn 2021 the Welsh Government started the process for taking the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill through the Senedd, the Welsh parliament. The post-compulsory education and training (PCET) reforms take forward recommendations made by the Hazelkorn Review, ‘Towards 2030: A framework for building a world-class post-compulsory education system for Wales’, commissioned by the Welsh Government and published in 2016. Many of the recommendations were reaffirmed in the Independent Commission on the College of the Future’s report for Wales.

The Bill includes proposals to introduce a new arms-length Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER), acting as the funder and regulator of all post compulsory education and research, with the dissolution of the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW).

Other relevant policy agendas: Future Generations

All of this sits within a wider policy context of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The Act gives a legally-binding common purpose for national government, local government, local health boards and other specified public bodies. It presents a critical agenda which reflects a sustainable and prosperous vision for the future of Wales, which includes concerted action on education and skills.

Collaboration is central to the strategy of the Future Generations Commissioner, who has argued that there needs to be much stronger alignment between public and other bodies to deliver on strategic objectives, including FE and HE institutions. The Future Generation’s Manifesto For The Future⁶ argues that this could lead to public bodies understanding the broader benefit and steps they can take to improve all aspects of well-being through skills . The Cymraeg 2050 Strategy⁷

to have one million Welsh speakers by 2050 similarly represents an agenda which requires a whole systems approach from across the education and skills system.

Spotlight on Wales

Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER)

A new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) in Wales is part of a key reform agenda, aimed at building a more integrated, coherent system where vocational and academic learning are equally valued. The commission, subject to legislation, will be responsible for overseeing the post-16 sector in Wales. This comprises FE, HE, apprenticeships, sixth forms and Welsh Government funded research and innovation bodies. The new Commission is expected to develop Outcome Agreements with the institutions it funds, which will set out how a provider will contribute to the objectives of the Commission’s strategic plan, and the overall goals for the tertiary education sector in Wales.

This shows real ambition from the Welsh Government to simplify the tertiary landscape, and to set out long term strategic ambitions for the sector. A key question will be ensuring alignment to local strategies across PSBs, City Deals and RSPs, and reflecting on the balance between the national and regional or local, as well as the inclusion of other providers, such as schools and community learning.

The reforms also include a duty on the Commission to encourage the provision of, and participation in, tertiary education and training through the medium of Welsh language and to promote the civic mission of tertiary education institutions, aiming to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing of Wales. The model retains points of distinction such as a tailored approach to inspection for different types of provision.

⁵ Professor Ellen Hazelkorn, Towards 2030: A framework for building a world-class post-compulsory education system for Wales (2016), Welsh Government. <<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-02/towards-2030-a-framework-for-building-a-world-class-post-compulsory-education-system-for-wales.pdf>> [accessed 19 January 2022].

⁶ Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, Manifesto for the Future (2020), Future Generations Commissioner for Wales <<https://www.futuregenerations.wales/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Manifesto-for-the-Future-FGCW1.pdf>> [accessed 19 January 2022]

⁷ Welsh Government, Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers (2017), Welsh Government <<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-12/cymraeg2050-welsh-language-strategy.pdf>> [accessed 19 January 2022]

Scotland

The Scottish post-16 education and skills system benefits from elements of strong collaboration, but certainly not without significant points of notable competition between colleges and universities. In 2020, the Scottish Government commissioned the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to propose changes to policy, funding and accountability frameworks to deliver greater coherence and sustainability of tertiary education and research. This, alongside other reports (Cumberford-Little, the Independent Commission on the College of the Future's report for Scotland) has galvanised a renewed focus on how to build a system that creates long-term stability and collaboration between colleges and universities.

The current system

Colleges and universities are both funded and regulated by the SFC, an arms-length body of the Scottish Government. All HE providers are required to agree an Outcome Agreement with the SFC, setting out how the college or university will contribute towards government priorities. Over the last ten years, around 30% of delivery of HE in Scotland has taken place in colleges, the highest across all four nations.⁸

The Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board brings together government agencies, including SFC, Skills Development Scotland, Scottish Enterprise, South of Scotland Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise with members from colleges, universities and employers, to collectively agree strategic priorities. The board has strengthened the links between tertiary education and economic development both in terms of policy and delivery. The regionalisation of the college sector, which created 13 college regions into which colleges were merged, or brought together under a single fundable board, has proved a particular strength providing a coherent structure for closer integration with universities, schools and others.

A substantial amount of work has been done in Scotland to create a more progressive and fairer tertiary system. Building on the original report of the Commission on Widening Access (2016), a succession of national policy initiatives including the Learner Journey project and the National Articulation Forum, have led to the creation of much clearer pathways for the individual learner as well as removing some of the duplication and inefficiencies in the system. Scottish colleges are reviewed by Education Scotland and universities by QAA Scotland. QAA Scotland and College Development Network undertake enhancement activities for their respective sectors.



⁸ College statistics 2019/20 (2021), Scottish Funding Council <<https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/statistical-publications/2021/SFCST012021.aspx>> [accessed 19 January 2022].

Spotlight on Scotland

Articulation Agreements

Articulation enables a student gaining entry into the second year of a degree with a Higher National Certificate (HNC) gained at college, or into the third year with a Higher National Diploma (HND) gained at college. This avoids students repeating academic levels in moving from college to university, which is costly for the learner in both time and money, and an inefficient use of public resources. There is an aspiration to increase articulation to widen access to university, creating more flexible opportunities for learners as well as closer collaboration between colleges and universities to meet learner demand.

There are very strong local models and Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland have come together to develop a National Articulation Forum, setting out guidelines for local/regional articulation agreements. At their best, these show local leaders taking responsibility to develop joined-up pathways that support people to access education and training opportunities that may otherwise be out of reach.

Through the National Articulation Forum, colleges and universities have come together at a national level to signal opportunities where this can be developed more universally too. A natural evolution of this will be to explore resistance to regional articulation agreements exploring where articulation agreements may be developed across regions. There is significant inconsistency across Scotland – some universities are much less keen on developing local agreements. So there is a question here as to where it should be voluntary, and where new or altered arrangements may be required.

Case Study: Improving articulation and securing student access

South Lanarkshire College University of the West of Scotland, Glasgow University and Stirling University, Scotland

The introduction of the HNC/D Legal Services at South Lanarkshire College (SLC) has opened up opportunities to students living in South Lanarkshire to study Law and progress to university to follow a number of specialist routes to employment. Legal services courses and the HNC Police Studies have consequently been growth subjects. They have increased opportunities in an area of deprivation and high unemployment, creating new

opportunities for articulation to university and delivering fair access to future student success. The work placement element of the courses is an important opportunity for students to see what a real working environment looks and feels like before they go onto university, with both students and employers benefitting. Employers can keep on students in placements and could offer jobs eventually should a vacancy arise.

“I cannot describe the benefit of coming to SLC... My personal skills improved at SLC. I came for one year to do the HNC but it was so good, I stayed to complete the HND”.
Dilara Monasipova – former SLC student now studying LLB in sScot Law at University of Glasgow.

Case Study: Increasing progression to HE through articulation

West Lothian College and Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland

A unique partnership for West Lothian students has been designed to increase the number of students progressing from Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 8 to level 9 in a region where degree study may not have been considered by students who were choosing the college route as an alternative to university. Regional skills assessments had identified that an increasing number of jobs in this region require level 9 qualifications.

West Lothian College (WLC) is located in the only college region without a university. In 2008 the college and Edinburgh Napier University (ENU) established a successful partnership to deliver the Business Management Degree programme at the WLC campus in Livingston. The programme is being offered to students on both a full-time and part-time basis to support widening access.

The route provides straightforward articulation for students and continuity of teaching and learning, as well as pastoral support. Retention rates have been improved due to the continuation of teaching and learning with familiar lecturers, direct contact and trust. Articulation agreements are regularly updated to ensure that advanced standing is given to students who complete HND level of study. There has been further articulation to postgraduate courses for about 10% of the students who have come through WLC programmes.

“This partnership has been excellent from day one, with the key players involved from both WLC and ENU to support success. We have watched this grow year on year with unique success to WLC learners due to the smaller numbers and more focussed pastoral support.”

