

The Future of Post-16 Education in England

The use of [blue text](#) in this document mainly indicates our quick summary of the possible implications for HE.

The Independent Commission on the College of the Future published [The English College of the Future – A nations-specific final report](#).

The report focuses on FE but as the current Government agenda inextricably links its intentions for FE with HE sector consequence it is of interest. The Commission was formed to answer these questions - *what do we want and need from colleges from 2030 onwards, and how do we get there?* The Commission has taken a four nations perspective in its considerations however today's report is specific to England.

The report's recommendations centre around the concept of a College place based network in which employers are heavily invested and skills needs addressed. The recommendations made hang off this network model.

Lord Willetts writes the foreword with his usual knack of cutting straight to the point. There are too many points to mention all here, it is [well worth a read](#), here are two snippets:

A key issue at the heart of the report is the right balance between collaboration and competition in our education system. The report sets out a powerful case for greater collaboration between colleges themselves. That will enable greater specialisation and more coherent planning of capital investment.

Colleges need a distinctive role which complements the role of schools for under-18 provision and universities for over-18s. The report argues that also means shifting the balance towards more collaboration and strategic oversight of relations with other providers. The report suggests some constraints both on schools creating new sixth forms and also universities delivering level 4 and 5 qualifications. There is certainly scope for better partnerships with these other providers which in turn need to respect the distinctive role of colleges. And all this needs to be balanced against institutional autonomy which remains an important principle.

Later in the document the Commission states that Colleges too often deliver *for people, productivity and place*. Implying that they are not delivering to their full potential. The Commission states the proposed reforms will *have to be met with significantly increased and long-term investment too, from government and from employers, redressing the significant underfunding of the sector at present.* [The implication is that within the limited Government pot \(exacerbated by Covid, Brexit and recession pressures\) funding moved towards FE will perhaps result in less funding for HE or Early Years \(or schools\).](#)

Jump to the [Recommendations](#)

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Other key excerpts:

This is not a report solely calling for action from government. Change must come from all actors across the education and skills system. [Including Colleges cooperating themselves.]

real change...a fundamentally new, trusting relationship: of partnership, of shared responsibility and of mutual respect. At all levels of the system, a shift from transactional relationships, to strategic partnerships is needed.

Colleges are poorly understood and their potential as public and economic assets is greatly underutilised.

Colleges operate in a quasi-market and are forced to compete with each other and with schools, universities and independent training providers – driving inefficiency and at times insufficiency of provision across a locality, as

colleges are incentivised to focus on provision that is viable in terms of student demand and affordability, rather than necessarily aligned with local or national labour market demand.

Summary of the Recommendations

1. **A national strategy for education and skills to support economic growth, industrial change and lifelong learning** overseen by a cross-departmental ministerial taskforce/ body informed by analysis and recommendations from the DfE's new Skills and Productivity Board.

*Government must develop a coherent post 16 education and skills strategy, with alignment to its industrial strategy – **redressing nugatory competition** that exists across the system, and setting out a coordinated approach to an expanded lifelong education service.*

Colleges as centres of lifelong learning, in providing new strategic service to employers and as anchor institutions, driving healthy, cohesive and connected communities. [Words not dissimilar to some HEIs mission statements and the HE civic institutions agenda.](#)

2. **College network strategies to meet local priorities across the tertiary education system.**

Government should introduce a legal duty on colleges to establish networks across appropriate economic geographies completed by 2023/24. Government to set principles with Colleges to model how the principles can be achieved in their context and population footprint.

*The local strategies should focus on growth sectors as well as declining sectors in the local economy, **agreeing where new skills development is needed, the priority specialisms at higher technical levels and the communities and groups of people who need to be reached.** Overall, the strategy will set out the purpose of the post-16 system in a place.*

*Networks...must have **'teeth'** – ensuring that funding and accountability ultimately sits at the network level rather than individual college level...Given the need for a much more connected and holistic education and skills system, ultimately the legal duty on colleges to develop network strategies must be matched by **a duty on all other post 16 education providers to ensure that provision complements the existing offer across an appropriate economic geography. This must be a precondition of funding settlements, and a central matter of oversight and accountability regimes.***

[So implications for future funding and regulatory intentions in the above.](#)

3. **Colleges as anchor institutions within the wider local and regional ecosystem.**

More reminders of the intention for colleges to be place focused within the heart of their community. [This is not necessarily an element for competition with the HE sector](#) – education itself (from early years to postgraduate) is place focussed, with HE also having the wider regional and national outlooks and recruitment base.

*New college network strategies will help to build stronger partnerships with other public and private agencies and civic partners and their wider investment plans locally and regionally... This will seek to ensure **a more coherent and connected approach** not only on skills and learning but **in relation to colleges' wider civic role**, ... in a range of areas including business enterprise, public health, lifelong learning, eliminating digital exclusion and supporting social integration. Universities are mentioned as a key partner.*

4. **A statutory right to lifelong learning**

Government must set out a new statutory right to lifelong learning...lifelong education must be meaningfully accessible for people...redress deficiencies in the existing student maintenance system.

