New Higher Education Institutions in England:

A real chance to innovate?

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Executive Summary

Across the UK a number of new university initiatives are starting to come to fruition, driven in part by the government's 2017 Higher Education and Research Act. New higher education institutions (HEIs) claim to be filling a gap in the market and aim to prepare students to become more employable and prepared to tackle complex problems of the 21st century. This research captures the experiences of setting up and developing new HEIs in England. It aims to explore how vision, pedagogies and approaches to learning are being developed. Specifically, the research considers:

● What are the guiding principles behind setting up a new HEI?

● How are structures and procedures developed by new HEIs to support their objectives?

● What (innovative) processes and pedagogies are being developed and what purpose do they serve?

● How have new institutions experienced the setting up a new HEI – what are the main challenges?

The qualitative research included semi-structured online interviews between Spring 2021 and Spring 2022 with stakeholders from six new HEIs across England. These stakeholders included founders, directors, senior leadership team members and those involved in the setting up a new university and developing the first programmes. Policymakers were also interviewed.

Key findings

Reasons for setting up a new HEI:

- In response to a paucity of higher education opportunities in certain regions, geography was a key determinant in establishing new HEIs. In some cases the provision was linked to local employer needs and skills shortages, which the establishment of a HEI would help to address.

- In other cases, new HEIs were established in large multicultural cities with the capacity to easily draw in students, particularly international students.

- New HEIs conceived of their mission as addressing deficiencies in existing university provision to prepare students sufficiently for a varied portfolio career in a complex world.

- Policymakers and some new HEIs wanted to offer an alternative to the traditional HE approaches, leading to diversification of the HE sector.

Structures and procedures for developing a new university:

- Some new HEIs collaborated with an existing university to validate their degrees, whereas other new HEIs did not pursue such an arrangement and instead applied for their own degree awarding powers (DAPs) from their initial delivery phase. Those that were working with an established university took advantage of using verified resources, processes and systems, as well as advice and guidance from a long-standing HE provider. An established university was also able to offer a level of prestige to the new HEI, boosting the new HEI's external reputation.

- Industry collaborations were key for new HEIs. They supported their ability to offer degrees that responded to local skills needs and offer course content that was up to date and relevant. New HEIs established these relationships in a number of ways, for example through sector skills groups or staff liaison roles, but also through informal networks of the staff.

- Admissions policies and procedures of the new HEIs can be regarded as more holistic in their approach to student recruitment. New HEIs claim that academic grades are not the primary judgement for admitting students. Instead they consider personal attitudes and the potential of the applicant important. They assessed this through use of broader admission measures, e.g. interviews and submission of 'selfie' videos. The scalability of such approaches however is uncertain as applications to the new HEIs grow.

- Staff were drawn from academia and from industry, possessing both broad subject knowledge and industry knowledge. Some of the staff recruitment techniques mirror the varied recruitment techniques used with students. New HEIs prized engaging teachers with the right mindset over academic research credentials.

Teaching approaches:

- Interdisciplinarity lies at the heart of many degrees offered at new HEIs, whether this be equipping students with the knowledge and skills from a range of disciplines so that they can tackle complex problems, or 'viewing a single discipline through a broader lens, for example encompassing social science aspects into engineering.

- Learning is not delivered through traditional lectures but often centred on problem-based approaches to teaching, whereby students work together in teams to tackle real world problems that are authentic and often have industry relevance.

- There are holistic approaches to the development of students, ensuring that the 'whole person' is developed. Professional and transferable skills and competencies are prioritised for work-readiness and broader life success. For example, students may be explicitly coached to develop independence and become life-long learners.

- Flexible modes of study are often being built into provision to allow learning to fit in with students' personal circumstances, for example modulised learning, breaks in study, part time options and varying lengths for work placements.

- The physical spaces compliment the learning approaches offered at the new HEIs. Lecture theatres are not used or are only used on rare occasions. Instead spaces have been designed that allow for collaboration between students and staff, and allow for hybrid learning in a post-Covid world of technology.

- Courses and the wider provision at the new HEIs tend to be industry focused. Therefore the new HEIs strategically develop strong relationships with a range of employers from the outset. Employers are involved in a number of operations. For example, supporting the design of the curriculum, input into student projects, and playing a role in assessment.

Challenges:

- The regulatory process from registering as a HE provider with the Office of Students to gaining degree awarding powers was seen as a slow, and for some, complicated process. New HEIs found some of these issues were ameliorated by the presence of a strong and collaborative team. Contacts, or informal support groups with external contacts, who had experience of gaining degree awarding powers improved their experiences. Positively, new HEIs felt that the processes involved in registration was a way to ensure they put in place strong internal governance frameworks and procedures that will last for many years to come.

- Despite the policy rhetoric stemming from the 2016 White Paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy, Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility & Student Choice* and the subsequent Higher Education and Research Act (2017) endorsing ideas of innovation, new HEIs felt that external factors restricted the degree to which they could truly be 'innovative'. For instance, the regulatory frameworks that new HEIs had to work within to register as a provider were based on assumptions about the traditional model of a university. Likewise, some new HEIs discussed similar restrictions applying when working in partnership with existing universities, meaning they were restricted within the parameters of their awarding university. In both cases, some new HEIs stated that this led to mission-drift or a watering down of their 'innovative' approaches.

- Attracting and recruiting students to a new HEI was identified as a key challenge by several interviewees, especially for the first cohorts of students to the institution. Firstly, new HEIs were likely to be unknown, or relatively unknown in the sector. Secondly, any perspective students were taking a risk on untried and unproven, often non-traditional, models. Convincing parents, as key influencers, was another challenge.

All the new HEIs set out clear and purposeful visions for development. They are at the early stages of conception or early stages of delivering courses, therefore it is too early to judge their success as HEIs. However many regarded the opportunity as a chance to break the mould of the traditional higher education landscape with a variety of interesting pedagogies and approaches. The markers of their success will be in their student numbers over the coming years and the success of their graduates once they enter the workplace.

Introduction

In 2016, the Higher Education and Research Bill set out to make it easier and quicker for new higher education providers to start-up, attain degree awarding powers and secure university status. These new higher education institutions (HEIs) were intended to be high quality, innovative and specialist institutions. Given this encouraging policy context, a small number of potential higher education providers have identified gaps in the market and an opportunity to take a non-traditional approach to HE delivery. This research focuses on these new providers and captures their early experiences and directions of development. It aims to explore the process of setting up and developing a new higher education institution in England, how their approaches differ from existing practices at other universities, in for example, programme development and recruitment, and how they attempt to develop students ready to respond to the twenty-first century's challenges. Specifically, the research considers:

- What are the guiding principles behind setting up a new HEI?

- How are structures and procedures developed by new HEIs to support their objectives?

- What (innovative) processes and pedagogies are being developed and what purpose do they serve?

- How have new institutions experienced the setting up a new HEI – what are the main challenges?

Within the report ideas of innovation within the higher education sector are discussed. This report is particularly interested in identifying what is meant when the state and other stakeholders expect new HEIs to be 'innovative' institutions. The OECD defines innovation as:

> *the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service) or process, a new marketing method, or a new organisational method in business practices, workplace organisation or external relations.* (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2017, p. 7)

In education this includes new practices with the aim of improving provision. While innovation is often understood as suggesting complete novelty or a change in practice, innovation also includes re-examining practices in a fresh and creative way in order to address a problem or make improvements, or introducing a new practice in a particular place or time. Standalone some practices may not be regarded as innovative but when combined with different practices may become innovative. For instance, project-based learning is nowadays not an innovative practice itself, but within the context of higher education provision may contribute to innovative approaches in combination with other non-traditional practices. Innovation is understood as a key principle in order to tackle longstanding and novel challenges facing the sector, and its cultivation remains a key ambition of the higher education policy and legislative landscape.

2016 White Paper and 2017 Act

There is a long tradition in the UK of developing centralised and local policy initiatives to generate new and innovative forms of higher education to serve specific identified social and economic purposes. This has included meeting the perceived scientific and technological knowledge and skills needs of employers or the nation and increasingly democratising access to higher education. Endeavours to pursue these ambitions include, for example, the foundation of new civic universities of the nineteenth century, but over the past half-century state interventions have included the designation of the Colleges of Advanced Technology in the 1950s, the 'New Universities' and the Polytechnics of the 1960s, and Colleges of Higher Education from the 1990s (Whyte, 2015; Pellew & Taylor, 2020; Parry, 2022). In all instances these new HEIs were imagined and intended to respond innovatively in their structure and teaching to gaps in existing provision. Many of these institutions in the past were initially primarily local institutions, and vocationally and economically oriented. They have, however, been repeatedly subject to varying degrees to the criticism they have undergone 'academic drift', becoming more like 'traditional' universities and losing their distinctive contribution to the higher education landscape (Pratt & Burgess, 1974).

Since the 1990s, in order to meet national social and economic needs a primary strategy of the successive UK governments has been to bring market forces to bear on higher education with the aim of improving quality of provision, accessibility, and value for money for the state in English higher education. This followed the logic that empowering students to obtain a return-on-investment on their time in higher education would encourage them to demand courses providing skills with high value on the labour market, meeting national economic needs and encouraging providers to innovate to meet this need. In pursuit of such a programme, the sector has undergone significant development. Between 19989 to 2021, student numbers increased roughly from around 17 per cent of young people to 45-50 per cent as student number caps were lifted (Mayhew et al, 2004, HM Government, 2023). Simultaneously, institutions' sources of income proportionately shifted from public grant funding towards primarily tuition fees to encourage providers to respond to this expanded student demand. From 2010-11 to 2021-22 the proportion of income from teaching recurrent grants fell from 50 per cent to 9 per cent of total institutional income via funding councils and fee income, while income from fees rose from 25 per cent to 73 per cent (Bolton, 2021). Alongside these changes, from 1992, in a move intended to develop the autonomy of polytechnics to innovate and promote diversification of higher education the polytechnics were bought into the university system (Shattock, 2012).

Recent efforts to encouraging new entries to the higher education landscape is a part of this strategy. The White Paper Success as a Knowledge Economy, Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility & Student Choice (2016) identified itself as instigating the first set of major sector reforms for twenty-five years and reaffirmed this market-led policy direction. Reviewing the earlier developments, the 2016 White Paper identified that the diversity and quality of provision was unsatisfactory.