The reform agenda

'Imagine a tertiary system in Scotland in which all our citizens have lifetime membership, where they are immersed in work-integrated learning, and where they 'touch' industry from the very beginning of their college experience. [...] In this highly connected and interdependent tertiary system, colleges are valued and celebrated with fundamental and equal place, in contrast to the current bifurcated FE/ HE system which is unhelpfully hierarchical and poor at engendering substantive, sustainable partnerships.'

The Cumberford-Little Report: One Tertiary System: Agile, Collaborative, Inclusive, 2020,
<https://view.pagetiger.com/inlhij/1/PDF.pdf>

The SFC review of the Scottish tertiary education system made the following recommendations to Scottish Government:

- to develop a clear strategic, longer-term vision and intent for the future of tertiary education and research undertaken by colleges and universities;
- to build capacity for, and a more systematic approach to, the collective planning of tertiary education and skills provision and investment, so that it becomes more responsive to current and future needs;
- to find better ways to support learning throughout life [...] by reviewing existing targets, the assumptions that underpin existing funding models and student support, and qualification frameworks; and,
- to ensure the interests of current and future students are protected and promoted in the development of standards, outcomes, blended and digital learning opportunities, equality and inclusion actions, participation frameworks, investment and approaches to accountability.

The Scottish Government published its response to this report in October 2021, affirming broad acceptance and agreement with the recommendations, including supporting the “whole-system view of coherent tertiary provision” and “accelerated, deeper collaboration”. The Scottish Government will now go through a period of capacity building and prioritisation.

There is also significant work being led by the SFC to review the approach to Outcome Agreements for both colleges and universities. This aims to deepen strategic alignment between providers in delivering regional strategic priorities, with new ways of joint working between colleges and universities being tested out in the Tertiary Provision Pathfinders. A set of pilots will explore the development of these regional collaborations and what further needs to be done to make the education and skills system responsive. SFC is also reviewing the quality frameworks with a view to introducing a tertiary quality framework.



England

The English system is notably complicated and, at times, disjointed, with colleges and universities often competing with each other for students and ultimately for funding. Current reforms to the education and skills system by the UK Government were kickstarted by the Skills for Jobs White Paper, following the case made by Sir Philip Augar for a re-balancing of post-18 education opportunities and funding. These reforms have the potential to support greater collaboration, and engender a more systemic approach. There are also some good institutional practices and initiatives, like Institutes for Technology (IoTs), that can be built on.

The current system

The English college sector is funded via the Education & Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) which is accountable for funding education and skills for children, young people and adults. Universities and HE provision in colleges is regulated and funded by the Office for Students (OfS). Depending on the type of provision, institutions can fall under the jurisdiction of Ofsted, Ofqual, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), the Charity Commission and the FE Commissioner. Taken together there is a complex picture for funding, accountability and oversight across colleges and universities.

Post-18 education funding and student finance has undergone a period of substantial policy change and uncertainty since 2012. Though recent funding announcements have been made that mark the first planned increases in college funding for 15 years, the FE sector has experienced a prolonged period of funding cuts, with the largest falls in per-pupil funding of any sector of the education system since 2010–11.⁹ This has created an unsustainable level of uncertainty across the tertiary landscape. At the same time, there is a patchwork of devolution to navigate in terms of political priorities and access to investment, for example with various levels of funding and powers through the Adult Education Budget (AEB).

The Augar Report of 2019 proposed a set of recommendations to create a more joined-up post-18 education system, supported by a funding system that works for students and taxpayers. More than two years after it concluded, the UK Government's final response to Augar has not yet been published, resulting in a period of prolonged uncertainty, particularly around the future of the student loan scheme. As we await the final response, now expected in the form of a White Paper, it is thought that a range of policy options continue to be 'on the table' including the introduction of minimum entry thresholds, other student number controls, and changes to the terms of the student loan scheme.

However, as part of the Government's Skills White Paper, some initiatives are starting to help better align and encourage strategic collaborations, including Institutes of Technology (IoTs), which are a new model for skills delivery between colleges, universities and leading employers.



⁹ 2020 annual report on education spending in England (2020), IFS <<https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15150>> [accessed 19 January 2022].

Spotlight on England

Institutes of Technology

Institutes of Technology (IoTs) are employer-focused providers specialising in delivering ‘higher technical education’ across England. The first wave of 12 IoTs were announced in April 2019 and nine more were added in December 2021, bringing the total to 21 across England. They are collaborations between colleges, universities and employers. They deliver various technical courses, for example in advanced manufacturing, digital and cyber security, agri-tech, aerospace, automotive engineering, healthcare and laboratory science. The courses cover a range of levels including:

- higher apprenticeships
- higher technical qualifications (HTQs)
- T Levels
- degrees
- other courses for adults looking to reskill or upskill.

IoTs are a tangible area of joint working that are receiving new investment. They have been given high status and attention from the UK Government. They provide a model for collaborative activity focussed on a subject/sectoral specialism, which supports the development of quality provision, a more strategic offer to employers across innovation and skills, and workforce development. IoTs include the development of governance arrangements.

A natural evolution of this will be aligning IoTs within the new Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) structures, and expanding investment at a network level through the continuation of the Strategic Development Fund (SDF) pilots.

So far, successes are dependent on leadership and navigating various decision making processes across organisations. An area for development is the extent to which the non-lead institutions feel fully engaged in the collaboration and that wider collaborative benefits are felt locally.

Case Study: Plans to close skills gap fostered by leadership

London City Institute of Technology, England

Through the London City Institute of Technology, Queen Mary University of London and Newham College are developing new, high-quality education and research. They are working with employers and students to address acute skills challenges important to the region and country. It will open in September 2022.

There are significant skills shortages in the transport, urban infrastructure and digital sectors in London. New skills and capabilities to operate and handle a more technologically advanced and data-rich digital infrastructure – including smart roads and rail - are required

Queen Mary University of London and Newham College will come together through the IoT to deliver T levels, Higher and Degree apprenticeships, specialist transport engineering degrees, industry-linked PhDs and research, CPD and micro-credentials. Industry partners have helped to design the Level 3-8 curriculum in line with both existing skills requirements and forecasted future skills gap.

A barrier they have faced is that each organisation – government, education, or industry partners – have their own decision making processes that need to be accommodated as part of the partnership. On occasion, they are not aligned.

“A positive and transparent working relationship between Newham College and Queen Mary University of London has been fostered by the leadership teams of both organisations.”

Case Study: Aligning curriculum and employer engagement

Lincolnshire Institute of Technology, England

The Lincolnshire Institute of Technology aims to strengthen and grow provision to fill skills gaps in Lincolnshire, including in agri-food, food manufacturing, energy, engineering and advanced manufacturing, all underpinned by digital. It operates from seven hubs across Greater Lincolnshire: DN Colleges Group (North Lindsey College), Bishop Burton College (Riseholme College), Boston College, Grantham College, Lincoln College, Lincoln UTC and the University of Lincoln’s Holbeach Campus. A central aim is to reduce the distance to travel for learners across the region’s dispersed geography.

The curriculum is aligned to the Greater Lincolnshire Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPS)’s priority themes. Curriculum development and longer-term plans are supported by an Employer Advisory Group made up of the IoT’s anchor employers, including Bakkavor and OAL and other key employers in the priority sectors including Siemens Energy UK, Allied British Ports and Catch.

The reform agenda

“... some have voiced concerns that the attention and support given to FE colleges will come at the expense of HE, failing to recognise the extent to which the two fulfil complementary roles in the education system. While the debate on tertiary education is less noisy in the devolved administrations, they too face their own tensions between universities and colleges.”

Study buddies? Competition and Collaboration between higher education and further education, Aweek Bhattacharya and Amy Norman, Social Market Foundation, 2021. <https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/study-buddies/>

The policy reforms in the “Skills for jobs” White Paper¹⁰ set out how technical education and training should “support people to develop the skills needed to get good jobs and improve national productivity.” It includes measures to:

- give employers a greater say in the development of skills
- provide higher level technical skills
- provide a flexible, Lifetime Skills Guarantee
- simplify and reform funding and accountability for providers
- support outstanding teaching.

