



COLLECTIVE

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN POLICY AND PEDAGOGY

BUILDING A STRONGER
FE AND SKILLS SYSTEM

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In Partnership



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The 'Why' and the Rationale Behind this Report

The FE + Skills Collective is a new model for bringing the different parts of the FE + Skills ecosystem together. The idea is that if we have the same type of events and the same type of reports, we should expect the same outcomes. We are stepping into a new stage for the Skills sector, with a mission-led Government and this requires a new way of working. So, we brought together close to 90 different Further Education (FE) and Skills representatives at Austin Court, Birmingham, on 10 October 2024 and gave them a mission to Bridge Policy and Pedagogy.

This was a collection of educators and leaders from across the FE and Skills ecosystem, working together with Government, employers and learners to share new ideas, visions and action points to help drive the FE and Skills sector forward for a better future.

The morning was all about 'scene setting' with panel discussions looking at the local and national skills landscape. Then we broke into dynamic small groups in the afternoon to pool our Collective intelligence and exchange knowledge, giving everyone a voice. The energy that emanated from it was huge, and the ideas and recommendations shared are reflected in the following report.

Gavin O'Meara, CEO and Founder of FE News

Foreword

This year's FE + Skills Collective was inspired by the findings of the [Changing Systems of Change](#) report, developed by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) in partnership with the Saïd Business School, University of Oxford. That report – which also inspired ETF's decision to sponsor the FE + Skills Collective event – called for a paradigm shift in the Further Education (FE) and Skills sector, encouraging a move from a compliance-driven culture to one that thrives on trust, collaboration, and systemic improvement. This shared vision for a self-improving sector formed the basis of the FE + Skills Collective agenda, where we explored the immense potential of the sector to shape both social justice and economic progress.

Building on the Changing Systems of Change report's insights, we recognise the need to overcome longstanding challenges – such as skills shortages and regional disparities – by harnessing the power of collective changemaking. FE and Skills must foster a system where educators, learners, and policymakers work together towards sustainable growth and innovation. In this FE + Skills Collective report, we delve into the systemic issues raised by the Changing Systems of Change report and present strategies to ensure FE and Skills can meet today's demands and prepare for future challenges. We aim to celebrate collaboration and explore how trust and collective action can help us transform this vital sector.

This collection of chapters is not just a series of thoughts and reflections but a powerful celebration of collaboration and shared vision within our sector. The FE + Skills Collective event was akin to an 'unconference' – informal, without rigid presentations – where the depth and richness of ideas came from diverse perspectives, fostering an atmosphere where every voice matters. Equity in our conversations is key, as each question and insight contributes to shaping our collective understanding.

The FE and Skills sector has immense potential to drive social mobility and enrich social value. The more we communicate the significance of our work, the more our impact will be acknowledged. Over the past year, government changes have brought renewed focus on skills development. With the five new missions – focused on economic growth, clean energy, and reducing social care and crime inequalities – our sector sits at the heart of these priorities. It is essential that we continue to assert our role as key contributors, not mere participants, in driving these national goals.

However, significant challenges remain. The Employer Skills Survey 2022 showed that over a third of vacancies are caused by skills shortages – an urgent reminder of the need for transformation within our sector. Disparities across regions, from the nuclear industry in the North West to financial services in London, highlight the pressing need for responsive education and training systems. As we move from crisis management to strategic missions, the question is whether our sector is evolving in line with these needs.

The future workforce – spanning healthcare, green industries, creative sectors, and civil engineering – depends on us. At the core of this is high-quality teaching. Inspirational professionals are the lifeblood of the FE and Skills sector, and their contribution cannot be overstated.

This report offers an opportunity for reflection, but more importantly, for action. By uniting our insights and efforts, we can meet today's challenges and seize tomorrow's opportunities.

Together, we will ensure that FE and Skills continues to be a powerful force for change and growth in our society.

Dr Katerina Kolyva, CEO, ETF

Introduction

In a fast-changing world where technical and vocational education is often overlooked, the FE + Skills Collective has identified some key themes and areas for action.

Its most important finding is that in almost every aspect of our shared enquiry, from the use of AI to enhancing dual professionalism, relationship-based collaboration between people will be essential.

While we may often look to Government for solutions (often expressed as ‘Government should fund...’), we have to face the reality that there are extremely limited public resources and that Government is unlikely to come up with both brilliant and immediate reform of rules and regulations. We therefore have to look to ourselves; we know that there is untapped and latent energy and possibility in how we work together. We can generate many of the solutions from within our sector and deliver many of the benefits directly while also, as a highly beneficial by-product, proving the case to Government for further investment and reform.

Relationships between people are at four levels: between us and others in our own organisations; with peers in other organisations; with others in the local ecosystem (e.g. training providers and colleges working more closely and consistently over time with local employers); and with people working in Government organisations at both local and national levels.

Particularly important relationships were consistently identified across many of the separate sessions at the FE + Skills Collective event:

- between educators, peer-to-peer, to learn from each other (for example, about using AI), to provide mutual support and ‘faculty’ (especially for often-remote vocational educators delivering in workplaces) and to drive up professionalism
- between providers and employers, to ensure that curriculum is relevant at both a technical level and when it comes to work skills (such as communication and innovation)
- between different providers, to ensure that the recruitment, enrolment and delivery practices and rules of one organisation do not inadvertently block pathways for individuals moving between organisations on their journey
- between colleges and training providers and those funding and regulating them (Government officials), to ensure that the strings attached to funding do not inadvertently undermine the very purpose of that funding.

