



Becoming Universities:

The Progress of England's New HEIs

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Executive Summary

This research explores new higher education institutions (HEIs) in England which have come into existence over the last 5-10 years. It follows an initial piece of research that was published in 2023 (Emms et al.) which explored new HEIs' reasons for setting up and their initial visions for delivery. Now that many of these HEIs have delivered HE courses to their pioneering cohorts of students, we wish to investigate how current and previous students and staff are experiencing new HEIs. Specifically, the research aims to answer:

- How have the visions of new HEIs evolved over time?
- In what way are new HEIs different from 'traditional' HE providers?
- How are the new HEIs' provision perceived and experienced by students and staff?

The qualitative research employed semi-structured interviews and focus groups with various stakeholders associated with new HEIs in England. Stakeholders included senior leadership team members and teaching staff, current and past students.

Key findings include:

- New HEIs are **disrupting traditional norms** of higher education, **using course structures and delivery** that intended to set them apart from established universities. Accelerated courses and block-based delivery are widely used and appreciated by students, allowing for immersion in the course content. The structure of the day more closely reflects workplace patterns, with the regularity and intensity of the schedule being largely considered convenient by students. However, there were some instances where students struggle to fit the schedule in with personal and part-time work commitments.
- **Pedagogy** is principally by active, experiential learning, whereby lectures are replaced with classrooms dominated by discussion, problem solving, hands-on tasks, live briefs and industry-linked projects that deepen engagement and support practical understanding.
- **Interdisciplinarity** and a broader approach to education, such as the holistic development of students, are central course design principles, preparing students for complex, evolving career paths and for a world which is not defined by single disciplines. The courses generally emphasise breadth of study and developing the whole person, including students' values, skills and capabilities. This is done through the integration of humanities, social sciences and professional skills across courses. However, some tension exists between the optimal balance between practical skills and theoretical depth.
- The importance of **practical, real-world relevance** across the curricula was emphasised no matter what courses are being taught. These institutions situate theoretical concepts alongside authentic application, rather than in isolation, to better develop both technical knowledge and professional skills. This is supported through collaboration with employers who help to ensure content addresses actual workplace needs and is kept up to date. In addition, authentic scenarios, industry input, and regular exposure to professional environments, give students the confidence to behave professionally and navigate the world of work. Employer partnerships are central, providing live briefs, guest speakers, placements and curriculum input; relationships were seen as strong but can be vulnerable due to disruptive factors such as staff turnover.
- **Assessment** is innovative and largely non-exam based, using portfolios, presentations, industry briefs and other creative outputs. Students value the variety and particularly see the lack of exams as a key selling point of the courses. However they sometimes struggle with adapting to new assessment formats and inconsistent feedback.
- Students play an active and crucial role in shaping provision, especially in early cohorts, with institutions responsive to **feedback** and committed to making improvements.

- **Small cohorts and class sizes** enable highly **personalised learning**. New HEIs all display strong staff-student relationships, ample opportunities for safe discussion and collaboration creating a psychological safety net, and tailored support. Most of the new HEIs in the research are still small which raises questions about scalability in the future and long-term sustainability.
- **Staff** tend to blend academic and industry expertise, helping further support the professional readiness of students and helps foster authentic real-world learning. Staff are encouraged to deliver innovative teaching methods. However, this requires support from their institutions to develop and sustain. There are also challenges around workload, staff turnover, training needs and the demands of a start-up culture that should be considered, particularly for staff well-being.
- New HEIs draw in students with their unique features and their offer of an alternative to traditional, exam driven higher education. However, new HEIs face challenges in **recruitment**, particularly around brand awareness and trust, since they do not have the long institutional histories or established reputations of other universities across the sector. This may be particularly pertinent for prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Nevertheless, these new HEIs show particular concern for **widening participation** and have taken positive and proactive steps to recruit students who might otherwise be excluded from higher education, particularly through broader admission requirements and the targeting of 'cold spots' which have previously lacked HE provision.
- **Regulation and the journey to gaining university status** have created major hurdles for new HEIs. In some cases, innovation has been limited and processes have been slow.

The findings from this phase of the research show a group of providers forging unique pathways in a traditional and highly regulated HE sector. They have proved themselves to be ambitious, adaptive and committed to distinctive models of learning, yet are still navigating the realities of growth, regulation and sustainability. As these new HEIs mature, their ability to preserve personalisation, applied pedagogy, and their distinct practices at scale will be central to their long-term impact.



Introduction

This report continues the story from the research [New HEIs in England: A real chance to innovate?](#) published in 2023. The first report explored new higher education institutions (HEIs) as they began their journey of setting up and developing a new HEI, exploring how visions, pedagogies and approaches to learning are conceived and being developed. In phase 2 of this research, we wished to explore how these institutions developed further in their journeys to become universities. At this stage the participating institutions were actively delivering courses, and we spoke to both staff and students who shared their experiences of this provision. At the time of writing some of these new HEIs have now had their first graduating classes and have therefore completed a whole 'cycle' of undergraduate education.



Policy and HE background

Many of the new HEIs explored in part 1 of the research were initiating their provisions in the 2010s, a starkly different landscape to the one they are now delivering in the 2020s. Not only did the Covid pandemic dramatically change the way we work and study, but the political landscape has also shifted a great deal. As discussed in detail in part 1 (Emms et al., 2023, p. 8-11), the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) (2017) afforded the higher education sector the ability for new institutions to apply for their own degree awarding powers (DAPs) with the ultimate aim to gain the protected status and title of 'university'.

The expansion of new higher education providers has been a defining feature since the HERA. Between the Office for Students' (OfS) inception in 2018 and 2023, 101 organisations joined the OfS Register, increasing the regulated provider base by around 30% (Bond et al., 2023). New providers on the register have included further education colleges, performing arts colleges, as well as numerous business and management-focussed providers (Ratcliffe, 2023). This growth reflects longstanding policy ambitions to diversify higher education provision, stimulate innovation, and widen participation. In December 2024, however, the OfS implemented a temporary ban on new registrations, obtaining DAPs, and university titles, due to concerns around the use of public money and quality of provision for students. This meant that those that had started the process by December 2024 had to put their plans on hold. Meanwhile, partnership agreements with existing established universities also came under scrutiny. Reports in the media and subsequently government investigations uncovered instances of partnerships between universities and for-profit colleges using dubious recruitment practices to increase student numbers whilst potentially sacrificing quality (Braisby, 2024). A National Audit Office investigation found that franchised courses accounted for over half (53%) of all detected student loan fraud in 2022–23, including one case potentially linked to organised crime (NAO, 2024).

In August 2025, the OfS resumed its powers with reformed registration tests, which it claims:

New initial requirements on effective governance will ensure that institutions registering with the OfS have arrangements in place to provide a high quality academic experience, safeguard financial sustainability, and deliver value for money for taxpayers (OfS, 2025).

The changes are designed to incentivise high quality applications whilst making the process more efficient. We are yet to hear whether the revived process will overcome some of the previous complaints, such as the process to register as a new provider taking '*far too long*' (Proudfoot, Chief Executive of Independent HE, 2024). To strengthen their role further, in January 2026 the OfS launched a new 'provider panel' of 11 senior leaders from across registered and unregistered institutions in England to act as a 'critical friend' to the regulator. The panel is intended to offer advice and constructive challenge on current and future OfS regulation (OfS, 2026). As it stands new providers face an increasingly scrutinised landscape, whilst existing universities that they may wish to work with face increasing pressure to reassess their partnerships.

New providers and franchising partners can deliver real social benefits such as widening participation. Evidence suggests they attract higher proportions of first-generation students, mature learners, and those from the most deprived areas, often offering local provision in 'cold spots' where traditional universities are absent, particularly to those who felt they were unable to move away and access higher education (Braisby et al., 2024, p.10). This aligns with policy goals around access and regional equity, yet stronger governance is essential to prevent abuse and protect students.

A parallel set of challenges across HE relates to levels of student engagement with their studies and attendance, which have declined sharply across the sector. Students report feeling little incentive to attend in-person teaching,

citing cost-of-living pressures, work commitments and a perceived lack of value in traditional lecture formats (Otte, 2024). In this context, some new providers have been recognised for adopting innovative pedagogies designed to address these issues (Pyakurel, 2024). Institutions offering practically orientated programmes, for example, emphasise applied learning, industry collaboration and team-based problem-solving, aligning curricula more closely with the world of work (Kersh et al., 2025).

Despite the examples of good practice witnessed across some new providers, the literature highlights several structural and developmental challenges. Issues have been raised around some of the struggles associated with new providers such as striking the right balance between representing student voice and over-surveilling students. Mapletoft et al. (2023) for example, focussed on students who were non-traditional mature degree apprentices from one case study institution. They identified '*difficulties of embedding meaningful student representation and closing the feedback loop*' (p.158) in a new provider context. Although not a representative cohort, it raises issues new providers must grapple with to balance student voice and feedback, whilst not overwhelming them with surveys and evaluations.

