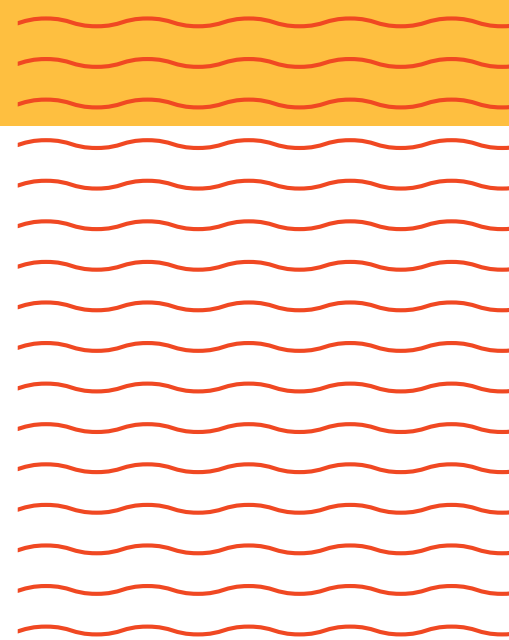
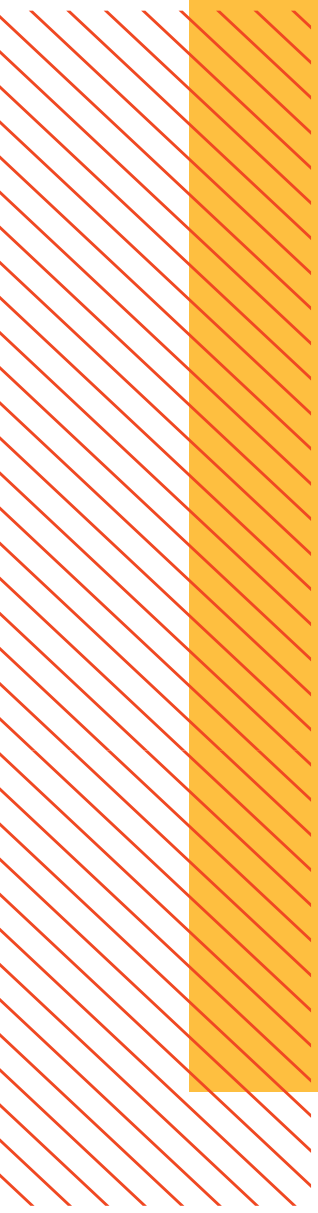


WONKHE



Universities’ response to the skills agenda

A collection of articles reflecting on strategy,
leadership, policy, and collaboration



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How disruptive will the skills agenda be to the traditional university model?



KPMG’s Mark Essex and Sam Sanders each consider the scale of disruption facing universities in the next decade, and set out their respective “plausible futures.”

Across the UK, governments are reassessing the role of the traditional three-year undergraduate degree in the post-compulsory education system. Technical qualifications, the FE offer and higher and degree apprenticeships are growing in profile - if not, yet, in number.

This need not be immediately existentially threatening to universities - there is every reason to assume that with demographic growth among 18-19 year olds much of the country may see expansion across the post-compulsory sector in the next decade, though government may balk at the cost of rolling out a genuinely flexible student finance scheme that could in principle be taken up by a much larger proportion of the adult population.

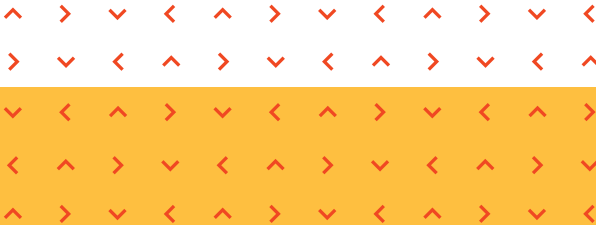
Yet, while universities may be looking optimistically at demographic trends, there is good reason to believe that the economy of the 2030s will look rather different from that of the 2020s. And the pressures underlying governments’ skills agendas - the suspicion that, in some cases, traditional three year undergraduate qualifications are not best serving the interests of the students who enrol on them, or the wider UK economy, will only intensify.

In responding to policymakers’ advocacy of further and technical education, some universities have pointed out that a significant proportion of their portfolio already falls into that domain (and that the academic/technical distinction is probably a category error in any case). There remains a lively debate as to what type of institution is best fitted to deliver higher technical provision, and the answer, as usual, almost certainly depends on local and regional institutional histories and cultures, geographies, and labour market patterns.

But there’s a risk that in focusing too closely on the detail of the technical education agenda universities miss the bigger picture of economic change that will inexorably bring pressure to bear on patterns of university provision in a more fundamental way. The Skills and Post-16 Education Bill currently making its way through Parliament paves the way for student finance to be available for single modules, potentially enabling lifelong learning and reskilling at scale, but also reducing the overheads for new providers of creating a higher education offer with student finance attached to it.

In The future of higher education in a disruptive world, Stephen Parker, KPMG’s global lead for education and skills has predicted the end of the “Golden Age” for universities in which “rising costs are no longer matched by a willingness of government and students to pay for them” - and the fundamental UK university operating model has limited prospect of offering the productivity gains that would be needed if, for example, the Westminster government reduced the undergraduate fee to £7,500, as proposed by the Augar review.

Faced with the prospect of permanent change, there are different schools of thought. Those who think the sector should **revert** to its pre-pandemic state; essentially do nothing on the assumption that the UK reputation for educational excellence will allow universities to ride the storm. Those who advocate **renovation**: actions that universities can put in place to improve their customer experience and make maximum use of their strategic advantages. And there are those pressing for **revolution**: a fundamental rethink of the role and purpose of higher education.