The key finding is that people-to-people relationships matter. In an opaque and ever-changing world, trust – that the other person is well intentioned, even if they have a different perspective and/or set of priorities – is the essential commodity. This was a key factor identified in ETF’s [Changing Systems of Change](#) report and was again borne out here. The FE + Skills Collective recognises that trust takes real commitment and time to happen and inevitably comes up against the bumps of misunderstanding and mistakes. But, as a Collective, this is what everyone involved committed to.

This is perhaps the most important role of leaders in all the organisations involved: employers, providers and Government – to nurture and encourage trust, even as people in those organisations experience those bumps along the way. The same leaders can make it clear in how they lead that they know that this is a journey, that we will not hit perfection immediately and that aiming for perfection is in fact counterproductive.

For example, leaders need to encourage their teams to move through new technologies, such as Generative AI, with curious caution, experimenting in order to learn rather than to reach an 'end state' as soon as possible. We need to explore data, not with a mindset that it will "give us the answer", but that it will stimulate and anchor our thinking and relationships. We need to cross boundaries, whether through shadowing or through secondments, to understand what it's really like to be in the shoes of another.

The rest of the paper summarises the individual sessions that made up the FE + Skills Collective, a combination of panel sessions with Q&A from the audience and individual workshop sessions with specific themes.

National Decision Making for a Stronger Skills System

In opening the FE + Skills Collective, the first panel recognised that the evolving landscape of the FE and Skills sector presents a critical juncture for policy and pedagogy. The introduction of the Government's five key missions – economic growth, clean energy, public safety, opportunity and an efficient NHS – makes the FE and Skills sector central to the Government's success. Our role in developing the skills necessary for national priorities is undeniable, but we also know that success will require close collaboration between policymakers, educators, and employers. ETF's report on [Changing Systems of Change](#) underscores the importance of that collaboration and of developing Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) that align educational outcomes with regional and national economic needs¹.

The panel acknowledged that one of the greatest challenges facing the sector is ongoing skills mismatches. As industries evolve, the education system must adapt to meet changing needs. The call from the Collective was for the FE and Skills sector to create a mechanism that can anticipate future demands and align curricula to ensure learners are ready for tomorrow's jobs. We agreed that this requires close partnerships between educators, industry leaders, and policymakers, ensuring that local and national skills strategies are in sync with economic development goals.

Central to this collaboration, is the alignment of policy and pedagogy. Effective education cannot thrive without the support of robust policy frameworks that enable high-quality teaching and learning². We need a policy environment that supports innovation, ensures adequate resources, and invests in educators' continuous professional development (CPD).

The panel also recognised that we must create and work to a long-term vision for adult education. We know that many adults, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those returning to education after career breaks, face barriers to accessing training. Modular and flexible learning opportunities, such as tailored apprenticeships and micro-credentials, were seen as a way to help address these challenges, but systemic reform is necessary to ensure these options are widely available and adequately funded³. The Augar Review of Post-18 Education captures the importance of lifelong learning and the need for reform in funding structures to support these flexible learning pathways⁴.

To achieve the above, the Collective agreed that a major focus must be on teacher development and support. Ensuring that our sector professionals have access to relevant, high-quality training is essential if we are to maintain excellence in teaching and learning. The panel recognised that quality CPD enables professionals to remain engaged with industry trends and new pedagogical practices, ensuring that learners are well-equipped for the demands of the workplace. All agreed that ongoing professional development is vital in ensuring that teaching practices evolve with industry needs.

¹ ETF, *Further Education and Skills: Changing Systems of Change*, 2024.

² Department for Education, "Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth," 2021.

³ Department for Education, "Barriers to Adult Learning," 2020.

⁴ Augar Review of Post-18 Education and Funding, 2019

Policy implications and recommendations

1. **Enhance collaboration:** stakeholders in the FE and Skills sector should redouble efforts to engage with employers and government departments in a tripartite effort to align educational outcomes with economic needs.
2. **Create a shared map for post 16:** develop a comprehensive strategy for adult education that includes flexible learning pathways, modular qualifications, and tailored support for underrepresented groups.
3. **Reform the qualifications system:** review and adapt the qualifications framework to ensure it meets the evolving demands of the workforce, facilitating quicker responses to emerging skill needs.
4. **Invest in educators:** fund teacher training, ongoing professional development and competitive salaries to help attract and retain quality educators in the sector and deliver a positive return on investment in the form of increasing skills across the economy.
5. **Foster professionalism:** alongside increased emphasis on professionalism, the sector should encourage career-long professional development for educators, emphasising the importance of sharing best practices and maintaining high standards across the sector.
6. **Embrace applied research:** promote a culture of applied research within the FE and Skills sector, enabling educators to experiment with and evaluate new teaching practices that enhance learning outcomes.

Localised Decision Making for a Stronger Skills System

The second panel began by welcoming the increased focus on localised decision-making that offers a unique opportunity for institutions to respond more directly to the needs of regional economies, employers and communities. Local empowerment was embraced by those attending the FE + Skills Collective, not least because it allows the sector to play to its strengths of agility and flexibility to create programmes that make a difference where they are delivered. As technological advancements and regional economic shifts continue to reshape the labour market, providers recognised that they must be ever more nimble in adapting their educational programmes to meet these changes.

