



Breaking down barriers to opportunity through skills excellence

Edited by Stephen Exley



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Foreword

Ben Blackledge is CEO of WorldSkills UK
and David Gallagher is CEO of NCFE



There is a danger that the discussion on the need for excellence in skills can very quickly become tired and clichéd. It can be misunderstood as elitism and just applicable for the few, or is obscured by calls for greater investment and a more responsive skills system, meaning the best we feel able to deliver for the majority is competence.

And whilst a competent workforce is of course a hugely important foundation stone, competence alone will not deliver the inclusive, motivated, and productive workforce that we could and should aspire to - not just for economic benefits, but to support people to find meaning and fulfillment in a lifetime of learning and work.

What better way to lift our ambitions to loftier heights than to capture the magic of excellence in education and training, and to share this far and wide throughout our technical and vocational system, with the ultimate goal of making excellence accessible for everyone.

This fantastic collection of essays seeks to contribute to this very goal. It's a wonderful range of expert opinions and insights on the different facets of excellence and provides diverse, thought-provoking, and very personal viewpoints on what the term means to them, from an outstanding cast of individuals, partners, and key figures across the sector. We are delighted to be working together as NCFE and WorldSkills UK to continue to champion the mainstreaming of excellence in the UK's technical and vocational education system. This is why we're pleased to introduce this collection and why we continue to invest in and develop new ventures such as the WorldSkills UK Centre of Excellence.

The Centre of Excellence has rapidly become a cauldron of ideas, innovation, and inspiration, finding and harnessing excellence where it exists, codifying the art and the science of exceptional teaching and learning, and in turn, distributing this insight and intelligence into the system where it can make the greatest difference.

Through the Centre of Excellence, we're investing in educators to engage, inspire and develop a teaching workforce that aspires to go even further for their learners and advocates for the highest possible standards.

We're enabling educators to embrace new techniques and practices from across the globe that can act as catalysts for raising standards across technical education – given the rapidly changing world it feels more important than ever to equip our educators with the tools they need to navigate and thrive in these new challenges.

Whilst we see the role of teachers as crucially important to the experiences and outcomes for learners, we also believe that it 'takes a village to raise a child'. Which is why the range of voices included here is so vital, we need different experiences, different perspective and different ideas to make skills excellence a reality for all. So, whatever your role in education and training, you are a critical part of the ecosystem and can contribute positively to creating a safe, healthy, nurturing, and nourishing environment for learners of all ages and stages.

In whatever capacity you're making a difference for learners, we hope you'll find ideas and inspiration within this report to support you to continue striving for excellence for everyone, including you.

Introduction

Stephen Exley is a freelance editor, Head of Policy, PR and Public Affairs at LTE Group, and former Further Education Editor at Tes



Producing a sequel that lives up to the standards of a blockbuster is no easy task, as anyone who has had the misfortune of sitting through *Grease 2* can testify. My role in editing this publication is to ensure it is more akin to *The Godfather Part II* than *The Mummy Returns*.

In 2020, I was invited by WorldSkills UK to edit a collection of essays written by eminent figures from across the technical and vocational sector, *Using Skills Excellence to Build Back Better*. This was the first attempt by WorldSkills UK to make a public case for excellence in skills, linking it to economic growth and increased investment and productivity.

Over a series of reports and events since then, WorldSkills UK has developed a distinct narrative around excellence which has influenced the design and development of the Centre of Excellence programme. It combines learnings from international benchmarking activity with a focus on the value world-class skills development has for regional and national economies, bound together by the conviction that excellence can and must be an inclusive, not elitist, endeavour.

In 2023 the Association of Colleges (AoC) conducted research for WorldSkills UK examining the ingredients for success in embedding excellence within technical and vocational skills at levels 3-5. A key finding was that although there was shared recognition across the sector about the importance of excellence, it was difficult to

derive a single definition of what it means from the evidence gathered.

So what *is* excellence in skills? In what ways does the concept manifest itself? And why does this matter to policymakers and politicians? That's where this essay collection comes in. WorldSkills UK invited a range of stakeholders, partners and key figures from across the sector, both in the UK and overseas, to put forward their expert opinions on the different facets of excellence identified within the AoC research, with the aim of setting out both what excellence looks like and what can be done to enable more people to achieve it.

Understanding excellence

The WorldSkills UK National Finals 2023 in Greater Manchester marked the first time the competition had been held across a number of different sites in a single region, with nine colleges, universities and training

providers coming together to host over 500 competitors from across the UK.

As Chief Executive of the LTE Group, one of the host providers, **John Thornhill** had the opportunity to witness a range of categories up close, and compare the perspectives of competitors with those of apprentices specialising in heritage skills whom he had recently met while they were taking part in the restoration of Manchester Town Hall. In his essay, he explores the interpretations of excellence which transcend disciplines and sectors. Reflecting on WorldSkills competitions from a different perspective,

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Adam Kirkpatrick recalls his personal skills journey, which culminated in being placed seventh in the world at the 2022 international finals in the industrial robotics competition. Adam's experiences enabled him to acquire a range of technical, professional and personal skills, which have transformed his career and life. Exploring the importance of skills excellence in social mobility more broadly, **Alun Francis** argues that experiences gained through FE – and WorldSkills UK competitions in particular – have a pivotal role to play in inspiring learners and competitors to improve their lives and those of their families.

Moving the focus towards the impact of excellence on regional economies as a whole, **Dame Ann Limb** examines what is needed to build an effective skills system. She draws on examples of successful eco-systems across the UK and Europe to tease out the shared, essential alchemical base elements which are needed to create pathways to success. And while much of the policy debate around skills centres on level 3-5, **Dr Mandy Crawford-Lee's** essay serves as a powerful reminder that degree apprenticeships have a key role to play in the UK's skills narrative, and are a success story that deserves to be celebrated. Meanwhile, **Jo Turbitt** shines a light on the importance of building a close and mutually-beneficial relationship between education and industry. She offers insight into how, with commitment, trust and responsiveness from both parties, employer collaboration can engender genuinely lifelong learning founded on adaptive, flexible learning paths. This theme is picked up by **James Tallentire**, who tells the story of how the West Midlands Combined Authority has utilised its devolved powers to develop a pan-regional skills system that can compete globally. Working in partnership with universities,

colleges and training providers, it has been able to respond to the demands of major international companies to help develop the talent pipeline they need. Successful skills systems do not, however, have to be limited to individual regions. **Dr Archana Patankar** delves into the approach taken by India as it bids to capitalise on its rapidly-growing economy, investment in infrastructure and booming working-age population. Little wonder, then, that the nation is bidding to become the skills and innovation capital of the world.

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When considering skills excellence at a system level, one often-overlooked area is that of equity, diversity and inclusion. For **Jeff Greenidge**, creating an environment in which every individual can excel is a critical precondition for achieving genuine skills excellence and widening participation. And inclusivity is not just a principle to be applied to individual learners; **Anthony Impey's** essay gives us a timely reminder that the vital role of employer engagement in

skills provision must take into account the challenges and opportunities posed by the particular circumstances faced by small businesses, as well as those facing large employers. SMEs have gone from providing the bedrock of the pre-levy apprenticeship system to finding themselves struggling to champion skills and talent development in the face of the state of 'permacrisis' in which they have found themselves. **Kevin Rowan** puts the spotlight on another set of key players in striving for skills excellence which have all too often found themselves overlooked: trade unions. He argues that the support offered by learning reps can and should play a major part in engaging low-skilled adults to participate in adult learning – bringing benefits both for individuals and the UK's economic outlook.



Challenging circumstances, it is fair to say, are nothing new to the further education sector. Over its 150-year history, City & Guilds has survived numerous political, economic and social shockwaves to stay true to its status as the royal charter body for skills. But the need to aspire to and facilitate excellence through the acquisition of skills is a constant, writes **Kirstie Donnelly**. Another pillar of the skills system over the last few decades has been assessment: the process of meaningfully measuring and assessing a student's learning. As **Emily Rowson** acknowledges, there is a growing consensus that current assessment methodologies are not adequately addressing the needs, or recognising the skills, of learners. Through its Assessment Innovation Fund, NCFE is striving to challenge concepts of excellence in skills assessment to ensure that it is measuring not what is easy, but what

really matters. In our final essay, **Chelle Travis** makes the case that the time has come for policymakers and practitioners alike to lift up their heads and think about the big picture behind skills excellence. Conceptualising the skills gap as being a problem in terms of technical skills alone, she argues, fails to acknowledge the urgent need to improve learners' personal and workplace skills, alongside their professional and technical qualifications.

As these essays make clear, skills excellence is not a straightforward concept to understand, define or achieve. Only by grappling with the complexities and challenges inherent in the process of striving for it can we hope to truly make this shared ambition a reality. I hope the reflections shared in this collection will prove to be a useful step in this process.

Laying the foundations for skills excellence

John Thornhill is Chief Executive of LTE Group

In November 2023, the WorldSkills UK National Finals came to Greater Manchester. We at LTE Group were honoured that The Manchester College's state-of-the-art new City Campus was chosen to host 17 of the skills competitions. It was fitting that finalists were able to display their prowess in fields such as 3D digital game art, cyber security and website development on this site. City Campus was designed, built and constructed during Covid. The modern, digitally-enabled techniques used in its construction flow through to how the space is used today. At its core, this is a campus designed to major on the creative and digital sectors, specialising in areas such as cybersecurity, computing, film and TV.

Less than a mile away across the city centre, one of Europe's largest and most important heritage restoration projects is taking place. The renovation of Manchester Town Hall, originally opened in 1877, is well under way. This unique building is being completely restored over several years and at a cost of several hundred million pounds. Here, a very different set of skillsets from those witnessed at City Campus during the WorldSkills UK National Finals are on display, from the retiling of mosaic floors or intricate stonemasonry to new stained-glass windows and regilding of historic features.

