



Delivering a joined-up post-16 skills system

October 2025

Foreword

When the Association of Colleges (AoC) and Universities UK (UUK) started working together on this report in the early summer we believed it was an important and emerging area of policy for the government, but after the prime minister's speech at Labour Party conference we are absolutely certain it is.

The prime minister's new ambition, for two thirds of young people to study to higher level – whether undertaking degrees, higher technical qualifications or apprenticeships – by the age of 25, seems to represent a genuine paradigm shift in how we approach education and skills. It is without question the right ambition and it sets a challenge to colleges and universities to think about their roles in delivering on it. Our aim is that the thinking is joined up, with colleges and universities working together to help achieve the target.

Colleges and universities have been working together for decades in many ways, in response often to local and particular needs and opportunities. So we are not starting from a blank sheet with this work, but it is important to recognise the competitive and challenging environment in which colleges and universities find themselves. Those challenges should make us all think about how institutions can work better together, rather than to slip into defensive and competitive behaviours.

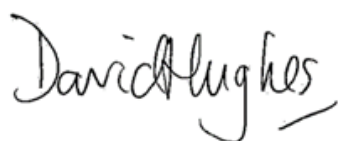
We wanted to think particularly about the opportunities; about the ways in which stronger partnerships could be of mutual benefit to the colleges and universities themselves, whilst also improving the learning on offer and the support for employers. In doing that, of course, colleges and universities will be delivering more on economic growth, opportunity and a more inclusive society.

This report builds on discussions we've held with a small group of college and university leaders (appendix one), and draws on a small number of case studies across the country (appendix two). But it really builds on a conversation many have been having across the sector for some time; and there are many dozens of additional case studies we could have chosen. In the report, we make recommendations for how the post-16 system could develop to bring colleges and universities more closely together, and we hope to see some of these proposals reflected in the upcoming Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper, and the subsequent discussions and reforms that will follow. We know this agenda is one

this government stands behind, and we are publishing this report as a contribution as to what this could entail.

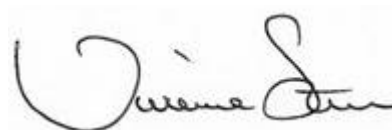
But this report is also a challenge to ourselves – as AoC and UUK, and as college and university leaders across the country – not to wait for someone in Whitehall to act, but to take leadership locally and reflect on the ways in which colleges and universities across the country and build on and strengthen the way they work together to have great impact. There are outstanding practices across the country, but every college and university could be doing more – whether exploring the collective engagement with employers, key to boosting productivity; working collectively on local skills planning, agreeing points of complementarity and redressing unproductive competition; or exploring the wider civic role as anchor institutions, playing a big role in the green transition, public health or community building. This is an area where policymakers and local leaders both need to stand up and think boldly about what more we can do.

As AoC and UUK, we take this challenge on ourselves. We commit in this report to continuing to convene a joint group of college and university leaders to focus on three key topics over the coming year. But we are committed more generally to playing our full role in thinking differently about where and how we might work together as colleges and universities within a post-16 system – delivering on the prime minister’s ambition, and unlocking our full potential as a system for people, employers and communities across the country.



David Hughes CBE

Chief Executive, Association of Colleges



Vivienne Stern MBE

Chief Executive, Universities UK

Background

At this year's Labour Party conference, the Prime Minister set out a renewed national ambition: for two-thirds of young people to have a higher-level qualification (Level 4 and above) by the age of 25, whether through a degree, higher technical qualification or apprenticeship. This could represent a paradigm shift in our national approach to education and skills – with a significant expansion in the number of people with higher level education and training begging the question of how we engage more people and employers in the system, and the pathways that will enable this. Ultimately, this requires universities and colleges coming together to reflect on how we can work in partnership, and within a national system, to make this a reality. With an upcoming Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper, there is a unique opportunity to explore what this might entail, and crucially the role universities and colleges can play in making this happen on the ground.

The case for stronger collaboration and partnership working between universities and colleges in England is not new. In recent years, numerous reviews and policy reports have argued for precisely that. The argument across these many reports is that high levels of competition and limited coordination undermine the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of the education and skills system¹. In response, UUK and the AoC brought together university and college leaders to develop principles-based recommendations for stronger partnership working between colleges and universities in England. This report explores the opportunities that a better coordinated and more coherent system can offer, including delivering on the government's stated ambition to expand access to higher level education and training. The report draws on case studies of good practice in college-university partnership working from across England and puts forward proposals for policymakers and sector leaders to drive forward this important agenda. The scope of the report is England only – although, there are similar trends occurring across the devolved UK nations, and internationally too, which are worthy of attention.

¹ e.g. [Social Market Foundation 2021](#); [Independent Commission on the College-Sheffield Hallam University 2021](#); [Association of Colleges 2024](#); [Universities UK 2024](#); [SKOPE 2025](#)

Context

The myriad of long-standing global trends facing the country – including demographic shifts and the rise of AI – invite reflection on how different parts of our education and skills system work together. Addressing poor coordination in the English post-16 education and skills system is clearly a priority of this Labour government. Recent policy developments have underscored commitments to strengthen coherence and coordination across the system – an ambition we see reflected across the devolved UK nations, and further afield.

