



# Further Education at the centre of economic and social recovery:

Next steps for *Our Plan  
for Further Education*

May 2021

Making Education Relevant

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# Introduction

*Over recent years, we have published a series of reports, **Our Plans**, which each set out key evidence, perspectives from leading researchers, examples of practice and our proposals for how the system could evolve towards making education relevant to the 21st Century.*

**Our Plan for Further Education**, originally published in May 2020, mapped the complex further education (FE) landscape, provided perspectives from researchers, FE providers and policy makers across the UK, highlighted case studies of promising practice within the sector and outlined our key recommendations and conclusions.

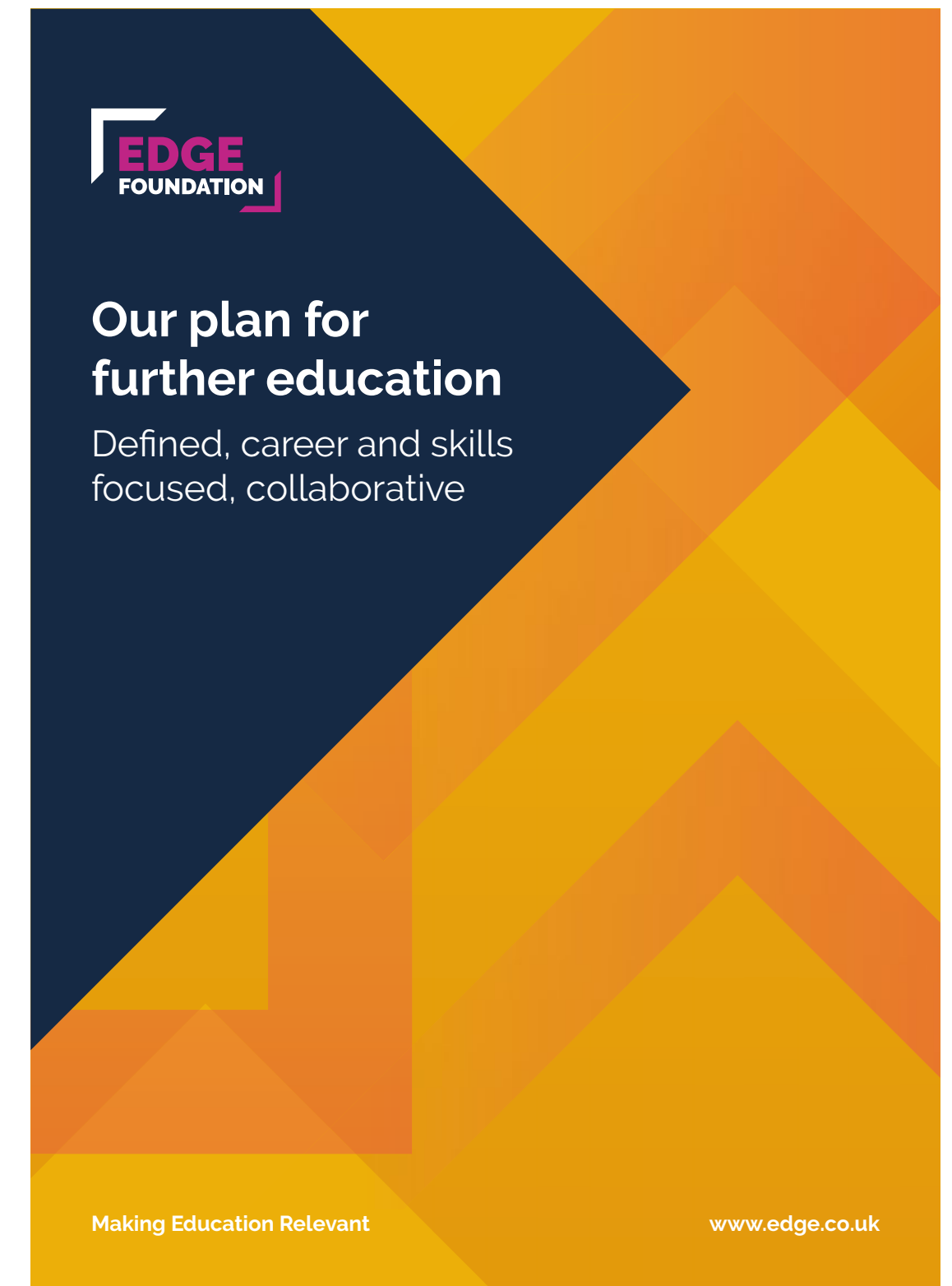
As Edge's Chair, Neil Bates, made clear in the introduction to the original report, our country has reached a pivotal point for the economy and society. With the challenges and opportunities of Brexit, the megatrends of demographic changes, environmental challenges, and the

fourth industrial revolution, now more than ever, we must make the very most of developing our home-grown talent.