In this piece, Mark will play the role of the provocateur, arguing that a decade from now the three-year undergraduate degree will not be the main “product” of higher education. And Sam will set out the case for renovation: supporting students to make more productive choices.

Mark: time to unbundle the undergraduate degree

Should universities revert, renovate, or press for revolution? I reflect on the words of Bill Gates: ““We always overestimate the change that will occur in the next two years and underestimate the change that will occur in the next ten. Don’t let yourself be lulled into inaction.”

We face a dislocation caused by Covid; discoveries we have made but cannot unmake will see one-off shifts in the way we work, consume, commute and learn. Some industries, such as retail will see strategic decline in the workforce compounded by increased automation.

We need to fundamentally question the relevance of the three year undergraduate degree to the 2030s economy.

Other industries are seeing demand rocket, with less potential for automation; think about healthcare, for example. But with potentially more opportunity for augmentation – using technology to allow professionals to operate more at the top of their license and boost productivity.

Depending on the concentration of sectors in different regions, some places will see a significant need to reskill and retrain individuals to switch careers. More switching means more transferring of skills into new contexts. As automation and augmentation replace tasks within roles, that will lead to a reshaping of the workforce.

That means identifying meta-skills which are

transferable and “topping up” with domain knowledge and specialist skills. It also means shorter courses, delivered in parallel to employment, are going to be in much more demand through our recovery.

We need to fundamentally question the relevance of the three year undergraduate degree to the 2030s economy. When 50 per cent of school leavers go to higher education, the fact of having a degree, once an elite qualification in itself, now merely signals “above average”.

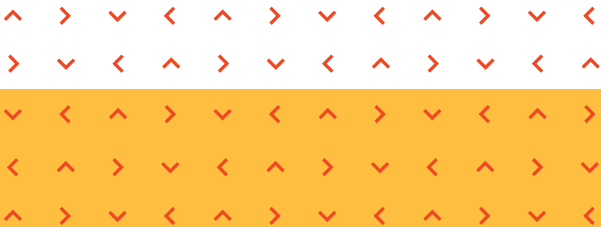
But is that the only reason people choose to study? What is an undergraduate degree for?

- To learn metaskills – those transferable skills such as scrutinising sources, making a logical argument, reviewing the available evidence
- Intellectual curiosity
- To leave home/find oneself
- To build networks
- To party hard
- Arts, sport, cultural expansion
- To enhance one’s lifelong earning potential

And those are just my reasons for doing one. My fellow students also gave these as reasons:

- Vocational skills
- As an entry ticket to a profession
- To acquire skills the country needs
- Prestige
- To learn English
- Preparation for a career in academia

And while many of these benefits are intangible, is it really sustainable that the only thing that is documented, which made my CV, was three syllables: “Maths, 2.1.” Or, if I wanted to add nine more: “University of Birmingham”.



If we value meta-skills, we should measure them

The skills I learned – creativity, analysis, problem solving, making an argument - “No-one cares what you believe, Essex, just what you can prove!” - are only captured in the narrative I put around that qualification in an interview. Not a lot of scrutiny for the main economic benefit of a qualification which would cost £27,750 plus living costs today.

Look at any list of top ten skills sought by employers today and you will find meta-skills such as judgment, critical thinking, and creativity feature highly - one of the reasons KPMG’s graduate intake features humanities as well as accounting graduates.

But the level six skill that earned the humanities degrees is measured and the meta-skills around assessing sources (valuable in the audit profession) are not, directly or separately. Is that sustainable in

New entrants to the market will be eyeing up the low cost to serve modules with a view to cherry-picking the profitable bits of courses.

a world in which job roles and skills are becoming more atomised and people seek to gain specific meta-skills in shorter formats?

Put it another way: do we think that the majority of demand for graduate skills in the 2030s will continue to be met by a single product – the three or four year undergraduate degree, delivered by a single institution in a single place including something like 84 weeks tuition over three years, delivered to predominantly 18-21 year olds via face to face lectures, tutorials, and independent study, at a single pace which precludes the ability to earn as you learn other than a part-time or holiday job to top up one’s living costs.

Would you design a system that way today if you had a blank sheet of paper? Because disruptors have exactly that: a blank sheet. New entrants to

the market will be eyeing up the low cost to serve modules with a view to cherry-picking the profitable bits of courses. After all, when budget airlines started to charge separately for meals on a flight, it was only a matter of time before “premium airlines” had to stop throwing them in for free.

Sam: we need to rethink choice

Mark outlines a plausible future. I think that demand will be met by greater variety and choice to allow learners to create a more personalised education experience. But choice alone is not enough to increase satisfaction. Indeed I worry that too much choice can lead to poorer outcomes, especially where that choice is not supported by effective information, advice and guidance.

The Augar review describes a future in which lifelong learning is a widely understood concept, in which students stop and start the learning in a flexible way over their entire career. In some ways this isn’t new; it has always been possible to defer study for a year, or to do some modules at other institutions, but this kind of flexibility is not the norm. Taken to the extreme, there would no longer be meaningful cohorts as students would be mixing and matching so much as they take their “learning passport” from institution to institution.

As someone who advises universities on their operations, I know that there is a good deal of logistical complexity involved in making modules more portable. Timetabling, accommodation, and real estate capacity come to mind. But there is also a potential for enormous increase in transaction costs arising from interoperability; in accrediting and validating students’ prior learning without all the quality control levers available within your institution.

