

# Opportunity England

How colleges can transform life  
chances, overcome inequalities  
and boost economic growth

JULY 2023



## Foreword

The next general election offers the chance for the political parties to set out their vision for our country after many years of political, constitutional, health and social turbulence and uncertainties. We passionately believe that colleges can be unleashed to contribute even more to addressing the challenges of the modern world, but also to realise the opportunities.

*Opportunity England*, at its heart, is therefore a plea to politicians to understand how, with the right investment and policies, colleges can play an even bigger role in an inclusive, tolerant, welcoming, strong society and a growing and productive economy. For too long colleges have been overlooked and under-funded and yet despite that they have contributed greatly in their communities and labour markets.

The document sets out our vision for a new tertiary education system, with clear priorities and great impact. It shows how colleges contribute and what changes are urgently needed to allow them to do even more. Colleges are an incredible public resource which can be relied on to deliver efficiently and effectively even in the toughest of times, as we showed during the pandemic and since.

I hope that *Opportunity England* is read widely and that it helps generate the debate and discussions we want to have about the future shape, purpose and funding of the post-16 education system. Please challenge us, engage with us and help to reach the cross-party consensus that is both possible and desirable for a long term step change in lifelong learning and investment in colleges.



**David Hughes**

CHIEF EXECUTIVE  
ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES

JULY 2023

# Introduction

Whoever wins the next general election faces many well-documented challenges, including the threat of recession, stagnating growth and productivity, and ever-widening skills gaps across the economy. Tackling these, and building an economy fit for the future will require bold action, and a cohesive education and skills training system, set up and supported to deliver for people, businesses and for communities.

**Education and training will be crucial in addressing five of the biggest challenges and turning them into opportunities, including:**



#### AGEING POPULATION

Growing numbers of older people will increase the demand for health and social care services and heighten the demand for more flexible forms of employment, education and training across the labour market.



#### BRITAIN'S PLACE IN THE WORLD

Changing trade and migration arrangements with continental Europe will increase the need for our system to support people to get the skills needed in our labour markets in low, medium and high skilled sectors and jobs, and to keep pace with changes in those jobs.



#### CLIMATE CHANGE

Increasing urgency to reduce carbon emissions will change the skills in many sectors, but particularly in the construction, energy, manufacturing and transport industries.



#### DIGITALISATION

Greater use of digital data, telecommunications and artificial intelligence is likely to alter the demand for skills, the need for re-training and maintaining currency of skills as well as changes in how education and training are delivered and assessed.



#### ECONOMIC GROWTH AND PRODUCTIVITY

The ambition for a high-skill, high pay economy will increase the need for more people to be skilled at higher levels and in growth sectors of the economy. Meanwhile, the growing emphasis on redressing regional economic inequalities necessarily requires a focus on addressing unequal attainment in our education and training system, and supporting people to be able to retrain and upskill later on in life.

**Education and training systems within the UK are organised separately in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and there is much to learn across all four nations. In England, these five big challenges need a strong response from government but our post-16 education and training system is not regulated, funded and organised to deliver as it can and must.**

Most of the issues we face are not unique to this country, but the opportunity is there for the next government to unleash the potential of colleges to make a step change and make skills a great British success story. Opportunity England sets out what the next Government needs to do to think big, to think bold, and to take on the future with optimism and hope.

This will require proper reform of the tertiary education system, to:

1. **Drive economic growth and improve productivity**
2. **Overcome regional inequalities**
3. **Offer better life and work opportunities for all**
4. **Bring about the green transition**
5. **Deliver the health and social care workforce revolution**
6. **Build safe, cohesive and integrated communities**

Achieving these will not be easy. Which is why we urgently need to see a bold and confident vision for tertiary education and a long-term strategy that is sustainable, deliverable, and supported by all parts of government.

#### **We need a system in which:**

Every young person and adult will be supported to attain and maintain the skills they will need throughout their lives

Every employer is supported to innovate, improve productivity and develop their workforce to have the skills needed in the transition to a green and flourishing economy.

Every community boasts of post-16 learning opportunities which meet the needs of all their citizens through an ecosystem of learning organisations delivering a coherent, diverse and compelling set of opportunities for people to learn and train.