At the same time, the regulatory framework intended to support innovation can feel overly burdensome for new providers. Research (see also Emms et al., 2023) points to tensions between the entrepreneurial agility that should be inherent in these new providers and the inflexibility of the legislation designed to bring about innovation, with quality assurance processes sometimes inhibiting curriculum experimentation. As Bond et al. (2023) explain:

In this case where QA processes lead to small changes such as altering a module title 'feeling too much' and stopping 'inventive people having a go,' it is clear how they are also considered as barriers to the introduction of more innovative changes to the curriculum (p.12).

These pressures risk diverting institutional capacity away from core tasks of culture building, pedagogic development and student support, when resources are already scarce.



Methodology

This research focuses on investigating the development and delivery of higher education programmes offered by new higher education institutions (HEIs) in England. Following on from 2023 research (Emms et al.) which focussed on the guiding principles behind setting up a new HEI; designing the learning, assessment and the wider student experience, and the role of stakeholders. The aim of this phase 2 research is to understand the experiences of the students and staff of the new HEIs, now that the delivery is underway.

Specifically, the research aims to answer:

- How have the visions of new HEIs evolved over time?
- In what way are new HEIs different from 'traditional' HE providers?
- How are the new HEIs' provision perceived and experienced by students and staff?

In order to answer the research questions, the qualitative research employed semi-structured interviews and focus groups with various stakeholders associated with new HEIs in England. In total five new HEIs participated, plus one interviewee who was an ex-staff member at two additional new HEIs, giving an insight into at least seven institutions in total.

Online semi-structured interviews took place with senior leadership staff and teaching staff, current and past students. In-person focus group interviews also took place with some of the student groups attending new HEIs. In total 37 participants were interviewed. The distribution is shown in Table 1. Note that one participant was both a graduate and a member of staff of the institution and so has been counted twice in the table. Staff members included a range of senior leadership and teaching roles such as vice-principles, course leaders and associate professors.

The researchers already had connections with some new HEIs from phase 1 of the research (Emms et al. 2023). New connections were also sought with other new HEIs via snowballing. For the student focus groups, lunch was offered during the sessions to encourage participation and to show appreciation for students' valuable time.

Table 1: Participants interviewed and taking part in focus groups

	No. of participants
Staff	11
Students	25
Graduates	2
<i>Total</i>	38

All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analyses to draw out common themes within the data (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The research adheres to the BERA Ethical Guidelines 2024. Participants received an information sheet and consent form prior to interviews. Participation was voluntary and participants had the right to withdraw at any time. All interviewees and participants will remain anonymous. Given the small number of new HEIs, we are not using case studies. The report is written using themes to offer anonymity to participants and the HEIs.

Findings

This section thematically addresses the questions explored in the interviews with staff, students and graduates across new HEIs. We explored how the original visions have evolved over time and the kind of learning and experiences that are taking place in these institutions, particularly focussing on those aspects that differ from traditional HEIs. Many of the participants were keen to highlight that the new HEIs are keeping to their original vision in that they are addressing deficiencies in existing university provision and disrupting the status quo, since *'the whole of academia is so based on a series of habits and practices that haven't been questioned for far too long'* (Staff 3). Starting a new HEI allows passionate educators to start with a blank sheet of paper in order to create something new. They are doing this through alternative approaches to traditional HE, in terms of the programme and curriculum design, teaching and learning, and structures not typically seen in higher education. Despite the original visions, stakeholders acknowledged that aspects of their ambitions had been adapted as they came to delivering their provision, either because of external regulatory factors, internal capacity issues or simply because *'the world will keep evolving, so education needs to keep evolving too'* (Staff 9).

The Findings section is structured by the themes that came out of the interviews.

Course structure

Some of the new HEIs chose to deliver accelerated courses (courses completed over two years rather than the typical three) and structure the programme using block delivery, meaning students would cover one topic at a time intensely as opposed to studying a number of modules concurrently over a longer period (usually a semester). For example, students study one module for a six-week period, four hours a day, four days a week. Some institutions also include a day allocated for online learning. This set up was positively received by students and also an initial selling point for choosing that HEI:

the fact that we study one thing at once. So some universities they'll be doing multiple modules at the same time. Whereas I find it much easier to just focus on one thing, do that in detail, and then move on to the different parts of the course (Student).

The fact that it was a 2 year degree was probably the thing that convinced me to come here because there's not many other [universities] - there's nowhere close to me that does the 2-year degree (Student).

Students appreciated the fact that they could complete an accelerated course faster. This was particularly important for mature students, and others appreciated being able to move into the professional world quicker. However, a few commented on its intensity which can take its toll because of long days and shorter holidays. Staff also raised some issues with the block delivery and accelerated courses; they can be *'really challenging for the normal rhythms that you would expect'* (Staff 2). For example, as blocks tend to build upon one another, staff raised issues such as the difficulty around progressing a student to the next level or 'block' if they haven't passed the previous one, since there isn't the chance for them to take the resit before the next one starts. Some HEIs had also managed to integrate more flexibility with multiple entry points into the courses which was a further aspect to juggle into the course structure.

The structure of the day was one that more closely reflected the workplace, with some HEIs expecting students to attend a 9am to 5pm pattern every day, or similar, most days a week, or attending either all morning sessions or all afternoon sessions five days per week. The regularity and intensity of the schedule was largely considered convenient by students:

It's the lesson structure of four hours a day [that] is very good. It allows me to get a lot more done (Student).

The structure of the classes and the timetable made it attainable for me to attend on a regular basis, consistently. It wasn't too far away from home and I can integrate it with my part time work (Student).

We bring all of our teaching together so that most of our students are only needing to be on campus for two days a week. So, we kind of timetable them as closely as we can, which facilitates them in being able to also have part time jobs outside and requires them to travel less frequently into the university (Staff 8).

Although in other setups that required daily attendance, some struggled to fit in personal commitments such as part-time work, which could therefore disadvantage some students:

I have a part time job which is unfortunately not very common. I think that there are some challenges (...) with jobs. And because our uni is from 9 to 5, it actually causes, for me, some inconvenience because I don't want to skip university, but a lot of places are closing at five or like if it's Sunday everything is closed at four.... sometimes I'd get lucky and have like two shifts or three shifts per week [...] so that's a bit tricky (Student).

For staff, the block delivery comprising of longer, more intense sessions allows greater freedom and flexibility to teach, allowing them to go into depth with their classes:

because we teach in the block model, as an educator you've got more time, you're not governed by the fact that at 10 o'clock you have to stop because half your students need to go there and the other third needs to go there, and some don't have to go anywhere and so on. So you have a great degree of freedom within the day (Staff 1).

Block delivery has been positively viewed by both staff and most interviewed students. It allows both teaching staff and students to immerse in the content of the module.

Course delivery

As was discussed in phase 1 of this research a key aim across all of the new HEIs is to break away from the monotony of lectures and emphasise learning environments that are characterised by interactivity, group work and practical experiences; ultimately '*active learning*' (Staff 9) rather than passive learning.

What I want to do is, over the two, three years of the degree, is I want to put a little itch at the back of their brains. So they're always questioning, they're always coming at something at a different angle to what other engineers might do. And for that, you don't do that by dumping content on them. You do that through something that's more interactive. And for me that's through discussions, often triggered by some kind of exercise (Staff 2).

Our focus on experiential learning, that's kind of our key pedagogical practice (Staff 10/Alumnus 2).

The idea is to bring the learning alive in the classroom through practical, hands-on learning, as well as drawing on real-world elements to help make the lessons impactful beyond the classroom, examples of stage design workshops or city walking tours were given. Other ways practical learning is integrated into lessons is through having a cycle of theory and practice, with the lecturer beginning by introducing concepts and then giving students a problem to solve either alone or in groups so that they have opportunity to apply their knowledge to real-world concepts. This can help demonstrate that students understand the principles and the applications that they've encountered. Students found that having something real to apply their knowledge helped them engage and remember concepts better, and ultimately made it easier to learn.

...involves a lot of problem solving, which I enjoy. And it's very practical because you actually have to make the thing to solve the problem (Student).

We're able to get what we were taught and then actually apply it to something like you would in real life if you were working for a business. And it just, it allows for me at least, to get an actual understanding of what's going on, rather than just purely theoretical view of the learning (Student).

The role of discussion was emphasised as a key element, with minimal time for the lecturer talking at the students. Instead in-depth discussions between the teaching staff and students or peer-to-peer discussions, as well as ample opportunities for students to ask questions of the teaching staff were seen as valuable:

I would have a PowerPoint, but with only one slide, just to show a picture, or maybe two pictures that will kick off a discussion. Or I'll set them up with an exercise to work in teams to report back, and then the discussion goes (Staff 2).

Whichever discipline we have taken and on Friday we have a Q&A lesson where we discuss any questions we have about it. More of a conversation (Student).

We were able to refine and shape our ideas through dialogue and through conversation over a sustained period of time. So it was an amazing model, because as a student I felt as if my ideas were taken seriously and I was provided with a safe space to express those ideas (Staff 10/Alumnus 2).

Participants claimed that discussion works best in the physical classroom rather than during online classes, which has the drawback of excluding some students who are not confident to speak online. In the classroom, participants discussed teaching staff '*mingling around us*' (Student) and around the classroom following introductory teaching. Teaching staff will be able to answer questions, support those that may be falling behind, and talk about how the content relates to industry.