But that flexibility isn’t just difficult to deliver. It may also threaten quality. There is a good deal of (often unfair) criticism levelled at the “Mickey Mouse degree”. I think it would be more accurate to think about “Mickey Mouse modules”. Students can be overwhelmed by the range of options and it is possible to select poor combinations. If the pick and mix degree adds the choice of everybody’s full menu we could create some very odd degree combinations which run the risk of failing to meet standards, or achieve students’ objectives.



I think in the future we will see universities offering a more personalised but also more curated experience, one in which students have some flexibility to study what and how they want - but with more active support to align their learning pathway to their future aspirations.

Those who seek specific skills to support a particular career, but who take tangential subjects may lose out in the competition for jobs against peers who have followed a clearer path. Those who are studying for reasons of intellectual curiosity, personal fulfilment or to pursue a particular academic field may want a broader exposure. One size doesn't fit all, but all students will benefit from guidance and pathfinding support.

How can institutions respond?

Those who favour a "revert" strategy may have the institutional brand power to hold firm. I think there will always be a place for the three year undergraduate degree; we only have to observe how many of today's students are so keen to return to campus life. Demographic growth in 18 year olds in the next decade suggests a ready pool of traditional students.

Many more institutions may find they need to renovate their offer to attract the students they want.

But I think many more institutions may find they need to renovate their offer to attract the students they want. And there are new entrants looking to bring revolution to the sector, not least from employers themselves. Corporates offer degree apprenticeships, powerful brands and potential for guaranteed jobs. It's a compelling offer and it is no wonder that more students are considering bypassing the more expensive alternative.

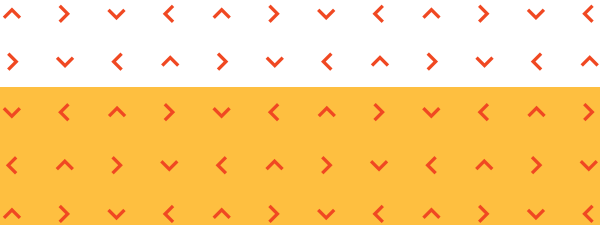
There is a good deal of (often unfair) criticism levelled at the "Mickey Mouse degree". I think it would be more accurate to think about "Mickey Mouse modules".

To compete, I think universities will need to provide more evidence than Mark's three syllables. I expect universities will need to demonstrate that they have equipped their learners with those meta-skills in a measurable way. In turn, this may well bring about more scrutiny of the components of individuals' degrees.

One strategy would be to create networks of institutions who recognise each other's standards and co-develop multiple institution courses. This means creating sustainable, mutually valuable partnerships is going to be increasingly important.

Another approach would be to try and meet the demand for flexibility within your own provision. For example, if students need or desire to spend time away from your campus, respond with more flexibility. That could mean taking a term out instead of a year out. Or exploit technology to study for a term remotely from another location. The institution's role would be to help students create the right programme for them.

Whichever the strategy, I think institutions that will have the most success are those who understand students' goals, help students chart a course, and then provide flexibility to allow the overall plan to adapt to events and uncertainties.



What will it take to convince policymakers that university leaders support the skills agenda?

Debbie McVitty finds enthusiasm for the Westminster government’s skills agenda among vice chancellors - and a desire to play a greater role in the conversation.

“Post-18 provision has not been delivering enough of the kind of opportunities we need, for the society we want,” said Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson at the annual HEPI conference.

It is notable how frequently the government’s skills agenda is articulated in terms that are oppositional to the university offer. Introducing the second reading of the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill in the House of Lords Baroness Berridge described “a problem in the balance of education” in which only four per

cent of young people achieve a higher technical qualification by the age of 25 compared to the third who achieve a degree.”

cent of working-age graduates are not in high-skilled employment” and concluded, “no wonder more parents would now prefer that their child gain a vocational qualification rather than a degree.”

At Wonkfest, University of Sunderland vice chancellor David Bell called this kind of “veiled threat” approach to post-compulsory education and skills provision “perverse”. “Something has gone wrong politically,” he added, “when that is the kind of conversation that has been allowed to go forward.”

It’s not that ministers are not sufficiently celebrating universities’ achievements, or that Treasury needs to hand over more public funds to universities, or even that government should stop meddling in university affairs - though you can certainly find versions of these arguments represented in the sector.

The real problem is that, at a time when the country is facing some very serious challenges, the government is not developing a meaningful partnership with universities to deliver on an agenda that universities not only support, but for which they are essential to that agenda’s effective development and delivery.

And the end result is not that universities will dig in and refuse to change - as university leaders have been clear when we’ve spoken over the past few weeks, universities have been changing consistently and will continue to do so, in response to the needs of students, employers, and their regions.

It will be that these agendas will not make the kind of difference that they would have the potential to make if government and universities were in closer alignment.

“The government is positioning universities as a problem rather than a solution,” says Liz Barnes, vice chancellor of Staffordshire University and chair of the Universities UK working group on the government’s planned Lifetime Loan Entitlement. “And yet if you look at what universities have provided during the pandemic we are the solution in terms of recovery, future jobs, and the future skilled workforce.”

The country is facing some very serious challenges, the government is not developing a meaningful partnership with universities to deliver on an agenda that universities not only support, but for which they are essential.

cent of young people achieve a higher technical qualification by the age of 25 compared to the third who achieve a degree.”

The Baroness went on to claim that “34 per cent of working-age graduates are not in high-skilled employment” and concluded, “no wonder more parents would now prefer that their child gain a vocational qualification rather than a degree.”

At Wonkfest, University of Sunderland vice chancellor David Bell called this kind of “veiled

The two way policy street

Universities face in many directions and serve many constituencies, of which national government is just one. And while you'd hope there would be some overlap in the priorities of the government and that of students, university staff, employers, public sector organisations, local governments and communities, and industry bodies and regulators, it's almost always messier than that.