Legislative change is happening through the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill and colleges and universities will need to respond to new mechanisms, including:

1. Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs), which will provide a new local infrastructure for shaping technical provision and are intended to improve the responsiveness of local skills systems and to deliver for local people and employers. Employer representative bodies (ERBs) will develop LSIPs in consultation with local authorities, mayoral combined authorities, FE providers and other stakeholders including universities.
2. The Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE), which there will be a consultation on, will aim to create a more efficient and streamlined funding system and is due to come into force from 2025. The LLE offers the equivalent of four years of post-18 education, and will be available for modules at higher technical and degree levels (levels 4 to 6), regardless of whether they are provided in colleges or universities.

“Levelling Up” is a central policy focus for the UK Government and the white paper, published in February 2022, sets out a plan ‘to transform the UK by spreading opportunity and prosperity to all parts of it’. It sets out how ‘systems change’ across government and society is needed to see “pay, employment, and productivity grow everywhere, and the disparities between the top and worst performing areas narrow”. Increasing skills is one of the twelve “missions” of the government’s plans, potentially presenting opportunities for colleges and universities to work together in order to deliver these critical place-based agendas and targets.



¹⁰ Department for Education, Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth (2021), GOV.UK <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-for-jobs-lifelong-learning-for-opportunity-and-growth>> [accessed 19 January 2022]]



Northern Ireland

As the OECD has said, Northern Ireland has gone through strategies and reforms to create a skills architecture.¹¹ There is a tradition of skills strategies, including the 2011-2020 overarching strategy “Success through Skills – Transforming Futures”, with a series of Success strategies that have followed, including strategies for FE and HE centred on themes such as economic development, accessibility and curriculum delivery. There is now a new Skills Strategy, which sits within the overarching 10X Economic Vision developed by the Department for the Economy. At the same time, the Department for the Economy and Department of Education have been jointly leading a review of 14-19 education and training. In addition, in line with commitments in the New Decade, New Approach document, the Department of Education has recently launched an independent review of education with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and considering the prospects for moving towards a single education system.

The current system

FE and HE falls under the remit of the Department for the Economy, a government department created as part of the restructuring of the Northern Ireland Assembly which followed the May 2016 elections. Unlike the other nations in the UK, there is no separate funding council. Colleges are Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) which are, in line with the two universities and the Open University (OU) funded and regulated directly by the Department for the Economy, and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) also playing a role as an independent body.

Structurally, colleges have been through a significant rationalisation process which resulted in six regional colleges across Northern Ireland, alongside the two universities, Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University, in addition to the Open University. There are also two initial teacher training university colleges: Stranmillis University College, a university college of Queen’s and St Mary’s University College Belfast. In addition, a College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise is run by the Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Representatives from all these FE and HE institutions are brought together regularly by the Department for the Economy in a Tertiary Education Sector Leaders Forum.

Northern Ireland’s colleges deliver a substantial volume of HE (typically around 20%), chiefly in the form of higher technical and professional skills programmes at Level 4 and 5, including Foundation Degrees, directly linked to areas of skills and labour market need.

Of particular note in the Northern Ireland system is the Curriculum Hubs model that has been developed across the six colleges, whereby each college leads on provision for one or two specialisms. This is already paying dividends across the college network, in consolidating specialist expertise, business support and innovation capacity within a lead college to the benefit of businesses and the wider economy, as well as benefiting from a deeper relationship with universities.

¹¹ OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland (United Kingdom): Assessment and Recommendations (2020), OECD <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/1857c8af-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/1857c8af-en> [accessed 19 January 2022].

Spotlight on Northern Ireland

Curriculum Hubs

The six regional colleges in Northern Ireland have developed a collaborative model to support a range of curriculum and business support interventions, built around Curriculum Hubs. This has enabled horizon scanning in developing innovative solutions, staff CPD, connections for development HE pathways and qualifications reform. The Curriculum Hub model has been rolled out across all six FE colleges in Northern Ireland with Hubs in place for: Digital IT, Engineering and Advanced Manufacturing, Construction, Health and Social Care, Life Sciences, Hospitality & Tourism and Entrepreneurship.

Previously, most of the work with universities in Northern Ireland was done through bi-lateral discussions, which varied across all six colleges, and with limited cross-sectoral sharing. This meant that there was a potential for a proliferation of pathways on individually negotiated partnership agreements between colleges and universities across Northern Ireland, which would not benefit learners or employers. Although the curriculum hubs have a broad remit across all qualification levels, more recently the Hubs have provided the vehicle for colleges to work to agree foundation degree pathways in Hospitality & Tourism and Computing Science.

Curriculum Hubs lead on engagement with the universities to discuss HE progression pathways. The work which the Hubs have facilitated has also been further enhanced by the colleges working together to develop new Higher Level Apprenticeships, which often must have Foundation Degree pathways with local universities and further opportunities for articulation on to degree programmes.

Moving forward in Northern Ireland, it is likely there will be further rationalisation of curriculum and qualifications with ongoing reviews to improve the efficiency of the delivery models across the region.

Curriculum Hubs show the benefits that can be achieved through an agreement of specialisms across an education and skills system, exploring how lead institutions can then benefit the wider network. A natural evolution will be ensuring that Curriculum Hubs are achieving their full potential across all six colleges, and deepening this to strengthen engagement with the two universities too.

Case Study: Agreed college specialisation supporting pathways to HE

Southern Regional College, Northern Ireland

The Life Science Hub at Southern Regional College is the lead in the occupational area and manages FE college collaborations with occupational specialists from the six colleges of Northern Ireland. Its aim is to provide a consistent high quality educational provision for learners and employers across Northern Ireland through economic engagement, curriculum review, future scoping, CPD and supporting the Life and Health Science Sectoral Partnership activity. Its activity focuses on analysis and prioritisation of business needs and curriculum development to support the growth of the Northern Ireland Life and Health sector.

The Hub supports progression pathways by reviewing and aligning HE provision, providing clear articulation routes from entry level programmes. An example of this is the Higher Level Apprenticeship (HLA) in Applied Industrial Sciences. It is the only one of its kind in Northern Ireland and supports employment in a variety of industrial science fields and provides articulation to a range of HE pathways upon successful completion. Apprenticeship pathways now exist from Level 3 to Level 7 in applied industrial and life sciences. The Southern Regional College has developed two pathways in applied industrial science and life sciences at Level 5.

The Foundation degree qualification that underpins these higher level apprenticeships was developed by Southern Regional College in conjunction with a number of leading pharmaceutical companies and was validated through Ulster University, who in turn worked within a Sector Partnership to offer a level 6 progression route (BSc Pharmaceutical Biosciences) with Queen's University Belfast offering a further Level 7 progression route (MSc Pharmaceutical Analysis).

This work has created a coherent progression route in applied sciences that offers apprentices the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge through degree level and onward to postgraduate level study. The degree level apprenticeships continue to evolve with regular review and updates from industry representatives on the Sector Partnership.



The reform agenda

In May 2021 the Department for the Economy launched the 'Succeed' Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland' consultation as a key pillar of the 10X Economic Vision for Northern Ireland. The 10X skills strategy aims to address skills imbalances, including within STEM subjects, to drive economic growth, to create a culture of lifelong learning and to enhance digital skills.

Commitments include embedding a more integrated, cross government approach to education and skills policy, and deepening integration across the tertiary education system. This includes:

- The establishment of a new Northern Ireland Skills Council, with responsibility for the implementation of the Skills Strategy and with an oversight role in the commissioning and development of all skills policies and related research. This includes senior representatives from all relevant government departments (Department for the Economy, Department of Education and Department for Communities) and local government, as well as representation from business leaders, senior representatives of education and employee representatives from trades unions. The Northern Ireland Skills Council will review and rationalise the existing (skills) advisory infrastructure and will focus on skill shortages.
- The Skills Strategy will be underpinned by 2, 5 and 10 year action plans.
- The Skills Strategy will be endorsed, as a whole-of-government Strategy, by the Northern Ireland Executive, recognising the key, strategic importance of education and skills development to social and economic prosperity.

There are recognised challenges in understanding and addressing declining participation in level 4-5 education. The ongoing work of the 'Review of Higher Education in Further Education' will set out a coordinated approach to redressing this decline, and will consider existing policies at level 4 and 5, including the focus on Foundation Degrees and the emphasis on working with the three Northern Ireland universities in their development.

