

# Higher technical education – discussion paper

Universities UK is the collective voice of 140 universities in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Its mission is to create the conditions for UK universities to be the best in the world, maximising their positive impact locally, nationally, and globally. Universities UK acts on behalf of universities, represented by their heads of institution.

## Introduction

This discussion paper sets an agenda for how universities can increase their higher technical education (HTE) provision. In July 2020, the Department for Education published proposed [higher technical reforms](#). The reforms responded to the concern in the [Augar review of post-18 education](#) that the decline in take-up of higher technical education at Levels 4 and 5 has led to skills shortages. The reforms will introduce a new approval scheme that will badge existing and future Level 4-5 technical qualifications that meet the needs of employers. Universities are responsible for delivering approximately 32% of Level 4-5 provision and are in a strong position to build upon this, particularly for learners with the highest qualification at Level 3 or below, or those who have been out of formal education for a long time.<sup>1</sup>

Universities UK (UUK) has published several reports looking at how partnerships can enhance Level 4-5 qualifications and meet learner needs

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<sup>1</sup> [Review of the level 4-5 qualification and provider market](#) (DfE 2019)

through the flexibility they offer. The [Routes to high-level skills](#) publication provides a comprehensive review of the drivers, benefits and challenges of higher education and further education partnerships, with case studies of how they work directly with employers to address the rapid change of labour market needs. [The economic case for flexible learning in higher education](#) provides a strong endorsement of and recommendations for the value of flexible learning and how it can be enhanced. In October 2020, UUK published [polling by Savanta ComRes](#) showing modular study has the potential to increase the number of people with high-level skills in the UK. Flexibility and lifelong learning should be present when considering developing HTE. Building on [UUK's response to the Higher Technical Education consultation](#), this paper sets out areas where universities can contribute to the [Skills for jobs](#) white paper.

In autumn 2020, UUK promoted a targeted survey to understand the drivers and barriers to universities engaging with HTE. In doing this we also explored the role of partnerships and institutes of technology (IoTs) as mechanisms to drive HTE delivery. The following is not an exhaustive list, rather it represents the reoccurring sentiments across the sector about the motivations and challenges of HTE. For discussion, possible solutions are also presented to promote constructive conversations to maximise HTE's success.

## **Motivators for universities to engage in HTE**

### **Strategic motivation**

Universities were motivated by long-term strategic drivers associated with delivering HTE. HTE was identified as an opportunity for higher education providers to develop partnerships with further education providers. Doing so enabled universities to explore new models of provision to help address higher-level skills deficits both nationally and locally. Delivering HTE was also seen as a mechanism to enhance the anchor role of institutions within the local economy and skills landscape.

## **Student benefit**

The reforms offer students the opportunity to study at a higher level where this may not otherwise be possible. Therefore, the broadening of course portfolios will attract more diverse student intakes, supporting widening participation at higher levels of study. The qualifications benefit students because they emphasise a body of knowledge that supports their career aspirations and leads to employment, in line with graduate ambitions. Strong progression routes for learners will support students who require flexibility in attaining degree-level outcomes. Therefore, universities saw HTE as playing an integral part of lifelong learning and acting as a pathway to higher-level study.

## **Filling skills gaps and employer engagement**

Raising educational attainment at all levels is vital to drive job creation, economic growth, productivity and the UK's innovation and international competitiveness. HTE is one way universities can develop local integrated systems which incentivise employers to engage with institutions. The partnership with employers to develop the qualifications will evidence industry buy-in. In turn, this means HTE equips providers to address regional skills gaps.

## **Challenges and possible solutions to HTE**

### **Joined up approach**

How HTE fits within current and future education architecture is vital. Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) need to be part of a national education strategy that focusses on all potential students, from learners in schools and further education colleges to those who are looking to retrain or upskill by developing new skills for the future. Ensuring the sustainability and longevity of newly introduced qualifications should be a priority. HTE should not only

be fully supported by the government through appropriate funding, but it should also be easily accessible for providers to offer and students to study.

Consideration must be given as to how the apprenticeship and HTE ecosystem fit together to support students. For instance, how will the new quality requirements differ from existing arrangements and is there opportunity to align processes?

While the focus specifically on technical education is welcome, it should also be recognised that there is value in Level 4-5 qualifications that are not technically defined. Otherwise, we perpetuate the artificial divide between the 'academic' and the 'technical', which also has an impact on social mobility. This kind of division could lead to the tunneling of education pathways that would reduce flexibility, which is essential for effective skills acquisition.

**Possible solution:**

- a) Standalone qualifications at Levels 4-5 should support progression for those who wish to study at higher levels sometime in the future, including progression to technical, apprenticeship and more academically focused provision.

### **Employer engagement**

Most Level 4-5 provision is employer sponsored, therefore without a specific interest from employers, universities are less likely to develop new qualifications to submit for HTE status. Combined with a perceived low level of understanding about Level 4-5 qualifications among employers, this raises a serious challenge. Local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) and Skills Advisory Panels (SAPs) can be effective mediums for large and medium-sized employers to identify these gaps. However, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) often lack capacity or knowledge to do this.

