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Tertiary pathways in practice

Institutions' views of partnerships between higher and further education in Scotland and England

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Contents

Executive summary

There has been growing interest in 'tertiary' systems across the four nations of the UK to encourage greater coordination between higher education (HE) and further education (FE). Advocates promise responsiveness to regional economic needs and flexibility for students, through holistic stewardship of the sector. This aims to address instances where competition has homogenised the existing education market and encouraged inefficiencies and duplication. Despite increasing enthusiasm, research on how existing partnerships have developed, the distinctive affordances of HE and FE partnerships from institutional perspectives, and how this informs student recruitment, experiences, and outcomes, is not yet widely documented. Understanding these dimensions are necessary to begin to assess whether tertiary reform can deliver a more efficient and equitable system and whether the benefits of a more towards a more collaborative system would be worth the frictional cost of transition.

To help address this, this research investigated one element of tertiary contexts: existing formal tertiary pathways enabled by HE and FE coordination designed for students to move from one institution to another, as part of an integrated and non-integrated delivery models. The study employed documentary review and conducted a series of interviews with representatives from universities and colleges in Scotland and England to investigate what motivates institutions to collaborate within existing systems, and whether such collaborations affect students' experiences. Concentrating on these two nations contrasts a more 'tertiary' system with more fragmentary policy landscape.

The research found indications that, ironically, the collaborations featured were often pursued because of, and as part of, the competitive market. While partner institutions were aligning their developments with local and regional labour market needs and prioritised widening participation agendas, these were often pursued in close association for cultivating student demand in service of institutional survival and growth. This finding suggests that tertiary collaboration, rather than representing a structural shift away from competition, may be considered an adaptive strategy within conditions of resource scarcity. Given the precarious conditions much collaboration is currently pursued in, it is unsurprising close alignment in institutional cultures and missions and trust are fundamental to establishing and maintaining effective relationships, particularly where partners might otherwise be wastefully competing for the same students. External factors such as regulatory frameworks played a notable role in enabling collaborative strategies. In Scotland, clearer articulations of social aims clearly facilitated partnerships and their associated benefits. However, their influence in conditions of high resource scarcity still facilitated some unintended consequences, including universities encroaching on FE markets. In England, the absence of mission coherence and regulatory alignment contributed to a greater reported fragility in collaboration and reduced capacity to work towards shared objectives.

Students' experiences and outcomes within tertiary pathways appear, to some extent, distinctive. Tertiary collaborations were considered effective in extending educational opportunities to individuals who might otherwise encounter significant barriers, attributed to partner colleges' attentive pedagogies and flexible resources. They facilitated access to a broader set of institutional resources and diverse learning experiences, drawing on both university and college partner facilities. Interviewees generally reported positive feedback from students, although formal evaluative evidence remains scarce. Retention and student outcomes were perceived to be modestly improved in comparison to mainstream college or undergraduate programmes, supported by strengthened pastoral provision, clearer progression routes, enhanced employer engagement, and supplementary academic support. This lends cautious support to the optimistic claims of tertiary advocates, particularly regarding the potential of such models to enhance inclusion and widen access, though more systematic evidence is needed to substantiate these benefits.

The report concludes by offering four considerations for policymakers, institutional leaders, and researchers, in assessing developments in tertiary collaboration:

1. Collaboration was frequently driven by institutional precarity rather than primarily a strategic response to national or regional educational objectives. Stakeholders should therefore critically consider the extent to which tertiary reform can provide a more stable operational foundation for institutions, potentially reducing dependency on competitive market behaviour and fostering more enduring cooperation.

2. While regulatory frameworks in Scotland were seen to facilitate robust partnerships, English institutions reported that regulatory incoherence contributed to a sense of uncertainty and fragility in collaborative ventures. Policymakers should evaluate the extent to which national regulatory environments can enable or hinder sustainable tertiary coordination, and consider reforms that promote systemic alignment in pursuit of agreed socioeconomic ends that partnerships can demonstrably serve within conditions of resource scarcity.

3. Partnerships were perceived as providing distinctive opportunities for students. Colleges and university partners should consider promoting their relationships and the contribution particularly of college's specialisms to distinctive student experiences and outcomes, and promoting the extent of co-design and co-delivery.

4. At present, few mechanisms exist for assessing the long-term outcomes of tertiary partnerships for graduates or their wider socioeconomic contributions. Institutions and researchers should prioritise the development of data strategies and evaluative frameworks capable of capturing and articulating the value and impact of these collaborations over time.

Introduction

What is tertiary?

The term 'tertiary' or 'third-cycle' education encompasses a wide array of post-16 education including further education (FE), higher education (HE), professional, and adult education. However, the use of the phrase 'tertiary' in the UK has taken on new meaning beyond encompassing these types of institutions (Morris, 2024, p. 127). Tertiary is associated with transformative visions of 'unitary' governance and oversight of third-cycle education, including funding, oversight, quality, and mission. This model is contrasted to more siloed or rigid 'binary' models between FE, associated with technical and vocational education and training and entry to the labour market, and HE, associated with education for professions, leadership, and research. Such models have persisted in the West since the nineteenth century (Parry, 2009). National tertiary systems have been identified in Australia, Ireland, Netherlands, and New Zealand, and Wales and Scotland.

The prevailing zeitgeist guiding the principles of tertiary education policy since 1992, particularly of HE in England, has been concerned with utilising market signals to help determine the distribution of resources and facilitate expansion. Such systems assumed that students required to repay loans and the incentive to pursue high-earning jobs would coerce providers to innovate and align their offer with this demand (Palfreyman, 2019). Providers unwilling or unable to respond to this demand would face market exit. This pressure was perceived as preventing universities from acting as a monopolistic 'cartel' conspiring to defend their lucrative state revenue streams from potentially more innovative and responsive new providers (Turner & Yorke, 2017). This was further intended to reduce costs to the taxpayer and permit rapid expansion. In FE policy, from 1993 institutions were moved from local authority control to forms of independent corporatism, emphasising its accountability to government and regularity bodies. This also included utilising market signals to prioritise the distribution of resources and infulence the pattern of delivery (Parry, 2016).

Critics have, throughout the market inspired period, emphasised the inappropriateness of using students' labour market return as a proxy for social needs, which fails to accommodate for the importance of highly socially valuable but lower paid careers such as nurses and teachers (Marginson and Yang, 2024). It also provides policymakers with few levers to align education and training towards areas of strategic national priorities determined by their democratic mandate. Market inspired governance models have been criticised as reducing diversity and innovation. At times of high competition for the limited and inflation-eroded resources of universities, providers are compelled to pursue high demand courses, and therefore wastefully replicating provision that might be better delivered elsewhere (Frank, Gowar, and Naef, 2019). High levels of competition in 16-19 provision has been identified as bad for quality, efficiency and sufficiency, particularly in terms of breadth of subjects on offer, the financial health of colleges, and even Ofsted ratings. In 2019 the Post-18 Education and Funding Review (2019), known as the Augar Review, advanced the possibility of a more rational, collaborative, 'joined-up system' of tertiary education in England. It identified imbalances in funding allocations were prioritising low-cost full-time three-year undergraduate courses at the expense of level 4 and 5 courses despite their recognised 'high labour market value' (Wolf, 2016, p. 7), and adult education, and unproductive and unacceptably wasteful competition between colleges for students.[1] However, in the subsequent political instability following its publication, little progress has been made in addressing Augar's concerns (Richmond & Regan, 2024).

[1] The market-inspired reforms of the early 2010s were premised on the presumption that periods of overlapping provision would be a necessary transitional phase en route to the eventual withdrawal of less competitive providers from the market, thereby establishing a theoretically efficient market equilibrium. However, in a context of heightened fiscal constraint and public accountability, such a trajectory has proven difficult to distinguish in practice from inefficient and arguably unjustifiable duplication in the allocation of public funds.