This reform agenda itself sits within the overarching 10X Economy Vision (May 2021), which has been led and adopted by the Department for the Economy, and within which the skills strategy sits. Taken together, these situate skills at the heart of Northern Ireland's economic strategy and well positioned to deliver its ambitions for an increasingly integrated, cohesive education and skills system.

Delivering joined-up tertiary education and skills systems: challenges & opportunities

Across the four nations, there are strengths and barriers to the effective delivery of a joined-up tertiary education and skills system. In many ways these are exacerbated by external shifts, but there are also unique opportunities within these developments that could be transformative. To deliver a more joined-up system, an honest reflection on both the opportunities and challenges is required, including the extent to which these apply across the four nations of the UK. More granular detail and analysis on the policy landscape across the four nations can be found in the previous section.

Challenges

There are barriers that impede strong college-university relationships across the four nations.

Inequity in funding levels and approach

- Significant underfunding of FE over decades – and of adult education in particular – across the four nations undermines the health of the wider system.
- Lack of funding stability drives a defensive and internally focussed approach to institutional management, and results in limited ‘headspace’ for senior leaders that undermines the capacity and appetite for collaboration.
- Discrete funding models across FE and HE can drive inconsistent incentives and approaches, and have not historically fostered collaboration. Similarly, the shift towards a more market-driven approach to the post-16 education sector is also frequently cited as a challenge.
- Divergent and inequitable approaches to student finance across FE and HE influences the choices available to students.

Disjointed oversight and accountability

- The variations in oversight, as well as the lack of clarity on the desired outcomes of each sector, means that the roles that different parts of the system play are poorly defined, inhibiting parity and collaboration. In some contexts, the emphasis on accountability through mechanisms such as inspections curtails opportunities for innovation and collaboration.

- The ways in which providers are expected to work together to create pathways are not articulated clearly.
- Local and regional skills infrastructure and leadership is often underdeveloped. Limited and inconsistent investment in strategic support for employers and place-making has impeded the ability of providers to fully capitalise on the benefits of collaborative working.

Limited levels of trust and long-term commitments to collaboration

- Lack of trust is one of the biggest barriers to effective collaboration between colleges and universities and hinders mutually beneficial relationships. Too often colleges and universities have been pitted against each other in policy debate and within a finite post-compulsory funding envelope. This tension can play out in local and regional relationships.
- An over-reliance on personal relationships means that partnership agreements can be built on weak foundations. Institutional memories can be long and building back trust is often a challenge.

Uneven and unwieldy system architecture and advocacy

- Much of our system has been dominated by historically narrow and compartmentalised views of education trajectories, for example those focused on school leavers. This means that individuals who do not follow traditional educational paths are often poorly served. This is also true for those already in, or wanting to re-enter, employment.
- Only a small proportion of politicians, journalists and opinion formers have personal experience of studying in colleges. This lack of experience and knowledge can result in few advocates and champions for colleges. Policy conversations around college relationships with universities aren’t always well understood or scrutinised.
- From a student’s perspective, progression routes between institutions and levels of study can be confusing and difficult to navigate, not least for the students most in need of clarity and coherence. This is also the case for employers, notably small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and those without established links with educational institutions.

A disjointed and short-term approach to policy-making

- Policy making across FE and HE can often appear piecemeal, poorly joined up, and lacking in long-term strategic focus
- Any incentives to encourage collaboration are often poorly-funded and involve competitive and one-off bidding processes. While this has facilitated collaboration in some areas, it also provides a fragile basis for genuine long-term partnership arrangements that could underpin a more strategic and trusting relationship.

Insufficient institutional headspace and resources to focus on partnerships

- In both college and universities, partnership working can receive insufficient strategic focus, commitment and funding, resulting in arrangements which are often temporary or transactional.
- Pressure on resources and a short-termist approach to funding can drive institutions to focus on organisational self-preservation and a risk-averse approach to collaboration.
- Perceived power imbalances between colleges and universities, perceptions of differing status, imbalances in resource (including staff pay) and size differentials, can inhibit partnership working.
- An increased focus and scrutiny on value for money and cost to the taxpayer (felt most keenly in England) can exacerbate a more inward looking or defensive focus.
- Metrification of quality and regulation (particularly in England) may become more of a barrier as institutions become increasingly risk averse, and reluctant to validate provision where they do not teach but are held accountable for metrics which may fall below minimum standards.



Opportunities

Alongside long-standing challenges that can impede a more joined-up approach, there are opportunities to help turn the tide.

A shared mission for the public good

- Colleges and universities have many of the same strategic objectives, with the underlying aim to work in the interest of ‘the public good.’ From removing barriers for underrepresented students and improving social inclusion, to boosting skills levels and productivity, both types of institutions aim to respond to local needs.

Driving positive change through response to societal and demographic trends

- An increasing focus on lifelong learning required by the changing world of work means that governments across the four nations are making new commitments on adult skills and learning.¹²
- The efforts on closing regional inequalities, for example through the UK Government’s ‘levelling up’ agenda, present opportunities to join together and tackle educational and economic disparities and inequalities and cold spots, including towns without existing HE or FE provision, acting as key drivers for positive change.
- There are opportunities for more co-creation of ‘learner-first’ pathways, designed in partnership with local communities, particularly for people who have been historically disadvantaged or for places considered harder to reach.
- The upcoming demographic upswing (until 2030/35) means there should be growth in the number of young people participating in FE and HE, most notably in England. Seeing colleges and universities as a tertiary education and skills system, that is aligned to collectively support and respond to growth, presents a potentially positive backdrop for collaboration and coordination.

Increasingly joined-up and place-based policy trends

- There is a trend towards a more joined-up approach to oversight and accountability of post-16 education and skills providers. This can be seen in Scotland with the Scottish Funding Council’s (SFC) Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability, in the ongoing proposals to develop a single post-16 regulator and funder in Wales, and to some extent through the direct sponsorship of FE colleges and direct funding of universities by the

- Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland. England notably lacks this joined-up approach.
- ‘Place-based’ political agendas are increasingly gaining traction on education, regional development, innovation and health policies across the four nations.
- There is increasing awareness of the importance of ‘civic agendas’, including through the work of the Civic University Network and the increasing number of colleges and universities publishing Civic University Agreements.

Building on increased resource and knowledge sharing

- Sharing of resources and infrastructure has formed part of many community and institutional responses to the pandemic. This has included more creative shared use of physical space, coordinated investment in digital infrastructure and workforce skills, as well as working together to adopt more sustainable supply chains.
- There are opportunities for, and examples of, knowledge sharing for staff development and creating cross HE/FE careers pathways, including through secondments and joint posts.



¹² Learning for Life: Funding world-class adult education system (2020), CBI <<https://www.cbi.org.uk/media/5723/learning-for-life-report.pdf>> [accessed 19 January 2022].

Recommendations to strengthen tertiary education and skills systems

This report seeks to unpick the complex landscape which underpins greater collaboration, both in policy and practical terms. Successful collaboration can and should be underpinned by the right national policy, funding and regulatory environment for tertiary education and skills systems. But it must also be rooted at a local and regional level, within each of the four nations, reflecting local opportunities and challenges and local political and institutional leadership. Underlying many of this report's recommendations is the need for the two sectors to nurture 'place-based networks' that make sense for any given locality.



The importance of a place-based approach

Place-based networks provide a model for colleges and universities to develop strategies across appropriate economic geographies and places that have a shared history and identity. Together colleges and universities are exceptionally well placed to identify local and regional needs and priorities consistent with national strategies. These can be developed in consultation with employers and other key stakeholders, like schools and local authorities, and can deliver a coordinated approach to the learning and training offer as well as civic engagement.

Place-based networks also enable colleges and universities to avoid inefficient competition and play a more proactive and strategic role in meeting the needs of learners and employers. Reflecting the vision set out in this report, this approach better enables colleges and universities, collectively and individually, to:

- Empower people with the learning they need to thrive, by:
 - Offering easily navigable careers advice and lifelong learning across colleges and universities that enables adults to upskill and retrain.
 - Providing young people who otherwise risk not engaging with education and training with the learning pathway that is right for them.
- Accelerate productivity through a coordinated approach to strategic support for employers and knowledge sharing, adapting to the local, regional and national economy and labour market demands, including responding to economic shocks and in major investment opportunities.
- Foster sustainable, healthy and fair places across the UK, redressing regional inequalities and supporting left-behind places through a collaborative approach to working with stakeholders.
- Work in partnerships that drive a more connected and coherent tertiary education and skills system, so that all institutions can reach their potential in creating impact across people, productivity and place.

