

PRESS RELEASE

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New Report Calls for ‘Step-Change’ in FE-HE Collaboration to Solve UK Skills Crisis

The [Lifelong Education Institute](#) (LEI), in partnership with the [Mixed Economy Group of Colleges](#) (MEG), has today published a landmark policy paper titled "**Partners in Progress: Colleges at the Forefront of Technical Education.**" The report argues the need for a re-examination of traditional Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) relationships; the creation of a 'tertiary ecosystem' capable of driving economic growth; and, critically, further development of higher technical education through colleges.

As the UK transitions toward a policy landscape favouring cooperation over competition, the paper outlines a strategic roadmap to move beyond transactional validation agreements toward long-term, structural partnerships. The report highlights that FE colleges already deliver approximately 10% of all enrolments at Level 4 and above, in England. Yet they often face a 'power imbalance' when partnering with universities.

Key Recommendations

The report makes several high-level recommendations to the government and the Office for Students (OfS) to embed collaboration into the heart of the Post-16 system:

- **Financial Incentives for Cooperation:** Introduce a 20% per-student revenue funding uplift for courses co-designed and co-delivered by FE and HE partners.
- **Reform of Awarding Powers:** Streamline the process for FE Colleges to gain Higher Technical Qualification (HTQ) awarding powers to reduce reliance on lengthy university validation.
- **Mandatory Collaborative Governance:** Introduce a regulatory requirement for university boards to include FE leadership expertise, and vice-versa for college boards.
- **Enhanced Local Skills Planning:** Require Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) to include a specific "HE Access Improvement Plan" to ensure universities are active participants in regional skills strategies.

Andy Forbes, Executive Director of the Lifelong Education Institute (LEI), said:

"It's great to see colleges and universities across the country working more closely together to deliver the skills every region needs. This timely report aims to accelerate this trend, in order to create a more joined-up and accessible offer to learners and employers."

Jon Ridley, Chair of the Mixed Economy Group (MEG) and Principal of Newcastle College, said:

"For too long Colleges have been seen as a route into higher education and not as providers of high quality higher technical education themselves. Across the country, thousands of young

people and adults are undertaking first class higher education training and studies at their local college. If we are serious about addressing the government's targets for participation in higher technical skills, as outlined in the recent Skills White Paper, then a re-examination of the traditional Further and Higher education relationship is required and the critical role of colleges in providing the skills needed to boost our economy, locally and nationally, needs to be fully recognised and rewarded"

Overcoming the Skills Gap

The paper identifies the decline in adult participation as a critical social and economic failure. Since the early 2010s, adult participation in education and training at Level 4+ has fallen by almost two-thirds. By fostering closer FE-HE ties, the report suggests the UK can better support the "IS-8" high-growth sectors—including Clean Energy and Digital Technologies—which currently face significant skills shortages.

The report concludes that while the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), due in 2026/27, is a positive step, it will only succeed if the complementary strengths of both sectors are utilised: FE's deep reach into working-class communities and HE's research and higher-level training expertise.

#ENDS#

Notes for Editors

Key Facts & Figures from the Paper:

- **Market Share:** FE Colleges deliver **10%** of all Level 4-6 provision in the UK.
- **Technical Specialisms:** Colleges are responsible for **80%** of Higher National Certificates (HNCs), **61%** of Foundation Degrees, and **53%** of Higher National Diplomas (HNDs).
- **The Access Gap:** In 2025, 18-year-olds from the UK's most deprived areas made up only **9%** of the total cohort progressing to university.
- **Sector Reach:** There are over **120** FE Colleges currently on the Office for Students register of HE providers.
- **Apprenticeship Trends:** Almost **half** of all apprenticeships are now taken by those aged 25 or older, with the majority at higher or degree level.

About the Lifelong Education Institute (LEI):

The LEI is a policy think-tank dedicated to promoting lifelong learning and reforming the UK's post-16 education system to meet the needs of a 21st-century economy.

About the Mixed Economy Group (MEG):

MEG represents over 40 large FE colleges in England that have a significant strategic commitment to delivering higher education (College-Based Higher Education).