On the face of it, the disciplines being used at the two sites, just a short walk apart, represent very different sectors of the

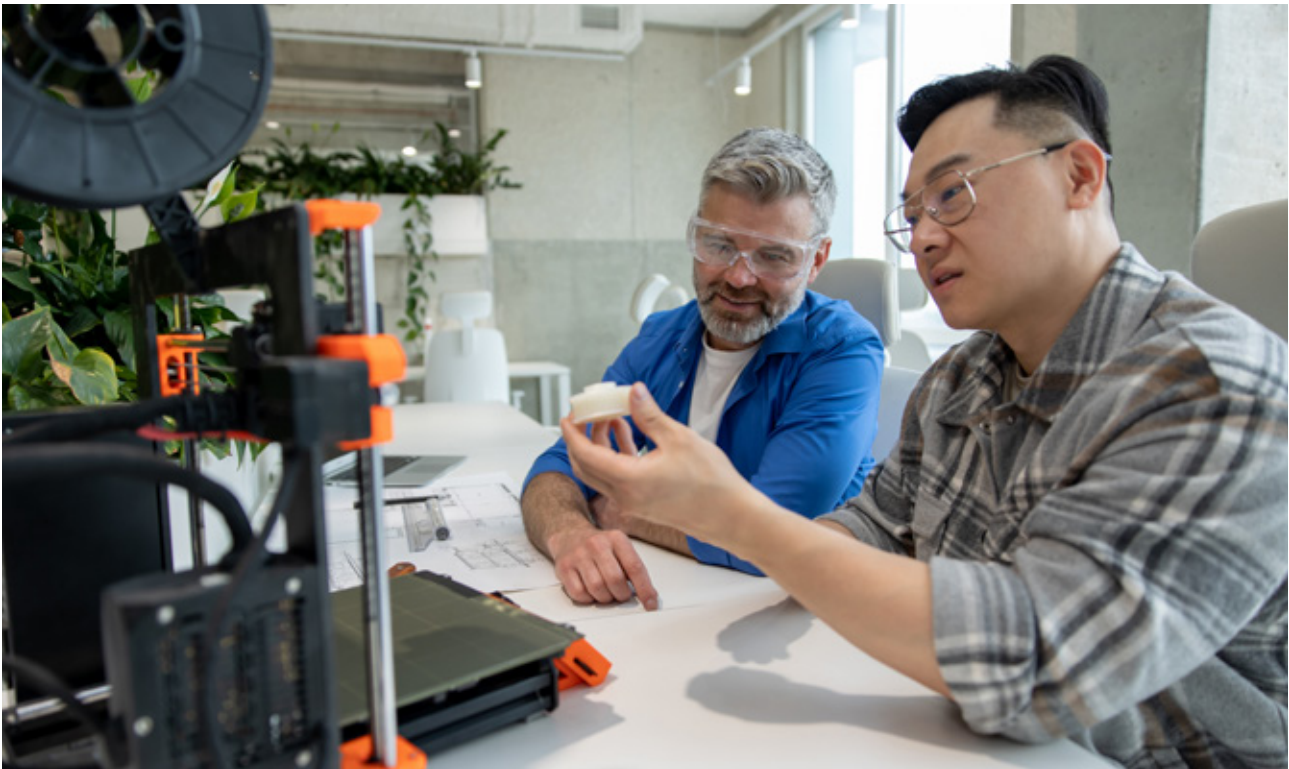
economy, and require distinct tools and techniques. Yet I have been struck by how skills from the past and the present are connected. When I have been speaking to the employers involved in the two sites, whether they be providing work placements for our students, hiring apprentices or offering wider learning opportunities in the city region, there are many common challenges for all.

Unsurprisingly, all of them have cited the scarcity of qualified candidates for work or projects, and reiterated the importance of WorldSkills UK in championing skills development and the need for more people qualified at "expert level". Which brings me to a common enduring theme I have encountered in all sectors I've come across. What was common to all employers was the desire to have employees

who are expert in their field or discipline. Interestingly, this was often described simply as *competence*. Irrespective of whether they work in the digital or heritage sector, employers value people who are competent to work efficiently, to a high-quality standard, and to complete work for customers within an allotted time. They value people who can work on different projects within different teams, develop new solutions to customer requests, and troubleshoot problems on site.

In another time and place the term artisan or master craftsman may have been used, but essentially it boils down to someone

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being experienced and competent in a very deep way in a particular field of work.

During the WorldSkills UK competitions at City Campus, I had the opportunity to sit down with finalists in competitions such as 3D animation and construction. I asked what made them successful and helped them stand out from others. All of them said beyond their grasp of the essential techniques and tools, the key element was having the time and space to practice and hone their craft. They also felt there was no substitute for putting in the hours and having the opportunity to learn from more-experienced colleagues on the job over an extended period of time. I have also chatted to apprentices and experts in stonemasonry and stained glass working at Manchester Town Hall, and they reiterated the same thing.

Despite huge shifts in technology and changes in how we live and work, what makes people expert and highly competent at what they do is a common core that has been evident for many years. Across different sectors and settings, having the time to practice, hone skills, be taught by specialist tutors and learn from others over

an extended period of time is key to laying the foundations of expertise. In the past there has been much commentary about the “10,000-hour rule”, with luminaries from Bill Gates to The Beatles cited as examples of the importance of honing one’s craft. Whilst this approach may be considered quite simplistic, it is clear that a number of factors are as relevant today as they were when Manchester Town Hall opened in 1877. Whether you use the term excellence, mastery or simply competence, you simply cannot get there without access to the right specialist training, tools and techniques, access to other people and projects to test this training with, and time to build confidence and develop a rich and deep knowledge of an area. And research into this area is clear that when it comes to the age at which people start to develop their mastery, the earlier the better.

All of this reinforces just how crucial championing skills development from an early age is. In a post-Brexit, post-Covid world, our future economy is dependent on us developing the next generation of experts, artisans and skills mastery. The WorldSkills movement, and all it celebrates, has never been more important.

Excellence through competition

Adam Kirkpatrick is a former WorldSkills International competitor for Team UK

I first became involved with WorldSkills UK in 2020 through Northern Regional College in Northern Ireland. At the time, I was studying for a foundation degree in mechanical and manufacturing engineering. One of our modules was industrial robot technology; around this time, the opportunity to take part in the industrial robotics category in the WorldSkills UK competitions came up. As it gave me the chance to put my newly-learned skills to the test, I jumped at the opportunity.

At the national competition, my teammate and I placed second in UK and progressed through to Squad UK, putting us in the running to take part in the WorldSkills International competition in 2022. The bootcamp training we received to develop mental resilience and mindset management, as well as the technical training sessions to gain the required skillsets for the competition, pushed me to keep improving between benchmarking sessions and eventually qualify for Team UK. I was thrilled to win the opportunity to pit myself against the leading countries from across the world.

During this time I got the opportunity to travel to Linz, Austria to compete in an international pressure test, designed to replicate the unique atmosphere and challenges I would soon experience for real at the 2022 WorldSkills finals. Due to Covid the international finals that year took place across several different countries; for me, it meant a trip to Esch-Sur-Alzette,

Luxembourg. Coming up against top competitors from across the globe, my teammates and I eventually placed seventh, an accolade which I will cherish for all my life. Being able to say I represented the United Kingdom in robot systems integration gives me a feeling which I still can't fully describe, it fills me with an unbelievable sense of achievement and pride.

I made some amazing friends and colleagues during my time as a competitor, many of whom I still keep in touch with today. The networking ability I developed alongside the technical skills also helps me in my day-to-day life. When dealing with projects at work, I can quickly turn to my contacts on my phone or LinkedIn and find someone who can advise me.

I learned a huge amount from taking part in the international competitions. Seeing the technical levels required gave me real drive to continuously improve and develop both the technical skills I needed in robot systems integration, and wider strategies for coping with this unique environment, which I can now apply to a host of scenarios in my career and life.

What exactly does skills excellence mean from the perspective of a WorldSkills competitor? For me, it really amounts to the skills, knowledge and ability necessary to achieve success and be the best at what you do. The approach I took was to analyse the latest, most advanced practice in my discipline and benchmark my own work

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against this. After identifying my areas of weakness, I spent time developing, learning and taking advice from experts and coaches who helped me to become the best competitor that I could be.

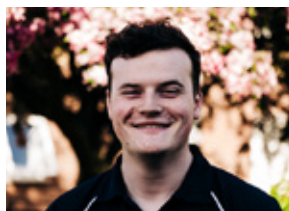
Being a role model to anyone who is keen to learn and develop is a great passion of mine. I became a WorldSkills Skills Champion as I greatly enjoy having opportunities to train and assist others in learning STEM-based skills. The ability to showcase what new technologies are available in engineering sectors to people from different backgrounds and inspire them to pursue careers in these areas is an amazing feeling. Seeing the next generation of young people showing an interest in developing the vocational skills needed to improve the industrial sectors in both Northern Ireland and the UK as a whole drives me on to continue striving for excellence in my field.

I must also give thanks to my former and current employers for their support. During my WorldSkills journey I was working for New World Developments, a composite door and window manufacturer based in Ballymena, Northern Ireland. When hearing about my experiences, they were keen to give me opportunities to find automation and robotic solutions to improve processes, improve quality and upskill operators and production teams. It was hugely rewarding to use the technical skills honed during international competition to help produce the best-quality products for customers.

Since then, I have started a new role at Wrightbus as a manufacturing engineer. As Wrightbus has begun producing their ranges of electric and hydrogen buses, it is an exciting time to be moving into a forward-thinking, zero-emissions vehicle business with big goals and targets for the coming

years. This role allows me to build on my own technical skills and hopefully to branch into the potentials of automation and robotics over the coming months. Having a supportive team around me has made the transition into my first engineering role after university comfortable.

Developing fresh ideas and perspectives on work is a great way to keep learning and developing. My time with WorldSkills UK helped my personal development and my ability to openly communicate with others, which in turn has helped me with settling into this new environment. So what else have I learned from my WorldSkills experiences? For me, there are five key lessons which have stayed with me.



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Be open to new and improved ways of doing things. There is always a way to better what you know, just take the time to learn and develop.

Be honest with yourself and others. If you are struggling with what you know, what you do or where you want to go, take the time to ask questions and discuss your struggles with colleagues who may be able to offer support.

Developing interpersonal skills is just as important as developing the technical skills you need in your profession.

Never stop learning.

Always have an eye on your next learning opportunity – being aware of and understanding what is going on around you makes for a better, more rounded individual.

Finally, and most importantly, **enjoy the experience.** At times it may be stressful, tiring, hard work, but one day you will look back and smile at the wonderful journey you've been on, and be amazed at just how much you have changed and developed without realising it.



Enhancing social mobility through skills excellence

Alun Francis OBE is Chair of the Social Mobility Commission, and Principal and CEO of Blackpool and The Fylde College

When I was asked to come up with an example of social mobility in action by the MPs on the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee back in 2022, I suggested that they look no further than WorldSkills UK. I chose it because it represents the best in technical education and training and because of the contribution which it can, and should, make to developing an alternative model of social mobility. This essay gives me the chance to explain more fully what this means – and why it matters.

