

# MillionPlus

The Association for  
Modern Universities



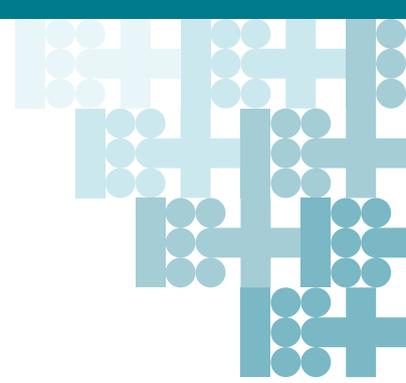
## RESEARCH REPORT

Skills, skills, skills – the role of  
modern universities delivering  
the workforce for the future



# Foreword

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Vice-Chancellor of the  
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**The skills agenda is currently at the forefront of policymaking in England, and for good reason: the skills gap facing the UK presents a significant economic threat. Persistent shortages in key occupations slow growth and hinder public services, resulting in a million vacancies nationwide and schools and hospitals struggling to recruit sufficient teachers and nurses.**

Closing these gaps requires expanding access to education that delivers the skills to meet labour market demands and prepares for future skills needs. With new technologies such as AI and automation continually transforming the way we work, this will become even more critical.

As anchor institutions in their regions with roots in some places dating back over a century, and with their close ties to local business and vocational and technical skills at the heart of their curriculums, modern universities are ideally placed to seize the vital opportunity that exists to upskill Britain.

As the case studies presented in this report make clear, delivering essential skills is the central focus of modern universities like mine and other MillionPlus members. Work-based learning models such as degree apprenticeships, which modern universities have pioneered, offer further integration, enabling students to gain practical experience while earning qualifications.

At my institution, the University of Central Lancashire, we are developing our micro-credential offering in anticipation of the lifelong learning entitlement, which gained Royal Assent in September. This will strengthen the university's comprehensive range of undergraduate degrees, degree apprenticeship programmes and research degrees, all of which are delivering skills essential to the local and regional economy.

Modern universities also continue to play a significant role in broadening access, serving mature students, first-in-family students, students with caring responsibilities, students from under-represented backgrounds, the list goes on. To close the skills gaps holding Britain back, the talent and potential of every individual must be tapped. Our institutions do this better than anyone else.

The examples highlighted in this publication provide just a glimpse of best practices and innovation in skill delivery. In addition to building students' technical abilities, modern universities emphasise transferable lifelong learning skills. Their programmes teach adaptability, communication, problem-solving and ethical decision-making to help graduates navigate fluid career paths in a rapidly changing world.

By harnessing the knowledge, passion and expertise at modern universities and continuing to allow individuals to walk through the door marked 'education' at whatever stage of their life, we can future-proof the British labour market for generations to come.

Taking steps to further unleash the potential of modern universities will be essential as the UK navigates the Fourth Industrial Revolution and builds an economy that leaves no one behind.

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## SECTION 1

# Introduction

In 2015, Klaus Schwab, founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, declared that we had entered the Fourth Industrial Revolution in terms of global affairs. Driven by the ongoing automation and connectivity of manufacturing, production and business processes, the Fourth Industrial Revolution will rapidly change how humans work. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, robotics, and the Internet of Things have the potential to change how people live and interact. While we do not yet know the full extent of these upcoming changes, it is evident that for both people and economies to prosper, they must quickly adapt to face new challenges.<sup>1</sup> To succeed in the future, individuals will need versatile skills and the chance to switch career paths at least once during their working lives.

As a response to these rapid changes, educational theorists have spoken of entry into the 'learning age'.<sup>2</sup> This emphasises the importance of continuing to learn and develop skills throughout a person's life with individuals no longer ending their formal education aged 18 or 21. Instead, individuals must be equipped with the ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn new and existing skills throughout their careers and this means 'skills' education needs to be flexible, responsive and accessible.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, learners must have full ownership of their education and be encouraged to direct their learning via personalised pathways that are facilitated by technology creating integrated pathways that can widen participation and engagement.<sup>4</sup> Critical thinking, problem-solving and adaptability are also vital to navigating a more unstable working life.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile growing collaboration between educational institutions, employers, government, local authorities and other organisations across national, regional and local levels will need to be fostered to first identify the skills required and then impart those skills to employees.<sup>6</sup>

The global economies that can quickly embrace these requirements will have a workforce able to withstand sudden changes while seizing new opportunities that will inevitably arise.

Yet accurately identifying skills needs, and then meeting those needs, is notoriously difficult. In the UK, modern universities can play a key role in achieving this success. These institutions have a long history of partnering with employers and professional bodies to design courses that prepare students for careers in industry, business, the public services and other professions. Their close relationships with employers mean they are well-positioned to recognise skills gaps in their local, regional and national economies. Through their commitment to widening participation and innovative pedagogies, modern universities are already embracing the 'learning age'.

Yet too often, the media narrative remains that too many young people are going to university, with statements focusing on the need for vocational, rather than academic, routes. This displays a distinct lack of understanding of the different types of education modern universities deliver.

As this report will demonstrate, modern universities are already offering both vocational and academic pathways, and these can be successfully integrated. An increasing number of learners are currently receiving skills training in the workplace, and flexible delivery methods are being developed to better suit individual work-life patterns. In addition, the skills needed to succeed in a modern and evolving job market are being embedded in vocational and academic courses. This spans all levels of education from continuous professional development provision to professional doctoral programmes.

- 1 Schwab, K. (2016). The Fourth Industrial Revolution: what it means, how to respond. World Economic Forum. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/>
- 2 The Department for Education and Employment. (1998). *The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain*. CM3790.
- 3 Kummer, B (2022). *Accessibility and Flexibility Can Lead to Student Empowerment, Instructure*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.instructure.com/en-gb/resources/blog/accessibility-and-flexibility-can-lead-student-empowerment>.
- 4 Drexel University School of Education. (n.d.). How To Use Technology in the Classroom: Benefits & Effects. [Online]. Available at: <https://drexel.edu/soe/resources/student-teaching/advice/how-to-use-technology-in-the-classroom/>.
- 5 Kaplan, Z. (2023). *What Are Adaptability Skills? Definition and Examples*. Forage. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theforage.com/blog/skills/adaptability#:~:text=Adaptability%20is%20a%20soft%20skill,updates%20or%20their%20work%20environment>.
- 6 Jain, V., Mogaji, E., Sharma, H. & Babbili, A.S. (2022). A multi-stakeholder perspective of relationship marketing in higher education institutions. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*. [Online]. DOI: 10.1080/08841241.2022.2034201.

The delivery of this education also requires universities to identify skills gaps and embed those skills into existing programmes. Again, modern universities remain ahead of the curve. Their strong networks with their business partners and enthusiastic engagement with a wide range of initiatives mean they are well-placed to gauge skills demands as they emerge. In addition, the thriving research communities located within modern universities are researching current and future skills requirements and how best to impart those skills to their students.

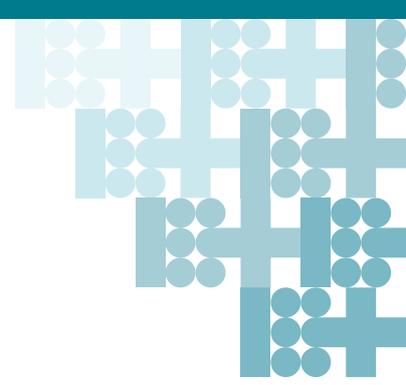
However, these innovations do not stop at identifying skills. Modern universities are also adept at tapping into externally sourced funding streams for the delivery of skills education. This has allowed them to adjust impressively to the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, which has dramatically impacted the sources of funding available to the higher education sector.

This report seeks to build understanding of the work moderns are undertaking and delivering for the skills sector. By recognising, supporting and building on the work already being done, England can fill its skills gaps more effectively and embrace the opportunities to come.



## SECTION 2

# A brief history of skills provision in England



The concept and delivery of skills education in England have both seen significant evolution since the Second World War. The immediate skills shortage and high rates of children leaving education before the age of 15 were the priority for much of the 1950s. It was only in the 1960s, due to rapidly changing economic needs and technological advancements, that vocational and technical education became a focal point. This shift also coincided with the emergence of different approaches to delivering education and skills development.

The educational shifts of the 1960s led to the founding of polytechnics and further education colleges that provided courses emphasising practical skills, often preparing learners for specific trades and professions. The availability of apprenticeship programmes also expanded during this period, recognising the importance of on-the-job training for delivering the skills required by the economy. However, the growth of the UK as a service economy in the 1980s saw significant changes to the delivery of skills training. Many individuals lacked the employability skills to meet the needs of the changing economy leading to the introduction of the Youth Training Scheme in 1983.

In part, to address a shift away from the uptakes of traditional apprenticeships and the need for more transferrable skills and qualifications in the face of an emerging digital revolution, the 1990s witnessed significant change in the higher education sector. In 1992, the Further and Higher Education Act allowed polytechnics to apply for university status and took hundreds of further education colleges out of local authority control. Modern apprenticeships were introduced. Combining work-based learning with classroom-based education, the goal was to provide individuals with a pathway to gain recognised qualifications while obtaining practical experience in the workplace.

The pursuit of a more joined-up skills landscape has been the prevailing theme since the turn of the century. This emphasises a more coordinated approach to recognising the needs of both employers and the broader economy when delivering skills education. To help oversee this,

the Learning and Skills Council was established in 2001 to direct vocational training. The result has seen efforts at fostering engagement and partnerships between the various stakeholders in skills provision.

The higher education entry rate among UK 18-year-olds increased from **24.7%** in 2006 to **38.2%** in 2021.<sup>7</sup> With a greater proportion of young people attending universities, efforts since 2010 have focused on offering a varied range of learning pathways. One approach has sought to make apprenticeships more accessible, employer-focused, and industry-driven. As a means to fund and encourage the growth of apprenticeships, the Apprenticeship Levy was introduced in 2017.<sup>8</sup> The system requires all UK employers with an annual wage bill of over £3m to contribute 0.5% of that wage bill to the levy. This reform aimed to create a sustainable funding mechanism for apprenticeship training and to increase the number and quality of apprenticeships in various industries, including degree-level apprenticeship provision.

The establishment of the levy strengthened the need to include the voices of employers in developing the skills education landscape. As such, several employer-led bodies have been introduced, most notably the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), which is an arm's length body of the Department of Education (DfE). The aim of these bodies is to give employers a greater say in setting standards and designing skills curricula and ensure that the skills being taught align with industry needs. In turn, it is hoped that learners receive training that is relevant to the jobs market and so enhances their employability.