Skills England has been established to bring together local and national skills partners to address skills mismatches, with investment targeted towards the eight priority sectors identified in the Industrial Strategy. The English Devolution White Paper sets out how local regions will be given greater powers to shape and deliver skills priorities, with a stronger relationship between skills and regional growth. The recent transfer of post-19 adult education and skills (but not higher education) to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)- with the Skills Minister sitting across DWP and DfE- suggests that government is thinking about ways to strengthen the join-up between skills, welfare and employment policies. This builds on a longer-term trajectory and policies of the former Conservative government such as the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) and establishment of Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs)- both of which remain critical elements of the Labour government's reform agenda.

This agenda comes into even sharper focus given the prime minister's party conference announcement that two-thirds of the population should have a higher-level qualification by the age of 25, whether through a degree, higher technical qualification or an apprenticeship. We see an enormous collective opportunity at the heart of the government's participation commitment- to explore how we extend and deepen access for a wider group of young people and adults; and to develop and amplify the wider role we play as a strategic partner and service to employers and as key anchor institutions within our communities.

Crucially, this ambition will require ensuring young people have clear, accessible pathways into a range of opportunities across higher level (L4+) education. It will require driving employer investment through increasing apprenticeship oppor-

tunities across all levels and ensuring high-quality provision right across our regional and national systems. Stronger coordination and collaboration between universities and colleges at a local level is essential to achieving this ambition.

Taken together, this invites questions around transformation and efficiency within the system (eg UUK 2025, ‘Transformation and efficiency’, AoC 2024, ‘100 per cent opportunity’²), and the relationship between universities and colleges. At the centre of this report are questions around how we can operate collectively to drive transformation and create a sustainable, resilient skills system on the one hand, and maximise opportunities to deliver on the government’s ambitions on the other.

Unlocking this agenda requires significant policy reform, and this report makes a series of recommendations as a contribution to this agenda. However, alongside policy reform, the leadership of universities and colleges is pivotal to driving collaboration, alongside the sector stewardship of the AoC and UUK. We conclude this report with a commitment to work together as AoC and UUK to take this agenda forward, with a focus on policy development and delivery.

Speaking at AoC Annual Conference in November 2024, the Skills Minister, Baroness Smith, set out three key shifts in approach to our post-16 education and skills system which reforms which seek to secure – towards a more coordinated and coherent system:

- From sidelined to supported: to move from a system where some people have been sidelined without the skills they need, to one where all people have the opportunity and support necessary to learn, in order to thrive in work and life.
- From competition to coordination: to move from a system where a hands-off approach to competition has led to inefficient outcomes, to one where skills partners work together, with Skills England at its heart, as part of a coordinated approach to address skills gaps at a local, national and sectoral level.
- From fragmented to coherent: to move from a fragmented system which can be confusing for learners and employers, to one where education and training is joined-up; meets a high standard; directly supports individuals to get a job or to progress in education and training; is easy for employers to access; and focuses public investment in skills where there is market failure.

² [UUK \(2025\) ‘Transformation and Efficiency’](#); [AoC \(2024\) ‘100 per cent opportunity: the case for a tertiary education system’](#)

Writing to higher education leaders in autumn 2024, the Education Secretary set out five reform priorities for higher education providers – reflecting a set of ambitions about the role providers should seek to play, working with others:

- Play a stronger role in expanding access and improving outcomes for disadvantaged students
- Make a stronger contribution to economic growth
- Play a greater civic role in their communities
- Raise the bar further on teaching standards, to maintain and improve our world-leading reputation and drive out poor practice
- Underpinning all of this needs to sit a sustained efficiency and reform programme

1. What is the opportunity?

Universities and colleges are integral to the prosperity of their local communities, regions and the country. They power economic growth, equip learners with opportunities for a more prosperous and fulfilling life, and drive social mobility – indeed, they play a role across many of our knottiest public policy challenges. Deeper collaboration and partnership between colleges and universities presents further opportunities for regional economies and for learners, through flexible skills pathways, enhanced employability, and lifelong learning.

There are many examples of strong partnership working between colleges and universities across England, all of which – in their different ways – highlight the benefits of collaboration. These benefits include:

- Extending access to a broader range of young people and adults into education and training. This might deliver on the PM’s target to open up higher level education and training to at least two thirds of young people by 2040 – alongside playing a more active role in retraining and upskilling adults.
- Making it easier for people to progress through the education and the skills system, reflecting changes in the world of work, and changes in people’s expectations and aspirations.
- Strengthening the role colleges and universities can play collectively in driving regional growth and meeting skills needs – which ultimately

involves developing the collective service we make for employers, both nationally and regionally. This can be a key tool for driving greater employer investment into the system too.

- Deepening their role within local communities, such as in improving health outcomes, in place-making or driving the green transition.