For many people, the link between further education, technical skills and social mobility seems self-evident. But it is not

as clear cut as some assume. The policy debate about social mobility has been dominated by a focus on relative mobility. This measures the chances which someone has of achieving a high status and high-paid occupation, depending on the background they come from. It means that the focus of much of the work done to improve social mobility is focussed on “long” mobility; those individuals who are moving from modest origins to elite, professional occupations. Historically the main route for achieving this has been university – the most prominent examples being the Russell Group and Oxbridge.

This work is important but the model is flawed. To begin with, it is based on a hierarchy of occupations which places the professions at the top (with managerial roles at the very top) while those requiring technical skills feature somewhat lower down, particularly if they involve mainly manual activity. Second, it was for a long time assumed that the three-year university degree was the best preparation for elite occupations because it developed the generic, abstract intellectual skills required by the modern, post-industrial, knowledge-based economy. Third, it offered little in terms of alternatives, largely ignoring the needs of non-graduates while allowing non-university routes and the system of vocational qualifications to wither.

However the world turned out to be rather more complex than the knowledge economy prophets assumed. Many of the graduate jobs proved to be less satisfying and less rewarding than had been expected.¹ Some technical occupations yielded higher returns than supposedly “better” jobs. And anxiety started to grow about skills “mismatches” alongside increasing awareness of the importance of the “right” skills, rather than skills in general, in driving up productivity and economic performance.²

In this context, the need to grow alternative routes to high-skilled employment and to raise the status of technical learning has become increasingly urgent. Success in delivering this has been mixed. At a policy level there have been some remarkable

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successes. A series of government-commissioned reviews – Wolf (2011), Richards (2013), Sainsbury (2016) and Augar (2018) – systematically set out a roadmap of reforms needed to deliver a stronger system. Implementing these reforms, however, has proved to be difficult. Some policies such as the Lifelong Learning Entitlement have not come into effect yet, while many of those which have been implemented have proved challenging. Ambitions to reform apprenticeships while simultaneously growing numbers have not been fulfilled; the best way to operate the levy has become a matter of debate; qualifications reform has met considerable opposition; and adult education funding has no over-riding framework of national policy to identify or address improvements.

However the central success of the reform programme has been that it reflects a growing awareness among policymakers, employers and the general public of the importance of technical, work-based approaches to education and training. This transition has quietly occurred in a very British way. Outside of the policy documents namechecked above, there has been no big debate about the philosophical basis and merits of technical learning, of the kind which took place between John Dewey and David Snedden in the USA around a century ago³. And only one policy document has tried to explain the process of technical learning and provide a framework for good practice and excellence. This is the almost-forgotten 2013 report by the Commission

1 Brown, P (et al) *The Global Auction : The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs and Incomes* (Oxford University Press, 2010); and Graeber, D *Bullshit Jobs : A Theory* (Penguin, 2019).

2 UK Skills Mismatch in 2030, Research Paper, Industrial Strategy Council, October 2019

3 Labaree, David F, “How Dewey Lost : The Victory of David Snedden and Social Efficiency in the Reform of American Education” (January 2010), available here – <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/How-Dewey-Lost%3A-The-Victory-of-David-Snedden-and-in-Labaree/bc55a8a28301bd06a2e233fc31bb4eef482af43a>; and also Unwin, L “Dewey’s understanding of and vision for vocational education”, in Higgins and Coffield (eds) *John Dewey’s Democracy and education : a British Tribute* (UCL, Institute of Education, 2016).

on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning⁴. So appreciation of the merits of technical learning has progressed pragmatically. Showing and telling, seeing and doing – these are the ways employers and learners have developed their interest in alternative routes.

And this is where WorldSkills UK comes into its own. It is based on bringing the highest expectations and standards to technical learning through a process of applied practice, linked to competitions. It tests learners and their tutors to think beyond simply passing a qualification. It challenges them to develop more precision, better quality and more demanding levels of performance – all under pressure. And the impact on anyone who has been involved in the process is quite dramatic.

In the colleges where I have worked, WorldSkills UK has been genuinely transformational. It opens the prospect of learners entering a global stage to test out their skills. And this is underpinned by a series of stepping-stone contests, from college-level up to local, sub-regional and regional competitions. With its coaching philosophy for contestants and the network of support it gives to tutors and organisations, WorldSkills pushes technical performance in the same way elite athletes push themselves to prepare for the Olympics. This not only benefits the individuals involved but has a wider ripple effect, driving up standards more generally. It excites employers and provides a visible, tangible window into the world of technical learning which is hard to ignore. And tutors, by and large, love it. Each of these individual stories raises the esteem in which technical education is held by society.

Not everyone who enters a WorldSkills UK competition will end up with an elite job or an occupation which earns them a fortune.

But they will learn a great deal about the cognitive, non-cognitive and technical skills needed to do well in their field – and in their life. These are the kinds of learning experiences which support short-range social mobility, inspiring people to improve their lives and those of their families, earning decent incomes and having skills they are proud to demonstrate.

And for some – those who go on to become the very best in their field or, on the back of their personal achievements, build businesses which in turn create opportunities

for others – longer-range upward mobility is also possible. Thanks to WorldSkills UK, this form of social mobility is becoming increasingly prominent in our society – and it matters just as much as anything which Oxbridge has to offer.

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4 “It’s all about work”, Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (2013) reviewed here – <https://repository.excellencegateway.org.uk/CAVTL%20one%20year%20on%20review.pdf>

Using skills excellence to drive regional economic prosperity

Dame Ann Limb is Chair of the
Lifelong Education Institute

At a roundtable in January 2024 held in the new city centre campus of The Manchester College, Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham spoke movingly to skills leaders and policymakers from the UK and overseas about his vision of hope for the citizens of the city region. He pointed outside to the city centre skyline, reminiscent of New York with its soaring skyscrapers, highlighting that Manchester is now home to giant global businesses like the Bank of America and Siemens. His ambition, he told guests, was that people from the surrounding suburbs would look to this glittering landscape of wealth creation and conclude that this is where they want, and will be able, to find meaningful, skilled and sustainable work. The pathway to success, he added, was through education and training.

This is the rationale for Burnham's pioneering initiative to create an employment-led, integrated technical system based on a ladder of skills opportunities and qualifications delivered in schools, colleges, universities, training providers and adult education centres that will give his constituents the greatest chance to flourish in life – and to live, work and stay in Greater Manchester. Vision, ambition and leadership are the essential alchemical base elements required to create successful regional skills systems which can thrive in a global world.

Similar models of local and regional skills eco-systems are also being developed in the other nations of the UK, Ireland, Scandinavia and other parts of Europe, such as the Netherlands and the Basque country. These also featured in the Association of Colleges (AoC) convened College Alliance

International Conference, *Driving regional economic development through education and skills: Learning from across the UK, Ireland and beyond*, at which I chaired the session attended by Andy Burnham.

A range of factors required to drive regional economic success through skills, and the components needed to build an effective skills system, emerged from the experiences of conference participants as we addressed the following questions:

- What does an effective local skills system comprise?
- How do the different elements of the system articulate with each other?
- How do a region's key employers, education and skills providers, community leaders and citizens work together to deliver sustained success?

Specific answers to these questions inevitably vary from region to region and country to country. It is encouraging however that across the four nations of the UK, college membership bodies such as the AoC, ColegauCymru and Colleges Scotland are coming together with the OECD, the Education and Training Foundation, the Edge Foundation and WorldSkills UK to learn from each other and share good practice. Another strand to this cross-sector collaboration is the Lifelong Education Institute's (LEI) policy and research activity. We are currently working with Newcastle University on a system of regional education partnerships to make it easier for education providers to work together and offer smooth learning pathways, and with the University of Derby on sector- and place-based skills academies

to refine how education providers and businesses work together. The LEI and City & Guilds (where I am also Chair) are working in partnership on a project to reform Learning Skills and Improvement Plans (LSIPs) so that learners and workers feature at the centre, and to give better national oversight and best practice exchange.

What emerges from this work is consensus around the universal principles which make up the 'alchemical base elements' for success. These are applicable across boundaries, are robust and flexible enough to enable local interpretation, and ensure regional empowerment and effectiveness. I highlight these below and very much hope that, without claiming to set out a blueprint for every region and nation, they constitute a framework for the discussion, design and delivery of skills systems that effectively drive regional economic prosperity, community cohesion and human flourishing.

Effective regional skills systems require three key essential alchemical base elements:

Ambition and agency

These are demonstrated through courageous leadership, clear accountability and consistency, but not conformity, of approach from all partners. They also rely on being underpinned by a collaborative culture – and a 'can do' attitude to solving problems.

Comprehensive and inclusive social partnerships

These are by necessity built on goodwill and trust, and rely on institutional cooperation between engaged agencies at local, regional and national levels. Equally essential is the integration of provision across school, colleges, universities and work-based providers, and a shared belief in the critical

role played by, and the practice of, lifelong education.

Alignment of employment outcomes, inward investment, regional prosperity and human flourishing

The starting point here has to be the key employers, education and skills providers and community leaders in a region agreeing to work together to achieve shared goals to deliver sustained success, specifically through giving skills opportunities to both existing employees and young people entering the workforce. But local and regional ambitions cannot be achieved in isolation; there must be a willingness from the national government to devolve funding aligned to and integrated with national skills funding systems and recognised qualification frameworks, ensuring any locally-branded skills qualifications are also validated and recognised nationally and internationally.

Finally, regionally significant employers have a key leadership role to play

in building a successful system. If it is to succeed, a system must offer learner empowerment and parental engagement if it is to truly inspire confidence among the people living in its back yard – and, in the words of Burnham, convince learners and employers alike that skills education truly offer the "pathway to success".

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Recognising excellence in degree apprenticeships

Dr Mandy Crawford-Lee is Chief Executive of the University Vocational Awards Council

To some, degree apprenticeship provision is caricatured as privileged, independent school students grabbing the best training places with leading employers and city bankers using their firm's levy payments to fund an MBA through a management apprenticeship. In contrast lower-level apprenticeships are seen as supporting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to get their first foot on the job ladder – with these opportunities fast fading away as employers prioritise degree apprenticeships. Is this true?

The first point to make is that apprenticeships are not simply a programme for less-advantaged learners. Apprenticeships – including those at degree level – are a programme for individuals from ALL backgrounds, and organisations such as the University Vocational Awards

Council and WorldSkills UK work hard to promote access for young people from a range of backgrounds. Indeed, since the introduction of degree apprenticeships in 2015, apprenticeships in England have gradually shed their image as a good programme for other people's children to become an increasingly aspirational choice. Degree apprenticeships are overcoming the academic and vocational divide that has stigmatised English education and indeed society for over a century.