Colleges are recognised, regulated and funded to play the unique role that only they can play in providing a truly comprehensive set of learning, training and education opportunities to people of all ages and at all levels whilst supporting employers to innovate and grow.

## ONE TERTIARY EDUCATION SYSTEM

Colleges, universities and other learning organisations need to be regulated and funded together as one tertiary system. Current separate regulation, funding, data and success measures make it hard for people and employers to understand and navigate the learning and skills they need and want. Learning organisations are forced to compete for scarce resources, resulting in a reduced breadth of offer, efficiency and quality of provision.

**We need a national post-16 education and skills strategy** developed in partnership with learning organisations and across a range of other institutions including local government, employer groups, unions and community organisations.

The national strategy and priorities would inform and drive local learning organisations to come together, alongside devolved authorities and others to show how local priorities, action and delivery help deliver the national vision and strategy. A more coherent and planned devolution presents an opportunity to deliver more coherence for learners and employers, more efficiency through collaboration and simplicity and ensure decisions about what are needed are made where they will impact.



## UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF COLLEGES TO DELIVER ON THIS AGENDA

### Policy recommendations

The incoming government should focus on five areas of urgent actions to unleash the potential of colleges to deliver:

1.



**A new statutory right to lifelong learning**

2.



**An apprenticeships system that works**

3.



**A curriculum for all**

4.



**A workforce strategy**

5.



**Investing in our future**

## RECOMMENDATION 1



# A new statutory right to lifelong learning

### THE CHALLENGE

At the very time when changes in our economy and society need people to gain new skills, we have seen a significant decline in the levels of participation in adult education. Since 2004 participation numbers in government-funded learning have almost halved (down 49 per cent) with only one in three adults self-reporting any participation in learning (the lowest level in 22 years). Meanwhile, more jobs require education at Level 3 and above and AI and other technology changes will only accelerate the need for a better-skilled workforce.

Currently only 60 per cent of young people reach Level 3 by age 19, while 15 per cent fail to reach Level 2 and the numbers studying higher and intermediate technical and vocational courses are lower than competitor countries. Those who do participate are far more likely to be well-educated and better off. The poorest adults with the lowest qualification levels are the least likely to access adult training despite being the group who might benefit most. Those who work for many employers are given no support or training at work, and flexible opportunities to learn outside of work have been greatly reduced.

Meanwhile, too many people who are unemployed cannot access the training that could get them into good jobs because of the disconnect between skills and welfare, with the current welfare system actively impeding people from getting the skills they need.

All of this results in millions of people missing out on opportunities to retrain and upskill for a new job or career, employers unable to fill key vacancies where skills gaps exist, slower economic growth and a huge impact on health and wellbeing.

## THE SOLUTION

We need a revolution in lifelong learning. This should be articulated through a new statutory right to lifelong learning consisting of three components:

- i) A universal entitlement to a first full Level 3 qualification, building on the Lifetime Skills Guarantee introduced in 2020 but with a wider range of courses on offer and with maintenance support. Local Level 3 priorities should be available to anyone, irrespective of their prior achievement levels, in line with local skills improvement plans (LSIPs).
- ii) Building on the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) to stimulate growth in higher level skills, with grants being made available as well as loans to ensure wider access and to incentivise learning in local skills priorities. That demand-side stimulation should be matched with investment in colleges to develop the offer at levels 4 and 5, in partnership with local employers to meet labour market needs.
- iii) Better access to adult education and training for people in receipt of Universal Credit (UC). Existing UC conditionalities which pose a major barrier to many from accessing training and reskilling opportunities should be removed, together with expanding local partnerships between job centres, colleges and other education providers to strengthen local working.





## RECOMMENDATION 2



# An apprenticeships system that works

### THE CHALLENGE

The overall apprenticeship programme is not working – for many people, employers, areas of the country and sectors of the economy. We have seen a dramatic decline in the number of young people undertaking apprenticeships, from an already low bar – now down to just 60,000 young people starting apprentices each year.