Localised decision making was seen to add value in two ways, for the development of specific skills and for social mobility.

We heard how localised decision-making allows for bespoke qualifications and micro-accreditations tailored to the unique demands of local industries. That, in turn, ensures that learners are not only prepared for the jobs of today but are also equipped with the adaptability and skills needed to thrive in tomorrow's economy. For example, in Wales we heard that there are moves to develop local ecosystems that target specific regional skills gaps, such as those in the renewable energy sector or advanced manufacturing. In Milton Keynes, a local approach has meant local providers have integrated AI and digital technologies into their programmes to reflect the area's growing tech industry. This kind of alignment between education and industry was seen as crucial for ensuring that learners are equipped with the skills required in high-demand sectors such as green energy, digital transformation, and healthcare.

In relation to social mobility, the panel recognised that FE and Skills institutions act as anchor organisations within their communities, breaking cycles of poverty and providing pathways to higher-skilled employment. This was seen to be especially important for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), a significant and growing issue. The panel members asked that the FE and Skills sector continue to prioritise inclusivity, ensuring that all learners, regardless of background and including those with SEND, have access to high-quality education and opportunities for personal and professional development. This requires both funding and the staff with the right training and qualifications.

However, the Collective also noted that the success of localised decision-making hinges on sustained financial investment, strong partnership and shared intelligence.

On the money, delegates noted (again!) the disparity in funding between the FE and Skills sector and other education sectors, such as schools and Higher Education. Equalising this funding gap was seen as essential not only for operational support but also for enabling critical investments in infrastructure, technology, and vocational training.

The success of local and regional initiatives, it was also pointed out, needs strong, trusting relationships between training and education providers with local employers, community organisations and government authorities. This collaboration has to be action, not just words. For

example, in the West Midlands, FE colleges share resources and expertise to make them go further. Collaboration like this allows institutions to pool resources, share best practices, and innovate more effectively in the drive for economic prosperity.

Local decision making also needs to be fuelled by shared data and intelligence sharing, for both planning and operations. We heard, for example, of the use of a web portal in the West Midlands that connects employers with skills providers, and this highlights how technology can facilitate collaboration and close the gap between employer needs and educational offerings.

However, the panel acknowledged that localised decision-making presents challenges as well. Maintaining consistency in educational standards across different regions was identified as a concern, particularly when it comes to ensuring that all learners – regardless of geography – have access to high-quality education. The desire was for a flexible but coherent approach that allows for local adaptation, while still maintaining national standards of education and social justice. Another challenge for all was how to accurately forecast future skills needs, especially in the face of rapid technological change. It was clear from the discussions that closer collaboration between providers and employers is crucial for ensuring that learners are prepared for the jobs of the future.

Policy implications and recommendations

To fully harness the potential of localised decision-making, several policy actions are recommended:

1. **Increased funding and investment:** a comprehensive funding strategy that includes both government and private sector investment is essential to support our providers in delivering the skills needed for regional and national growth.
2. **Employer engagement and workforce planning:** the sector should engage employers as active partners in shaping the skills agenda, with workforce planning integrated into our provision to ensure alignment with future employment needs.
3. **Flexibility with accountability:** localised decision-making should be coupled with clear accountability mechanisms to maintain standards across regions.
4. **Data and intelligence:** sharing is a key 'fuel' for the process of achieving the balance between flexibility at a local level and cohesion/accountability at a national level; a great example is in careers advice, where local commitment to and engagement over time with marginalised groups, such as prisoners and disadvantaged youth, as well as mainstream groups, can be combined with knowledge of local and always evolving opportunities.
5. **Strengthening collaboration:** a culture of collaboration across our institutions, local authorities, and employers should be fostered, with policy incentivising partnership working.

Fuelling the Industrial Strategy

In this session, the group opened with the critical role that the UK's FE and Skills sector plays in shaping the nation's workforce, supporting not only individual career progression but also the Government's broader industrial strategy. Yet, significant challenges were seen to lie ahead, including persistent skills gaps, geographical mismatches between educational provision and workforce needs, and inadequate careers advice for learners at all stages of life.

One of the most pressing issues seen to be facing the UK was the demand for skills in emerging and fast-evolving sectors such as cyber security, AI, and green technology. The rapid pace of technological change was said to have left many sectors vulnerable, creating an urgent need for highly skilled professionals. However, everyone acknowledged that workforce planning is complicated by the niche and specialised nature of many of these industries, making it difficult to predict future skills gaps accurately. The group agreed that the FE and Skills sector must be more proactive in working with employers and policymakers to identify these needs and develop targeted, flexible learning pathways that can quickly respond to changing demand.

In addition to technical skills, there was an increasing recognition of the importance of "soft" skills such as creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving. The group acknowledged that these skills are often overlooked in traditional education models that focus heavily on rote learning and exams. Entrepreneurship and AI literacy were hot topics and embedding them into the FE curriculum was seen as another vital step in preparing learners for the future of work. As AI and automation continue to reshape industries, the group recognised that many learners would need to develop entrepreneurial mindsets as well as the ability to apply technology creatively. There was an ask that funding be made available to FE and Skills providers to create entrepreneurship hubs, where students can gain practical experience in business creation and innovation. The thinking here was that this would not only prepare students for self-employment but also foster the kind of innovative thinking that will be needed in larger organisations as they navigate the challenges and opportunities of digital transformation.