Since our report, we have lived through a momentous year. The global pandemic has forced dramatic changes to take place across our economy and society and there has never been a more important time for the whole FE sector to play a key role in driving the economic and social recovery.

We have also seen the publication of two key documents: The 'College of the Future' and Government's 'Skills for Jobs' White Paper published since our original report. We were pleased to see many of the ideas that we called for in "Our Plan for Further Education" echoed and built upon in these seminal papers. At Edge, we will continue to work closely with policy makers, researchers, academics, lecturers, students and parents to build the narrative and drive for further change across FE.

In this Summary Report we provide you with key messages from **Our Plan for Further Education** (2020) and reflect on the changes that have happened since its publication.



**Download** the full report 'Our plan for further education'

# Key messages from Our Plan for Further Education

In *Our Plan for Further Education*, we identified longstanding system challenges the sector has faced along with some of the unique responses being used to address them. This helped us develop three strands for the FE sector to develop further.



## DEFINED

The FE sector has endured constant changes through the years with a very wide scope and lack of stability in both policy and funding. This has resulted in no single clear definition for FE. Edge encouraged the **FE sector to establish a clear definition for itself**, with a focus on what it is, as opposed to what it is not. Edge recommended that individual FE providers continue to define their own identity and missions within this to ensure that their local offer is equally clear.

Furthermore, we suggested that Government should work with the FE sector to establish a clear definition for itself, and develop a positive long-term roadmap. We should celebrate clear sector-led messages about what FE stands for and display these proudly in what Frank McLoughlin, the Director of Leadership at the Education and Training Foundation calls **FE's "shop window"** so that any member of the community has an overall idea of what their local FE providers can offer.

## CAREER & SKILLS FOCUSED

Colleges look to their communities to employ industry-trained professionals. However, as evidenced through our report, staff recruitment and retention within the FE sector has been difficult, with high levels of organisational turnover including one in eight lecturers and leaders leaving the college.<sup>1</sup> To develop a skilled FE workforce, the FE sector needs the resources to **attract, develop and celebrate its teaching staff**.

Edge wishes to see Government agree a new deal with the FE sector across the four nations based on their renewed vision and purpose, which includes **sufficient funding to address the recruitment and retention crisis**. We also encouraged Government to **fund a systematic programme of industry exchange** where lecturers can continue making links with employers, keep their industry knowledge up-to-date and consistently update the curriculum that links directly to businesses and is reflective of industry demands.

## COLLABORATIVE

FE providers are one of the few key civic institutions that exist across the country and open their doors to the whole community. To help solve and develop solutions to the challenges faced by the FE sector, FE providers must work together by sharing best practice. Edge advised that this can be achieved through forming **collaborative college groupings**, where colleges are positioned at the forefront of their local communities.

Edge encouraged the FE sector to become more collaborative both within itself and with other institutions. Colleges and Government education department across the four nations are encouraged to focus on **bringing together schools, independent training providers and higher education institutions** to find links and share resources and approaches. With support from organisations like Edge, sharing best practice can be facilitated right across the UK.

<sup>1</sup> Thornton, A., Edwards-Hughes, E., Simon Edsger, S., Boniface, R., & Wilson, G. (2020). College Staff Survey 2019 follow-up: research report: September 2020.



# Views from researchers, FE providers, and policy makers



In our full report, we explored a range of different perspectives from some of the leading academics and organisations working with the Edge Foundation across the UK. These perspectives illustrate how devolution has played a role in shaping and governing the FE sector. There are lessons in each of the devolved administrations that others can learn from.



**Ewart Keep, University of Oxford**, Emeritus Professor of Education, Training and Skills

**Marketisation in English FE:**

"As they operate on narrow financial margins, the result is that significant number of colleges have suffered serious financial problems, and some have gone bankrupt. FE provision has, as a result, become quite unstable".