Recent analysis has shown for example that we have lost over 160,000 engineering and manufacturing apprenticeship training places since the reforms were implemented – directly contributing to the current record of 84,000 vacancies in this sector alone.

The apprenticeship levy has been successful in persuading more large employers to participate in the programme and has fostered new high-quality apprenticeships as part of their workforce plans. But overall, the government's failure to set any priorities for how the levy is used by employers has seen unwanted and major shifts, with higher-level apprenticeships for existing employees in big companies growing at the expense of opportunities for young people and new labour market entrants where numbers have reduced. Many small companies are put off by the bureaucracy. Overall employer investment in education and training remains low, compared to OECD counterparts.

Oversight of apprenticeships is messy, involving the Department for Education, IfATE, Ofqual, Ofsted and OfS and there are no programme levers for any of them to ensure that priorities are being met.

## THE SOLUTION

A fundamental rethink of our approach to apprenticeships would have five key elements:

- i) Apprenticeships to be integrated into the wider system with clear articulation and simpler progression routes into and out of apprenticeships with other qualifications at all levels.
- ii) A review of the levy should be held, to look at where the money is currently spent, what forecasts suggest about future spending, whether there are options to pool employer contributions and whether it will be necessary to increase the levy rate from 0.5% to 1.0% as some have suggested.
- iii) Apprenticeships to be focused on new job starters. We should return to the recommendations of the 2012 government review which stated that an 'apprenticeship should be redefined... clearly targeted at and promoted to those who are new to a job or role that requires sustained or substantial training.
- iv) Training and accreditation of existing workers should be delivered separately, as should provision aimed primarily at entry level jobs. This requires more investment in new routes into apprenticeships for those who are not yet ready and different arrangements, outside apprenticeships, for those who are no longer new in role.
- v) At least half of the levy should be spent on apprenticeships, as defined above. Government should set priorities in consultation with the range of social and economic partners for the use of the levy, as it does on other programmes funded from taxation. This might, for instance, require more transparency from employers on how they use the levy by publishing their starts, completions and outcomes as well as the requirement to use a certain percentage of the levy on young people.



## RECOMMENDATION 3

# A curriculum for all

### THE CHALLENGE

The technical education reforms started in England in 2016 are in their infancy and will need to evolve over the next few years as we learn more about how they fit, how they work and which students will benefit most from them. Overall, technical and vocational qualifications are still not respected and understood as they should be. But the speed of change brings great risks. As the Education Select Committee said, 'rushing ahead with major reforms to post-16 qualifications risks leaving young people stranded without suitable qualification pathways and deepening worker shortages in key sectors'. Current plans to withdraw funding for many existing qualifications risks constricting student choice and narrowing progression opportunities, with the potential for an increase in the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET).

The wider challenge on qualifications, though, is that there is no overview of how qualifications work for the whole cohort of young people and adults, across their lives, in all pathways and across all industrial sectors, subjects and professions. The result is that students, parents, advisers and employers are confused about how things work. For instance, does a T Level (Level 3) allow progression onto an apprenticeship at Level 4? What option is available for someone with a Level 2 in English and maths at grade 4 wanting to do engineering when the T Level entry requirement is for a grade 6 in maths?



## THE SOLUTION

We need an immediate pause to the proposed defunding of existing Level 3 and below VTQs, until we can see how T Levels are working in terms of accessibility and progression for students, meeting industry needs and promoting social mobility. This pause would allow a wider review of the whole suite of qualifications to ensure that they are enabling and supporting every young person and adult to access the best possible pathways and outcomes.

Longer term, government needs to work with colleges, awarding organisations, employers and other partners to develop an overarching strategy that brings together the entire offer, both technical and academic, for young people and adults.