To be successful, place-based networks must be developed and led by colleges and universities themselves, alongside other key partners – building on the best of what is already happening in localities across the UK and supported by a new trust-based collaborative culture. Success is dependent on the right tertiary education and skills policy context at a national level, which enables and encourages the development and maintenance of stronger place-based networks. We therefore set out recommendations both for sector leaders and for policy makers in national, regional and local governments.

Recommendations for sector leaders: leading the way

A stronger place-based approach requires ambition, vision and commitment from leaders in both FE and HE, moving beyond individual and transactional relationships, to a truly cohesive strategic offer for learners, employers and communities.

College and university leaders must take shared responsibility for developing stronger place-based approaches, building trust and ensuring appropriate institutional investment. Through the case studies set out in the appendices of this report, it is clear that developing a coherent local strategic approach takes time, and requires both practical steps to build trust and familiarity, as well as broader vision and ambition. Many institutions are not starting from scratch in their collaboration, but there are opportunities to strengthen partnerships as they continue to develop.

Characteristics of effective partnerships

Based on the case studies we reviewed, there are a number of elements that are common to existing effective partnerships:

- Ambiguities in geography embraced;
- Defined and agreed roles that play to institutional strengths;
- Mutual trust between leaders and institutions, based on an honest assessment of areas of collaboration and potential competition;
- Dedication to creating clear pathways for students, including in careers information, advice and guidance and supporting transitions;
- Coordinated approach to employer engagement; and
- Joined-up approach to meeting local social and economic needs and national priorities.

A collaborative journey

There are three important steps that sector leaders must take as they work to create strong local networks, wherever they are on their collaborative journey. These steps are not linear - and all three will require ongoing attention.

We urge sector leaders to:

1. Agree who is involved in your local network.

- Reflect the natural geography, however imperfect: Developing and strengthening place-based networks means reflecting on the natural geographies that institutions will work within. This is a necessarily imperfect process within a complicated and evolving local

government landscape. In some nations, a nation-wide network might be the most appropriate level of focus.

- Agree the providers within your network. The focus of this report is on the need for deeper collaboration between universities and colleges within a tertiary education and skills system. Other institutions and providers are also important elements of this system, including schools offering post-16 provision, adult and community learning providers, independent training providers, and prison education - and these providers will often be important to involve in local strategies.
- Embrace ambiguities and use place-based networks for maximum impact: It is important to ensure that networks across a locality do not become limiting, or create new, harder boundaries. The approach to a network should therefore include reflection on the ways in which networks can collaborate across geographies. Wider national and international networks and institutions can complement this, for example through commercial or international partnership opportunities like capacity-building or training. A place-based network forms a strong basis from which to collaborate at this level. This is especially important where there are natural specialisms where knowledge and best practice can be shared.
- Look to other nations of the UK: There are emerging models within each of the four nations which represent a good starting point for the question of geography.
 - In England, the Skills for Jobs White Paper has introduced ambitions to develop new Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs), which are being rolled out with a number of trailblazers in 2021/22. There is a question as to the extent to which these will align with Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs), and any further local and regional devolution.
 - In Northern Ireland, the six colleges have undertaken a significant piece of work to develop a cohesive, complementary offer, including through the establishment of curriculum hubs. In addition, leaders in FE and HE institutions in Northern Ireland come together regularly through a Tertiary Education Sector Leaders Forum and other groups. This provides a solid network and foundation which can then be further developed locally within City Deals.
 - In Scotland, the regionalisation of colleges presents a coherent interface for universities – which the SFC has proposed is further developed, through coordinated college-university outcome agreements. This can be further complemented with City Deals, where they exist. There will be many contexts in which it is preferable to work on the basis of a Scotland-wide tertiary network.
 - In Wales, Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) sit across four regions of Wales – North Wales (NWRSP), South East Wales Cardiff Capital (CCRSP), South West Regional Learning and Skills Partnership (SWRLSP), and Mid Wales. Additionally, there are Public Service Boards (PSBs) sitting in each local authority, and successful City Deals too, which colleges and universities will be keen to build on and ensure they are cohesively aligned to RSPs. An important task will be determining how and where these align, and how they sit within the proposed new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER). Another important task, similar to that in Northern Ireland and Scotland, is the question of where the network approach should be developed at the national rather than local or regional level.

2. Develop a cohesive local offer for individual learners, employers and communities.

- Start small and build up. In the case studies set out in an appendix to this report, it is clear that partnerships often develop in the first instance by picking ‘low hanging fruit’. It is important for institutions to find an area where they can play to their strengths. This can give them the best chance of developing an expansive and cohesive remit, delivering a lifelong learning offer for people of all ages, a strategic offer to employers across innovation and skills, and a developed offer in place-making.
- Unlocking lifelong learning
 - Build stronger pathways through the education system. Ensuring that there is ‘no wrong door’ for people to engage in lifelong learning is vital. Developing strong and coherent pathways through a tertiary education and skills system is critical to supporting access and progression for people throughout their lives. This will mean redressing inefficient duplication and competition. This should include strengthening local and regional ‘articulation agreements’, building on the national articulation framework developed in Scotland and strong local practices. This should be supported further by an emphasis on modular credentials and funding that supports this approach.
 - Deliver a coherent, all age system of careers information, advice and guidance. A lifelong careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) strategy must be part of a place-based network to ensure strong alignment between the roles of university and colleges, as well as other providers (notably schools), local government, JobCentre Plus and other relevant agencies. Agreeing a coordinated approach is critical to supporting people to navigate their education and skills options. This can drive a significant increase in access, as well as efficiencies and improvements in quality. This is strengthened by agreeing a consistent offer, for example for adult lower-level learners across the locality.

For an example of this in action, please see case studies on pages 29-30

- Commit to a joined-up approach to employer engagement. Colleges and universities across the four nations can play a stronger role supporting business innovations and long-term workforce development plans. This will help employers move to a higher productivity, more technologically enabled and net-zero carbon economy. This expanded role requires collaboration to coordinate existing employer support. This would ensure a clearer entry point for employers seeking to engage with the tertiary education and skills system. Coordinating roles and sharing resources, infrastructure and staff expertise will be important elements in providing better support for employers.

For an example of this in action, please see case studies on pages 31-32

- Harness the ‘civic’ power and obligations of colleges and universities. With increasing focus on the power of colleges and universities in their ‘place’, a more collaborative sector could help address regional skills shortages and tackle entrenched disadvantages. For universities, this means embedding a partnership approach into Civic University Agreements, using these as the basis for strengthening ways of working locally with colleges, and aligning civic visions to drive positive societal change.

For an example of this in action, please see case studies on page 33

- Collaboration as a route to improved quality and efficiency gains.
 - Increase shared infrastructure, resources and expertise. With financial pressures on the education and skills system, and the expanded role colleges and universities must play in meeting the challenges of the future, it is important to develop a wider strategy for the development of shared infrastructure, resources and expertise across the system. A coordinated approach not only offers significant potential for efficiencies, but also for driving up quality and coherence.
 - Develop a coordinated approach to workforce development. This presents significant untapped opportunities and should be an element of national and local strategies. There is an immediate priority around the development and ongoing updating of digital skills of the workforces. This requires investment from national governments and should be coordinated to ensure that this is delivered in an efficient manner, ensuring consistent skills across the system.

3. Invest in complementary systems architecture

- Move from individual-based to a whole institutional approach: Local partnerships cannot rely solely on strong personal relationships or be limited to the ‘win-wins’ where they exist. This means reflecting on structures and systems that can be developed to sustain relationships over the long term. There are a number of ways in which this can be developed:
 - Memoranda of understanding (MOUs), or similar models of overarching governance, to agree ways of working – setting out clear roles and obligations and anticipating points of tension.
 - Ensuring representation respectively on college and university governing bodies as a practical way of ensuring shared responsibility for the respective missions of distinct institutions.
 - Reflect partnership in structures and systems, including for the ‘how’ of collaboration, with investment in staff development, and appropriate recognition.
 - Focus on the bottom-up. Great effort should be taken to ensure close working at departmental and practitioner level – which will be further enabled through deeper integration of services, infrastructure and estates. Bottom-up initiatives, coupled with high level support in each institution to drive collaboration and maintain momentum, is a powerful combination.

