

TALKING TERTIARY: HOW LONDON'S UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES ARE WORKING TOGETHER TO SUPPORT STUDENTS, EMPLOYERS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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- Mark Hilton, Policy Delivery Director, Membership at BusinessLDN
- David Hughes CBE, Chief Executive at the Association of Colleges
- Dr Josh Patel, Researcher at The Edge Foundation
- Professor Dave Phoenix OBE, Vice Chancellor of London South Bank University and CEO of LSBU Group
- Dr Sam Parrett CBE, Principal and CEO at London and South East Education Group

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This publication considers how we can best harness the potential of London's tertiary education sector in the context of the ever-increasing demand for highly skilled workers. Holistic, place-based approaches to bringing further education (FE) and higher education (HE) together provide opportunities to tackle skills needs and shortages from new angles, as illustrated by case studies from London South Bank University and Middlesex University London. These approaches could include joined-up approaches to widening participation and providing smoother transitions for learners moving between FE and HE.

There are several issues that must be addressed in order to make these collaborations successful. Firstly, the different funding circumstances of FE and HE students present challenges, so efforts to link up these areas of provision need to start with a plan for making the student funding situation work for both FE and HE students across London's boroughs. We can draw on examples of unified tertiary education systems in devolved administrations, for example new developments in Wales, to understand how these might be shaped.

These collaborations have the capacity to benefit both London's most disadvantaged residents and the businesses that power London's economy. FE-HE collaboration can make higher qualifications, and the many earning and wellbeing benefits that come with them, available to communities and demographic groups who might have struggled to access those opportunities in the past with further reach into groups that HE has historically struggled to engage. At the same time, it enables London's employers to identify and tackle skills shortages in equitable ways through the Local Skills Improvement Plans.

In the context of ever-increasing numbers of 18-year-old Londoners and a greater appetite for post-18 study across the population, there is an urgent need to adapt the regulatory systems we have across higher and further education to enable both universities and colleges to keep doing excellent work in harmony with each other, and for place-based approaches to acknowledge the strength and diversity of different UK regions approaching this issue.

FOREWORD

This foreword has been written by Dr Diana Beech, Chief Executive Officer at London Higher.

As the need to fill skills and labour shortages rises ever higher up the political agenda, it is clear that more post-18 education is the solution to the nation's biggest challenges, not less.

While London may be thought of as being well-served in this respect compared to other regions – with over 50 higher education (HE) institutions, 30 further education (FE) colleges and a high progression rate into tertiary education – the capital's nine-million-strong population is growing rapidly, and London's policymakers still face the conundrum of addressing multiple inequalities within the city while better matching training provision to employer demand.

Although London benefits from a highly developed skills infrastructure, the challenge for the capital now is twofold: first, working out how to get it operating more efficiently to meet the region's high-level skills needs and, second, futureproofing it for the expected bulge in demand for tertiary education that lies ahead. After all, [research by the Higher Education Policy Institute \(HEPI\)](#) found that London's under-18 domestic population is not only set to grow year-on-year for at least the next decade, but that 40% of the total 365,000 new full-time undergraduate places that are anticipated to be required in England by 2035 will need to be in London and the South-East just to accommodate the regions' rapidly rising population and impressive participation rates.

The demand from London's employers for highly-skilled workers also shows no signs of abating. [A survey of London's employers conducted for Universities UK](#) into the value of going to university found that almost eight in 10 business leaders in Greater London (78%) believe that going to university enables graduates to build crucial transferable skills and serves as an essential training ground for industry, while a staggering 97% of London's business leaders revealed that graduates reach managerial positions faster purely as a result of them having gone to university. With high-level skills so clearly being the currency needed to unlock lucrative careers and progression in the capital, the challenge for policymakers that lies ahead, then, is not only about increasing the supply of high-level skills provision in the region but also directing demand into the full suite of high-level training pathways, which do not just comprise conventional full-time undergraduate degrees, but a whole host of technical and vocationally-orientated high-level qualifications from Level 4 upwards.

This context goes some way to explaining why the London region has become something of a 'tertiary testbed' for new models of post-18 education. In the past few years alone, the capital has become home to three new government-backed Institutes of Technology (IoTs) in West London, East London and London City, intended to encourage collaboration between colleges, universities and businesses to deliver the technical education and skills that industry needs. The LSBU Group in south London has also unveiled England's first comprehensive technical college, which is not only delivering cutting-edge courses to local Londoners to set them up with industry-ready skills, but has also crafted innovative progression pathways within the LSBU Group, including London South Bank University, to ensure no learner, irrespective of their route through education, ever has to be held back by a cap on aspiration.

These educational innovations must, however, just be the start of ever-closer tertiary partnerships within the capital if the region is going to address its pressing skills needs and provide genuinely transformative opportunities to the next generation of learners. Given London's population density and its role as the biggest contributor to UK economic growth, it is essential that we get the tertiary tapestry right for London while we also work out how to crack the skills conundrum across other parts of the country.

With a General Election on the horizon, policymakers of all parties now have a rare opportunity to engage in longer-term thinking about the role of tertiary education in England and how we can best catalyse it for economic success. By offering a snapshot of the current state of play in London and details of recent developments in college, university and business collaborations, this report will hopefully provoke thought about what works for the region, what other obstacles we need to address and, above all, where we go next in our mission to build a better connected skills ecosystem for the capital – creating pathways from universities to schools, colleges, businesses and other research-performing organisations.