'Tertiary' has therefore become associated with transformative visions of 'unitary' oversight of third-cycle education through one national organisation, opposed to more rigid siloed governance models. Tertiary 'ecology' or systems models embrace institutional flexibility, networks, and collaboration (Hazelkorn, 2023). Holistic, rationalised, central articulations of stated public goods including sustainability agendas (McCowan, 2023) are privileged over wasteful duplicative competition as in market-led systems (Robson et al., 2025). Collaboration particularly at regional levels, it is argued, promotes coordination and specialisation enabling greater responsivity to international and local socioeconomic needs. It further facilitates widening participation, the provision of lifelong learning, and credit transferability (Hazelkorn, 2016; Horvath & Shattock, 2023). Tertiary has come to indicate a vision for post-compulsory education very different from the market-prioritising systems it hopes to succeed, based on stewardship (Hallsworth, 2011), consensus, and alignment with democratically accountable political direction.

Tertiary and the four nations[2]

Across the UK, growing interest in tertiary systems has prompted studies mapping the policy landscape, charted FE–HE interfaces, and highlighting collaborative practices (Bhattacharya & Norman, 2021; College of the Future, 2022). Shattock and Hunt (2021) estimate that 111,800 students are engaged in academic programmes under FE–HE partnerships, which they describe as 'strategically integral' to many colleges. Tertiary collaboration typically comprises four formal activities: student progression, franchised teaching, course validation, and degree apprenticeships (pp. 8, 19-20). These categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive of each other. Modes of collaboration explored in this research include:

- Outsourced delivery, such as validation (where a university approves a course designed and delivered by another provider) and franchising (where delivery is by the partner institution but the university retains control). Franchising has come under increased scrutiny due to student finance fraud and concerns about quality assurance (Braisby, Harper & Page, 2024).
- Foundation Degrees and Access to HE, providing routes into undergraduate study for non-traditional learners, and skills escalators/ladders, which support progression across educational levels aligned to labour market needs.
- Recognition of prior learning, including articulation and formal and ad hoc arrangements that permit advanced entry or credit transfer.
- Integrated partnerships, where institutions operate under a unified governance structure, contrasted with non-integrated partnerships, which remain autonomous but collaborate across shared functions.

Much of this work is often grouped under the umbrella of 'HE in FE': an alternative and sometimes marginalised route historically subject to scepticism regarding quality (Bathmaker & Orr, 2020). Such activities span a spectrum of collaboration and vary in depth, as this report will explore. As one participant described, at the lowest level of collaboration:

> *we may just benchmark our curriculums, […]. At the sort of middle end of the collaboration, we would co-design or co-quality assure provision, […] then at the full end, we would either co-teach […] [or] co-design provision into skills escalators and guarantee admission for learners* (Staff 08).

[2] The information in this section is, unless indicated, publicly available and not derived from the anonymised research findings featured later. The institutions named and featured here are not necessarily the same as those featured in the research findings.

In 2021, Shattock and Hunt (2021, pp. 17, 20) reported that 80% of colleges and 50% of universities had formal programme links, with post-1992 universities more engaged than pre-1992 ones, and collaboration more prevalent outside England.

Devolution since 1998 has created distinct tertiary systems across the UK, establishing a 'policy laboratory' that allows comparative learning rooted in national contexts (Laczik et al., 2023). Wales has progressed furthest towards a unified tertiary system. Since 2024, Medr, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, has assumed responsibility for FE, HE, adult education, apprenticeships, and training. Medr acts as a sector steward, coordinating strategy, funding, and planning across providers in alignment with public goals. This includes promoting strategic duties in for example equality of opportunity, participation, sustainability, civic mission, and Welsh Ministers' statement of priorities for the sector, in alignment with the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015. Merthyr Tydfil College exemplifies the Welsh model, functioning as part of the University of South Wales and offering pathways from sixth form to HE within one of the UK's most deprived areas (Shattock & Horvath, 2023, pp. 52–53). Broader collaboration is evident in the USW Strategic Alliance (with five colleges) and regional initiatives like the South Wales Civic Engagement Partnership.

Scotland has likewise adopted a system-based approach. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) funds both FE and HE, and free tuition remains available to Scottish-domiciled students. While funding per student has declined (Odgen, 2024), tertiary strategy has been shaped by major reviews including Cumberford-Little (2020), the Withers Report (2022), and SFC's own reforms. A 2025 Bill will expand SFC's remit to include apprenticeships and training. Articulation is well established; where systems of recognition of prior learning and the award of credit towards advanced standing allow, for example, HNC/HND students to enter university in later years. Between 2007 and 2016, regional articulation hubs increased articulating student numbers by 85%. Expectations that institutions would support articulation were subsequently transmitted through the Outcome Agreement process where colleges and universities set out their activities in return for their funding (Universities Scotland, 2020). The SFC also funds Additional Funded Places and supports the Scottish Widening Access Programme (SWAP), which provides access routes for adult learners. These programmes are closely associated with targets established by the Commission on Widening Access to ensure that students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent 20% of entrants to all HE by 2030 (COWA, 2016, p. 13). Distinctive institutional forms have emerged, such as the University of the Highlands and Islands, a distributed institution formed of 48 college campuses with degree-awarding powers, and regional partnerships like that of North East Scotland College and Robert Gordon University. Recent interventions include seven Regional Tertiary Pathfinder pilots (SFC, 2025), and New College Lanarkshire has inaugurated an innovative, multi-facility undergraduate school in partnership with the University of the West of Scotland.

Northern Ireland exhibits strong FE–HE collaboration, with FE colleges delivering over 20% of HE provision and there have been further calls to collaboratively design higher-level vocational courses, with articulation into degree courses, to be delivered locally in colleges (College of the Future, 2021, p. 38). Progress has been hampered by the absence of a functioning Executive (Smyth et al., 2022, pp. 70-91). Unlike the rest of the UK, the Department for the Economy directly funds both sectors, though they operate largely in silos. Recent development include the 'Curriculum Hubs' were each of Northern Ireland's six regional colleges lead on a selected priority occupational area, in collaboration with universities and employers (ETI, 2022). The 2023 Independent Review of Education recommended consolidating colleges into a single governance model while preserving local flexibility (pp. 61-2).

England represents the most fragmented system, marked by multiple regulators and a more marketised model (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2020). FE and HE are overseen by distinct bodies, including the Office for Students, Ofqual, Ofsted, ESFA, and IfATE/Skills England. Historically, 8–15% of HE students have studied in FE colleges (Parry, 2016; Parry et al., 2012). However, there are indications a tertiary system may emerge in England too. The creation of Skills England in 2024 reflects a more coordinated industrial strategy, identifying

key growth sectors. The Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), launching in 2027 (UK Government, 2025, p. 67), uniting the finance system across FE and HE, is promoted as advancing capacities for institutions to accommodate recognition of prior learning. The capacity of unitary tertiary governance bodies to coordinate and make strategic decisions about their local area priorities has led for for further devolution and regionalisation given England's scale. Calls have been made for Mayoral Combined Authorities to take on the responsibilities of a decentralised tertiary system (Shattock and Horvath, 2023, pp. 135-6) and to expand work like that of the Regional Education Partnership in the North East (LEI, 2025). Within England's variable tertiary landscape there are a number of initiatives and institutions cultivating tertiary collaboration. Institutes of Technology (IoTs), launched in 2019, are a flagship model. These are partnerships among FE colleges, universities, and employers, focused on higher technical education from level 4 to PhD (Always et al., 2022, p. 14). The 21 IoTs vary in form, from contracted arrangements to independent legal entities. Integrated FE–HE institutions include London Southbank University Group incorporating two colleges, an academy and sixth form; the University of West London which merged with Ruskin College; and Buxton & Leek College owned by the University of Derby. Universities such as Plymouth, Lincoln, and Chester have formed extensive college partnerships in low participation areas, while some colleges such as Hartpury University and Warwickshire College Group have obtained degree awarding powers. England therefore presents a diverse and evolving tertiary landscape, with emerging system-building mechanisms operating within a historically competitive structure.