2. What are the barriers to collaboration?

While welcoming the ambition to strengthen coherence and coordination across the post-16 education and skills system, it is important to recognise that there are a number of barriers to collaboration between universities and colleges which disincentivise or impede partnership working. Engagement with members of UUK and AoC in a series of roundtables to develop this report revealed the following key challenges- many of which reflect and build upon the findings of a joint report from the Independent Commission on the College of the Future and the Civic University Network/ Sheffield Hallam University in 2023.³

Competitive environment

Both further and higher education provision are shaped by a highly marketised and competitive environment, which has been encouraged by the long-standing approach to policy and regulation. In a system in which funding is driven by student demand, clear disincentives to collaboration are created. College-based higher education represents around 5-6% of overall HE in England with 11 colleges holding their own degree awarding powers. Universities meanwhile deliver over half of both level 4 and 5 provision (not including apprenticeships) and act as the awarding body in 60% of Higher Technical Qualifications. The diversity of the sector is a great strength, but it can mean that there is a significant overlap of provision between local providers, which without careful management can heighten unproductive competition. This is particularly so in light of the funding pressures facing the sector.

³ [Going Further and Higher: How collaboration between colleges and universities can transform lives and places - Civic University Network, 2023](#)

Funding pressures across the system

16-19 college funding is down by nearly a quarter since 2010, while adult skills funding is down by nearly half over the same period. Meanwhile, the real-terms value of teaching funding – from both tuition fees and the government teaching grant – has fallen by 32% since 2015/16, with funding to support the delivery of highest-cost subjects having fallen by 18.4% since 2018/19. Pressures on expenditure for both colleges and universities have increased markedly due to short-term economic shocks, causing spikes in inflation, alongside more sector-specific pressures. For both colleges and universities, a consequence of this financial picture has been to accelerate and accentuate the competitive environment that they operate within. The potential for the decline in the number of 18-year-olds post 2030 is likely to exacerbate this financial picture.⁴ These funding pressures act to increase competitive behaviours, but also reduce capacity for collaborative working, and can lead government and regulators to be occupied with shorter term challenges and managing financial instability.

Limited institutional capacity to focus on building new partnerships

Funding pressures, and the wider approach to funding, can mean that partnership working receives insufficient strategic focus, commitment and funding, and becomes focussed on short-term or transactional work rather than deeper strategic collaboration. Meanwhile, there can be a general lack of trust across the system – again reflecting the environment in which colleges and universities operate, which often drives a focus on institutional health or indeed survival, rather than opportunities for the wider system.

Regulatory challenges

Both further and higher education providers are subject to the requirements of multiple regulators and at a course-level, the requirements of professional statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). The differences in oversight, and lack of alignment across the further and higher education systems can result in overlapping and duplicative burdens for providers (for example, the role of both the Office for Students [OfS] and Ofsted in assessing the quality of higher and degree apprenticeships, rather than something more streamlined). This often

⁴ [The number of young adults in Britain is about to rise sharply](#)

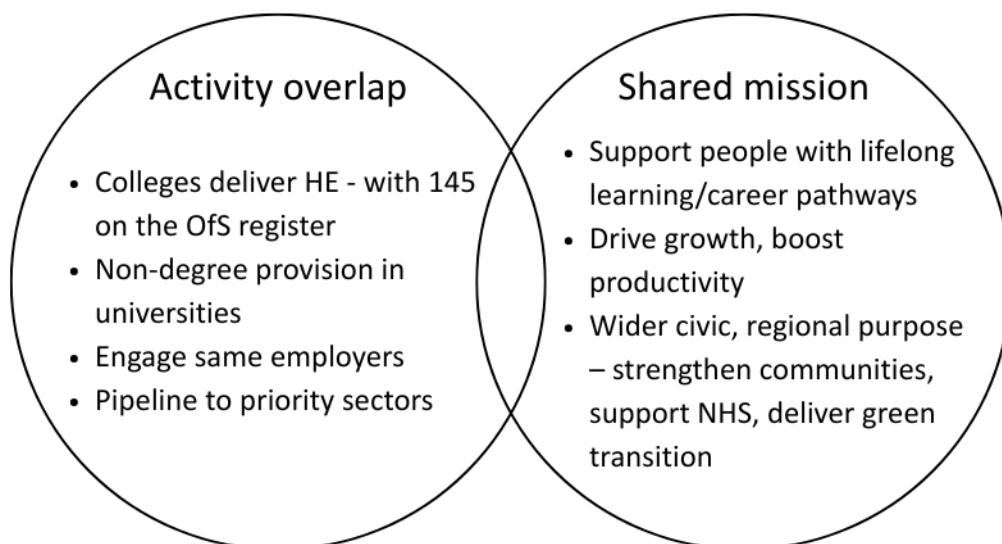
means that the roles that different parts of the system play are poorly defined, and while diversity needs to be protected, the current arrangement inhibits coordination and collaboration. Where there is a continued lack of clarity on regulatory expectations, for example the lessons to be learned from the outcomes of investigations and what constitutes an acceptable provider response, it can also encourage risk-averse behaviours. To support collaboration, the regulatory environment needs to be an enabler of innovation. Providers need to be confident they will not face sanctions for doing things differently.