> *Courses are inflexible, based on the traditional three-year undergraduate model, with insufficient innovation and provision of two-year degrees and degree apprenticeships* (BIS, 2016, p. 8).

The White Paper reported high levels of student dissatisfaction especially with teaching quality, and a mismatch between employer and labour market needs particularly in STEM areas and student outcomes. Deficiencies in the system persisted due to universities behaving, then Minister of State for Universities and Science Jo Johnson declared, as a 'cartel' (Turner & Yorke, 2017). As one later analysis put it, 'vested interest, producer-oriented, rent-seeking' providers were concerned with retaining historic privileges and state income streams rather than responding to genuine social need as indicated by markets (Palfreyman, 2019). To address these issues, the White Paper proposed that increasing competition between providers and enhancing the visibility of information and metrics would incentivise providers to 'raise their game' by diversifying and improving their offer and ultimately democratising access to more and to a more diverse population (BIS, 2016).

Introducing competition especially included enabling new and innovative HE entrants to disrupt the market. What was meant by innovation however was left undefined. Following consultation including on the opportunities and barriers encountered by new entrants (Stockwell, 2016), the White Paper identified that HEIs faced 'significant and disproportionate challenges to establishing themselves in the sector'. The White Paper proposed to address these by reforming what it described as outdated and insufficiently flexible arrangements. The proposed reforms would firstly enable providers of recognised quality to register as HE providers, obtain their own Degree Awarding Powers (DAPs) more immediately on a probationary basis without having to enter into potentially stultifying validation procedures with partner universities, and finally secure university title and status (OfS, 2018). Secondly, they would be able to access sources of government funding including student fee loans (BIS, 2016, p. 9). To manage this process new responsibilities would be exercised by a new body, the Office for Students (OfS), which would assess the quality and financial sustainability of new entrants and bar poor quality or financially unsustainable providers from market entry. Crucially, and novelly for the public sector, providers unable to compete should be allowed to fail and exit the market and their market share taken by new or more dynamic providers (Hunt & Boliver, 2021; McCaig, 2018). The White Paper argued that these reforms would address skills shortages, stimulate economic growth, facilitate social mobility, an engender a system responsive to domestic and international student demand. Critics worried that lowering the barrier to entry would enable the proliferation of weak or fraudulent for-profit providers at the expense of quality of student experience and outcomes (Lock, 2017).

New institutions, new purposes?

The following Higher Education and Research Act (2017) enacted the White Paper for the diversification of the sector. While the 2017 Act was deliberately non-perspective about the purpose of higher education, ministers and the government had a clear idea of the sort of provision they were expecting to facilitate. As then Minster for Universities Sam Gyimah explained in 2018, the intention was to diversify the provision of higher education to include:

> *accelerated degrees, for new ways of delivering university education, and for undergraduate and post graduate courses that focus on the higher technical skills that our innovation and technology driven economy needs…* (DfE & Gyimah, 2018)

Through the Act, Gyimah hoped to foster the 'next Open University, the next BPP or the next Buckingham' (DfE & Gyimah, 2018). All three of these institutions promote themselves as offering non-standard degree provisions including distance learning and accelerated degrees, and two of the three are private. Government ambition to cultivate a diverse sector oriented towards the economic and meeting technological skills needs has intensified since 2017. Its rhetoric has become more explicit since the 2019 Augar Report's emphasis on 'Bearing down on low value HE' which does not align with the 'country's economic requirements' (HM Government, 2019). Diversification of provision also has important ramifications for diversification of the geography of higher education, with the *Levelling Up the United Kingdom* White Paper (2022) intending to increase access to higher education in areas without existing provision to develop local skills bases and improve local productivity.

There has been, six years on from the 2017 Act, only limited assessment hitherto as to how far its reforms enabled new providers to enter, disrupt, and improve provision in the higher education sector as imagined. However, recently it was highlighted that it still remains difficult for new entrants to gain a foothold and to innovate in the HE sector (Hillman, 2022).

Even prior to the 2017 Act, there were a large, volatile and heterogeneous group of so-called 'alternative' or 'private' higher education providers in the UK outside of the 150 or so higher education providers registered with the Office for Students, though assessments of their contribution to the diversity of higher education provision were pessimistic (Hunt & Boliver, 2019). Estimates of their numbers range from around 700-800 providers in the late 2010s, of which half had under a hundred students, while nine had over 5,000. Surveys have detailed their functions as offering sub-degree, degree, postgraduate, specialist, generalist, for-profit, not-for-profit, distance, and overseas education. Most of these providers were based in London and south-east England; most offered higher education qualifications through partnerships with academic or professional partners; just nine providers had degree-awarding powers and of which three were for-profit (Fielden & Middlehurst, 2017; Hunt & Boliver, 2019). In their review of 813 private providers in April 2019, Stephen Hunt and Vikki Boliver found 'There is evidence of innovation in delivery, such as accelerated courses, but this is only a small proportion of the teaching; most is structured in a traditional manner'. They found that most of their teaching was concentrated in business and administration. The primarily small scale of these providers' delivery meant they were 'unlikely to provide a more general alternative to the public system of standard undergraduate higher education envisaged by the government' (Hunt & Boliver, 2019, pp. 2-3).

Meanwhile in the wider HE sector, innovation has been identified as emerging through the growth of interdisciplinary studies. One review of this emerging trend remarked on the 'lacuna' of peer-reviewed literature concerning empirical evidence of interdisciplinary teaching (Lindvig & Ulriksen, 2019, p. 698). Nevertheless this interdisciplinary teaching has been identified as often innovative and located outside of across traditional academic disciplines. These courses tend to orient around problem-based learning with relevance to local and global challenges (Bernstein, 2015) and employer needs, and built on collaboration and discussion between

disciplines and students (Lindvig & Ulriksen, 2019). This approach to teaching features in the marketing of flagship interdisciplinary and liberal arts and science courses at a wide range of universities and higher education institutions.

Simultaneously, the assumption that many courses in higher education are unresponsive to employer and economic needs is being challenged. The government's use of the label of 'low value' courses has tended to be interpreted to mean especially non-STEM and arts and humanities subjects with little immediate vocational applicability. The British Academy's SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities, & the Arts for People and the Economy) campaign and Higher Education Policy Institute have reported on the contribution of arts and humanities courses to meeting current and unknowable future employer skills needs (BA, 2022; Thain et al., 2023). Particularly since the pandemic, the social contribution of universities as a public good has been bought to the fore (Yang et al., 2022) and the role of universities in tackling social 'grand challenges' of the twenty-first century such as climate change has been recognised in the government's Research and Development strategy (HM Government, 2020).

Given this policy background, the emerging trends in the higher education landscape, and the lack of research in the area, this research explores how new HEIs have been established and how they are developing 'innovative' approaches.

Methodology

Following the research questions, this research takes a qualitative approach focusing on six newly established HEIs across England. Some are recruiting their first intake of undergraduate students and some are in their first few years of programme delivery. Within each HEI semi-structured online interviews were carried out with a range of stakeholders, including founders, directors, senior leadership team members and those involved in the setting up a new university and developing the first programmes. Policymakers were also interviewed. Data collection was undertaken between Spring 2021 and Spring 2022. In total 10 interviews have been conducted. All interviews were recoded and transcribed verbatim. The interview data has been analysed using thematic analyses to draw out common themes within the data (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This is stage one of an ongoing process of data collection. As the new HEIs develop, begin to take on further cohorts of students, and their programmes become established, we plan to carry out semi-structured interviews with new students and staff over the course of the next 1-2 years.

This research follows the British Education Research Association ethical guidelines 2018, concerning issues such as informed consent, anonymity of interviewees, confidentiality of research data and data protection (BERA, 2018). This research might be sensitive as it explores new HEIs that develop processes that are still in flux and are still being under development. Participants were informed that their names will remain anonymous throughout this report. While institutions names are avoided in the 'Findings and Discussion' chapter, given the small number of institutions that have utilised the 2017 HE and Research Act it is difficult to ensure full anonymity. In order to reduce the chance of being identifiable, the 'Findings and Discussion' chapter is written up thematically. Participating HEIs were also consulted and were given the opportunity to read the research report prior to publication to avoid any potential harm.

The findings will be presented by responding to each of the research questions outlined on page 7 in the Introduction.

Findings and discussion

1. Guiding principles behind setting up a new Higher Education Institution

The new HEIs that are discussed in this report differ in their size and offering of provision. Some were offering only one type of undergraduate degree, whereas others had a large portfolio of courses spanning many subject areas or sectors. Although for some, planning of the new HEI had been ongoing for a number of years, the majority we interviewed took their first cohorts of students in 2021 and 2022. Despite this range, the new HEIs shared three primary reasons justifying their ambition to establish a new university. Firstly, they were rooted in a specific place-based vision, secondly, they aimed to address skills gaps and nurture work-ready graduates, which meant, thirdly, challenging prevailing models of delivery in HE.

Place-based vision

Some of the HEIs were establishing themselves because of an apparent lack of university provision in their local area. Without other post compulsory education opportunities, young people at the age of 18 were being drawn away from the area. At the same time, a lack of local HE provision acts as a barrier to young people especially from disadvantaged areas who might not be able to afford to move away from home. In this way new HEIs saw themselves as contributing to a 'levelling up' (HEI stakeholder 9) agenda in order to retain talent during and following graduation and promote local economic growth and prosperity. One interviewee discussed this further, arguing that new HEIs could contribute to tackling social deprivation issues, particularly poor education and health outcomes, and improve social mobility by encouraging more local people to attend university and ultimately getting into higher-skilled jobs.

> *You've got your innovation, high skills, working together really trying to change the fortunes of the city* (HEI stakeholder 1).

Not only was the local need for a university discussed in terms of the students it can recruit, but also in terms of the benefits it could bring to the public through civic engagement. As one HEI explained, it was important that their institution was really:

> *part of the city as well…. And within there that's really about getting the public in and being part of our research and development* (HEI stakeholder 1).

At the other end of the spectrum, the chosen location for some new HEIs were large cities with already established universities. In these cases, the city was used as a draw in itself, particularly to potential applicants. London for instance was regarded as an attractive place to start an institution since it is a well-known, global city, with a *'proven track record of being a draw for international students'* (HEI stakeholder 8).