Considerations in the wider literature

Given this considerable policy enthusiasm and interest, there is surprisingly little published research on what the existing landscape of tertiary collaboration and coordination looks like from an institutional perspective. There is a sense, however, that as pressures on tertiary education have homogenised the educational experience and reduced flexibility and choice, that tertiary 'rhetoric and the reality have been moving further apart, rather than closer together, in recent years' (Wolf & Cohen, 2024, p. 12). Critical evaluations of the extent to which tertiary collaboration across FE and HE enhances institutional strategic capacities are not readily accessible. The sharing of best practice, such as by the College of the Future (2022) can be valuable. Such publications however are often intended to promote aspirational possibilities and prioritise sectoral advocacy over the illumination of common practice, general modes of operation, and general barriers. This is particularly pertinent given that, despite policy rhetoric emphasising the improved strategic capacities possible, tertiary collaboration appears to be in part driven by competition for diminishing domestic funding. Such pressures have aligned the strategies of some universities and colleges, raising the attractiveness of rationalisation. HE and FE strategic priorities are also converging. HEIs have sought to supplement national recruitment by entering local markets, and colleges have sought to augment their income and enhance their prestige by offering HE. International research has indicated that rationalisation may erode colleges' localism, and participation pathways do little to improve diversification of access (Wheelahan, 2009). Similarly, in the UK, White (2024) has identified that the targets set by Access and Participation Plans (APP) in England has meant that widening participation students who would have previously stayed at their local college to progress to level 4 study and above are now 'target students' for the local university resulting in 'displacement' of students as a result of 'of an uncoordinated institution-based approach to APP target-setting – as opposed to one that looks at what a region needs and asks the institutions that serve it to agree a coordinated and deliberate approach' to widening participation. A single tertiary sector might lead to continued homogenisation and hierarchisation of provision (Teichler, 2008; Bathmaker & Orr, 2021) through the stipulations of overbearing funding and quality regimes or through domineering university interests (Emms et al., 2023). Our knowledge of student experience in these spaces is also limited (Bathmaker, 2016; Lavender, 2020; Shattock & Hunt, 2021, 21-22). Developing an appreciation of how far tertiary collaboration can deliver a more efficient and equitable system, and assessing whether the benefits of a more collaborative system would be worth the frictional cost of transition, is important for determining the direction of reform.

This study

To begin addressing the limited understanding of institutional and student perspectives on tertiary partnerships across the four nations, this research posed two primary research questions:

1. **Institutional experiences:** what motivates the creation of existing FE-HE partnerships, and how do institutional cultures and policy contexts shape their development?

2. **Student experiences:** to what extent do new strategic and governance models influence divergent student experiences in recruitment, learning, skills development, support, and outcomes? To what extent do these partnerships afford distinctive opportunities otherwise unavailable?

This exploratory study draws on a small empirical sample to illustrate key issues in tertiary collaboration rather than to provide a comprehensive evaluation. It focused on 'tertiary pathways': formal transitions between FE and HE at levels 3-6, where students engage with two learning environments. As such it examines a particular type of transition, considering not exclusively student experiences or theorisation (Gale & Parker, 2014; Gravett & Winstone, 2019) but accounts of their development and implication within an institutional context. Data collection involved interviews with students and professionals in colleges, universities, and integrated partnerships across England and Scotland, supplemented by documentary analysis. A small number of student interviews were conducted between October 2024 and January 2025, including a critical incident charting exercise and a 30-minute interview. Recruitment was challenging despite outreach to approximately 75 providers. A second phase in April 2025 involved 13 interviews with professionals (senior leaders, delivery staff, and administrators), recruited through prior contacts and snowballing. In total, 17 interviews were conducted, representing around 11 institutions, roughly half in England and half in Scotland. Due to overlapping partnerships and consortium arrangements, the number of partnerships represented is higher but difficult to define precisely. College participants in this study appear to have engaged with a greater number of partner HEI institutions than the average of 2.81 per college reported by Shattock and Hunt (2021, p. 18). A few interviewees offered dual perspectives on shared partnerships from different institutional standpoints.

Given the uniqueness of some models, a thematic rather than case-study approach was adopted to preserve anonymity and focus on cross-cutting strengths, weaknesses, and issues. The limited sample size, especially of students, permits only indicative insights. Student data primarily serves an illustrative function. Nevertheless, when combined with documentary analysis, the findings offer useful prompts for policy dialogue and future inquiry. As such, this report does not provide recommendations but identifies several considerations in conclusion.

Tertiary pathways

Nature and operations

The participants in this study described a range of partners and partnership types that fostered particular pathways for various purposes. Partnerships were generally initiated along two primary vectors: geographical proximity, or subject or sector area. The identification of new partnership opportunities was often a fairly ad hoc process, and depended on staff keeping aware of changes to partner institutions' offer via websites, conferences, and networks. This was often assisted by an underlying alignment to broader local and regional characteristics such as prominent regional industries resulting in a 'natural alliance' (Staff 13). Regional partnerships were the most common and generally the most well-integrated in terms of a unified strategic overview, and broadest across multiple disciplinary and vocational areas. Most institutions also engaged in specialised partnerships beyond their immediate locality, often aligned with distinct disciplinary or vocational areas. For instance, a provider collaborating with a pathway in one specialism might partner with others elsewhere to access requisite expertise or accreditation not available through their primary affiliation. As one college interviewee described, 'It's about having the right university partner for the provision' (Staff 04).

Structures to manage partnerships also varied considerably. Most developed some form of common strategy with operational boards with curriculum leads, and steering boards consisting of senior leaders from key partner organisations. Boards might additionally include employer representatives and seconded members from external organisations such as chambers of commerce and local authorities. Less integrated partnerships tended to have boards convened generally once a term, though more integrated partnerships might incorporate oversight of pathways into their executive committees and feature in strategies and visions. Other means of management included establishing and maintaining of data-sharing agreements, means of coordination of admissions for dual applications, regular meetings for delivery staff including curriculum alignment and mapping, and coordination between partner institutions' marketing and recruitment teams. The strength and breadth of a partnership did not always lead to one clear line of communication. One college interviewee spoke of how their single-subject partnerships had a single point of contact. By contrast, contact with their primary regional university partner was fragmented between numerous disciplines and contacts distributed over multiple faculties which resulted in inconsistency in communication (Staff 04). Some institutions, particularly in Scotland, had designated staff with responsibility for managing partnerships.

Curriculum mapping exercises are ubiquitous in facilitating tertiary pathways. In Scotland the process was described in routine terms. Mapping worked best with staff who had had experience of delivering the courses. Where mapping exercises identified disjunctures, partners would 'usually have a solution'. This might include clarifying in dialogue with delivery staff to identify where requirements were in fact already included in existing provision but had not been flagged as they 'didn't come up in the module descriptor or something' (Staff 01). Where there was a genuine gap, supplementary provision or bridging study might be developed delivered by the college, university, or both collaboratively. This might include including summer schools or online modules, or specifying optional modules that would need to be mandatory for students aspiring to participate in such pathways. Inevitably there were some instances where mapping might fail. This might include too divergent curriculum or, 'the finance doesn't work; there's not enough students in the pipeline to justify it from faculty point of view', for example (Staff 11). Articulation into interdisciplinary courses was described as 'not always clear cut as we initially thought' (Staff 07). An initial mapping phase and implementation of a pathway would usually be followed by a review cycle dependent on specified end dates. One interviewee in Scotland reported that articulation tended to be renewed every 3-5 years, while some institutions renewed articulation agreements every 12 months 'just to double check that we're all singing from the same hymn sheet' (Staff 01).

