CIVIC UNIVERSITIES AND REGIONAL SKILLS GAPS: UNIVERSITY-FE COLLEGE COLLABORATIONS

A RAPID EVIDENCE REVIEW
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National Civic
Impact Accelerator

BACKGROUND

The National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) is an ambitious three-year programme to gather evidence and intelligence of what works, share civic innovations, and provide universities across England with the framework and tools to deliver meaningful, measurable civic strategies and activities. The programme is funded by Research England, part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). It aims to drive collaboration and policy and practice innovation, involving universities, local government, business groups, and the community sector to inform place-based transformations.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The Institute for Community Studies at The Young Foundation is carrying out primary and secondary research activities to generate an evidence base supporting the NCIA programme. This research focuses on the role of universities in delivering impact in their places, considering the perspectives of a range of organisations, actors and communities, to develop a holistic understanding of the impact of university activities and strategies.

The evidence generation process of the Institute is guided by four co-commissioning panels, which represent a range of stakeholder perspectives. This rapid evidence review responds to the direct input of Inclusive Growth and Placemaking Panel, made up of representatives from universities across England and third sector organisations with a stake in the issue.

The panel prioritised three lines of enquiry around the role of universities in inclusive placemaking, which the Institute team developed into research questions. The aim is to ensure the evidence produced is as meaningful and useful to a range of stakeholders as possible, within the natural constraints of the project. For a full description of the process and prioritised research topics, please refer to the Research Agenda published by the Institute.

INTRODUCTION

In our overview of the current and potential economic impact of universities on their places (Redmond and Coburn, 2024), the Institute for Community Studies identified a role for universities in economic 'placemaking': transforming places in ways that catalyse opportunities for people to work together. Universities' role can be through direct spending on employees and procurement in place, through to supporting entrepreneurship and innovation, promoting alternative paradigms of prosperity such as degrowth and doughnut economics, and through supporting students and workers in learning and applying new skills. This latter role, where universities cultivate the skills base supporting the UK economy, was identified as a key area to focus new research and evidence that could demonstrate 'what works' and enable impact.

While the Labour government set economic growth as its national mission (Full Fact, 2024), England is challenged by persistent stagnant productivity. The 'productivity puzzle' has many possible explanations, but one area which has received significant government attention is 'skills gaps' – where employers are unable to find potential employees with the right level of skills for their job vacancies. Skills gaps in sectors seen as particularly important for a revitalised UK economy, such as the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) sector and green industries, are seen as a pressing policy problem (Weston, 2024), with universities central to the potential solution.

The skills gap agenda is predominantly viewed from the policy and industry or business perspective. The previous Conservative government's Levelling Up White Paper (2022) identified lower skill levels as a challenge for economic development in what they deemed 'left-behind places', where low investment in skills and innovation led higher skilled workers and firms to leave places, creating a vicious cycle of economic stagnation. At the same time, the 'skills for jobs' narrative assumes people only take part in education and training as routes into work and as part of a wider economic strategy. In fact, there is a mismatch between this presentation and the skills and motivations for learning that are valued by wider society (Kenyon et al, 2022).

Within policy and industry or business spaces, vocational and technical training delivered through the further education (FE) sector are seen as key mechanisms for responding to the skills gap agenda. However, short-term funding cycles, challenges with staffing programmes delivering training in some sectors, and a lack of dedicated funding streams for engaging with employers all actively hamper FE colleges' ambition and ability to support the education and training needed (Nelles et al, 2023).

Universities – which are already skilling people for the public and private sectors (MillionsPlus, 2023) – have complementary strengths and resources that mean they could and should play a more prominent role in the skills gap agenda, alongside FE colleges. There are clear motivations and potential for universities and FE colleges to collaborate in ways that play to their strengths and support each other's weaknesses. But a disjointed and highly marketised tertiary system instead encourages competition, while policy enacted at the national level flattens important regional differences. These conditions ultimately lead to poorer outcomes for students, communities, and local and national economies (AOC, 2024).

Recognising the potential for greater collaboration between universities and FE colleges, this rapid evidence review and stakeholder interviews seek to address the lack of evidence to understand the types and impacts of higher and further education collaborations, by responding to the following questions:

- When are universities better placed to meet skills gaps, and when are FE colleges?
- How might they partner together to address a more localised skills agenda?