INTRODUCTION

This introduction has been written by David Hughes CBE, Chief Executive Officer at Association of Colleges.

Getting the relationship between colleges and universities right is crucial, for both to fully deliver on their missions. Success offers people access to the education and training they need throughout their lives, supporting them to move smoothly across all levels and modes of study. It will also be the core of a system which works proactively to prioritise learning, education and skills which meets the priorities of a more inclusive, fairer and strong economy whilst reaching out to communities and people who need to be encouraged into lifelong learning.

Successful partnerships between colleges and universities would offer a 'no wrong door' system to employers who seek support, whilst drawing on the world-leading research that takes place across our university system to drive tangible benefits in terms of regional economic growth, and the green transition. That collaboration would give much more focus to wider social or civic roles, including across public health and social inclusion – again, something that can only be done meaningfully through strong place-based collaboration.

Sadly, despite many emerging strong local partnerships, we are a long way from achieving this. In her chapter in this report, Sam Parrett outlines a number of the drivers here, including crucially the way the system is funded and regulated, and the fact that funding for non-HE adult education has suffered enormous cuts over the past decade. One result of this is that we now have four million fewer adults studying compared to the early 2000s. And the wider collective role we can play, across regional growth and community development, is all too often viewed as a nice to have, rather than being a core expectation of what we do.

Building a more coherent and systemic approach to post 18 education and training has to include a national strategy from government, setting out what is needed from across the system – which in turn can set a framework that is taken forward regionally through devolution. It has to involve looking at how we fund the whole system, and redress the stark cuts to non-HE adult education. And it should involve thinking about how we more fruitfully manage the balance between a focus on institutional priorities and the wider needs of the system – crucially resisting a collapse into a 'survival of the fittest' approach as funding pressures bite further.

An important part of the change needed must come from Whitehall, but we cannot wait for policy-makers to address these systems failings. There is a huge amount more that sector leaders can and should do now – being both ambitious in responsibilities towards people, employers and communities across London, and humble in recognising this cannot be done alone. Notably, there is no single model to follow – different approaches will be right and appropriate in different places, recognising local geographies, local needs, and the nature of existing relationships.

The challenge is now to college and university leaders and policy-makers across the system - to make the case that building a more coherent, balanced and cohesive tertiary system that works nationally and locally must be a priority for policy-makers in Westminster and City Hall, and to give attention to the work we can and must be leading locally too.

THE ROLE FOR UNIVERSITIES IN IMPROVING SKILLS: PERSPECTIVE FROM LONDON SOUTH BANK UNIVERSITY

This chapter has been written by Professor Dave Phoenix OBE, Vice Chancellor of London South Bank University and CEO of LSBU Group.

I was delighted to host colleagues in September from across Further and Higher Education at London South Bank Technical College (LSBTC) for a roundtable on how our sectors can work together to both support disadvantaged students and improve local productivity.

During our discussion I spoke about LSBU Group's unique structure which comprises South Bank Academies (SBA), South Bank Colleges (SBC), South Bank Innovation and London South Bank University. It represents one of the most comprehensive FE-HE collaborations currently in operation and required both Ministerial approval and secondary legislation to enable its development.

The model has brought with it several opportunities to build local learning pathways and facilitate skills innovation.

The first, and most tangible, is LSBTC itself where we hosted the roundtable. Bringing SBC into LSBU Group has enabled us to centralise numerous back-office functions including IT, HR, Finance and Procurement. As well as saving costs for the college, it has allowed them to draw upon the resources and expertise of a much larger organisation. Given our estates department had experience in large-scale development projects and managing a multi-million-pound estate, LSBU was able to create an estates masterplan for SBC, which has enabled the construction of what is the first comprehensive technical college for a generation.

The skills system in England is severely disjointed – particularly for those learners that do not follow the GCSE to A-Level to university route. This manifests most prominently in the lack of individuals qualified to Levels 4 and 5 and the 25% of young people who are not achieving Level 2 Maths and English by age 19.

The integrated model of LSBU Group, however, provides numerous opportunities for tackling this at a local level.

We can conduct joint access and participation activity by working in an integrated way with SBA and SBC to identify risks to equality of opportunity facing different socioeconomic groups in schools and society. A more considered, tactical approach like this is more effective in increasing pre-16 attainment than by simply parachuting university staff and students on the ground in school settings and hoping direct contact with pupils will inspire them to continue in education. It also recognises the expertise in the school and college sectors rather than assuming universities can address an ever-increasing list of social challenges on their own.

Our Group model, as well as our role as the Lead Provider of the London Uni Connect partnership, means we are well situated to identify the needs and aspirations of students before they enter HE. So, when a student enrolls at LSBU and completes their Personal Development Plan (a tool that signposts to the university any issues they may need support with) we are already aware of their areas of need and able to offer tailored assistance, ensuring that each learner is well placed to build the portfolio of skills, experience, and qualifications they need to achieve their ambitions. We are able to leverage this comparatively greater understanding of the incoming student demographic to build qualification pathways from Level 1 to Level 8, allowing us to meet both student demand and address local skills gaps.