Skills gap and work-ready graduates

A frequently mentioned justification for starting a new university was framed in terms of the current disconnect between what students do as part of their university degrees and what graduates then experience in the workplace. It was claimed that current university provision is not preparing students for the world of work nor for an increasingly complex world. For some this was discussed in terms of skills gaps and claimed their institution

is therefore being set up to help meet the skills demands of employers. This included general transferable skills to specific skills required by employers in specific sectors and localities, including for example digital and management skills.

> *[It's] all been driven by working with industry, and saying well 'what do you actually need?' and them going, you know 'history and geography is great, but I can't get them to sit in front of a robot and mend it, it doesn't help them'. So all of our focus on subjects is very much on that 21st century skills* (HEI stakeholder 5).

New HEIs saw themselves responsible for preparing students for work and equipping them to make a successful transition into employment. This was often referred to in terms of being 'work-ready'. For some, this preparedness was discussed as being much broader than just being ready to move into a specific job from university. It was recognised that there are complex world problems that need to be solved, potentially both inside and outside of work, such as climate change and deprivation. In order to tackle these issues successfully students need to be equipped with interdisciplinary knowledge and a broader set of skills. Workplaces are increasingly needing this interdisciplinarity as jobs are decreasingly domain specific:

> *…a view of what do these graduates require in a few years' time when they enter the labour force and they are looking for employment in these increasingly contemporary digitised economies, where certain sorts of skills have really come to the fore and some of those skills we might categorise it sort of interdisciplinary skills around synthesis of information, connection of different domains of knowledge. Turning your hand quickly to different domain knowledge* (HEI stakeholder 4).

Some institutions also discussed how they wanted to develop their students to be 'world ready', not just work ready, and therefore have a real focus on character and personal development as part of all their provision.

> *Really equipping, and ensuring that, students who graduate have got the skills to thrive in the world of work and thrive in life. Recognising actually that there's much more to that than having a good, solid academic degree and it needs to be much broader than that....Really looked holistically, having resilience is really important, and having being strong mentally and physically. Things like leadership, team working, ensuring you eat properly, you know just those kind of things* (HEI stakeholder 9).

Equipping students with the right skillsets and preparing them for life in the modern world was, in some cases, also linked to place-based visioning. New HEIs discussed particular skills needs that were specific to their region and therefore meeting the needs of local employers and the economy, as well as supporting local people into local jobs:

> *Things like environmental management, again, recognising quite large farming community from [place name], and it's a very urban [place name], but you've got some really interesting kind of farmers working with their agricultural communities around that. Things like regenerative farming, and also with the changes in legislation around land usage, is how can we help support with that, with having the right graduates there working with them?* (HEI stakeholder 1).

Challenging the status quo

From the policy point of view, the impetus behind the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act was to bring in new providers to the HE sector in order to 'challenge' the sector and bring innovation to the forefront.

> *[The] original thinking was to bring challenge into the sector....as well as new ventures exploiting holes in the market - market opportunities, skill shortages and things like that. So the expectation was that new, so you know just a sense of where it was with Jo [Johnson, Skills Minister in 2017] it was new providers that he wanted. [Minister] wanted new and innovative providers* (Policymaker).

However, how this 'innovation' was defined is less clearcut. The 2017 Act was purposely not prescriptive and did not define what innovative higher education should be, in order to allow autonomy and flexibility (DfE & Gyimah, 2018). A policymaker we interviewed described how the government was not looking to replicate the current market of alternative, private providers:

> *[The Universities' Minister] wasn't looking for Accountancy qualification factories or Business Administration factories or you know some of the practices that seem to just replicate provision.*

In this context, innovation is in fact difficult to define and can even be subjective.

> *The real difficulty was the innovative is really in the eye of the beholder but also innovative might be a great idea, but until it's tested is much harder to understand whether it really is innovative. So there were two strands to that. Was it an innovative idea that had got some sort of track record somewhere else? So you can then get into the Australian college of law and people like that coming in. ... Or was it something that was just a really fresh start like [name of new HEI]?* (Policymaker).

Providers themselves also reflected this innovative vision by discussing their wish to start a new HEI in order to explore new and innovative practices and go against the 'norm' of traditional university practice. Some interviewees spoke in terms of challenging the current status quo of studying a single, or at most sometimes two, disciplines at university level. Others identified a market gap for those who want to study more than one or two subjects, and that there is an increasing interest in multi-disciplinary/broader provisions at higher level.

I mean almost all of the undergraduate provision in the UK is single discipline. There's just a culture that's what you do. You become an expert by studying one subject as defined by subject disciplines, whoever defines those. That's a big cultural paradigm that we all just accept….That's a massive market error that it is not providing an option for students that want to study, more than one subject (HEI stakeholder 3).

Other new HEIs also spoke about their visioning in delivering in a way that goes against the norm of how HE is traditionally taught, whether that be delivering through problem-based learning approaches or offering flexible delivery models which challenge the traditional full-time student module approach of the majority of higher education. Some of these approaches will be explored further in the .

On the other hand, some of the HEIs challenged the idea of innovation and maintained the idea that their new HEI did not necessarily need to be completely innovative or include new practices. In some cases this was to respond to a market gap regionally, and their vision to build a new university involved applying what already exists elsewhere and bringing high quality provision to their setting.

… it doesn't always need to be innovative. What [place name] was crying out for is high quality, higher education, research and innovation at scale taking place. And that happens elsewhere……And what we're doing is applying it to a city in a new way. That means that is really inclusive, that really helps accelerate the fortunes of the city (HEI stakeholder 1).

What we're in the process of doing more of is taking best practice from around the sector and applying it within a single institution. So essentially we're doing what hasn't been done anywhere else before. I think the key thing is the extent to which it is being done (HEI stakeholder 8).

Having outlined the guiding principles why new HEIs were initiated and how interviewees considered their institutions contributing to the diversification of HEIs now we turn to discussing what the approaches are that are developed in order to bring their vision to fruition.

2. Developing a new university – structures and procedures

A number of themes were discussed by the interviewees that illustrated the structures and procedures that these new HEIs' used to realise their visions. Interviewees emphasised the importance of managing collaborations, tackling recruitment and admissions and hiring the right staff.

Collaborations

Some of the new HEIs stemmed from a collaboration or a partnership between themselves and an existing well-established university. The nature of this relationship varied from those new HEIs whose partners were centrally involved in the original scoping and establishment of a new institution, to those that were using an established university as partner to accredit the new HEIs' degrees whilst they establish themselves and gain their own degree awarding powers (DAPs).

For some without their own DAPs, having an academic partner was essential to validate their degrees. This partnership engendered other benefits too. It enabled new HEIs draw on advice and expertise from an established partner and tap into verified resources, processes and systems including for example estates or an IT department. This had practical cost-saving effects as well as operational benefits, meaning that, for example, *'We were able to make significant savings on IT licences in our first year of operation'* one new HEI reported (HEI stakeholder 1). Those with a closer relationship also shared staff, who may be seconded or move institutions to work in the new HEIs, or who give more ad hoc support such as guest lectures:

> *We've got a lot of [established university] people who will be coming in either doing individual lectures if they've got a particular specialism, and that might be a PhD student coming in and talking about their research…. And that's great about [established university], they're got a real pool of people. We've then got course leads, of which two are [established university] people that are doing this secondment…* (HEI stakeholder 5).

Having the partnering or 'parent' university related to the new HEI also had the benefit of bringing kudos to the new HEI, which in most cases would lack prominence and status in the sector. This further bought credibility, trust, and confidence.

> *So [established university] is well known within the UK, well respected in the UK so both for stakeholders in the UK and indeed for potential students in the UK and their influencers.* (HEI stakeholder 8).

The influence and benefits are not always one-way however, and some interviewees discussed that the established universities were in fact learning from the new HEI. Often these new HEIs were bringing innovation to the sector and new ways of thinking that challenged established practice, provoking senior partners into revisiting their own practice. This included practices in learning and teaching and building new industry relationships for example.

> *I think increasingly [established university] is enjoying collaborating with us. I think we're moving on to a different footing with them as we're growing in maturity as an organisation. They can see that there's something that we might do differently to [established university] and actually the things they can learn from how we might do things differently as well* (HEI stakeholder 9).

Conversely, being so closely linked to an established university also brought with it some challenges, and these will be discussed more in the of this chapter (page 32).

Another key collaboration which was discussed by all interviewees was the collaboration with industry. This was stressed as a key feature of developing a new HEI, particularly in terms of developing the courses and curriculum, and being able to offer students a university experience which would help support their professionalism. Some of the ways employers were involved in different teaching approaches will be discussed in the following chapter. Here we discuss the building of these employer relationships. Many of the courses on offer, it was explained, were responding to the needs of industry in order to address skills shortages and prepare graduates for professional roles. New HEIs discussed trying to build relationships with as many employers as possible, and trying to ensure they interact with a wide range of employers, including large employers and small and medium-sized employers (SMEs), and public and private employers. Many appeared to have already had successes with this. One interviewee highlighted that *'we've got a large number of companies that are working and have been working with us in development'...* (HEI stakeholder 1). Others also discussed a wide set of employer partners they have been working with and who seemed keen to be involved with the new HEIs.

We've got about 110 companies [supporting us], but it represents over half a million employees. So some really big companies, some really small companies. We spent a lot of time talking to them and listening to them and saying, you know, what are the skills gaps? (HEI stakeholder 5)

One of the ways of managing these relationships was through formally organised processes such as skills workshops and regular sector interest groups with clearly signposted roles for employers. Interviewees stressed the importance of ensuring that employers are given a customer-focused approach, ensuring they feel like they are getting benefits from the collaboration by identifying their wants and needs. Realising the benefits for both sides of the partnership was indeed a reason for maintaining relationships. For instance, a 'bright' student on a placement can effectively contribute to the business while working on existing projects, whilst universities can use industry facilities for their learning. Some employer-provider relationships progressed beyond 'transactional' relationships where employers shared excitement in the mission of HEI.

A lot of organisations found us before we found them. Employers and organisations read about us and they think 'hey, this is actually really interesting' and want to get involved (HEI stakeholder 2).