This practical work can be small tasks or take the form of larger projects or live briefs, or 'challenges', that might be worked on over several lessons or weeks. Again, these give students tangible application to theoretical concepts that have been explored in class. Employers or other external partners will sometimes set the brief which might require students to design a physical product or design an initiative. Students commented that the projects help solidify the learning and make hard concepts easier to understand. They also help students to think creatively and have meaningful interactions with employers. Students can also showcase their work and demonstrate their thoughts and work to future employers:

They've got commissioned new work themselves on the back of the work that our students did. So as first year students really being able to demonstrate in their CVs that they've impacted that sector (Staff 8).

The live briefs also give students ample exposure to working in teams, with a variety of different people, which develops good collaboration and communication skills.

That's always a challenge to be mixed with other people that you haven't worked with before and they have different styles (Student).

Last term our group really struggled to work together and that reflected in what we presented. It was important for us to do that badly in the first term because we still have the same groups. We have had to reflect and stop and look at ourselves see how we can work better as a group (Student).

Working alongside peers with diverse abilities and personalities mirrors the realities of many professional environments, encouraging students to step beyond their comfort zones. As one lecturer noted:

37% of their marks are based on team activities, probably the highest in the UK. But most people go to work and work in a team. And so they learn to understand probably their strengths and weaknesses for team-based activities much earlier on than they would as a regular undergraduate (Staff 1)

While teamwork can enrich learning and foster valuable skills, several students noted that it can also feel inequitable when contributions are uneven, but students receive the same credit or grades for the assignment. Students from one new HEI described an approach their institution has introduced to address this challenge:

So in general, when you do a team task, everybody receives the same grade so if it was a team of four, you hand in your group assignment and everybody will get the same grade back. But if you have like a log of what people have done, and there's evidence that say one member of your four man team hasn't done everything and everybody in the three of you agree that he hasn't done anything and you have the log to show that you've done the rest of the work then they go into separate marking pool and they get marked independently from your work basically (Student).

Students discussed keeping logbooks and ensuring formal communication channels are used such as Teams so that it can be proved who has done what and if individuals may have not shown up to meetings. For more, please see the Assessment section on [page 18](#).

Course content

Two key themes emerged when considering the content of courses at new HEIs: interdisciplinarity and the broader approach to education, such as the holistic development of students. Even if they are not providing fully interdisciplinary courses, the institutions claimed to teach beyond the realms of single disciplines instead organising learning at a higher level of complex world problems, which facilitated the application of classroom learning to the real world:

At all of those three [new] universities, rather than kind of like educating students within the silos of disciplines, they created a curriculum that was interdisciplinary in nature. So, the world is not organising the silos of disciplines, so education shouldn't be. There's a big skills gap between what students learn in the classroom and what they need in the workplace. And also, we're preparing students for jobs that don't even exist yet. So how do you do that? By not preparing them for one specific job but giving them the skills and tools that they need to apply to any job, right? So, focus on complex problems, rather than on disciplines, and focus on developing skills that you need to tackle those problems (Staff 9).

This also helps leave the door open to a broader range of possible career paths and prepares students for a world which is not defined by single disciplines.

I know that after 10 years I probably will be interested in doing other things. So I thought why not do a degree where I can actually use things I learn here through my entire life, instead of using it for the first 3-5 years in my first job (Student).

I have been able to pivot from more STEM subjects to something quite creative just like that. It is quite interesting for me and also humanities. I had not really considered this with my degree. The ability to shift between and not feel bogged down to one. If it had been exclusively STEM subjects or exclusively Arts probably would have been a lot less interesting (Student).

As well as offering a breadth of learning, it also supports students who have broad interests and find variety appealing:

I could not focus at all and during the pandemic I realised that there was no way I could go and study the same subject for 3 years, because that would drive me mad (Student).

The blurring of disciplinary boundaries was also evident among staff, driven by the interaction of specialists who were either co-located in shared physical spaces or encouraged to collaborate across courses and projects. This collaboration between expertise was widely seen as a catalyst for innovation:

[you] would find a social worker sat next to a mechanical engineer, sat next to a lawyer, and actually, from that mix of staff being together all as one team, the richness of conversations that you have and the innovation that comes out of having people from very different disciplines working together on projects (Staff 8).

Although appealing for some students, the prospect of not specialising can be seen as daunting for some prospective students and parents as it goes against the general route of traditional education in England, whereby students are continually expected to specialise as they go through the education system, from narrowing GCSE choices, to three A levels, to ultimately one undergraduate subject. One interviewee suggested that this could be one reason why numbers for a purely interdisciplinary degree have not grown exceptionally.

Depth is also an issue that has been raised with regards to interdisciplinary learning. Some students commented that they do not feel they are getting all the knowledge that they had expected to gain and therefore there were some levels of dissatisfaction. Time was considered one of the constraints, in so far as too much content was being attempted to be covered in a small amount of time, meaning at times content is skimmed over and touched on in a shallow way. Likewise, the greater inclusion of practical activities risks diminishing the depth of knowledge which can be covered. Some students claimed that the course can give them a good introduction to concepts and it is up to them to go into depth themselves by complementing the classroom activities with their own research. This of course would depend on students' own motivation and curiosity.

Obviously in the two weeks that we studied that discipline briefly we only learnt x, y + z content but within that discipline then there is a universe of content that you can draw on if you do your own reading (Student).



Furthermore, it was argued that the point of an interdisciplinary education was in fact to develop the skills and abilities to draw on multiple disciplines and use these to solve real-world problems:

In the way that we are learning here there is a lot more focussed on the soft content and skills side rather than facts and figures etc., because we are learning an interdisciplinary degree rather than a multidisciplinary degree. That focus is all on the skills integration. The skills like being able to marry different pieces of knowledge, different perspectives, different places to hone it for the problem you are trying to solve (Student).

This also links closely to the holistic approach to education the new HEIs took; they were not only interested in developing the body of knowledge of students, but beyond the main disciplinary knowledge and skills, a broader approach to developing the whole person including their values, skills and capabilities. For some HEIs this included teaching essential elements of economics and philosophy to all students, or for others incorporating social or liberal studies into science or engineering majors. A key idea being that these elements are integrated into the degree rather than being an 'add-on,' linking back to the idea of interdisciplinarity.

The role of the humanities in their undergraduate experience, whether they're taking a primarily scientific route into their undergraduate experience (Staff 10/Alumnus 2).

This really draws on the human aspects of all learning and potentially helps students' learning have an impact in the wider world.

The university [is] focusing specifically on this employment and co-op angle, because it's a real concern for a lot of students who want to study the humanities: what are my options with... how am I going to get a job in the future if all I do is read the most beautiful poetry? And so, we're here to offer a pathway into a future in which students know that their study of the humanities can actually have an impact in the wider world, and it's also seen as developing the crucial critical skills which are interdisciplinary (Staff 10/Alumnus 2).

Others emphasised 'add-ons' to the degrees that support the personal and professional development of the student, yet are still essential, compulsory components. Some may be tailored to the degrees but others may be disconnected from the content, from a wellness festival, courses on critical thinking, to setting up a business:

The [XX programme] takes up about a week's worth of our block. And that's more about, like, personal development and learning skills that we need in the professional world. So we also get assessed, we do a journal at the end of every block on like, what we've learned, and stuff like that, what skills we've used, how we've worked on ourselves. It's kind of like a reflection kind of thing. And that's something we also get assessed on. And it's worth, I don't know if it's worth, like 20% of your final grade (Student).

I liked the additional professional side and the extra chances for learning and knowledge sharing (Alumnus 1).

The idea for many was to make the whole student experience more connected and holistic, to bring together the different elements from the classroom as well as other experiences, whether that be an internship or career development opportunities, to ensure that it becomes a coherent student journey, which ultimately develops the skills, knowledge and capabilities to be successful in their futures.

Real world relevance of curricula

No matter what disciplines (or multidiscipline) are taught, interviewed staff from the new HEIs emphasised the importance of practical, real-world relevance across the curricula. Rather than teaching theoretical concepts

in isolation, these institutions integrate authentic applications, such as calculating bridge load capacities in mathematics or analysing real construction sites. The curriculum is deliberately designed in consultation with industry, ensuring content addresses actual workplace needs and is kept up to date:

[We have a] typical maths sheet but it's more ...the questions are more focussed on real world applications. So the question is, it's not just a random question, it will be something like this, this bridge is needed for something and you need to make sure it's safe. So you need to work out the forces being applied to it to ensure it can carry the maximum load that it needs to, so it gets you thinking about later in life we'll be needing to do that stuff in engineering to ensure that the things we build are capable of withstanding what they're supposed to withstand (Student).

How much of that content [at traditional institutions] is just being taught because that's what people have always done? And how much of it is actually adding value to what people need to be able to do? (Staff 3).

This approach was contrasted with traditional education that often lacked meaning or practical application. The new HEIs' focus on developing both technical knowledge and professional skills particularly benefited students, whereby they gain exposure through work placements, guest lectures featuring current events and real scenarios, and hands-on workshop training that mirrors professional environments.