In 2021, the *Skills for Jobs* White Paper proposed further solidifying industry involvement by allowing employers to define the skills for various occupations, in addition to proposing a flexible lifelong learning model and reforming technical education.<sup>9</sup> Around the time the White Paper was published, Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) were established in England. HTQs, like higher national certificates (HNCs), higher national diplomas (HNDs) and foundation degrees, bridge the gap between

7 House of Commons Library. (2023). *Higher education student numbers*. [Online]. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7857/><https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7857/>

8 Department for Education. (2019). *Key facts you should know about the apprenticeship levy*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/key-facts-you-should-know-about-the-apprenticeship-levy>

9 Department for Education. (2021). *Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-for-jobs-lifelong-learning-for-opportunity-and-growth>

A levels/T Levels and undergraduate degrees. Offered at universities and further education colleges, HTQs are created by awarding bodies and employers, aligning skills and standards with industry needs, and so seek to ease progression to undergraduate study. Approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), HTQs are also part of an ongoing effort to enhance post-16 technical education and offer a vocational path.

The Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022, a pivotal legislative framework, was introduced to reshape the post-16 education landscape in the UK. Its primary aim is to bridge opportunities across the nation, ensuring individuals can access the skills necessary for sectors with pronounced skills gaps, such as health, engineering, and digital fields. This act places emphasis on local needs, flexible study options, enhancing the quality of education, broadening careers advice, and prioritising green skills. It represents a significant step towards ensuring that the UK's workforce is equipped with the necessary skills to drive economic growth and address the challenges of the modern job market and provided a statutory framework for much of what was covered in the *Skills for Jobs* White Paper.

Employer involvement was enshrined in Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) in a system of collaboration between local authorities, education providers and other stakeholders. These collaborations are designed to address regional skills gaps and align skills provision with local economic needs.

The Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022 also provided support for lifelong learning by including modules within the regulatory framework of higher and further education. This paved the way for the introduction of The Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill in early 2023.

This bill enables the implementation of a lifelong loan entitlement from 2025 which seeks to radically change the student loan fees system for prospective students. It will provide individuals with a loan of up to £37,000, which can be used flexibly throughout a person's lifetime to pay for courses, modules or full degrees at colleges or universities from levels 4 to 6. This development would enable England to embrace the Learning Age, allowing learners to better

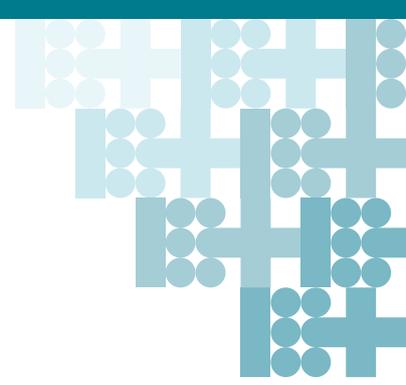
navigate the rapid economic and social changes that will accompany the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Overall, skills education in England has evolved significantly since WWII as the economy changed over the decades. Originally teaching occupation-specific abilities, the focus shifted to transferable and enabling skills that aid career shifts amid fluctuating demands. This has led to statutory collaborations between authorities, education providers, and industry on skills development. Modern universities have adapted, designed, and led on delivering essential skills provision through the course of these changes.

The development and introduction of a flexible, lifelong learning entitlement from 2025 promises further evolution, requiring convenient, transferable skills development. Widening access to new prospective students is crucial for full rewards and modern universities are well positioned to drive this through existing diverse, accessible skills offerings. Their ability to reach underrepresented learners will be vital in realising lifelong learning's full potential.

**Section 3** focuses on skills taught by modern universities, and MillionPlus institutions in particular, and how they deliver this provision. It highlights their role in addressing public and private sector workforce needs and how their education and training programmes build workforce capacity in teaching, nursing, policing, social workers and other key public and private sector roles. It also showcases how they develop graduates' adaptable lifelong learning abilities through flexible delivery designed to ready students for rapidly changing career demands.

**Section 4** provides an overview of how MillionPlus universities identify skills needs through extensive collaboration with employers, engagement with official bodies and their own research. This section explains how this multifaceted approach allows them to accurately pinpoint skills gaps and emerging occupational demands. Their analysis and responsiveness in developing skills provision also ensures graduates gain expertise that meets business and workforce requirements.



Finally, **section 5** discusses how modern universities in England fund skills education. This is achieved through a variety of funding sources, including student loans, government grants, the apprenticeship levy, partnerships with businesses and public service providers, and available regional funding streams.

The section illustrates how MillionPlus universities can adapt to changing funding landscapes by seeking innovative ways such as crowdfunding and partnerships to sustain skill provision. However, the section shows that these innovations only go so far. If the true value of modern universities' skills provision to England's skills capacity is to be realised there is an immediate need for a sustainable funding model.



## SECTION 3

# Type of skills being delivered and how they are delivered

The UK is currently experiencing an acute skills shortage resulting in a recruitment challenge for employers. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), as of November 2022, 13.3% of businesses reported staff shortages.<sup>10</sup> This situation has seen a rise in unfilled job vacancies, reaching nearly 1.2 million by the close of 2022.<sup>11</sup> The same sources report that some sectors including accommodation and food services and construction, have been disproportionately affected. In particular, smaller businesses with less than 49 employees are struggling to find suitable candidates, with almost 80% having reported facing recruitment difficulties.<sup>12</sup>

Smaller businesses, constituting 99.9% of the business landscape and often vital for local economies, are pivotal to overall economic growth.<sup>13</sup> However, this challenge extends beyond the private sector. Schools are contending with significant shortages of teachers,<sup>14</sup> and nursing has a vacancy rate of approximately 10%.<sup>15</sup>

Amidst this landscape, modern universities are delivering the skills and knowledge to help fill gaps at both the national and local levels. Collectively, modern universities train **66%** of all nurses<sup>16</sup> and around **60%** of teachers.<sup>17</sup>

They are also solidly rooted in their local communities which means they are able to identify and meet the skills needs of the small to medium-sized businesses that are feeling the skills shortage most acutely.

## WHAT SKILLS ARE BEING TAUGHT?

### Delivering for our public services

Given their shared mission of delivering skilled workers to industry and public services, combined with their history of delivering technical education, the delivery of practical skills remains central to provision at modern universities, including those affiliated to MillionPlus.

MillionPlus modern universities have strong public services portfolios which educate future teachers, police officers and health and social care workers.

For example, **The University of Worcester** is a leader in teacher training and other education-related courses, encompassing all levels of education and special education needs. Recently Worcester's Institute for Education (IfE) identified specific needs within the Early Years Sector and is building skills provision in that area to be rolled out in 2024. **Leeds Trinity University** plays a central role in training their region's Police Constables, while the **University of Cumbria** trains a range of healthcare workers, from allied healthcare and social care practitioners to nurses and providing specialist training to paramedics in Cumbria and beyond.

**Staffordshire University** has developed its Centre for Health Innovation that not only successfully trains the region's healthcare workers but applies evidence-based solutions to deliver the skills required for success in the modern healthcare system.

10 Rabaiotti, G. (2023) *Business insights and impact on the UK economy*. Office for National Statistics. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/economicoutputandproductivity/output/datasets/businessinsightsandimpactontheukeconomy>

11 House of Commons Library (2023) *Skills and labour shortages*. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2023-0001/>

12 National Federation of Self Employed & Small Businesses Limited (2023) *Scaling Up Skills*. Available at: <https://www.fsb.org.uk/resource-report/scaling-up-skills.html>

13 National Federation of Self Employed & Small Businesses Limited (2023) *UK Small Business Statistics*. Available at: <https://www.fsb.org.uk/uk-small-business-statistics.html>

14 Education Committee (2023) *Education Committee launches new inquiry into teacher recruitment, training, and retention*. UK Parliament. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/203/education-committee/news/194283/education-committee-launches-new-inquiry-into-teacher-recruitment-training-and-retention/>

15 NHS Employers (2023) *Latest NHS workforce and vacancy statistics*. Available at: <https://www.nhsemployers.org/news/latest-nhs-workforce-and-vacancy-statistics>

16 MillionPlus (2023) *Who trains the nurses? Universities and the placements shortfall*. Available at: [https://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Policy\\_briefing\\_-\\_Who\\_trains\\_the\\_nurses\\_-\\_universities\\_and\\_the\\_placements\\_shortfall\\_Feb23.pdf](https://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Policy_briefing_-_Who_trains_the_nurses_-_universities_and_the_placements_shortfall_Feb23.pdf)

17 HESA (2022) *HE student enrolments by HE provider and subject of study 2019/20 to 2021/22*. Available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-49#metadata>



### INNOVATION AND ENGAGEMENT AT SUFFOLK

The University of Suffolk uses several channels to identify which industries and sectors will require new skills and knowledge and how these can be introduced through different courses. This insight is gained by working in collaboration with a range of partners, and the university is proud to be a patron of both the Suffolk Chamber of Commerce and TechEast as well as providing higher education representation on the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP Board) IoT and the New Anglia LEP (NALEP) as well as working closely with local authorities.

In addition to utilising programme and course advisory panels to develop the curriculum, the university is also proactive in identifying new skill requirements. This includes the Innovation and Engagement Advisory Board (IEB) that provides support, guidance and direction in establishing the university as one of the region's critical business support agencies, the provider of choice for knowledge exchange, innovation, and entrepreneurship as well as a state-of-the-art training provider.

The university is committed to understanding the needs of the region through significant projects such as:

- EDF Sizewell C, which is delivering an £18bn project looking at a workforce requirement of around 65,000 from L2 to L7.
- Freeport East – Logistics and Freeports project (The university will be offering an apprenticeship in this area from January 2024).
- The Smart House at BT's Adastral Park is used as a "living laboratory" utilising systems to evaluate the performance of sustainable materials, low carbon energy and water consumption.

Many MillionPlus institutions are essential to delivering the skills needed by their local economies. This includes the **University of Sunderland**, which has developed over 130 accredited and 140 non-accredited programmes through its dedicated Corporate and Professional Education (CaPE) team, that focus on practical skills in the areas of medicine, nursing, pharmacy, paramedic sciences, social work and policing. Providing the required skills for trainees to enter the public services, however, is only one important part of MillionPlus provision.