Employer-provider links were not generally pursued in any systematic fashion. Many employer links originated via networks of passionate and engaging existing staff, particularly those who had previous experience of working with industry, ad-hoc suggestions, and self-selection from employers. The process was described by one interviewee as happening 'organically', tending to be the case of 'who you know'. Charisma and reputation played a role, as another HEI described:

> *Our CEO is just, they're one of those highly charismatic people, … they're just absolutely brilliant with engaging with [employers]* (HEI stakeholder 5).

Some new HEIs were attempting to bring more formality to the process of establishing and developing employer relationships. Some interviewees described establishing dedicated partnerships teams whose remit was to establish and maintain these relationships.

Recruitment and admissions

Many of the HEIs asserted widening participation was a key element of their institutional vision, especially that their provision was accessible to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

> *The driver there is to bring in a diverse group of students, because we believe that diversity is a key to solving many of the challenges that we've got within the world. What we want to do is bring in a diverse cohort of students so that they can learn together* (HEI stakeholder 8).

Generally, established universities will have outreach programmes which target schools and colleges and aim to widen participation for underrepresented groups. Ensuring young people make an informed decision, and receive adequate information, advice and guidance plays a part in many of these universities' outreach programmes. Likewise the new HEIs spoke about ways they were engaging with the education and training sector, especially those new HEIs who were attempting to fill a gap in the local market. These were particularly targeting certain local schools where, for example, there is a higher proportion of disadvantaged learners.

In a number of ways, widening participation initiatives reported by the new HEIs goes beyond common practice at universities. Many emphasised that academic achievement, i.e. A level grades or UCAS points, should not be a principal prerequisite for entry. Some even stated that being academically successful and having A levels would not necessarily make them a good candidate for their HEI, and they wanted to contest that general perception. Instead, some wanted to focus on the whole person, beyond their grades, including the attitudes, mindset and other abilities of the applicant.

> *We are really keen to look at holistically a student applying to us, we've got a contextual admissions policy. So again, looking at kind of a whole range of factors that might impact on someone either not quite performing, as well as they might have thought, or understanding some of the kind of pressures or barriers that they might have had previously. And then the contextual admissions is really key for us* (HEI stakeholder 1).

> *… the first thing we're testing for is - are you able to do the course? And that's the most important thing. This again sounds very basic but no other university are testing for that* (HEI stakeholder 3).

Some discussed specifically excluding the usual prerequisites that would usually allow access to certain course. For instance, some new HEIs did not require maths and/or physics qualifications for entry for engineering and other STEM courses. This was intended to widen access for traditionally underrepresented groups in these subjects, such as females. HEIs instead evaluated applicants' ability for mathematical concepts through other means. Applicants could either show that they have the ability and motivation to learn the concepts specifically

required for the course, and which would be taught in an applied way when doing the course, or the new HEIs would run their own maths tests as part of the admissions process. As one HEI described, they were more interested in:

> about the propensity of the students, the potential of the students to thrive with the maths that they need for engineering. Rather than the knowledge of maths they have already got (HEI stakeholder 8).

Despite the potential relaxation of academic entry requirements, interviewees still stressed that rigor was important as part of the admissions process and shielding students from embarking on courses they were unlikely to benefit from. HEIs reported using interviews and the submission of videos by the applicant to inform selection. These more personal approaches permitted HEI to understand the motivations, mindset, *'resilience or curiosity'* of the applicant. In some cases, interviews were accompanied by assessment of a project, case study or portfolio. These were distinguished as tests of ability to do the course rather than tests of prior knowledge or achievement.

Interviewees stressed such methods enabled their institutions to develop a more comprehensive appreciation of an applicant's character and disposition. However, interviewing and assessing projects and portfolios are time consuming and staff resource intensive processes. It is questionable how scalable these approaches are going to be in the future if and when these new HEIs grow and receive more applicants. This challenge was admitted by at least one of the HEIs:

> … it's not scalable because we're now going through admissions for the undergraduate cohort. It's so complex it involves so many different individuals in the organisation, we are all involved, whether it is mindset interviews or case studies and then going through each of the student's files (HEI stakeholder 2).

One HEI discussed a way around this problem would be to bring some automation to the admissions process.

> As we grow eventually that's what we need to do and have a number of these kind of steps in the process being automated, then designing certain algorithms so that you can still pick up on those kind of individual differences…So that the human effort only comes really at the end of that process. In that way you can make it more scalable but still recruit for diversity making sure that those students don't fall through the cracks (HEI stakeholder 2).

How an automated process or algorithm could filter personal characteristics and judge motivations and mindset was not fully explained. There seems to be a tension between still being able to have a personal approach to student recruitment whilst being able to do this en masse. Another HEI explained using a two-minute video task to efficiently filter candidates.

> … the first thing is, can they obey the rules? You say 'I want a two minute video in which you explained to us this…' - you know why you want to come, or something about engineering, it doesn't matter what the task is you set a task and two minutes. If they run into five minutes, it's in the bin straight away. If they read a script straight to the camera they're in the bin. You know and it's very, very quick to do (HEI stakeholder 7).

Staffing

The type and quality of staff involved in establishing and running the new HEIs were identified by interviewees as crucial to achieving their institution's aims. Many identified teaching as their primary focus as opposed to research, and this determined the type and characteristics of the staff sought, though HEIs also stressed a rich variety was important. This mix tended to include academic staff and those with an industry background, as well as academic staff with relevant industry experience.

… a number of our tutors work in the industry as well. In the sport space there are a number still working practitioners and in the media space as well we've got some well-known journalist who are part of our academic team as well (HEI stakeholder 9).

Although some wanted to allow some time for staff to do research, many interviewees suggested that this would not be their main role at the institution. Dedicated research time was recognised as important to ensure staff were at the cutting edge of their discipline, particularly at the 'forefront, doing interesting interdisciplinary projects' (HEI stakeholder 3) as well as it being helpful to attracting expertise staff to join the institution. However, many interviewees indicated teaching was their primary focus.

The importance of interdisciplinarity was emphasised by some HEIs who explained the importance of having a mix of staff, some who have deep expertise in a particular area, such as a chemist with technical expertise, as well as having polymaths, who could teach across subject areas. Breaking down structural and physical barriers that usually exists between different departments and disciplines was crucial for building a collaborative and interdisciplinary environment. Some described how they would not have staff working in separate departments but co-located to encourage cross-disciplinary working. This is also reflected in the physical space.

And then with our staff themselves, our staff are all co-located. So there's no one going to be sitting in the engineering department or sitting in the health department, they're all going to be in the same areas working together. Our academic development work is as a whole staff group. So as we look at kind, of course, design and improvement, we look at our research work, really it is mixing people together. And again, that's an opportunity, you know, you're starting to break down some of the structural barriers you find in universities and taking advantage of starting something from ground upwards (HEI stakeholder 1).

This *'common space'* is further extended to other staff. As one interviewee described, they were *'making sure that we are not building a them and us culture between the support staff and the academics'* (HEI stakeholder 5).

Some of the methods employed in staff recruitment, as well as desired characteristics, mirrored the approaches employed in student recruitment. The new HEIs distinguished themselves from traditional universities with different mindsets and environments, and staff needed to reflect this. Interviewees discussed that took a holistic view of a candidate when recruiting staff and particularly prized those disposed towards collaboration. Staff, like students, were taking a risk to do something different, effectively working for a start-up, requiring agility and investment in mission. As one interviewee put it, *'nobody has had that experience really. You've got to believe in what [HEI] is doing before you consider making that step'* (HEI stakeholder 8). Assessing these characteristics entailed deploying less traditional approaches to staff recruitment. Instead of interviewing, methods included, for example:

> *We did a group assessment day first, so we did an exercise where all of the candidates had to talk together about slightly controversial /hybrid teaching. There are different ways of doing it and we could see actually how they engage with each other. We did a group exercise with them around actually developing a module* (HEI stakeholder 5).

> *The other thing is that you've got to be is charismatic into delivery. You've got to be engaging and we test that we put up every staff member who gets to interview has to give a test class for half an hour to a bunch of kind of pseudo students…So the task is, can you explain something technical to an unfamiliar audience in an engaging way* (HEI stakeholder 7).

Again, echoing their novel student recruitment methods, in some instances staff candidates were required to included submission of a short video, psychometric tests and other group exercises. Such activities enabled the new HEIs to understand whether the candidates would be good at team working, and whether they would be able to offer dynamic and engaging learning experiences for students.

Having outlined the main factors how new HEIs aim to realising their vision, this report moves to discuss how interviewees saw their (innovative) teaching and delivery approaches.

3. Teaching approaches developed

The 2017 Higher Education and Research Act aimed to encourage the establishment of innovative HE providers and practices. This chapter explores the area of 'innovative' pedagogies and approaches as reported by the interviewees. These include interdisciplinarity, problem-based learning, and the holistic development of the student.

Interdisciplinarity

Many of the new HEIs sought broader approaches to knowledge and learning. For example, they sought to enable students to study beyond the limits of a single discipline degree. Students might study for a fully interdisciplinary Bachelor of Arts and Science degree, which aims to equip students with the knowledge and skills from a range of disciplines so that they can tackle complex problems. Alternatively, a course might provide students with a broader understanding of a discipline. In this model, students are able to specialise as they progress through the years, as well as have the flexibility to individualise their degree by being able to take modules from other disciplines:

> … *[the degree] is about generalised, specialised and individualised. So at level 4 the students will get a general understanding of that topic, and they will stay within their pillars…They will then specialise. So if I'm a cybersecurity student, I will have a digital data introduction, which is a broad understanding of the area, I then focus down onto cyber security. But I might be really interested in the algorithms behind cyber security, so I might go off and do a data science module. Or I might want to set up my own cyber security business, so I go off to the entrepreneurship course and do some modules from there* (HEI stakeholder 5).

Such approaches are inherently flexible. They permit movement between different subject areas and the sharing of modules across disciplines, enabling students to co-create their own learning journey to suit their individual needs and interests.

Other approaches to broadness were stressed within subject areas. For instance, general engineering degrees are being offered which bridge the many disciplines of engineering from mechanical, electrical and electronic, civil to product design. These degrees cover the whole breadth of engineering disciplines, but also offer wider knowledge and skills that may come from other disciplines: *'getting more into the social as well and getting into the supply chain as well'* (HEI stakeholder 8). This, it was argued, permits a more holistic approach to projects which graduates may tackle when working in the industry, where they would need to bring in knowledge from different disciplines.