Through kind of work placements and internships and giving students exposure to kind of these real-world settings. And to also understand how what they are learning in the classroom, how that then is reflected in a real-world setting, and kind of like building those bridges, making those connections (Staff 9).

One course leader described a guest lecturer discussing a real-life sports tournament, who:

set the context and the scenario, and he split [the students] into three groups and said, 'right, what are the pros and cons of postponing? Cancel [the event] completely or rescheduling it?' So gave them real life activities that happened. And then they all had to present that to [guest] and then they debated around it. So the guest lectures are not again, death by PowerPoint, they're active and real life (Staff 5).

Students appreciated learning that would be useful for them after university and for some students it was this relevance that attracted them to these institutions in the first place, having been disenfranchised with the education system that did not feel meaningful to them.

The business stuff was [...] to not learn about your degree in isolation, but to have some practical skills for the workplace really (Alumnus 1).

Activities included, for example, entrepreneurship programmes where every student creates their own business or app, and gradual confidence-building through repeated presentations and public speaking opportunities. The emphasis is on preparing students to be practitioners who can perform their roles, not just individuals with theoretical knowledge.

I think a lot of people have fear of like talking in public and so on. But each module just does get a bit more complicated. It's a bit more requirements, such as like building it up slowly. So in the end we would be very confident in our presentation skills (Student).

We had alumni who created their own theatre companies, who launched their own consulting businesses, and my prof programme project was to create some sort of social media design app that would help in the theatre production space. So there was a real focus on employability, but also putting some of the skills that we had learned into practice. So like, how does my English degree help me create something that's going to serve my community? (Staff 10/Alumnus 2).

The interviewees overwhelmingly highlighted the importance of real-world relevance of the activities and tasks with which students engage during their degree programmes. These activities are often linked to engaging with employers who actively support curriculum delivery. During these activities, students have to marry their theoretical knowledge with practical applications to find solutions to real life problems. These exercises mimic real work situations and students become better prepared for the world of work, as explored in the next section.

Work readiness

The high level of real-world relevance entwined throughout the student experience strongly supported the students' work readiness. New HEIs emphasise developing students' practical, interpersonal, and professional capabilities in response to employer concerns that graduates often lack workplace-ready skills rather than subject knowledge. Subject knowledge can become dated very quickly, yet the ability to work in a team for example and other workplace skills are at the core of what these new HEIs attempt to nurture. Staff and students describe a deliberate focus on communication, professionalism, teamwork, punctuality and cultural awareness, with programmes and classrooms designed to mirror real working environments and expectations. This includes business-style timetabling, problem- and process-focussed learning, sector-specific simulations, and character or personal development courses.

All these skills that sometimes people think: oh, they just come naturally. They don't. [...] So all the key skills and preparing for when they go and have the interview, you have the academic knowledge, the underpinning the work experience, but also through our XX programme, the character and personal development programme, that they have the ability to go in, make eye contact, shake hands, sit down, be polite, present themselves well and give a good impression (Staff 5).

[New HEI] also wants students to be world conscious. So in a sense world-ready, as well as work-ready. And that's where I'm trying to work more and more, but at the moment, that balance is very much towards being 'work-ready' (Staff 2).

So we run it like a business so if you know if you're going to turn up. if it's nine o'clock and it's five past nine. All right, so why late?..... So it's about conditioning that from the early days really isn't it? (Staff 5).

Students spoke about gaining confidence, improving public speaking, learning how to present themselves professionally, and applying their skills through start-up projects or industry linked tasks. Many institutions also provide intensive, personalised employability support, such as detailed CV-writing guidance, LinkedIn development, and ongoing portfolios evidencing holistic growth across personal and professional capabilities.

I've definitely used the basic accounting skills. All the CV advice I ever was given has been invaluable. And I definitely received, I'd say, way more advice than like the average person ever has on their CV. Like having an hour with someone one on one and you they do dissect every single word is pretty unique (Alumnus 1).

....the degree will get you the interview, but the personal character, sort of skills, will get you the job. And we've been doing the [HEI XX] programme, a few lessons every block based on a different aspect, it could be wellbeing, professionalism, wellness, strengths. So it's just all different aspects that we can tie together to use in an interview (Student).

However, this strong employability orientation raises questions about whether practical skills sometimes overshadow deeper theoretical understanding. On the other hand, some argued that knowledge can become dated very quickly, yet employability skills and competencies can outlive this and branch across the sectors and roles.

Students also noted challenges in the job market due to the relative unfamiliarity of newer HEIs, particularly within large organisations that rely on traditional recruitment filters, for example employers who conduct a first filter of applications based on those who attended a Russell Group university. Yet once given the opportunity to explain their educational journey, students felt their distinctive experiences and opportunity to showcase what they have done became an asset, helping them stand out in interviews. Across the study's institutions, there is a clear ambition to build reputations for producing a particular kind of graduate – work ready, adaptable and having a unique approach to problem-solving. Furthermore students commented on their lecturers' efforts to combat this disadvantage through building strong links with industry professionals.

We can sometimes, as a student, I can feel that I'm in a vulnerable position because I'm in a uni that nobody heard of because it's like only three years old (Student).

Quite often [...] it might be hard, like if we were applying for a grad scheme, it might be harder for us to get onto the grad scheme, because no one knows what [HEI XX] means. If you compare that to Durham or whatever, Exeter, you know those are better names. You need brands. But if we get past that initial stage, someone asks us, 'what is that uni you went to?' or 'why did you go there?' It's an interesting conversation point. Like, it's a good differentiator. So, what we used to say is, like, it's better for us in interviews, maybe necessary, than applications (Alumnus 1).

These new HEIs were also making students work-ready by broadening their horizons to a range of possible career paths that are available to them. The exposure to different fields and external experts helps keeps students minds open to different next steps and future opportunities.

The university has definitely, like, helped me explore different areas, either you know, exports, digital, finance, like, whatever. And I think one of the biggest things like, I'm glad the uni kind of like pushed with LinkedIn because I can see a lot of potential, you know like building my LinkedIn or professional kind of side, connecting with people (Student).

Even for those who are still unsure what their next career steps would be, nevertheless had a sense of confidence about their options:

I don't feel like there is any pressure for me to make up my mind because it feels like they have a really good safety net for having not made up your mind (Student).

Exposure to multiple fields, external experts, and varied forms of professional practice appears to give students a sense of security and possibility, reinforcing the idea that they can explore different futures without pressure to commit too early to one role or sector. As several interviewees noted, the intention was to prepare students for uncertainty, an approach that naturally complements the broader aim of enabling them to apply themselves in a wide variety of contexts.

Assessment

Students and staff discussed a variety of assessment methods that were used through the courses, rather than just traditional exams or written essays, which were usually tried to keep to a minimum. Instead, assessment included industrial reports based on real-world industry briefs, presentations from projects worked through in teams, making videos and podcasts, writing a product specification, and writing programming for a machine. Assessments were based on tasks in the professional world and linked to developing students' skills, such as problem solving, collaboration, presenting and team working. However questions were raised around how ready students were to complete these broader assessment activities, that were often starkly different to the types of skills they have developed to cope with exams.

When you're in school before, there's like A levels and stuff, the questions are quite like 'Do A and B', 'Answer one plus one'. Whereas here, they tend to be more contextually based. So it'd be like you're doing this thing, so you need to work out this. And I found it quite hard to adjust to having to judge for yourself how to do it. But it's something I've picked up from talking to the lecturers after my exams (Student).

Another common mode of assessment was through the portfolio development which aimed to capture the holistic development of students over time and supported their development of reflective writing skills. Further still, presentations were appreciated by students as well as receiving 'real' feedback from external partners, especially when employers praised them and wanted to pursue some of the students' ideas:

We have a group pitch to external people who were working on the problems we were discussing. They reported back alongside some internal examiners who were watching and that was really good (Student).

While AI was not specifically discussed in relation to assessment, presentations and interaction with employers might offer some protection against some of the challenges AI poses for traditional assessment practices.

From a student recruitment point of view, the proposition of having 'no exams' was particularly appealing to some students, with strong consensus that many students did not appreciate exam-heavy practices from their earlier education experiences:

No exam is one of the selling points of [HEI XX] (Student).

Then I heard how about [this HEI] and they said that they do not have any exams which was a relief to me. It was all course work. I got the impression there was not that much emphasis on assessment, it was much more about learning with assessments along the way. That sounded great to me (Student).

Most of these new HEIs promote a 'no exam' approach in their HE courses. However, this was not always consistently implemented, and some students reported feeling disappointed by the discrepancy between their expectations and the reality.

I thought because they said no traditional exams and things like that, I thought we would just be in a workshop all the time just making stuff (Student).

There were also misconceptions around students being under the impression that they might have the option to choose how they are assessed during their course. In focus groups, students from one new HEI were told that they would have flexibility to 'design' their own assessment, but in practice this did not necessarily happen, hinting that this was due to the idea that such flexibility in approach was not approved by the regulator.

Assessment is closely linked to curriculum and reflects the pedagogies used in teaching and learning. There are clearly innovative ways of thinking about assessment in the new HEIs that are appreciated by students. It is evident that some skills are more complex to assess and skills assessment can become even more complex when linked to collaborative team projects.