UNDERSTANDING THE SKILLS GAP CHALLENGE IN ENGLAND

The scale and cost of the skills gap challenge

Despite receiving consistent attention within England's policy landscape, high numbers of people not in education, employment or training, low skill levels, skills mismatch and stagnating productivity remain persistent challenges. The skills gap has been further exacerbated by various events and changes in the last decade, including Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, an increasingly severe climate crisis, digitalisation, and automation (Laczik and Patel, 2023). In addition, projections for the future suggest the UK will face a growing challenge, with a surplus of potential candidates for low and intermediate-skilled jobs, and a deficit of potential candidates for high-skilled jobs (Melville and Bivand, 2019).

Quantitative data collection and modelling present the scale and cost of these future challenges as vast. One study estimates a £120bn loss in economic output by the end of the decade if the skills needs of employers aren't met (Melville and Bivand, 2019). Another suggests preventing a new skills gap through adult education will cost an additional £13bn a year (CBI, 2020). By 2030, it is thought that 90% of the existing workforce will need to be reskilled, including one in six requiring a radical job change, and the remaining five in six needing upskilling in their existing roles (McKinsey, 2020).

s well as responding to future skills gaps, there are significant existing ones (Nelles et al, 2023; ISC, 2019), where 40% of workers in the UK do not have the correct qualifications needed for their current occupations (IFS, 2019). Results from the latest Employers Skills Survey (2022) identified one in ten employers having a skills shortage vacancy – meaning a vacancy that is hard to fill because of lack of skills, qualifications or experience amongst applicants. Some 80% of small businesses, which constitute 99.9% of the business economy and are vital for local economies, reported recruitment difficulties.

Regional skills inequalities

Different regions have distinct industry compositions and workforce dynamics, as well as economic and social priorities. This creates different skills ecosystems, that function at different spatial scales. An England-wide view therefore masks helpful detail and can make it challenging to align skills supply with local demands (Green et al, 2022; Marioni and Pabst, 2024). It also ignores the relevance of local conditions that need to be met to support people to access more employment, such sufficient local infrastructure, care provision and transport systems (Green et al, 2022; Westwood, 2022).

There is a noticeable trend of mobility of younger people with higher education qualifications moving towards the southeastern regions of England, which have high levels of growth and productivity. Meanwhile smaller cities and towns fail to appeal to skilled workers. These labour outflows exacerbate regional inequalities, causing a 'brain drain' that leaves weaker economies with significantly lower levels of skilled people (Westwood, 2022; Marioni and Pabst, 2024).

Analysis conducted with The Centre for Progressive Policy (2021) identified a robust statistical relationship between a lower proportion of people without a formal qualification and a higher employment rate at the local authority level, suggesting a place-based disparity in skills that creates significant employment costs. They found that, in the most deprived places in England, this materialised as hundreds of thousands fewer jobs. By modelling across different areas to match the skills levels present in the top 10% of local authorities, they found tackling basic skills inequalities could increase employment by 573,000 jobs.

Perspectives on the skills gap challenge

The 'skills gaps' discussion presupposes that the reason such vacancies exist is primarily a lack of training. Some have argued that there are also deficiencies in existing employment opportunities, which fail to match the skills that people developed through various educational routes, or that services and businesses don't know how to best use these skills (Ward, 2015; Westwood, 2022). While evidence suggests a wide range of skills are increasingly important – such as literacy, digital, technical, 'soft' and managements skills (Green et al, 2022) – there can be a lack of specificity in articulating these different skills needs in relation to different industries (Nelles et al, 2023). In addition, an employers' perception of their own skills gap may be incorrect, due to within-organisation underutilisation of skills caused by internal information failure or the 'withdrawal' of skills due to worker disaffection (Bocock et al, 2024). The 'STARs' (Skilled Through Alternative Routes) initiative in the US found that employers persistently undervalue the skills of employees without college degrees, often associating 'low wages' with 'low skills' (Blair et al, 2021).

Even accepting that training is a policy priority, there may also be a trade-off between providing training for workers to meet higher skill needs for businesses, and addressing skills gaps experienced by people and communities that generate structural unemployment. While the two goals can align, depending on the nature of the skill gap, targeting skills training for those further from the labour market may require more resource and co-ordination than targeting other available workers. Different political priorities may therefore result in wildly different approaches to addressing 'skills gaps', and alignment between stakeholders is necessary to ensure a coherent approach.