They also deliver on a social good agenda that is wider than social mobility. In February 2024 the Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Keegan MP, launched a new degree apprenticeship that was designed to help tackle the massive shortage of maths teachers. The NHS is using degree apprenticeships to train new

registered nurses to tackle, arguably, the biggest skills shortage in the economy – and the programme is proving hugely popular. Police forces are using the police constable degree apprenticeship to recruit more women and individuals from BAME backgrounds to ensure their recruitment reflects the populations and communities they serve. Even the much-scrutinised senior leader apprenticeship (its MBA was removed in 2020) has an important social good role. One employer making the most of it is the NHS, which has found the programme plays a key role in raising performance and productivity while improving patient care.

The Secretary of State rightly describes degree apprenticeships “as a way to unlock opportunities for people who may not have had them early on”. This is where degree apprenticeship can really support social mobility and widening access. Think of a 30-year-old health care assistant training as a nursing associate through a higher apprenticeship, or a 40-year-old nursing associate training as a registered nurse through a degree apprenticeship. Regardless of whether a degree apprenticeship supports social mobility at the age of 18, 25 or 45, it should be regarded as a success. Any evaluation of the scheme must be based on the fact that apprenticeships are designed and delivered as lifelong learning programmes.

From a policy perspective, the current government is clear that apprenticeships are an all-age, all-stage, all-level programme. Their impact on social mobility should, accordingly, be measured on how social mobility is supported for individuals, irrespective of age. More fundamentally it could be argued that apprenticeships can make the biggest positive impact on social mobility when they are supported and used as a programme for all ages. This is because apprenticeships and vocational programmes are very different from

academic programmes. With traditional academic programmes, progression is mostly linear; individuals typically complete GCSEs, progress to A levels and then move on to full-time higher education at the age of 18 or 19. Vocational and apprenticeship progression is very different; individuals may leave school or college with an Applied General qualification, work for several years and start a family. In their mid-20s, they may have the opportunity to study and train for a profession through for example, a degree apprenticeship.

The Westminster government understands the importance of flexible learning throughout life, as demonstrated by the forthcoming introduction of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement. If we are to maximise the contribution of higher technical, professional education and

skills programmes to social mobility, we must consider and support their use by individuals of all ages.

Certainly, more needs to be done to support 18- and 19-year-olds to use degree apprenticeships but equally more need to be done to promote them as routes into the professions for older individuals – not to mention

the importance of opening up progression routes for under-served individuals to further their careers, in turn supporting the drive to increase diversity in the workforce.

We need to remind ourselves that apprenticeships in England are a success story. Apprenticeships are increasingly being seen as an aspirational programme – in no small part because of degree apprenticeships. They have moved from being an intermediary- and provider-led programme with little focus on skills gaps and shortages to becoming a high-quality, employer-led programme targeted on addressing the real skills needs of employers and the UK economy. Apprenticeships may not be perfect, but they have come a long way – and this is an achievement which should be celebrated.

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Fostering excellence through employer collaboration

Jo Turbitt is Learning & Teaching Lead at the College Development Network (CDN)

In today's rapidly-evolving job market, collaboration between further education institutions and employers has become paramount in ensuring the success of both students and businesses. The intersection of curriculum and industry holds the potential to cultivate a talent pool that not only meets the immediate needs of employers but also thrives in the face of future challenges. Bridging the gap between academic learning and real-world skills is essential in preparing students for the challenges of the workforce.

From curriculum development to experiential learning opportunities, fostering a seamless integration of education and industry needs can help us cultivate a workforce that is well-equipped to meet the demands of the modern professional landscape. I'd like to use this essay to explore key ideas that can support and enhance collaboration between further education and employers, with the aim of creating a symbiotic relationship that benefits all stakeholders involved.

As we delve into the characteristics of effective collaboration, it becomes evident that a shared vision and proactive engagement are paramount. By bridging the gap between education and industry demands, we pave the way for a more seamless transition from learning to employment. Current activity at the Colleges Development Network in this space includes running networks where curriculum staff from different colleges, industry and supporting organisations come together to discuss ideas and opportunities for

developing projects that create synergy around learning and teaching. Agency and confidence are key here, along with a willingness from all parties to try something new. These meetings may seem like a run-of-the-mill activity, but for many the time and discussions can spark, ignite and illuminate an innovative project that wouldn't be possible without the input and collaboration from an industry partner (which wouldn't have come about if they hadn't shared the space).

It is essential to recognise that the collaborative relationship between further education and employers is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Contexts, regional variations and industry-specific requirements must be carefully considered to tailor collaboration strategies that are both effective and sustainable. By acknowledging the unique needs of each partnership, we develop opportunities to surpass traditional boundaries, creating a system where education and industry seamlessly converge for the benefit of all involved.

When considering the key ingredients for successful collaboration between FE and employers, I'm reminded of the 'Braintrust' approach that Pixar uses within its creative process to ensure that films are being developed with the utmost creative potential. Braintrusts are groups of people all with invested interest in a specific project – in the case of Pixar, this means a group of trusted colleagues which meets periodically to review the progress of a Pixar film that is in development. The whole point of the exercise is that the participants bring

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a variety of perspectives to the table; it's imperative that there is trust but, over and above the role of candour, honesty is key. With this comes a willingness to take risks supported by the psychological safety to try out new things, knowing that the benefits of doing so will outweigh any consequences.

When we have the support and trust of those we're working with, we are more inclined to try out new ideas. In terms of FE and employers collaborating, these principles would support a synergetic partnership leading to co-creation, with stakeholders becoming investors and adaptive learning paths ensuring lifelong learning does what it says on the tin.

What follows are a few suggestions that could potentially be feasible to implement for the next academic year or further into the future, and which are based on the Braintrust model of collaboration between education providers and industry. While they are speculative and reliant on collaborative methods, they could be used as frameworks to nudge comfort zones, implement changes or help support discussions of what could be possible. At the heart of each idea lies the rationale that each party (the student, the college and the employer) gains significantly and the benefits are universal.

What if we had...

Fully co-created curriculums

Colleges and employers would collaborate to create curriculum courses, with the process going beyond simple awareness and recognition of what the other does. Skills, capacities and capabilities would be fully embedded into the experiences that are holistically constructed by education and industry. Could apprenticeships, for instance, be elevated through this mindset? Is this approach feasible?

Employer stakeholders as active participants

Course assessors from the education sector would be paired with representatives from industry who would carry out the role of second marker. As a result, feedback for learners would be from both angles, the

'physical portfolio' would be instant. Would this help to bridge the gap between training and industry? Would it help boost learners' confidence and alleviate the nerves of job interviews?

Adaptive, flexible learning paths

There are no longer 'jobs for life'; being able to morph or 'regenerate' yourself professionally is a skillset in itself. If we created truly flexible pathways, qualifications would embed and promote opportunities to develop skills beyond the title of a course. As an education system, we're still fixated on needing the wording of a course to inform us and our employers that we can do something specific, rather than recognising that our capacities and capabilities are valuable in other fields of work. Could a collaborative model provide these learning paths and, with it, opportunities for growth?

Genuinely 'lifelong' learning

Rather than categorising professions and industries as either 'forgotten vocations' or 'jobs for the future', a radical new approach would seek to create intergenerational learning across the full spectrum of career paths. It is often assumed that 'dying' careers, such as those in the manufacturing industry, are destined to be the inevitable victims of automation or the Fourth Industrial Revolution. But what if learning, skills and insights gained from these endangered vocations could be shared at the same time as 21st century skills are being learned? Could the experience and wisdom of the older generation be exchanged with the digital nous of the young generation?

These suggestions may give you some food for thought. But what can we do to start making these ambitions a reality? What conversations could we start to have? Are there ideas which you've long been sitting on and you're now starting to think, "Let's give this a go"?

Just maybe now is the time to do it. We'll never know unless we try – and a collaborative approach might help make it happen.

From regional skills success to exporting excellence

James Tallentire is Delivery Manager – Stakeholder Engagement (Plan for Growth) at the West Midlands Combined Authority

“Investing in people is the single most important thing in the knowledge economy.” Those were the words of former US president Barack Obama⁵ who believed that an educated and skilled workforce was the key factor in achieving economic success.

Obama’s succinct analysis may offer a guiding principle for any regional economy wanting to achieve a globally competitive advantage. As we look for international success stories, Singapore stands out after pivoting itself from operating an economy which was driven by competition against its peers to offer the cheapest labour costs, to one that is much more skills intensive. This transformation is thanks, in part, to an innovative model of public-private cooperation coupled with an inward investment programme that puts skills development at its heart. Could a regional knowledge economy – i.e. an economy that is able to grow through innovation – based in the UK achieve a sizeable market share of global investment by focussing on skills development, including technical expertise?

The West Midlands can offer itself as the number one candidate for this ambitious aspiration – not least because the region is already a beacon for inward investment. Over a number of years, the West Midlands has been increasingly successful

in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI); in the UK’s 2022-2023 regional rankings for overseas investment, the West Midlands scored the highest growth rate for all the UK outside London, attracting more investment projects than Scotland and Wales combined.⁶

Investors are drawn to the impressive industrial, technology and services portfolio based in the West Midlands, which is underpinned by an innovation ecosystem that includes world-class R&D capability. However, all this may still not be the final dealmaker for overseas companies looking to find a UK base. According to a report⁷ by the Skills Taskforce for Global Britain, made up of a group of experts led by WorldSkills UK, there is clear evidence of the critical role that skills play in attracting inward investment.

With control of the region’s adult skills budget, the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) – the body responsible for driving regional economic development using its devolved powers – has been able to develop a pan-regional skills system that can compete globally. Working in partnership with local universities, FE colleges and training providers, this business-facing skills provision has been able to respond to the demands of even the biggest international companies to help develop the

5 Quote taken from the full transcript of former President Obama speaking at the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative Town Hall (April 2014) <https://says.com/my/news/7-quotes-from-obama-s-speech-at-university-malaya-that-struck-a-chord-with-us#:~:text=You've%20got%20high%20literacy,resources%20is%20between%20our%20ears>

6 'West Midlands tops regional rankings for foreign investment and sees highest growth in the UK' story published by West Midlands Growth Company, June 2023 <https://www.investwestmidlands.com/news/2023/06/27/west-midlands-tops-regional-rankings-for-foreign-investment-highest-growth-in-uk/>

7 3) 'Wanted: skills for inward investors' a report by the Skills Taskforce for Global Britain, published by WorldSkills UK, June 2022) [Skills-Taskforce-2022-FINAL.pdf \(worldskillsuk.org\)](https://www.worldskillsuk.org/Skills-Taskforce-2022-FINAL.pdf)

talent pipeline that FDI businesses need. Crucially, the WMCA looks to ensure that local residents are trained and supported to access the good jobs that are being created by inward investment.