Student feedback

Students play a particularly powerful role in shaping new HEIs in the pioneering years. Interviewees noted that students were frequently called upon to give feedback in the form of surveys, student committees and forums, especially those who were in the first year or two of delivery of the new HEIs. Staff were appreciative of the students' views and constructive criticism in helping to refine the HE experience of future students, from the curriculum content and delivery to very practical aspects such as the building facilities.

Especially that first cohort, they were so invested in their experience, in also wanting to kind of help us, you know, it made changes that were necessary, etc. It did really feel to me like a collective kind of project almost (Staff 9).

Overall, that kind of feedback from students has been positive. Yes, they might highlight modules where they've particularly struggled or the teaching learning method hasn't been adapted appropriately for their needs (Staff 11).

Likewise students liked the fact that they could help shape a university and were in a unique position, as a couple of the pioneering students explain:

It felt like a utopian vision for what a university could be. And so having a blank slate in which we could define our university experience was very empowering as a young student (Staff 10/Alumnus 2).

I think probably a benefit to it being new is that they did hold a lot of feedback, and there were a lot of forums where you can like feedback your opinion and things like that. So because they wanted to make sure that people liked what they were doing. So that was good (Alumnus 1).

Students at new HEIs also seemed to receive deeper and more personalised feedback in their assessments and ongoing work. Face-to-face individual feedback was repeatedly mentioned as a key feature of the delivery, including during classroom activity which was possible due to the non-lecture-style set up, and opportunities to book in personal time with any of the staff to meet and discuss freely.

If you were in a lecture hall and you did not get something and it is a lecture hall of 200 people, there is no chance. Whereas regularly I will be in a class and I think okay I am going to book a meeting with the teacher after and chat with them one-to-one about whatever they are talking about. Although it is not a formal feedback system these are relationships you build, I think are far more important than a procedure which allows you to receive written feedback here. It's far more human and it makes more sense (Student).

Because we were constantly producing new work, we were able to reflect, in a very intense way, on the work that we had previously done, and we were able to refine and shape our ideas through dialogue and through conversation over a sustained period of time. So it was an amazing model, because as a student I felt as if my ideas were taken seriously and I was provided with a safe space to express those ideas (Staff 10/Alumnus 2).

Some noted the amount of time it takes to receive feedback on their assessments is disappointing, and in some cases the feedback to assignments is not detailed enough. New HEIs have attempted to overcome this by ensuring feedback is due on scheduled dates across the year which is fixed across the institution, *'and if it comes any later than that, it's an issue higher up'* (Student). This gives the students assurance that they should receive feedback in a timely manner and increases the staff accountability to the students. The drop-in sessions with staff also compensated for when students felt they needed to ask for more detailed explanations or feedback if required.

It's getting better. And now I'm seeing changes; we are getting more feedback and it's more constructive and more personalised (Student).

Given the more personalised approach to student feedback, concerns were raised around the greater amount of staff time that is required to give this level of customisation. This was particularly an issue because of the larger range of assessments that are being implemented which require more time to review compared to exams. However, one interviewee weighed up this additional time per student and assessment with the fact that these HEIs have fewer students in total, therefore overall staff workload should be manageable. New HEIs may have to reconsider this once new HEIs are fully populated.

Small cohorts and personalisation

The most pertinent factor that was most appreciated by the students at new HEIs was the individualised support and highly personalised experience that they felt ran through many aspects of their university experience. This is a result of small cohort sizes and close staff–student relationships which create an environment where multiple students commented that *'everybody knows your name'*. Staff are approachable and learners feel genuinely seen. This personalisation showed up in thoughtful practices, from staff introducing themselves in advance to reduce first day anxiety to lecturers adapting sessions in real time to meet the needs of the group.

Students and staff spoke of the small classes in the new HEI where the majority of learning takes place. Rather than attending lectures, students attend classes usually consisting of around 20–30 students, akin to a school class rather than a university cohort.

You want to have one academic in the studio of 25 students rather than one academic in a lecture theatre of 350 (Staff 3).

Many students drew on examples of friends at other institutions, or their own personal experiences at previous universities, comparing it to the more negative environment of large lecture halls of 300 plus, which can feel anonymous and where some found it difficult to engage. This was supported by the physical environment of the new buildings that were all set up with small classrooms where students can work together in groups, as opposed to large forward-facing lecture halls that do not facilitate collaboration. Instead, classrooms were described as collaborative, discursive spaces where students were encouraged to contribute, ask questions freely and receive tailored guidance. The advantage of having small classes was that students felt they were more *'immersed in our learning'* (Student) and supported the building of positive relationships between peers and with staff:

I find that if I'm told to like sit down and just listen to something for like an hour, two hours, three hours, I just switch off. I don't remember any of it. Whereas with this way I can actually interact with it, which keeps me engaged. And the lecturer is also able to engage more with you because there's a smaller amount, they're not balancing 300 people, there's just 16 of you (Student).

...ability to ask questions, ability to bond with your lecturers, you know, if they had to write recommendations for you or internship letter or master's degree application reference, they actually did know you. And a lot of people actually from [new HEI] they have actually gone on to be very successful in higher education, and I do believe that that is because they had so much more attention (Alumnus 1).

Some suggested that this level of engagement contributed to the significantly higher attendance rates reported by many new HEIs, in contrast to the wider HE sector where declining attendance has become a common critical concern.

Staff were better at supporting students because they knew their individual strengths and weaknesses, therefore staff knew when and how certain students needed help in class.

My social work lead, for example, when she's meeting the new social work students, she's just a name on a piece of paper for them. So she emails them up front with a picture of her and tells them what she's going to be wearing on the induction day so that when she's in reception, meeting and greeting, they can immediately know that's who they need to go to talk to. And I think that's the sort of thing that we see across all of our staff is thinking differently, being a little bit quirky, but it really makes students feel at home (Staff 8).

So whilst we do have that plan, and whilst that kind of scheme of learning may exist originally, we do have to be quite flexible with how we approach every day, even kind of within sessions, adapting kind of our thought processes and plans in order to meet the needs of the people we have in front of us in the room [...] I'm very student centric and very student focussed in trying to build those relationships up with students to ensure that they're getting a learning experience that suits their needs (Staff 11).

Small classes allowed for group activities, peer reviewing and discussion to take place. Students felt they were able to get the attention and support they needed from lecturers, it was more personalised and, in some cases, more individualised, and therefore they viewed it as a higher quality education. One staff member discussed that it allowed them to create a '*psychological safety in the classroom, first and foremost*' (Staff 5) which would be near impossible to do with a group of 200 students, but with a class of 30 it is feasible.

Whereas here I feel like almost everyone like knows each other. And it's just like got a real like community feel to it (Student).

The small-sized classes and often cohorts, contributed to a greater sense of community, along with opportunities to work with many different people from different backgrounds, which some noted would help them in the world of work when they are likely to encounter people from diverse backgrounds. This was particularly highlighted by those on interdisciplinary courses or where they were opportunities to work with, and learn from, students from different disciplines:

Now being here I found it really useful being able to talk to students about subjects I am not strong on but they are very strong on is incredibly useful. That was something I had not done on a traditional degree (Student).

Many students also benefited from one-to-one mentoring, personalised feedback, industry or CPD mentors, and support for finding suitable placements, all of which reinforced a sense of being supported as individuals rather than anonymous attendees.

When we have breakout tasks they do come around, even if we're just split across a unit, they check every level really, wherever anyone is, and they come and check, like what are you doing? Is it looking good? Let me have a look. And they also do ask first, how are you? Rather than how's it looking like the work? So it's the person first (Student).

This personalised approach extended to all aspects of their HE experience, including strong pastoral care, which students felt helped them stay engaged, especially in a post-Zoom era, whereby students learning online can turn off their cameras and easily disengage with peers and their lecturer. This supported students to become active learners rather than passive learners, making them less likely to disengage and which supported them to remember the content better. Staff noted that they were better able to offer this personalised support thanks to the block teaching structure whereby students will spend many hours in one day with the same staff member.

I say the level of like personal and academic help was probably above what I expected. Because I'm quite used to, in secondary school and college, if you have an issue you tell them and they kind of do the bare minimum and then go 'See you, Thanks. Bye, bye. Have fun.' Whereas here, the people that you go to with these issues, or like the people you go to to ask for help on your maths skills or something, they seem to genuinely care. So that was quite above my expectations (Student).

Staff emphasised creating psychological safety and prioritising the person before the work, often going above and beyond formal hours to support students with personal and academic issues. The approach helps create a safe and inclusive environment in an era when students can feel very unsafe due to a number of identity, personal and societal factors. It was also deemed as a beneficial support system for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, which supported the widening participation agendas that many of these new HEIs had.

While this high-contact model helped build confidence, independence and active learning habits, staff also recognised the tension between providing support and fostering self-reliance. Some worried that heavy reliance on staff could inhibit the development of independent learning skills and many noted the intensity of the workload required by staff to sustain such close relationships.

...because I'm a member of staff that he trusts, I'm the member of staff that's had to deal with that for an hour or so [...] so the pastoral care is theoretically built into the four hours of contact time, but can exceed that in terms of those ad hoc meetings (Staff 11).