Increasingly, higher education institutions are upskilling existing members of staff to meet emerging gaps in the economy or in response to the changing demands of existing jobs. One example is the National Professional Qualifications that **Leeds Trinity University** delivers in partnership with the Church of England Educational Office. These qualifications, comprising four programmes, are aimed at providing school leadership skills to qualified teachers looking to advance their careers.





### WORK-READY SKILLS

Learning and teaching modalities at Staffordshire University emphasise problem-solving, real-world scenario responses and work-integrated curricula. The university's signature pedagogies, Phenomenon Based Learning and Simulation Based Education approaches, are designed for learners to develop the subject-specific and transferable skills they need to succeed in the world of work.

Staffordshire's collaborative and digitally enhanced teaching spaces, such as the Catalyst Building and the Centre for Health Innovation were purpose-built to deliver on its signature pedagogies, enhance employer engagement with students and provide access to digitally enhanced spaces. The university supports the skills development of over 22,500 students a year (includes partnership provision) and delivers a variety of higher learning and industry-led qualifications.

The university's varied course portfolio is delivered through its academic strategy and employability framework which integrates theory, practice and employability. These maximise different type of learning opportunities that develop life-wide learning skills; enable engagement in research and enquiry; enhance understanding of people, place and society contexts; support the mastery of digital skills and increases career readiness.

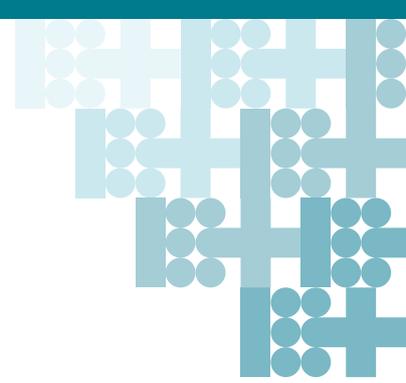
Learners graduate with significant subject-specific and transferable skills to enable them to secure graduate employment including confidence and self-efficacy, entrepreneurial behaviours and problem solving.

### SKILLS FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR

In addition to delivering the skills required for the public services, modern universities also supply high-level skills needed by private industry, often specific to their regions. The proximity of the **University of Suffolk** to British Telecom's (BT) innovation labs at Adastral Park has led to close collaboration. This has resulted in programmes at the university focused on computer science, digital networks and cybersecurity to help meet the core skills requirements of BT. Furthermore, the DigiTech Smart House Project headed by BT has seen collaborative research and learning opportunities to build regional capacity for designing, building and occupying sustainable homes.

Likewise, the needs of the forestry industry in Cumbria has seen the **University of Cumbria** develop a unique Development Woodland Officer Apprenticeship, while the university also works closely with Sellafield Ltd to accommodate the skills needed for the region's world-leading nuclear waste processing and decommissioning industry. The **University of Sunderland** has continuously adapted to meet the changing needs of the local community and industry, offering a diverse range of courses and degrees. It was among the first to offer Social Work and Youth Work apprenticeships, has an extensive offer in health-related apprenticeships and supports the development of skills essential to technology industries and creative and performing arts in the region. While the **University of the Creative Arts (UCA)** fills an important skills need in the creative arts sector. Often in the shadow of other sectors, the creative arts is a £100bn industry in the UK. **UCA** covers traditional creative skills like crafts, textiles, fine art, fashion and photography, as well as technical disciplines like film and animation. In addition, the university has a School of Business for the Creative Industries that is unique in the sector and meets the specific challenge of merging creativity and business. This equips learners with highly transferrable skills, including creative thinking, problem-solving, effective communication, presentation, and proficiency in creative software and hardware.

Modern universities have also evolved to deliver continuing professional development (CPD) provision. The **University of Central Lancashire** offers short courses across a range of specialist areas, including management, human resources and nursing and healthcare. While some of these



courses are standalone, others are accredited, meaning learners can work towards a university qualification.

What all this demonstrates is that modern universities have a long history of delivering skills-based education that continues to evolve to meet the needs of their regions and wider economy. Put simply, without the skills, education, training and access opportunities they provide, many areas of the public services and private industry would cease to function effectively.

### SKILLS OF THE LEARNING AGE

In addition to successfully providing practical skills that employers value highly, modern institutions are also preparing learners to navigate the rapid changes expected in the economy and society.

The term 'the Learning Age' began to gain prominence in the late 20th century. Notably, the 1997 Labour Government published a white paper titled '*The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain*' in 1998.<sup>18</sup> It laid out a vision for transforming the education and training landscape to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing economy and technological advancements. The paper highlighted the need for continuous learning throughout one's life to adapt to evolving work demands and personal development goals.

The Learning Age framework aimed to foster a culture of learning that extended beyond traditional educational institutions and encompassed all stages of life.<sup>19</sup> It emphasised the importance of adult education, training, and skills development to enhance employability, personal growth, and social inclusion.<sup>20</sup>

Since then, the framework has evolved to include an emphasis on workplace training<sup>21</sup> and the economic<sup>22</sup> and social benefits<sup>23</sup> of expanding access to education to

adults later in life. This has served as a catalyst for discussions on the role of education in a knowledge-based economy and the necessity of equipping individuals with the skills to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

Education and training at MillionPlus institutions is helping to lead the transition to the Learning Age. Their curricula are evolving to build skills essential for success in the future, with provision being delivered in a range of settings. This is giving learners adaptable, entrepreneurial and transferable skills combined with ethical and critical decision-making capabilities. This equips their graduates with the skills to address society's big questions in the coming years. Some examples of these partnership programmes are:

- The **University of Cumbria's** Project Academy trains Sellafield staff with in-demand skills. Founded in 2016, the Academy offers integrated education, training, development, and certification in project management. Courses range from two-day overviews to degree apprenticeships. Delivery blends workplace, online, and classroom learning, fitting with people's daily lives. Though focused on nuclear, the skills apply more widely. Over 40% of the Academy's higher education students come from outside Sellafield, benefiting the whole region. The Academy builds nuclear skills immediately while giving learners transferable skills for their whole career.
- **Leeds Trinity University** has adapted its approach by embedding a skills framework alongside its existing programmes. This framework includes working independently, critical thinking, adaptability, managing professional life and outlook and ethics, diversity and sustainability. This equips learners with a common set of transferrable skills alongside subject-specialist

18 The Department for Education (1998) *The Learning Age*. Available at: <https://education-uk.org/documents/pdfs/1998-the-learning-age.pdf>

19 Hodgson, A. & Spours, K. (2000) 'Building a Lifelong Learning System for the Future', in A. Hodgson (Ed.), *Policies, Politics and the Future of Lifelong Learning*, pp. 191-206. London: Kogan Page.

20 Aspin, D.N. and Chapman, J.D. (2000) 'Lifelong learning: concepts and conceptions', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 19(1), pp. 2-19.

21 Richard, D. (2012) *Richard review of apprenticeships*. [Online]; Universities UK (2019) The future of degree apprenticeships. Available at: <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv:83575>

22 Preston, J. and Green, A. (2003) *The Macro-Social Benefits of Education, Training and Skills in Comparative Perspective* [Wider Benefits of Learning Research Report No. 9]; Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Institute of Education, University of London. Feinstein\*, L. and Hammond, C. (2004) 'The contribution of adult learning to health and social capital', *Oxford Review of Education*, 30(2), pp. 199-221; Jenkins, A., Vignoles, A., Wolf, A. and Galindo-Rueda, F. (2003) 'The determinants and labour market effects of lifelong learning', *Applied Economics*, 35(16), pp. 1711-1721.

23 Field, J. (2000) *Lifelong learning and the new educational order*. Trentham Books: Stoke on Trent; Schuller, T., Preston, J., Hammond, C., Brassett-Grundy, A. and Bynner, J. (2004) *The benefits of learning: The impact of education on health, family life and social capital*; Routledge. Aldridge, F. and Lavender, P. (2000) *The Impact of Learning on Health*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

knowledge unique to each programme. The university also supports local entrepreneurship which boosts business acumen, communication, leadership and resilience skills in graduates. They participate in the Ad:Venture program which is funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and coordinated by Leeds City Council. Ad:Venture provides full support to grow and maximise potential for new businesses through tailored workshops and further knowledge exchange is aided by Leeds Trinity staff leading hybrid workshops that equip startups with skills and tools to prepare for growth. Through this programme the university has built relationships with young, innovative businesses for future graduate opportunities.

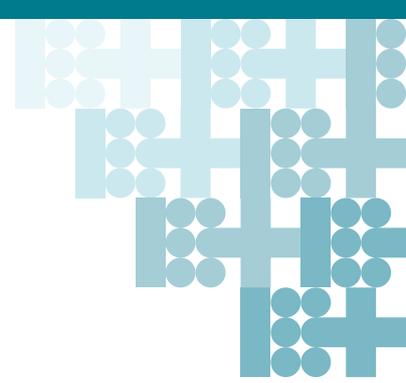
- The **University of Bedfordshire** has recently partnered with global IT leader Wisetek UK to run a Digital Marketing competition, aimed at future marketers. The partnership, facilitated by the university's Research and Innovation Service, provides students with work-based problems to solve. Solving these problems allows their students to gain practical experience by contributing to the digital marketing plan for Wisetek UK. Students and members of staff also visit the company's headquarters in nearby Milton Keynes to meet with senior members of the Wisetek team to discuss the project.
- The **University of Central Lancashire** has also partnered with businesses with the aim of enhancing students' employability. UCLan's Creative Innovation Zone (CIZ) enables students to respond to real-world business challenges. Winner of the Business/Industry Collaboration-University Sector award at the Educate North Awards in 2022, CIZ benefits businesses by giving them access to the ideas and academic expertise of students while providing learners with industry experience. This has seen students expand their commercial awareness and gain confidence as they embark on their careers.
- **Staffordshire University** builds skills through an academic strategy and employability framework. This combines theory and practice with a life-wide employability focus. The university imparts research and inquiry skills, understanding of people, place and society, and mastery of digital skills. Recognising that

upskilling and reskilling will be the norm, Staffordshire makes life-wide learning central to their skills strategy. Graduates will be able to re-engage with education and continue learning outside of an education setting. Self-evaluation skills from life-wide learning give graduates confidence to apply both formal and informal skills to new work settings.