The West Midlands' skills offer is uniquely integrated and comes with expert consultative guidance to help large employers tailor training provision for their benefit. This model has been very successful – and we can look to the future with even greater confidence. On behalf of the region, the WMCA has successfully negotiated an historic 'deeper devolution deal' with the UK's national government. This will secure a £1.5 billion budget to help supercharge the regional economy and will give greater flexibility in how this funding is spent, including the development of its skills offer. The recently published Harrington Review⁸ of the UK's FDI performance has highlighted the huge opportunity offered by devolved bodies like WMCA in shaping and delivering a powerful place-based investment proposition.

But what can be done to drive regional economic success? As report author Lord Harrington put it:⁹ "The reality is that many of our [international] competitors chase investments via their industrial strategies backed by substantial government support. The UK needs to respond." We have listened and the West Midlands has taken the initiative at a local level. Its Plan for Growth¹⁰ is a regional economic strategy that looks to directly support important sectors, including eight high-growth clusters based around electric vehicles, aerospace, manufactured homes, creative content and gaming, professional services,

health and medtech, logistics and low carbon utilities. The Combined Authority is making a direct contribution by developing cluster-focused skills frameworks – an approach originally pioneered in Singapore – to help these sectors meet their respective skills needs of the future, including higher-level, technical training.

The WMCA is therefore working with national bodies like the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to ensure the West Midlands meets the best of education standards and delivery. And full credit to WorldSkills UK which is doing great work with the region's colleges – and looking to build a world-class skills system to

help ensure domestic apprenticeships and technical education are consistent and can meet an international standard.

With a proven track record to attract inward investment, a highly-effective skills system that works at scale, and a regional economic strategy underpinned with capability to deliver the required technical skills, the West Midlands has the right assets to develop a distinctive competitive advantage to win a significant market share of global FDI. As the UK looks to confirm its trade and geopolitical positioning under the 'Global Britain' vision, the West Midlands is establishing itself as a regional economy that can punch well above its weight with a distinctive international offer. With a strategic focus on developing its skills proposition, the West Midlands has the potential to offer a USP that outplays other regional economies – both domestically and internationally – in attracting significant overseas investment that in turn will power our local and national economies.

The WMCA looks to ensure that local residents are trained and supported to access the good jobs that are being created by inward investment.

8 Harrington Review of Foreign Inward Investment, November 2022 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/655f62310c7ec8001195bd5f/231123_Harrington-Review-Report-FINAL-2_HH_Global_.pdf

9 'UK must adopt strategic approach to woo foreign investment, says Harrington report', report in Financial Times, by Peter Foster, November 2022 www.ft.com/content/0375c4c9-011a-4db1-bf6a-64f214ab494e

10 'West Midlands Plan for Growth', published by the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) <https://www.wmca.org.uk/documents/strategies/plan-for-growth/west-midlands-plan-for-growth/>

Opportunities for all: Developing excellence in future skills

Dr Archana Patankar is Vice President –
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Development Corporation, India

India is one of the world's fastest-growing economies with average growth rate of 7% per annum. It is expected to maintain this momentum thanks to unprecedented investments in physical and digital infrastructure, a healthy financial sector and steady job creation. India also aspires to become the skills and innovation capital of the world. With a working-age population exceeding 880 million, including 500 million aged 18 to 35, and a median age of 28 years, we have a significant demographic dividend that is expected to last until 2055-56.

In the domestic economy, large investments in infrastructure, renewable energy, defence manufacturing, space, semi-conductors and rural infrastructure upgrades, coupled with strong consumption demand driven by a growing middle class, are creating exponential demand for a skilled workforce. At the same time, our young workforce has a significant role to play in the global innovation ecosystem by participating in the global value chain through offshoring as well as remote working. Hence economic growth and infrastructure expansion needs to be accompanied by a strong focus on investment in building an effective and efficient skilling ecosystem and matching the

demand with supply of relevant skill sets for domestic and global markets.

India has trained more than 17 million youth in the last 10 years through various short-term skills programmes involving government as well as private funding.¹¹ We are also witnessing a surge in female apprenticeships, with female apprentices making up 20%¹² of the total number trained

over the last five years – and the figure standing at more than 41% in the digital and future skills sectors (encompassing IT-ITeS, telecommunications and green jobs)

Since 2007 India has also actively engaged in the WorldSkills competitions, showcasing its talent on the global stage with competitors selected through rigorous competitions at district, state and national levels.

Over time, India's active participation and success in the WorldSkills Competition has resulted in a gradual ascent, seeing the country placed 11th in the 2022 edition. In line with the goal of broadening the reach of skills and vocational education and encouraging youth to showcase their skills, skill competitions are organised nationwide, aiming to highlight and foster excellence across various sectors with the active support of more than 200 industry and

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11 NSDC Skills Development Key Indicators Dashboard <https://populationofindia.shinyapps.io/App2019-20/>

12 Apprenticeship Training administered by Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship, Government of India and implemented by NSDC

academic partners. The motivational aspect of skill competitions makes it an excellent platform for advocacy.

Economic growth coupled with labour-market transformation driven by new-age technologies and Industry 4.0 is expected to cause large-scale occupational disruption and transition. We are preparing to meet these challenges by nurturing a skills ecosystem that can identify and meet the future skill requirements.

In order to align this ecosystem with the digital world, the government of India has launched the Skill India Digital Hub. It is a state-of-the-art platform embodying innovation and accessibility and designed to meet the evolving needs of India's diverse populace. Furthermore, it offers a unified platform for all government initiatives in the skills and entrepreneurship ecosystem – a go-to hub for citizens pursuing career advancement and lifelong learning. This is a key part of our journey to build a skilled, empowered and future-ready India.

Looking to the future, there are three key strands to this work:

Future of jobs for those entering the workforce

The programmes are designed for the fastest-growing job opportunities in the areas of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, business intelligence, cyber security, renewable energy and sustainability specialists.

Future of work for the existing workforce

Top industries focusing on AI skills and AI literacy include professional services, technology, information and media, financial services, administrative and support services, and manufacturing.

Future of government functions and services

As the economy progresses through the adoption of new-age technologies, governance – particularly citizen-centred services and their delivery – is also experiencing a significant transformation

thanks to pioneering projects such as Aadhaar, UMANG and DigiLocker. In order to ensure cutting-edge technologies are utilised effectively to improve public services, policymakers will need to have sufficient awareness and understanding of areas such as AI and blockchain.

Besides preparing the workforce for future demands in the economy, India is also focusing on creating a pool of skilled workers to facilitate international mobility. Our demographic dividend provides many advantages, especially at a time when countries around the world are facing declining birth rates, ageing populations and tight labour markets. India can become the largest provider of human resources in the world, with the potential for around 20% of the incremental global workforce to come from India within the next decade. To facilitate international mobility, programmes related to labour mobility, capacity building, skill harmonisation, government-to-government and business-to-business engagements, and technical advisory and implementation services to the global TVET market are currently in development. We are committed to widening opportunities for all through technical education and skills – and this commitment goes beyond India's borders. We look forward to working with key partners such as WorldSkills UK to make our shared ambitions a reality.

This essay was co-authored by Arpit Asthana, Industry Partnership Manager at the NSDC.



Equity, diversity and inclusion in skills excellence

Jeff Greenidge is Director for Diversity and Governance at the Association of Colleges

In the technical and vocational skills landscape, the intrinsic value and significance of striving for excellence is well established. However defining what constitutes excellence remains a challenge, highlighting the complexity of this concept in education. This point was highlighted in the Ingredients for Success¹³ research which the Association of Colleges (AoC) carried out for WorldSkills UK in 2023, with the report noting the difficulties of drawing a single definition of excellence from the variety of data obtained.

To navigate this complexity it is crucial to incorporate equity, diversity and inclusion (ED&I) strategies. Doing so fosters an environment conducive to cultivating exceptional skills.

An inclusive culture within technical and vocational education is a bedrock upon which learners and educators can thrive. It transcends mere tolerance and moves towards a leveraging the impact of difference. It goes beyond simple acceptance and demands a celebration

¹³ Ingredients for Success, WorldSkills UK, 2023 <https://www.worldskillsuk.org/insights/ingredients-for-success/>

of diversity. Students are more likely to engage deeply with their studies when they feel appreciated and valued for their unique backgrounds, skills and viewpoints. We are seeing across the further education sector that inclusive learning environments enable students to improve their academic performance and develop important interpersonal skills that will help them deal with the varied demands of the workplace. One example of such an inclusive environment is Bolton College, where the engineering curriculum supports a cohort of students, of whom half are from minority ethnic backgrounds – with 55% of the total number being engaged through widening participation interventions.

The pursuit of skills excellence demands equitable access to high-quality technical and vocational routes. To achieve this we need proactive measures such as the work being undertaken by the Multicultural Apprenticeship Awards,¹⁴ which showcase the range of talent within multicultural communities and the hard work of learners that is made possible with the contribution and support of employers and learning providers. These awards exemplify how partnerships with industry bridge the gap, provide tailored support and create pathways that accommodate a more diverse cohort of learners.

The composition of leadership and governance structures significantly influences the inclusivity and effectiveness of educational institutions. Efforts to improve diversity and inclusion at these levels yield far-reaching benefits. Diverse leadership brings a spectrum of perspectives, fostering innovation and more holistic, decision-making processes. A report by *Times Higher Education*¹⁵ highlighted a positive correlation between diverse leadership teams and improved student retention rates, illustrating the tangible impact of ED&I at the

helm of educational institutions. In further education we are seeing an increased focus on developing leaders with inclusion, equity and diversity at their core. At the AoC Annual Conference in 2023 Katerina Kolyva, CEO of the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), launched the ETF/AoC inclusive leadership programme by sharing how inclusivity and transparency are pivotal in enabling teams across an institution to feel valued and, collectively, able to raise standards.

Despite the clear benefits ED&I strategies bring to organisations, challenges persist in implementing them within the technical and vocational education landscape. Structural barriers, unconscious biases and systemic inequalities pose hurdles that demand systematic change. Investing in targeted training for educators, revising curricula to be more inclusive, and fostering partnerships with diverse communities are essential steps. Moreover, ongoing data collection and analysis are crucial in measuring progress and identifying areas for further improvement.