Key components of a more coherent system of qualifications includes:

- i)** A qualification plan for every sector with a range of specialist vocational and technical qualifications at different levels. One framework or format doesn't fit all but there need to be stepping-on and stepping-off points with progression opportunities, including into apprenticeships
- ii)** Appropriate qualifications for adult learners with opportunities to study the same qualifications (or parts of) as 16 to 18-year-olds, but in a flexible way that recognises prior learning and experience (for example micro credentials and options for hybrid learning).
- iii)** An ESOL strategy for England for better co-ordinated support to those in our communities whose first language is not English to improve integration and labour market access.
- iv)** Careers Education, Information Advice and Guidance (CEIAG): both online and face to face, which starts in at least early secondary for young people and is easily accessible for adults. There should be an expectation that students in KS4 have access to extended tasters of post-16 education and training options.
- v)** Opportunities which go beyond qualifications with every young person entitled to study English, maths and digital skills, to benefit from work experience, to learn life skills, to cover relationships, sex and health education, political, economic, environmental and cultural literacy and enrichment, including sports, arts, guest speakers, skills competitions (e.g. WorldSkills and international mobility visits through the Turing Scheme and alignment with Erasmus+).

## RECOMMENDATION 4



## A workforce strategy

### THE CHALLENGE

There is a crisis in college workforce recruitment and retention, driven largely by poor pay but also by a sense that college staff are not valued by the government as much as school staff. Turnover is high, with too many good staff leaving the sector for better pay elsewhere. Finding and keeping teaching staff in skills shortage and priority sectors is increasingly difficult, leading to many colleges having to restrict the offer they make in the very areas where skills needs are greatest, creating a vicious cycle of intractable challenges.



## THE SOLUTION

There are three elements to addressing the college workforce recruitment and retention crisis:

- i) Poor staff pay must be addressed. The average pay for teaching staff in colleges sits c£8000pa below that of their colleagues in schools and for other staff the gaps are equally significant. Funding rates need to be increased for colleges to at least be able to match the new starting salary of £30,000 a year for teaching staff in schools and a longer-term approach which ensures no gap appears again, whilst as importantly addressing the pay of support staff too.
- ii) There is also a big pay gap between college lecturers and the industries they are training people for. The government should invest in a cadre of sector experts to be employed by colleges in priority sectors, paid closer to industry levels, to stimulate demand, engage with employers and to help ensure curriculum, delivery, quality, CPD and work placements are all adequate to meet labour market needs.
- iii) The mechanism for setting a non-binding pay recommendation through the National Joint Forum (NJF) between AoC and staff unions has come under strain in recent years, with the government as major funded absent from the process. AoC is keen to explore and test other options to setting pay, through discussions with the government, the TUC, relevant education unions and with member colleges.





## RECOMMENDATION 5

# Investing for the future

### THE CHALLENGE

A growing economy needs ongoing investment in skills, for jobs today and to be agile as job needs change. Investing in skills gives instant as well as long-term returns through supporting innovation and higher productivity, helping employers find and develop productive workers and in turn delivering higher wages.

Sadly, that investment is lacking in our country - post-16 education funding is way behind what is needed to boost economic growth. Without additional investment in further education and skills, particularly from government and from employers, we will not be able to fill skills shortages in key priority areas of the economy nor deliver the labour market the country needs.

The apprenticeship levy was put in place in recognition of the need to secure higher employer investment, but it is not enough. An extension of the apprenticeship levy, focussed on priorities will help increase investment, but government also needs to invest more.



## THE SOLUTION

Higher investment in post-16 education and skills is the overall goal, with more work to encourage as well as require employers to invest more in their own workforces. But it is also about choices for the government into where they invest: in recent decades higher education has won more of the scarce resources than other parts of the post-16 system. That needs to change.

Addressing this requires concerted action:

- i) The next government needs to increase investment in young people aged 16 to 18 to ensure there are places for the growing population but also to ensure young people get the right foundation they need, whichever route or qualifications they opt for.
- ii) More investment is needed for transition programmes at age 16 and beyond age 18 to help those who do not succeed at GCSEs at age 16 to turn things around in their last few years of compulsory education.
- iii) There is a need for accelerated investment in skills for the transition to low carbon, for construction, engineering, health and digital skills. This needs to be additional to maintaining existing provision at Level 2 and Level 3. More investment is also needed to support adults who do not have English as their first language in order that they can participate fully in work and life.
- iv) Colleges as public institutions are keen to work with government to simplify the way in which they are funded, organised and regulated. Multi-year grant agreements, more centralised purchasing and modernised data collection could all contribute to reducing administration and investing more in the system – together with a wider review of regulatory oversight, with a view to removing duplication and inefficiencies.
- v) Government's £2.8 billion capital investment in further education between 2022 and 2025 has helped colleges, schools and other providers provide places for the growing 16-19 population, modernise facilities for technical education and tackle a large maintenance backlog identified by the Post 18 review in 2019. The task after 2025 will be to finish the job of improving buildings but also to transform energy systems to cut a large bill and to reduce carbon emissions. A small number of colleges have tested systems that combine ground-source heating with solar and exchanges with the grid to meet net zero targets. Similar approaches are needed across the 800 campus estate.
- vi) Meanwhile, colleges spend an estimated £210 million a year on VAT that they cannot reclaim because education is exempt and because, unlike councils, academies and other public sector organisations they are not covered by the VAT refund scheme. These VAT costs are a tax on FE students – the beneficiaries of college activity – and are damaging to government aims because they fall more heavily on those taking technical education programmes and those who are more likely to be disadvantaged.



## Appendix

Opportunity England sets out recommendations to improving our country's tertiary education system. Below gives wider context to the issues and shares some case studies of colleges doing great work on each area.

### STRONGER ECONOMIC GROWTH AND IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY

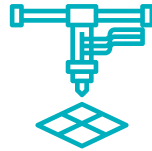
We suffer from poor levels of productivity (ONS, 2018), and are particularly ineffective at transferring groundbreaking innovations in process, design and technology into routine, day-to-day use by SMEs and micro businesses, which make up over 95 per cent of businesses across the UK (BEIS 2020). The need to innovate is critical, as employers seek to take up the benefits offered through technological innovations and seek to adapt at pace to deliver a net-zero carbon economy.

Addressing these long-standing challenges requires concerted and coordinated action from governments. Colleges have a key and expansive role to play as a part of this agenda, working in close partnership across local, regional and national systems, as a key strategic support to employers. Colleges can and must play a central role in convening, coordinating and providing high quality strategic support to employers, across innovation and skills, and in stimulating demand, particularly from SMEs and micro businesses.

This must become recognised as a core part of what a college networks delivers, in close partnership with universities, local authorities, business chambers, trade unions and others. This is vital as part of a skills-led economic recovery, as we redress long-standing regional and social inequalities and as we move towards a sustainable, net-zero carbon economy supported by a green technology revolution.

A more expansive employer service would provide a mechanism for stimulating demand from employers, coordinating strategic engagement and building new deeper relationships between employers and the education and skills system.

This would see colleges working closely with universities, employer representative bodies, local government and others, to play an expanded role in innovation and knowledge transfer, whilst also equipping employees with opportunities to develop new skills.



## CASE STUDY

### Dudley College of Technology supporting employers with close to market innovation and business development

Dudley College of Technology have developed an advanced manufacturing & engineering facility, reflecting their expertise in this area, which includes an innovation zone that local employers can use. This includes a rapid prototyping lab with a 3D scanner, printer, a wide range of software and other kit, all available for employers to test for proof of concept. Employers who don't have the space have used it for everything from development space to a team building venue.

When the college developed the new Institute of Technology they took this up a level, building a large hangar where employers can do larger projects. This has access to rapid prototyping facilities, CNC, robotics and other much more besides (some of which have been donated by local employers who sell the equipment). This facility aims to support SMEs to try new equipment before investing, by piloting design projects for them and giving them access to the technical equipment they need to do it.

This work supporting business with innovation and business development is something that could and should be extended across the sector, with the right support from government. Colleges are deeply embedded with SMEs within their communities, and could and should be central to boosting productivity right across the country.



## OVERCOMING REGIONAL INEQUALITIES

Redressing regional and social inequalities is rightly a major political focus - as we recover from the impact of the pandemic and the global recession, and as we look forwards to growing megatrend challenges such as an aging population, the climate emergency and technological innovation and AI.