Adaptability is increasingly seen as a key skill in insulating learners from change. A large part of this is the ability to think critically. Companies, particularly in the areas of law, business and finance, are increasingly embracing corporate social responsibility. Some see this as a prequel to corporate social justice which will see businesses address pressing social issues like poverty, discrimination and environmental damage. In part this will involve identifying and supporting marginalised groups, following ethical practices and reducing their environmental impact. Modern universities are centrally placed to equip their students with these skills.

For example, the **University of Sunderland** is using its diverse and multicultural identity to foster intercultural competence and global awareness in its learners. This results in students developing their awareness of other cultures and so allowing ethical decision-making skills to be developed. An ability to handle moral challenges with these skills is highly valued by employers. The result is improved employability of graduates while ensuring the university's alumni make positive impacts by responsibly engaging as citizens.

Finally, the **University of East London**, within its Vision 2028 strategy, embodies a careers-led education. Seeking to equip graduates for the immediate demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the ability to ethically navigate future advancements, the university has embedded a mandatory Mental Wealth and Professional Fitness programme into every course at every level. The skills that learners gain through the programme are recorded in their 'Careers Passport', an online repository providing a summary of activities and achievements, allowing solid evidence of those skills to be given for job applications and interviews.



## TYPE OF PROGRAMME AND MODE OF DELIVERY

In recent years, universities faced calls to expand programme offerings beyond traditional academic subjects.<sup>24</sup> Advances in technology also led researchers to rethink conventional teaching delivery modes.

Researchers have been quick to note, however, that technology only adds value when a learner-focused approach is taken.<sup>25</sup> Rather than being inherently useful, technology brings benefits only when it makes tasks quicker, easier, more efficient, and expands access to learning materials.<sup>26</sup>

When universities get this balance right, learning can be tailored to the needs of individuals.<sup>27</sup> Improving self-evaluation, reflection, goal-setting, and responsibility for learning. Likewise, blended learning has shown to be useful tool for developing soft skills.<sup>28</sup> These skills include communication, leadership, teamwork, problem solving, work ethic, flexibility, critical thinking, and time management.

It should be noted though that there is no 'right' way to teach the skills students will need to succeed in the future workplace. Indeed, to get the most from 'networked learning' – where peer-to-peer connections and knowledge creation is facilitated through online networks and communities – digital delivery should be blended with face-to-face modes of teaching.<sup>29</sup>

Yet despite significant innovations in how and where learning is delivered within England's universities, a common perception remains that universities primarily offer full-time, three-year undergraduate degree provision to recent school leavers. This report provides essential evidence to refute this thinking.

The skills offerings from modern universities, and MillionPlus affiliated institutions in particular, extend well beyond the traditional, with a broad range of programmes being delivered in increasingly innovative and accessible ways. While modern universities have fully embraced higher technical qualifications (HTQs)<sup>30</sup> providing more flexible learning for students and fresh engagement with businesses, this is just one part of their skills offer. Many MillionPlus institutions deliver continuing professional development (CPD) in their local regions, while evidence-based innovations are seeing new approaches to delivering skills education at institutions. This delivery of the skills critical for the success of businesses is an essential, yet often overlooked, function of universities.

Further to this, the challenges of delivering education and training during the pandemic saw the acceleration of online learning platforms, allowing for more flexible delivery of courses and the breaking down of traditional barriers to accessing higher education.

The **University of Cumbria's** National School of Forestry exemplifies how modern skills education is meeting the specific needs of regions. One of the school's recent additions is the Professional Forester Degree Apprenticeship. This programme equips students with practical skills, relevant knowledge and appropriate behaviours through a blend of classroom instruction, fieldwork, online coursework, and on-the-job training. These skills are vital to Cumbria's forestry industry, and the apprenticeship benefits from the university's collaboration with the Forestry Skills Forum (FSF), a partnership organisation dedicated to promoting forestry education, skills development, and learning in England and Wales. The program has also garnered significant popularity among students, boasting a 100% retention rate since its inception.

24 Brennan, J. & Little, B. (2006) *Towards a strategy for workplace learning: Report of a study to assist HEFCE in the development of a strategy for workplace learning*. Centre for Higher Education Research and Information; Wilson, T. (2012) *A review of business–university collaboration*. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

25 Kirkwood, A. & Price, L. (2014) 'Technology-enhanced learning and teaching in higher education: What is 'enhanced' and how do we know?', *Learning, Media and Technology*, 39(1), pp. 6-36.

26 Henderson, M., Selwyn, N. & Aston, R. (2017) 'What works and why? Student perceptions of 'useful' digital technology in university teaching and learning', *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(8), pp. 1567-1579.

27 Beaty, L., Gibbs, G. & Morgan, A. (1997) 'Learning orientations and study contracts', in *The experience of self and flexible learning*, pp. 6-22.

28 Bischel, H. (2012) 'Blended learning for soft skills development: Testing a four-level framework for integrating work and learning to maximize personal practice and job performance', *Human Resource Development International*, 15(5), pp. 529-574.

29 'Networked learning, stepping beyond the net generation and digital natives', in *Exploring the theory, pedagogy and practice of networked learning*, pp. 27-41.

30 MillionPlus. (2020). *Levelling up: investing in higher technical education at universities in England*. [Online]. Available at: [https://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Levelling\\_up\\_-\\_investing\\_in\\_higher\\_technical\\_education\\_at\\_universities\\_in\\_England.pdf](https://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Levelling_up_-_investing_in_higher_technical_education_at_universities_in_England.pdf)

The **University of Bedfordshire** has broadened its offering to now include 16 apprenticeship standards, seven HTQs, six suites of CPD around Lean, Productivity and Management, 182 undergraduate courses across 16 subject areas and 128 Postgraduate courses in Engineering and Technology, Life Science, Arts, Business, Health and Social care, Education and Sport.

**Leeds Trinity University** has around 1,000 students spread nationally receiving hybrid provision. This is taught by highly experienced work-based tutors who have experience of working in the relevant field. The knowledge, capability and expertise that is passed onto students through this approach are significant. This illustrates how technological innovation can help the inter-generational exchange of skills and knowledge to go alongside the delivery of quality education.

**Staffordshire University** has become the leading institution in the delivery of microcredentials. These have been co-designed with local businesses and the offer will be further innovated through SPF-funded MC development underpinned by local economic and employer research to meet the skills needs of the city and region. They take the form of small, bite-sized units of learning that differ in size, complexity, and duration from traditional qualifications.

Providing flexible learning pathways and using varying modes of delivery, including in-person, distance, remote or blended learning, microcredentials are opening-up higher education to groups that would not otherwise have access to university study. The 'micro' focus of such provision also allows learners to target specific skills, allowing learners to gain relevant and in-demand abilities quickly, efficiently and in a cost-effective way. For this reason, many believe micro-credentials to be essential for gaining maximum benefit from lifelong learning initiatives.

The **University of Central Lancashire** (UCLan) is also developing its micro-credential offering in anticipation of a lifelong learning entitlement. This will strengthen the university's comprehensive range of undergraduate degrees, 35 degree apprenticeship programmes and research degrees, all of which are delivering skills essential to the local and regional economy. UCLan also supports the wider skills ecosystem through close working relationships with the Lancashire Skills Hub, their partner Further

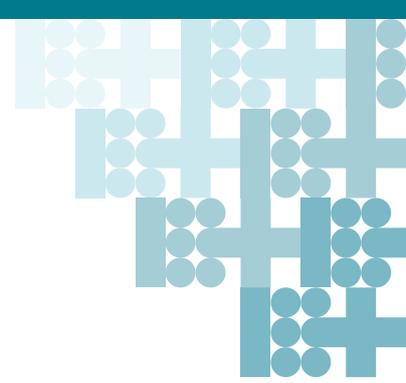
Education Colleges and their wholly owned subsidiary company, Training 2000. This led to them delivering Department for Education funded Skills Bootcamps, aligned directly to regional priorities around digital skills.

The importance of opening access to learners is also recognised by the **University of Bedfordshire** and the **University for the Creative Arts**, both of which provide classes in the evening so that people can learn around their jobs.

**Staffordshire University** has adopted an innovative approach to developing skills called job rotation. As Professor Martin Jones' contribution illustrates (page 18), the program exchanges unemployed individuals into open roles while upskilling existing staff. This approach more effectively meets needs for workforce training, business growth, and inclusive employment vital to local economies.

The **University of Sunderland**, like other MillionPlus institutions, has taken an evidence-based approach to delivering skills provision that has been informed by the university's own researchers. This has resulted in skills provision being based on the Universal Design for Learning approach. This approach tailors learning experiences and materials to individual students. In doing so, the needs and abilities of learners are recognised, helping to reduce obstacles to access, participation and knowledge acquisition. In turn, this helps engage students in their own learning journey which will aid future learning. Examples of approaches used at Sunderland include problem-based learning, extensive use of simulation facilities and interaction with employers/customers and patients/clients to replicate, as far as possible, 'real-life' scenarios. This equips graduates with skills and abilities that travel with them across their working life.

Finally, the **University of Suffolk** recognises that modes of delivery should also be tailored to the skills provision being delivered. Most undergraduate programmes at the university are delivered as 'block and blend' learning. This is an innovative approach that sees students focus on one subject or topic intensively for a 'block' of time, such as a few weeks, allowing understanding to be developed thoroughly by delving into the subject. Meanwhile, 'blend' learning mixes various methods, such as classroom learning, online resources, digital tools and self-directed



learning. Combining the two makes education more engaging, compassionate, personalised and effective for learners.

However, it is important that teaching is suitable for all courses. As a result, some courses, especially those that involve apprenticeships or are co-taught with apprenticeship programmes, continue to follow a semester-based learning approach at Suffolk. In this format, students undertake three modules simultaneously. This flexibility in skills provision is crucial to ensure that the teaching methods align with the content being delivered.