Generally, across the HEIs that prioritised breadth and interdisciplinary learning, the benefits were framed in terms of being able to tackle real-world problems which in nature are not confined to a single discipline, for instance tackling climate change and homelessness. It was highlighted that industry and the world more broadly is changing at a rapid pace, and passing on knowledge for a single discipline is not as important in the twenty-first century. Instead, what was needed was a view of what:

> *graduates require in a few years' time when they enter the labour force and they are looking for employment in these increasingly contemporary digitised economies. Where certain sorts of skills have really come to the fore and some of those skills we might categorise it sort of interdisciplinary skills around synthesis of information connection of different domains of knowledge, turning your hand quickly to different domain knowledge* (HEI stakeholder 4).

A counter argument was discussed during one interview in that in achieving breadth there is a loss of depth of knowledge and ability. The interviewee, however, argued the lens of many disciplines allows a deeper, richer experience of a particular problem. This type of learning prepares students for a varied career, as many graduates are likely to work numerous roles and across multiple sectors.

Problem-based learning approaches

All interviewees who worked on curriculum development emphasised how their institutions had attempted to move beyond traditional teaching methods in higher education. Lectures, delivered from the front of a class with subject knowledge being transferred to students, rarely or never featured.

Instead, HEIs claimed they would make use of primarily 'student-centred approaches'. In doing so they hoped to shift the focus away from the teacher, especially by adopting problem-based and project-based learning (see Rogers & McGrath, 2021). Although the two approaches differ, they will be considered here together. At the new HEIs, students would be presented with a particular issue or problem to tackle over the course of several weeks or months. These projects were based on real-world examples or an authentic issue that had been set out by an external stakeholder (e.g. an employer). Students, usually working as a team, are expected to draw on interdisciplinary knowledge and skills to provide a solution and relaying this to an authentic audience (see Emms & Laczik, 2020). Some HEIs emphasised the social impact that they wanted the learning and these projects to have. Projects might feature pressing issues such as the mental health of young people, climate change and local injustices. Students would work with relevant organisations both to understand better the issues but also feed back to them with some of the solutions they had developed as part of their final 'product'.

> *We had someone from TikTok talking about wellbeing and someone who's involved in wellbeing in the London Mayor's office, who [students] talked to at different points throughout the course and at the end [of the project] they formed the authentic audience for the work that the students produced. …and so then the students are getting this habit of transferring that knowledge, or rather, making that knowledge relevant* (HEI stakeholder 3).

Learning was, many of the interviewees from the new HEIs stressed, intended to be authentic, imbedded in the real world and industry. This will be discussed further in the following section on employer engagement.

Broader personal and professional development

All participants emphasised how new HEIs aimed to offer their students more than a good academic degree. Many spoke about the broader approach they wanted to take to the personal development of individuals. This included character development and enhancing skills and competencies to assist graduates' successful transition into the world of work. It also meant more broadly equipping them to be successful in life.

One way of this is to develop independence in students. It was explained that many students arrive at university needing 'hand-holding' as the teaching approaches at school or college are highly structured and disincentivise independence. One HEI explained the learning journey their students undergo to eventually work autonomously. In the first year they begin with projects that are set by staff, before moving to employer-led problems. Slowly building in real-world elements helps bridge the gap from their prior learning in school to a state where they are ready to work independently and flourish in employment.

> *Because clearly there's a gulf, typically someone who has had a very structured school life, who then comes into taking responsibility for their own learning. So we've scaffold it and to some extent taking them by the hand from where they are as they join us to become autonomous learners….Giving them confidence as they then go along that journey* (HEI stakeholder 8).

It was also discussed that learning to be independent would support students to become life-long learners. This is important due to the rapid pace at which knowledge and skills are changing. To stay up to date students must continue to learn and develop themselves throughout their lifetime. This is demonstrated especially in the digital and data industries:

> *…they're changing so rapidly, just whatever we teach them in their level four could well be out of date by the time they get to their level six. So we will make sure that they understand the underpinning so that they are lifelong learners and there's been a lot of focus on lifelong learners* (HEI stakeholder 5).

Professional skills and competencies, which are necessary competencies and abilities to function successfully in the workplace, were also mentioned continuously as something needed to be offered by these new HEIs. These include transferable or soft skills, such as team working, communication skills and leadership, and in part the interviewees acknowledged that the project/problem-based learning were key to honing many of these skills. Professional skills were also part of the core offering of degree, for example, as part of credit-bearing units:

> *I just think that you need to do professional skills as part of the degree, not an additional area, so we have all of our students will do 15 credits of professional skills at level 4, another 15 credits for level five and then 30 credits on this project - professional project, which will pull together their professional skills with technical knowledge and other elements and the degree, and that will pull together* (HEI stakeholder 5).

Great importance was placed on the integration of professional and personal development being fully integrated into the curriculum, as opposed to traditional university provision where career development and personal development is siloed and sit separately from the degree course.

> *[At traditional universities] career development sits separate from personal development, health, mental health, wellness also sits separate from academic development and learning and academic support. So part of what we're doing is to break through those silos and to look at it very holistically because you can't really do one without the other. That's not how life works but it's also how higher education shouldn't work* (HEI stakeholder 2).

> *Students sort of understanding themselves and reflective practice as well are some of those built in as a thread running through....So it's about integrating it in there, rather than having separate modules* (HEI stakeholder 8).

Such a holistic curriculum with student development, career guidance, ethics and sustainability embedded throughout provision is strongly aligned with the broader ambition of preparing students to flourish in a complicated modern labour market and realise a fulfilling life.
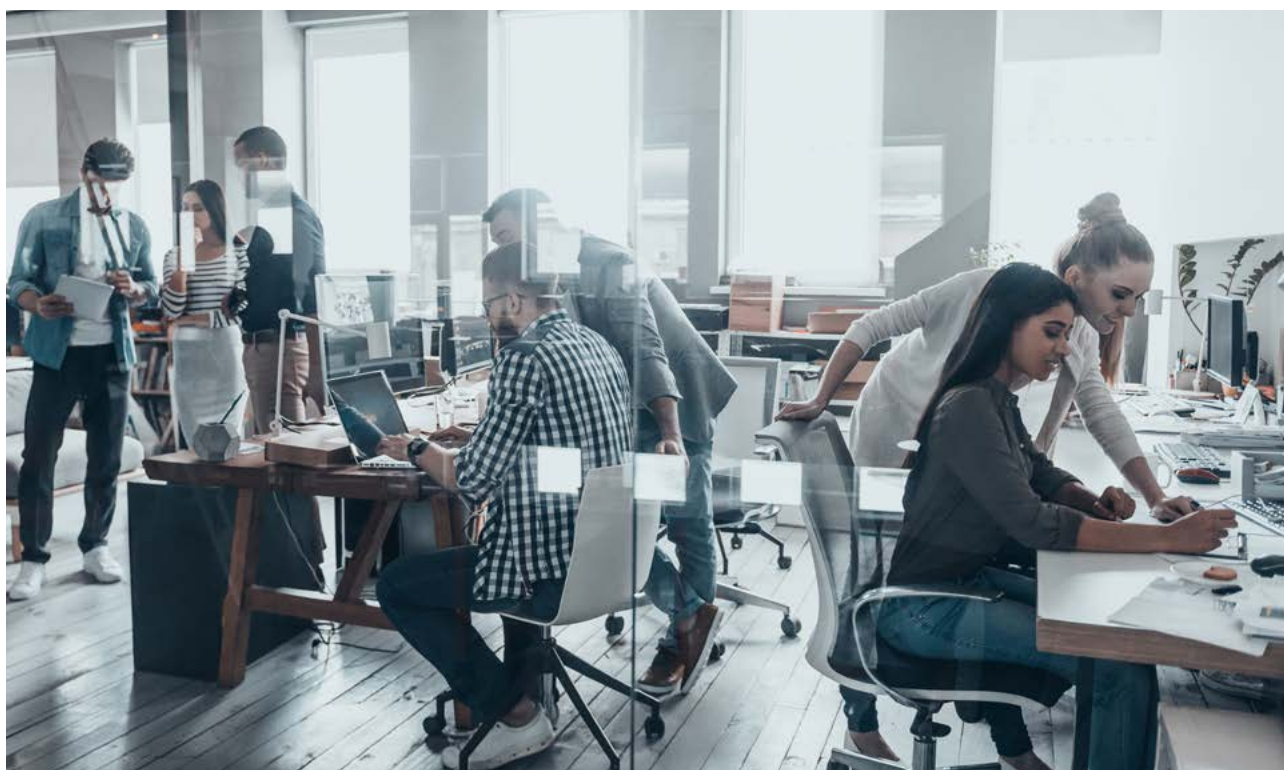
Flexible modes of delivery

Flexibility was a key element that was discussed by some of the new HEIs in terms of the delivery of their provision. Interviewees stressed the importance of being able to offer a degree that fitted in with students' personal needs. The traditional three-year full-time residential undergraduate structure is not always the best or most efficient way to deliver a degree. Alternatives included:

> … a two year accelerated version. So they'll be able to not study across three semesters in a year, but they will study at a kind of high speed. They can study it in the normal kind of three-year way, they can study in a part time way, they can put in gap years, so they can go out to industry - either for a semester or an entire academic year (HEI stakeholder 5)

Such flexibility highlighted as potentially a better fit with students' careers or part-time work plans. Flexibility also enabled responsiveness to changes in students' individual circumstances, such as financial difficulties, change in their job situation, or family or caring issues to contend with, by offering a different mode of learning or a break in learning. In this way, students could avoid wasting time and money and avoid incompletion.

All of the interviews took place after the Covid-19 pandemic. HEIs experiences of the emergency migration to online learning in some instances propelled forward ambitions to deliver online provision, while those who had yet to commence delivery reflected on how online learning would be a feature at least in part of their future provision as part of students' preparation for an important emerging element of the future of work.

> It's really just got us thinking in perhaps even more ambitious ways about how we can combine that [online delivery] with the face-to-face experience to really augment it and really prepare students for what is increasingly becoming an even more digitised work environment than perhaps we had 12 to 18 months ago globally (HEI stakeholder 4).