A short-term, often disjointed approach to policy-making

Policy making across FE and HE has historically suffered from poor coordination, and can appear piecemeal and overly focussed on addressing immediate challenges above securing longer term stability. This of course in large part reflects political cycles and change, and the scale of pressures facing the system. The Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper offers an important opportunity therefore for a clear and confident statement of the long-term ambitions for the system.

Figure 1

Colleges and universities



3. Principles of good collaboration

As demonstrated by these case studies there are common principles underpinning effective collaboration between universities and colleges. The

following key principles should guide universities, colleges and the government to enable effective partnership working across the further and higher education sectors:

Learner focused

There should be a strong focus on coherence and flexibility throughout a learner's lifetime. This requires clear, navigable routes through different qualification options and levels, straightforward access to funding, and greater flexibility and choice for learners. Learners should receive high-quality information, advice and guidance to support them to navigate skills pathways and to stimulate student demand aligned with employer need. This also means ensuring that funding and accountability enable institutions to focus on what is best for learners and the systems within which they operate. Breaking barriers to access for younger learners will continue to be fundamental, alongside a growing focus on engaging adults in education and training throughout their lives.

Flexible and responsive

Lifelong learning must evolve quickly to respond to the workforce needs of a growth economy. Qualifications must remain relevant and flexible, and providers receptive to recognising prior achievement so students can progress coherently from their previous qualifications to new learning.

Driving local/regional economic growth and labour markets

To help close skills gaps, post-16 providers should be empowered and expected to work together to meet local needs – both co-designing and delivering on local growth plans (LGPs) and local skills improvement plans (LSIPs). This will need support from national frameworks such as the Industrial Strategy and the work of Skills England that provide direction for the development of tertiary partnerships and innovations regionally – but which allows for local/regional design, reflecting the particularities of a place and ongoing devolution agenda.

Incentivised by policy

Policy should focus on incentivising and facilitating closer working and collaboration between universities and colleges rather than only encouraging

competition. This should be focussed on encouraging and facilitating bottom-up models of collaboration, whilst recognising the need for supportive national policy.

Supported by regulation

Regulation should be proportionate and create mechanisms to support partnerships between universities and colleges- for instance, via the OfS' proposals to support regional access partnerships encouraging universities and colleges to collaborate in their outreach work. The OfS also needs to minimise the regulatory burden it places on providers, and only introduce regulation where the public benefits are clear and costs are justified. This can be achieved through the development and adoption of a consultative cost-benefit methodology to assess its impact. There also needs to be closer working arrangements between all relevant regulators and government departments to consider the cross-cutting implications of their respective sector-oriented expectations for other policy objectives and the overall regulatory environment.

Diverse and distinct

The valuable diversity of the further and higher education sectors should be protected and encouraged. It will be important to avoid a universal approach and instead to encourage and celebrate diversity and specialisation, allowing all parts of the sector to flourish, including across education, research and innovation. It is argued in this report that a more collaborative and coordinated approach to the post-16 system will enable greater diversity to flourish.

Value for money

Policies must improve efficiency and extract maximum value from public funds without creating unnecessarily regulatory complexity.

4. Recommendations

The government's post-16 education and skills agenda presents several policy opportunities to apply these six principles and remove barriers to collaboration, innovation and partnership between colleges and universities within the wider system. Beyond systems change, there is a great deal that colleges and

universities can and should be doing together to deepen their collective impact, nationally and regionally.

Skills England

Skills England presents clear opportunities to create a more coherent, flexible and learner-focused skills system and supportive policy environment for university-college collaboration.

The ongoing devolution agenda and related skills reforms (in LSIPs, Local Growth Plans and local Get Britain Working Plans) will require strong oversight and coordination. This comes into even sharper focus in light of the government's commitment to increase participation in higher education through diverse pathways, which will require both a line of sight into our national and regional skills needs, and oversight of the capacity of the post-16 education and skills system to deliver on this, in a coherent and effective manner.

Recommendations:

1. Skills England should review and articulate the capacity of the post-16 education and skills system to deliver on our national and regional skills needs – including identifying barriers and making recommendations for action.
 - a. This should include describing:
 - i. funding challenges (where the cost of delivery is out of step with available funding, or where demand needs to be grown over time);
 - ii. coordination challenges (where excessive competition and poor alignment drives inefficiencies in the system); and
 - iii. demand-side challenges (where employers are not recruiting in emerging sectors, or where pay, conditions and progression opportunities are impeding demand from learners).
 - b. The national assessment of both skills needs and barriers to delivery must reflect local/regional intelligence – building a strong two-way dialogue between national and local perspectives.
2. The relationship between Skills England, the OfS and MSAs is critical and will require clear articulation:

- a. Skills England and the OfS should work together to map out how their existing work supports and incentivises the role universities and colleges are able to play in meeting local and national skills needs.
- b. To ensure Skills England can engage with universities and colleges across all regions of the country, effective regional mechanisms for engagement must be established. Given the significant role that MSAs will play in bringing together local skills partners, equivalent structures must be put in place in regions where MSAs do not currently exist.

Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs)

To fuel sustainable economic growth and widen participation, we need strong, place-based networks that ensure that local skills priorities, alongside wider national priorities, are delivered on – including by reducing local competition, duplication and complexity. Close collaboration between universities and colleges as part of an integrated approach to the delivery of LSIPs – alongside other skills plans and the Industrial Strategy – will enable skills provision to be responsive to both employer needs and long-term economic ambitions, including helping regions to build skills pipelines for the 'IS8' priority sectors.

Currently LSIPs go some way to identifying and addressing local skills priorities, but can be too limited in their focus, and engagement with universities is variable. It is proposed that the role of universities within LSIPs should be strengthened – from working with employers, colleges, the MSAs and others to identify future skills needs within their localities. LSIPs can moreover galvanise a much more coordinated wider service to employers regionally – with colleges and universities working together to ensure 'no wrong door' to employers seeking to engage with the education and skills systems, and a more active collective role as a service to employers, supporting innovation and business change.

An evolving approach to local skills improvement plans (LSIPs) presents an opportunity for providers to be more regionally engaged whilst preserving the diversity of their skills offer- ensuring that local skills planning reflects economic needs and labour market priorities and strengthening regional coordination and coherence of the system.

Recommendations:

1. Colleges and universities should be central to the LSIP process, as key strategic partners as well as delivery organisations.
 - a. Universities, colleges and other relevant providers should have a central role in informing, rather than just delivering, the plan – drawing on their understanding of local skills needs and the wider regional economy, and interpreting the articulated priorities of employers.
 - b. Universities, colleges and other providers should have a role in describing wider demand-side challenges which require consideration – including terms of learner demand to study/train in certain areas (which might relate to employment conditions, progression opportunities, pay etc). This will provide a more complete understanding of both the skills needs, and barriers to delivering on them.
2. Government should clarify the statutory role of colleges, universities and other providers in delivering on LSIPs, both as individual institutions, and as a collective in order to in deliver regional needs.
 - a. LSIPs should enable colleges, universities and other providers to work collectively on a response to priorities identified – exploring where there are gaps and bringing stakeholders together to develop coordinated responses.
 - b. This must feed into Skills England, for them to aggregate and use to make recommendations to policy-makers across government.
 - c. There is a role for the MSA (where it exists) and Skills England, as those with oversight across the regional and national system, to engage leaders where they feel these responsibilities are not being undertaken effectively.
 - d. Where MSAs do not exist, alternative routes for engagement should be established, and we will need to ensure that they feed into Skills England on equal terms with MSAs in order to avoid a ‘two tier’ system for devolved and non-devolved regions.

3. LSIPs should seek to develop the wider role universities and colleges can play as a collective service to employers – including in innovation and knowledge transfer.
 - a. Moving beyond skills supply, LSIPs and local growth plans present an opportunity to strengthen the way in which colleges and universities work collectively as a regional service to employers, across business change and innovation. This should become something that colleges and universities review collectively, as part of the LSIP process.
 - b. Government should recognise and seek to develop the role that colleges and universities play in innovation and knowledge transfer – including through expanding and aligning innovation funding streams such as the FEIF pilot and the HEIF, which are critical to developing and retaining the agile capacity needed for universities to support local economic development, inclusive growth, and the delivery of the Industrial Strategy. Every £1 invested in the HEIF returns £10.10⁵ and aligning this more strongly to the role colleges play in engaging employers could extend this further still.

Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE)

The LLE can play a powerful role in addressing the twin challenges of meeting skills needs and expanding opportunity to a broader range of learners. If successful, it could enable learners to move between different providers of post-18 education, building a portfolio of qualifications that suit their ambitions and meet workforce needs. The new ambition to expand access to L4+ qualification underscores the need for a purposeful use of the LLE- focussed on emerging sectors people who would not otherwise participate in higher level education and training.

Ultimately, the LLE presents an opportunity to create a more flexible and learner-focused system that ensures value for money for both learners and employers. This will be key to driving growth in higher technical provision – as the ‘missing middle’ in the post-18 system, and will work best where delivered in a place-based manner, responding to both local and national skills. There is notable overlap between the purpose of the LLE and the Growth and Skills Levy.

⁵ [Reports Confirm High Returns for Investment in Knowledge Exchange - Knowledge Exchange UK](#)

Closer alignment of these policies, and enabling employers to fund LLE-approved modules presents an opportunity to open up new opportunities for people of all ages, whilst stimulating employer investment too.

Recommendations:

1. The LLE roll-out should be driven in line with the local growth plan (LGP) and LSIP – ensuring a direct link to their local/ regional labour market.
 - a. Roll-out of the LLE should be developed in line with the priorities established in the relevant local growth plan (LGP) and LSIP, where appropriate.
 - b. The LSIP geography also enables a vehicle for agreeing a collective plan for delivery, with both an explicit link to regional labour markets, and avoiding the risk of duplication or unproductive competition across providers.
2. Employer funding of LLE-approved modules via the Growth and Skills Levy should be enabled to maximise the benefits of these funding streams for people, employers and providers.
 - a. Government should work with AoC and UUK to develop an LLE-Growth and Skills Levy framework, in order that employer and individuals can co-invest in their learning in a joined-up manner, and that providers are clear on what they are able to fund.
 - b. A joint LLE-GSL framework should in turn allow for consideration of the content of provision, and pathways between the two programmes. Ultimately, this will enable an individual's education to be flexibly funded by themselves or their employer across their lifetime – which is particularly important in sectors with strong employer demand, but weak learner demand.
 - c. At a regional level, modular provision via the LLE and the GSL should be aligned via the LSIP, with a high-level collective plan across providers.
 - d. AoC and UUK will work together to both make further recommendations for national policy in terms of the relationship between the LLE modular provision and GSL, and in proposals for the regional delivery of these distinct but related funding streams.