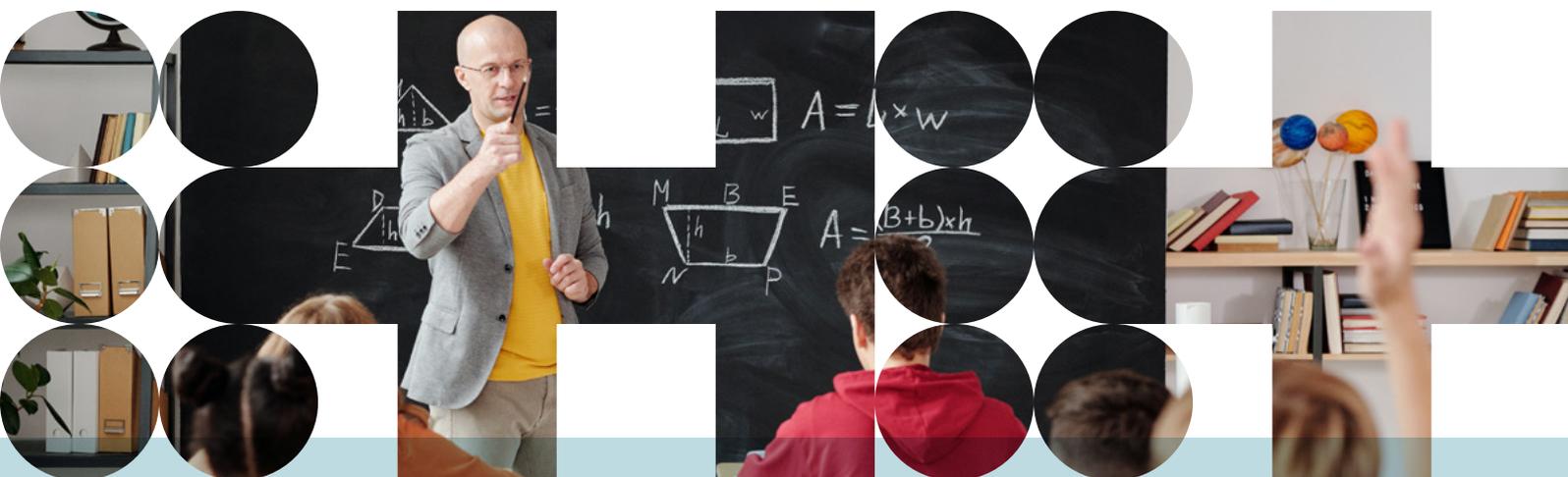
The skills shortage facing the UK poses a significant challenge. With over 1 million vacancies nationwide, major public services like healthcare and education face staffing crises. Smaller businesses vital to local economies also struggle to find qualified candidates.

Modern universities actively address these needs through targeted education and training. Their public services programmes supply teachers, nurses, police, and other essential personnel. Collaboration with regional industries equips graduates with skills matching local business demands—from nuclear expertise to creative arts to digital marketing.

Beyond imparting practical abilities, MillionPlus institutions also develop adaptable lifelong learning skills. Their programmes emphasise transferable skills like communication, problem-solving, and ethical decision-making to help graduates navigate a rapidly changing world. Pedagogical innovations allow customised, accessible learning experiences blending online and in-person instruction.

In response to evolving learner and employer requirements, modern universities now offer more continuing education, apprenticeships, accredited courses, and flexible learning options alongside traditional degrees. Their teaching methods also increasingly simulate real-world practice through collaborations, work-based challenges, and experiential activities.

Overall, MillionPlus higher education providers supply diverse, forward-looking skills development responsive to public and private sector needs nationwide. Through academic excellence and regional integration, they empower individuals while driving economic and social progress. Their essential, evolving role addressing skills gaps and fostering a 'Learning Age' merits greater recognition and support.



# From skills to employment and beyond



**Professor Martin Jones**  
Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, Staffordshire University

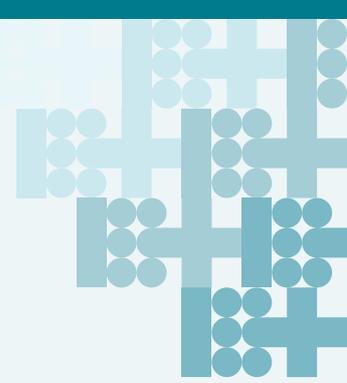
**Questions around the links between higher education and well-paid jobs for graduates are rarely far from the headlines. There is clearly the need for an honest conversation about the role of higher education and how the UK might achieve a better match between the supply and demand for graduate level skills. We need greater debate and synergy between the agendas and institutions of education, skills and industrial strategy, certainly in the context of Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, where there are too few graduate level jobs. We also need to incentivise the take up of opportunities in the areas where we want to grow the economy and to preserve areas where we have comparative advantage.**

This key ground—from skills to employment and beyond—has become apparent from the involvement of Staffordshire University in the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP), alongside being recently invited to join the Investment UK Shared Prosperity Investment Board for the delivery of the Stoke programme.

Staffordshire University works on next generation ideas, with one key area being the links between skills, employment, employability support (including pre-employment training and coaching), lifelong learning, flexible delivery, and in-work support. The idea of Job Rotation (hereafter, JR) and the role that higher education can play in this landscape, is important. JR provides opportunities for unemployed people and up-skills existing employees. It can be applied in both public and private sectors and could be particularly useful for sectors or businesses who struggle to recruit and could be a solution to the UK's long-lamented under-skilled labour market.

JR was originally developed in Denmark and the Nordic countries and was mainstreamed throughout the EU in the 1990s and early 2000s. JR is a form of job matching and a short-term job guarantee—it prepares people for the labour market by guaranteeing placements for unemployed individuals and it also guarantees employment and skills training for existing employees in the partner employer organisation. JR seeks an inclusive approach to skills and employment. An essential ingredient of the JR model is the role of social dialogue and the bringing together of relevant labour market partners, including trade unions and worker representatives. JR seeks an inclusive approach to skills and employment.

The JR process, particularly evident in Denmark, is based on a seamless 'rotation' model comprising four steps. First, there is a need to identify the training needs of low-skilled workers in a participating organisation or company. Unemployed 'substitutes' can free up existing workers for training without the organisation losing production/service delivery. This is the key challenge emerging with the LSIP in places like Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire. Second, unemployed individuals are targeted to apply for JR jobs. Unemployment benefits are topped-up, so they work for the agreed rate for the job, usually at the Living Wage. Third, unemployed individuals receive pre-employment and in-work mentoring, as well as access to vocational courses provided by partners (private, FE and HE). Fourth, workers being 'released' in participant organisations can access apprenticeships and Apprenticeship Levy funding can be packaged for training to up-skill, retain, and develop in-work progression.



JR meets three separate but inter-related needs of local economies: tackling unemployment, encouraging business development through staff training and learning and the promotion of lifelong learning. JR also helps disadvantaged labour market groups by providing a period of paid-work placement, along with the opportunity to improve their vocational skills and qualifications. Employers reap the benefits of enhanced training for existing employees, and the enhanced capabilities of future employees, improving their retention, reducing turnover and saving costs to their business. We know that it's difficult to engage employers/businesses in programmes, largely due to the number and complexity of labour market interventions. The JR model is effective and efficient in reaching its target groups and reduces the potential for programme duplication and employers being approached by multiple providers.

Our thinking at Staffordshire University is to develop a pipeline of JR activity by engaging a number of smaller businesses and connecting them to secure volume in the JR activity, allowing the development of bespoke courses, delivered by using the microcredential approach, for employees from the different companies. This is already a tried and tested approach in the employability sector that improves employer engagement. For example, in Health and Social Care, JR has provided career routes for low-skilled workers without loss of staffing cover for essential services.



## SECTION 4

# Identification and integration of skills in curricula

Higher education institutions must accurately determine skills gaps in the labour market to develop relevant programmes. This section examines how MillionPlus universities pinpoint national and regional skills needs.

Institutions are faced with several difficulties in identifying which skills to teach. First, persistent recruitment difficulties alone do not necessarily indicate skills shortages.<sup>31</sup> Wider economic factors like business conditions and labour costs can also impede hiring. Therefore, universities must employ multifaceted analysis to identify genuine occupational shortages. This can then provide an evidence base to shape their skills provision.

Modern universities rely on national surveys to get an initial idea of what skills employers need. These surveys give a general sense of the situation across the country, but they do not capture the specific differences in different areas. In addition, these institutions take advantage of their close connections to local businesses and communities. They use their unique position as central institutions to uncover the specific skills shortages in their local and regional areas.

Official bodies and plans are also a useful way for MillionPlus institutions to build networks and understand their local skills needs. But what makes MillionPlus members particularly effective at delivering the skills in highest demand is the ability to draw on their own cutting-edge research on occupational patterns, economic trends and education to design more effective skills provision. This positions MillionPlus institutions as leaders in their regions who provide an authoritative understanding of skills needs.

### IDENTIFICATION OF SKILLS FROM EXTERNAL SOURCES

#### Partnerships with industry

Aggregating diverse data sources to determine skills shortages is notoriously difficult.<sup>32</sup> However, appropriate skills provision depends on accurately identifying skills needs. This is where the long-standing relationships modern universities have with a range of stakeholders bear fruit.

Modern universities educate a significant proportion of public sector workers and the skills taught on those courses are shaped and accredited by Professional, Statutory, and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs). PSRBs provide standards and competency guidelines for the curriculum and learning outcomes, ensuring that students gain the necessary skills and knowledge to meet industry standards and professional expectations. Examples include the Nursing and Midwifery Council and the College of Policing.

For non-accredited courses, however, MillionPlus universities have devised a range of ways for identifying the skills needed by employers. The simplest of these is to ask businesses what skills they require. The **University of Bedfordshire** asks 1,500 businesses “What help do you need” every year. This provides a comprehensive picture of a region’s skills needs.

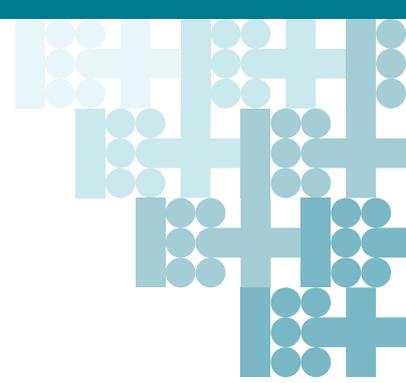
The close links many institutions have with businesses have, in many cases, been formalised to help course design. **Leeds Trinity University** collaborates with industry to identify skills gaps and then invites industry representatives to sit on course committees to ensure the university meets those needs. Likewise, the **University of Suffolk** is committed to understanding the needs of the region through existing projects with locally-based corporations like EDF and BT, and ahead of new ventures, such as with Freeport East from January 2024.

This approach is highly effective in identifying skills in rapidly evolving sectors, such as the creative industries, where the **University for the Creative Arts** equips graduates with essential expertise. The university is able to use its extensive networks with industry professionals, like creative directors and entrepreneurs, for insights into current and future demands in a system where skills demands are often hard to gauge.