Careers advice, too, was identified as needing to evolve to reflect the realities of the modern workforce. Concerns were registered that current systems all too often focus on narrow, linear career paths, and as such are failing to provide young people and adults with the support they need to navigate a rapidly changing job market. The group called for personalised, ongoing careers advice that begins in secondary school and continues into adulthood. They asked that the development of transferable skills should be emphasised to better support career transitions, and help learners explore the full range of educational and vocational opportunities available to them. Reforming the National Careers Service was called for, to make it more relevant, accessible, and responsive to current and future labour market needs.

It also became apparent that geographical disparities in skills provision present another significant challenge. We heard, for example, that in many rural and coastal areas, there is a persistent mismatch between the skills being developed and the needs of local employers. This issue was said to be particularly acute in sectors such as health and social care, where workforce shortages are most severe. The answer was seen to be place-based skills strategies, such as LSIPs, which devolve greater control to localities in order that they can work to address disparities. By tailoring skills programmes to the specific needs of regional labour markets, the group agreed that it would

ensure that learners in all parts of the country have access to education and training that directly supports local economic development.

The group also asked that the revised Apprenticeship Levy be structured to support lifelong learning, accommodating individuals who need flexible, modular education without financial barriers. This would enable individuals to upskill throughout their careers, contributing to both personal development and national economic resilience.

The final ask was for local intelligence networks to be strengthened to ensure that educational offerings were aligned with current and future labour market needs. The group saw that bringing together employers, FE providers, and local authorities via these networks would help to identify emerging skills gaps, forecast future demand, and allocate resources more effectively.

On the basis of the discussion, the group identified policy recommendations and actions for the sector to commit to.

Policy implications and recommendations

1. **Establish a unified skills framework:** the Government should create a single, unified skills framework that integrates essential skills across sectors, simplifying the landscape for both learners and employers. This would allow Skills England to focus on delivering sector-specific strategies within a more coherent national framework, ensuring that all sectors are aligned with broader economic goals.
2. **Restructure the Apprenticeship Levy:** the Government should enable adult education and modular retraining programs. This would allow individuals who are changing careers or re-entering the workforce to access flexible learning opportunities without financial barriers. Additionally, Universal Credit rules should be amended to allow individuals to engage in full-time training without losing their benefits.
3. **Reform the National Careers Service:** the Government should undertake a comprehensive review of the National Careers Service to align its offerings with the demands of the modern workforce. This should include transforming the service into an all-age career service, ensuring equitable access to personalised careers advice at every stage of life. Starting at the secondary school level, the service should focus on helping young people identify their strengths and develop essential, transferable skills. For adults, it should provide tailored guidance to support career transitions and offer increased funding for modular and retraining courses. By adopting an inclusive, lifelong approach, the National Careers Service can better support individuals to navigate a rapidly changing labour market.
4. **Implement place-based skills strategies:** the Government should adopt place-based skills strategies, devolving greater control to combined and local authorities to run skills programmes that meet local labour market needs. These strategies should include tailored initiatives for rural and coastal communities, and funding should be allocated to address geographical disparities in skills provision.
5. **Strengthen local intelligence networks:** the Government should invest in local intelligence networks that bring together employers, FE providers, and local authorities to identify emerging skills needs. These networks should inform regional skills strategies and help to allocate funding and resources more effectively.

6. **Embed entrepreneurship and AI in the curriculum:** the Department for Education should mandate the inclusion of entrepreneurship and AI literacy in the FE and Skills curriculum. This would involve teaching students how to apply problem-solving and creativity to real-world challenges and how to utilise AI to drive innovation. Funding should be made available for FE providers to develop entrepreneurship hubs where students can explore business creation in a supported environment.

Sector calls for action

Further Education and Skills providers should:

- collaborate with local employers and industry bodies to provide real-world careers advice, tailored to the needs of students at all levels, and ensure that career pathways are visible and accessible to all learners, including those seeking career changes
- work closely with local authorities and community stakeholders to identify regional skills needs
- commit to identifying and using labour market data and metrics to track trends and, crucially, our own performance in delivering against local needs
- embed entrepreneurship and AI literacy into our curricula by designing activities that foster creativity, problem-solving, and innovation around real-world projects
- align teaching with essential skills that are transferable across sectors, using data to both identify what these are and to ensure that we are delivering them in a way that supports progress within a career and transition between careers.

Employability, Social Mobility, and Growth

A recurring rejoinder for this session was that the FE and Skills sector is a critical driver of employability, social mobility, and economic growth. But to fully realise its potential, the group recognised that the sector needs to become more effective in demonstrating its impact. Higher Education (HE) was seen to lead the way when it came to quantifying and promoting its value to local communities and the economy; the call was for the FE sector to follow suit. By improving the collection, analysis, and sharing of data, the group agreed that the sector could more clearly demonstrate the transformative effect that FE has on learners, employers, and local economies.

The group discussed the need for learners to recognise and articulate the transferable skills they had developing during their education. They agreed that many learners, particularly school and college leavers, struggle to understand how their experiences in education can translate into employability. This fact was also seen to be true for other groups, such as carers, parents, and career changers, who often possess a wealth of skills acquired through life experience but may not know how to present these to employers.

We heard how programmes like the Successful Mums Careers Academy offer a valuable model for how we can help learners recognise and sell their skills to employers. The programme builds confidence by identifying employability skills gained through parenting, such as time management, budgeting, negotiation, and conflict resolution. Expanding such programmes across the FE and Skills sector was thought to be a solution that would provide learners with the tools they need to navigate the job market more effectively.