"It's about making the university relevant for the place in which it sits and for its student population. That's why our diverse sector is so rich, because it is diverse and responsive to a plethora of needs," says Liz.

For vice chancellors and their executive teams, there's the immediate challenge of pandemic recovery: learning the lessons of the pandemic, international recovery, and responding to change agendas - in technology-enabled education, in flexible working, in governance, and in equality,

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diversity, and inclusion - that have been accelerated as a result of the upheaval.

In the medium term there's the implementation of government policy on skills and student finance reform, the Office for Students' review of the quality regime and the rollout of a revised Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, and a comprehensive spending review scheduled for the autumn that could yet result in cuts to the undergraduate fee.

And in the longer term there's a bigger - and in many ways more interesting - picture: universities' contribution to local and regional economic regeneration, changing patterns of work in industry and the public sector, technologies that could radically enhance education capability but also threaten university business models, and evolving student expectations of what and how they want to study.

Building an institutional strategy requires executive teams to assess the source of potential changes in the external environment, the scale of those changes, and their pace - and then decide what the university should do, how it should do it and, importantly, what it should stop doing.

So while universities have to be mindful of policy agendas and prepared to respond, for policy to really come to life policymakers also need to make the case for policy to universities - and be confident it's going to make a meaningful impact in the context of the wider forces that universities must respond to. And talking to university leaders, it's not clear that that's happening to the extent it could.

Response to the skills agenda

Discussing the skills agenda with university leaders, there is a real sense of opportunity and positive alignment between the agenda of government and that of universities - but there is frustration, too.

"The skills agenda is big, and bold, and marks a real moment for tertiary education, even though the focus is on FE," says Karen Stanton, vice chancellor of Solent University. "What we need to do with the skills agenda is strengthen the partnerships we have with FE colleges and employers and the pathways through levels four, five, six and into postgraduate.

"What that means in practice with FE colleges is mapping the curriculum. At city level we have Southampton Connect which brings together local leaders, the council, and business to work out what levelling up means for Southampton. One of the consequences of the pandemic has been a new quality in those city wide conversations about system-wide leadership. For me what's going to be important in any of these changes is how they are implemented, how they are funded, and how the link is provided with HE."



“Local partnerships aren’t new,” says Liz Barnes. “It has always been the right thing to align with FE colleges, especially if you are thinking about a civic agenda, and making provision for a seamless offer for social mobility, and working with partners to create a wider subject spread for the local offer.”

Staffordshire already offers accelerated degrees, and is about to launch its first microcredentials, supporting local businesses to build capacity for digital transformation. “I’m very pro lifelong learning, and pro the flexible offer,” says Liz.

“Employers really want short courses so people can go out, come back in and impact on the business. And they are less interested in assessment than in programme content.”

“But it’s not clear yet how the Lifetime Loan Entitlement will work, how it aligns with the traditional offer, and what it means for people who did their degree years ago, and now need to upskill. And I’m not convinced of the case for more level four and five provision - in Staffordshire our challenge is adults that haven’t qualified beyond level two, and it was cuts to adult education funding a decade ago that really created the issues for FE. There’s a risk of spending too much time talking about the jobs of today, but when we design our courses our constant mantra is the jobs of the future, the jobs of tomorrow.”

“I support the skills agenda - I believe in the principle,” says Charles Egbu, vice chancellor of Leeds Trinity University. “There is a real merit in aligning to the needs of employers and working closely with employers, and there are significant opportunities with HE and FE working together - my university does this and we want to do it more, to serve employers and the local community. But I believe the essence of a university education is more than ensuring graduates earn beyond a particular salary threshold - students take different courses because they want to contribute to society in a different way which is not always reflected in the level of remuneration they get for a particular job. Many of the students at LTU go on to make a significant contribution to our economy and wider social good. Many of our graduates continue to live locally. Government should not force students to move away from that which they naturally want to do, or force universities to be that which they are not.”

There’s a sense, in thinking about the future that some universities will need to change more than others to adapt - with the implication that it’s the post-92 part of the sector that will need to consider its position in relation to FE and other kinds of provision, while the research-intensive part of the sector will remain relatively immune.

But that’s not the view of Colin Bailey, vice chancellor of Queen Mary University, London. “Universities do need to change, because they are part of the

“Students take different courses because they want to contribute to society in a different way which is not always reflected in the level of remuneration they get for a particular job.”

education ecosystem - they need to be joined up with primary, secondary and colleges,” he says. “We do degree apprenticeships, and we’re proud of that. HE does need to link up with FE - we take BTEC students because there is talent coming through that route, but we do need to make sure we continue to provide extra support for these students. But I’m frustrated with the government chopping and changing on the skills agenda - let’s have a long term policy plan and let’s get behind it.”

The scale of change required

Being up for the challenge is one thing - but how much change are these university leaders expecting in the years ahead, whether as a result of the skills agenda or - perhaps more likely - because universities themselves have invested in offering new courses or modes of engagement?

“There’s now quite a lot of variability and flexibility within the traditional core of university offer,” says David Bell. “I think that is unambiguously a good thing. It provides many students, including

mature students, with different ways of learning.” At Sunderland, in nursing, for example, there is a traditional three year undergraduate course, but the university has recently contracted with Health Education England to offer more online delivery of nursing education, as well as working on nursing apprenticeships.