This process could consequently be reasonably labour intensive. How often remapping occurred was also dependent on changes made to the programme which would require a review 'to ensure it is still appropriate' and therefore necessitated an 'ongoing dialogue' to ensure any changes are picked up (Staff 09). Mapping exercises determined prior requirements, and when these requirements were not communicated effectively this could cause problems: one interviewee recalled an issue with a student who was not able to articulate on the route they intended, as the student had not been told they needed to take a required optional module until too late (Staff 01). In England, the sector's scale and number of potential partners hindered the development of nationally consistent articulation agreements. Where colleges offered HNCs and HNDs through a major awarding body, universities could 'map specific qualifications' across multiple institutions (Staff 09). In contrast, articulation was 'a little bit slower' where provision was more tailored (Staff 06). One English university partner described the interface between curriculum pathways and standard entry requirements as 'the biggest, most contentious piece' of developing partnerships. Where entry involved T Levels, BTECs, Access to HE qualifications, or apprenticeships this could be quite a painful process because it was seen as 'outside the mould of volume-based admissions for traditional university courses' (Staff 08).

Sharing across partnerships

Most interviewees identified that the most important shared element in developing FE-HE pathways was a shared attitude and culture: this is explored in more detail later. This section instead discusses the practicalities of what is shared in design and operation of tertiary pathways. Approaches varied widely. In less intergrated modes of collaboration, such as franchising or validation, sharing was often limited to academic materials and quality assurance, typically managed by the university partner. Even in more integrated partnerships, it was not always the case that partnerships were pursuing explicitly formal collaborative curriculum development across partner institutions. Staff responses to the relationship between FE and HE diverged. Some maintained clear distinctions between stages, reinforcing the transition through separate delivery and social environments. One integrated partnership explained they had 'no crossover' in delivery, with level 3 and below delivered exclusively by the college, and level 4, 5, and 6 delivered by the university (Staff 05). This helped affirm progression into a new phase of learning while supporting both staff preferences and students' adaptation to a more autonomous academic culture. Most participants, however, emphasised continuity, using shared spaces and facilities to foster a unified student experience (Staff 08). One non-integrated partnership reported a much greater degree of co-delivery and co-design:

> *we now have staff, [and] postgrad students from the university that contribute to the teaching on some of our level 3 and our level 4 courses. We align some of our units, so we're a more cohesive curriculum vision* (Staff 12).

Other examples included associate university lecturers based in colleges, and university students accessing specialist facilities in partner institutions: 'the [university] students come to us to use our CAD facilities, even in third year' (Staff 13). Co-design also occurred where specialist college staff led the development of HE programmes later franchised by the university. Some partnerships also highlighted the importance of sharing access to employer contacts, particularly large national employers (Staff 09). For colleges in particular, the form of such partnerships permitted connections to 'cutting edge technology' through proximity to industry leading employers and world-leading research at universities (Staff 06). Many interviewees noted shared CPD and the exchange of pedagogical practice across FE and HE (Staff 10; 04; 12), suggesting the potential for significant cross-sector influence even where collaboration was informal. Greater dissemination of such practices may help address issues of parity of esteem, discussed later in this report.

In terms of practicalities and operations, the variability of partnership types meant what was shared between partners and the extent to which it was shared varied considerably. It included, most commonly, shared

learning materials and resources, particularly for example library access (to some extent) and access to electronic resources. This was particularly important for smaller college partners. For example, as one described 'it would be very expensive for us to [obtain] licenses for journal articles' (Staff 04). Often, it also included shared or integrated careers advice and mentoring. The accessibility of these facilities was not always equal. One interviewee described as a result of the university being subject to a cybersecurity breach prior, access had been restricted and 'our college partners aren't actually afforded the same access that university staff are. So when we introduce new systems, quite often, they're forgotten about' (Staff 03). Shared facilities ranged from whole campuses to more limited spaces, which necessitated shared timetabling. However, again, in at least one integrated partnership featured in this research, there was a clear division between the higher education institution and FE college as 'two separate entities' despite sharing accommodation, and within the accommodation clear demarcation even to the extent to 'different social areas for our university students and our college students' (Staff 05).

Motivations and enablers

The main motivation to develop partnerships and tertiary pathways was to expand a provider's offer and provide a 'strategic advantage' (Staff 07). Usually these were capacities that institutions were not capable of pursuing without a partner due to feasibility barriers or regulatory hurdles. While partner institutions were aligning their developments with local and regional labour market needs and prioritised widening participation agendas, these were often pursued in close association for cultivating student demand in service of institutional survival and growth.

The widening participation agenda was high priority in Scotland especially in pursuit of Commission on Widening Access targets, and also in England for both college and university partners. It was common for colleges and universities to talk about their position as a provider in areas of high deprivation or targeting particular disadvantaged demographic groups. The rationale for such targeting was often underpinned by a broader social justice and economic imperative. Colleges were acknowledged to have a greater embeddedness in their regional and local communities and therefore well placed to advance access to tertiary education (Staff 11). Mapping of offer provided clear 'line of sight' for learners that might otherwise struggle to navigate and overcome the changeable journey through tertiary education (Staff 12). One student in this research, for example, studying a HND at a partner college, was aiming to complete a Masters (Student 03). Widening participation was closely bound up with institutional responsibilities to advance social mobility through place-based, employer-informed missions. As one interviewee put it, the ambition was 'to have an impact on social mobility and be place-based, employer-led. So we're fixing that local good jobs for local people mission' (Staff 12). Strong employer partnerships were central to this agenda, particularly where universities sought to build local talent pipelines by collaborating with FE colleges to widen access to degree and postgraduate pathways. These efforts were often underpinned by labour market intelligence, guiding the development of tertiary routes into emerging sectors. In some regions, such alignment was well integrated; in others, more ad hoc (Staff 01; 04). For large employers such as multinationals or public bodies seeking unified training solutions, a single point of contact across institutions enabled streamlined provision, allowing students to stay within one educational ecosystem (Staff 11; 08). Institutions benefited from aligning existing curricula with employer needs, and in one case, a university worked with an employer requiring provision from level 2 upwards. Though not equipped to deliver lower-level training, the university saw value in co-delivering with its partner college, ensuring progression to level 4 and beyond under a trusted institutional brand (Staff 08). The offer of integrated partnerships in particular was stimulated by these relationships. Without a prior relationship and their need for 'level two and level three as a pipeline', as one integrated partnership put it, 'We wouldn't have even thought about doing it' (Staff 12). These collaborations exemplified how employer needs and social mobility goals could converge, as in one Scottish university's strategy to address rural workforce shortages in areas like nursing and cybersecurity. Their vision was to build pathways with colleges that led from HNC

to degree and into 'highly skilled, well-paid careers', allowing individuals to upskill and remain rooted in their communities (Staff 11).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these missions and social purposes were pursued within and interwoven through the financial reality institutions found themselves in. The existing collaboration between the institutions featured in this study were shaped by shared experiences of resource scarcity. This scarcity is evident in both the Scottish and English systems, despite their differing approaches to resource distribution, whether more system-led or more marketised. As Keep (2018) put it:

> *Even in countries where a systems-based approach is dominant, such as Scotland, institutions are sometimes competing for scarce funding, students and prestige. In other words, inside systems there is often an element of contestability and competition.*

Disparities in funding per-student incentivised behaviours: as one English interviewee put it: 'every student in the college is worth £5000. Every student at university is worth £9.5-£10,000 pounds a year' (Staff 03). This manifested in slightly different ways at universities versus colleges. At universities, there was a clear strategy in integrated and non-integrated partnerships to 'grow your own' student demand. This strategy was particularly identified as necessary given acute levels of competition for student numbers and tight fiscal contexts and could result in tensions. One English college interviewee noted that 'we do certainly get some tough questions' from a specific university partner if a large proportion of students were not progressing from the college to the university as intended. They explained that the college-delivered portion, offering industry accreditation, meant learners could leave and go into industry, while others who still might want to complete a degree might wish to attend other universities not quite as geographically distant from the established partner, which 'has occasionally caused [the university] a little bit of frustration' (Staff 04). Another Scottish interviewee recounted that there was also a sense that:

> *there has been some bad behaviour in Scotland. We do hear horror stories of, you know, you've got students in HNCs that are going to be going on to do their HND, and a university, unnamed universities, will come in. They'll offer them an unconditional on to the first year of their university degree. And those that work in the colleges are saying that learner is not ready- they're not ready to do that yet. They would actually benefit from an extra year in college, articulating at a later year* (Staff 11).