Colleges have a central role to play as key institutions at the heart of their regional economies. There are exemplary practices from colleges across the country, where their vital role has been well embedded. But equally, this is an area where the existing systems can fail to fully utilise or recognise the potential of colleges - where the approach to funding, accountability and oversight, constrains what colleges can offer, where there is insufficient alignment within other national/ regional strategies and where ultimately colleges are left delivering despite, rather than because of, the system.

### CASE STUDY



## Hopwood Hall driving regional economic development

As an anchor institution in the Borough, the Hopwood Hall College chairs the work and skills group for a cross borough Mayoral Zone project, linked to advanced manufacturing, machinery and materials - which is one of the most significant projects in a generation, Atom Valley.

Within Rochdale there has been a 10% increase in the number of students participating in Further Education (excl. SFC), because of the exciting and innovative curriculum offer that has been developed at Hopwood Hall College & University Centre. The attainment level in the borough lags behind the rest of the North West at levels 1-4, but since last ONS published data in 2018 the borough has reduced the gap and increased attainment at levels 2-4 at quicker rates than is being seen nationally. There is a direct correlation between partnership work with our key stakeholders and our continually developing technical education curriculum, apprenticeship and higher technical qualification that meets the ambitions of a high skilled economy that meets sector specific skills gaps.

## OFFERING BETTER LIFE AND WORK OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

The changes and challenges that we face mean that people need to be able to engage with education and training throughout their lives to have the skills and opportunities they need for good jobs and to live well.

This will be needed as people adapt to technological changes and to changing practices; as we ensure that people in low-skilled, low-pay sectors are not left behind, as disadvantaged groups suffer from limited opportunities to get into good quality jobs and progress within them; as we move urgently towards a carbon-neutral, green economy; and in responding to changes in the labour market and economic shocks.

In the context of ongoing technological advances, a flexible, personalised lifetime service must crucially include a radical expansion of the online and blended offer colleges deliver to people. This will require serious investment in digital infrastructure, resources and college staff expertise and capacity.

Alongside this increasingly blended offer, colleges' physical estates and resources will remain critical – and as we describe below, the role that colleges must play in place-making will only become more important in addressing social and regional inequalities and more vulnerable communities who risk being hit hardest by changes in the world of work, climate change and technological changes.

This will have to be supported through funding and student finance that ensures that cost is not a barrier to engagement with lifetime learning opportunities – and ensuring that pathways across all aspects of the education and skills system are equally valued and supported. It will also mean colleges offering much more informal support, with people of all ages using the college estate to support independent learning, to access high-quality skills and careers advice and guidance, and as a hub, incubating entrepreneurship.





## CASE STUDY

### New City College supporting new arrivals to get the English they need to get on in life

New City College (NCC) has over 20,000 students across the East London area. ESOL at NCC starts young, 14-19 year-old new arrivals to the UK learn English alongside GCSEs, A Levels and vocational qualifications. And, for adults, ESOL leads to employment through the college's innovative ESOL Plus programme. Jennie Turner, Curriculum Director for ESOL explains: "At NCC we recognise the enormous contribution migrants make to our society and economy and that English language is crucial to unlocking and developing the skills we need as a nation."

NCC's ESOL Plus career routes range from teaching assistants, health care and service industries through to accounting and business management. As a result of the college's carefully tailored opportunities, over 400 ESOL students will progress to adult vocational qualifications in the next academic year. Through this focused approach to English language support alongside vocational qualifications, individuals get unrivalled life and work opportunities, communities are upskilled and migrant capabilities across the region are unlocked.



## DELIVERING THE GREEN TRANSITION

To deliver on the net zero carbon transformation and biodiversity targets, there is an urgent need for businesses to transition to more sustainable practices and for decarbonisation projects to move at pace. This means a transformation centred around people and their jobs.

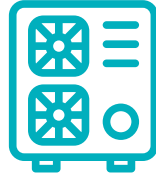
Modelling from the “Place-based Climate Action Network’s Just Transition Jobs Tracker” suggests that one in five jobs in the UK require skills that could experience demand growth (approximately 10% of UK jobs) or reduction (approximately 10%). People whose skills are no longer in demand will need retraining and upskilling, and the right careers advice to recognise and use skills they already have differently. Across the UK there are over 410,000 jobs in low carbon businesses and their supply chains already. This shift comes at a time when due to mega-trends affecting the labour market, 9 in 10 people (over 30 million people) will need to be reskilled by 2030. Colleges play a vital role in key sectors that will be affected.