For an example of this in action, please see case studies on pages 34-35

Recommendations for governments: make collaborations central

A place-based network approach must be led by local college and university leaders – and build on the best of what already occurs. National policies and systems either hinder or enable this. In our recommendations for governments, we draw on policies that exist to differing extents across the four nations and which should be developed within each national system.

Institutions across the different nations are at varying stages of their journey in realising the vision this report calls for and operate in notably different contexts. However, there is much more needed from governments across each nation to deliver systems that drive much deeper integration and alignment in pursuit of a tertiary education and skills system.

We urge policy makers to:

1. Set an ambitious 10 year strategy to deliver a more coherent approach

It is critical that education and skills policy is developed as a cohesive system seeking to drive the change needed to deliver on national goals and ambitions. This must be long-term, offer stability, ensure coherence and articulate the complementary roles of distinct elements of the system. It must be embedded in a cross-government approach and describe the alignment to other relevant policy agendas – across industry, economy, health, decarbonisation and welfare.

2. Ensure the whole education and skills system is sustainably funded.

FE is notably under-funded in each of the four nations, comparing poorly to HE funding levels. This must be redressed within each nation to ensure all institutions are operating from a position of strength. At the same time, universities are also operating in an increasingly constrained fiscal environment, with financial pressures limiting potential for more innovative and collaborative approaches to the skills system. Investing sufficiently and fairly in the whole system would provide fertile ground for collaboration between equally strong institutions. Importantly, a secure and long-term funding settlement would enable institutions to make and honour long-term commitments to their partnerships and give senior leaders the ‘headspace’ required for large scale, long-term strategic planning and relationship building.

3. Create financial support systems that work for every student, at every life stage

Student financial support is inequitable across FE and HE within each of the four nations. There are three principles that should be embedded across student finance systems:

- Equal maintenance support across loans and grants should be available for individuals in FE and HE and advanced skills training. This must be adequate for an individual’s needs, whether part-time or full-time and whether learning is in-person or delivered at a distance, so that everyone has the opportunity to pursue the route best suited to them throughout their lifetime.

- Flexibility in the use of the entitlement, and any associated maintenance support in grants and/ or loans, is essential, so that individuals are able to build up their skills over time to match their evolving career development needs and their personal circumstances.
- Unemployed people must not lose their welfare benefits where they use their entitlement to reskill or retrain full-time in areas of identified job opportunities and skills shortages.

4. Redress unproductive competition through greater clarity of purpose

To deliver on national strategies, funding and accountability systems should describe the complementary and distinctive roles of different parts of the system. This would go a long way to redressing unproductive competition where it exists. This must involve looking at issues in the ‘messy middle’, and seeking to better coordinate and align specialisms across tertiary systems. This will require oversight and clarity about who is the local, regional and/or national ‘referee’ to support and mediate where agreement cannot be achieved between institutions.¹³

5. Ensure a joined-up approach to regulation and oversight.

Oversight systems across the four nations must be simplified, drive efficiency, engender greater trust and enable better strategic coordination to deliver outcomes across people, productivity and place. This is crucial to ensuring a coherent lifelong education service, and in addressing nugatory competition between colleges and with other education providers. A joined-up tertiary education and skills system is best delivered through a single funding and regulatory body (or in the case of NI, a coordinated approach within government). This is more complicated in some nations. At a minimum, a more aligned and complementary regulatory approach is critical where discrete funding and regulatory approaches exist as an enabler for smoother learner transition and navigation.

What does this mean across the four nations?

It is clear that the four nations are on different stages of the journey, and some nations have a number of the features we describe. But each nation has much further to go to develop a truly integrated, coherent tertiary education and skills system and to ensure the intentions are ‘lived out’ at a local and regional level too. This is not happening consistently nor sufficiently at present. To understand the road left to travel, read the appendix to this report on the policy landscape across the four nations.

¹³ Aweek Bhattacharya and Amy Norman, Study buddies? Competition and collaboration between higher education and further education: Executive summary (2021), Social Market Foundation <<https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Executive-summary-Study-buddies-March-2021-.pdf>> [accessed 19 January 2022].



Next steps

Building integrated, coherent systems of tertiary education and skills within each of the four nations will require ongoing work from both sector leaders and policy makers. Through this report, we have highlighted exemplary local practices, and systems features, which provide models that others can and should draw on.

We will be bringing together sector leaders within each of the four nations to continue this conversation. We are keen to continue hearing about what colleges and universities are doing to strengthen their ways of working. We will continue to build and amplify a pool of existing practice that institutional leaders and policy makers across the UK can learn from, so please continue to share case studies with our teams.

There are many challenges, but as we have highlighted, there are opportunities as well. Colleges and universities, propelled by their shared mission and deep-rooted commitments to place and people, are undoubtedly more powerful together. Through these ideas, we aim to help make the system work to support this ambition.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix: Case studies

Throughout this project, we heard from many colleges and universities about what is currently working well and that can be built on and the lessons learned. Alongside local case studies, we put a spotlight on a strong systems feature from each nation in the next section of the appendices, which offers lessons for other nations.

By championing the best of what already exists, we affirm the ongoing commitment of sector leaders to deliver on this agenda. It is important to note that each success we set out in these case studies are the result of a unique mix of local economic and political context, geography, personalities, historic institutional relationship, scale of project, and - of course - the national system that they sit within. Replicating the collaboration and impact of each in another place and at a different time would be impossible. We do hope, however, that they provide inspiration for further action and partnerships.

How colleges and universities are empowering people

Mentoring between university, college and school students to support transition

Portsmouth Scholars, England

Portsmouth Scholars is a cascade mentoring scheme where undergraduate students from the University of Portsmouth mentor final year college students, and the college students then mentor final year/transitioning students from schools into college. The scheme includes many schools and all colleges in Portsmouth.

The use of a cascade mentoring scheme helps raise aspirations of students, school staff and the community for whom university/HE is not well understood. A member of university staff, who is situated in Portsmouth College, coordinates the programme, trains the mentors, raises awareness of the scheme and oversees its operation.

“Although it is part of the University’s civic duty, and not a recruitment exercise, one of the knock on benefits has been increased applications from partner colleges than predicted. The colleges report increased numbers of students overall applying to progress to HE. College results for those on the scheme have also increased to above national averages.”

A single source of information of higher education

Tertiary Education Partnership, Northern Ireland

Colleges and universities came together in early March 2021 to explore how they could collectively promote the wider HEn offer available in Northern Ireland. There was clear recognition that accessing information on HE options, including those offered through colleges, was both complex and time consuming. No single source of information existed that provided prospective applicants, parents and school careers staff with the information needed to make more informed decisions.

As a first step, a Tertiary Education working group was established to develop microsites that included all full time higher level routes provided through the six regional Colleges. The microsites were developed by Queen’s University and Ulster University in conjunction with regional colleges and provided a single listing of all full-time routes available. These microsites were then actively promoted to local schools and careers officers, as well as college and university admission teams, to help students find a progression route that was right for them.

The Tertiary Education group is currently working on the development of a similar single information portal for Northern Ireland HE. This will help promote local opportunities and provide all stakeholders with a complete resource on university and college offers.

Innovative online platform for navigating progression options

Edinburgh College, Fife College and Queen Margaret University, Scotland

Pathways, a national online platform, provides a user-friendly search function for the South East Scotland region to find information on articulation routes available from the Regional Learner Passport Partnership partner providers, which include representations from six colleges and eight universities.

The online platform signposts and promotes all curriculum pathways that recognise full academic credit for prior learning at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) levels 7 and 8 (‘Advanced Standing’) from college to a university degree within South East Scotland. The aim is to minimise confusion by reducing the number of institutions, websites and documents students need to consult to decide their path to learning success.

“Shared vision and ambition has been strong, with the group currently exploring the opportunities to expand the reach of their work.”