Yet with the reliance on contact time and those relationships is sometimes students don't recognise the ... relationship. [...] but the reliance on academic staff to support them progressing sometimes is at the expense of developing their independent learning skills (Staff 11).

This further raises the questions of whether this personalised approach could be sustained in the long run. Staff admitted that this is an expensive model to deliver, particularly in terms of staffing but also other overheads. However all were keen that it is not an element they wish to relinquish.

You can't pile them high and sell them cheap. It is staff intensive but the results are phenomenal. And if and if it becomes tight, or we have to find some mechanism to suppress that ratio, then we have to find a way to do it (Staff 1).

Other HEIs described their ability to maintain features of personalisation and community despite having grown over their years of establishment:

Interviewer: The university has been growing. How, or if at all, have you managed to, as a university, keep a personalised experience? Does that still happen? And if so, how?

Staff 10/Alumnus 2: Yeah, I would say it absolutely still happens, and I would say that it's a difficult thing to achieve, but a lot of our faculty really believe in it because a number of our original faculty are still with us. And so, one way that we achieve this personalised experience is through the experiential dimension and the different workshops that we offer, for example. Because it becomes far more of a collaborative and a communal experience to be in the classroom. So students are constantly discussing things with one another, feeding back to their lecturer. It becomes far more of a discursive space. And I think that really highlights the capacity for a personalised relationship, even as the student numbers keep growing because each student knows that they are expected to contribute in full in the discussion.

From a student perspective there were some downsides to the small classes, particularly in terms of social aspects such as the lack of societies or less established unions. Small student cohorts can limit the variety of available activities and opportunities to find others with shared interests; for example, low numbers may mean that only three or four students might be interested in playing football, insufficient to form a team. Some institutions were able to form partnerships with other local universities to allow their students access to their social activities and spaces, however this was only possibly in large cities such as London and Manchester that had universities geographically close. Only being exposed to a small cohort of peers in a classroom setting also posed problems for students at times:

Sometimes the group sizes were slightly too small. You'd end up with the same people all the time, and you'd hear the same point of view from them all the time, some random guy mansplaining every time [...] So, you definitely, you know, you could be put off from socialising with them and things like that. And I think there were no outside of degree - there weren't really any opportunities. There was no sport (Alumnus 1).

Others commented on buildings not being large enough, which could feel cramped, along with other issues around the infrastructure, which at times were perceived to be relatively poor quality.

As institutions grow, staff questioned whether this level of personalisation could be maintained if class and cohort sizes were to increase, and without proportional increases in staffing, acknowledging that the 'personal touch' may be difficult to scale.

Staff recruitment, roles, support and CPD

New HEIs are fostering staffing models that blends academic expertise with industry experience. Many institutions employ lecturer practitioners who split their time between teaching and active industry work, bringing '*real, authentic experience directly into the classroom*' (Staff 8).

We've got associate lecturers from AstraZeneca, for example, who I can't possibly hope to match their hourly rate with what they're doing, but really want to give back to the institution. And so that's really positive (Staff 12).

A lot of them have been at the coalface, so they have the connections as well (Staff 5).

New HEIs give opportunities for new staff to work in academia who may have not been able to work in jobs at traditional universities because they don't have the academic qualifications. Yet they have the expertise and teaching abilities which are prized by the new HEIs. Drawing on staff from industry can also bring a breadth of knowledge and experience that students can draw on, which is seen as a major asset for students:

The staff are well connected as well. If they can't give an answer, they probably will know a person who can (Student).

Staff are encouraged to develop creative and active pedagogies, moving away from traditional chalk and talk methods towards project-based, student-centred learning. However, staff needed support to deliver their lessons using innovative teaching methods. Some staff discussed having received training for new pedagogical approaches but for small institutions it can be difficult to cover training costs and staff time. Beyond structured training courses, delivery methods are best developed through continuous staff experience and integration into the new HEI, introducing new delivery methods into the classroom and then refining them over time through continual practice:

As I have kind of grown in my practice, I've recognised a lot more of the nuances associated with project-based learning and trying to ensure that the classroom is active for as long as possible in those environments (Staff 11).

Furthermore, innovative teaching requires a change of mindset from the traditional lecture-style approach commonly seen in HE:

It's been a really steep learning curve and I think it's been underestimated, the extent of which academics actually need some support in adapting to this new learning teaching style essentially. [...] So academics would still kind of come in with a fairly traditional mindset or idea of what teaching would look like, or what their role should be. Whilst in reality, the expectations were very different, so they had to really adapt to a different model (Staff 9).

The personalised teaching approach also requires staff to take on broad pastoral responsibilities and be competent to give that level of student support: '*we are their first point of contact, we are customer service, we are lecturers, we our pastoral support, kind of all in one*' (Staff 11), highlighting the need for structured training, especially for those transitioning from industry who may have not interacted with students professionally before.

Requiring such mindset and specialist teaching skills can also pose an issue for recruitment and retention. Some new HEIs commented that they have high staff turnover and therefore they are losing people who have developed these specialist teaching skills that suit their unique model. They also have a very small pool of candidates who have experience teaching in line with their methods.

Staff were drawn to work at new HEIs which they saw as having real impact. Staff consistently describe new HEIs as an energising environment to work in, where they feel valued and able to make a meaningful contribution to individuals and the greater good. Many staff felt disengaged from traditional HE practices, with those coming from industry noting that traditional universities have not succeeded in developing the type of graduates they need. Others were drawn to the widening participation angle that some new HEIs seek to respond to, where they were hoping to bring HE, or a new kind of HE, to cold spots or underrepresented groups. These new HEIs were offering a new vision, which staff wanted to play a role in:

I became increasingly frustrated with the traditional model of education, both in terms of its relevance to today's changing world. I think I just saw more and more and more challenges with that, and also the lack of accessibility; university education still being quite privileged (Staff 9).

Because it's a once in a lifetime opportunity really, as a senior academic to be given a blank sheet of paper and to be able to design and put together a brand-new institution (Staff 8).

I feel like I bring a value. And that wasn't necessarily something that I felt was recognised at my old institution. And something that with our delivery style and method of delivery, is something that's really emphasised here as being a key string (Staff 11).

Many of the staff interviewed were proud of their job at a new HEI, being able to shape the institutions' development and to work with colleagues that care about each other and their students.

Despite working in a job that they felt passionately about, staff working in new HEIs also described an environment marked by uncertainty, rapid change, and often high workloads, with some institutions reporting *'the highest staff turnover of any organisation in the country'* (Staff 3). Limited budgets, lower pay and workload intensity contribute to this pressure, alongside the reality that small teams must cover multiple roles, often teaching consecutive blocks, taking on responsibilities normally held by central services and navigating change and uncertainty in the absence of established structures. For example, one interviewee described paradoxically that implementing a change at their institution in fact takes longer than it would at a traditional university because there are not the established structures or formal processes in place as there are in an existing institution.

Comparisons were also made between the pace and pressure of a new HEI compared with members of staff's backgrounds. Those joining from industry must adjust to the slower, more process-heavy pace of academia. Whereas those coming from an academic background likened the environment to that of private industry and a 'start-up culture'. Some noted that new HEIs are less stressful compared to industry but perhaps more so than a traditional university.

Despite some challenges, many staff value the dynamism and flexibility of working in a 'start up' university. The culture is often more open to critique and innovation, with staff encouraged to be open to feedback:

My remit to [colleague] is rip it [lesson plan] apart. What's wrong with it? Me and [colleague] did a step-by-step guide over the summer [...] to rip it apart, find faults with it, because it's going to be better for everybody, if it's better for the staff, it's better for the students. So that's happened. I would say that is very different. You have the culture to be able to do that. A culture where there's no fear (Staff 5).

This mindset fosters a sense of shared purpose and continuous improvement. While the work can be demanding and time consuming, those who stay are driven by a commitment to students and the opportunity to shape something new:

Because we work on a six-week block, it's one module at a time. We all focus on that, we have a week's turnaround, we're on to the next block [...] So we're not restricted. So if we've always got in mind and like we always say in our team 'we're here to serve the students' (Staff 5).

University environment and facilities

The comparisons to industry carry over to the environment and the experiences of students. Some new HEIs were modelled on business environments, the classes are more akin to offices, supporting it to become an 'active' learning space, where students are encouraged to contribute and work flexibly. For students, they felt that staff would *'treat us like adults in the workplace'* (Alumnus 1). Even for staff, glass walls and open office spaces were used to encourage a more open environment, where staff could work together rather than in silos.

I want it to feel like a university, but it really needs to feel like a professional environment as well (Staff 12).

The standard of facilities and infrastructure students encountered at new HEIs in their inaugural years was a mixed experience. Some new HEIs started with almost 'makeshift' facilities that were potentially inadequate for the students, for instance they were too small and/or not purpose-built. Whilst other institutions sported state of the art new facilities from the outset, that obviously students greatly appreciated.

We've got specialist facilities built into all of that provision. So skills labs, we've just spent a large portion of money, many, many millions on brand new science laboratories (Staff 8).

With it being a new university, it's obviously got a lot of new equipment being used (Student).

Participants noted the high-spec equipment had been shaped by employer input to ensure strong industry relevance. Students also appreciated when common spaces had been developed for interacting with peers whether socially or for study purposes.