The quest for excellence within technical and vocational education at levels 3-5 is not merely about achieving predefined benchmarks; it's about creating an environment in which every individual can excel. The ongoing partnership between the AoC, WorldSkills UK and the ETF on the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Pledge¹⁶ will continue to advocate that equity, diversity and inclusion are fundamental pillars in this pursuit. Fostering an inclusive culture not only supports learners and educators but also widens access to high-quality routes. Challenges persist; if the sector is to overcome them, it must remain committed to purposeful collaboration and refining strategies that prioritise ED&I, thereby cultivating an ecosystem where skills excellence thrives hand in hand with inclusivity.

14 <https://multiculturalapprenticeshipawards.co.uk/>

15 *Belonging: why it is the next step on the equity, diversity and inclusion ladder*, Times Higher Education, April 2022
<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/belonging-why-it-next-step-equity-diversity-and-inclusion-ladder>

16 <https://www.worldskillsuk.org/about-us/diversity-and-inclusion/equity-diversity-and-inclusion-pledge/>

Thinking big: Why skills excellence matters to small businesses

Anthony Impey MBE is CEO of Be the Business

According to the Federation of Small Businesses, more than half of all small businesses struggle to recruit skilled workers.¹⁷

When you consider everything business leaders have been through in the last five years, it's not hard to see why. An onslaught of challenges – from pandemic lockdowns to supply chains disruption; from rapid inflation and soaring energy costs to historically high interest rates and taxes, to name but a few – have left business leaders feeling battered and bruised. And when you've been struggling to keep your head above water, work *on* your business rather than *in* it falls to the bottom of the list of priorities.

But finding the right skills and managing talent should be a prime concern for small business leaders for one key reason: productivity. We all like to consider ourselves productive, but the truth is more complicated: the UK is massively underperforming compared to its international peers when it comes to productivity growth. Among the G7 group of countries, the UK is at the bottom of the productivity rankings, just ahead of Japan but a long way behind the US, Germany and France. While we have some of the most productive firms in the world, we have a large number of firms that are unproductive

in comparison to equivalent firms overseas.

It hasn't always been like this. Up until 2008, UK productivity grew at an annual rate of 2.3%. Today the figure stands at around 0.5%. And this means that, for the average UK worker, average wages are £11,000 less than they would have been if earlier rates of productivity had been maintained. This is why poor productivity growth is the biggest

economic challenge of our generation. Addressing the country's productivity performance needs to be a priority if we are going not only to maintain our competitiveness but also boost wages, living standards and public services. At the centre of this needs to be a concerted effort to provide small businesses with access to the skills they need.

All parts of the skills system have a role to play in this, from apprenticeships to universities, and the aspirations that organisations such as WorldSkills UK set for

skills excellence and world-class capabilities are vital. Apprenticeships have been an important route to achieving this for many small businesses. The opportunity to provide hands-on training to individuals combined with structured learning has delivered big benefits for small businesses by developing the specific skills that they need. One business leader who I spoke to explained how their apprentice had helped their media

Addressing the country's productivity performance needs to be a priority if we are going not only to maintain our competitiveness but also boost wages, living standards and public services.

¹⁷ Scaling up Skills, Federation of Small Businesses, (August 2022), <https://www.fsb.org.uk/resource-report/scaling-up-skills.html>



business become more innovative. Others tell me about how their apprentices have helped drive operational efficiencies and the use of new technology. These examples are supported by a UK government study, which found that eight out of ten employers believe apprenticeships made them more competitive.

Training programs tailored to the needs of small businesses play a pivotal role in fostering skills excellence. These programs can encompass various areas, including technical skills, soft skills and leadership development. For example, the leader of an electronics business that I visited recently told me how a leadership development programme operated by Be the Business had a transformative effect on their business's productivity and enabled them to grow from 10 to 120 employees.

Leaders of small businesses are some of the hardest working people I know, frequently working 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week. The many and varied demands on their time mean that they often just don't have the head space to think about how to address the very skills challenges that their business is facing. But showing them how businesses like theirs can support their employees to achieve skills excellence is one of the best ways to encourage them to act.

This is why WorldSkills UK has such an important role to play, because it

demonstrates that skills excellence is not something that's exclusive and unreachable for all but the very biggest businesses – it's something that every employer can do. Showcasing world-class skills in small businesses gives others the opportunity – and inspiration to learn how to do it themselves.

It's important to remember that some of this country's most successful businesses, big and small, have achieved international success by being the very best at what they do. In so many areas of the economy UK firms lead the way. This leadership only comes from world-class skills, so showing more businesses how they can achieve this by practically demonstrating what's involved, will unlock growth and drive productivity.

The challenging times that business leaders currently face might be with us for some time – some are even saying that we're in a 'permacrisis'. In this environment, it's vital that leaders of small businesses have access to skills and talent development that enable them to enhance their competitiveness, resilience and productivity. But it's only by demonstrating how this is practically done that we can inspire others. Access to world-class skills for every small business in the country is a bold ambition, but one that we must aspire if we are going to drive productivity growth and, in doing so, improve living standards for all.

Enabling excellence: How unions can open up access to skills

Kevin Rowan is Head of Organisation, Services and Skills at the Trades Union Congress (TUC)

As the global economy evolves and change happens at an unprecedented pace, the demand for skilled and adaptable workers has become more pronounced than ever before. Amidst this dynamic landscape, the UK finds itself grappling with a growing gap in its ability to ensure our workforce is equipped to meet these demands. The UK labour force is largely underprepared for the new skills landscape. Research suggests one in five workers will be significantly under-skilled for their jobs by 2030, equivalent to 6.5 million people.¹⁸

These pressing challenges and the pace of rapid technological change make the ongoing, continuous adoption of skills essential, underscoring the critical importance of workplace upskilling and development opportunities. This is an area in which WorldSkills UK has been proactive, offering skills development programmes which equip young people with essential employability skills as well as technical capabilities. But this is a job that is bigger than any single organisation. In this essay I will highlight how a key partner in this vital endeavour – trade unions – has been overlooked in policymaking in recent years.

Trade unions have a long and proud history of promoting education to working people. As the backbone of workforce development, union-led learning has proved to be instrumental in equipping workers with the necessary skills to thrive in an ever-changing labour market. Analysis of training trends in the UK reveals that training volumes were

on average a fifth (19%) higher at workplaces with union representation or a staff association than at those with neither.¹⁹ As our economy stagnates and living standards fall, it is imperative to acknowledge and fully appreciate the invaluable role that union learning plays in closing skills gaps.

The TUC and our affiliated trade unions have developed a strategy for a new type of union rep, a union learning rep (ULR) dedicated to supporting workers' personal development in the workplace, from essential skills through to higher level skills. This unique model of union learning, which was delivered through our pioneering Union Learning Fund (ULF), places the needs of workers and collective bargaining at the heart of its approach. Union learning is successful at getting working people into skills training they would not otherwise have access to. That is because union learning reps are trusted by their colleagues and by employers.

Don't just take our word for it. Supporters involved in the ULF included a range of major employers as well as the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD), whose Chief Executive Peter Cheese told us in 2020:

"Workplace training is critical for individuals and organisations to support growth and productivity, yet UK business has been falling behind. The Union Learning Fund has played an important role and has demonstrated its success at reaching organisations and individuals who would

18 Oxford Learning College, (2023) [Skills Gap Statistics UK 2023](#) | [Oxford Learning College \(oxfordcollege.ac\)](#)

19 Training Trends in Britain, Unionlearn (2019) <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/training-trends-britain>

not otherwise have engaged in learning. It has never been more important to ensure that we are investing in the skills and capabilities of our workforce, and this fund should continue to be supported to play its part in this vital agenda."

Separately, an independent evaluation of the ULF²⁰ conducted in 2016 found it had a positive impact on skills growth: 68% of learners with no previous qualifications went on to achieve a qualification, while 47% of learners whose prior learning was at entry level or level 1 went on to complete a qualification at a higher level. Some 80% of respondents said they had gained skills through the programme which could transfer to a new job. Employers, too, recognised the benefits of the ULF: 53% of employers surveyed reported an increase in the number of employees gaining qualifications. More than three-quarters (77%) said that union learning had a positive effect on their workplace, while 68% said unions could reach and inspire reluctant learners to engage in training. And the impact of the ULF can be measured in terms of value for money: the 2016 research found that, for every £1 spent on the ULF, workers gained £7.60 through better pay, employers gained £4.70 through higher productivity – and the Exchequer gained £3.57 from welfare savings and revenue gains.

In 2021 when funding for the ULF was cut, employers including Tesco, Tata Steel, Heathrow, Hinkley Point C and Arla Foods stood with unions to oppose the decision.

Now more than ever, with economic growth stalling and living standards falling, closing the skills gap stands out as the catalyst needed to reignite prosperity. Achieving this ambitious goal requires a collaborative effort from all stakeholders.

At the point of its closing, the Union Learning Fund had delivered an estimated net contribution to the economy of more than £1.4 billion from the boosts to jobs, wages and productivity.²¹ Despite the loss of the Union Learning Fund, unions continued to support ULRs in workplaces and to negotiate learning agreements with employers. The personal nature of practical support and help from a union learning rep has proven

to be impossible to replicate. This is demonstrated both by independent evaluation and in scores of employer testimonies. In an OECD skills report, the work of ULF and our ULRs was cited as an outstanding example of "proactive initiatives undertaken in OECD countries to engage low-skilled adults to participate in adult learning".²²

Now more than ever, with economic growth stalling and living standards falling, closing the skills gap stands out as the catalyst needed to reignite prosperity. Achieving this ambitious goal requires a collaborative effort from all stakeholders. With direct access to 5.5 million trade union members across our

48 affiliated trade unions, the TUC (and the Unionlearn model) can have a key role to play. By recognising this and supporting collaborative initiatives, government and employers can foster an environment in which workers have access to the training opportunities they need to succeed, paving the way for sustainable long-term economic growth and prosperity.

20 Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change, University of Leeds, Evaluation of the Union Learning Fund (2016) <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/sites/default/files/publication/ULF%20Eval%201516%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>

21 The Future of the Union Learning Fund, TUC, (2020) <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/future-union-learning-fund>

22 Promoting Interest and Participation in Adult Learning, OECD Skills Outlook (2021) <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/efc2570b-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/efc2570b-en>



Building the pathway to excellence

Kirstie Donnelly MBE is Chief Executive of City & Guilds

As the royal charter body for skills, City & Guilds was founded almost 150 years ago by the City of London and the Guilds, whose promotion and protection of skills excellence goes back centuries. The skills society depends on may have changed over those centuries, but the need to aspire to and facilitate excellence through the acquisition of skills is a constant. Consider that, in a 50-year career, a person may have to reskill four times as the demand for new skills emerge, just as we are seeing today with skills for the green economy. Skills do change lives and lead to the enablement of lifelong employability, which in turn enhances our nation's productivity. It's a simple formula to evidence and yet skills still attract far less funding or attention than they should given their importance in our society.