**Paul Grainger, Institute of Education, UCL**, Co-Director of the Centre for Post-14 Education and Work and Head of Enterprise and Innovation for the Department of Education, Practice and Society (EPS)

**The role of FE colleges in inclusive economic, social and educational growth:**

"Colleges have become civic anchor institutions', steadying the local skills system and encouraging participation from all members of society".



**Rachel Bowen, Colleges Wales**, Director of Policy and Public Affairs

**View from Wales:**

"The biggest shakeup affecting FE in Wales is the proposed establishment of a new arms-length strategic body to oversee tertiary education and training. This would bring together all areas of Further, Higher, Adult and Work-Based Learning".



**Jim Gallacher, Glasgow Caledonian University**, Professor of Lifelong Learning

**View from Scotland:**

"The structure of the college sector in Scotland has been reshaped through a major programme of regionalisation for colleges. This policy was designed to end unnecessary duplication and create a college structure which would more effectively meet the needs of learners and employers within the regions".



**Marie Therese McGivern, Belfast Metropolitan College**, Non-Executive Director

**View from Northern Ireland:**

"The colleges in Northern Ireland are at arm's length from their parent Department for the Economy. This underlines the clear role the colleges are seen to have in relation to economic success and growth and colleges are expected to be closely aligned with local business and its needs".



**Holly Henderson, University of Nottingham**, Assistant Professor of Education

**Further Education College on Small Islands:**

"Colleges in these contexts are responsive to UK education policy, but also have distinct localised governance that operates in a variety of ways. On-island policy-making requires that the colleges offer courses that are consistent with island labour market shortages, thereby responding to policy objectives addressing loss from the island of youth labour and skills".



## Views from Colleges



In our report we also explored examples of colleges across the UK and abroad that have showcased promising practice and found ways to respond to the challenges identified within FE. From these examples we illustrate there are many pockets of innovative practice occurring that colleges can learn key lessons from, we highlight that:

**College Cambria** is championing cross-border collaboration. Through harnessing the use of modern technology, they have been able to create a post-merger community that address the labour market needs on both sides of the border.

It is key for colleges to work closely with industry to develop provision that matches industry needs, such as 'the Digital Mile' at **Dundee and Angus College** and 'the Sustainable Factory Model' at **Da Vinci College** in the Netherlands. Both of these colleges work on establishing links with local digital employers to work to meet the demands of the labour market and ensure FE curriculum remains reflective of real world problems and changes.



**Coleg Cambria:** operating, and thriving, as a cross-border college



Computing and creative media at **Dundee and Angus College**



A hybrid approach to professional and vocational education at **Da Vinci College**, the Netherlands



Working with industry and embedding projects into curriculum areas develops more real-world learning for students and makes learning more relevant and engaging. The investment in project-based learning by **South East Regional College** embodies this principle.



Project based learning, enterprise and entrepreneurship at **South East Regional College**, Northern Ireland

Lecturers' continuous professional development is crucial in delivering up-to-date knowledge, as well as improving staff satisfaction and retention, as highlighted in the strategy development for **City of Bristol College**. The college draws on the voices of lecturers and young people to identify key priority areas that include; informing and listening to parents and carers, improving staff training and support.



Improving Bristol post 16: a partnership approach at **City of Bristol College**

Colleges need to collaborate to share and learn from one another. **Sunderland College** are a fantastic example of how a college merger has facilitated tangible improvements in attainment amongst students, by having the capability to offer a wider range of provision and share best practice among institutions with vested interests.



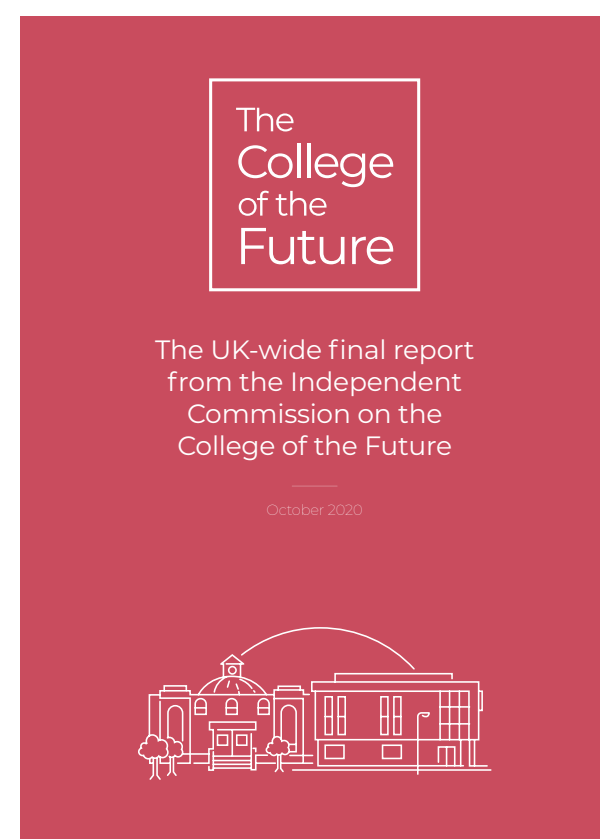
Changing the shape of technical and vocational education at **Sunderland College**