- FE, HE and advanced skills training providers offer equal maintenance loans *adequate to an individual's needs whether part time or full-time, in-person or distance learning*
- Flexibility in how the individual uses the learning entitlement and their maintenance support
- *Unemployed people do not lose their welfare benefits where they use their entitlement to reskill/retrain full-time in areas of identified job opportunities and skills shortages*
- Study up to level 3 should be free (including modular methods).
- As dictated by local and national priorities some level 3+ provision should be fully funded

So little unexpected news here – Level 4+ to be funded by individuals accessing loans with Government flexibility to fund priority higher provision at a different rate or offer full funding.

5. Skills guarantee for a post-COVID economy and future labour market changes

A Skills Guarantee would provide free training to upskill employees at all levels reflecting national and regional priorities, with maximum flexibility to meet sector needs and to enable upskilling of employees

targeted investment to upskill, retrain and reskill to help individuals find work in higher demand priority sectors, to supplement previous qualifications and to help them maintain relevant skills

This would further include incentives for small and medium sized employers (SMEs) with a contribution to wage replacement costs to encourage uptake and to contribute to productivity improvements in the wider economy.

Nothing unexpected in here. Again just Government flexibility to target certain industry sectors through incentives for education & business.

6. A new strategic partnership with employers

Regional/local strategic networks between Colleges and employers so that employers are recognised, have a central voice and are a crucial part of the education and skills ecosystem with involvement in the development of the network strategies.

The intention is that employers to have a bigger say in what and how regional education and skills are delivered. Again not unexpected as the Government have been clear, through criticism of the HE sector, that learning must meet the needs (and approval) of employers and the national skills needs. The report recognises this as a challenge because the employer infrastructure does not currently provide a coherent voice.

Crucially, the new relationship must be based on a genuine strategic partnership which appreciates the mutual goals of higher levels of participation in education and training which meet the needs of people and labour markets – with an employer-led system recognising college expertise and leadership in interpreting as well as challenging and stimulating employer demand.

7. A new strategic support service to employers

*College networks must work to build on existing natural specialisms to develop **sector/occupationally focused 'employer hubs'**. These would:*

- **Lead on higher technical level provision across the network.**
- Lead strategic support to employers across innovation and skills.

- Coordinate engagement with the wider education and skills system, across universities, schools and ITPs, including across progression and articulation, workforce development and stakeholder engagement.
- Build on Institutes of Technology.
- complement the existing offer across an economic geography (e.g. (LEPs, Growth Hubs, Catapult Centres.)

The employer hubs must **complement rather than cannibalise** or duplicate the existing offer – *ultimately leading to a better integrated service that works for employers.*

The report suggests the employer hubs should be funded through the college network grant funding settlements – [placing Colleges as the key broker and a controlling role for decisions on educational delivery to meet local industry needs.](#)

8. Stable funding and accountability frameworks for colleges

A three-year funding grant settlement for colleges to enable the network to plan a long-term systems focus. There should be a *single strategic regional point of oversight and accountability with college networks... a necessary decluttering of the regulatory and oversight system.*

With agreement on overall purpose and new local strategies to meet local need, accountability can be clearer and focused on the longer term.

Funding levels are wholly inadequate. Compounding this, is the complexity and short-term nature of funding mechanisms – which acts to impede the ability of colleges to plan for the long-term, and to focus on strategic systems outcomes. Instead, colleges are all too often focused primarily on immediate financial survival.

9. A strategic relationship with government and simplified processes

Government must simplify the oversight of Colleges – there should be efficiency, trust and better strategic coordination. The long-term vision is for **one post-16 education oversight and funding body** and it should **address wasteful competition between colleges and other education providers.**

[This would seem to propose one single behemoth body across the diverse range of post 16 education pathways and covering both FE and HE. However, the detailed text at the end of the document only covers the 16-19 bodies currently in existence and the Office for Students so it is unclear - the report may well only be taken to apply to the myriad of bodies which FE are accountable to.](#)

[It would be a difficult undertaking to realise the ambition for one organisation to cover both FE and HE and deliver it well. Furthermore, the components of the current regulatory and funding organisations are spread throughout England so, to maintain expertise and in line with the levelling up agenda, it is likely that the functions of the single body would be disparate and distributed geographically.](#)

10. Diverse and representative systems leaders

The lack of diversity across the English college sector leadership and workforce must be urgently addressed – sector bodies and DfE should cooperate to tackle this. This must include mandatory collection of data across all levels of the college workforce, and setting robust targets to redress under-representation where that exists. A Four Nations College Alliance which would provide leadership development is proposed as a supportive mechanism.

Representation within HE has been a sector focus for some time with little progress made. As yet the Government have not championed direct change for this within the HE sector in a big way.

