



FE and HE partnerships – a road to regional skills ecosystems

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The last week has seen a flurry of reports published around the levelling up agenda, including our own report [Post-Covid recovery – what now for regional growth?](#) and the connection between place, skills and local institutions. As we enter a second lockdown, and the economic impact of the covid-19 pandemic becomes more pronounced, it is more important than ever that local institutions work collaboratively to provide the skills needed to enable regions across the UK to tackle these challenges head on and build back better.

The correlation between skills and economic and social prosperity is widely acknowledged and improving our skills system is high on the Government's policy agenda. On numerous occasions government has highlighted that investment in FE is fundamental to the levelling up agenda. There are few who would disagree about the adverse effects austerity has had on the Further Education sector; a point highlighted in the recent [IFS report](#)). Investment in FE will be greatly welcomed by the FE sector, however, as the scale of the economic crisis becomes apparent, it is clear that an integrated skills system that is responsive to regional needs is what is actually fundamental to the levelling up agenda. Regional partnerships will be imperative to understanding the demographics of the area and identifying regional strengths, potential skills shortages and growth sectors. The [Teesside University College Partnership](#) (TUCP), is a prime example of how effective such collaboration can be and was referenced as a case study in the College of the Future report on [People, Productivity and Place](#).

The final [College of the Future report](#) is timely for the UK, but more importantly, regions such as Tees Valley which are faced with persistent economic challenges further exacerbated by Covid. The report makes for interesting reading and provides much food for thought. The report suggests that colleges work better when effectively networked across economic geography as this enables colleges to play a more proactive and strategic role in supporting regional skills needs. This is an approach which has been deployed in Tees Valley for some time, where Teesside University has been working in partnership with Darlington College, Hartlepool College, Stockton Riverside College and Redcar and Cleveland College for more than 20 years. Drawing on expertise and facilities of all partners TUCP drives the higher-level skills agenda across the Tees Valley. Through working in genuine partnership, TUCP has established an innovative networked approach to the delivery of higher-level skills, ensuring that the location and nature of provision directly responds to regional industry needs. Underpinned by a shared

vision and decision making, TUCP provides seamless pathways of employer responsive education and training across the Tees Valley, supporting economic growth and productivity.

The false dichotomy between FE and HE was acknowledge by the Prime Minister in his [recent speech on skills](#). Our experience in Tees Valley shows that FE and HE are part of the same system and working together can make a difference. The eagerly anticipated white paper on skills will be published later this month and we wait to see how the Government intend to revitalise the UK's skills system. Whilst the a new system will not be without challenge, it is our hope that recommendations such as those contained in recent reports are considered as well as good practice from models such as TUCP.