Opportunities for increased collaboration therefore could also be wielded as instruments for increased competition. Interestingly, the most integrated partnerships seemed to accommodate the importance of greater student choice. One interviewee at a integrated partnership explained how in the past they had 'key performance indications around progression' between the college and the university where subject interests aligned. However, they reported that 'We've never, I don't think, met them, which I think is quite a good thing, because you won't want to be like a slipstream. You don't want to be a conveyer belt'. Not all students wanted to move from a FE environment to a HE environment, and assuming progression was universally appropriate made 'a mockery and a mess' (Staff 05). Another integrated partnership had a slightly different take: 'students will want to go around the UK', particularly to take up offers in areas that were distinctive to the offer of the partner university, they indicated. However, where substantial proportions of college leavers chose to move to another local institution in a similar tariff area with a competing offer, this would be a considered by university management with concern (Staff 12).

While stimulating demand appears to have been considered important, direct income from activities such as franchised provision could often be considered marginal for universities. 'The financial benefits of the university is very, very small, in which case the civic responsibility, or the opportunity for students to progress into higher education, is really the selling point' as one interviewee described (Staff 03). Another interviewee, however, indicated that there was value instead in greater flexibility with staffing and resources, particularly around co-delivery. As one interviewee from a university explained,

> *Our cost base is probably too high to do some of the lower volume stuff in the HE space, and the workload allocation is much more favourable. I think for FE staff, we can flex them a lot more […] We can do a lot of the stuff that we would ordinarily say is not commercially viable* (Staff 08).

Secondly, there was a recognition that college staff brought strong teaching specialisms, with pedagogical expertise and contextual knowledge. Their embeddedness within local communities enabled them to be more responsive to the particular needs of disadvantaged groups. The breadth of experience of FE staff meant for HE, 'We've got more options to do more elective modules with those FE staff […] more optionality for employers and specialisation' given this increased cost-effectiveness (Staff 08).

Colleges, meanwhile, were well aware of the difficulties universities were facing in recruitment, and were able to use this dynamic to their advantage. As one college interviewee explained that, 'if I'm chancing my luck, I will say, you know, we would really love this. Your numbers are dropping. Let us help you fill those spaces. What can we do to get these kids who would not be able to come?' (Staff 01). Colleges, with many years of experience of highly constrained finances, derived their benefit from partnerships to distinguish their offer by its association with clear progression opportunities to HE and open up new markets of aspirational students. One university interviewee noted that, following the formation of a tertiary partnership, a college was newly welcomed into a local sixth form for recruitment activities, particularly those involving employer and university partners: 'breaking a barrier that historically they had never managed to break' (Staff 06). Further privileges included colleges gaining and growing their 'expertise' in particular subject areas, opportunities for college staff to pursue 'personal gain' including support pursuing Masters' level qualifications (Staff 03). Partnerships could also offer a form of risk mitigation and avoided prohibitively expensive or bureaucratic processes whilst still enabling them to engage in delivery of a spectrum of HE. As one college interviewee described, 'our numbers are too small to warrant […] having our own degree awarding powers'; collaboration was therefore 'a lot more straightforward' (Staff 04). The shared income from the partnership despite its marginality for universities was still perceived by at least one college as a 'a big chunk of money per course that that goes off to the universities in terms of regulatory burden' (Staff 04).

Some institutions were engaging in a form of co-optation or division of labour, where collaboration helped avoid direct and wasteful competition for the same student cohorts. For instance, in one example from this research, a university was proposing to introduce a new course in a particular specialist area which risked placing the university in direct competition with its college partner. Senior university leadership promised to monitor applications and ensure the course was attracting students from outside the region or from international markets. They committed to 'review the situation and review the stance' accordingly. As the interviewee summarised, this was about 'monitoring and being open and honest about what the plans are' (Staff 07). Such arrangements could also be construed as more restrictive. Another college interviewee described how: 'We do have restrictions in what we can deliver with them if they see it as direct competition to a course that they provide' (Staff 04). In some ways integrated partnerships could be seen as a logical conclusion of such agreements, though this was not without difficulties. Instances of overlapping provision, for example, around level 4 offer between the college and university could still occur even in integrated partnerships; though one interviewee indicated that this had been resolved using the communication and coordination mechanisms in place (Staff 12).

Institutional cultures

A good match in institutional cultures and orientation was understood as the most important shared element in sustaining effective partnerships – even if, as one interviewee put it, that what they wanted was first 'obviously a plentiful supply of students, but […] the main thing is communication with them and working in partnership' (Staff 02). A good match constituted a number of elements: first, interviewees frequently identified the importance of joint vision in relation to 'social purpose' and an aligned mission. 'If you weren't already

committed to that agenda, wouldn't be the right partnership', one interviewee put it (Staff 12). Alignment on these elements meant partners could hold one another to account. The second element of effective institutional cultures in sustaining partnerships was mutual respect, trust, transparency, honesty, and openness (Staff 07). The sort of co-optation discussed in the previous section, for example, would not have been considered possible without the pre-existing trust and commitment of partner institutions. Trust was important even in less integrated partnerships. As one interviewee explained, in monitoring quality, 'the model is a hands-off one: we franchise […] to another delivery partner, and it really is up to them […] So there's a lot of trust' (Staff 03). Third, and less frequently identified explicitly, was a partner's willingness to 'challenge some of the status quo around those rules, regulations, cultures' (Staff 08). Some partnerships were able to operate with considerable cultural differences. For example, one interviewee discussed the mitigation required to foster a partnership between a highly vocationally-oriented college and a research intensive university. This required additional effort, including novel course creation, to permit 'those skills escalators to be developed. So aligning the curriculum has been difficult' (Staff 08).

Universities in this study who were participating in these partnerships positioned themselves as aligning with cultures conducive towards collaboration and as an antidote to those that were not. One interviewee stressed they wanted to ensure their partners 'don't see the [university] as coming in and taking their chips. And our message is always, we both want the same thing' (Staff 11). Colleges similarly reported many universities were not well suited to become partners: 'it's either seen as competition, or they don't have that as an area, so they're not interested in or able to validate' (Staff 04). There was a persistent sense that some universities were 'very particular about getting into bed with colleges. They don't feel like they need it. […] They have enough applications'. One Scottish interviewee described repeated rejection from two Russel Group universities unwilling to risk the impact of college entrants on performance metrics (Staff 01). Others pointed to structural disincentives, such as the effect of lower entry grades on average UCAS tariffs, which discouraged holistic admissions practices (Staff 08). These factors contributed to a broader reluctance among high-demand universities to engage in partnership. As one interviewee put it:

> *If I'm sitting there and I've got 500 applications, like 10 applications for any place, I've got good, strong applications. I'm not going to be going right. How am I going to look at different ways to bring in students?* (Staff 02).

It was not just specific universities with a broad market appeal, but there are fewer articulation routes into particular more competitive and high demands fields like health because of this.