Student recruitment and admissions

Students are drawn to new HEIs because they offer an alternative to traditional, exam driven higher education. Many arrive feeling disenfranchised with previous educational experiences at secondary or higher level, and are seeking programmes that are broader, more meaningful to them, and more practical. They value the freedom to explore multiple disciplines, the emphasis on group work, and learning models that prioritise ongoing development over high-stakes exams. Accelerated degrees and active, skills-based pedagogies appeal to those who want a faster, more applied route into work, rather than *'the usual run of the mill, sitting at the back of the lecture, talked at and passing an exam at the end of the year'* (Student).

However, new HEIs face challenges in recruitment, particularly around brand awareness and trust. Without long institutional histories or established reputations, prospective students, especially those from widening participation backgrounds or who are first in the family to go to university, may perceive a greater risk in choosing them.

By its very nature, you haven't got a hundred years' worth of history to fall back on and say - well, of course you can trust us. Of course we're going to be here. Of course your degree certificate is still going to mean the same in five, ten, fifteen, forty years' time (Staff 12).

New HEIs also encountered difficulties in selling their offering due to regulatory demands. For example, they were unable to use much of the standard terminology of the sector because they are protected terms which can't be used until a new HEI has achieved university status, including the term 'university' itself. Along with this they may not have the full set of facilities to showcase as discussed in the previous section and exemplified by this staff member:

Our first building was under construction, but it literally was a building site without a roof on it, which is quite scary when we were trying to hold open days and tell people that, you know, trust us, come to us in September (Staff 12).

Many institutions invest heavily in outreach, hosting school visits, running community programmes such as youth clubs, and adapting traditional entry requirements. These outreach activities open doors for students who might otherwise be excluded from higher education. Whilst structured support during the student journey, such as the personalised approach, was praised for supporting these students succeed during their courses.

But one thing that I think we do very differently here is we run our own youth club on site, which is supported by the academic staff [...] which is advertised to the local population, local demographic, where young adults or old teenagers - 16 to 18 year olds, come onto campus on the last Thursday of every month and engage in activities associated with our different programme areas (Staff 11).

The new HEIs have broadened opportunities for underrepresented students, including confidence building, and access to opportunities, such as prestigious internships or industry connections, that they may not have encountered through more conventional routes.

As discussed, a defining feature of these institutions is the personalised experience, and this begins even before enrolment. Applicants often describe more meaningful admissions processes, including interactive open days, extended interviews, problem-solving tasks and sustained contact with staff prior to enrolment, which help build a sense of community early on. As one staff member explains:

I believe it had the most applications out of any postgrad programme that we're running this year. And a main reason for that is because during the application process we, as a faculty, and especially my colleagues [...] managed to maintain a personalised relationship with interested applicants throughout the whole process. [...] they build that community before they've even arrived at the front door of the university. And so I think it's techniques like that which are really meaningful as a mechanism for creating that individualised experience (Staff 10/Alumnus 2).

An application process that focuses on motivation and personal aptitude reinforces the message that these HEIs value the whole learner, not just their grades. While students without certain qualifications (such as A level maths for engineering) may need to work hard to catch up, many feel that the tailored support and alternative learning environment give them the leg up they need to thrive.

International students

International students were not discussed in great detail, and it seemed to be the case that for these new HEIs, the core focus tended to be UK students. However, after setting up and sometimes running for a year or two, a number of the new HEI diversified into the international student market. This meant the student community diversified and brought an interesting mix to student cohorts but also the local area, particularly in cases where there previously wasn't a university.

The city's been incredibly welcoming. So the city mayor held a tea party for our international students [...] it was just really fabulous to see a city genuinely opening its arms to the international students (Staff 8).

Some staff believed having a more global outlook could support their outreach mission by considering areas of need around the world where they could have a significant impact, such as parts of Africa where there is a lack of access to HE, rather than only thinking about widening participation in terms of the UK.

External partners and the broader skills landscape

External partners play an important role in the running of a new HEI. These include employers as well as more broadly '*people linked with work*' (Student). Whether they are employers or other external partners, such as community members, they ultimately support the development of students' industry expertise. Another staff member explained that at times it is not necessarily the expert that they want to bring into the classroom in order to challenge the students:

If you think about electronics, the worst person to come in to help you teach electronics is an electronics expert. Because if you're putting a problem in front of the students, the electronics expert will want to fix it. And I don't want them to fix it, I want the students to fix it. And if you want a problem, the worst person to ask is an electronics expert. Because they're an expert and if they can't solve the problem, how do you expect the students who've never done it before to solve it. So you have to go and find people who are not experts in the field you're trying to teach but might have a problem that you can reasonably put in front of the students. And that it sounds counterintuitive, but actually it's the factor of them meeting a person who has a problem is good, so that's a tremendous student motivator, and the fact that they have to explain it to this person who doesn't understand the electronics is also good (Staff 1).



Therefore students are developing their problem-solving skills through 'real world' encounters. New HEIs bring in a range of external partners who students engage with from multinationals to small start-ups, to charities and individuals.

Interviewees discussed many ways that students engage with external partners from the setting of problems that students must respond to which includes interacting with the clients, to networking sessions, guest speakers, visits to organisations and site visits. All these '*act as a door to the outside world*' (Student) and give insight to the roles available in the world of work. Some new HEIs set minimum requirements for these types of encounters, ensuring that students have regular interaction with employers and other guests:

The guest speakers, we work on a minimum of two guest speakers per block, per six weeks, we generally have more (Staff 5).

As with the other elements of classroom learning, students are encouraged not to passively experience the guest speaker but to interact with visitors. The environment is created whereby a lecture-based talk from a speaker is actively discouraged:

We have a panel of three experts coming in, they introduce themselves and then I'll moderate a discussion between the experts from industry and the different student teams who are working on a particular challenge (Staff 2).

Especially guest speakers come. But every single time you've got a lecture from, like the group, really we always need to link into the person. [...] she [lecturer] makes us connect with him. So somebody will either send them like a message, ask them about something specific they want to know (Student).

All these interactions helped students gain insight into industry workings and build connections which could assist them in making steps into employment following their studies. Students cited having opportunities for one-on-one discussions with employers for example in order to ask their own questions and get personalised advice, as well as getting real insight about how an industry functions in reality. Furthermore, students appreciated these opportunities which allowed them to sell themselves as a potential future employee in the organisation or as a candidate for a placement.

It was good to have the opportunity to not only work on pitching something that should be valuable and sellable to an external but also to then recently we have had an opportunity to do 5 – 10 min afterwards to discuss what we presented with them. That was quite helpful because they could frame it in their own actual work environment (Student).

...to learn more about the industry, or to like basically demonstrate yourself so you can try get your foot in the door as early as possible and start making the connections in the direction you want to go (Student).

In order to create these opportunities for students new HEIs have a large network of partners they can call upon. The responsibility falls on the staff to create connections and develop the institutions' relationships, which is also aided by the fact that many staff are drawn from industry:

We were all just tapping into our own personal networks, just having a lot of just one to one conversations (Staff 9).

The new HEIs discussed how the relationship with employers and other external partners was generally very positive and that once onboard they were '*only a near stranger once*' (Staff 1), meaning relationships were easily sustained, since many employers understood the vision of the new HEIs and the need for the way they were doing things differently. Once they understood the new HEIs' way of delivery they often became personally

invested in the success of the project. Many employers also have critical skills gaps and believe the new HEIs were responding successfully to their needs. One interviewee (Staff 12) also believed that employers were particularly keen to work with new HEIs because of their newness, which allowed them to be more agile and responsive.

We've done really well with the recruitment on that. So many people recognise this is a really interesting project [the new HEI] and want to be involved. We found out, particularly some people who live locally, and are from the area that work in different industries that are really keen to be involved (Staff 12).

Some knock on the door. Genuinely we get emails from people 'I've heard about you, sounds interesting, can I come and have a look around? Can I come and help?' [...] Or the other thing that I'll do is I'll go to big trade events and just meet people on stands and talk to them. See what they think. And quite often again, they'll volunteer to give time (Staff 1).

However, reliance on personal networks creates instabilities in relationships. New HEIs, as discussed, were susceptible to high staff turnovers, and employer contacts at external organisations are also liable to leave. Any networks could disappear with these moves. In some circumstances a key employee with a relationship with the new HEI may have been an advocate for its vision and way of working, but if they leave, then a new employee may automatically wish to build a relationship with a well-known university with a long-standing reputation.

HEIs tended to try to ensure that the relationships are formalised centrally so that they are not at the mercy of one member of staff. Many discussed having dedicated partnership teams or central members of staff to help sustain and '*reinforce the synergy between the organisation and institution*' (Staff 11). These teams also proactively develop further relationships for example through working with the local Chamber of Commerce and through professional bodies. As well as supporting curriculum delivery, this engagement helps ensure the curriculum is kept up to date and relevant by ensuring the HEI is responding to local and national skills needs.