Equally, many of the interviewees stressed that face-to-face delivery also reflects the industry students are preparing to enter:

> Our students are in professional training as well and is another reason why ideally we want them on campus. So they are working, nine to five, five days a week with us as well (HEI stakeholder 8).

The new HEIs interviewed emphasised their aim to ensure coming to campus in person is a worthwhile and meaningful experience for students, especially given the prevalence of online learning since Covid. Many highlighted that in-person learning would be used primarily for collaboration and team working, for example working together on live briefs and group problem-solving activities. It was argued that collaboration happens best in a face-to-face environment, and it also supported many of the new HEIs arguments for not having lectures or lecture theatres.

> I think it's not so much about sacrificing face to face in the name of online. It's more about asking us the question, asking ourselves the question why should I show up as a student, why should I be there in person, why is it meaningful for me to be here rather than watching this or experiencing this in a digital format? Which sets the bar for what's happening in face to face even higher. I think it sets a higher requirements what students are experiencing and what we're delivering pedagogically speaking face to face (HEI stakeholder 4).

Another way new HEIs discussed that their delivery was different to traditional methods was the use of block delivery. Whereas in many degrees students will be studying multiple different modules at the same time, through block learning students would be focussing on one area of study or project at a time, in depth and then moving on to something different after a period of a few weeks.

> *So they'll look at those lenses, they'll do two weeks on each of those lenses, so two weeks of philosophy and the current plan is they do this sequentially. The two weeks of philosophy then two weeks of chemistry and so they're getting the threshold concepts of those disciplines but applying them, pointing them back towards this problem* (HEI stakeholder 3).

It was argued that flexibility in delivering the course happens in a variety of forms and brings advantages to the students. These flexible approaches meet their individual needs and may ensure they complete their degree.

The physical space

As discussed previously, new HEIs wanted to prioritise their face-to-face learning for teamwork and collaboration activities and plans for the use of physical space reflected these aims. Interviewees emphasised that in most cases they would not have lecture theatres as part of the new university buildings, especially avoiding spaces with large numbers of forward-facing seats. Instead, interviewees described spaces which allow for group work, collaborations between peers and with staff, and social interaction. One interviewee described their set up:

> *…they're called plectrum desks - so they're like little kind of ovals with a flat bit, and they will sit either six or seven in the group, depending on whether seven are there. And they're height adjustable at the end, so you can fit a wheelchair under them. […] And so in those groups are the academics in the centre; this is based on the mentor in the centre kind of way. So all of the students are at desks around the outside in there groups of six* (HEI stakeholder 5).

This complemented many of the learning approaches that HEIs discussed they are primarily using, such as problem-based learning. Such provision facilitating meaningful interactions justified requiring students to come to campus:

> *…there's quite a lot of drop out spaces where people can come out of those collaborative classrooms and labs and mix with staff and students together in a professional environment. And, you know, there's some really great theory around an experience around people having those spaces to then kind of work together afterwards and continue this conversation. So when you're on site, you're really going to be using that time productively, you're not scratching your head and wondering what to do next. And, you know, you get a sense of purpose on site* (HEI stakeholder 1).

Classroom design was also discussed in relation to hybrid learning; allowing rooms and technology to accommodate people working both in-person on campus as well as allowing students to join the learning environment remotely. This included providing seating and furniture with mobility to accommodate different classroom set-ups to enable moving to work in groups or to face a screen. Hybridity also necessitated appropriate technologies including large enough screens and a high-quality audio and visual system.

> *So we've had a look at the technology, what we're having is a hybrid teaching room, which means I can do some of the class in the room, and some of the class out of the room. We're going to have a 96 inch screen, I think it is, which is bigger than you can possibly, honestly it's huge….they call it a 50 heads screen – you can have 49 people dialling in and then the presenter as well on one big screen….So that's how technology is going to help us do that* (HEI stakeholder 5).

These plans were ambitious and a note of caution sounded as to whether such setups would work as intended in practice. One further element emphasised by interviewees was the accessibility of the spaces. This included ensuring that wheelchair users could use the tables properly and ensuing the needs of those who had hearing or visual impairments were accounted for by, for example, giving tables 'bright edges for somebody with poor vision, [so] they can actually move around the spaces as well' (HEI stakeholder 5).

Engaging employers in curriculum design and delivery

As discussed, new HEIs aimed for their provision to encompass interdisciplinary approaches, knowledge, and skills to address authentic, real-world issues through problem- or project-based learning approaches. This approach to curriculum and pedagogy would produce work-ready graduates and life-long learners. This necessitated developing the curriculum in partnership with external stakeholders, principally employers. Some HEIs stressed that they deviated from the traditional supply-led (i.e. academic) course offer. Their courses and content were demand-led (i.e. employers).

> *We engage employers at the design stage firstly. As part of our new course development process we meet with employers and listen[ed] to what their experiences are of graduates coming out…. Then we'll share with them this sort of program specifications, module specifications etc as part of that approval process. So quite a lot of input there* (HEI stakeholder 9).

The degree to which employers were involved varied between institutions. For some of the new HEIs, prospective demand for the skills in the labour market took precedence over the academics' expertise. For others, employers were consulted on specific aspects of the curriculum rather than acting as co-designers.

> *They can't co-design our curriculum because the regulators would have a heart attack. And also they're not necessarily the right people to do that actually. They are the right people to try and share with us so that we can learn, our students and our faculty, how they think about these problems currently so that we can over time genuinely build expertise in that space between the academy and business* (HEI stakeholder 3).

Bringing industry into the design process often involved setting up workshops or having regular ongoing conversations with businesses. This could include industry representatives participating in course and module validation processes to ensure content is kept up to date and relevant. HEIs also sought employers reflections on which skills graduates from similar courses might be missing and where HEIs might address undersupply. In many cases, employers identified deficiencies in transferable and professional skills.

Collaborative curriculum design also involved experts from different disciplines contributing to interdisciplinary course and module design. This might involve, for example:

> *a quant team of three academics and a qual team of three academics, they go away and they craft what those methods are going to look like across and within their field but is still quite broad….You have experts within so it's just marshalling their expertise as much as it is building something together from scratch* (HEI stakeholder 3).

Beyond curriculum design, employers had input into course delivery. Alongside their input into problem/project-based projects as discussed in the previous section, employers and other external audiences were also brought into the assessment process. Their contributions to evaluation of students' end products again helped bring authenticity to the learning. Such engagement from employers needed to be meaningful and ongoing, not a one-off encounter.

> *It is not sufficient [for an employer] to come in for one afternoon, say 'well, the project is this, what we want is that, goodbye, see you in three months', that doesn't do it* (HEI stakeholder 7).

In some cases employers are called upon to offer examples from their work that provide assessment opportunities for students, for instance, writing a business strategy or:

> *…writing an audit report, which they took from their own internal audit reports that they had literally done for their clients. They anonymise them and smooth them out a little, you know we took out some of the variables. And then around it we wrapped a 'write a management report', which I then marked. So absolutely we will be using industry as part of that assignment development process* (HEI stakeholder 5).

Another common theme was the disdain for traditional academic examinations. Many HEIs stated that these would not be used or only where *'pedagogically an exam is the right way to assess or there is a professional body reason why we need to assess in that way'* (HEI stakeholder 9). As one HEI explained:

> *… there is absolutely no evidence that says examinations have a place in long term and lifelong learning – they're not authentic and have anything with what we do in industry these days. The ability to be critical about what Google tells you though is really important. But you cannot use Google in the exam, so why would we assess that kind of read and repeat, because it's just not authentic. And that is something industry has very much said to us – '…It's no use to us, you know, they give [us] a good ranking of where the student's memory is'. But how many times have ourselves been in an exam, walked out and can't even remember the questions, let alone what answers we gave. So that does not replicate what we do in industry* (HEI stakeholder 5).

Typically HEIs named a range of other methods that they plan to use to assess including podcasts, and blogs and video logs, reflective portfolios, posters, pitches for business, building a website, or building a portfolio.

Work placements and other activities that related to careers support, for example one-off workshops and talks with guest lecturers, networking events, insight days, and mentoring, where a further important element in engaged employers with students. This additional link to industry helped link the theory from the course to the practice of the workplace and a further source of authentic interactions:

> *…that challenge will come from industry or local society or it could come out of a charity but an employer and someone outside [name of HEI]. I won't back off from that. So the student will actually meet quite a lot of people from outside the institution* (HEI stakeholder 7).
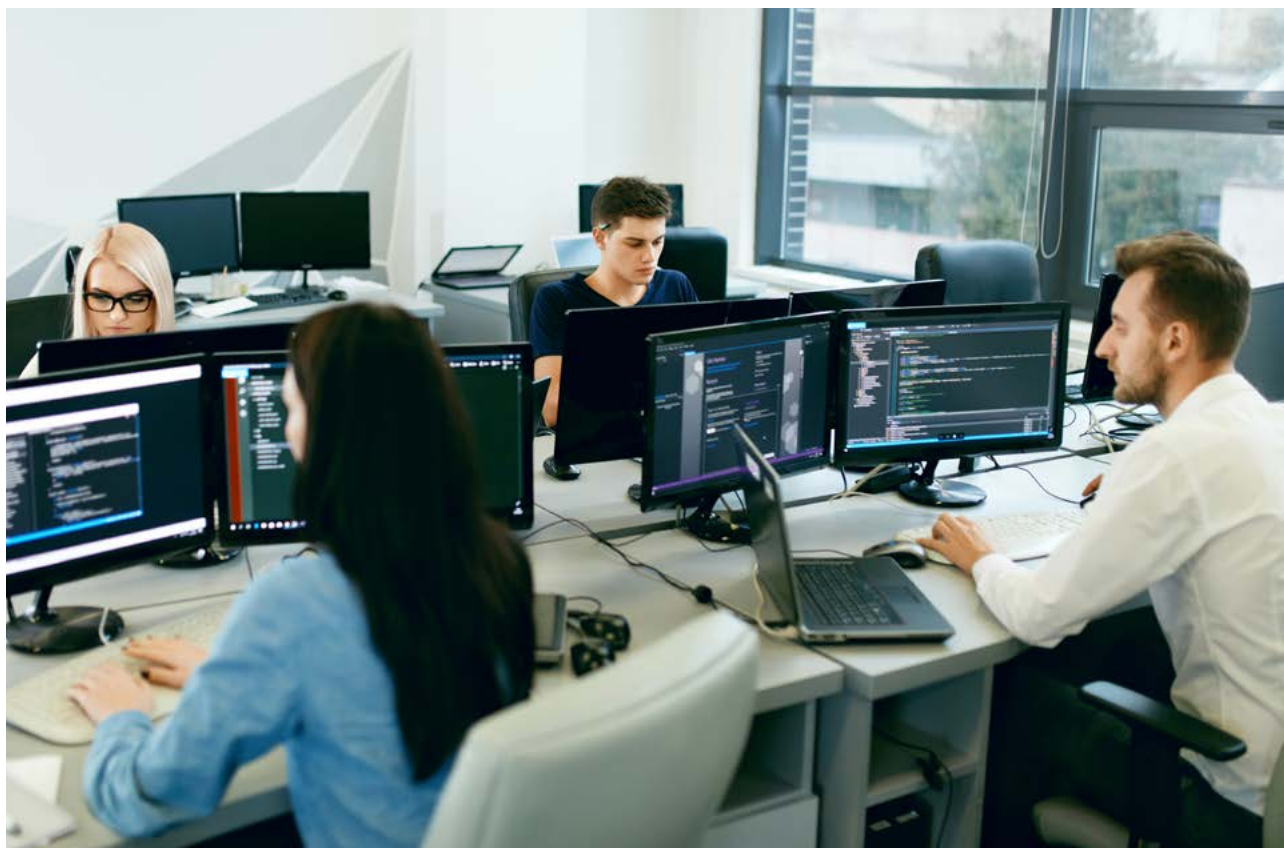
Similarly paid internships or work experience were encouraged, providing an opportunity to relate students' learning to employer contexts, engage in a distinct project, and deliver a meaningful outcome.