This integrated approach to learning pathways also provides an opportunity for growing alternative routes into HE. Operating at a Group level enables us to align SBC's Level 4 provision with our courses, enabling advanced entry into the second year of relevant Bachelor's courses at LSBU for those learners that successfully pass their Level 4 and wish to continue their learning. T Levels and Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) similarly present an avenue for skills innovation between FE and HE; we can identify specific standards which match the skills needed for students to enrol onto Level 5 and 6 qualifications at LSBU.

In contrast, work between SBC and SBA enables us to run a 'fresh start' program for 14–16-year-old pupils at risk of exclusion. This is run by the college but links to SBA ensure learners are not excluded from mainstream education.

LSBU's Passmore Centre – our apprenticeship hub – works with employers to deliver more apprenticeship standards than any other university in the UK for nearly 3,000 apprentices. Our Group model means that we can offer standards from Level 2 to Level 7 with lower-level provision taught at SBC, enabling the Group to offer a one-stop-shop for our employer partners and providing progression pathways through the apprenticeship route. Progression rates from Level 3 to Level 4 within the apprenticeship system are very poor and a more holistic approach is needed to address this in collaboration with employers. One example is Level 3 Civil Engineering Technician Apprenticeship taught at the College, which provides direct entry into both the Level 4 Civil Engineering Senior Technician Apprenticeship and the Level 6 Civil Design Engineer Apprenticeship taught at the University.

However, not all prospective higher-level apprentices have the GCSE English and Maths qualifications necessary to enable them to even begin their course, an issue that is particularly prevalent in the NHS. Large numbers of healthcare support workers put forward by Healthcare Trusts to LSBU as Nursing apprenticeship candidates lacked the required Level 2 English and Maths qualifications. In collaboration with Health Education England and Praeceptor Consulting, SBC enhanced an existing qualification (a Level 3 Higher Development Award) while adding a corresponding Level 2 award, providing a logical pathway for healthcare assistants seeking to transition into different roles and access further education or higher apprenticeships. This approach has already won numerous accolades from the sector.

I hope these examples provide some insight into the potential of a more holistic place-based approach to education and they have been generated through leaders from schools, further and higher education sectors. Although we are already seeing impact from these various initiatives, it would be disingenuous to claim that creating LSBU Group has also not come with significant challenges.

Of these, the complexity of the regulatory landscape across tertiary education is probably the most prominent – particularly around apprenticeships and Level 4 and 5 qualifications where the Office for Students, Ofsted, Ofqual, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and various professional, regulatory and statutory bodies (PSRBs) all vie for influence and set different expectations. Navigating this landscape can take significant institutional resources through much duplicated effort.

Although the Government has increased investment into further education in recent years, colleges continue to face financial pressures (as increasingly do universities) and one area where this particularly affects developing technical pathways is staffing costs.

Recruitment of staff to teach technical courses with skills gaps at FE is a continual challenge given prospective candidates can earn far more in the private sector. The disparity in general between HE and FE contracts can create further challenges, which we have sought to tackle in one way through extending LSBU's continuing professional development training to staff at SBC and SBA. But addressing the underlying unfairness of this two-tiered system is important if we want to facilitate consistently high-skilled teaching at FE level and create sustainable progression routes for learners through to higher levels.

The differences between FE and HE student record reporting systems is another operational challenge for universities seeking to collaborate with other post-16 providers. Training providers submit FE learner data to the ESFA which maintains an individual record for each student, but no personalised information is recorded when HE providers send student data to HESA. This makes mapping student journeys more difficult because LSBU is unable to fully integrate our student record system with SBC.

Universities do have an opportunity within the current system to work collaboratively to provide student pathways which enable them to fill the skills gaps local employers identify. However, it is not an intuitive process, and working with FE institutions is certainly not encouraged. If we are serious about addressing productivity and fostering prosperity, we must build a more locally responsive, permeable tertiary system; ensure a greater coordination between Level 3-6 qualifications, and place universities on a sustainable financial footing.

THE ROLE FOR COLLEGES IN IMPROVING SKILLS IN THEIR LOCAL AREAS: PERSPECTIVE FROM LONDON AND SOUTH EAST EDUCATION GROUP

This chapter has been written by Sam Parrett CBE, Principal and CEO at London and South East Education Group.

As an education group, we know that learning has the power to change lives. Giving people access to high quality training and education enables them to achieve their career ambitions - which supports economic and social mobility, locally, regionally and nationally.

Colleges and universities are also a crucial vehicle for employers to secure the skills they need to support the innovation, growth and success of their businesses. With the growth of many new sectors including cyber, green and Artificial Intelligence (AI) – this is a huge priority on a global scale.

Education providers have a joint purpose and a shared ambition. Our role is to ensure everyone, no matter what their background or where they live, can access education and job opportunities. We need to create seamless pathways for people to progress successfully, right through to higher-level qualifications – and this must include those who haven't come through the traditional A-Level pathway.

We are passionate about effecting social change, with widening participation being part of our sector's DNA.

But to facilitate this effectively, colleges and universities need to be connected in a less transactional way than they currently are. FE and HE relations are generally underpinned by matters relating to progression – driven by institutional perspectives and interests - rather than a genuine commitment to social/economic mobility and changing lives.

We must build healthy, long term, sustainable relationships with our partners – and for this to happen we need mutual respect, equality and a balance of power.