Some recent literature steps out of the mainstream skills gap discussion of skills valued by businesses – the focus for policy and industry or business – and instead questions what skills and motivations for learning are more valued by wider society. A recent survey by the RSA showed skills development for personal interest and personal development to be twice as important to respondents as professional development (Kenyon et al, 2022). A relative dearth of research on motivations for learning suggest that the 'skills for jobs' narrative does not widely resonate with individuals, who preferred a focus on skills that enable people to exercise agency over their interests, or to build and bolster their interpersonal social networks (Hughes et al, 2019).

Pressures on further and higher education

Despite what is known about the skills gap challenge in England, investments to address it are decreasing. With 80% of the 2030 workforce having left formal education, there is significant pressure on further and higher education to support adult and lifelong learning (CBI, 2020; CUN, 2020). However, government spending on adult learning in England has fallen since the 2000s (IFS, 2023), and currently adult education spend (excluding student loans) is primarily financially supported by employers (CBI, 2020), in an environment where employers are increasingly wary of investing in training and reskilling (Nelles et al, 2023; Chapman et al, 2024).

While the skills gap agenda is often orientated around vocational and technical skills training provided by further education colleges, education support and funding is unevenly distributed. More resources go towards those accessing higher education – applicable to a much smaller proportion of people (AOC, 2024). Both further and higher education institutions have faced spending cuts in the last decade, however the policy and funding environment has become increasingly harsh on further education colleges, who are a part of a system shaped by institutional, policy and market forces far beyond their control (Nelles et al, 2023).

At the same time there are unrealistic expectations, from both employers and policymakers, around creating programmes that address skills gaps (Nelles et al, 2023), which can often be expensive and time-consuming (SI 3 2024). Adult provision has dramatically decreased, and subsequently there are more than 1m fewer learners today than there were ten years ago (Further Education and Skills Statistics, 2024). The existing policy environment places emphasis on long-term qualifications, eg, with the Lifelong Learning Bill, whilst employers are seeking shorter, flexible and modularised training, or don't have the capacity to support more structured learning opportunities (SI 1 2024).

Recent policy developments

England lacks a joined-up approach to post-16 education (CUN, 2022; Laczik and Pate, 2023). Significant policy churn around skills limits how well-embedded policies and strategies can be, resulting in complexity, confusion and a lack of trust. National policy tends to have a strong influence on the skills agenda, and regulatory and funding apparatus is developed nationally. This can create a clash with strategies implemented at the regional scale, and infrastructure developed at the local scale (Green et al, 2022). Similarly, education policies are controlled centrally, with a relatively small adult education budget devolved to mayoral combined authorities (Westwood, 2022).

Notable recent policy developments include the Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning White Paper, the Apprenticeship Levy, and the introduction of Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs). While the Skills for Jobs White Paper and the Apprenticeship Levy have faced criticisms, LSIPs have been seen as a more positive infrastructure in practice, to convene different local stakeholders to focus on addressing skills in particular industrial sectors with a more local or regional framing, and has resulted in some successful collaborations (Nelles et al, 2023). However, these were published under the previous Conservative government and what they evolve into is still to be seen.

This Labour government's 'mission-led' approach includes a mission to ensure greater access to education and training at all stages of life, including reforming further and higher education (Labour, 2023a). A key pledge in their manifesto was the establishment of Skills England and devolution of adult skills responsibilities to combined authorities, to enable more place-based skills development programmes. There was also a call to better integrate further and higher education, with a post-16 skills strategy that articulated how students can move between different institutions, linked to a ten-year industrial strategy (ibid). Labour's proposed skills and growth levy will fund new foundation apprenticeships and shorter apprenticeships of less than 12 months (Department for Education, 2024).

THE POTENTIAL OF UNIVERSITY AND FE COLLABORATION

Motivations for collaboration

In recent years, to address England's skills gap, governments have angled towards a post-16 education system that is employer-led. However, analysis by the Association of Colleges (2024) suggests this approach has not been successful. Instead, a more joined-up tertiary system that encourages collaborations between educational institutions, employers, policymakers and the government is crucial for identifying and responding to existing and emerging skills requirements (ibid, Marioni and Pabsk, 2024). This systems-based approach is adopted in the other devolved nations of the UK (Laczik and Patel, 2023). Notably, the voluntary or third sector is less mentioned in conceptualisations of a more joined-up tertiary system.