Across the road from City & Guilds' London office in Giltspur Street is the great hospital of St Bartholomew – more commonly known as Bart's, where for 900 years excellence in

medicine has been practiced. The application of excellence in practical skills by surgeons there not only changes lives, it saves lives – day after day. These vocational skills put into practice are genuinely life enhancing. Attaining mastery was what all the Guilds were, indeed still are, committed to. At City & Guilds we are proud to continue that tradition through the 3 million learners who engage with us each and every year across a range of vocational and technical subjects.

The aspiration to mastery of a craft or skill comes from the pride in achieving a job not just well done but done to the best standard possible. That pride is evident in many different contexts, from those representing their country at an international WorldSkills competition to the young people I met recently at HMP Pentonville who had just achieved their first recognition of skills development whilst serving a custodial sentence. The point is that across the breadth of society

and including marginalised groups, the acquisition of skills is a game changer. Success encourages progression and with it the transformative experience that skills can bring for individuals and society alike.

The important role of employers can't go unmentioned, in respect to fostering talent through skills. We know first-hand through our Princess Royal Training Awards that employers who invest in their people through transformational skills development programmes can evidence the impact at a level of excellence that attracts royal recognition. In fact, almost two-thirds of recipients report increased investment in their learning and development programmes, proving the value of independent assessment and royal recognition. In addition, these employers report other significant benefits from taking part: attracting and retaining better quality staff; enhanced customer satisfaction; positive culture change; and demonstrable commercial success.

Skills excellence has always been at the forefront of what City & Guilds is about. We are proud of the role we played in founding UK Skills, the precursor to WorldSkills UK, and in supporting WorldSkills London 2011 and the early Skills Shows. They successfully brought excellence in technical skills to the attention of tens of thousands of people. And we applaud the work of WorldSkills UK in taking the lessons learned through skills competitions into the wider skills community. Just as the motor industry uses Formula 1 as the proving ground for new technologies, using skills competitions to drive real change and encourage the focus on excellence in the skills sector is an admirable aspiration.

The evidence shows that this is driving impact. Measuring this impact is vital in continuing to make the argument that skills change lives and lead to much greater wealth

and productivity. From our recent research we can see that for every £1 invested through our Big Ideas Fund supporting skills development in prisons, the return is over £18 of social benefit: opening up real opportunities, driving social mobility and changing lives for the better. In addition we know that 72% of City & Guilds-qualified learners gain sustainable employment or progress into further training as a result of their qualification. Gaining that recognition is their passport to brighter and better futures. Independent research also shows that courses leading to technical skills contributed £11.2bn to the economy last year alone.

Just as WorldSkills competitions drive the imperative to continually push the boundaries further, we know that diversity in the workforce drives greater productivity. Through our work creating inclusive curricula we are especially committed to opening up opportunities for many more people. As we aspire to continue to be a socially responsible organisation, we are challenging ourselves to ensure our way of working supports our sustainability goals and our workforce reflects the diversity of society.

Equally important is ensuring that we embed sustainability in our qualifications and courses as well as providing recognition for those new skills the green economy demands. Having ensured that employers have been able to access the skilled workforce society needs for almost 150 years, City & Guilds is well-placed to ensure that our future workforce is appropriately skilled.

In conclusion, just good enough will never be good enough for individuals or employers. WorldSkills UK highlights the pathway to excellence and provides a key and invaluable asset to the nation's skills ecosystem which we are proud to support ensuring that skills continue to enhance and change lives and contribute to the fortunes of our economy.

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Excellence in assessment

Emily Rowson is Research Manager at NCFE

When considering excellence in assessment it is easy to resort to considerations of exams, grades and essays: traditional markers of academic success. However there is an increasing awareness and agreement among stakeholders that current assessment methodologies are not adequately addressing the needs, or recognising the skills, of learners. Assessment methods currently remain focussed on recall and repetition and are structured to benefit a minority of learners to the detriment of others. Those who can be disadvantaged include learners with additional learning needs, those from socially deprived backgrounds and those from ethnic minorities. Hence, there is a need for diversification of assessment methods that offer greater validity, authenticity and inclusivity for learners.

Assessment and feedback methodologies have moved on from simple measure of recall to become an active learning process governed by a learner's judgement, growth and agency. These new methods are focused on processes that are interrelated with learning just as much as, or even rather than, generating grades. The goal can often be the development of skills, thus turning evaluation from the final step to part of the learning process.

NCFE prides itself on being invested in the learner and ensuring the best outcomes possible for all; if current assessments fail to facilitate this, change is essential. We believe there is a need to build a learner

journey that brings the purpose and value of assessment at different points of the journey to life. To this end, and in the of pursuit rigour, validity and excellence in alternative assessment methodologies, NCFE launched the Assessment Innovation Fund (AIF).

The purpose of the fund is to lead innovation within assessment across the sector in a controlled process that delivers robust results and reliable evidence through

piloting, evaluation and research. To date, NCFE has committed £1 million of funding through our social investment strategy to support the first five windows of the AIF process. The fund allows any organisation which has an innovative idea around the theme of assessment to apply for grant funding of up to £150,000.

Thus far the AIF has seen incredible success across projects and has done much to counter the transactional, disconnected nature of traditional assessment. Any of the

finished pilots could be used as an example of this excellence. However Bolton College's FirstPass platform in particular offers a unique way of providing real-time feedback to learners on open-ended questions, a notoriously time-consuming marking task which can sometimes lead to frustrating delays for learners. Moreover, feedback is regarded as one of the most impactful actions that educators can use to improve learner outcomes, emphasising the potential of this platform.

There is an increasing awareness and agreement among stakeholders that current assessment methodologies are not adequately addressing the needs, or recognising the skills, of learners.

FirstPass uses AI to offer feedback to students as they compose their responses, making feedback an instantaneous, collaborative process that supports improvement in the moment as opposed to retrospectively. The platform also evolves organically. A crowdsourcing model is used to support the development and expansion of the knowledge base that underpins the platform. That knowledge base grows as tutors offer labelled sentences to each subject topic classifier, and as students respond and submit their work to their teachers. The platform's ability to label or annotate previously unseen text improves as additional subject specific text is contributed.

Numerous colleges, tutors and learners took part in the pilot programme to test the effectiveness of FirstPass. The key findings demonstrated just how beneficial the use of AI in this manner can be: 82% of teachers stated that FirstPass will be an effective AI service for supporting them as they undertake formative assessment, whilst 92% of learners said that the feedback from FirstPass helped them to compose better answers. Additionally, all learners welcomed the immediacy of the feedback from the platform.

The FirstPass pilot study makes a strong case for the adoption of AI-powered formative assessment tools. The platform's real-time feedback and crowdsourcing model show promise in addressing longstanding challenges in open-ended question assessment. That the technology has been developed by a college within the education sector, for the sector, adds to its appeal and puts Bolton College at the forefront of the use of AI in education. Moreover, the study also embodies the intent of the AIF more broadly: it demonstrates NCFE's commitment to research, investment and the evolution of assessment methodologies, and its continual striving for the best outcomes for all students.

Too often the notion of "excellence" in assessment focusses on recall, repetition and the final grade: an arguably limiting

scope. Through the AIF, NCFE endeavours to challenge concepts of excellence in assessment, pushing boundaries to ensure we are measuring not simply what is easy to measure, but what is important to measure. Assessments must allow students to demonstrate not only what they have learnt, but *how* they learn. NCFE believes all students are capable of excellence, we must simply provide the environment in which they can prove it.

The essay was co-authored by: Janet Lloyd, Market Insight Analyst; Gray Mytton, Assessment Innovation Manager; and Dean Blewitt, Senior Innovation and Investments Manager.



Why excellence is about more than technical skills

Chelle Travis is Executive Director of SkillsUSA

If you're engaged in workforce development, you've likely heard the term "skills gap" many times. We hear it often at SkillsUSA, too, especially from our current and prospective industry partners looking to secure their future workforce. When most hear that phrase, their first thoughts turn to a lack of technical skills related to a specific industry, and that's entirely understandable. In the United States alone, for example, the manufacturing industry forecasts more than 2.1 million unfilled jobs by 2030, and other industries offer their own daunting predictions.

According to a recent report from McKinsey and Company²³, 87% of companies worldwide claim to either be experiencing a skills gap now or expect to face one in the next few years. Viewing the skills gap as mainly a

shortage of technical skills is so pervasive because that shortage is such a clear and present threat to our global economy.

But this view fails to capture the full picture. Confining the concept of the skills gap to technical skills alone is like blaming a leaky roof on the rain and disregarding the hole the rain is leaking through. Technical skills are absolutely a huge – and certainly the most prominent – part of the problem but, for SkillsUSA, they represent only one of three crucial components that encompass the whole of the skills gap: personal skills; workplace skills; and, last but not least, technical skills grounded in academics.

As the number one workforce development organisation for students in the United States, we at SkillsUSA empower students

²³ The Skillful Corporation, McKinsey & Company <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/five-fifty-the-skillful-corporation>

to become skilled professionals, career-ready leaders and responsible community members. Those three components are defined in our SkillsUSA Framework, which is the foundation for everything we do, our “blueprint for career readiness”.

Each of its three components is in turn made up of what we call “essential elements”; specific skills identified as crucial to success by more than 1,000 industry partners who helped create the framework. For example, within the personal skills component you’ll find essential elements such as integrity, work ethic and adaptability. Within workplace skills, students may develop leadership, decision making, teamwork and communication. Within the technical skills component, students could focus on areas such as safety and health, professional development and computer and technology literacy.

In a SkillsUSA classroom our framework is woven into the curriculum. While students are sharpening their specific technical skills through the latest industry standards, they’re also learning those ‘soft skills’ that never go out of style. Our industry partners love this approach too, as it directly aligns with a broad paradigm shift in hiring practices.

As companies realise they’ve been hiring for technical skills and firing for soft skills (or a lack thereof), they’re beginning to find new ways to gauge the strength of an applicant’s soft skills during the hiring process. In fact, so many partners now tell us they’d prefer to hire an entry-level worker who may be weaker in their technical skills but who excels in soft skills. Why? Because the older one gets, the more difficult it is to learn those soft skills, while technical skills can be much more easily taught with the right instruction.

While students are sharpening their specific technical skills through the latest industry standards, they’re also learning those ‘soft skills’ that never go out of style.