Without these things – and with the reality of market forces - we have a disjointed system, which is difficult for people, and indeed, employers to navigate through. From my own organisation's perspective, which delivers both FE and HE provision in partnership with two universities, there are several reasons that these challenges exist.

Firstly, as ever, is the funding issue. With the FE sector having been underfunded for decades, the number of publicly funded qualifications for adults outside of HE has dropped from over five million in the early 2000s to just over a million by 2020. This is providing less choice and less opportunity for people wanting to return to education.

An inequitable approach to student finance across FE and HE also affects the educational choices of, and indeed the viable options, for an individual. For example, a 25-year-old wanting to study for a degree can access over £13,000 in student loans – while the same person choosing to take a Level 3 qualification has no guaranteed financial support. They would instead have to apply for a discretionary advanced learner loan bursary fund.

An adult in receipt of universal credit who wanted to upskill would risk losing their benefit entitlement if they were to undertake a college course – as they may then be unavailable to attend job interviews, which is a condition of universal credit. This is an unjustifiable and nonsensical barrier for so many people wanting to obtain fulfilling and better paid employment. The system needs to encourage aspiration and social mobility, not limit it.

The funding pressures faced by both colleges and universities can also deter collaboration. The incentives to encourage proper partnerships are often underfunded – which risks a survivalist, competitive culture and undermines the very reason for creating a relationship in the first place.

Solving these issues is not easy. However, by being clearer about what we want from a skills system – and what is needed – is the starting point we need.

For example, the introduction of a national post-16 education and skills strategy, joining up the whole system, would provide clarity as to the role and purpose of its different parts. All areas would need to be adequately funded, addressing the issue of the stark inequality of adult education funding. Access to support for living costs should not vary as starkly as it does based on what level a person studies.

Development of specific qualifications and products to match market demand should also be considered – for example, a degree apprenticeship linking to Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) priorities, which reflects the technical and vocational expertise of FE within the higher-level qualification.

A greater focus is also needed on more standardised Career Information Advice and Guidance. Looking ahead to where people are progressing and the pathways available to them is fundamental to the work of colleges and universities. Agreeing an approach to shared terminology, for example, and agreeing a consistent approach to working with key partners would be highly beneficial to both students and employers.

Our college is leading the local skills improvement fund (LSIF) bid for our Local London region. This has involved us working with 12 colleges, three universities, adult education providers, local authorities and employers across several London boroughs to access some significant funding. This is a fantastic example of coherent and collaborative working – with a genuine, shared ambition of all parties to improve green and digital skills development across the region.

This is a unique blueprint for future collaboration, not just between colleges and universities, but across the whole training and skills ecosystem. This will help meet labour market needs, both now and in the future, and will facilitate an innovation pipeline that businesses need to thrive. The world-leading research that is taking place in so many of our universities can also play into this, ensuring we are taking full advantage of the talent and knowledge on offer in London.

Such partnerships could also be used to support recruitment and retention in FE colleges. This is a major challenge for our sector, with vocational specialists and dual professionals in short supply – often owing to the higher salaries available on offer in industry.

University graduates could be given support and opportunities to teach in partner colleges, and other staff could take up secondments or Continuing Personal Development (CPD) opportunities by working in different educational environments. This could include developing peer networks across subject specialisms or accessing world-leading researchers – all of which would ultimately improve the quality of education for students.

True collaboration requires a common agenda and agreed principles. Partnerships must not be viewed as a staff and/or student recruitment pipeline. We must create meaningful relationships that go beyond transactional and progression boundaries – and which are, instead, boundless opportunities to shape and create exceptional prospects for students and our communities. Only when we achieve this, will we be able to fulfil the true potential that exists in college-university relationships.

THE EVOLVING TERTIARY SPACE IN LONDON

This chapter has been written by Dr Josh Patel, Researcher at The Edge Foundation.

'Tertiary' or 'third-cycle' education, encompasses the international diversity of further, professional, vocational, post-16 and higher education. However, as my colleague at the Edge Foundation Andrea Laczik and I explored in our contribution to a recent Higher Education Policy Institute Report, the phrase 'tertiary' indicates more than just a catch-all term for these types of institutions.[1] Tertiary is associated with transformative visions of what might more usefully be called 'unitary' governance and oversight of third-cycle education through one organisation. This is opposed to more rigid siloed governance models, including for example historic and current 'binary models' of HE and FE funding and quality such as England's. Reforming tertiary governance structures may have important consequences for collaboration between HE, FE and other elements of the tertiary landscape in London and elsewhere.

The benefits of collaboration between FE and HE (such as enhanced capacity for transferring students, personnel, contacts, and practice), can be significant. Tertiary collaboration has been identified by Michael [Shattock and Horvath](#) as primarily consisting of four formal activities aiming to improve access and responsiveness to socioeconomic needs for educated citizens: student progression, franchised teaching, validation of courses, and degree apprenticeships. In the UK in 2021, [research by Shattock and Stephen Hunt](#) found that 80% of colleges and 50% of universities had 'formal programmatic links with one another', and that post-1992 universities were more likely to engage in collaboration than pre-1992 universities. The research found particular nodes of tertiary and multi-sector collaboration around London Southbank, Plymouth, Lincoln, South Wales, and Highlands and Islands. [Gareth Parry's research](#) tells us that since the beginning of the twenty-first century around 8% to 15% of all HE students in England were taught in FE colleges – though the most recent accessible figures indicate in London around just 4% of HE was taught in FE.[2]

Given the possible contribution of increased scale and quality of FE-HE partnerships, more could be done to foster these relationships. As we argued, England's fragmented HE and FE funding and quality regimes do 'not offer a good basis for HE and FE collaboration'.[3] The separation of HE and FE funding, the underfunding of the FE sector, and quasi-marketisation strategies have encouraged competition between and within FE and HE rather than that sort of deliberate collaboration towards desired strategic aims.