Though the next decade is likely to see universities focusing on areas of strength in terms of subject and course provision, they may also find that they are catering to a more diverse set of student needs. No vice chancellor I spoke to believes that the traditional three year degree will disappear or radically reduce in the coming years, meaning that supporting a traditional on-campus experience will continue to be a priority. But many universities are keen to diversify their offer - and are contending with a fuzzy picture of post-pandemic demand.

“There are areas of what we do where technology will transform how we operate and I’m not sure we’re adequately prepared for that.”

At Leeds Trinity, Charles Egbu has just completed a process of analysing which courses are likely to see growth in student demand over the next five years, which include data, computing and healthcare aligned courses. But knowing where demand might be doesn’t necessarily answer the question of delivery modes. “There’s a dichotomy between those who want to come to campus, feel and smell the campus because that is what they believe it is all about, and those who favour blended, dual delivery, digitalisation, hi-flex, or block release,” says Charles. “The proportion is difficult to tell and what universities will need to do is be very flexible in how we deliver programmes, with a high level of modularisation, and be mindful we have mature students, those with jobs, those with caring responsibilities. For universities like ours where

many students are first in generation to study in higher education, there’s a lot of administrative complexity, because it’s going to be a new way of doing things. It’s going to be a tough time.”

Karen Stanton isn’t sure the sector is prepared for the scale of change that technology could bring. “We are really going to have to get up to speed on the introduction of artificial intelligence into the digital ecosystem of universities - we don’t have an immediate clear response to this as a sector - and there are some real questions about using AI in admissions or marking. There are areas of what we do where technology will transform how we operate and I’m not sure we’re adequately prepared for that.”

Student loan finance at module level and credit transfer seem to offer a blueprint for a lifelong learning model, but there are quite a few hurdles to overcome. “On the more radical end could you envisage a system where people do modules over time - yes, but it is going to take quite a change in the plumbing, if you want to put it that way,” says David Bell. “And universities need to be better because we can sometimes be quite rigid in the ways that we organise and assess what we do and how prepared we are to bundle it all up.”

“Doing transferable credit is where it starts to get very interesting,” says Colin Bailey. “There might be a market for upskilling, and for stackable modules to support Masters, postgraduate certificates and diplomas, and there might be some way we can adapt or do it across a number of universities. It boils down to who is awarding the degree at the end. The value and robustness of our degree is something we will defend because without it employers will lose trust in us.”

“There will be a massive shift towards students personalising and curating their learning pathways but we’ve tried credit accumulation and transfer and it’s enormously unwieldy,” says Karen Stanton. “The jury’s out as to whether learners will be up for it, on what scale, and whether it will benefit individual academic journeys.”



What happens next?

While government rhetoric is certainly discouraging, it won't be rhetoric that makes life materially more difficult for universities, it will be funding cuts, or restrictions to student recruitment. None of the leaders I speak to believe that a fee cut would mean the end of their institution, but they are frank that it would make it harder to achieve their missions.

"In simple terms I am just about breaking even on home students, and losing money on some courses," says Colin Bailey. "We lose money on research and the only way I can support it is with other income streams, especially overseas students. If the unit of resource reduces on home students I would have to try to cross-subsidise with non-regulated fees. If I can't do that you're possibly looking at different ways of teaching, but the quality of teaching will go down."

"I'm sure the rest of the sector has done the scenario planning," says Karen Stanton. "The problem is that this comes alongside the impact of Covid, and Brexit - the European student body has pretty much disappeared. For us, practically, that would mean we'd need to build bigger contingencies than

firing on all cylinders to make sure you are serving everyone."

Yet even against the backdrop of a tricky policy environment, universities have significant room for manoeuvre - especially where the strategy is clear and local relationships and partnerships are good.

"You might think that for someone who has spent a lot of my career in Whitehall I should be encouraging everyone else to keep a close eye on what comes out of policy, but to be honest, I don't do that. My line is, we have a huge amount that we can control ourselves - there's a whole set of changes and strategic conversations, the things we decide to spend money on or not, we can really shape what we do," says David Bell.

Given this is the case, if the government wants to build a flourishing post compulsory education ecosystem, it would be wise to bring universities more fully into the conversation, to drop the confrontational rhetoric, and focus on building a shared agenda for the long term.

“You need to make sure you are firing on all cylinders to make sure you are serving everyone”.

we'd have done previously to enable us to be able to respond to whatever change is coming down the line."

"If it comes, it will be a worry for a university like mine," says Charles Egbu. "The new quality regime could make it harder to be agile because of the higher stakes. The financial envelope is very tight. You need to be sustainable financially, be mindful the community wants you to play a role, work closely with the local authority, and support their wider strategy. Some of these don't equate well with what OfS is asking for - you need to make sure you are



We must overcome FE and HE silos to build an education ecosystem that extends opportunity



Former skills and apprenticeships minister Anne Milton makes the case for the ramping up of collaboration between further and higher education in the interests of places, and learners

When asked what further education and higher education collaboration looks like my mind goes back to my former life in the NHS.

The constant cries that: “health and social care really need to be more joined up/work closer together/ collaborate” have gone unheeded despite the continued agreement from governments of all political persuasions over decades, that this needed to happen. Yes, some progress has been achieved but it is nowhere near sufficient to have an impact on the users of the services.

The cry for FE and HE collaboration is now similarly starting to echo in my life. I sincerely hope that the economic and social benefits that can be derived from collaboration will shine through and overcome any of the perceived barriers that it is believed stand in the way of what is essential progress.

After all, the case for collaboration has been made for two decades and probably longer.

Go back three years and you can find universities minister Sam Gyimah talking about wanting “colleges, universities, business and industry to work together to ensure our education and training system is giving young people the skills they need to succeed.”