When a student develops all three areas represented by our SkillsUSA Framework they aren’t just career ready, they’re life ready. They’re confident, engaged, passionate and eager to help others become the same. A recent study²⁴ conducted by the Student Research Foundation in the U.S. confirmed the effectiveness of our approach. The study found that SkillsUSA members consistently outperformed their non-member peers in seven essential areas:

1. Earning a license or certification related to their field of study
2. Meeting potential employers
3. Being excited about their chosen career
4. Gaining work experience as a student
5. Understanding the work environment
6. Being excited about school
7. Connecting school to the real world.

Across the United States, SkillsUSA proudly serves more than 400,000 students and teachers — the most in our nearly 60-year history — who are spotlighting that advantage while changing the perception of skilled trades career pathways along the way.

As we work to improve our students’ hands-on skills, we must always remember to place an equal value on those other skill sets that physical tools play no part in developing. Committing to that common purpose is how we’ll fully close the skills gap. It’s also how we’ll build a next-generation workforce of career-ready leaders who will do more than fill vacant career openings; they’ll shape our communities, nations and world in positive, powerful ways.

24 The SkillsUSA Advantage, Student Research foundation (November 2022) <https://www.skillsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SkillsUSAAdvantage-Full-Report.pdf>

Biographies

Dr Mandy Crawford-Lee



Dr Mandy Crawford-Lee is the first female chief executive of the Universities Vocational Awards Council (UVAC). A doctoral graduate from Middlesex University, UK, her professional field of interest is discursive shifts in apprenticeship reform in England and higher technical skills policy, recognising and reflecting the role of universities in delivery.

Having worked on behalf of its 90+ university members, UVAC has been championing Degree Apprenticeships since their introduction, and the value of higher technical and professional education for over twenty years and is regarded as the most authoritative voice on all strategic and operational aspects of higher and degree apprenticeships in England.

Alun Francis OBE



Principal and Chief Executive, Blackpool and The Fylde College

Alun has thirteen years of experience in further education, having previously led Oldham College. Prior to this he had a varied career which has included a range of public services, local government, area-based regeneration, youth work and education, including primary, secondary and higher education. Alun has a strong interest in the economics of what is now referred to as 'levelling up' and sees FE colleges as making a strong contribution to addressing this challenge.

Alun is Chair of the Social Mobility Commission. He received an Order of the British Empire for services to education in the 2021 New Year's Honours List.

John Thornhill



John is Chief Executive of LTE Group, a family of five education and training providers working together to transform lives through the power of education and training, delivering further education, higher education, apprenticeships, professional development and working in prisons to help offenders turn their lives around.

John joined LTE Group in 2012. His previous roles included director and CEO positions within BT Group. He has also held a number of non-executive positions, most recently serving for four years on the board at Manchester Metropolitan University. He was appointed Chair of the Collab Group of large UK colleges and college groups in 2020.

Kirstie Donnelly MBE



Kirstie is Chief Executive at City & Guilds, the global skills pioneer, whose purpose is about helping people and economies grow and prosper through skills development. Kirstie is a hugely passionate advocate for Lifelong Learning and has worked at the forefront of education and skills and the broader sector for 33 years, contributing to National and Regional programmes.

Throughout her career Kirstie has spearheaded the development of award-winning products and services across the skills landscape both in the UK and internationally and is a passionate advocate of the role of digital and social media in transforming how people live, learn and work.

In the past Kirstie has been a Commissioner on the Labour party's lifelong learning committee, Apprenticeship Commissioner for the cross party Commission and was one of the original committee members of the David Blunkett's *Learning Age* Green paper back in 1998. She was awarded a Queens Honours in 2011 for her services of innovation in Adult learning & FE.

Jeff Greenidge



Jeff Greenidge is an experienced senior education leader, with a reputation for independent and strategic thinking. Jeff has taught at all levels of education from Primary, Secondary, Adult Education and Post Graduate teaching at Swansea University. He then worked for the Welsh and UK Government on the design and implementation of the National Curriculum before spending 3 years developing European vocational training programmes. Then followed 17 years at learndirect where he was first Director in Wales, then Northern Ireland and ultimately responsible for the delivery of education and training across the UK. Since leaving learndirect in 2015, Jeff has supported education and community organisations to assure their impact. He is now Director for Diversity and Governance with the AOC. In his spare time he walks and cycles in the mountains of South Wales.

Adam Kirkpatrick



Adam is a manufacturing engineer at Wrightbus and the WorldSkills UK assistant training manager for robot systems integration. While studying for a foundation degree in mechanical and manufacturing engineering at Northern Regional College in Northern Ireland Adam entered the 2021 WorldSkills UK national competition in industrial robotics, winning a silver medal and progressing to represent the UK in robot systems integration at WorldSkills Special Edition 2022 in Luxembourg.

Anthony Impey MBE



Anthony is Chief Executive of Be the Business – the UK’s leading expert on small business productivity which, as an independent charity, has already added £500m to the productivity of the firms it has worked with.

As a serial entrepreneur, he has spent his career starting and scaling several businesses (the first being while he was still at school), as well as a number of social enterprises.

He also works with UK Government as chair of the Department of Education’s Apprenticeship Ambassador Network and is a member of the Department for Business & Trade’s Expert Advisory Council. He chairs the City & Guilds Industry Skills Board and University College London’s International Advisory Board and is a Fellow at the Royal Docks School of Business at the University of East London.

He was awarded an MBE in the Queen’s 2018 New Year’s Honours for services to Small Business.

Dame Ann Limb



Dame Ann’s teaching career in Further Education began at Wythenshawe College (now part of The Manchester College) in 1976, whilst she was undertaking her PhD at the University of Liverpool. She enjoyed a successful teaching and leadership career in the FE sector in Manchester and Derbyshire before becoming a Principal & CEO – of Milton Keynes College in 1986 and then Cambridge Regional College in 1996. In 2001, Ann joined the civil service and was responsible for the UK government’s flagship digital learning initiatives, learndirect, UK online and gov.uk.

Ann is currently Pro Chancellor of the University of Surrey, Chair of the City & Guilds of London Institute, Chair of the Lifelong Education Institute and Vice President of the FE sector’s social justice charity, the Helena Kennedy Foundation which Ann founded in 1998. She is also Chair of The Lloyds Bank Foundation, the charity arm in England & Wales of the Lloyds Banking Group, Deputy Chair of The King’s Foundation, a heritage-led regeneration charity founded by HM The King,

In 2019, Ann was named #1 LGBTQ+ public sector role model in the OUTstanding List and one of the 50 most influential women born in the North of England in the Northern Power Women Power List. In the 2011 Birthday Honours, Ann was awarded the OBE for services to education, in 2015 ‘upgraded’ to CBE for public service, and in Jubilee Honours 2022 ‘elevated’ to the rank of Dame Commander of the British Empire, DBE for services to young people, philanthropy and charity.

Dr. Archana Patankar



Dr. Archana Patankar is a Researcher and Practitioner with substantial National and International experience in the field of Climate Change, Health and Environment. She is the Vice President - NSDC Research and Impact at the National Skill Development Corporation and looks after research, CSR, impact financing and outcome-driven livelihood intervention projects.

Archana brings over a rich experience of conceptualizing, operationalizing and leading policy and practice-oriented assignments across different verticals such as climate change vulnerability and adaptation, rural livelihoods, public health, applied environmental economics and economics of energy sector. She holds PhD in Economics from Indian Institute of Technology Bombay (IITB) and LLM in Environmental and Energy Law from Birmingham Law School, University of Birmingham.

Kevin Rowan



Head of Organisation, Services and Skills Department TUC since April 2013 and Director of unionlearn from January 2017.

Leading on public services, trade union renewal, health and wellbeing, learning, skills and trade union education, regional policy and devolution, plays a key role in TUC's leadership and broader campaign work.

Member of the Strategic Transport Apprenticeship Taskforce, co-chair of the Manufacturing Skills Task Force.

Previously Northern Region Secretary of the TUC (2002-2013) and Education and Research Officer for the GMB (1997-2002), the Health and Safety Executive (2015-2020) and member of One NorthEast Regional Development Agency (2003-2008) and the northeast Learning and Skills Council (2003-2007).

James Tallentire



Delivery Manager – Stakeholder Engagement (Plan for Growth) West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA)

James is based in the Employment, Skills, Health and Communities directorate at the West Midlands Combined Authority with a focus on supporting high growth business clusters as part of the region's industry strategy, the Plan for Growth.

Before joining the WMCA, James led on communications and stakeholder relations in the higher education sector, supporting leadership teams at Staffordshire University, Birmingham City University and The University of Manchester. All these institutions have shared similar commitments to support the economic and social development of their respective regions through applied research, innovation and creating the talent and leaders needed to make positive change happen.

Chelle Travis



Executive Director, SkillsUSA

Chelle Travis is the executive director of SkillsUSA, a national organization of nearly 400,000 teachers and students operating within the framework of career and technical education (CTE). Prior to becoming executive director in 2019, Chelle served as the senior director of workforce and economic development at the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), where she built valuable partnerships with employers, workforce agencies and postsecondary institutions. Prior to her work at THEC, Chelle served as associate vice chancellor for students for the Tennessee Board of Regents College System. There, she provided leadership in promoting student initiatives across 40 technical and community colleges.

Chelle has collaborated with every category of CTE stakeholder to design curricula, develop programs, draft legislation and more. The ultimate goal of these and current efforts is the same: to help students realize their full personal and professional potential while elevating the value of CTE to the forefront of educational discourse.

Chelle holds a bachelor's degree in business administration and finance, and a master's degree in business administration, from Middle Tennessee State University. She is a doctoral student at Tennessee State University.

Jo Turbitt



Jo Turbitt is a creative educator powered by Duracell and sheer determination. Currently, she is Insights and Innovations partner at CDN (College Development Network). A Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, Jo was shortlisted for a Herald Higher Education Award (2019) and is a former recipient of the Sir Paul McCartney Human Spirit Award (2004). Prior to joining CDN, in a career spanning 17 years Jo lectured at Edinburgh College in Performing Arts and latterly joined the quality enhancement team as Learning and Teaching advisor.

Jo's passion for education lies in supporting the sector to cultivate confidence and curiosities in their practice, encouraging dangerous ideas in pursuit of innovation and embracing the joy of not getting things right first time! While her work life doesn't directly include dance, that creativity, curiosity and inquisitiveness are fundamental to Jo's role at CDN where she is on a mission to spread the Ideation mindset across the FE sector. Additionally, Jo is an MSc Education Futures scholar (recipient of the George Lindsay Cooper Scholarship) at the University of Edinburgh/Edinburgh Futures Institute.



WorldSkills UK is an independent charity and a partnership between employers, education and governments. Together, we are raising standards in apprenticeships and technical education so more young people get the best start in work and life.

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