To remedy this, there is growing enthusiasm for reform of tertiary governance, including calls from the [Association of Colleges](#) and [Labour Party](#). Solutions to this include tertiary '*systems*', sometimes called 'ecology' models, of which some are imagined and some have already been realised. These tertiary systems, advocated for by Ellen Hazelkorn in [2016](#) and [2023](#), embrace institutional flexibility, networks, and collaboration. An essential element of this is holistic, central articulations of stated public goods, including sustainability agendas as explored by [Tristan McGowan](#), privileged over the wasteful competition we see in market-led systems. Collaboration promotes coordination, collaboration and specialization enabling greater responsiveness to international and local socioeconomic needs. This further facilitates widening participation, the provision of lifelong learning, and credit transferability.

International examples of Tertiary systems operating today include New Zealand and Norway. There have also been recent moves towards adopting tertiary approaches in the UK, as explored by the [College of the Future](#), and myself and my colleagues at the Edge Foundation.[4] In September 2023 the new Welsh regulator, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER), took on responsibility for the entire tertiary landscape in Wales. The CTER is the foremost example of progress in the UK towards unitary tertiary governance, intended to be a consistent 'steward' for the whole tertiary sector in Wales. Its responsibilities, arrived at in consultation with stakeholders, align the sector's activities towards promoting strategic duties in, for example, equality of opportunity, participation, sustainability, civic mission, and other priorities stated by the Welsh Ministers. Elsewhere, in Scotland, 20% of HE is delivered in FE colleges through traditional articulation agreements. Northern Ireland has pioneered new forums for coordination between FE and HE.

The capacity of unitary tertiary governance bodies to make strategic decisions about their local area priorities and direct the sector's efforts towards those goals collaboratively has led for calls for further devolution and regionalisation. [Michael Shattock and Aniko Horvath](#) have argued that existing Combined Authorities could take over the implied responsibilities of a decentralized higher and further education system, including Greater Manchester, the West Midlands and London. Based very crudely on size of regional population alone, any devolved commission for tertiary education in London could, provocatively, be similar in scope to the Welsh CTER. Mayor of London Sadiq Khan has [called for](#) greater devolution to London of skills and employment beyond adult education. A holistic and place-based vision and the capacity to address the strategic priorities of the region seems very attractive.

How far tertiary governance reform can improve the institutions' strategic capacities is, however, an open question. Tertiary collaboration appears to be in part driven by competition for diminishing domestic funding. Higher education institutions (HEIs) have sought to supplement national recruitment by entering local markets, and colleges have sought to augment their income and enhance their prestige by offering HE. All of this raises the attractiveness of rationalisation. [International research](#) tells us rationalisation may erode colleges' localism, and participation pathways do little to improve diversification of access. A single tertiary sector might lead to continued homogenisation and hierarchisation of provision, such as in Ann-Marie Bathmaker and Kevin Orr's analysis of the [higher vocational sector](#) and in Ulrich Teichler's [study of diversification](#). Overbearing funding and quality regimes or domineering university interests [might restrict innovation](#). Devolved governance's capacity to exercise strategic direction over education institutions could play into longstanding anxieties around academic freedom, and studies from [2016](#) and [2020](#) remind us our knowledge of student experiences and outcomes in these spaces is limited.

The pieces in this collection however indicate that through the co-creation of strategic priorities and sharing of best practice, effective collaboration between FE colleges, HEIs, the rest of the tertiary sector, and other stakeholders across the wider education and skills landscape is possible. Further research is required to gain a broader appreciation of the range of collaborations possible, and how far national and devolved governance unified or bifurcated can generate affordances for tertiary institutions to collaboratively pursue those progressive social ends, to help inform governance and practice in London's tertiary sector.

[1] Laczik, A., & Patel, J. (2023). The evolving tertiary space in the UK: Meeting the skills needs through HE in FE. In H. Carasso (Ed.), UK higher education - policy, practice and debate during HEPI's first 20 years. Higher Education Policy Institute.

[2] Parry, G. (2016). College higher education in England 1944–66 and 1997–2010. London Review of Education, 14.

[3] Laczik & Patel. The evolving tertiary space in the UK

[4] Laczik & Patel. The evolving tertiary space in the UK

HOW CAN FE/HE PARTNERSHIPS IMPROVE THE LIVES OF THE MOST DISADVANTAGED IN LONDON?

This chapter has been contributed by Dr Richard Boffey, Head of AccessHE at London Higher.

Partnerships with education and training at their heart are self-evidently beneficial to improving social mobility and tackling socio-economic disadvantage, given the earnings premium attached to obtaining higher levels of educational qualifications, not to mention the positive correlation between (higher) education and other health and wellbeing outcomes.