**Possible solutions:**

- b) Develop a common sector approach to LEPs and SAPs engaging with their local universities, including sharing case studies and best practice where collaboration has been innovative and effective.
- c) Small businesses should have greater flexibility of funding arrangements so releasing employees to study is more feasible.

**Staff capacity**

There are capacity challenges for providers introducing new qualifications alongside existing portfolios. Attracting and retaining high-quality teaching staff who have strong sector occupational competence remains a significant barrier for providers.

**Possible solution:**

- d) A national training scheme to attract staff with occupational competence to deliver high-quality teaching, learning and assessment.

**Process and regulation**

The quality assurance and regulatory landscape for HTE is particularly complex. The move to Ofsted assessment of apprenticeships is furthering the concern that engaging with the higher technical landscape brings with it a parallel set of policies and processes that add workload and complexity. HTE should closely follow existing regulatory arrangements to avoid demotivating providers from engaging.

Continuation metrics historically align to traditional three-year undergraduate courses where exiting is presented as a failure rather than temporary suspension in study that may resume later in life. Therefore, the inclusion of

learners who start on a Level 6 qualification that exit the course with Level 4 or 5 in non-completion data is challenging and disincentivises more flexible study patterns.

In putting forward qualification submissions it takes providers significant time to roll out standards for different routes. In doing so work is created by adapting existing courses and putting together the applications. In turn, the short time period for putting forward qualifications for approval has been a challenge for providers.

Current apprenticeship standards provide little space in the curriculum to add content to meet local needs, should this be the same for HTEs that would limit their attractiveness and potential impact.

**Possible solutions:**

- e) Review quality metrics to ensure they appropriately reflect the diverse educational offer. Ensure that Level 4-5 components of an undergraduate degree are recognised in the regulatory system rather than as non-completion of Level 6.
- f) Existing Level 4-5 qualifications that have employer accreditation should have the option to fast track acquiring the recognised HTE badge with less regulatory burden.
- g) Introduce multiple and longer windows for providers to submit qualifications for approval.
- h) Have a space in the curriculum where providers are required to tailor content to meet local needs.

**Learner needs**

Evidence of demand from learners is a critical barrier. Employer demand may be evident, but unless they are either sponsoring or supporting learners, this has to be matched with demand from students. There is a perceived lack of

awareness of HTE, both from potential students and employers. Therefore, sustained activity is needed to raise the profile of HTE through information, advice, and guidance for young people, adults and employers. This should be linked with outreach and recruitment activities that can be undertaken by providers to improve awareness and then take-up.

HTQs have the potential to complement lifelong learning, particularly in terms of widening participation and upskilling adults whose employment and life circumstances may mean continuous study is not possible. Opportunities for blended and distance delivery should be explored, particularly for upskilling those in employment while minimising the impact on business operations during study.

**Possible solutions:**

- i) HTE needs a rigorous and sustained public awareness campaign where the benefits of studying for an HTQ and the opportunities it brings are highlighted at a national level.
- j) A common approach of applying recognition of prior learning to HTE achievement should be developed, regardless of institution.
- k) The student loan funding barrier which only allows for up to 120 credits of study in a calendar year could be removed. Disassociating HTEs from the concept of academic year would empower students to start and finish at times appropriate to them and employers.

## **Funding**

Funding for learners is a barrier to ensuring market interest. This is particularly the case if HTE intends to draw from full-time learners without employer support or where students intend to study part time but without support from their current employer. Funding bands allocated by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) for apprenticeship

standards have not been stable to date and continue to fluctuate regularly. Funding streams are often short term, particularly within regional infrastructure, and this does not enable long-term development and capacity building to take place. In addition, there are sometimes complex reporting requirements, which can lead to administrative burdens for providers, particularly where requirements differ from their main funding streams. Ultimately, funding should underpin learner choice, build on existing strengths and support lifelong learning.

**Possible solutions:**

- l) Providers that have a track record of delivering quality ‘vocational’ awards should be encouraged to engage with HTE through appropriate ring-fenced funding mechanisms.
- m) Remove the restrictions on the availability of maintenance loans to students studying part time at Levels 4-5 and in some non-higher education settings. Specifically, remove the requirement to study at 25% or greater intensity of a full-time course.
- n) Introduce catalyst funding to energise meaningful collaboration between universities and partner colleges, which would support the development of courses and online learning materials.
- o) Funding allocated to HTE should be stable and give providers the confidence that funding bands will not reduce.
- p) Clarity on employer access to the national training fund would be helpful. There is significant risk employers will be drawn to HTE for upskilling staff rather than apprenticeships due to the regulatory complexities required in apprenticeship delivery.



## **Delivering HTE through higher education-further education partnerships**

### **Motivators**

One way to accelerate and enhance HTE is through forming higher education and further education partnerships that are embedded in local communities, support skills needs, reach learners in cold spots and diversify educational practice for a more sustainable, collaborative future. The feedback from universities saw the delivery of HTE as intricately linked to their work with further education partners. These relationships were front and centre of their plans to develop provision in this space. Therefore, as a key determinant of HTE, greater mechanisms to support higher education-further education partnerships would be beneficial. We found many institutions were actively looking to expand their partnerships. However, there is a need to both build on existing provision but also review barriers for those institutions not as active in this space.