College and university leadership

As key anchor institutions at the heart of towns and cities across the country, colleges and universities have a key role to play right across the government's five missions. The civic role of universities and colleges within their communities and beyond is a cornerstone for delivering local economic growth, developing key skills, creating vibrant and attractive places, and serving local community needs. Devolution in England will create increased opportunities for collaboration to enhance local growth and impact at a local level. This is a big opportunity for colleges and universities to play a leadership role in the delivery of this agenda.

The government's missions provide a valuable framework upon which to strengthen the wider role colleges and universities can have, being both regionally engaged and leading actively on some of our most challenging public policy issues.

Recommendations:

1. Universities and colleges should work to play their full role as anchor institutions, including in delivering locally, regionally and nationally across the government's five missions.
 - a. Where they exist, universities and colleges should review their Civic University Arrangements and Civic Strategies to embed the collective role that both colleges and universities play across the government's priority missions. This should include efforts to improve public health for students, staff and the wider local community (the health mission), to deliver the green transition (the green energy mission) and to foster stronger communities (the safer streets mission).
 - b. This, we propose, is principally an area for local leadership – but can be supported by national government and MSAs but ensuring that colleges and universities are proactively engaged in relevant local/ regional and national strategies (eg Neighbourhood Health Plans, Police and Crime/ Community Policing Plans, etc).
2. Universities and colleges should collaborate to ensure that all regions of the UK contribute to the Industrial Strategy, sector plans and skills pipelines

ensuring opportunities reach all communities including those that have yet to form a Mayoral Strategic Authority.

- a. Collaborative approaches between universities and colleges should be enabled and incentivised through improving regulation to remove requirements for duplicate reporting to different regulators.

Next steps

AoC and UUK are committed, working with their members across the country, to take forward this agenda – reflecting the principles and recommendations establishing in this report. We will be convening a group of college principals and university vice-chancellors, with a focus on three specific areas for the coming year:

- i. To seek policy alignment and help design delivery (including locally/regionally) of the LLE and the GSL; and measures set out in the forthcoming Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper.
- ii. To identify opportunities to deepen alignment across local plans/strategies, including through local growth plans, LSIPs and local Get Britain Working Plans – again, both at both a policy and delivery level.
- iii. To explore the role of local leadership and governance in enabling stronger partnership working.

Appendix one – Contributors

This report was supported and informed by contributions from college and university leaders across two meetings in July and September 2025.

- Andrew Broadbent, Principal and CEO, New College Durham
- Professor Andrew Gower, Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive, Lincoln Bishop University
- Anna Dawe, Principal and CEO, Wigan and Leigh College
- Professor Claire Taylor, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, Plymouth Marjon University
- Professor Emma Hunt, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, Falmouth University
- Gary Headland DL, CEO, Activate Learning
- Jerry White, Principal and CEO, City College Norwich
- Jon Ridley, Principal, Newcastle College
- John Laramy CBE, Principal and CEO, Exeter College
- Professor Malcolm Press CBE DL, Vice-Chancellor, Manchester Metropolitan University and President, Universities UK
- Professor Martin Jones, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, University of Staffordshire
- Michelle Dowse, Principal and CEO, Heart of Worcester College
- Rachel Nicholls, Principal and CEO, Inspire Education Group
- Professor Dame Sally Mapstone DBE, Principal and Vice Chancellor, University of St Andrews
- Professor Tara Dean, Provost, London South Bank University

Appendix two – Case studies

Greater Manchester: first steps in realising the ambition for a regional tertiary system

Greater Manchester is working towards the development of a more integrated and aligned tertiary system, building on strong collaboration and partnerships developed through the Greater Manchester College Group, and the creation of the Manchester Civic University Agreement, with the aim and ambition of ensuring there are pathways to keep people in Greater Manchester and regional employment and skills needs are met. The focus on local pathways anticipates the impact of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement and aims to ensure an interconnectedness between institutions to support the development of skills with a coherent training and qualification offer throughout the region.

Several key principles are feeding into the creation of a collaborative system, which is made up several large and potentially competing institutions, including: breaking down cultural barriers and developing an understanding of context; creating a sustained approach to strategic planning; and effective use of data. It has been essential to understand the different types of provision within the system and a detailed understanding of the markets served, including the type and range of courses on offer, the context of the student body (for example one which serves local communities compared to one which recruits nationally and internationally), and the type of employer engagement (again, whether that is at a local or national level). For example, LTE Group, of which The Manchester College is part, has its own degree awarding powers with a focus on specialist provision in the creative arts and higher technical professions and often serves a different market to the regions HE institutions. By building cultural understanding, institutions in the areas can see they are meeting different education, training and employment needs, are less competitive and therefore specific points of collaboration and pathway opportunities can be found.