The barriers to apprenticeships were central to the conversation. Apprenticeships were seen as a crucial pathway into skilled employment, but it was noted that financial challenges often prevent learners from pursuing them. We heard, for example, that the withdrawal of Child Benefit for parents of apprentices or the lack of financial support for apprentices themselves creates a significant barrier, particularly for families from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Addressing these challenges through measures such as hardship funds or transport subsidies was identified as critical in making apprenticeships more accessible to all.

Data sharing between institutions was another area where the group thought the sector could improve. Currently, important information about learners, such as their SEND needs, is rarely shared between schools, FE and Skills providers, and Higher Education institutions and this can create inconsistencies in the support that learners receive as they move through the education system. By developing better mechanisms for sharing data, the group were clear that we can better ensure that learners receive continuous, tailored support throughout their educational journey, improving both retention and success rates.

There was a recognition that the FE and Skills sector must also improve its ability to network and share best practices internally. The refrain was that all too often, institutions work in isolation, missing opportunities to collaborate on innovative approaches to teaching, learning, and administration. Creating online platforms or regional networks for sharing resources and strategies was seen as one way to avoid duplication of effort and drive greater efficiency across the sector.

On the basis of the discussion, the group identified policy recommendations and actions for the sector to commit to.

Policy implications and recommendations

1. **National data access:** policymakers should grant FE colleges access to HESA data, allowing them to better track student outcomes, community impact, and long-term employability statistics. This would provide an evidence base for future funding decisions and policy reforms.
2. **Funding flexibility and targeted support:** there is a clear need for more flexible and targeted funding models to support students, particularly apprentices, from deprived backgrounds. Policymakers should explore the feasibility of securing funds to provide bursaries for travel, uniforms, and other essential expenses.
3. **Mental health and wellbeing support:** Government policy should mandate the provision of mental health and wellbeing support in FE institutions, with dedicated resources for full-time staff on each campus. This will be essential in addressing the post-pandemic challenges faced by learners, especially the most vulnerable.
4. **Employer-institution partnerships:** policymakers should incentivise stronger partnerships between employers and FE institutions, including tax breaks for SMEs that offer work experience or apprenticeships.
5. **Centralised information systems:** the creation of a centralised national dataset for tracking attendance and skills development in post-16 education is recommended. This would enable a more accurate assessment of learner progress, reduce duplication of efforts across institutions, and allow for targeted interventions to support those at risk of disengagement.
6. **Expanding the scope of employability initiatives:** FE institutions should be encouraged to collaborate with local authorities and community organisations to ensure that employability initiatives reach vulnerable and underserved populations, including school "refusers" and NEETs.

Sector call to action

To address the challenges identified, stakeholders in the FE and Skills sector must pursue the following actions:

1. **Strengthen alumni networks:** institutions should build and maintain strong alumni networks to foster ongoing connections with employers, support lifelong learning, and promote professional advancement among graduates.
2. **Develop the digital skills and knowledge of FE and Skills practitioners:** providers should prioritise upskilling practitioners in emerging digital technologies and pedagogy to enhance teaching and learning. Establishing communities of practice on this and other areas, will enable practitioners to share knowledge, collaborate on innovative approaches, and retain expertise within the sector. These networks can also support the development of new experts, for example digital experts, at both local and national levels, ensuring the workforce is equipped for future challenges.
3. **Advocate for flexible funding models:** FE institutions should lobby for flexible funding models that enable them to offer employability-focused programs, especially for underrepresented groups. This includes exploring alternative funding streams to cover costs like travel and uniforms for apprentices.
4. **Enhance employer engagement:** employers need to be educated on the value of transferable skills and the importance of recognising qualifications and experiences

gained outside traditional academic routes. FE institutions should work closely with employers to create more inclusive job descriptions that attract a diverse range of candidates.

5. **Promote careers education:** there should be a concerted effort to enhance careers education in schools and colleges, ensuring alignment with the Gatsby benchmarks and providing meaningful, experience-based opportunities for students to explore various career pathways.
6. **Improve data access and usage:** the FE and Skills sector must push for better access to HESA data and develop robust mechanisms for measuring its impact on local communities. Such data will be essential in demonstrating the long-term value of FE and advocating for appropriate funding and policy support.

Quality Teaching and Learning: A Cornerstone for the Future

In the session focused on high quality teaching and learning, the group were unanimous that as the FE and Skills sector navigates the challenges of a rapidly evolving workforce, the concept of quality teaching and learning becomes ever more critical. High-quality education was seen by the group to be the foundation upon which the sector's success rests. The rationale was that it is high-quality teaching and learning that prepares learners not just for the jobs of today but for future opportunities in an increasingly complex world. However, the group went on to acknowledge that defining and ensuring quality teaching across a diverse sector like FE – spanning academic, vocational, and technical training – requires careful thought and sustained investment.

At its core, the group agreed that quality teaching and learning involves educators who inspire, engage, and challenge learners to reach their full potential. High-quality teaching was seen to encompass expert subject knowledge, but just as important was the use of effective pedagogical techniques that encourage critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability. These skills were identified as vital for success in the modern workforce, where the ability to solve problems, work collaboratively, and innovate is as important as technical know-how.