Go back nine years and you can find commentary that colleges need to be clearer about what makes them distinctive, and that the HE sector needs to recognise that colleges bring something distinctive and valuable to the table.

Go back 20 years and you can find commentary on research that concludes that the culture differences between HE and FE can be a strength of collaborative

provision and that “information and communication technology” has the potential to support such provision.

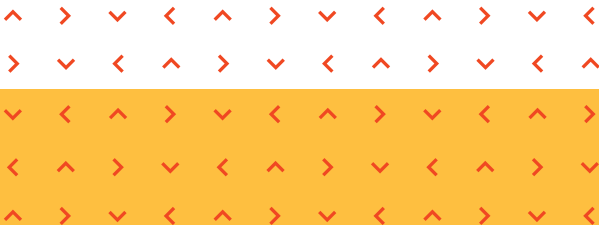
The case for collaboration

Collaboration is the way we solve the skills shortages that we have. If you look at educational attainment we have a huge supply of untapped potential among our adult population. We have large numbers of adults who with the right retraining and upskilling could solve our skills shortages – and the UK is not alone.

I visited the World Skills competition and conference in Abu Dhabi in 2017 and heard education ministers from across the world talk of the shortages they face. Those skills shortages will not be solved unless FE and HE come out of their silos, work together and take an approach that enables people to get the skills they need and the country needs, so we can compete globally.

The age of institutional silos is surely over. Post Covid we are at a “phoenix from the ashes” moment. A year of virtual working has shown us that the barriers that we previously envisaged can easily be torn down and FE and HE can work in a different way.

Collaboration really matters. We need to be unleashing the potential skills of thousands of people who could be working in higher skilled jobs, earning more money and having better jobs and careers. If post 16 institutions work alongside each other using their individual strengths and filling each other’s gaps in provision they will offer greater opportunity together than they can ever offer working alone.



There is no fixed blueprint for FE and HE to work together, nor should government set one out - universities and colleges must find ways that work for them both. There is huge variation among individual universities and similarly amongst further education providers. One size most certainly won't fit all - they should do what works for them in their local area.

There may, however, be some best practice from which to learn, how some of the common challenges in collaboration can be overcome, and what opportunities can result - but any prescription as to how the collaboration should work is doomed to fail.

What does good collaboration look like?

Great collaboration should be evaluated on results. It's where learners and students get the education and teaching that they need, at the most appropriate location, from the most appropriate staff to deliver that teaching.

Prior learning and attainment of local populations will vary significantly so there will similarly be variable educational uplifts needed from the institutions best suited for that learning. Moving seamlessly from one institution to another is essential to provide an easy route for all so they can follow mapped job and career paths. Collaboration has to be centred around the needs of the individual, not the institutions.

Good collaboration needs highly motivated people and good leadership. All of those working in the FE and HE sectors believe that the job they do is invaluable to those that they teach - they believe in the mission of their organisation. But change is never easy. The benefits and opportunities need to be sold to the staff so that all are working together for a common purpose. We need leaders in those organisations to be committed to the benefits and collaboration will not happen until the real and tangible benefit is fully understood by those at the top.

The current government has made some strong statements about its focus on skills, retraining and upskilling. Waiting on government to force change can be a dangerous game. It is all too easy to say it's much too difficult, that despite the benefits that

could be derived there are still barriers in the way. We know that the way funding streams are set up can make post 18 education more competitive than collaborative, and government should consider ways to overcome this to create the best conditions for effective collaboration.

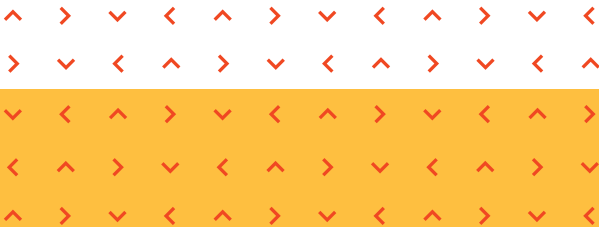
Good collaboration needs highly motivated people and good leadership.

But if FE and HE really want to do the job they were set up to do, start that collaboration now. There are superb examples around the country. London South Bank University developed a model of FE/HE collaboration three years ago. In May in Manchester nine FE institutions and five HE institutions have come together to address regional skills and economic challenges.

As apprenticeships and skills minister I saw at first hand the changes that can be achieved through education and training opportunities. I saw young people and adults who had left school with no qualifications complete degree courses, and get on career paths that transformed their lives. Many had been given a second, and sometimes third chance, by an institution or employer who saw their potential.

If we want to level up this country, and make sure everyone gets these opportunities, it will only come about by a collective and collaborative vision from the educational institutions and leadership from the top.

Do this and we will be on a path to getting the skilled work force the country needs and a more equal opportunity for individuals to have a rewarding job and career.



No government has ever achieved credit transfer in HE. Will it be different this time?



David Kernohan explains why repeated efforts to implement a credit transfer system have been unsuccessful

Credit frameworks are a forlorn expression of the hope that all this learning that people do somehow links together.

That might, on the face of it, feel a little vague. This is because our use of credit as an idea may tend towards the theoretical rather than the practical, even as policy - emboldened by the seemingly unstoppable march of microcredentials - tends ever more concrete.

But it's about to get very concrete indeed, because the success of the government's proposed Lifetime Loan Entitlement, which is intended to allow people to access the equivalent of four years' learning at different points in their lives, if it is not to act as essentially a straitjacket tying learners to a single location or institution, depends on the ease with which credit can be accumulated and transferred from one tertiary institution to another.