## Progress since *Our Plan for Further Education*

Against the backdrop of a changing economy, Brexit, and the urgency of Covid-19, it is clear more than ever before that we need our FE sector to be at the forefront of social and economic recovery. Much has changed in the last year and in this section, we explore recent key developments.

### Key Developments

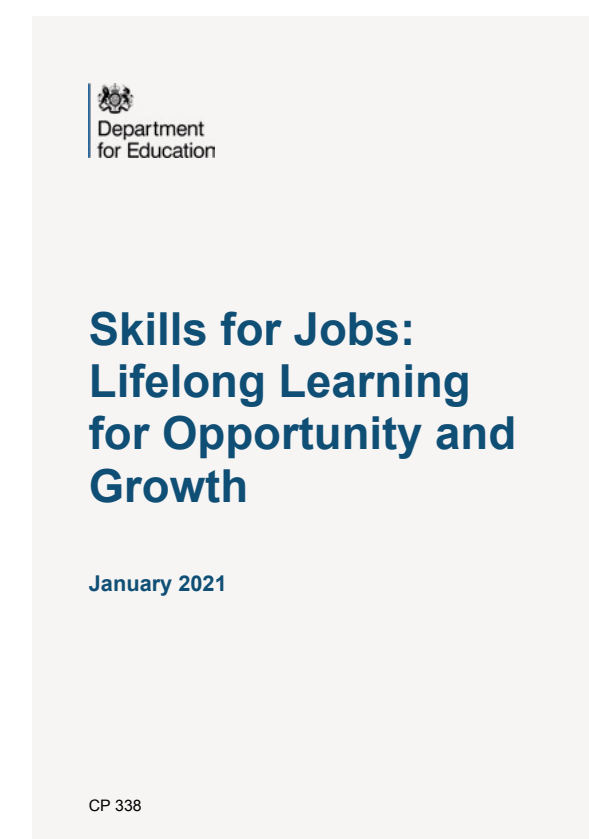


#### College of the Future published in October 2020

In October 2020, the Independent [Commission on the College of the Future](#), supported by the Edge Foundation, published their UK-wide report exploring two simple but fundamental questions:

- What do we want and need from further education colleges in 10 years' time?
- How do we realise this vision by 2030?

**What did we call for at Edge?** As *Our Plan for Further Education* pointed out, while our FE sector has many strengths, it has long been at the mercy of constant upheaval, political reform, a lack of clear identity and direction. We were pleased to see these central points developed into the Commission's key questions, and we strongly support their rallying cry for FE to deliver for "people, productivity and place" which will ultimately enable FE colleges to deliver a more joined-up, all-age education and skills system.



#### Department for Education's "Skills for Jobs" White Paper published in January 2021

The Government's long-anticipated '[Skills for Jobs](#)' White Paper was published in January 2021. However, while the White Paper mentioned the important role of colleges, we are concerned with the lack of recognition of wider FE providers. To be successful, any long term roadmap needs to be developed together with colleges and providers across the whole FE landscape.

**What did we call for at Edge?** *Our Plan for FE* highlighted the importance of colleges playing an anchor role within the heart of their local community and we are encouraged to see the White Paper emphasise the importance of collaboration. While it introduces ideas such as Local Skills Improvement Plans, working with College Business Centres and Chambers of Commerce, we need to see more detail on what this looks like. More than anything, we must avoid making the system even more complicated. In our [response to the White Paper](#), we also caution that the reduction to a one year comprehensive spending review hampered the Government's ability to look too far to the future and provide the kind of long-term direction and funding that is needed.