The ask of this group was for the sector to ensure that educators are provided with the resources and support they need to excel. CPD was identified as key to fostering high-quality teaching because it allows teachers to stay up to date with the latest industry developments, emerging technologies, and innovative teaching methods. However, they acknowledged that access to CPD across the FE and Skills sector often varies, be this in terms of quality and/or availability. To address this, the call was for a sector-wide commitment to CPD – supported by national funding – thereby ensuring that every sector professional has the opportunity to develop their skills throughout their career.

Technology was never far from the conversation and was identified as playing an increasingly central role in education. With the rise of AI and digital tools, the group saw the opportunity to enhance both the delivery of education and the management of administrative tasks. That said, they also noted that these technologies must be thoughtfully integrated into teaching frameworks. It was noted that training and development was needed for sector professionals to build their confidence and to help them embrace the advances and new ways of working. Investment in training and development was said to be needed to ensure technology enhances learning rather than becoming a burden. The ask was for policymakers and education leaders to invest in creating hybrid and flexible learning environments where technology supports engagement and learning mastery.

The group also identified addressing persistent attainment gaps within the sector as essential; this was seen to be particularly important for students from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds. They readily acknowledged that FE and Skills institutions serve a highly diverse learner base, and that promoting equity in learner outcomes is a priority. They went on to say that targeted interventions and support systems are required, and this includes enhanced support for students from global majority backgrounds and those with additional learning needs. It was agreed that ensuring that all learners have access to high-quality teaching and are supported

throughout their learning journey is essential for achieving social mobility and broadening participation in the workforce.

All said and done, there was recognition that operationalising quality teaching involves more than individual teacher effort. The ask was for institutions to provide structured frameworks that promote ongoing reflection, collaboration, and improvement. The group suggested this could include feedback loops, peer collaboration opportunities, and mentoring programmes that help educators continually refine their practice. There was also recognition that fostering strong relationships between teachers and learners is key to ensuring student success. The expectation was that teachers should serve as role models and mentors if they are to have a lasting impact, inspiring learners to aim higher and achieve more.

Building strong partnerships between educators, industry, and government was also noted as crucial for defining and sustaining quality teaching. The suggestion was that regular roundtable discussions and collaborative efforts help align educational outcomes with the evolving needs of employers, ensuring that teaching remains relevant and responsive to the demands of the workforce.

The group were keen to flag that the role of innovation in teaching cannot be overlooked. The ask was for sector professionals to be encouraged to experiment with new methods of teaching and learning, particularly where they involve AI and digital tools that can streamline their workload and improve learning outcomes. This came with an ask of leadership, namely that there needed to be a culture of innovation, that would allow teachers to take creative risks and explore new approaches to pedagogy.

In summary, the group acknowledged that maintaining high standards of teaching and learning across the FE and Skills sector requires concerted efforts from policymakers, educators, and industry partners. Their suggestions were that free lifelong training opportunities, mandated CPD hours, and investments in technology are just some of the ways in which the sector can ensure that all educators are equipped to deliver high-quality, impactful education. Looking to the future, it was clear to them that quality teaching would be at the heart of the sector's ability to meet the needs of both learners and the economy.

Policy implications and recommendations

For the FE and Skills sector to ensure that all educators are well-equipped to deliver quality teaching and learning, policy changes and investments are needed. Below are several recommendations for policymakers and education leaders:

1. **Lifelong entitlement to training:** all educators in the sector should have access to a lifelong entitlement to training and development opportunities, ideally free. This should include training in new technologies, digital pedagogy, and emerging industry skills.
2. **Mandated CPD hours:** a national policy should enforce minimum CPD hours for all teachers, with focus on pedagogy, pedagogical innovation, digital literacy, and artificial intelligence (AI) as high priorities. Such a mandate ensures that teachers remain at the forefront of educational advances while reducing the workload burden through AI integration.

3. **Closing attainment gaps:** policies need to address persistent attainment gaps, particularly for students from global majority backgrounds. Targeted interventions and support mechanisms are essential to promote equity in learner outcomes.
4. **Sector-wide definition of quality:** a unified and clear sector-wide definition of quality teaching should be established, drawing on input from practitioners, employers, and learners. This definition must reflect the diverse needs of the sector, including academic and vocational training contexts.
5. **Investing in technology:** there is an urgent need to embed emerging technologies into the curriculum. Providers should invest in creating hybrid and flexible learning spaces that make full use of digital tools to support learner engagement and mastery. Equally, teachers need training on how to effectively incorporate these technologies into their pedagogical practices.

Sector call to action

1. **Supporting dual professionalism**
 - Implement a coherent, meaningful CPD system that promotes collaboration between educators and industry professionals, ensuring that teachers remain current in both their teaching excellence and industry-specific expertise.
 - Establish subject-specific communities to foster collaboration and knowledge sharing among educators, particularly in sectors like health and engineering.
2. **Building strong professional communities**
 - Encourage the development of sector-wide communities that go beyond individual institutions, to combat isolation and competition within the sector, and that enable the sharing of knowledge.
 - Use technology to build virtual networks that allow educators to collaborate, share resources, and engage in continuous learning across institutions.
 - Revamp teacher training programmes and embed dual professionalism into the system so that teachers are able to balance subject expertise with pedagogical knowledge.
 - Implement meaningful induction processes, where new teachers are mentored by experienced colleagues in their subject area.
3. **Reducing workload and enhancing management practices**
 - Address the high workload and management practices that drive attrition rates in the sector.
 - Encourage leadership models that prioritise professional development, focus on trust and autonomy, and reduce workload pressures to improve staff retention.
4. **Integrating industry expertise into education**
 - Create mechanisms for those working in industry to join the education workforce, whether on a full time or part time basis.
 - Find ways to maintain strong connections between educators and their original industries, through CPD that keeps them updated with the latest industry trends.
 - Collaborate more effectively with industry partners to ensure alignment between education and workforce needs.
5. **Leveraging technology for professional development**
 - Address the fear of technology by incorporating it into CPD in a meaningful way, helping educators to both enhance their teaching practices and manage administrative tasks more effectively.