As part of the UK Research and Innovation Creative Cluster ‘StoryFutures’, the **University for the Creative Arts** collaborates with prominent partners like the BBC, National Film and Television School and VIVE, as well as small and medium-sized enterprises in the areas of virtual reality, film, immersive theatre and games. This helps cater to well-established skills needs while responding to these newer skills innovations.

31 Richardson, S. (2007) *What is a skills shortage?* National Institute of Labour Studies, Flinders University, Australia.

32 Shah, C. & Burke, G. (2005) ‘Skills shortages: concepts, measurement and implications’, *Australian Bulletin of Labour*, 31(1), pp. 44-71.



**Staffordshire University** collaborates with industry to share expertise and gain insights into the skills required in specific sectors. Engagement with innovative sectors, including digital, Net Zero and advanced materials, often leads to joint programmes. An example is Staffordshire's MSc Entrepreneurship, funded by the Peter Coates Foundation, which gives learners the opportunity to develop real-world skills by founding a start-up idea into a sustainable, scalable and investable business.

Embedded regionally, modern universities understand local skills gaps and workforce demands. They collaborate with employers to understand their skills needs and then offer solutions through curriculum development and targeted training. This collaboration is ensuring learners are equipped with relevant skills and the opportunity to gain hands-on experience through placements, internships and degree apprenticeships.

### IDENTIFICATION OF SKILLS FROM INTERNAL SOURCES

As well as identifying skills needs from stakeholders outside of their institutions, MillionPlus universities are able to draw on their own research in identifying skills to teach.

The **University of Suffolk** is proactive in identifying new skills requirements. This includes their Innovation and Engagement Advisory Board (IEB) that provides support, guidance and direction in establishing the university as one of the region's critical business support agencies, the provider of choice for knowledge exchange, innovation, and entrepreneurship as well as a state-of-the-art training provider.

A unique feature of universities, when compared to other skills providers, is their ability to conduct academic research to identify skills needs. This is crucial in understanding skills needs in specific sectors. The **University for the Creative Arts'** academic research programme, therefore, is key for developing skills provision within the university and communicating changing trends to the wider sector. Through industry surveys, the course accreditation process, consultation with professional bodies and other organisations (e.g. the Creative Industries Federation), and student feedback, UCA assesses technological relevance, employability, and internationalisation. The delivery of skills that match emerging trends helps ensure graduates gain employment in the sector.

### BODIES, PLANS AND OFFICIAL DATA

In addition to their close links with employers, modern universities engage with a range of official bodies and plans. Often leading these local initiatives, MillionPlus institutions not only aggregate skills needs from these programmes but also inject innovation around skills into their local areas.

They are able to draw on the expertise of their own thriving research communities to help direct skills provision and shape the future skills agenda. This role means modern universities are central to the development of skills in their local areas.

The **University of Cumbria** exemplifies how modern universities fulfill vital skills needs in their regions. As Professor Julie Mennell's (page 22) contribution describes, Cumbria strategically partners with local stakeholders to address urgent workforce shortages in sectors like manufacturing, nuclear, and healthcare. The university's agile, employment-focused offerings boost local economies while creating accessible pathways to new opportunities.

# The importance of place: delivering skills for the people of Cumbria



**Professor Julie Mennell**  
Vice-Chancellor of the  
University of Cumbria

**As a Vice Chancellor and Co-Chair of Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership's (LEP) People, Employment and Skills Strategy group, I know first-hand what a significant role our universities fulfil, direct and through collaborative working, in addressing place and skills needs.**

In 2007 the University of Cumbria was established in one of the largest, most sparsely populated and rural parts of the UK, with a small population size (half a million), declining working age population, low HE participation rates, and five thousand 18-year-olds. In an operating context further challenged by its dispersed and poly-centric employment, skills and sectors' landscape, cold spots of higher-level skills and labour supply, health inequalities, travel and affordable housing constraints.

It was always going to be tough to establish a sustainable and successful university in Cumbria. Indeed, this challenge was exacerbated following the removal of the student number cap, teacher training policy changes, the student fee introduction (and subsequent freezing), and the removal of the student maintenance grant and NHS bursary for nursing and midwifery students.

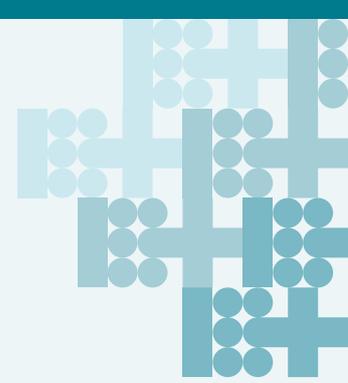
However, despite this operating environment and landscape, we are succeeding. We are transforming lives and livelihoods. We are bringing new talent and capability to and from Cumbria. We are embracing our civic responsibilities and our role in place vibrancy, attractiveness and 'stickability'.

We are doing this, by fulfilling the 'why' of why we were established. We are focused on the place, employer and sectoral needs of our region from advanced manufacturing, nuclear, supply chain and logistics, visitor and rural sectors through to health and social care, arts, education, professional services and STEM.

We are working collaboratively and strategically with our LEP, Chamber of Commerce, Local Authorities, Integrated Care Boards, employers and sector representative bodies to understand and address labour and skills needs – into and throughout our workplaces and workforce. We are co-creating and delivering new programmes and routes into and throughout employment from boot camps, degree apprenticeships to master's provision and collaborative research.

This is evidenced by our student population which grew considerably in 2022, and includes 46% of students studying off campus, and nearly two thousand degree apprentices learning in the workplace. We have students upskilling and reskilling through workforce development contracts with BAE, the BBC, Sellafield, Rolls Royce, the NHS, the Forestry Commission, DEFRA and Defence Medical Services.

We are looking to the future and our region's labour and skills needs. For example, this year marked the establishment of a new Institute of Engineering, Computing and Advanced Manufacturing and planning permission was obtained to develop a new University of Cumbria campus in Barrow, an industrial location of national and global importance with world-leading strengths in advanced manufacturing, sub-sea and renewable energy.



This focus includes working with the LEP, Cumbria's advanced manufacturing sector (across the full range of employers and types) and our FE partners to develop a skills pipeline from level 2 to address our considerable workforce development and labour supply needs.

We are responding positively to the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan and in many ways. This includes a significant contribution to the apprenticeship agenda with over a thousand paramedic apprentices across seven ambulance Trusts, over one hundred others studying across nursing and radiography (Cumbria boasts the first apprenticeship for radiography in the UK) and the creation of the Cumbria School of Medicine in partnership with Imperial College London. The latter will produce medical practitioners, from, for and into Cumbria and beyond, with a focus on general practice, public health and rural health.

As we look towards 2030, our role in and for Cumbria will intensify and impact further. We are playing a vital role and we are needed. With £66m from the Borderlands Growth Deal Initiative, Carlisle Town Deal and Barrow Town Deal to address place, skills and productivity needs across Cumbria and the Borderlands region, this is visibly recognised and reinforced.

Our new Citadels campus, The Carlisle Business Exchange Centre, and Learning Quarter presence in Barrow demonstrate the confidence and expectations regional and national stakeholders are placing in us to:

- boost the vibrancy and vitality of Carlisle city centre and to improve skills and productivity in the Borderlands economy,
- create more opportunities for people in Barrow and the surrounding areas to access further and higher education,
- address sector and regional skills needs in Advanced Manufacturing, Computing (Digital and Cyber Security), Business Management, Project Management, and Supply Chain and Logistics,
- ensure that our region and workforce is equipped to thrive.

Our university is a shining example of the transformational role universities have on and for place, working strategically and collaboratively with employer, sector, local-authority, and education partners; and with a Towards 2030 Strategy and funding secured to deliver continued and long-lasting impact to our region, communities, and economy.

Cumbria is but one example of a university serving its region, in a multitude of ways, to deliver benefit to individuals, place and the economy.

## LOCAL SKILLS IMPROVEMENT PLANS

Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs), introduced in 2021 and currently covering 32 regions in England, are designed to connect education providers with employers to ensure local and regional skills demands are being addressed. This provides modern universities with a rich source of data with which to shape skills provision.

They have been central to shaping the LSIPs that cover their areas, often using their central role in skills delivery to shape direction.

The **University of Bedfordshire** holds a Directorship of Bedfordshire Chamber of Commerce. This has built close relationships with local businesses from which skills demands are determined. From this, LSIP development is streamlined, the university can be more responsive to changes and the wider skills ecosystem of the region is improved.

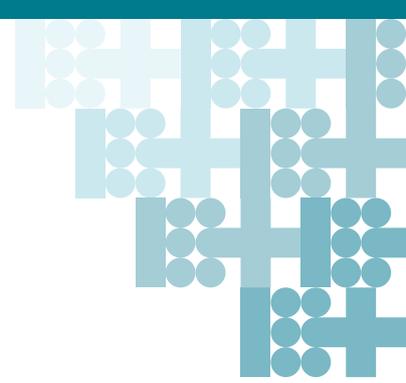
Locally the **University of Cumbria** makes use of the LSIP to identify needs. The structures around the LSIP also enable closer working with regional bodies, employers, other universities, FE colleges, and partners to shape and support the delivery of Cumbria's economic, as well as skills, strategies.

**Leeds Trinity University**, located in the West Yorkshire Combined Authority, has access to additional skills data from that Authority for determining needs. This is integrated with LSIP data to provide more comprehensive skills provision for the region.

The **University of Suffolk** provides higher education representation on its LSIP Board. Similarly, the **University of Worcester** sits on the Herefordshire and Worcestershire LSIP Board from where it helps lead on its design. In this role, Worcester has helped support sector skills council subgroups to map the region's employment and skills requirements. Examples of these subgroups include Business Services, Health and Social Care, Digital Skills, and Net Zero.

The **University for the Creative Arts** actively contributes to the Southeast England LSIP, responding to the region's priorities in the creative industries as well as in the wider digital and technology sector. The university's partnerships span over 700 businesses and ensures extensive work-based learning opportunities for students. This commitment to collaborations with external stakeholders provides students with the necessary skills for successful careers.





## LOCAL ENTERPRISE PARTNERSHIPS (LEPS)

Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) in England are partnerships formed by local authorities and businesses to stimulate economic growth and job creation within a region. LEPs play a key role in identifying local economic priorities, securing funding, and implementing strategies to support business development, infrastructure investment, and skills training. Their mission is to support vibrant and sustainable local economies by facilitating partnerships between the public and private sectors, ensuring that regional strengths and opportunities are harnessed for the benefit of local communities.