How colleges and universities are empowering people *(cont.)*

Integrating student recruitment and support

The Open University (OU) in Scotland, Ayrshire College, Fife College and City of Glasgow College, Scotland

Flexible degree pathways provide progression opportunities from study at HNC and HND level and combine OU expertise in supported online learning with localised teaching and student support from college lecturers.

This model of partnership involves the delivery of a range of Social Sciences, History and Criminology modules, providing students with the opportunity to study towards a degree on a part time or full time basis depending on their own circumstances and needs. Students study predominantly online with support from the OU, but with the OU tutoring role being taken up by a subject specialist from the partner college.

This model of collaborative provision offers students who may not otherwise progress to degree level study with the opportunity to undertake a qualification with the OU. Continuity of support from college staff who teach HNC and HND programmes and the degree modules makes this model distinctive.

“Establishing a strong working relationship with the partner colleges has been critical to the success of this collaborative model, as it involves a high level of integration. Jointly developing processes for student recruitment and support and engaging in a reflective annual review process has been key to the success and development of this model.”

Widening participation through collaborative partnerships

Queen’s University Belfast and Stranmillis University College, with all six FE Regional Colleges, Northern Ireland

A 12 year consortium partnership has successfully delivered the Foundation degree in Early Childhood Studies as both full-time and part-time provision. Southern Regional College extended this collaborative arrangement with university partners in 2019 to validate the delivery of a BA Hons in Early Childhood Studies. This provides localised progression for existing Level 5 students, including through part-time evening courses that provide mature students, often with work and family commitments, the opportunity to study to degree level and access affordable high quality HE on their doorstep.

“This collaboration has been outstanding from the perspective of offering high quality Early Childhood qualifications to the wider college regional community. The programme has successfully empowered over 250 students to achieve their qualification and gain employment within their chosen sector.”

How colleges and universities are accelerating productivity

Co-delivering degree apprenticeships with defined roles

Gower College Swansea and Swansea University, Wales

The Digital Degree Apprenticeship, co-delivered by Swansea University and Gower College Swansea, underpins a long-term strategic vision to build well-established industry links.

Working in partnership with apprentices, employers and sector skills councils, the institutions responded to the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy by redesigning the existing foundation and articulation degrees at Swansea University into a three-year degree apprenticeship programme, focused on Applied Software Engineering.

The appointment of a full-time Employer Liaison Tutor by Gower College Swansea was instrumental in building greater understanding between college and university staff about what was expected and improved communication. Both delivery partners have clear and defined roles within the project and it is running extremely effectively. This has led to an even better experience for the apprentices and employers.

“This is an example of a strong collaborative partnership between the University and College and employers. The relationships between apprentices, College/University staff and employers is excellent.” QAA review team

Addressing the workforce needs of local SMEs

The Sheffield College, Sheffield Hallam University and the RNN Group, England

The Higher Skills Higher Growth (HSHG) project positively demonstrates how the collaboration between HE/FE impacts local businesses and charities. Since April 2021, the project has provided a single point of contact for SME businesses in the Sheffield City Region (SCR), offering a seamless, rapid, and effective engagement service for employers, students, and graduates.

SMEs and micro businesses are frequently challenged by limited resource, strategic planning capability and the ability to engage with innovation and manage change. Delivered in partnership by Sheffield Hallam University, The Sheffield College and the RNN Group, the project provides solutions to these challenges, whilst providing students and graduates with opportunities to gain meaningful and valuable employer led work experiences, designed to further support the development of long-term robust economic partnerships in the region.

As well as supporting SME business, the project also supports local charities. The Cathedral Archers Project, which helps the homeless achieve a better life, suffered an arson attack which destroyed the charity's interior building. The project provided trade students to reconstruct the building back to its former state.

Student Lucas Hodgkins, 19, who is studying a Carpentry and Joinery Level 2 qualification, said: “I worked alongside Wates to put up polystyrene roof tiles by cutting them down to size and fitting them. As a result, I feel like my communication skills and working with others has improved. After I finish college, I plan to go into carpentry and joinery full-time doing something like kitchen fitting or furniture making because those are the things that I enjoy the most.”

In the first year the project has successfully facilitated business growth and change to almost 100 SMEs. A further 500 businesses and 800 students across the region will be supported throughout the project's lifetime.

Data driven innovation programme to deliver a pipeline of skills

Colleges and universities across Edinburgh City Region, Scotland

The Data Driven Innovation (DDI) skills programme aims to develop a strategic approach to increasing the data skills of the city region population, regardless of gender, background or location. It brings together industry, universities, colleges, schools and other partners to help develop an integrated pipeline of skills development and progression routes into data careers. Partners include:

- City of Edinburgh Council
- Edinburgh College
- Edinburgh Napier University
- Fife College
- Heriot Watt University
- Scottish Borders College
- University of Edinburgh
- West Lothian College

Typical paths into data-related roles rely on the traditional HE route, which is currently not delivering the number or diversity of qualified people required to fill the growing regional and national demand. The Data Education in Colleges team works closely with the Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) to develop a Data Science curriculum from level 4 to 9), delivering consistency in skills, knowledge and understanding for both pupils at school and those entering college or parallel learning pathways and progressing to HE.

How colleges and universities are accelerating productivity *(cont.)*

Cross college and university collaboration to better connect with businesses

Grŵp Llandrillo Menai (GLIM) and The Management Centre at Bangor University, Wales

This Partnership between GLIM and Bangor University offers a suite of professional training qualifications from Team Leader (level 2) to Executive (Level 7).

The partnership has enabled access to funded support for businesses as well as the capability to deliver face to face training across a wider geographic area. This in part is due to the extensive network of FE facilities within the region, which also includes Coleg Cambria.

“There was a culture of interdependence on funding by the business community which presented an initial challenge in attracting students due to affordability.... The harnessing of £18.7 million Skills for Employers and Employees (SEE) funding has served to strengthen and provide a sustainable business model.”

Supporting pre-employment – an intensive training course partnership

North West Regional College & Ulster University, Northern Ireland

The North West Assured Skills Academy with FinTrU is a four-week intensive training course delivered online by North West Regional College and Ulster University to develop core skills for the business services sector. The training covers areas including compliance, risk, legal, operations, Know Your Customer and consultancy. Participants who complete the training are guaranteed an interview for a role at FinTrU’s NW Centre of Excellence.

The courses, which are fully funded by the Department for the Economy, have supported more than 300 individuals, primarily from the North-West region of Northern Ireland, into full-time employment, with plans for a further 400 over the next three years. As well as benefiting the individual, these routes into employment boost the economy, provide opportunities for local talent and attract talent back into the region, and encourage more companies to invest in the region.

“Following guidance from the NI Executive during the Covid-19 pandemic, teaching and learning moved online. The academy content had to be re-developed and adapted to ensure engagement with the students and to achieve the desired outcome of a quality, work-ready candidate at the end of the programme. This model has proved very effective in terms of reaching FinTrU’s growth plans for employment.”

Collaboration through strategic partnership agreements for subregional economic recovery

Big South London, England

Launched in January 2021, the Big South London partnership brings together local colleges and universities for the benefit and economic recovery of local businesses and communities across five boroughs. The collaboration is focused on stimulating knowledge-based growth through business start-up or expansion, improved productivity, and the creation of high-quality jobs. In Autumn 2021, the partners issued a joint statement in support of the Economic Recovery Plan for South London and launched an Innovation Support Programme. A consortium of partners, forged through relationships then established by the partnership and led by London South Bank University, bid successfully for £2.5 million from the European Social Fund (ESF) for Higher Level Skills delivery.

The next stage of work will look at cluster development, supply chain optimisation, funded accelerated Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) and establishing SME peer-to-peer innovation networks. A network of physical innovation hubs and co-workspaces will deliver further innovation support to the region’s business community.

“Partners are large and complex. We have a mantra – collaboration by default, competition where unavoidable. Whilst we are committed to exchanging information and insight and seeking opportunities for further collaboration, our partner institutions are independent institutions; this must be respected... Success will be when the ecosystem manages or fuels itself, and no longer requires facilitation, enabling or organisation.”