Conclusion: The Collective Vision for a Stronger FE and Skills Sector

As we reflect on the themes explored throughout this report, it is clear that the FE and Skills sector is at a moment of potential significance, as the new Government instigates a series of ambitious changes. The challenges we face – skills shortages, regional inequalities, and the rapidly changing demands of the workforce – are significant. However, the opportunities for growth, innovation, and collaboration are equally compelling and the sector's potential to drive economic growth, social mobility, and innovation is unparalleled.

Central to this vision is a commitment to high-quality teaching and learning. Inspirational educators are the backbone of our sector and ensuring they have the support, resources, and professional development opportunities they need is essential. Their dual professionalism, combining industry expertise with teaching excellence, must be supported through structured CPD, technology integration, and collaborative networks. By embracing innovation and fostering strong relationships, educators can better prepare learners for future challenges while advancing their own professional growth.

The theme of localised decision-making emerged as a powerful tool for tailoring education to regional economic needs, for driving regional economic growth, allowing institutions to tailor their offerings to the needs of local industries and communities. The FE and Skills sector must deepen its partnerships with employers, local authorities, and community stakeholders to deliver responsive, place-based strategies. Such collaboration will address skills mismatches, support disadvantaged learners, and drive inclusive economic growth. In so doing we will create a more agile, responsive skills system that supports both learners and the wider economy.

The importance of social mobility, and the ways in which the FE and Skills sector acts as a gateway to opportunity for learners from all backgrounds, cannot be overlooked. By breaking down barriers to access, supporting disadvantaged learners, and addressing skills mismatches across the country, we can ensure that no one is left behind in the drive for economic prosperity.

Equally important is the need to reform and modernise careers advice and guidance. The National Careers Service must evolve into an all-age, data-driven resource that supports individuals throughout their working lives. By integrating personalised advice with insights into local and national labour market trends, the service can better guide learners and workers navigating transitions in a dynamic economy.

Finally, the sector must adopt a data-led approach. Skills England, working collaboratively with the FE and Skills community, should champion the use of robust labour market intelligence to align skills provision with economic priorities. Tracking metrics such as learner outcomes, employer needs, and regional skill gaps will be essential for ensuring training programmes remain relevant and impactful.

Unlocking the future

It was clear to all attending the Collective that the FE and Skills sector plays a pivotal role in addressing national skills shortages and supporting regional economies. To maximise this potential, several key policy recommendations emerged from the discussions, with significant implications for stakeholders across education, government, and industry and for working collaboratively across these bodies:

1. **Invest in educators:** increase funding for CPD and offer competitive salaries to attract and retain skilled professionals, ensuring high-quality teaching across the FE and Skills sector.
2. **Support dual professionalism:** establish a structured framework to promote dual professionalism, allowing educators to balance teaching expertise with industry knowledge through meaningful CPD, industry placements, and collaboration.
3. **Modernise careers advice:** transform the National Careers Service into an all-age careers service, providing lifelong, personalised guidance informed by local and national labour market data.
4. **Adopt flexible funding models:** create funding structures that support modular learning, apprenticeships, and adult retraining, with targeted support for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups.
5. **Strengthen place-based strategies:** empower local authorities and combined authorities to implement tailored skills programmes aligned with local economic priorities, addressing regional disparities in skills provision.
6. **Enhance employer collaboration:** foster stronger partnerships between employers and providers by incentivising collaboration, simplifying engagement processes, and incorporating employer input into workforce planning.
7. **Embed data-driven decision making:** equip Skills England and sector providers with advanced labour market intelligence tools to track emerging skills gaps and align training with regional and national economic needs.
8. **Broaden the government levy:** broaden the scope of the Apprenticeship Levy to include modular learning for career transitions and flexible adult education, supporting lifelong skill development.
9. **Accelerate technology integration:** invest in equipping the sector with advanced digital tools and training in areas like Generative AI to enhance productivity, reduce administrative burdens, and support hybrid learning environments.
10. **Prioritise inclusivity:** ensure equitable access to high-quality education and skills development for disadvantaged groups, including learners with SEND, through targeted interventions and adequate funding.

This is clearly a moment of both challenge and opportunity. By embracing innovation, fostering collaboration, and maintaining a relentless focus on quality, the FE and Skills sector can lead the way in meeting the UK's skills and economic needs. With the collective insights and recommendations outlined in this report, we have a clear roadmap to build a more agile, resilient, and inclusive system.

By acting on these recommendations and key asks, Government, and Skills England in particular, can drive forward a transformative agenda that not only addresses immediate workforce needs but also fosters long-term economic and social mobility across the UK.

By addressing these recommendations, the FE and Skills sector can evolve into a more resilient, agile system capable of meeting current and future demands. The collective insights of this report and the Changing Systems of Change agenda provide a roadmap for a future-focused FE and Skills system. Through collaboration, trust, and innovation, we can unlock the potential of learners, educators, and communities alike.