There is no doubt that universities and FE colleges have shared missions in the interest of public good (CUN, 2022). For example, meeting the future skills needs for the country, responding to increasing demand for lifelong learning, reducing regional inequalities and contributing to place-based agendas, and to support people to live more fulfilling lives (ibid). Despite this largely overlapping mission and purpose, universities and FE colleges have distinct and often complementary functional differences, that materialise as different strengths. There is potential to learn from and create opportunities for each other, with mutual benefit (Bhattacharya and Norman, 2021).

The FE and HE sectors face several distinct challenges (explored later in this evidence review), and collaboration might foster a more coherent education system and fill gaps, particularly in the context of scare resources (AOC, 2024). For example, universities could share their facilities and knowledge for innovation with FE colleges, while learning from FE about how to better support students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (Bhattacharya and Norman, 2021; Nelles et al, 2023). Stakeholder interviews also raised the economic motivations for collaboration, as competition can create huge financial inefficiencies (SI2, 2024; SI3, 2024; SI5, 2024).

Stakeholder interviews suggested that engagement with the civic agenda can act as motivation. Collaboration could leverage ambitions to be strong anchor institutions to skill and train people in ways that are locally or contextually relevant (SI2, 2024; SI5, 2024). In addressing skills gaps, FE colleges have historically had close relationships with local employers and a good understanding of local and regional need, providing technical provision in key sectors such as construction and green energy (Laczik and Patel, 2023; Bhattacharya and Norma, 2021). Often, but not exclusively, these more local relationships are with small to medium-sized enterprises, which make up a significant proportion of local economies.

While universities often position themselves as global actors, and attract larger, global employers - given access to world-class researchers, technologies and facilities - they still actively contribute to addressing national skills gaps. For example, universities have collectively trained 66% of nurses and 60% of teachers – two sectors that are struggling with shortages (MillionPlus, 2023). In addressing local skills gaps, there is then good rationale for collaboration, where FE colleges and universities working together could have more comprehensive understanding and reach into the local economy, for a more joined up view and response within a place or a system (SI2, 2024).

For example, the NHS requires people with qualifications from both universities and colleges, and collaborative working between HE and FE is more likely to cover the different skills flows required to support the NHS's long-term plans. This would also offer students a broader spectrum of careers and training opportunities in their local area. This kind of collaboration would also require closer working with the NHS and wider health services, to understand and detail scale of need, level of qualification, skills plans for young people transitioning between qualifications and then into the NHS, and plans for reskilling and adult education (SI3, 2024).

Collaborations also present the opportunity to address place-based skills disparities and offer more accessible progression routes for students (Bhattacharya and Norma, 2021). Though universities can have more traction to bring people to a place and distribute knowledge and talent across the country (SI1, 2024), this is also thought to result in 'brain drain' from smaller towns and cities. Meanwhile, HE provision within FE colleges or articulation between FE colleges and universities can widen participation and support people that can't or don't want to relocate for education. This is particularly important for those with caring responsibilities or those facing greater financial hardship (Laczik and Patel, 2023).

Stakeholder interviews pointed out the moral imperative for collaboration, sometimes using the civic framing to articulate this. It was widely agreed that student success and progression is a priority for collaborations. That might mean collaboration as a way to encourage students to aspire to higher education (SI3, 2024; SI5, 2024), particularly local students who have previously been a more neglected group in university recruitment, when compared to national and international students (SI4, 2024). It might also mean giving people multiple chances to reengage with education and reskilling, particularly where they might have missed out in the past due to austerity, place-based disparities or marginalisation (SI3, 2024).

Challenges in collaboration

While there are clear motivations and benefits for collaboration between universities and HEIs, both existing evidence and stakeholder interviews gave an understanding of the different challenges and how they currently hinder meaningful progress. Broadly speaking, these challenges emerge from a disjointed post-16 education system, where despite an overlapping mission and shared responsibility, the HE and FE sectors sit in distinct and separate systems, disincentivising collaboration and encouraging unproductive competition (CUN, 2022; Shattock and Hunt, 2021). Several stakeholder interviews indicated that where collaborations do exist, because of these challenges, they are underdeveloped.

Universities and FE colleges operate under several different frameworks and bodies for funding, accountability and oversight, making collaboration complicated and the enabling of skills flows challenging. These different systems affect who funds and regulates provision, who is responsible for regulated qualifications, who assesses capacity of leadership and governance structures (CUN, 2022; Bhattacharya and Norman, 2021). Both sectors face funding pressures – FE colleges have faced significant funding cuts in the last few decades, and the tuition fee cap for universities has stayed at a similar level since 2012 (IFS, nd). One stakeholder interview described institutions within and across sectors functioning on a 'survival of the fittest' model (SI2, 2024).