In Scotland and England, interviewees repeatedly gestured to the idea that where universities were struggling to recruit they would be more inclined to pursue income diversification including tertiary collaboration activities to obtain even marginal income. It was also the case nonetheless that a similar logic was applied to colleges and their willingness to collaborate. For example, one interviewee described how a college, prior to joining a partnership, faced serious performance issues across multiple metrics, including financial stability and student achievement. However, in participating in the partnership, the institution had seen marked improvements. For example, over a six-year period, achievement rates for 16–18-year-olds had improved from being among the lowest nationally to well above national average. Without these serious challenges, the interviewee doubted whether or not the college would have been willing to surrender some of its 'territory' and autonomy to participate in the partnership (Staff 12). Indeed this sense was applied by another interviewee to the whole FE sector. The precarious financial position in HE meant universities were 'having to do voluntary severance, having to cut back, having to re-rationalise. Colleges have been doing that for 10-15 years in Scotland. And what it means is, they are really open partners' (Staff 11). Aside from the practicalities and fundamentals of trust and shared missions, a shared or aligned institutional culture was important for fostering a sense of belonging for students, which will discussed below.

External influences

Interviewees typically conceptualised external influences on partnerships as operating at two levels: local and national authorities. At the local level, respondents highlighted the importance of relationships with councils, with one referring to 'buy-in' from their local authority (Staff 12). In certain cases, local authorities were seen to provide strategic clarity. One interviewee observed that their council had articulated 'a very clear agenda', which prioritised vocational and technical education alongside efforts to broaden participation and diversify educational provision, ensuring 'there are ways for everybody to go into the jobs that [the city] is creating' (Staff 06).

Generally, however it was national policy that featured as exerting the greatest influence. In Scotland, the Widening Participation agenda, such as the Commission on Widening Access to ensure that students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent 20% of entrants to all HE by 2030 was a significant impetus for collaboration. Articulation Hub reforms, similarly, had formalised the system. As one interviewee recalled:

> *the days have gone from years of old, where articulation […] varied from year to year. It was a way of plugging your drop-out gaps, […] so you would have one year, you would take in 10, you'd another year, you'd take in 50* (Staff 02).

This had built a 'strong infrastructure' of matriculation in Scottish universities able to 'receive those students without huge amounts of hurdles in their way' (Staff 02). Scotland also had comparatively more widely available capital funding to help build on existing collaborations and capacities. This included, for example, dedicated networking, CPD, and 'lunches', because 'normally, we wouldn't necessarily have the resource' (Staff 13) and with opportunities of transferable learning to other partnerships (Staff 07). Where external funding was awarded, this meant 'there's also been a lot of buy in with more senior staff at both institutions, and it's about developing an understanding of the ethos of both institutions as well' (Staff 07)

In England, the regulatory environment is necessarily different given the scale of English tertiary education. One interviewee with experience of the four nations context described the Scottish Funding Council's expectations of universities to facilitate partnerships, which makes the process of developing relationships 'a bit easier having that expectation'; the scale of the sector however, meant that in England, delivering on such 'would be challenging' (Staff 09). The Department for Education's backing of IoTs had significance in facilitating a sense of purpose and authority in the exercise (Staff 06). This meant that there was 'obviously some capital involved, so they're on really top-quality kits and resources', and this was also closely related to being able to afford 'a lot more interaction with employers' (Staff 09). However, changes in government introduced uncertainty and the possibility of 'killing the brand', as one university partner of an IoT put it, meaning investment was 'kind of wasted now', and undermined the longevity of the partnerships (Staff 08).[3] This sort of unilateral decision-making means providers felt they were operating in a 'very reactive system rather than a proactive system' (Staff 03).

Student experiences, feedback, and data

The lack of published research on student experiences' of tertiary institutions is likely related to a lack of data and formal mechanisms for capturing student experiences and feedback across partnerships. In this research, participants generally reported their impressions based on their professional judgment and

[3] Since these interviews were conducted, there have been assurances of government's commitment to supporting IoTs until 2028 (Institutes of Technology, 2025), but there is still concern for security for IoTs and their objectives beyond that short-term horizon.

familiarity with partnerships and pathways. 'We don't really have that sort of robustness in the evaluative feedback' (Staff 13), as one put it, another thought they did not do 'as much as we could do, really, to really exemplify how advantageous maybe it is to stay on or not' (Staff 05). Student responsivity was low: 'students are not great at even filling out a Microsoft Teams form' (Staff 01). At the same time, others 'felt their students were surveyed to death' (Staff 06).

Gathering feedback across two different institutions across transition points was difficult 'from a system perspective' (Staff 09), particularly where such as in franchise provision quality assurance itself could be difficult (Staff 03). For providers using credit transfer models, there was limited capacity to follow learners across their pathways (Staff 09), and data sources such as UCAS or the national articulation database were 'three or four years behind' and lacked the sort of comprehensiveness that would be most helpful (Staff 01). Even in integrated partnerships where evidencing 'value added' was particularly important, feedback and data-gathering mechanisms were not embedded from the outset (Staff 12). The overall impact of partnerships could be measured in growth in retention. One interviewee gave the example of the increase in the proportion of college level 3 students progressing to level 4, and also increasing the percentage of that number that applied to the partner university (Staff 12). Other measures might include general attainment in social mobility rankings, though this did not necessarily produce granular data helpful for informing delivery. Where mechanisms for monitoring and feedback across partnerships did exist they were primarily 'informal' and primarily depended on the strategic structures for coordination and advice (Staff 02) and were consequently highly time consuming (Staff 09). They frequently included articulation attainment surveys (Staff 07) and general surveys, student conferences (Staff 12), and focus groups (Staff 02). Feedback generally covered whether they recommended the course, understanding of the partnership, and the quality of equipment (Staff 06).

Despite challenges in gathering student feedback, interviewees generally reported that what was collected offered valuable insights into student needs and institutional shortcomings. Much of the feedback was pragmatic, drawing attention to gaps in induction support during the first six weeks (Staff 10) and to difficulties with academic content, such as statistics in psychology (Staff 02). Such observations were helpful in indicating the need for supplementary provision. More broadly, it might include anything from students asking for 'a microwave', or 'wifi', to those on level 5 and 6 programmes having technical difficulties accessing learning resources (Staff 04) or timetabling inconsistencies (Staff 11), and complications around fees and loans statuses (Student 04). In a few cases, students commented on the social and academic character of their learning environment. Younger learners appreciated studying alongside their peers working for 'your Goldman Sachses and your Morgan Stanelys' in a professional environment, while some advanced learners perceived their setting as 'too FE centric' (Staff 08). One student in this study initially struggled with the shift from interactive, discussion-based college teaching to the lecture-heavy delivery typical of university, but ultimately came to prefer it (Student 01). More fundamentally, feedback revealed the problems that arise when academic and welfare provision are not coordinated holistically across institutional boundaries. Without seamless information-sharing and clearly defined support roles, students may find themselves repeating their concerns to different teams within the same partnership: 'if they come to us, why do they have to repeat the story when they go to university?' (Staff 13). One student in this study, having found their college environment supportive and believing the university would offer similar reassurance, nevertheless anticipated ongoing challenges in managing their learning difficulty (Student 04). Even in integrated partnerships, data-sharing could be hampered by misplaced GDPR concerns ('we can't give you the list of students but- but we're one group!') (Staff 12) suggesting that given adequate frameworks and communication, adequate data sharing was a feasible goal.

Distinctiveness and outcomes

This research was interested in illuminating whether FE-HE partnerships were conducive to innovative or distinctive educational experiences for students contrasted to the experience of mainstream college students or undergraduates who attended only one institution. This incorporated an interest in, firstly, whether students' who would otherwise have not attended FE or HE were afforded opportunities to do. Secondly, it considered whether students' learning experiences were informed by the unusual circumstance of their experience being informed by the input of two institutions. Third, it investigated whether there were any distinctive student outcomes from their time moving through tertiary pathways. It found cautious indications that at each stage partnerships afforded some degree of distinctiveness for students.