But what makes partnerships between higher and further education providers in London such a powerful tool in unlocking social mobility benefits not otherwise achieved by the partners working alone? As this chapter will show, a core strength of these partnerships is their ability to support adult learning, especially the learning of adult Londoners who are least well represented at the higher-skilled end of London's labour market.

The reach of FE-HE partnerships into these communities makes them a powerful complement to other education pathways in London that have been a driving force in the capital's social mobility success story to date, most notably the 'academic' pathway into higher education directly from A-Level study. This has transformed the life chances of young Londoners from underrepresented backgrounds who achieve the necessary level 2 and 3 qualifications to progress to HE. It is now the case that London students from Free School Meals (FSM)-eligible backgrounds are more likely than not to progress to higher education by age 19, and in London a higher proportion of FSM-eligible students progress to high-tariff higher education (which carries the highest earnings premium) than anywhere else in England.

But not all Londoners have benefitted from the expansion of the 'post-school' model of higher education. Nearly 30% of 19-year-olds in London do not hold a level 3 qualification and in some London local authority areas more than 10% of the adult population do not hold any formal qualifications at all. Londoners with lower qualifications are more likely to live in poverty and as such, supporting them to progress their education is pivotal not just to processes of upskilling but to improving their life chances more broadly. This is where the HE-FE partnership model stands to have most impact.

The remainder of this chapter will highlight three ways in which HE-FE partnerships meet the needs of disadvantaged groups. One of the primary advantages of HE-FE partnerships is their ability to engage and recruit students from underrepresented backgrounds through the community engagement infrastructure of the respective partners. Many of London's colleges have well-developed links with community partners such as local Jobcentre Plus offices, whilst several of the capital's HE providers have for their part created Civic University Agreements that formally embed them in local training and resident support networks. There is significant scope for innovation through practice sharing between outreach teams operating in London FE and London HE, too, given their joint expertise in engaging highly diverse communities in the capital.

The ability of these partnerships to offer training provision (including modular and bite-size courses) at low or no cost can mitigate against the increased price-sensitivity of adult learners from underrepresented backgrounds who are more likely than younger students to have concerns about upfront course fees and student debt. Indeed, to take the example of Capital City College Group (CCCG), its decision to offer training and skills provision free of charge up to level 3 has led to increased enrolments especially from low-income households.

Secondly, the flexibility of offer – beyond price point alone – that can be achieved through HE-FE partnerships can better accommodate the needs and circumstances of underrepresented student groups. These learners may need to balance any training they undertake with caring and family responsibilities and/or paid work, meaning that providers should consider offering block teaching, running in-person sessions off-campus, scheduling daytime activities around school runs and/or delivering teaching predominantly during the evening. There is considerably more scope to do this if HE and FE partners can combine the resources and staff expertise that they each bring to bear in the delivery of training.

Finally, HE-FE partnerships can uniquely scaffold progression pathways for learners that extend from levels 2 and 3 up to levels 4-6 and beyond. In London specifically, higher level skills acquisition is the surest mechanism to unlocking social mobility given it is projected that, by 2035, 84% of new jobs in the capital will be at graduate level. Accordingly, Londoners who are qualified to this level will be most likely to benefit from the shifting demand for skills as they will be best placed to seize these new labour market opportunities.

With this in mind, CCCG and London Higher together with Middlesex University have recently partnered to develop new training courses for students seeking to enter the screen industries. These are focussed on lighting technician pathways into the industry and are designed as highly adaptable bridging courses that can be integrated into a range of study pathways. They can, for instance, follow on from a level 3 qualification in areas such as Electrical Installation, and familiarise those students holding relevant technical knowledge with screen industries requirements and practices. Equally, they can support HE graduates from level 6 Film/TV programmes to acquire the necessary technical skills to progress into roles such as Gaffers and Directors of Photography.

The time required to establish partnerships of this kind, not to mention the commitment from staff at different levels across the various partners, should not be underestimated. But as this chapter has shown, the benefits of HE-FE partnerships to those Londoners who may otherwise be excluded from the capital's social mobility success story more than justify the effort invested in them upfront.

HOW CAN SKILLS PARTNERSHIPS SUPPORT SKILLS AND PRODUCTIVITY IN LONDON AND THE UK?

This chapter has been written by Mark Hilton, Policy Delivery Director, Membership at BusinessLDN.

London is a beacon for talent and opportunity, however underneath its successes in attracting and retaining talent lies a complex labour market with multiple inequalities and distributional challenges. London residents are more highly qualified than any other UK region, or indeed any major world city, yet the in-work poverty rate is one of the UK's highest. London's skills challenges have intensified post-pandemic, with almost seven in 10 businesses reporting at least one skills shortage in Q3 2022, despite existing spending by firms of around £8 billion a year on training.

So, what is to be done? BusinessLDN is proud to be leading the [London Local Skills Improvement Plan](#) (LSIP), an ambitious plan to tackle employers' skills shortages, address inequality and boost labour market inclusion in London. Following the biggest data deep dive on these issues that the capital has ever seen, the LSIP outlines a blueprint for tackling the big challenges in London's labour market and better matching the supply of training and technical education with employer demand for new skills.

LSIPs are an initiative funded by the Department for Education, which aims to bring employers, educators and other key stakeholders together to transform the local skills system. Over the last year, BusinessLDN and its partners including the Greater London Authority (GLA) and boroughs, have conducted extensive qualitative and quantitative research on employer skills needs and system issues, engaging more than 1,000 employers, colleges and universities, and key London stakeholders to build a granular picture of London's labour market and [create a plan for the capital](#).