# Progress and Next steps

Here we reflect on further work we are undertaking at Edge, and further work needed to strengthen the principles of a more Defined, Careers and Skills Focused, and Collaborative FE sector.



## DEFINED

- 1. Defining FE's identity** - In an attempt to define the role of FE, the Skills for Jobs White Paper emphasises the importance of "putting employers at the heart of the system". Meanwhile, the College of the Future define the role of colleges as being "at the heart of communities... as centres of lifelong learning and anchor institutions within their communities."

While both definitions highlight the importance of both employers and colleges, rather than positioning one stakeholder above another, we would argue that partnerships must be core to FE. For us, any vision should position FE as the convenor and the centre of recovery both nationally and as anchor institutions in local communities, working closely with local stakeholder including employers, combined authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships, colleges and providers.

- 2. Introducing T levels** - In clarifying the breadth of provision and the identity of FE we have also seen the introduction of the [T-levels](#) since September 2020. The first three T-Levels in design, surveying and planning for construction; digital production, design and development; and education and childcare, are now available at selected colleges, schools and other providers across England. A further seven T-levels will be introduced in September 2021. However, there have been mixed views on how well the T-levels are being delivered, especially in terms of the 45 days of industry placement. Insights from the National Foundation for Educational Research ([NFER](#)) show that "around a third of providers reported that they are ready for the industrial placement 'to a small extent' or 'not at all'.

## What we are doing at Edge

- 1. Defining FE's identity** - Our recent research on the National Occupational Standards highlighted the importance of a clearer, simpler architecture for occupational standards across the UK that support training providers to navigate. So, FE must work in partnership with providers, students and wider stakeholders and should link back to an underpinning skills architecture that makes the system simpler and easier to navigate.

To reach consensus on the role of Further Education in our broader education system, difficult discussions and conversations are needed. So we have introduced and convened a series of debates around the fundamental principles and philosophies underpinning FE and you can read our latest report [here](#).

- 2. Introducing T levels** - In time, we would be keen to see T-Levels play a key role in the overall definition and vision for the FE sector, but we are concerned that they currently require a binary choice for young people between an 'academic' or 'vocational' route. As our response to the Government's consultation on [Level 3 qualifications](#) set out, we think there is an important role for high quality standalone vocational qualifications in England (a role that is modelled by Foundation Apprenticeships in Scotland) that can be taken as part of a rich and blended programme.

For example, we would advocate for students to be made aware of the broader range of post-16 qualifications such as BTECs, general qualifications, the advanced diplomas, (among others) in addition to T-levels and A-levels, and encouraged to blend both academic and vocational subjects.



## CAREERS & SKILLS FOCUSED

- 1. Skills shortages and lifetime skills** - Recognising the importance of FE in supporting life-long learning and addressing skills shortages, the Government launched the Lifetime Skills Guarantee in April 2021 to support adults towards their first full Level 3 qualification. While this is a welcome step, this must not come at the expense of funding Level 2, which in many important sectors such as business administration, construction and hospitality remain the backbone qualifications for the workforce.
- 2. Supporting the FE workforce** - To develop a skilled FE workforce and talent pipeline, the FE sector needs to have the opportunity to attract, develop and positively recognise its teaching staff. This is, of course, intimately bound up with the need for FE providers to receive fair funding for their work.  
  
We are encouraged by the College of the Future who have called for an “ambitious future college workforce strategy” led by “diverse and representative systems leaders”. Building on this, the ‘Skills for Jobs’ White Paper highlights “outstanding teaching” as a core pillar, setting out renewed support for professional development, including a new workforce industry exchange programme. However, the White Paper has been stumped by the lack of a longer term settlement. So all eyes will be on the Comprehensive Spending Review where we need to see an increase in core funding to support our FE workforce.
- 3. Careers Guidance** - The College of the Future highlights that the fourth industrial revolution will require a different skillset and fundamentally changing notions of career pathways. We are encouraged to see the Skills for Jobs White Paper has committed to providing clearer information about career outcomes, ensuring pupils are given information about all options and exploring potential to align the National Careers Service and Careers Enterprise Company.

## What we are doing at Edge

- 1. Skills shortages and lifetime skills** - At Edge, we look forward to working with policy makers and our wider [policy network](#) to discuss and respond to the vast skills and unemployment challenges that lie ahead. The DfE have trailed consultations on the National Skills Fund and Lifelong Loan Entitlements due to open in 2021 and we look forward to working with the sector to develop sensible solutions.