There was careful agreement from students and staff that tertiary pathways created opportunities, particularly in cold-spots or specialist areas, that would otherwise be unavailable to students. The visibility of these routes itself acted as a form of communication, opening possibilities for learners who might not have considered such options. This aligns closely with widening participation goals and 'grow your own' student demand models (even if some students may have pursued other tertiary routes regardless, a possibility this research is unable to measure or comment further on). Staff explained that recruited students often portrayed themselves as constrained by 'personal circumstances, finances or maybe […] a lack of confidence [and] self-esteem', which shaped how students viewed their own capacity to progress directly into a university degree (Staff 03). This research heard that in at least one instance, collaboration was being used to permit a sports academy at the university to recruit students for a sports team through the college who would otherwise not meet the entry requirements to study at the university (Staff 04). There was a limited sense, reported mainly by integrated partnerships, that some students saw progressing through the institution as an 'easy route' (Staff 04; 12). This was framed more as an unfounded criticism than a reflection of the academic value or opportunity such pathways provide.

The nature of courses offered through partnerships was a mechanism for recruiting and retaining a distinct cohort of students. Several interviewees reported improved retention and achievement rates, sometimes exceeding those in standalone college provision and comparable to university benchmarks (Staff 08; 05). One provider explained that the model of combining continuity of location with increased pastoral support and peer learning had demonstrably improved student outcomes versus their standard university provision (Staff 11). This success was generally attributed to both college pedagogies and the greater per-student investment available in HE. Courses typically featured small class sizes (6-12 students), fostering personalised support and 'a more gentle introduction' to HE (Staff 01), often without formal exams and instead favouring continuous assessment. While low attendance could raise concerns around financial viability or disruptions from non-attendance (Staff 03), the smaller scale was widely seen as enabling colleges' generalist curricula and permitted students to delay specialisation and make more informed degree choices (Staff 01). For example, one student in this research moved from an arts-oriented subject to a digital subject (Student 03). This was supported by a strong sense of community and attentiveness to 'the best thing for the learner' (Staff 11), and practices such as 'dual registration' (Staff 04), shared facilities, and a coherent mission (Staff 12). Shared facilities, such as libraries, sports centres, or teaching spaces, also fostered belonging, even in non-integrated partnerships where for example campuses being within easy walking distance enabled students to access shared resources (Staff 04). In several cases, students progressed through partnership pathways and later returned as ambassadors, staff, or lecturers, reinforcing a genuine sense of community (Staff 05; 12; 11). As well as the benefits that colleges could lend through their particular teaching and support mechanisms, associations with universities offered their own benefits. This included opportunities for accreditation of courses that would otherwise be unavailable, including for example, as one interviewee described, extension of a partner university's Nursing and Midwifery Council registration that would be prohibitively expensive for them to acquire on their own (Staff 04).

Assessing whether student outcomes were distinctive was hindered by limited tracking and data. Most interviewees acknowledged this gap, with many reluctant to draw firm conclusions. Some offered cautiously positive observations. Several reported that articulating students often performed well against standard benchmarks for engagement and completion and grades (Staff 11), were seen as 'well rounded' by employers, and were more mature and motivated than those entering directly from school (Staff 01). This was partly due to the courses distinctive offer, and partly due to students' distinctive characteristics:

> *students that enter us through prior learning do incredibly well in terms of study, and whether that is because they're ready to complete […] they're two-thirds of the way there, they want to complete. So they've kind of got that motivation […] we get quite a high proportion of them achieving good degrees, either a first or 2:1* (Staff 09).

There was little sense from the interviewees in this research as to the sort of outcomes students were experiencing after graduation in the labour market and more widely in society which await further research.

The future

Interviewees were generally positive about the nature and opportunities for partnerships between FE and HE in the future. The challenge of collaboration was seen as productive for universities, disrupting 'complacency':

> *Are we genuinely affecting social change by skimming off the cream of the crop who are getting three As at A level because they probably would have gone to university elsewhere? Versus these learners, who genuinely wouldn't have applied for university if it wasn't for the collaboration between our two institutions, or just don't have traditional academic grades, and therefore university would never have been an option for them. So it forces us to confront our social mission and actually look at the KPIs around what we're doing* (Staff 08).

While identifying these opportunities, interviewees had reservations regarding resource and the role of government in enabling or inhibiting collaboration.

Interviewees consistently identified future resourcing as the most significant uncertainty for their partnerships. While some, particularly in Scotland, viewed articulation as cost-effective and beneficial for both students and the public purse (Staff 02), others were more cautious. As one interviewee put it, without improved conditions, colleges and universities were unlikely to:

> *to come together and off the back of, I don't know, Local Skills Improvement Plans and develop these skills escalators organically? I don't think they will, but because there's just too much competition at the moment, and I think that's only going to increase* (Staff 08).

In England especially, competitive pressures for limited student funding and institutional recruitment strategies placed collaboration on unstable footing (Staff 03). In both countries restrictions on international recruitment were said to have undermined partnerships, with universities lowering entry requirements and bypassing colleges, potentially to students' detriment if they were 'not necessarily ready' (Staff 01). Financial strain and staffing reductions were also limiting progress, with partnership work increasingly dependent on already overstretched individuals (Staff 07).

Questions around the role of government were often couched through broader concerns about resources. Several interviewees suggested that clearer strategic direction, particularly in addressing cold spots and identifying priority vocational or disciplinary areas, could better support collaboration. This would allow providers to refine their offer and strengthen progression pathways (Staff 09). While Scottish interviewees

were generally more optimistic about the future of FE-HE collaboration, concerns remained, including the impact of recent HNC/HND curriculum reforms on articulation (Staff 10). In England, some expressed hope for broader systems of recognising prior learning that could streamline progression without the need for bespoke legal agreements, to 'replicate more what we do in Scotland' (Staff 09). The impending introduction of the LLE was a source of contention on its potential impact on collaboration. Some saw it as an opportunity to widen pathways within England (Staff 09), though it raised concerns about exacerbating existing challenges in tracking students across institutions. The primary concern, however, lay in the potential for increased competition: modular and stackable credentials could encourage learners to 'shop around', opening level 4 and 5 markets to FE, HE, and private providers alike. If combined with an expanded Growth and Skills Levy, this could intensify fragmentation.[4] One university described how commercial incentives already tempted partners to bypass established arrangements: lucrative contracts made it difficult to justify sharing provision with colleges (Staff 08). Such tensions reflected broader frustrations with inconsistent policy signals and misaligned incentives. Such developments would increase and not reduce duplicative provision. Other developments, such as Degree Apprenticeships, have 'just blown the landscape much wider apart', complicating funding flows and undermining strategic coherence (Staff 03). These uncertainties left many interviewees doubtful about the long-term viability of partnership-led collaboration.

Despite policy uncertainties, interviewees remained hopeful about near-term opportunities for their institutions and partners. Some saw scope for deepening collaboration through initiatives that fostered shared identity and belonging, such as 'co-branding', joint inductions, and a clearer articulation of institutional ethos (Staff 08). Others emphasised the value of shared resources and more 'integrated teaching', including expanding 'associate student' schemes that familiarised students with university environments and staff (Staff 07). A few interviewees also looked beyond colleges, aiming to involve local schools in early outreach (Staff 02, 11). One interviewee offered an example of their enrichment programme:

> *that includes lots of visits to the university. So I can be sat in my office at the university and I hear this kind of chitchat chatter, and I look out the window and there are 50 year 7s out going into the university. So that whole sense of belonging, and this is our university, is starting to be built in at a very early age* (Staff 12).

Such initiatives reflected a broader commitment to embedding institutions within their community needs, aligning widening participation efforts with strategies to cultivate long-term student demand.