Modern universities are enthusiastic participants in LEPs and often lead initiatives by building networks with, and between, their existing partners.

**Leeds Trinity University's** involvement in their LEP has strengthened relationships with other key stakeholders, such as Leeds City Council, the Combined Authority and the Mayor's office. As a result, students graduate from the university with skills in high demand in the local economy.

In 2020, Worcestershire LEP identified health and social care as a key sector. The **University of Worcester** responded by establishing the Three Counties Medical Centre. The Centre will meet the region's growing demand for skilled healthcare professionals, both by training new graduates and providing professional development opportunities for existing professionals.

The **University for the Creative Arts** collaborates with Southeast England LEP and the Creative Industries Federation. UCA's Director of Technical Learning also helps improve technical training by leading the Research England Funded TALENT Commission which is focused on improving skills in the creative industries.

The **University of Suffolk** works with New Anglia LEP and partners, including TechEast led by Suffolk Chamber of Commerce, to create 5,000 new digital technology jobs in East England. Suffolk's tech education in computer science, IT, software development, data analytics, cybersecurity, and digital marketing has provided the vital skills needed for tech sector growth in the region.

The **University of Sunderland** uses insights from the North East LEP to identify skills needs. In response to

local needs, the university opened the School of Medicine in 2019. Sunderland also leads the NEWS consortium, consisting of education providers and industry, to coordinate skills training across the region. Working alongside the North East LEP, Combined Authority, and Education Development Trust has seen skills education shaped to benefit the broader community, including economically inactive individuals.

## WHERE INDUSTRY AND RESEARCH COMBINE

Of course, when it comes to determining skills, using either external sources or internal methods does not have to be mutually exclusive. Indeed, MillionPlus universities are adept at combining the two to provide world-leading skills training for their students.

For example, the skills provision of the **University of Central Lancashire** is research-informed and employer-engaged. UCLan uses several functions for this purpose. The university's Strategic Data and Policy Insight team analyses bigger trends within higher education and the wider economy with the aim of identifying opportunities and adapting to changes quickly and more effectively. Likewise, the university's Head of Workforce Development and Skills is a unique role within the region and allows UCLan to directly contribute to suitable skill discussions and platforms. UCLan combines this with engagement with external bodies. The Vice-Chancellor chairs the University Vocational Awards Council ensuring the university is at the forefront of vocational education in HE. As a result, sector-leading practice is fed directly into UCLan's provision. Meanwhile, UCLan's academic schools engage with stakeholders to identify gaps in provision and then work to fill them. This might be through the development of new degree apprenticeship courses, CPD opportunities or the development of major new initiatives, such as the School of Veterinary Science.

**Staffordshire University** combines labour market information and other external data with internal research to identify emerging trends, technologies, and areas of study that require specialised skills. Collaboration with local authorities, local businesses, industry representatives, community stakeholders, students and alumni ensures industry-led and work-based provision aligns with the skills required in the local, regional and national economy.

The **University of East London** has developed this combined process further. A study undertaken in 2020 found that fewer than one-in-eight UEL students went on to be employed by Times Top 100 companies. To tackle this the Diversity of Thought programme was developed to directly address the key stages of the recruitment cycle where those from marginalised backgrounds would be less likely to be represented. Co-created with industry partners, the programme has three core elements – mentoring, on-site visits and work experience – that are intended to build social and cultural capital among learners while driving positive changes in the recruitment process more widely.

Modern universities employ numerous ways to pinpoint needs, drawing insights from a diverse range of stakeholders, data sources, and original research. Central to this are the close and long-standing links they have with local and national employers. These relationships allow them to quickly and effectively adapt their skills provision to respond to changing demand. This collaboration with industry on programme development and work-based learning ensures graduates gain expertise matching business needs.

Engagement with national surveys, local skills plans, economic development agencies and professional bodies also provides intelligence on wider occupational patterns and trends. MillionPlus institutions play a leading role in these networks, steering skills policy in their regions.

Crucially, universities also conduct their own cutting-edge research on labour markets, industry shifts and skill demands. Their thought leadership also drives innovation and knowledge-sharing in their local skills ecosystems.

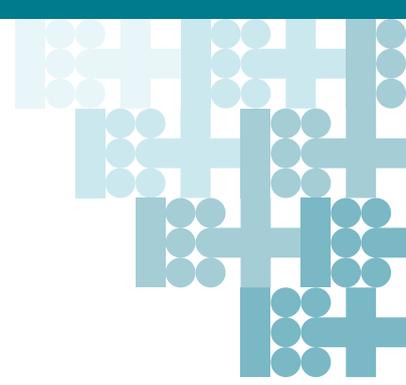
Combining world-class academic expertise with deep community integration allows modern universities to take an evidence-based approach to building skills provision. Their analysis verifies genuine shortages while identifying emerging needs ahead of time. The result is responsive education aimed at preparing graduates for the real world. Students gain up-to-date technical abilities reinforced by adaptable lifelong learning skills to navigate future changes.

Overall, modern universities' multifaceted skills analysis and development capabilities are unmatched. Their research excellence and regional connections make them highly agile providers of relevant, future-oriented skills. This sees MillionPlus members producing graduates that are benefitting employers and the economy at the local, regional and national levels.



## SECTION 5

# Funding skills education in England



Delivering high-quality skills training requires adequate funding. This section examines how modern universities attract investment to provide affordable, relevant education to meet labour need. While many undergraduate programmes receive student loan support, the real value of the £9,250 fee has declined to £6,500 for universities.<sup>33</sup> This has seen a growing need for more diverse funding for innovative skills offerings. MillionPlus institutions leverage financing from government, businesses, public services, and partners to sustain skills programmes.

Apprenticeship Levy funding has enabled expansion of degree apprenticeships tailored to employer requirements. Institutions also use grants from bodies such as the Education and Skills Funding Agency and Office for Students to deliver outreach, technical training and innovative programmes benefiting local communities. Funding targeted at improving regional skills helps modern universities serve their anchor role.

Partnering with health services, police, technology firms and other major employers provides work-based learning opportunities funded through contracts. Employers gain a skilled talent pipeline while students get real-world experience. Meanwhile, drawing on Shared Prosperity Funds and partnerships with economic development agencies finances skills initiatives improving social mobility and inclusion. Additionally, combining diverse income streams with dynamic delivery models can expand access to education.

Overall, modern universities skilfully leverage public, private and charitable funding alongside student fees to provide affordable, relevant skills education for all learners while meeting UK workforce needs. To continue financing these innovations a more sustainable funding model for skills must be pursued.

### GOVERNMENT AND INDIVIDUAL FUNDING

Much of the skills education being delivered at undergraduate level is funded through the student loans system. Some students also self-fund their skills training, with post-registration programmes for health workers often being funded in this way. However, what sets modern

universities apart is the high number of learners that follow non-traditional pathways.

The Apprenticeship Levy has supported the expansion of degree apprenticeship provision, but other government funding is made available for universities. **Staffordshire University** draws funding from the Office for Students, including funding to widen access and participation, develop degree apprenticeships and support the delivery of high-quality teaching. The university also received investment from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) – a government agency in England responsible for funding education and skills training for learners of all ages – for Higher and Degree Apprenticeships. Other MillionPlus institutions receive funding from ESFA for apprenticeship provision. This includes tenders submitted by the **University of Central Lancashire** to look at future skills needs for employers. The **University of East London** has also received central funding through the Office for Students to deliver an artificial intelligence and data science postgraduate conversion scholarship programme for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The aim is to increase diversity in the tech workforce while also addressing the digital skills gap.

### APPRENTICESHIP FUNDING

The Apprenticeship Levy has played a significant role in building skills provision at universities in England since its introduction in 2017. The funding has widened the provision of degree apprenticeships and MillionPlus institutions have been enthusiastic adopters. Using their long-standing links with employers, members have fully engaged with employers to determine skills needs and developed apprenticeship provision that is tailored to those needs.

As outlined in **Section 4** of this report, this has seen a large expansion in degree apprenticeship courses at modern universities which are now educating a growing proportion of students in the workplace. The opportunity for learners to gain practical skills and work experience while earning a wage makes levy funding particularly effective at two important aspects: widening participation in higher education and addressing much-needed skills gaps.

<sup>33</sup> Universities UK (2023) Opening the national conversation on university funding. Available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/opening-national-conversation-university>

The Apprenticeship Levy has also incentivised MillionPlus universities to innovate and develop new opportunities.

The **University of Cumbria** has invested payments from the levy into developing a Centre for Excellence. The centre is focused on providing high-quality support and resources to enhance teaching and learning practices within the university. Through promoting innovation in education and encouraging research-based teaching approaches, the skills of both students and academic staff are being enhanced.

The **University of Central Lancashire** is actively supporting innovative approaches to improve the efficiency of apprenticeship funding. The university is a key partner in the Lancashire Levy Transfer Network which is a platform that allows unused apprenticeship funds of up to 25% to be transferred between businesses in Lancashire.

Meanwhile, the **University of Bedfordshire** has developed a new opportunity that sees businesses fund knowledge exchange projects to be delivered by students undertaking work-based learning.

## **COLLABORATION WITH BUSINESSES AND/OR PUBLIC SERVICES**

As shown in **Section 4**, modern universities work closely with industry in their delivery of skills education. As well as collaborations to identify skills needs, MillionPlus institutions draw revenue streams from businesses and public sector organisations to fund skills provision.

Delivering skills to the healthcare sector makes up a large part of the **University of Cumbria's** skills portfolio. As such, Cumbria has formed a work-based funding route to train over 1,000 learners funded by their region's ambulance service. In return, this has created a sustainable internal recruitment pipeline for the ambulance service that delivers on the organisation's workforce skill requirements.

The **University of Cumbria** also delivers a large number of post-registration programmes for the NHS. These are programmes that provide additional training or education to qualified healthcare professionals. These programmes,

often funded by employers, are awarded to the university through a tendering process. Funding for the continued professional development (CPD) portion of this provision, previously allocated on a regional basis, has been devolved to NHS Trusts. Trusts are able to select providers which has increased the flexibility of funding. Through its Centre for Excellence, Cumbria has been awarded a number of contracts to deliver CPD.