We ran something called subject interest groups, so where we brought together employers from within a sector. So, for example, in the construction area, we brought together some of the big local companies, but also some of the smaller SMEs to ensure that we'd got that breadth of employer voice across the piece. And even before the courses came through the university process to validation, we engaged in thinking about what that curriculum needed to look like, what the job opportunities would be within their organisations and across other organisations that they were involved in. To ensure that we were creating a portfolio of courses that directly addressed the skill set that they would be looking at in graduates coming through (Staff 8).

Ensuring that new HEIs were working with local employers specifically supported the drive to encourage graduates to stay in the area to drive local employment in those areas that had previously been HE 'cold spots'. The presence of a new university likewise brought economic and social benefits to these local areas through new business opportunities targeted at students:

They're starting to see changes in the city as a direct result of the university being here. So things like new cafes opening, you know, there's just that bigger buzz. We've got a couple of cafes locally who've renamed themselves as the campus café (Staff 8).

Placements and real-world experiences

Institutions place significant emphasis on providing high quality, relevant internship and placement opportunities, supported by their strong employer relationships and proactive brokerage from partnerships and student support teams. Students can access these opportunities as part of their course or by approaching staff, who help connect them with industry partners and facilitate meaningful, real world experiences. Some institutions even guarantee access to paid summer internships, though participation remains optional.

However, this 'brokerage' work is often labour intensive for HEIs, involving careful matching of students to roles based on skills and interests and ongoing communication with employers. Staff also manage expectations on both sides: helping students balance work with study, and ensuring employers meet standards such as paying interns appropriately. Since year long placements can be financially challenging for some students, the new HEIs have attempted to increasingly offer flexible alternatives such as shorter summer placements, work shadowing or part time roles. They also try to provide opportunities close to students' homes to reduce barriers to participation such as travel costs and to fit in with students' personal lives.

While some students do take that up [a year out in placement], we also work really closely with local employers to ensure that we've just got work shadowing opportunities, shorter placements over the summer. We also have our own job agency [...] that work on site to help to place our students into relevant work experience with local companies as well, that they can run as part-time jobs then alongside their studies (Staff 8).

Internships play an important developmental role, helping students clarify their career interests, particularly in broad or interdisciplinary degrees.

I hope the internships will give us more of an understanding. From doing design and doing a lot of placements in product design which is the degree I was looking at. I realised there was a very big separation between learning and studying design than doing product design. I realised then I actually enjoyed the studying more than actually doing it. That is what moved me away from product design (Student).

For our first-year internships, [staff member] is quite keen for us to do something we would not normally do: 'Do this; you would never apply for a job here so go do an internship there' (Student).

Exposure to unfamiliar sectors is encouraged, enabling students to test assumptions and refine their aspirations. The impact of this structured, supported experience is significant. In some cases, the vast majority of students complete an internship each year, graduating with multiple work experiences. Employers have reported to HEI staff that they are highly satisfied, often noting that students' engagement, contribution and skill levels match or exceed those of recent graduates, even after just one year of study.



Regulation and the journey to becoming a 'university'

New HEIs described the process of setting up and securing registration as extremely frustrating and at times restrictive, particularly in relation to their dealings with the Office for Students and other external bodies. Senior management recalled being prohibited from using basic sector terminology—such as *'degree'*, *'course'*, *'module'* or even *'university'* (Staff 1), which made it difficult to communicate their offer or build credibility. These constraints often forced institutions to balance their founding vision with the need to comply with prescriptive regulatory requirements. Many felt that regulatory expectations have only become more demanding over time, especially with ongoing changes involving the OfS and QAA (see Introduction section).

These constraints also shaped the student experience. Some students felt that early promise, such as highly flexible assessment and learning models, were not fully realised because they could not be approved within regulatory frameworks. Staff acknowledged that initial ambitions were sometimes unrealistic and required later adjustment to create more workable, compliant models. Some of the most innovative curriculum delivery and assessment methods proved particularly difficult to realise, as new providers must still meet the prescribed existing standards of the sector.

QA, kind of quality standards that are imposed to you by the OfS, and if you even deviate slightly from that, so if you want to have a different model of assessment, if you want to have a different model of teaching, if you want to bring in externals to cover or to co-design, co-create part of your curriculum, that is really really hard to do because you still need to kind of like fit the same standards and the same kind of outcomes and quality standards as any other university (Staff 9).

Those working with a partner (awarding) university and are on the journey to gaining university status noted that they were gaining a little more independence slowly year on year as trust was gradually being built between themselves and the external awarding partner.

Beyond regulation, new HEIs face structural challenges around student recruitment, financial sustainability and building brand trust. Their small size brings higher per student costs as they must provide core infrastructure (libraries, IT systems, staffing etc) without the economies of scale enjoyed by larger universities.

If you think from a scalability standpoint, you have to have a marketing department, you have to do recruitment, you have to have an IT function, you have to have a registrar. Now, whether you've got three students or 30,000 students, you still need a registrar, you still need a library (Staff 3).

Limited resources also make it difficult to invest in the administrative capacity required for degree awarding powers or other start-up processes. As discussed earlier, staff expressed concern that the pressure to secure funding and grow student numbers could risk diluting the original mission, while others emphasised the importance of avoiding rapid expansion that might compromise quality.

I think with any business, you have to be careful of not growing too quickly [...] but also to be cautious of that, because when you do expand too quickly, and I've done this in business many years ago, you start to lose control of the quality of what you do [...] But I don't think it's about becoming a, you know, 30,000 strong university. It's not about that. It's about making it as much as a difference to these young people as possible (Staff 5).

Overall, those involved described establishing a new university as exceptionally demanding, requiring constant navigation of regulatory, financial and operational barriers, yet this makes the achievements and progress both exciting and fulfilling.

Conclusion

Diversification of higher education has been an ongoing priority (Emms et al., 2023) in order to meet social and economic objectives. Given an increasingly market-driven HE sector, there are competing pressures on HEIs to meet employers' and labour market demands, as well as students' needs. The 2016 White paper (Higher Education and Research Bill) and the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) (2017) encouraged the setting up of new high-quality, innovative and specialist HEIs. Since then there has been a clear increase in the number of HEIs on the OfS Register (Bond et al., 2023).

This report is the continuation of the story about new HEIs in England. Phase 1 research (Emms et al., 2023) was conducted when the participating HE providers were developing and planning to realise their vision, some partnering up with existing universities and striving to get onto the OfS Register. Not all new HEIs engaged with students at that time, and for those that did it was not possible to judge whether their practices back in 2021-2022, including student and staff recruitment, employer engagement and/or pedagogical thinking, would survive the upscaling of student numbers and the regulatory requirements. However, the ambition and the drive to create something new and of high quality was unquestionable. Their successes can be measured by the increase in student numbers (recruitment), staff retention and how their graduates will fair in the labour market. The coming years will be testing the robustness of their structure, processes and approaches.

The new HEIs remained consistent in their initial thinking with regards to programme design, delivery and applied pedagogy. They have created a learning environment that was business-like and supported students' active learning. These manifested in both, physical space and student-centred pedagogies. Institutions pro-actively engaged with external partners to further students' experience with real-world curricula that naturally blurred disciplinary boundaries. New HEIs have developed new assessment approaches that linked to the curricula content and pedagogy they cultivated. In some cases it was, however, difficult to fully move away from the traditional types of assessment methods, which occasionally went against students' expectations.

All participating new HEIs, staff and students, frequently referred to personalisation of their experience. This has been demonstrated in a variety of different ways, including: during open days; student recruitment; induction weeks; small class experiential learning; one-to-one tutor time; in-depth, personalised feedback on students' work; student pastoral support; and employability support.

The personalised approach was noted as beneficial for both staff and students. Whether HEIs were purposely keeping to their small size or were doing so because they had not reached full capacity, it allowed them to nurture this personalisation. While their student numbers have increased over time, they were still in the growing stage. Consequently, high level personalisation at this stage was still possible to offer. However, questions were raised about its sustainability due to the model being of high costs and discussions pointed to potential challenges that was linked to staffs' time and capacity.

The literature increasingly emphasises belonging as a strategic imperative for student success (Toivo et al., 2025). While smaller or specialist new providers may be well placed to cultivate strong staff-student relationships and personalised support, they must also contend with limited resources and the need to build robust student services from scratch (Rowse, 2025). Ensuring that belonging is embedded structurally rather than informally remains a key challenge.

Staff and students identified a number of features in new HEIs' provision that were particularly considered positive, effective, and attractive. These included accelerated degrees; block delivery; active, experiential and personalised learning; small class sizes; and a focus on work-readiness. Most of these features are resource

intense; for example, there is a question about affordability and sustainability of small class sizes (Rowsell, 2025). It is clear that students' number may have to increase over time, as similar to all HEIs, many struggle with financial woes and insufficient income to deliver their courses (Williams, 2025).

The Higher Education and Research Act in 2017 made it easier to set up a new HEIs, obtain DAPs and secure the 'university' status. The evidence gathered during this research portrays a sector in transition: new HE providers are contributing meaningfully to access, 'innovation' and local responsiveness, yet they operate within regulatory and financial conditions that can constrain their potential. The new HEIs in this study demonstrate thoughtfulness and real engagement with thinking outside the box to attract and develop work-ready students. However, given their relative 'newness' it is too soon to conduct an impact study of graduates' long-term outcomes in the workplace.



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