Now is the time to act – together, we can ensure the FE and Skills sector fulfils its potential as a cornerstone of national prosperity and social progress.

Acknowledgements from Gavin O’Meara, CEO and Founder, FE News:

Thank you to the Collective

First, I wanted to say a huge thank you to everyone who was involved in the FE + Skills Collective. Everyone rolled up their sleeves and got involved. Egos were left at the door, and everyone was committed to the mission, working on behalf of the sector to share ideas. This kind of participation involves courage, collaboration and creative thinking. This is not your normal chalk and talk event. So, thank you to each individual who was part of the Collective for taking time out for the good of the sector. Without you, we wouldn’t have this report.

Thank you to ETF

The second big thank you is to the Education and Training Foundation (ETF). Together, we spun up a Collective Intelligence event within just a few months of a new Government coming into power. The ETF team worked in an agile and dynamic way with team FE News to create the environment for everyone to come together for this Collective. You also enabled us as a sector to align with the Government’s mission-led approach. So, a massive thank you!

Thank you, in particular, to Dr Katerina Kolyva, CEO at ETF, and Dr Vikki Smith, Executive Director, Education and Standards, at ETF, for chairing the morning scene-setting panel sessions and for supporting and enabling the event’s ethos of trust and collaboration – two big themes that come up time and again in this report.

Thank you to Edge Foundation

The third big thank you goes to the Edge Foundation. Edge was the media sponsor and enabled the amazing video outcomes from the event. Olly Newton, Executive Director, Edge Foundation, stepped in last minute as a panel member when a guest speaker was ill, and Olly and Holly Papworth, Head of Policy, Edge Foundation, both facilitated sessions in the afternoon – talk about rolling your sleeves up and getting stuck in! Thank you from everyone at the Collective.

Thank you to our report writers

Fourth massive thank you is to Dr Vikki Smith, Executive Director, Education and Standards, ETF, and Ben Rowland, CEO, AELP, for writing this report and representing the Collective’s individual and shared voices and ideas. This was a massive responsibility, and you took it on with grace and integrity to ensure that everyone’s voice was heard.

Sharing everyone’s views, opinions, ideas and visions is hard! Not only from the Collective intelligence sessions, but also from the audience session Q&As. I think you have done an amazing job. We are exploring new ideas, new ways of working, innovation and pushing the envelope – I think you have done us all proud. Thank you!

Thank you to our panel members and facilitators

Getting on stage, sharing your ideas and giving back is hard. We made it clear that everyone is equal in the Collective; there were no ivory towers, ‘no them and us’. Our panel members and our

facilitators were amazing. They came to serve the Collective and the FE and Skills community, to share their knowledge, their ideas and, most importantly, to encourage everyone to have a voice and feel safe to share their ideas.

I have supported hundreds and hundreds of events in the 21 years of being at FE News and the way everyone felt valued (as they were), and felt included (as they were), was amazing. That is down to the panel members, the scene setters and the facilitators who enabled everyone to feel welcome and be encouraged to have a voice. So here is a big list of thanks:

Local skills panel session

Dr Vikki Smith (chair) – Executive Director, Education and Standards, ETF
Sally Alexander – Chief Executive, Milton Keynes College
Kate Shoosmith – Deputy CEO, Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC)
Yusuf Ibrahim – Assistant Principal, Cardiff and Vale College
Eddie Playfair – Senior Policy Manager, Association of Colleges

National skills panel session

Dr Katerina Kolyva (chair) – CEO, ETF
Philip Le Feuvre – Chief Operating Officer, NCFE
Ben Blackledge – CEO, WorldSkills UK
Ben Rowland – CEO, AELP
Olly Newton – Executive Director, Edge Foundation

Pre-lunch Q&A

Jennifer Coupland – Chief Executive, IfATE

Our working group facilitators

Dr Katerina Kolyva and Paul Grainger
Olly Newton and Chris Cherry
Dr Vikki Smith and Matt O'Leary, Professor of Education, Birmingham City University
Lou Mycroft, Co-Director, FE Constellations and JoyFE, and Dr Paul Tully, Associate Director, Policy and Research, ETF
Holly Papworth, Head of Policy, Edge Foundation and Suzie Branch-Haddow, Vice-Principal – External Development, Birmingham Metropolitan College

Thank you to those behind the scenes

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Thank you for reading the report and taking on these ideas

Also, to everyone who reads this report – thank you. The FE + Skills Collective is a collective of experts across the sector. We deliberately brought together leaders, educators, and different parts of the FE and Skills ecosystem together to create this report. But this is just the report... it is down to you, the readers, to breathe life and energy into these ideas and suggestions. I want to thank you in advance for making this happen and for taking on the Collective's ideas, vision and action points. We need your help to make this a reality.

What next?

We want to build on the Collective, explore new ways of working, new ways of bringing the wisdom of the crowd together to tackle big challenges and also look to the future of Skills. Everyone is welcome, it is important that the different parts of the FE and Skills ecosystem come together, share ideas and expertise and pass this on. A big recommendation is to be data-led and to form communities of practice or expertise to be shared with the entire sector. So, we will aim to continue this work. We will also continually learn and innovate. We will make mistakes, but we will trust that the collective intelligence of the sector will share solutions and actions to take us all forward.

So, watch this space and we'd love for you to join us and help us on the next Collective.

Thank you!

Gavin O'Meara, CEO and Founder FE News.