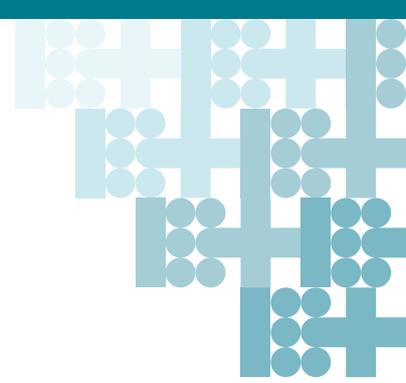
MillionPlus universities also partner with businesses to obtain funding. As discussed in detail in **Section 3**, the **University of Cumbria** has a close relationship with Sellafield Ltd to deliver project management courses, which acts as an important income stream for meeting regional skills needs.

Capitalising on the opportunities presented by the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), **Staffordshire University** is partnering with Stoke-on-Trent City Council to deliver the Stoke-on-Trent Higher Skills Accelerator. This will extend the university's microcredentials offer – short and focused courses that offer specific skills or knowledge in a particular subject – to businesses' workforce and communities. This will create skills development pathways and progression options in the Staffordshire region and form an important funding stream to help meet local skills gaps.

## **REGIONAL FUNDS, DEVOLVED BODIES AND OTHER FUNDING**

Another significant source of funding for skills is derived from programmes aimed at reducing geographical inequality. Many of the skills initiatives at modern universities were established during the UK's membership of the European Union (EU). This allowed institutions to access the EU's financial instruments, including the European Social Fund (ESF), the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Focused on supporting employment, education, and social inclusion, these funds were valuable to universities seeking to improve local and regional skills.

Following the UK's withdrawal from the EU, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) has sought to fill the funding gap for skills programmes. However, the transition has led to issues, including the reduced size of the UKSPF relative to



ESIF,<sup>34</sup> a more burdensome application process<sup>35</sup> and a less responsive regional allocation of funds.<sup>36</sup> Yet programmes, such as Multiply which aims to boost numeracy skills, is helping to fund skills provision at MillionPlus institutions.

However, given ESIF has been central to funding large parts of the skills offering from MillionPlus universities, institutions have had to develop fresh funding streams to support innovations in the delivery of skills educations where replacement funding is not directly provided.

Funding from regional bodies, particularly Combined Authorities, has helped fill this gap. For example, **Leeds Trinity University** has used West Yorkshire Combined Authority's 'gainshare' pot to develop their Skills Connect project which links graduates to local opportunities. While **Staffordshire University** has established its pioneering microcredentials framework through two regional skills projects.

Universities have also been adept at combining funding from more than one source. This has seen the **University of Suffolk** initiate a Make A Difference Social Enterprise Camp through a combination of Borough Council and Business Growth Coaches Network. The camp helps aspiring social entrepreneurs through workshops over a two-month period.

The **University of Suffolk** has also partnered with some high-calibre national training providers who have been able to contribute financial discounts, which are passed on to course attendees.

The **University for the Creative Arts** has also adopted innovative funding mechanisms. The university has used crowdfunding to raise funds for its skills education process. Businesses can sponsor students to offset tuition fees and other associated costs. While in 2021 UCA received a £1m charitable donation from a private foundation to support its digital skills programme.

Modern universities skilfully pool diverse funding sources to deliver accessible, high-value skills education. Their ability to blend student fees, government grants, business contracts,

public service partnerships, and charitable donations helps expand opportunities to wider spectrum of learners. However, changes to EU funding structures following Brexit have created uncertainty. Replacement programmes like the Shared Prosperity Fund do not fully substitute lost regional development funding that previously enhanced skills and social mobility.

As a result, MillionPlus institutions have shown increasing creativity in generating revenue, forging new partnerships and designing affordable programmes. But a piecemeal, project-based approach risks instability in provision. Ensuring consistent skills education requires a simplified, sustainable funding model. Outcomes-focused funding following learners across education levels, rather than rigid institutional divides, would enable more flexible lifelong learning.

Alongside sufficient base funding, competitive challenge funds for collaborative pilot projects between educators, employers and communities could spark innovation. But creativity is limited without core investment. Modern universities have proven their ability to make substantial impacts through delivering skills with limited budgets.

Their role as placemakers in their regions allows them to amplify investments by enhancing education and widening opportunities to more groups of people.<sup>37</sup>

Backing these institutions is the most effective way to build England's skills capacity. Their abilities to understand local needs, forge partnerships and attract diverse resources requires stronger policy support. Sustainable funding and autonomy will empower modern universities to fulfil their economic and social missions.

34 House of Commons Library (2022) The UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8527/>

35 Universities UK (2023) Hundreds of local jobs, skills and growth on a cliff edge across the UK as funding stalls. Available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/latest/news/hundreds-local-jobs-skills-and-growth>

36 Phillips, D and Zaranko, B. (2022). IFS response to UK Shared Prosperity Fund [Comment] The IFS. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/ifs-response-uk-shared-prosperity-fund>

37 MillionPlus (2022) Staying local to go far: modern universities as placemakers. Available at: <https://www.millionplus.ac.uk/policy/reports/research-report-staying-local-to-go-far-modern-universities-as-placemakers>

# Conclusion

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**The skills gap facing the UK poses a major economic threat. Persistent shortages in key occupations slow growth and hamper public services. This has resulted in one million vacancies nationwide and schools and hospitals struggling to recruit sufficient teachers and nurses. Small businesses vital to local economies also cannot find qualified workers, especially in sectors like hospitality, construction and digital.**

Closing these gaps requires expanding access to education that delivers the skills that match labour market needs but also plan for future skills needs. As anchor institutions woven into the fabric of their communities, modern universities are ideally positioned to provide this targeted, responsive training. Through strong partnerships with regional employers, these institutions have their finger on the pulse of local skills demands. Collaboration on course development ensures graduates gain expertise tailored to business needs, from project management to cybersecurity to creative arts. Work-based learning models such as degree apprenticeships provide further integration, enabling students to gain practical experience while earning qualifications.

In addition to building students' technical abilities, modern universities focus on transferable lifelong learning skills. Their programmes teach adaptability, communication, problem-solving and ethical decision-making to help graduates navigate fluid career paths in a rapidly changing world. Pedagogical innovations blend online and in-person delivery to help expand access and tailor the learning experience to individuals.

Expanding opportunities for those missed by traditional education has long been a mission of MillionPlus-affiliated modern institutions. They have led the way in developing degree apprenticeships and more flexible learning options to make earning a qualification achievable for wider groups of learners. Their commitment to widening participation continues as they build expansive continuing professional development offerings and champion new credentialing models such as microcredentials.

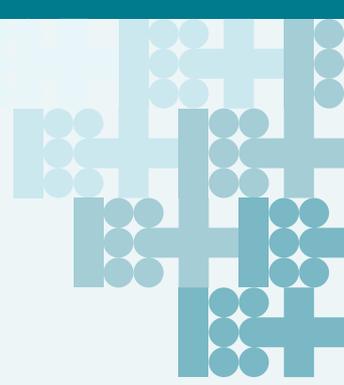
This drive for inclusion also powers their efforts to make education affordable. Modern universities adeptly leverage funding from diverse sources including government grants, business contracts, public service partnerships and charitable donations. But inconsistent replacements of lost EU development funds risks destabilising their ability to deliver cutting-edge skills programmes that aid social mobility.

Sustaining their vital training capacity requires a simplified, sustainable funding model. Outcomes-focused funding following learners across education levels could enable more personalised pathways. Challenge funds encouraging collaborative pilot projects between educators, employers and communities could further spur innovation. But creativity has limits without stable and consistent investment. Backing modern universities offers high returns, amplifying impacts by building on their regional integration and funding versatility. Their proximity to communities and employers makes them highly responsive providers of the skills needed now and in the future.

Overall, MillionPlus higher education institutions already play an indispensable role supplying diverse, forward-looking skills that drive prosperity across sectors nationally. The agility, connectivity and focus that enable their success needs greater recognition and strategic support. Investment and policy reforms should focus on increasing their autonomy and regional coordination capability.

As England seeks new talent to fill its skills gaps, empowering this undervalued skills development engine is key. Modern universities possess unmatched understanding of real-world needs and ability to open new routes to opportunity. Realising their full potential will be essential as the UK navigates the Fourth Industrial Revolution and builds an economy that leaves no one behind.

# Glossary



## **APPRENTICESHIP LEVY**

The Apprenticeship Levy, introduced in the UK in April 2017, is a tax on employers that is used to fund apprenticeship training. It is payable by all employers with an annual pay bill of more than £3m, at a rate of 0.5% of their total pay bill. The levy is designed to encourage employers to invest in apprenticeship programmes and to improve the quality and quantity of apprenticeships. The funds raised by the levy are placed into a digital account which employers can use to pay for apprenticeship training and assessment, with the Government providing a 10% top-up to the funds. The levy aims to increase apprenticeship opportunities and boost both productivity and skill levels within the workforce.

## **COMBINED AUTHORITIES**

Combined Authorities in England are regional governance structures that bring together multiple local councils, including city and county councils, to work collectively on key issues affecting their areas. These authorities have elected mayors who provide strategic leadership and decision making. Their primary purpose is to coordinate and improve services like transportation, housing, and economic development, enabling more efficient and integrated policymaking to address the specific needs and priorities of their regions while promoting local growth and prosperity.

## **EUROPEAN STRUCTURAL AND INVESTMENT FUNDS (ESIF) AND THE UK SHARED PROSPERITY FUND (UKSPF)**

The European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) provides financing to European Union member states to boost economic development and job growth. Funding supports projects creating jobs, upgrading infrastructure, and assisting disadvantaged communities. Covering areas like research, infrastructure, small businesses, employment, and social inclusion, England received around €8bn from the fund between 2014 and 2020. ESIF funding in England ceased in 2020 following the UK's exit from the EU.

As a substitute for ESIF funding, the UK Government introduced the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) in 2021. The UKSPF aims to "level up" and create opportunities across the UK by investing in skills, community and business development, and local infrastructure. It is designed to reduce inequalities between communities, with a focus on areas that have experienced less economic growth as more prosperous areas.

## **LOCAL SKILLS IMPROVEMENT PLANS (LSIPS)**

Introduced in the UK Government's *Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth* White Paper in January 2021, Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) are strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing and upgrading workforce skills within an area. LSIPs actively involve local stakeholders, such as employers, educational institutions, and community organisations, in identifying skill gaps, setting priorities and implementing targeted training and development programmes. The plans aim to foster economic growth, employment opportunities, and overall prosperity by ensuring that the local workforce has the necessary skills to meet regional labour market demands.



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