My way of thinking about the credit framework world is unashamedly stolen from a common, informed, perspective on much of higher education data. What we have is good enough for what we use it for, but there is very good reason to doubt that it is usable in ways that are sometimes proposed.

But perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself.

What is credit and what is a credit framework?

Imagine you've just completed a course. It was a single module, usually offered to first year undergraduates at your local university in England. You got a good pass, and you are delighted with

what you have learned - so much so that you are wondering about returning for more learning and an eventual qualification. Your question is - can I use this learning that I have already done to count towards this planned qualification?

The course you completed was worth "15 credits" at "level four". The 15 credits mean that the learning you have done is equivalent to 150 notional hours of learning - which includes time spent in learning the lab, the lecture hall, the library, and your living room. The level four means that this learning was at a level of difficulty usually offered to people in the first year of their degree. None of this has anything to do with your grades - if you scraped a D you got 15 credits, just like you would if you aced an A.

If you wanted to top up to a certificate in higher education you'd want another 105 credits at level four. If you wanted a full-on honours degree you'd need another 345 credits, and while you could pick up more at level four and level five you would need at least 90 of these to be at level six.

Because we're in higher education the levels stuff comes from the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (for England, Wales, and Northern Ireland - in Scotland the slightly different Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework applies). The credits stuff (and the convention that one credit is equivalent to ten hours of learning) derives from the UK-wide Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS). CATS is widely used enough to be an accepted standard, but is not a requirement as things currently stand.



The promise of credit

Think back to the course you completed. You would perhaps imagine that as your study was worth 15 credits at level four, it could be counted against requirements for any course that you wanted to apply to - no matter the provider, system, or subject of study.

Indeed, because the UK is a signatory to the Bologna Process, which established a European Credit Transfer and Accumulation Scheme (ECTS) broadly compatible with UK credit, you might imagine that you could take your credit to any provider in Europe.

Credit transfer is complex and arduous - for this reason it happens very rarely and usually with a financial cost.

There's a name for this idea - Accreditation of Prior Certified Learning (APCL). In some places it works quite well - for instance in the articulation agreements between colleges and universities in Scotland, or when dealing with large chunks of learning that are already qualifications in their own right - topping up a two year foundation degree to an honours degree by studying for an extra year is a good example here.

Where approaches like this work there are usually a few factors in place:

- The route is established - either by lots of people doing it or by a specific agreement between two providers.
- The provider you are bringing credit into already understands the nature and coverage of learning you have done, and how it compares to what is usually taught to their students - usually because efforts have been made to map the curriculum.
- The provider you are bringing credit from is established, widely understood, and subject to common regulatory or professional requirements. In essence, it is much easier to move credit between two similar providers.
- You are transferring credit to a course in a similar subject area to the one you are entering.

Outside of this, credit transfer is complex and arduous - for this reason it happens very rarely and usually with a financial cost. You would specify an area of the course you are applying to that you felt you had already covered, the provider you were applying for would work with you to ensure that your claim could be properly evidenced - using anything from transcripts and references to an exam or demonstration.

You can see why doing this at scale could cause a problem - it takes a lot of human expertise and resource. And while it might be tempting to write this off as unnecessary university bureaucracy, remember that universities are expected to protect the standards of their courses - and this includes testing the claim that someone is qualified to start one.

The political ideal

The Skills and Post-16 Education Bill currently under scrutiny in Westminster and which applies to English institutions dares to imagine the collection of credit at levels four to six from numerous providers in numerous subject areas. The detail of the bill currently only specifies that student finance may be allocated at the level of a module, but we are awaiting a government consultation on how credit accumulation and transfer would work in such a system.

Although the plumbing that enables credit transfer has been widely available for at least a decade, the use of these capabilities is very much the exception. And this has been noted by politicians - a call for evidence on credit transfer featured in Success as a Knowledge Economy (this resulted in a great report but very little activity), and there was a call to action in 2003's The Future of Higher Education that also failed to move the dial appreciably. Even Dearing (1997) included a section on credit transfer that sketched out the forerunner of the modern FHEQ.

The launch of the QAA's new credit framework in May 2021 reflected the new interest in the topic. Though the FHEQ is a required standard, the credit framework has the status of voluntary guidance that sits outside of the regulatory framework. What it does and how it does is entirely uncontroversial - it simply maps common qualifications to levels (FHEQ, SCQF, ECTS) and credit amounts (using the



old CATS standard applied by the majority of higher education).

Arguably, while compliance remains optional (though you'd need a pretty good reason not to use it) widespread use of credit transfer - and thus the dream of lifelong learning - will remain just that.

What would make a difference is enshrining credit transfer in the English regulatory framework, and it needs to be compatible with systems of post compulsory education that students may choose to use, including elsewhere in the UK, in Europe, and globally. This will require a collaborative and consultative approach, especially where the four rapidly diverging systems in the UK are involved.

Getting there

As you may have read already, the QAA is putting the work in on micro-credentials. Perhaps the most discussed element of the emerging post-16 skills system globally - these are short credit bearing courses with a discrete set of learning aims, that can (often) be "stacked" to contribute to larger qualifications. That single credit bearing module you did at the top of this piece? It could well have been a micro-credential.

But other parts of this approach remain at the conceptual stage. We're long overdue, for example, a properly accepted approach to APCL - and there'd also be a case to sharpen up the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) to allow professional skills and work-based expertise to be recognised within larger awards.

We're also a long way off bottoming out the way we treat level four to six vocational and other FE qualifications, and apprenticeships, as prior learning within higher education - beyond the way we treat them in the UCAS tariff for entry.

We also need to tackle the question of longevity. We might know how much your 15 credits at level four is worth now - how does that change if it was ten years ago, or referred to a professional standard that has since been superseded?