Partnerships offer the opportunity to develop deeper and more connected solutions within regions, offering learners seamless educational provision. Partnerships also enhance the professions-facing portfolio of universities. For employers, having higher education and further education working together makes it easier for them to navigate the system and maximise the benefits to them and their employees.

Partnerships offer the opportunity to break down barriers to education progression at Level 3-5. Social mobility is the driver enabling students to study in a location suitable for them such as a college environment. Local progression routes can support students who would not otherwise access higher education and support a pipeline between further education and higher education. This supports regional partners and allows for a critical mass of support within an area and coherent provision for students and employers to meet local needs.

Financial sustainability – including growth – and diversification of income has also been highlighted as a motivator for higher education to engage in partnerships. Partnerships provide opportunities to share resources, staff development opportunities and expertise.

## Barriers to partnerships

### Market competition

The most significant barrier identified in our discussions was market competition – with financial pressures driving behaviour and making mutually beneficial partnerships more difficult. Identifying strong partners where the collaborative motivation goes beyond monetary value is key. Policy proposals that support higher education and further education as part of an integrated system rather than in opposition may support this. Policy proposals that support alternative markets (employer funded and part-time mature) rather than movement from within current student destinations would be welcomed. Addressing the financial precarity across the further education sector would enable colleges more time and funding to develop innovative joint initiatives.

### Funding

Maintenance loans are currently not available for all Level 4 learners depending on their college and whether they are full time or part time. Level 3 funding requires change in order to support the regional and national agenda around skills. Fundamentally, funding capacity influences student decision-making and therefore whether the higher education and further education sectors are able to work in partnership or become competitors.

### Regulation

The regulation of further education operates differently from higher education (ie the use of external exam boards). This makes it harder to have a strong

bond between the institutions as further education colleges have to meet this external need. College metrics are not disaggregated from university metrics, and this has had a major impact on performances such as in the National Student Survey (NSS). This is particularly true in relation to the new Office for Students consultation on quality and standards – here the use of absolute baselines does not recognise that the driving force behind partnerships is to reach learners who, due to their social and economic background, are less likely to achieve high outcomes.

### Risk associations

The COVID-19 pandemic has put unprecedented pressure on higher education institutions to ensure students and staff are safe on campus, in student accommodation and while studying online. The additional resource at a time of great uncertainty has affected the finances of universities and their internal capacity to develop new partnerships. While these new partnerships offer opportunity, they also offer risk and universities need to balance the need for existing activity with any future ventures.

### Governing body endorsement

We would be supportive of finding ways to engage governing bodies to ensure ongoing commitments if there is a change of institutional leadership. One of the most disruptive factors in further education-higher education partnerships is a change of vice-chancellor or principal. There is an issue about how the strategic importance of partnerships to a university and the engagement and support of governors can be strengthened. When partnerships have been disrupted in some cases there have not been clear, detailed agreements in place and many colleges have multiple higher education partners each with different contracts.

**Possible solutions:**

- a) Revamp the Sector Deals to support higher education-further education partnerships and Level 4-5 across the board, including through integration with local Skills Advisory Panels.
- b) If there is to be meaningful higher education-further education partnerships then there needs to be alignment of regulatory, quality and governance requirements to remove inconsistencies between further and higher education. This along with any changes to higher education-further education regulation should be based on consultation.
- c) Significant time is required from both further education and higher education providers to develop and deliver partnerships. Developing and creating effective governance frameworks, data sharing agreements and legal contracts can be costly, complex and time consuming. A common approach/toolkit could reduce risks and give greater confidence to providers.
- d) Develop the commitment in the spending review to develop innovative models for local collaboration between skills providers and employers. Higher education-further education partnerships are an example model that would effectively drive up higher technical provision.

**Delivering HTE through institutes of technology**

There was optimism from providers that IoTs were a suitable mechanism to deliver increased Level 4-5 provision. However, many noted that their involvement with the scheme was at too early a stage to comment. There was also a concern that for them to be effective nationally a dramatic increase in the number of institutes would be required. Instead of this, providers saw more potential within higher education-further education partnerships, building on relationships that already exist.

That said, IoTs were seen as an opportunity to broaden the educational reach and increase the local narrative around educational options. By strengthening student progression and employer engagement, the IoT approach provides a value-added outcome. It has enabled a broader engagement with further education providers and strengthened existing working partnerships. The formal involvement of industry partners has similarly helped providers ensure that provision is relevant both in terms of content and delivery.

**Possible solutions:**

- a) Provide ongoing support to IoTs so they can grow and be sustainable.
- b) The recruitment, training and retention of suitable staff will be essential, however, this along with specialist equipment is not currently being funded. Front-ended investment would help ensure industry practitioners can gain academic experience to ensure a pool of teaching staff with industry-contemporary experience.
- c) The capital investment has been welcomed to enhance provision. However, investment in the revenue costs of delivery is also necessary to ensure that providers can respond to demand.