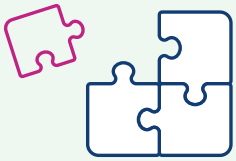
Interviewees frequently highlighted the potential of college specialisms to contribute meaningfully to shared institutional goals. However, a persistent theme was the structural inequality in FE-HE partnerships. One English interviewee remarked, 'having worked in further education for 15 years, I still feel that further education is seen as the little brother of higher education', with universities ultimately holding control over qualifications (Staff 03). Even in Scotland, universities tended to envisage that, despite a rhetoric of collaboration, 'colleges feed into us, not the other way round' (Staff 02). Such asymmetries reinforced perceptions of FE as subordinate, with one interviewee criticising the terminology itself: 'the fact that we use terms HE and FE, for me, is quite alienating […] it surreptitiously creates a strata whereby college routes are not deemed as worthy' (Staff 11). This stratification could encourage rigid divisions of labour, summed up by one college leader's quip: 'you do the bashing at laptops, and we do the bashing of metal' (Staff 08). In practice, however, colleges brought specialisms and staff expertise, for example in relation to local industries or specific sectors and teaching, were through a range of collaboration forms with universities produce innovative and ambitious courses across levels 4, 5, and 6, and inform university teaching more widely. This was particularly seen addressing gaps in the UK's middle-skills landscape, especially when compared internationally.

[4] In the time since these interviews, the government has confirmed it intends to make 'short courses' in growth sectors eligible under the Growth and Skills Levy (UK Government, 2025, 67).

Considerations

This report concludes by drawing together some of the primary themes and suggests some considerations for further research and policy discussion to take forwards.

1



Collaboration in a resource restricted system

The tertiary partnerships in this research were only in part underpinned by democratically determined shared educational or socioeconomic goals; instead, they were predominantly informed by institutional responses to resource scarcity. This basis is unstable and risks further inefficiencies. In both integrated and non-integrated partnerships across Scotland and England, collaboration often emerges as a strategy to access new markets and remain viable within a highly competitive environment. While this has enabled dynamic and creative institutional responses to widening participation and some labour market needs, it also highlights a systemic tension: partnerships are forged under pressure, not necessarily as part of a deliberate and coherent strategic direction. It also induces instability: the same financial pressures and some targets that motivated joint working could also destabilise partnerships, particularly where acute need bred mistrust or competitive anxiety. The perceived vulnerability of government support for IoTs is similarly indicative of the precarity of the conditions required to support such partnerships.

Tertiary systems are necessarily conducted in conditions of resource scarcity and democratic accountability. Where market systems are insufficiently responsive to national needs, the capacity to facilitate collaboration as a strategic good is an important policy lever. This indicates the **need for a clearer articulation of national educational priorities and accompanying reforms to the funding and regulatory landscape that incentivise sustained cooperation,** particularly where market mechanisms are unable to respond immediately and efficiently to the imperatives of national need and public finance. Further research should explore the structural features that foster sustainable collaboration in pursuit of such aims, such as risk-sharing models, mission alignment, and relational governance. In systems like Scotland's, clearer social mandates in regional articulation hubs and Outcome Agreements appear to support more robust coordination. Similar modes of stewardship might be trailed in England. The Lifelong Education Institute (2025) has explored a devolved model of Regional Education Partnerships, drawing on practices established in the North East. This model is one possible mechanism through which agreed social ends might be pursued, particularly in relation to the second key consideration of this report.

2

Strengthening regional governance and policy alignment

Governmental structures and regional governance play a critical role in shaping the possibilities for tertiary collaboration. In Scotland, where articulation agreements and widening participation targets are embedded in policy frameworks, interviewees reported more systematic collaboration. In England, however, frequent policy shifts and fragmented regulation have created an unstable environment. Participants described a landscape defined by short-termism, with collaboration pursued primarily for survival rather than shared social objectives. As one interviewee observed, these new iterations of technical excellence colleges or Institutes of Technology are 'just a badge […] it's the collaboration underneath that that is kind of what we need to encourage, not new institutions to do that' (Staff 08). Comparative policy analysis across the four nations could clarify how different regulatory approaches enable or inhibit institutions to achieve their social goals. In Wales, Medr's capacities to foster collaboration on a statutory basis are underlaid by the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015. There are emerging debates regarding challenges and opportunities of rationalisation and resource sharing among Welsh universities (Jones-Evans, 2024; and indeed across the UK, UUK, 2025). Interviewees familiar with Northern Ireland noted that regionalised coordination and formalised progression pathways built into validation agreements facilitated greater coherence. England, by contrast, presents a more complex picture, with its sheer number of institutions often necessitating bespoke local arrangements and impeding wider coordination.

Policy **should shift from proliferation of initiatives to strategic alignment that embeds collaboration in shared regional and national priorities.** It is anticipated that the forthcoming Post-16 White Paper in the autumn will establish a vision of the direction of FE and HE particularly in England. But in the meantime there are several concurrent maturing and proposed policy initiatives that at present may have consequences that are both conducive and antagonistic to institutions' capacities to collaborate. The government has announced the rollout of LLE and the introduction of short courses in England funded through the Growth and Skills Levy will align with priority provision, future skills needs, and the industrial strategy (UK Government, 2025, 67), but institutions in this research were concerned whether opening these new markets could undermine strategic coherence at a provider level and engender inefficiencies. The Immigration White Paper proposed a levy on HE provider income from international students to be reinvested into the HE and skills system (HM Government, 2025, 39), but the increased institutional precarity this could enact is a further source of instability. Without overarching stewardship, inequalities and inefficiencies may undermine capacity of these initiatives to achieve their social goals.

3

Valuing innovation through college specialisms

The capacity of partnerships to facilitate novel and distinct experiences and outcomes for students appears to be a dynamic arena for innovation and responsivity to local, national needs. This includes employer needs. The contribution of colleges' localism and deployment of specific teaching-oriented pedagogies, and capacity to identify and address gaps in prior learning with supplementary provision, and the flexibility of their staff, seems to have been particularly valuable. **Colleges and university partners should consider promoting these relationships and the contribution of college's specialisms** to help address the persistent questions of parity of esteem in partnerships. This might also help contribute to a attitude towards collaboration that is less concerned with trade-offs between institutional survival and autonomy and instead about joint capacities to achieve agreed socioeconomic ends with shared available resources. Instances where college specialisms in particular delivery areas or employment sectors, including sharing of educational or technical resources with universities, should be particularly celebrated, shared, and encouraged, in addition to their already generally understood roles in widening participation. This might include a **greater degree of co-design and co-delivery in the sort of tertiary pathways that this research was particularly concerned with.** The contribution of universities was similarly important, particularly in their capacity to enable economies of scale around degree awarding powers and providing and sharing learning resources and expertise. This research uncovered a range of fascinating examples of the ways in which two institutional specialisms could be bought together in a range of novel forms through partnerships.

4

Enhancing data sharing and evaluative capacity

Improved gathering and sharing of evidence of the capacity of partnerships' to respond to democratically agreed ends is a major consideration. There was little sense in this research that institutions were regularly systemically tracking students' journeys on a granular level. Interviewees themselves were advocating for, for example, more 'distance travelled' evaluations (Staff 13). Interviewees emphasised the difficulties in gathering this sort of data. This project itself also faced identical difficulties in its struggle to recruit student interviewees. **Institutions and researchers should consider how to best capture data and evidence the contribution of such partnerships** to areas such as widening participation, access how far student learning experiences and outcomes are distinctive from the different capacities collaboration affords, and their contribution to achieving stated social ends and common goods. This should include ways of sharing students' experiences on their own terms in a holistic manner that goes beyond marketing of student courses and engages with the full range of their entry, experiences, and outcomes. This will be crucial if institutions want to make the case for tertiary reform and a sense of the relative costs and benefits of embarking on such reform. Recommendations on improving the capacity of instruments of governance to capture or acknowledge evidence of these outcomes and respond in ways that facilitate such developments is outside the remit of this report. There should be **broader consideration of the appropriateness of existing accountability schema in relation to the educational capacities of tertiary partnerships.** This research observed the importance of data sharing between partners for student support, and one which has particular significant in the light of reforms including LLE and other forms of recognition of prior learning.

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