11. An ambitious future college workforce strategy

Tackle the pay decline within Colleges:

- £30,000 starting salary for teaching staff in Colleges
- A chartered teaching status for FE teaching staff
- *Urgent work undertaken to prioritise increased investment in the workforce, across remuneration and investment in CPD*
- *A national social partnership must be established between government, the AoC and trade unions to look at long-term strategic workforce challenges. Proposes DfE, AoC and TUC form an initial working group to develop this model, to report by September 2021.*

Relationships with Universities (full text available from page 37)

*The competitive relationship also exists starkly in the case of universities, with particular pressure in terms of level 4-5 provision. This risks being accelerated further as funding pressures on universities increase over the coming year, with **the potential shift towards a 'survivalist' relationship between colleges and universities. This must be avoided at all costs – and involves instead pausing and reflecting on the complementary relationships that must be developed.***

*There are a large number of exemplary partnerships that exist between universities and colleges... However, **these relationships are often fragile, because universities hold all the cards, resulting in a simple power-imbalance between them and colleges.***

*College networks across appropriate economic geographies provide a mechanism for developing much better coordination and collaboration across the education and skills ecosystem – and **this coordinated approach must be met by universities too.** Serious reflection should be given to ensuring that provision complements the wider offer available, including with reference crucially to college networks.*

Whilst we do not endorse a delineation of level 4-5 and 6, provision across a locality/ region must offer a coherent offer and play to the strengths of the institutions involved.

The phrasing here is interesting:

*This means that colleges will be well placed to deliver a lot of the growth in level 4-5, but so will some universities, just as universities will continue to deliver the bulk of level 6, but so will some colleges. **University delivery at level 4-5 must exist where it meets needs and complements existing provision from colleges,** and colleges with provision at level 6 must be able to account for the way in which this in turn meets need and complements existing provision.*

I.e. Universities slicing into the level 4-5 college pie must justify their action, colleges nibbling at level 6 likewise.

*Growth in higher technical, L4-5 requires a strong focus on the labour market, relationships with employers, skilled and experienced staff with industry knowledge and a teaching and training approach. Government seems to be moving to a model in which funding will be equal across colleges and universities and for qualifications which reflect occupational standards. With suitable investment and oversight, **this should offer fertile ground for colleges to***

develop and grow their offering, in partnership with universities. That partnership will be vital for employers to know where to go, for pathways to be clear to learners and for priorities to be met which enhance the local economy

College networks present a new strategic interface which can play a central role in convening strategic employer engagement between providers within a region/ locality. Employer hubs would form the basis of this specialisation – as sector or skills focused specialists... **Employer hubs would also draw on university research in relevant areas, in order to inform curriculum development, workforce development and support the strategic support offer to employers.** We see this as a natural development of the introduction of Institutes of Technology (IoTs).

Careers Advice

A new lifetime skills and careers advice and guidance service would be hosted within colleges, where appropriate – and where holistic services already exist, will build strong links to complement this, ensuring a coherent and connected community service. This must also include quality information and guidance about available student finance

The report surprisingly suggests the Lifelong careers and skills advice service be hosted within Colleges rather than other institutions such as universities. This seems odd given the infrastructure, expertise, size of and investment in the HE careers teams. The expectation for FE to deliver guidance on student finance too seems odd surely if there is to be true partnership this is an aspect HEIs may be willing to deliver onsite within colleges. Especially as outreach and schools teams are already doing so.

Independent Providers

There is a real opportunity with the upcoming FE systems reforms to embed [Independent Training Providers] more clearly within the skills system, with college ‘employer hubs’ convening engagement with high quality providers right across the local education and skills ecosystem. This ensures a ‘whole systems’ approach, and crucially allows for colleges, universities and ITPs to play a coordinated role in stimulating and responding to employer needs. Augar’s mention of independent providers is referenced.

Singing from the same funding sheet (similar to earlier)

Given the need for a much more connected and holistic education and skills system, **ultimately the legal duty on colleges to develop network strategies must be matched by a duty on all other post 16 education providers to ensure that provision complements the existing offer across an appropriate economic geography, as well as working closely together across employer engagement and support and careers advice and guidance. This must be a precondition of funding settlements, and a central matter of oversight and accountability regimes.**

Boris Johnson, Prime Minister, speaking from Exeter College, September 2020

The truth is we’re not giving anywhere near enough of the right kind of training or support to the fifty per cent of young people who don’t want to go to university, and so we’re depriving them of the chance to find their vocation and develop a fulfilling, wellpaid career. And so the result is business isn’t happy; the economy is underproductive; and many working adults are stuck in jobs without much future when they are hungry for new opportunities. So it is time for change, and for radical change.”

Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education Reform of Further Education, July 2020

This autumn I will be publishing a White Paper that will set out our plans to build a worldclass, German-style further education system in Britain, and level up skills and opportunities.... to put further and technical education at the heart of our post-16 education system

This will not be about incremental change, but a comprehensive plan to change the fundamentals of England's further education landscape

We need fundamental reform: a wholesale rebalancing towards further and technical education... (and) establishing a high-quality system of higher technical education.

The report fits well with Williamson's ideals

The proposed model