Within England, the post-16 education system operates within a highly marketised system (Bevan, 2023). This was raised in several stakeholder interviews as a key challenge to collaboration, described as encouraging universities and FE colleges to focus at an institutional level, rather than a regional level or on coordinated actions. For universities, funding is primarily secured through tuition fees, which forces institutions to prioritise student recruitment, keeping collaboration to the margins for fear of undermining competitiveness. For FE colleges, operating in this environment means they don't have the confidence to invest in higher technical qualifications (SI2, 2024).

This difference in funding structure also discourages innovation and risk-taking for collaboration. While universities can secure longer-term funding through tuition fees and longer-term research grants, FE colleges face restricted and short-term funding, often lacking reserves to front the costs of investment and innovation. This limits how risky or experimental they can be with new partnership models in comparison to universities (Bhattacharya and Norman, 2021; Laczik and Patel, 2023). While universities might have more resources, one stakeholder interview highlighted that designing innovative courses such as degree apprenticeships is an expensive and time-consuming endeavor, and one that universities are not incentivised to do (SI3, 2024).

Both stakeholder interviews and evidence discussed how some of these conditions and challenges can create power dynamics between universities and FE colleges, that hinder collaboration and partnership. Generally, universities hold more power in terms of financial security, cultural norms, accreditation and prestige, which can make collaborations feel unequal (Bhattacharya and Norma, 2021). One stakeholder raised the reality of FE colleges promoting progression pathways into universities, but universities offering little back in terms of encouraging students to engage with local colleges where they might see particular benefit (SI1, 2024).

Finally, stakeholder interviews discussed the need for a culture change within universities if meaningful collaborations are to happen. They emphasised the need to think about the needs of local places, regional priorities and 'systems good' ahead of institutional goals (SI2, 2024; SI3, 2024). In some cases, this would require leadership within universities to give up power (SI3, 2024) or use their standing and resources to advocate for FE colleges (SI4, 2024). This would also help to reduce reliance on personal, rather than institutional relationships for building collaborations, which make for weak foundations (CUN, 2022). A more unified post-16 skills and education system would also require clarity and commitment about which parts of the system are to take what leadership roles (SI2, 2024).

Challenges in collaboration

This evidence review suggests a potential evidence gap on how universities and FE colleges within places might complement and co-ordinate with VCS organisations to make sure communities have updated future-proofed skills. The role of VCS organisations often did not feature in literature discussing how education institutions might address skills gaps. However, many employment support programmes - including training schemes, jobs brokerage and person-centred bespoke support - are delivered by VCS. Evidence focused on the effectiveness of employment-supporting VCS programmes suggested VCS was well placed to target individuals 'further' from the labour market, such as long-term unemployed individuals or those facing structural barriers to employment (Twycross et al, 2015). They can also offer place-based support, supplemented by strong local networks and bespoke, person-centred services (Haddleton, 2023; Woodall et al, 2021).

VCS involvement in university-FE collaborations may be particularly effective when collaborations seek to support individuals who would benefit from holistic support including health management, financial support and pastoral support. At the same time, many VCS organisations specialise more generally in training for socially desirable skills, such as green skills. This suggests an important role when policies that address 'skills gaps' seek to also reduce inequality or promote a socially desirable end, such as the transition to net zero. The role of the VCS alongside universities and FE colleges should be further explored.