And this plays into the wider question of accounting for skills or domain expertise - I took my music

technology qualification two decades ago. The state of the art kit I learned to use then is now prized ironically for its lofi, retro sound: but the fact that I know what a compressor is and how to apply it still has currency.

And I've studiously ignored the question of subject till now; but what does a level four qualification in plumbing, an abandoned masters in European literature, a smattering of modules and microcredentials in finance, drawing with charcoal, and marine cephalopod biology, and a six year old Google Certified Professional certificate actually add up to?

I mean, it might be 360 credits with 90 at level six, but is it an honours degree? What in? Awarded by whom? For some, the answer to these questions might matter less than what they can do with each qualification as they get them, but it's hard to see how that's the case for most.

Reality check

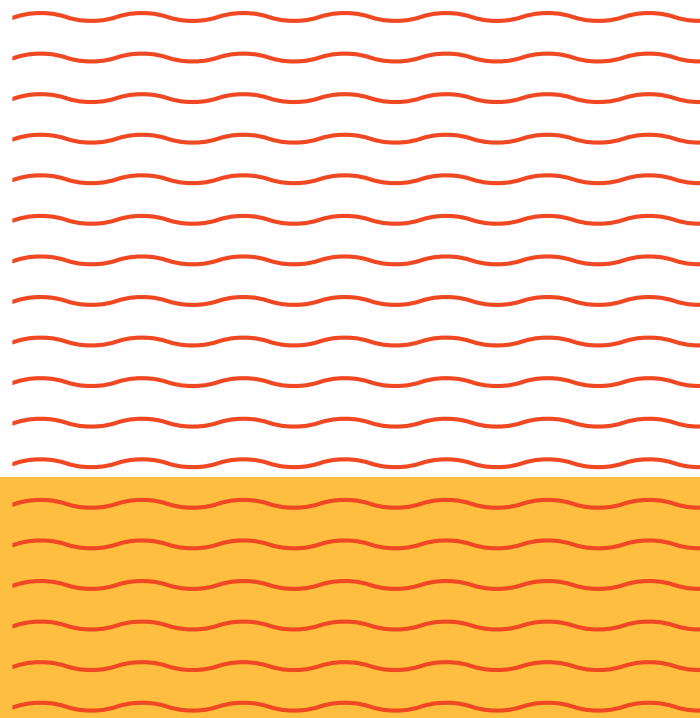
Surely by now we must be wondering about the demand for this kind of thing. After all, previous attempts at providing alternatives to traditional university education have not foundered due to a lack of government backing. Who wants to study in this piecemeal fashion?

The appeal to adult learners, reskilling or upgrading, is clear. There's clearly a market for work-related and professional training that can be taken as needed - although arguably the proposals to support this practice with SLC-style student loans doesn't fit in as well with family and financial responsibility.

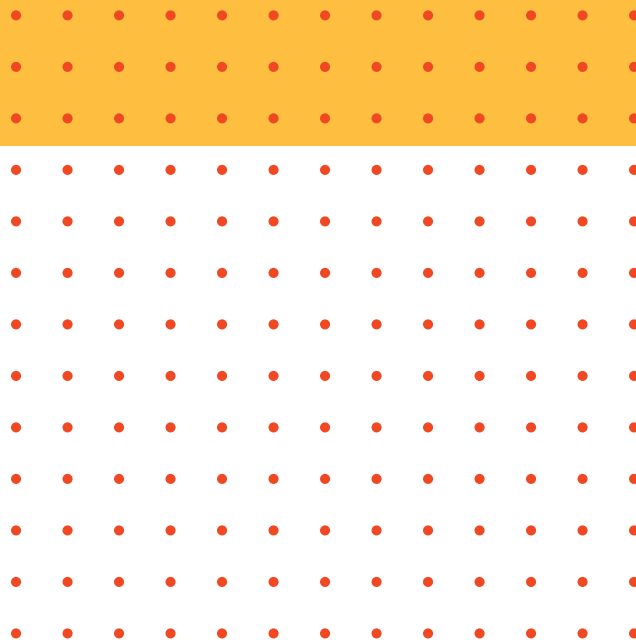
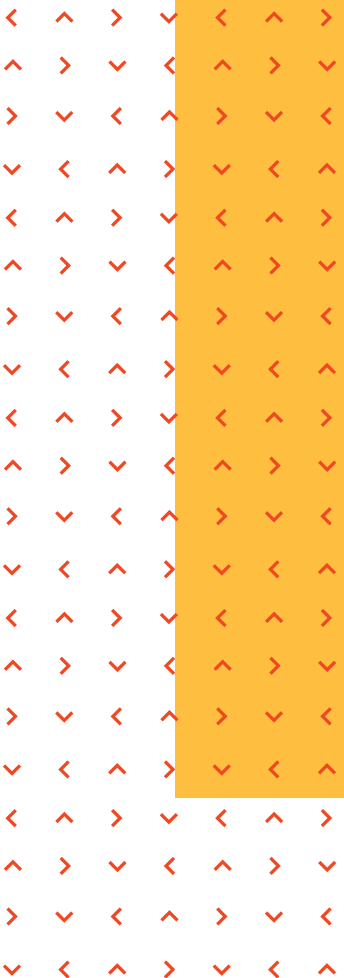
What is far from clear is how popular trading an early and established level six qualification in favour of a lifetime of just-in-time work-based learning would be to school leavers. Something very odd would have to happen to see young people (and their parents) forgo what has become a right of passage for more than half of the population. The Treasury impetus for this shift is clear, but given the history here it does look a lot like wishful thinking.



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