Integral to breaking down some of the cultural barriers have been specific projects linking providers to support the delivery of provision. An example of this is the employment of PhD students to teach in the region's FE colleges, mitigating against some of the staff recruitment challenges the FE sector faces and securing connections between HE and FE providers. Another project utilised

university lecturers to support curriculum design and delivery of T Levels in the FE sector leading to a deeper understanding of the qualifications, opening up opportunities for T Level students to study on degree programmes, and creating more coherency between programmes at different levels.

An increasingly systematic approach to data collection and sharing has also been instrumental in paving the foundation for the proposed tertiary system, with its focus on understanding progression of local students into the region's universities, and progression of students within the region post-studies.

London South Bank University Group: local integration of learning pathways

London South Bank University Group (LSBU Group) is a collection of like-minded specialist organisations – working together within a group structure to provide an alternative to institutional competition. The Group's institutions – London South Bank University (LSBU), South Bank Colleges (SBC) and South Bank Academies – provide educational pathways under a united academic framework, with combined professional services. In this way, the Group aims to provide a genuine choice for learners between technical, vocational and academic pathways, while at the same time focussing on the needs of individual students – ensuring each one can build the portfolio of skills, experience and qualifications they need to achieve their ambitions.

LSBU Group was created in 2019. The desire to create such a structure was driven from both sides. SBC's ambitions to merge with LSBU were formed during the central London area review process and in the context of financial difficulties and an FE Commissioner-led structural appraisal; while LSBU wished to complement its sponsorship of a multi academy trust with FE provision to create integrated local learning pathways that would extend its institutional mission to support access to opportunity and student success.

The merger was the culmination of almost three years' work with the Department for Education (DfE) as part of a national pilot which required both ministerial approval and secondary legislation. While a structure like LSBU Group is slower to develop than other forms of FE-HE collaboration, having a single chief executive (the LSBU Vice Chancellor) and integrated accounts means there

is no competition for resources, allowing for deeper, long-term structural integration, while also protecting the distinctiveness of each institution.

As a result of the merger, SBC has become cash generative (with a positive EBITDA), seen year-on-year improvements in its achievement rates, received its first Ofsted 'Good' grade since 2012 and has experienced 20%+ year-on-year growth in Level 3 recruitment. Utilising the expertise of LSBU's estates team has enabled SBC to undertake a master planning exercise that has supported the construction of a new technical college in Nine Elms (London South Bank Technical College), with over £100 million of funding derived from the Greater London Authority and DfE grants as well as land sale. The curriculum at London South Bank Technical College, which focuses on technical qualifications, has been designed to provide learning pathways that map onto LSBU's qualifications and are clearly aligned to professions.

By virtue of being a subsidiary, SBC is able to utilise LSBU's degree awarding powers, reducing their regulatory burden and enabling them to offer several Level 4 courses, successful completion of which guarantee advanced entry into the second year of the relevant LSBU bachelor's degree. At the same time, the course offering at Lambeth College has been refocused on 'gateway' provision – including essential skills, ESOL, SEND and adult education – to provide a key point of entry back into education for learners of all ages and support lifelong learning. This deliberate emphasis on essential skills provision has enabled SBC to outperform national achievement rates despite having the second lowest intake of students with grade 4 or above in Level 2 English and maths in England. LSBU has a well-established higher and degree apprenticeship offer with more than 3,000 apprentices enrolled across 29 standards. The creation of LSBU Group has enabled LSBU to further develop the relationships with its 2,000+ employer partners by providing a seamless 'all-through' training offer from Level 2 to Level 8.

The Group structure has enabled the integration of shared services and systems across large areas of the two institutions, which has supported academic units to focus on delivering outstanding teaching and learning outcomes.

Loughborough College and Loughborough University: creating an infrastructure for high quality student experience

Loughborough College and Loughborough University have a long-shared history, predominantly based both on the unique position of Loughborough as a national centre for elite sport and their joint origins in teaching practical engineering skills. The town's identity and infrastructure are now built around sport, and it has been integral to the development of the partnership between the two institutions. The college and the university have over 30 years' experience of partnership and collaboration through the university validating sport related degree courses at the college. The creation of the East Midlands Institute of Technology, along with University of Derby and the Derby College Group which is focused on engineering, digital and construction skills from Level 3 to postgraduate, and the creation of Careers and Enterprise Hub in the town, have also played a key role in serving the local community, increasing opportunity and supporting economic growth.

A formalised approach to the partnership has been underpinned by a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), ensuring there is a clear and coherent approach to their collaborative work to develop an educational ecosystem where the institutions can complement each other, rather than compete. The MoU highlights the importance of having shared values and messaging, a clear strategy for influencing and lobbying, and clarity round roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders. The MoU allows for sustained focus on what is important for the region and where the strength of the partnership lies – in this case the delivery of BSc (Hons) degrees and student participation in sport, and support for staff development. Strong systems are in place to ensure confidence in the partnership remains secure and a high trust environment between both institutions remains.