At Edge, we also produce a series of [Skills Shortage Bulletins](#), exploring the changing labour market as a whole and within key sectors of the economy. We will continue to aggregate and amplify key messages, in order to support sound policy decisions in addressing the skills gaps.

- 2. Supporting the FE workforce** - At Edge we are already piloting successful [‘teacher externships’](#) in schools and colleges in the North East of England to improve workforce and industry interchange. We [offer training](#) to colleges and post-16 providers who want to develop and deliver this externship model and stand ready to work with DfE and other partners to extend and build on this model.
- 3. Careers Guidance** - We have long advocated the importance of high quality careers guidance and post-compulsory education options for young people. This should be embedded throughout the whole education journey, particularly placing Gatsby Benchmark 4 to fully integrate careers into the school and college curriculum.

To inform current policy, we also strongly believe in [learning from the past](#). Our new research series explores historic policy initiatives, and we kicked off by exploring the [‘Connexions’](#) service to ask what lessons we can learn for current careers policy.



## COLLABORATIVE

- 1. Collaboration** - Cross sectoral collaboration is key for the FE sector to learn from one another and harness the diverse range of good practices identified across the UK. At Edge, we support initiatives such as the introduction of the DfE [“College Collaboration Fund \(CCF\)”](#) which aims to enable colleges to collaborate and share good practices and expertise.

We are also encouraged by the College of the Future, which outlined the importance of college network strategies being developed in collaboration with other key partners – including employers, employer representatives, universities and schools, the NHS, trade and student unions and other key community partners.

The Skills for Jobs White Paper has also outlined reforms such as ‘Local Skills Improvement Plans’ which aim to put employers at the heart of the system, working closely with Chambers of Commerce, new College Business Centres and local stakeholders to drive collaboration and identify local priorities for change. This is due to be supported by the new £65 million Strategic Development Fund to be launched in 2021/22.

- 2. Preparing for a digital transformation** - With the onset of the fourth industrial revolution, digital skills will be needed now, more than ever before. At Edge, we support initiatives such as the [EdTech demonstrator programme](#) which aims to support colleges by developing a network of providers who have used technology effectively and can assist other schools and colleges to enhance their use of technology

## What we are doing at Edge

- 1. Collaboration** – We want to see colleges incentivised to work towards greater collaboration with local areas joining forces to identify and respond to their own skills needs. This is something we are passionate about and through [Edge Future Learning](#) we are sharing leading approaches to employer engagement, such as from our partner [South East Regional College](#) in Northern Ireland.

We also believe in the importance of sharing best practice across the four nations. Here at Edge, we have developed a [practice library](#) which outlines innovative and exiting practice from across the UK and internationally.

Edge has supported and will continue to support the [Four Nations College Alliance](#) as a way to share best practice across FE.

- 2. Preparing for digital transformation** - At Edge, our [‘Education Technology in Further Education’](#) report explores how four further education colleges across the UK have integrated digital technologies across their practices. For example, colleges like Basingstoke College of Technology have become an EdTech demonstrator college through their exemplary use of technology both before and during the pandemic. We hope these case studies can inspire others towards similar innovative practice.



## Concluding remarks

After a year of much turbulence, it is clear that we need our FE sector to be at the forefront of social and economic recovery. While the “Skills for Jobs” White paper has set out a step in the right direction that offers hope and ambition for FE, we now need to see substance behind ambition matched with funding, action and long term planning. Government now needs to work closely with the whole FE sector to develop a clear, positive long-term roadmap. They have proposed a series of consultations on “FE Funding and Accountability,” “The National Skills Fund” and the “Flexible Lifelong Entitlement” later in 2021, which we hope will be a first step in this direction.

We look forward to discussing, debating and finding solutions together with colleges and policy makers. Together, we must ensure that future FE legislation and the upcoming Comprehensive Spending Review delivers for all of Further Education and translates strategic vision into reality.

To work with us in taking forward these recommendations to support the FE sector, you can:

- **JOIN our Edge community** <https://www.edge.co.uk/join-our-network/>
- **ENGAGE with the debate online** [@UkEdge](https://twitter.com/UkEdge)
- **CONTACT one of our team** at <https://www.edge.co.uk/about-edge/our-people/> to discuss further.





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