This deep engagement focused on several sectors and themes, including the built environment, creative fields, health and social care, hospitality, digital, green, transferable skills, and labour market inclusion. This garnered rich data on the capital's key skills shortages, including: electric vehicle charging point installers and sustainability managers; both essential and advanced digital skills including AI; and transferable skills including critical thinking and resilience. The work also shone a light on the multiple barriers disadvantaged groups face finding employment and building successful careers.

The London LSIP sets out a roadmap for delivering the priority actions necessary to get London's skills system firing on all cylinders for the benefit of employers and all Londoners. The roadmap has been organised around five major areas which identify the actions that the key actors - employers, educators, and London government - must deliver: meeting London's skills needs; supporting and galvanising business action; delivering a skills system that is fit-for-purpose; building an inclusive London workforce; and tackling sector specific priorities. Only through these actors working together in partnership can progress be made.

The actions set out in the roadmap aim to be simple to understand, measurable and therefore actionable. Many of these actions are technical in nature; those that could really shift the dial include: the introduction of a 'London Recruitment & Skills Support Hub' to help employers, especially small-to-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), navigate the skills system; embedding transferable skills and Essential Digital Skills (EDS) as a core part of training funded by London's Adult Education Budget; and the creation of a one-stop-shop model to support job seekers that brings together the co-location of employment support, careers advice, and skills support.

From the outset, BusinessLDN has recognised the importance of Higher Education being included in the LSIP process. London is a highly skilled city, and HE has a pivotal role in delivering employers' priority skills needs. That's why London Higher is a valued member of the dedicated LSIP Advisory Group, while lots of universities have attended the consultation events over the last year and continue to remain engaged.

Strong partnerships between HE and Further Education will be crucial to the successful implementation of the LSIP. Colleges and universities have a shared role in responding to the LSIP's priorities, supporting businesses and communities and the people and places they serve. HE-FE partnerships can play a crucial role in driving employer engagement, strengthening workforce capability, and delivering curriculum pathways and new qualifications aligned to the LSIP's needs. BusinessLDN will also be identifying and putting in place the best business/educator partnership for strengthening London's advanced digital skills provision. This will require significant collaboration between HE and FE.

Over the coming year, BusinessLDN will work to embed the LSIP in London, building support for it and the individual actions it contains through convening employers, educators, London government and others.

In the context of a challenging labour market, the LSIP represents a key turning point for employers. With a compelling plan in place and quality universities and colleges standing ready to work with business, this represents a clear opportunity for effective collaboration to meet employers' skills needs and help more Londoners into good jobs and careers.

EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE IN LONDON THAT CAN HELP INFORM FUTURE PARTNERSHIPS

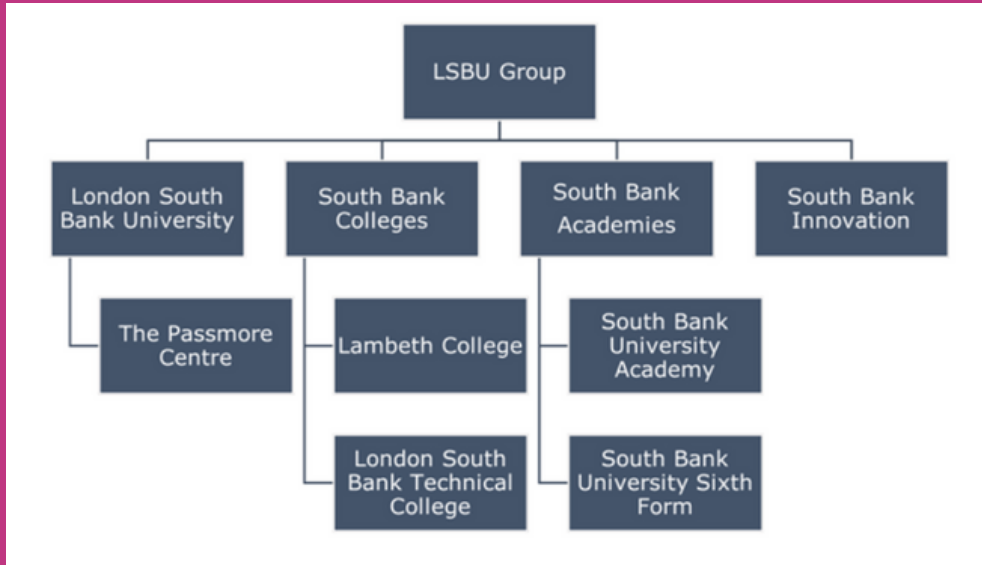
Case Study: The LSBU Group

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

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

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

- London South Bank University: a civic university providing high-quality professional and technical education.
- The Passmore Centre: a pan-Group institute of professional and technical education with a focus on apprenticeships and work-based education providing a one-stop-shop for employers' skills needs.
- South Bank Academies, comprising:
 - South Bank University Sixth Form – the first dedicated 16-19 technical academy with employer sponsors including Skanska and Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust. Focused on technical qualifications, it also uses a hub and spoke model to support local schools that wish to deliver more applied options from Year 10.
 - South Bank University Academy – a 11-19 secondary school and sixth form with a STEAM-based curriculum.
- South Bank Colleges, comprising:
 - Lambeth College – a new dedicated gateway college with Adult Education, ESOL, SEND and Entry-Level qualification provision.
 - London South Bank Technical College – the first comprehensive technical college for a generation, focusing on provision from Levels 2 – 4.
- South Bank Innovation: the Group's commercial and enterprise arm.