The MoU has led to the addition of degree programmes at the college, with engineering and business degrees now validated by the university alongside the sports offer, widening high quality opportunities for local, national and international students. The partnership has been instrumental in recruiting students to the area and widening participation onto degree level courses. The university and the college share a Student Union, allowing all students in the area to access clubs and participate in national sports competitions, widening

participation, particularly in elite level sport and ensuring parity in student experience. Equitable access to facilities such as libraries have also improved the experience of students within the area.

A clear and sharp focus on collaboration and partnership, based on a regional specialism, continues to be integral to raising the quality of the student experience in the town, supporting the community, and widening participation opportunities for local, national and international students.

Sheffield Hallam and South Yorkshire Colleges Partnership: a regional collaboration agreement

Driven by a firm belief that working closely together is the best way to develop a truly world class regional skills system, Sheffield Hallam University has signed a collaborative agreement with colleges across South Yorkshire to address regional skills challenges, including the provision of new Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs).

Driven by successes like the establishment of a South Yorkshire Institute of Technology (SYIoT), a 'regional collaboration agreement' was signed between the South Yorkshire Colleges Partnership and Sheffield Hallam, covering Barnsley College, DN Colleges Group, RNN Group, and The Sheffield College. Officially launched in January 2024, this collaboration has led to a more joined up local skills offer around HTQs.

The partnership has secured £1.3 million from the government's Higher Technical Education Skills Injection Fund, to support the delivery of HTQs across the region. Sheffield Hallam is now working with colleges to establish a consistent approach, clear pathways for learners, and economies of scale for future bids and projects to support HTQs. After discussions between partners, Sheffield Hallam has made entry tariff changes for HTQs to better match partner needs. Also, the University is collaborating on design and delivery of qualifications through joint 'deep dive' workshops into HTQ design that informs changes and new provision. For example, a HTQ Youth Practitioner has been co-designed through this method of development.

The collaborative agreement has allowed partners to better influence the University's overall offer, including developing improved progression pathways

for students. More generally, the agreement has meant that all partners have been able to work more collaboratively to find solutions to the developing regional skills need – making joint propositions that avoid duplication in what is a complex funding picture – for example, the Skills Injection Fund, SYIoT and Local Skills Improvement Fund.

Over the years, Sheffield Hallam has acted as a validation partner for college provision at an operational level and senior leaders across institutions have developed strong working relationships across local and regional skills and education boards. A clear institutional commitment to more formal and strategic relationships to develop trust and true collaboration, moving away from a short-term transactional approach enabled the partnership to be successful. Regionally, the establishment of a South Yorkshire Combined Authority and colleges coming together through a new South Yorkshire Colleges Partnership helped to promote collaboration. In parallel, the developing national policy picture meant that working together provided new opportunities to tackle regional skills challenges.

By putting collaboration at the heart of future developments in skills across the region, South Yorkshire is better placed to provide the skills that local students and employers will benefit from – driving economic growth and greater prosperity.

University of Exeter and Exeter College: Skills Escalator

The University of Exeter and Exeter College are working closely together to understand and respond to skills needs within the local economy via a ‘Skills Escalator’ model. The Skills Escalator approach has twin drivers – meeting the skills needs of local employers and growing local talent. The Skills Escalator seeks to build new inclusive pathways to learning, so learners can move seamlessly between providers.

Exeter is one of the UK’s fastest growing cities. However, like other relatively rural cities, it also suffers from low levels of progression to higher education, pockets of deprivation, a lack of social mobility and historically low levels of productivity. There are also skills gaps associated with sectors pivotal to economic success.

Skills Escalators are an innovative way of understanding skills provision within a smart specialisation sector – identified as being pivotal to both regional economic success and the provision of high-quality jobs for those living and working locally. The model was developed in a partnership between the University of Exeter, Exeter College and Exeter City Council following representation from local employers unable to source the right skills needed locally. It enables the FE and HE partners to target existing resource effectively and to identify and fill any gaps.

Data Analytics was chosen initially as a theme as Exeter is home to a globally significant cluster of Climate and Environment Scientists with both the University and MET Office located in the city who were struggling to recruit. Exeter is now home to a rapidly expanding Tech Cluster. The Data Analytics Skills Escalator- initially created in 2019/20- has recently been updated and further Escalators produced for green skills and social care. New provision across the Escalator themes has helped inform considerable new provision in both the College and University including facilities, infrastructure, new degree apprenticeships and more traditional academic qualifications. One outcome was to establish a Level 6 data scientist degree apprenticeship delivered by Exeter College in a validated degree arrangement with the University of Exeter.

The recent Green Skills Escalator identified that there is considerable local provision, but scope for more, particularly through:

- Skills Bootcamps
- Level 4/5
- Degree Apprenticeships
- Executive Education Programmes and Short Courses

The Skills Escalator approach also provides a very real and visible vehicle for engaging employers as the driving force in identifying curriculum developments, pathways and future skills needs.