The benefits to HEIs and students of effective employer engagement were clear: ensuring graduates are fit for purpose to work in industry and are up to date with the skills and knowledge that they need for work. Employers also benefited. Beyond having a say in how course curriculum and delivery emphasises skills they want to see developed in students, employers also gain from developing relationships with students during their studies. As one HEI explained:

> *… what is most important is actually getting to know the students and then developing a relationship with those students they feel would be good employees for themselves. So it's equivalent to a placement…. So that again helps the students to see where they see that they fit, and where they don't fit* (HEI stakeholder 8).

This mutually beneficial relationship between the institution, employers, and their students stands out as a distinctive feature of the new HEIs. Employers, embedded in the initial design of the curriculum and delivery and through the opportunities facilitated for student-employer engagement through projects, assessments, and placements, are key in securing authentic learning opportunities for students. While the HEIs reported their excitement and successes in securing their institutional vision, as this report considers next they also faced considerable challenges.

4. Challenges associated with developing a new HEI

The registration process and gaining Degree Awarding Powers

The new HEIs we spoke to found the process of registration as HE provider, gaining degree awarding power, and being able to use the title 'university' a tedious and lengthy process, and one not necessarily leading to a successful outcome. First of all, HEIs must register as a higher education provider with the Office for Students (OfS). Second, after registering with the OfS, HEIs can apply to have their own degree awarding powers (DAPs) again granted by the OfS. The third step for new providers is to apply to use the title 'university'. From April 2019, the OfS has powers to approve the use of the word 'university' in the name of a registered higher education provider. Most of the HEIs discussed the process of initial registration as a provider, and some also spoke about gaining their own DAPs. Gaining DAPs was not relevant for all HEIs; some were awarding their degrees through an established partner university that they were working with, though some interviewees did indicate an interest in gaining their own DAPs in the future. The process of gaining approval to use the title a 'university' was hardly discussed by the interviewees. They were all at early stages of conception or delivery and the step to become a university comes once the first two conditions have been met.

For all the new HEIs, the process of getting regulated was not an easy task. As one interviewee described:

> I think getting the regulation has been the biggest [challenge] That's the thing we failed at frankly. We failed at it two years ago, and we had to delay so that would be the thing that I'd say was the hardest thing. We didn't do it first time around (HEI stakeholder 3).

New HEIs faced three primary challenges as they moved through these processes. Firstly, there was little precedent for how to establish a new HEI, a point also acknowledged by policymakers. Secondly, as new institutions, they lacked familiarity with the regulatory system and navigating it raised challenges. Thirdly, proceeding through the registration route was especially laborious.

> In a lot of ways the system is more accessible now but that doesn't mean there's not a lot of hard work needs to go into putting in a registration. Some of the [new HEIs] didn't even understand about validation and things like that. Even traditional modes of operation were new to them because they really were completely coming at it a fresh (Policymaker).

One of the main criticisms was how time-consuming registration as a provider and to achieve DAPs was. Communication was often back-and-forth and slow, causing frustration and delays to HEIs' timelines and planning. Delays even hindered them taking on more students, as HEIs were not able to confirm that they had DAPs. Covid also exacerbated some delays.

> The biggest challenge I think was the timeline and the amount of time it took with OfS, the Office for Students. At times we we're moving at a fairly glacial sort of speed. We were fortunate to get through with our degree awarding powers just in time for our September intake. It was getting critical (HEI stakeholder 8).

> We used to find that [OfS] would ask for information we would provide it to them and then things would go quiet for months. We'd have to be chasing saying look is there anything else you need. Can we provide anything else to you?... I think ultimately it took about two years. It probably didn't need to take two years. Some of the questions again were things they had asked us before (HEI stakeholder 9).

One of the key factors that interviewees specified which helped them get through the registration and DAPs processes was having the right key staff and working together as a team. Wider connections, networks and informal support groups were also helpful, some of whom may have gone through the regulatory process themselves already.

One of our board members is [name] … who is incredibly well connected. There were definitely some individuals at both local and national government that I think we're supportive of us and we've had probably some conversations with. We had some people, former members of the QAA who were helping us, coaching us through the whole process. We did a lot of mock audits and stuff like that (HEI stakeholder 2).

There was a very good community outside of government doing the support that meant that at least people weren't making the same mistakes twice, often (Policymaker).

Other HEIs felt that they did not have sufficient networks or connections who could support them through the process, which discouraged and prevented them from applying for their own DAPs. Likewise a lack of 'formal' support, both in advice and guidance but also financially, was a hinderance.

We had nobody who knew the game and so that's very difficult. You don't know your way around, you don't know the people in HEFCE, and you don't know anybody to start with. Of course you are now making friends as fast as you can but you start from a position of complete ignorance (HEI stakeholder 7).

So no money to start a university, no new schools network or an equivalent to tell you how to get through the regulation, you had to figure it out yourself (HEI stakeholder 3).

The regulatory process was not an entirely negative experience. Organisations challenged themselves to set out a strong internal governance framework and procedures that would be in place for many years to come, which could withstand changes in staffing and leadership and engendered confidence:

…a heightened emphasis on laying down a kind of long term and rigorous standards of governance that we felt would effectively hold [new HEI] to account to [new HEI's] own governance over a really long period of time, irrespective of which personnel happened to be in charge in 50 or 100 years time (HEI stakeholder 4).

Fitting the higher education sector's mould

There were extensive discussions amongst interviewees about the degree to which they were able to be innovative compared with fitting into an existing and traditional model of what higher education looks like. Here, regulatory bodies and partnering universities where present had a considerable influence.

One of the primary aims of the 2017 Higher Education & Research Act, as discussed in the introduction of this report, was to challenge the HE sector and bring about innovation. However, many of the interviewees felt a tension between the ideas behind the new policy and working within the confines of the restrictive regulatory framework.

> *I mean it's like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole sometimes. UK regulation - it's great that they opened up the space for new providers to enter the scene, but then if those new providers are still being assessed based on the traditional model it is very hard to then actually be as innovative as you want to be* (HEI stakeholder 2).

Many of the HEIs explicitly aimed to operate 'differently' to traditional HE provision but found themselves restricted in order to meet statutory requirements.

> *The feeling at the time, amongst the new providers I was working with is, we can't be too innovative because we don't know what the OfS appetite for innovation is. So do we go in with a conservative offer and that gets through registration more quickly or do we spend time really being thorough in terms of exploring what our innovation is, to de-risk it, to make sure that when we come to the OfS to register, we can prepare ourselves for the interrogation of the business model as it were* (Policymaker).

For example, HEIs reported having to tightly define learning outcomes restricting flexibility in different outcomes for different students, and prescribing a narrow definition of a 'partner'. One crucial impasse was the lack of a shared language. For new HEI to meet the requirements they had to understand how to speak the regulator's language, yet still staying as true as they could be to their values. This was a gradual learning journey.

> *[It] was something of an intellectual challenge to kind of fit our innovative model into an existing regulatory structure in such way that all parties could understand it. In some senses that's a challenge of communication, but in other senses it's also a challenge of design as well* (HEI stakeholder 4).

> *…so each jigsaw piece did come from somewhere else, but the fact that we put it together to make the [new HEI] picture is what's innovative. And that's the difficult kind of bit to articulate to government* (HEI stakeholder 5).

New HEIs faced challenges in helping wider audiences and stakeholders beyond the regulator understand their novel values and concepts, including funders, partners, or other policymakers. Some reported having to confront traditional language and assumptions about, for example, what was understood by the concept of a degree:

> *I think one of the biggest things is getting people to think about education as something which is about the students' futures as opposed to about the academics' knowledge* (HEI stakeholder 5).

New HEIs also experienced restrictiveness pressed upon them from their partnering universities, as well as from the regulator. For those new HEIs that did not have their own DAPs, they were using a partner university as their awarding body. The restrictiveness was again in terms of the new HEI's ability to do things differently and away from the traditional approaches that tended to be used by the existing university sector. Instead new HEIs without their own DAPs had to stay within the parameters of their awarding university. It was described that the tick boxing exercises of the validating university doesn't apply to the new HEIs because the missions and delivery are different, and the same rules do not apply. One interview described that their new HEI had therefore experienced *'mission drift because of our validators'* (HEI stakeholder 7). Another reflected on how another new HEI was able to take a *'a completely radical approach'* whereas *'we still had to fit within sort of university bounds, because we are sitting within an established university'* (HEI stakeholder 5).