How colleges and universities are fostering sustainable, healthy and fair places

Delivering on regional priorities through a Catapult

Newcastle College Group (NCG) and Newcastle University, England

This partnership, formed in 2021, is committed to creating an ecosystem of a comprehensive, coherent education offer for the City of Newcastle, the North East region and beyond. It aims to improve the prosperity and well-being of people through high quality education and training, and working with industry, has jointly designed and co-constructed programmes to support regional economic development in areas such as Green Energy, Digital, Health and Mobility.

The partnership is working to:

- Develop a coherent education offer as a Catalyst for Economic Growth
- Raise aspirations by drawing on intellectual and local cultural capital
- Facilitate knowledge and skills exchange for employees in both organisations

Recently, the partnership has expanded to include the Offshore Renewable Energy Catapult (ORE Catapult) and Education Partnership North East.

“We celebrated the differences in our institutions. We addressed the thorny issue that often arises when universities and colleges collaborate: that this was not about competing in the same space to recruit students. Trust, respect and clear communication have helped nurture the partnership.”

Collaboration on national priority of Welsh language

Routes Cymru and Colleges Wales, Wales

Routes Cymru is a pan-Wales project funded by five Welsh universities, the regional education consortia in Wales and British Council Wales. The project operates as a two hub structure in Cardiff University and at Bangor University, with project coordinators based at both universities.

The project aims to raise the profile, visibility and uptake of languages among secondary and primary school pupils, by collaborating with ColegauCymru in training students who are studying Modern Languages for AS/A Level to become College Language Ambassadors. The Ambassadors provide support at events, and talk to school pupils about their language journeys and why they chose to study languages at FE.

Routes Cymru also offers A Level Masterclasses on films, novels and themes of the WJEC exam specifications in French, Spanish and German every year. The Ambassadors support the event and attend presentations by academics. Visiting universities provide networking opportunities with lecturers and undergraduate students.

“It’s a reciprocal scheme where the FE students themselves are given opportunities to develop their own personal skills with activities and opportunities that will make them stand out from the crowd. In turn, the Routes Cymru project benefits from the passion of these students for languages. The power of peer-to-peer engagement is key to our success.”

How colleges and universities are working in partnerships

Knowledge sharing and collaborating to increase research in FE

Cardiff University and Cardiff and Vale College, Wales

The Cardiff Q-Step Centre of Excellence in Quantitative Methods Teaching and Learning works closely with local schools and colleges to increase engagement with research methods among young people. Cardiff University, where the centre is based, and Cardiff and Vale College (CAVC) are working together to build research capacity within FE colleges, both for staff and for students.

Two initiatives are supporting this:

1. Research methods training for students who are completing the Extended Project Qualification in the college, delivered in workshops and supervisions (currently online) by PhD students from Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences.
2. Research methods training as CPD for teachers and professional service members of staff at the college to support action research projects in collaboration with academics.

Level 2 and 3 units in Social Analytics have been developed in partnership with Agored Cymru, the qualification body, and are delivered to staff and students in local schools and colleges. The ambition is that those staff members who have completed the units will be able to later deliver them in their own institution.

Partnership For Innovation and Engagement (Pie)

Multiple FE and HE institutions, Wales

This partnership brought together universities, colleges and industry in South Wales to create a regional cluster to support curriculum development and graduate employment, develop new cross-sector relationships, and to encourage new strategic joint projects.

Funded with £1.2 million from HEFCW, the partnership works to develop regional resources, expertise, resilience and industry engagement across the creative industries; compound and semiconductor projects; and design. These initiatives are also underpinned by two cross cutting themes of digital and part-time and flexible study.

As a result of the project, HE, FE and work-based learning have a more connected and a clearer offer, and there is now a mechanism in place for identifying and tackling gaps and changes in requirements. FE partners are connected with HE staff who are leading in their industry and academic field, and industry and HE are more aware of FE talent, expertise and how sectors can support and complement together.

“We were warned we would never get everyone to work together. The experience has been a lesson on the importance of travelling hopefully and purposefully.”

A new university campus and integrated progression pathways

Vision West Notts College (VWNC) & Nottingham Trent University (NTU), England

The partnership's vision is to transform education provision, skills development, and innovation within Mansfield and Ashfield, Nottinghamshire. The curriculum is designed and delivered in consultation with local employers to form integrated pathways from level 2 to level 7.

Nottingham Trent University delivers HE provision from the college campus in Mansfield: the NTU Mansfield Hub, which opened in September 2020. Only 15 miles from Nottingham, Mansfield is amongst the ten least socially mobile of the 324 local authority areas in Great Britain (Social Mobility Commission).

Alongside this, working with stakeholders, the NTU has co-created the Mansfield and Ashfield Development Programme. The programme and Skills Group has been established to work with local businesses, councils, schools and political leaders to improve educational attainment in schools. The programme has received funding from the Arts Council to develop a 'Culture Compact' with local partners to improve the cultural offering, and has developed other bids – including from the Future High Streets and Towns funds - for mutually supportive initiatives, such as those that contribute to economic prosperity and wellbeing.

“An initiative like the new campus demands long-term commitment, focus and opportunity cost. A clear vision and rationale for the programme is critical so that longer-term outcomes can motivate the more immediate inputs required.”

...The close commitment and involvement of senior leaders have been pivotal. Navigating the different infrastructures and political contexts of FE and HE has required considerable investment of time to make collaboration and joined-up provision effective.”

How colleges and universities are working in partnerships *(cont.)*

Creating a new tertiary provider

The College Merthyr Tydfil and University of South Wales, Wales

In 2006 Merthyr Tydfil College merged with the University of Glamorgan (now The University of South Wales), creating the impetus for a new tertiary provider: The College Merthyr Tydfil, in 2013. The unique partnership supported significant new provision for the town of Merthyr Tydfil and across the Heads of the Valleys and South East Wales.

For learners, this has led to:

- Increased choice and progression opportunities including to HE
- Participation in HE enrichment and taster activities
- Use of sports and and creative industry facilities
- New progression pathways across school, FE and HE.

The partnership has driven development of a more industry focused and relevant curriculum linked to regional skills priorities.

The merger resulted in increased financial stability through access to preferential funding arrangements for HE, access to HE purchasing consortia and the resulting economies of scale, and cost-savings.

“College staff can draw on a larger bank of skills, resources, development and progression opportunities...It has raised the college’s profile and engagement with external organisations, and paved the way for the new college and more joining up around sustainability and cyber.”

A place based partnership over 19 years

The University of Exeter and Exeter College, England

This partnership is both long-established and has a broad and ambitious scope. The University and College have in place a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), a Civic University Agreement (CUA), and a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT), and are both part of an Institute of Technology (IoT).

The MOU defines the ‘Level 6 and above’ focus of the university and the ‘Level 4 and below’ focus of the college. This is embedded in governance, senior leadership and operational delivery. The University and the College are co-sponsors of the Ted Wragg Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) and the Exeter Specialist Mathematics School.

The University is the lead academic organisation for the South West Institute of Technology (SWIoT), of which the College is one of the Founding Directors. The SWIoT delivers training in data, digital and advanced engineering across the region, with a ‘skills escalator’ approach and a mapping of skills from KS2 to Level 7, and Level 8 in data analytics, that enables the effective management of resources around workforce skills’ gaps.

“A true partnership takes time, effort, trust and mutual respect... Colleges and universities are different, with different complementary areas of expertise: play to your strengths; what you don’t do can be just as important as the things you do, do.”

Training international students in a strategic partnership with an employer

Forth Valley College and Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU), Scotland

The BP Mauritania and Senegal National Apprentice Technician Training Programme is a collaborative project between Forth Valley College and Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU), who are working in strategic partnership with BP. The programme aims to develop and prepare technicians in the production, mechanical, instrumentation and electrical fields to work safely, efficiently and compliantly on project facilities in the west African nations by attaining internationally recognised, accredited qualifications.

The apprentices on the international training programme will become qualified to work on the Greater Tortue/Ahmeyim (GTA) Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project on the maritime border of Mauritania and Senegal, where BP is the operator. The apprentices are registered students of FVC and study a range of oil and gas specific HNC qualifications within the college’s specialised lab and simulator environment. They are also taking a Project Management programme with GCU to complete their UK stay.

“The collaboration between GCU’s Institute for University to Business Education’s and FVC brings together the capability and capacity to win multi-million pound international contracts that showcase the knowledge and skills available in the UK.”

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