Colleges are uniquely placed at the heart of communities to support a fair transition to a green economy for people and employers. They must be invested in and empowered to play their role in the journey to net zero and meet the need for green skills and green jobs.

Colleges educate and train people of all ages for key low carbon sectors and those that are on the journey to transforming, from construction and energy to agriculture and transport. They train the workers of tomorrow, upskill and retrain those transitioning into other jobs, and act as a stepping stone to progress into higher education and other training relevant for the green economy.

Colleges also provide careers advice to support every student with the right education and training pathway for them, including working with JobCentre Plus to signpost courses that support the green economy. Whether an employer is in an established green sector that is growing, an emerging green sector that is predicted to grow throughout the transition, or a sector experiencing significant transformation and/or decline, colleges work every day to meet their skills needs.

At the same time, small and medium-sized enterprises are not always sufficiently aware of how to adapt to be more sustainable, what skills are needed, and their investment in green training is often limited. As strategic partners, there is an important role for colleges to support local businesses with these changes, to build partnerships that can share knowledge and work together to support the right skills development and innovation.



## CASE STUDY

### The college sector's role in training heat pump installers

The government has confirmed an ambition for all new heating systems installed in UK homes from 2035 to be low carbon and recently set a target to deploy 600,000 heat pumps per year by 2028.<sup>18</sup> Colleges will play an important role in training and upskilling installers. Decarbonising households and workplaces could support 240,000 jobs across the sector by 2035. To meet net zero targets by 2050, over 44,000 heating installers will be required to meet this ambition by 2035, according to the Heat Pump Association.<sup>19</sup> This will need to include both young people and those within existing workforces. To overcome any future skills shortage, the boiler manufacturing workforce will be critical for both safeguarding jobs and harnessing existing skills. Individuals with the needed skills could also come from air-conditioning manufacturing and the automotive industry. As a recent Friends of the Earth report stated, "whilst the technology is different, many of the engineering and component assembly processes are similar."

The recently announced initiatives from the Government to drive down the cost of low carbon heating technologies like heat pumps through government grants mean that demand is expected. However, a college can only implement training in the new skill set when there are jobs for those who undertake the training to progress in to. That's why AoC has been working with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and heat pump industry representatives to bring colleges and industry closer together in a working partnership. This is with the aim to try and reduce the lag between training delivery and skills demand. The conversations have been considering the upskilling of the existing workforce, the migration of other workers from jobs in lower demand, and the training of young people who would seek to enter the sector.



## DELIVERING THE HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE

Meeting existing and future workforce needs is one of the biggest challenges facing NHS leaders. By better embedding colleges into core NHS workforce development, and better using their local recruitment and training power, we can help to ensure a sustainable, agile and innovative future health and care workforce.

Colleges currently play a significant role in the training and upskilling of health and care staff, providing a strong base from which to better understand how closer working can develop and promote new career pathways. In many ways, colleges are the main link for the NHS to recruit in the communities it serves, opening up opportunity to a much greater and diverse pool of talent and increasing the ability to retain and further develop its workforce.

Alongside their role in progression towards university, colleges offer a breadth of qualifications from Level 1 to foundation degrees that lead to a range of NHS and social care career pathways – including roles from healthcare assistants and lab technicians to catering staff.

But we strongly believe colleges should be seen more as recruitment partners. There is also an opportunity to jointly promote the health and care sectors as a career to communities. The important role they play could be enhanced through honing health and care career paths through careers education, information advice and guidance (CEIAG). This requires collaboration with other partners, such as schools, to engage young people. A national, college-led campaign could help to celebrate NHS careers and achievements through the college sector, with recognition of the workforce's significant contribution in response to COVID-19. Apprenticeships provide a key opportunity to put this into practice, as do T Levels which include industry placements that will require coordination.