Collaboration Model	Example
Transactional agreements Transactional agreements, such as articulation agreements or degree validation that are formed at the administrative level of an institution, but result in no deeper collaboration around strategic objectives.	This is one of the most common collaboration models and numerous examples can be found across England and the UK. For example, University of Portsmouth has articulation agreements with several UK colleges, and the Open University validate almost 390 programmes. Scotland also has a strong history of university-FE partnerships, including the Joint Articulation Group, that is developing more routes for a wider range of qualifications.
Time-limited agreements Memorandums of understanding that create time-limited agreements, to achieve certain objectives while clearly demarcating responsibility and limiting competition.	Durham University has been engaged in the Durham Learning Alliance for 18 months, building trusted institutional relationships and exploring practical work with four local FE colleges. Following this, the university is looking to develop 'MoUs' with the four colleges, addressing areas such as local workforce development, relationships with industry and business, and progression and careers guidance.
Longer-term agreements Longer-term agreements, such as joint employment contracts for staff or pooling of resources, that allow for some strategic collaboration while maintaining operational independence.	Nottingham Trent University partnered with West Nottinghamshire College to open a satellite campus in Mansfield, delivering courses from a dedicated University Centre on the college's main campus in Mansfield. As well as access to the college's wider facilities on campus, students will have access to the university's student support services and student union. The university is also hoping to enable work placements with local employers.
Institutional mergers Mergers between universities and colleges, where colleges might become subsidiaries of a university under a single governance structure.	Following a merger between London South Bank University and Lambeth College, all college assets were transferred to South Bank Colleges, which is a new subsidiary of the university. South Bank Colleges is a company limited by guarantee and has been designated an FE institution. Other similar examples include Anglia Ruskin and Writtle College Limited, and Hartpury University and Hartpury College.

Collaboration Model	Example
Informal collaborations Informal collaborations, such as shared Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities and peer-to-peer knowledge transfer between FE colleges and universities.	Teesside University has institutional partnerships with several local FE colleges in the Tees Valley region, and participates in various types of formal collaboration models. Nonetheless, informal collaboration still happens within specific schools or courses, in the form of shared enhanced enrichment days, co-developing research and sharing good practice.
One-to-one collaborations Exclusive relationships, partnerships or collaborations between a university and a college.	Exeter University and Exeter College have been working together to agree on complementary but distinct roles, and to secure representation on each other's governing bodies, to reduce local competition. This includes an institutional-level memorandum of understanding regarding the levels of qualifications taught at each institution.
One-to-many collaborations Relationships, partnerships or collaborations between one university and several local FE colleges.	The University of Manchester is in the early stages of exploring teaching opportunities for PhD students at local FE colleges. FE colleges face increasing staff shortages, given their inability to provide competitive salaries in comparison to working in industry. At the same time, lack of funding and employment opportunities can create financial hardship amongst PhD students. This type of agreement might help to address both of those challenges.
Many-to-many collaborations Structured, multi-stakeholder relationships between several universities and FE colleges.	Greater Manchester hosts the Greater Manchester University Board, which is comprised of five universities. Through this partnership, the board engages with many FE colleges in the region. This includes direct engagement with GMColleges, which is a coordinating body for FE colleges across Greater Manchester.

Table 1: An initial typology of university-FE collaborations, drawing on findings from Bhattacharya and Norman (2021), Shattock and Hunt (2021) and stakeholder interviews.

University - FE collaborations as part of the civic agenda

Where both universities and FE colleges are seen as local anchor institutions – although colleges more so, in the context of the skills agenda – the potential of the civic agenda for framing university-FE collaborations to address the skills agenda has arisen. As several stakeholders identified, the civic agenda has opened useful conversations about the responsibilities educational institutions have towards their local places and communities, and provides yet another motivation to strongly consider how collaborating with other local stakeholders and institutions might impact on students and local communities (SI2, 2024; SI3, 2024; SI4, 2024; SI5, 2024).

Bringing this together with a change in the policy landscape around skills and education – given the 2024 change in government – this is an opportune moment to better understand how universities and FE colleges might collaborate, and importantly, what impact different collaborations might achieve. With the introduction of Skills England and the devolution of adult skills responsibilities, we see a much-welcomed focus on local and regional skills agendas, that take into account a place, the businesses and industries that operate there, the people and communities that work there, and skills opportunities deemed valuable to them. This all speaks to the place-based nature of the civic agenda. A civic agenda which scopes the roles of universities and FEs in defining and responding to local skills challenges should also incorporate a role for the voluntary or third sector as local collaborators.

The civic agenda also challenges universities to ensure local economic development is inclusive, suggesting a need to triangulate between meeting the needs of local business and delivering targeted support for groups who are economically marginalised. Our next round of research into this area will convene stakeholders affected by and addressing skills gaps within a specific place to discuss these challenges, the opportunities and impacts of different collaboration models, and potential roles for the VCS sector.

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Stakeholder Reference	Stakeholder
SI1	Programme Manager at FEC in Southwest England
SI2	Senior Representative of national FEC umbrella organisation
SI3	Senior Leader at university in Northeast England and Senior Representative of national FEC umbrella organisation
SI4	Senior Leader at university in Northwest England
SI5	Programme Director at university in Northeast England

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