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

- South Bank Academies recording no NEETS (not in education, employment or training) despite over half of pupils being free school meal eligible.
- Lambeth College achieving Ofsted 'Good' for the first time in a decade and surpassing national achievement rates in spite of significant numbers of adult (87%), free school meal eligible (25%) and looked after (10%) students.
- The opening of London South Bank Technical College increasing 16-19 applications to South Bank Colleges by 100% in its first year.
- London South Bank University being ranked 12th among UK universities for graduate starting salaries one year after graduation (Longitudinal Educational Outcomes Data 2020-21).
- London South Bank University being ranked 8th worldwide for its contribution to Sustainable Development Goal 8 – Reduced Inequalities (THE Global Impact Rankings 2023).

Case Study: Middlesex University and Barnet & Southgate College

Middlesex University has collaborated with a further education partner, Barnet and Southgate College, to provide experiences for students from the College's specialist centre for Learners with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LLDD) to raise their awareness of and interest in higher education opportunities.

The project aimed to demonstrate to these students that higher education was accessible to them, and to highlight the additional support available for those who need it. The collaboration was designed to equip these young people with information so that they can make an informed choice regarding different pathways into higher education and, importantly, to help minimise any barriers that they may face.

The project began with a pilot in 2022, where Middlesex University and Barnet and Southgate College held information sessions to communicate the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) support available for students at the LLDD Centre who were interested in higher education. Following the success of the pilot and positive feedback, the University and College have developed these sessions into interactive discussions, designed to fully immerse the students in subject areas of particular interest – whilst keeping a focus on maximising accessibility and support.

So far, focus has been on the Performing Arts and 3D Animation & Games Design and the higher education options and careers those areas can lead to. Activities include learning-by-doing approaches, imagining professional career paths, workshops, tours of the University campus and meeting with current university students studying these subjects.

As with many of Middlesex University's collaborative projects with further education partners, there is a strong focus on social mobility and widening access to higher education. As well as falling into the SEND category, 86% of the students who have participated so far qualified for Free School Meals and 43% would be the first in their family to attend higher education.

Feedback so far has been extremely positive. Through data collected via pre- and post-project surveys, the percentage of students who find the idea of university exciting increased from 71% to 86% and the percentage who would consider studying at Middlesex University increased from 43% to 64%.

CONCLUSION

Written by Dr Diana Beech, Chief Executive Officer of London Higher.

As this report has shown, the will to enhance tertiary collaboration is already strong in the London region and there are several examples of successful partnerships between higher and further education institutions. What is hampering progress, however, is the fact that policy and regulation have not moved in step with the tertiary sector's collaborative efforts. So, while universities and colleges may be moving closer together in terms of establishing shared educational pathways and even shared infrastructure and resources, the failure of the regulatory landscape to adapt to change is still keeping higher and further education apart.

With London's under-18 population rapidly on the rise, the need for UK Government to address incompatibilities and unnecessary overlaps in regulation in the HE and FE space could not be clearer. There is also a pressing need to ensure that departments across Whitehall are talking to each other if we are to stand any chance of bringing down barriers for individual learners – some of whom are perversely finding themselves locked out of learning and obtaining the skills necessary to secure employment by the rigidity of the benefits system. Tutors and educators, too, must be valued equally to ensure quality and standards across the different attainment levels, and I would add that skills innovation must not come at the cost of research and innovation. After all, any reforms to tertiary education need to help, not hinder, our scientific and creative talent pipeline and not undermine essential investment in research.

What we need more than ever, then, is a whole-system approach that enables future FE-HE partnerships to flourish and provides flexibility for learners throughout their working lives. If we are serious about providing lifelong learning opportunities then we need to be devising policy in dialogue with both the public, to understand the challenges and opportunities related to skills acquisition as people progress in their careers, and employers to ensure that provision is keeping up with emerging skills needs, especially as AI, sustainability and digitization rapidly alter the world of world.

The recommendations to policymakers are simple:

- **With the population growing, policy reform in this area cannot wait.** Without immediate action, a whole generation could miss out on opportunity, employers will fall short of productivity, and the whole nation will lose out on economic prosperity and success.
- **This isn't about designing something from scratch, it's about refining the high-quality infrastructure that is already there.** Our universities and colleges are already doing excellent work providing individuals with life-changing opportunities. What is needed now is a consistent and harmonious regulatory, funding and policy framework around them to allow them to thrive, not just survive.
- **And it's time we embrace the diversity of the regions, taking place-based approaches to what works.** For too long, policymakers have tried to fit the diversity of the regions into a 'one-size-fits-all' national policy approach, rather than take a tailored approach to what works best for each part of the country. The LSIPs have laid the groundwork for bespoke regional approaches, so it is now imperative that we build on this momentum to enhance regional skills ecosystems and deliver provision that facilitates employment and progression in local areas.

As the most densely populated English region, with the largest concentration of tertiary education providers as well as the highest predicted demand for higher education, policymakers would do a lot worse than to look to London for examples of what is possible.