And beyond this, colleges have a key role in public health. Health outcomes can be improved through collaborating on the development of college courses that lead to pre-prepared and tangible entry points into job roles. This is important for those found furthest from the labour market, such as those with special education needs and disabilities (SEND), low education attainment, homelessness, care leavers, carers, a criminal record and low aspirations. As we look to future health and care roles, college courses should increasingly focus on innovative health and wellbeing services that are strongly aligned with the NHS Long Term Plan and local growth plans. This includes social prescribing and new tech-driven approaches to health and care.





## CASE STUDY

### Bridgwater and Taunton College- Nursing Provision

The nationwide shortage of qualified nurses is well documented, but the problem is particularly acute in Somerset, a county with no major cities or traditional university campuses. Young people wishing to enter the nursing profession have previously had no choice but to leave home to gain the necessary degree qualification, whilst those already employed by the NHS who aspire to progress further have been unable to do so without major disruption to home and family life.

Bridgwater and Taunton College has spent a decade negotiating, collaborating and innovating to overcome this challenge, becoming the first FE college to gain the consent of both the Nursing & Midwifery Council (NMC) and its university partner (University of the West of England) to deliver nursing degrees locally and in its own right. The College was also the first FE College to be invited and accepted into the Council of Deans of Health, and now sits alongside university healthcare faculties at the heart of policy and political debate.

The college is the first – and still the only – FE college in England to gain NMC site approval to deliver direct entry (via UCAS), fee-paying registered nursing degrees and has enrolled 190 students to its nursing degree programmes since September 2021. The Trainee Nurse Associate (TNA) programme has been successfully delivered to 230 learners, with course retention rates of 96% that far exceed the national averages of 58% (19/20) and 74% (20/21) and consistently outperform the overwhelming majority of the university sector. Of those successfully completing the programme, 89% (205 graduates) have been directly employed into the NHS across the Southwest region. The college has of last week received approval from the NMC to offer the Nurse Associate Route as direct entry. This is of particular importance in addressing widening participation.

In partnership with the college, Somerset NHS Foundation Trust is strategically addressing some of our biggest workforce challenges and threats to the delivery of high quality, sustainable health care across the South-West region. This provision is a superb example of a college responding to local workforce demand. Not only has it opened up exciting new career and progression routes for individuals of all ages in Somerset, but in doing so has made a hugely positive contribution to the health and wellbeing of the entire community, whilst also ensuring that local talent is retained in-county, where it is desperately needed to help resolve a critical workforce crisis.

## BUILDING SAFE, COHESIVE AND INTEGRATED COMMUNITIES

Colleges are important anchor institutions in communities across the country, but this dimension is not sufficiently supported or incentivised. Colleges can and must play a significant and expanded role in building safe, cohesive, integrated communities - including through addressing digital poverty and literacy, supporting non-English speakers to learn the language, providing digital hubs to people of all ages who are able to access infrastructure, resources and basic training. This requires working closely with other community partners, including adult and community learning providers, local authorities and others, to develop coherent joined-up strategies.

Colleges at their best are one of the few places where all parts of a community will come together - and as they become touchpoints available to everyone throughout their lives, the role that colleges will play in deepening social inclusion and cohesion and tackling discrimination needs to be given greater prominence. This must also include the college estate genuinely being recognised and used as a community asset - with sport and performing arts facilities for example being used by local partners, and colleges playing an active role with other community partners in supporting health and wellbeing strategies.



### CASE STUDY

## South Gloucestershire and Stroud College working to reduce re-offending

In2Sport is a sport education programme designed for individuals with experiences of the criminal justice system and those overcoming addiction. The overarching aim of the provision is to reduce reoffending rates and support learners into meaningful employment. Referrals are made into In2Sport via prison, probation and addiction support services.

Across two academic years, learners complete both Level 2 Gym Instructing and Level 3 Personal Training qualifications, as well as having the opportunity to complete work experience with the college and the wider community.

At present, reoffending rates in the UK stand 24%, with the average cost per prisoner at around £45,000 per annum. Since 2021, the In2Sport programme has successfully engaged 24 males, none of whom have returned to prison, saving the taxpayer over £1 million.