The compromises new HEIs had to make when validated by an existing university restricted the sorts of innovative practices that could be implemented. For instance, one gave the example of an issue encountered around the delivery of lectures:

> *We wanted to offer an education which didn't involve lectures or at least only very rarely. But one of the first boxes you have to tick when being validated by someone else is how many lectures per week are there. When you write zero you're immediately for a battle. That question shouldn't be on the form, it's an irrelevant question for us. How our students are going to learn is a valid question, how many lectures are they going to get is a useless question but it's there on everybody's tick boxes list* (HEI stakeholder 7).

Another discussed their ambition to co-create modules with the students, which failed to meet validators concept of quality.

> *I really want to do that [students co creating the curriculum for one module together], but partly because I have to go through the [existing university] processes, I still have to go through fairly traditional university processes and that's been interesting. It's just pushing through these quite different ideas through traditional [existing university] sign off processes and that has been a little bit of a struggle. I would love to have a module where the students write the assignments, but that is terrifying to people who are on the quality side* (HEI stakeholder 5).

Another interviewee described the issues they had had with the titles given to their staff. The new HEI wanted to move away from the title 'professor' or 'lecturer' and instead use facilitator or mentor, since much of the delivery was not based around lectures and so using 'lecturer' as a job title seemed inappropriate. Yet this was the preferred and specified term of the awarding university. Validating universities acted as a *'final arbiter'* (HEI stakeholder 9), in some instances discouraging new ideas.

Gaining DAPs relieved new HEIs of this attachment to a partner university and pursue their own visions and the curriculum and pedagogies they desired as a fully self-governing body:

> *… you can't in my view start a genuinely innovative new degree course being validated by another university that doesn't have that course or anything like it. I think it's very hard to do in fact we tried to do it with another institution, and we could not and we had to go for degree awarding powers* (HEI stakeholder 3).

> *It means that our ideas of what we do and how we do things do have to pass [existing university] scrutiny. Inevitably they are compared with how they do things, which is why in hindsight I would have gone for direct degree awarding powers because then you're not being directly compared with how someone else does it* (HEI stakeholder 7).

Ultimately however the partnership with the existing university was seen as a beneficial relationship. Many spoke positively about their collaboration with their partner university. The primary benefits were avoiding having to go through the lengthy and difficulty process of gaining DAP, and instead they could rely on a well-established and high-quality brand.

> *Because we're being parented by an established university, we don't have the same problems as places like [other new HEI] for example….But because we're doing [partner university] degrees, all that we've had to do really is - ….that basically we just had to pop them back on our statutory books. So, for us that's been really easy, but I think if you talk to some of the other institutions that are in the process of setting up, that's been a bit of a longer and more complex* (HEI stakeholder 5).

Existing universities can bring confidence to the new HEI as well as other benefits that were discussed earlier, such as the sharing of personnel, resources, guidance and status.

Funding

The new HEIs generally used a number of sources to fund the new institutions, ranging from public local and central government funds to private investments. Ensuring that the new HEI raised enough start-up capital before a viable cash flow was established was an ongoing challenge.

> *The government gave us by one route or other via the local enterprise partnership - the LEP - and the department for education, together they gave I think 23 million, which is peanuts. It doesn't build you a decent building never mind anything else but it was an indicator that this might fly. We've been running on that plus donations ever since… Of course we should have been earning money by now but for the pandemic and that has delayed the financial plans but essentially it's still a viable enterprise* (HEI stakeholder 7).

Student recruitment

The success of the HEI relied on having viable student numbers, and recruitment and retainment was as a result a key anxiety. Many of the HEIs discussed the fact that attracting students to their institutions was a challenge, one describing it as:

> *I think the biggest challenge that we are facing right now or will face is the students, is attracting the students to turn up on day one. From day one on I'm pretty confident we can engage them. I think it's the recruitment of students* (HEI stakeholder 7).

As new institutions they had little to no brand presence in the sector. They were also asking students to take risks on an untested and potentially experimental non-traditional approach to the university experience.

> *In reality who we are going to get are people that don't want to study one subject and are brave because they have got to be brave to come to us in this first cohort* (HEI stakeholder 3).

One of the main challenges for recruitment was convincing parents of potential students that their offer was high quality and worthwhile for their child. This becomes even more challenging when the course is not yet up and running and buildings have not yet finished being built. As one interviewee put it: *'Would you book a hotel for a holiday that isn't finished yet?'* (HEI stakeholder 1). The new HEIs had to instil confidence in stakeholders nevertheless, as one policymaker reflected:

> *I think [new HEIs] will do open days, they will do lots and lots of contact, they will make people very welcome and they will reassure people. And they have now the backing of the OfS saying 'this is a quality body that can deliver'. But whether that counts when you're talking to your mum and dad and saying 'Well I think I might go to [new HEI]'. It's difficult isn't it?* (Policymaker)

The challenges facing HEIs in realising their vision are twofold. The first is the intrinsic difficulty in HEIs proving to external stakeholders their readiness to receive students and successfully mitigate potential risk without having a proven track record of delivering success. The second is the problem of deploying a mutually intelligible language to those stakeholders to share their vision for higher education and to inspire confidence in themselves and their stakeholders.

Conclusion

This research sought to better understand the visioning, early development of processes and practices, and initial delivery of new Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England following the Higher Education and Research Act in 2017. All the new HEIs set out clear and purposeful visions. Many regarded the opportunity as a chance to break the mould of the traditional higher education landscape and to help provide solutions to some global issues. This included equipping students with the skills to solve world problems such as climate change or responding to more local needs, whether that be local skills shortages, or offering HE opportunities for young people in their locality to help tackle local economic and social problems.

Only a limited number of new HEIs were established following the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act, perhaps less than envisaged. This small cohort nevertheless contributes to the diversification of the higher education landscape. In the government White Paper, it was proposed that the competition these new HE providers pose would effectively address skills shortages, stimulate economic growth, and catalyse social mobility (HM Government, 2016). The new HEIs in this research were indeed setting out to achieve these aims and address what they perceived as deficiencies in existing 'traditional' higher education provision.

In every aspect, they were ambitious and to achieve their visions were confident wielding and deploying unorthodox means. Their holistic vision of what a HEI could do involved reimagining organisational structures, administrative and academic processes, and the physical space. While their specific elements of their practice would not necessarily be considered innovative, such as problem-based learning, interdisciplinary teaching and learning, student-centred teaching, presenting them all together or in different combinations and in new contexts represents ambitious attempts to generate different student outcomes. Innovation in this sense arises from the deployment of these approaches in novel ways relative to the context they were deployed in and the problems they sought to challenge.

All the new HEIs in this research took non-traditional approaches to programme design and delivery, particularly by not relying on lectures and exams to teach students. Instead they wished to use more student-centred approaches to learning and make connections to the real-world through pedagogies such as problem-based learning, whereby students work primarily in teams to tackle issues whilst drawing on knowledge from multiple disciplines. Employers and external partners also are key role players in the design and delivery of these new HEIs, from designing the curriculum to 'offering real-world and authentic projects for students to work on. Importantly students also interact with these employers whether that be through presenting their 'product' from the team projects to the employer or through such interactions as expert lectures or work placements. A disinterest in traditional pedagogies and bodies of disciplinary knowledge and their enthusiasm for external collaboration was understood as key to ensuring authenticity otherwise suggested to be lacking in some existing, siloed HE provision.

All the new HEIs were keen to foster the growth of diverse student and staff bodies. Using broader approaches to recruitment, beyond grade achievement for students and beyond standard interviewing processes for staff, was important for new HEIs. For students, they wanted to ensure they widened participation to more disadvantaged and diverse groups of students who may struggle to have previously entered HE. Short videos and portfolios were intended to provide a more accurate picture of the attitudes, mindset and other abilities of an applicant, and help determine more clearly whether an applicant might benefit from their course. For staff, new HEIs wanted to ensure that they recruited not just pure academics but also those with a background in industry. In addition to being an engaging and excellent teacher it was also important to have the ethos, creativity and impetus for working in a start-up environment. Rather than selecting for existing attainment, these new HEIs base their selection on potential to make contributions to tackling those authentic problems, and see the most valuable quality in their staff as being facilitators of that potential.

This focus on student potential rather than replication of academic knowledge means HEIs are much more receptive to catering to diverse student learning styles. Many of the HEIs promoted ideas around flexibility of delivery, for instance in terms of offering part-time options, accommodating breaks in study for work or for other reasons, and being able to design the course flexibly around the students' interests. Some of these new HEIs are offering their students a personalised experience to allow them to shape their own degree in terms of mode of study and content. Whether students consciously seek these non-traditional approaches offered at some of the new HEIs is still unclear. However this could be seen as the direction of travel that the wider HE sector is taking, in particular with the introduction of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement, rather than remaining a unique feature of these new HEIs.

The new HEIs were designing their campuses to be flexible spaces, rather than basing them around traditional static lecture theatres. Spaces for collaboration were being prioritised in buildings, as well as rooms that could accommodate hybrid learning. Many universities now are making such allowances, particularly since the switch to more online learning since Covid, which has prompted institutions to consider how best to use spaces when students are on campus and how to allow for hybrid teaching. The advantage these new HEIs have is that they are now designing these spaces anew with these considerations in mind.

New HEIs still faced challenges in realising their innovative visions, despite the policy initiatives of 2017 (DfE & Gyimah, 2018). They had to work within the realms of the regulator's conditions in order to register as a HE institution, as well as working within the jurisdictions of a partnering university which had its own specifications for delivery. HEIs faced the barrier of having to translate their vision into the existing and often restrictive legislative and validating language. The findings here suggest that those HEIs that have attained their own DAPs felt they had been the least restricted in terms of what they intended to offer.

The HEIs featured in this research were still in the early stages of conception or delivery. It is difficult, therefore, to judge their success as HEIs. It is yet to be seen whether many of their current practices, such as their innovative and personable approach to recruitment, are manageable when student applications and intake grows or whether relationships with employers can be sustained and courses kept up to date. It is remarkable how similar the pedagogic aims and interdisciplinary ambitions of these new HEIs are to earlier attempts at founding New Universities and polytechnics in the 1950s and 1960s (Patel, 2020), perhaps indicating something of how hard it may be to overcome broader regulatory and sector norms and stipulations and avoid mission creep. For the new HEIs of today, many of them consider the markers of their success will be in their student numbers over the coming years and the success of their graduates once they enter the workplace.

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