



# Validation partnerships and their role in addressing higher education cold spots and expanding student choice

Learning for validation partnerships (validating higher education providers and validated further education colleges)

## Introduction

This learning digest brings together a series of learning points for further education (FE) colleges and their validating partners. It draws on data from interviews with key project stakeholders, and case studies with participating colleges as part of Ecorys' 2025-26 evaluation of the Open University (OU) HE in FE (validation) project.

The digest is intended as a tool to share evaluation findings and learning. It has been compiled by Ecorys, based on an independent evaluation commissioned by the Office for Students (OfS). It does not necessarily reflect the OfS's views or position.

With special thanks to the OfS, the OU and to the FE colleges that took part in the evaluation.

## Background

The HE in FE (validation) project set out to test how commissioned validation arrangements could support high-quality HE delivery in new settings, strengthening partnerships between FE colleges and HE validating partners.

One of the objectives of the project was for colleges to evidence a skills need and/or that they were based in a higher education (HE) cold spot in their application. In practice, colleges needed to explore data, consult stakeholders and present a picture of HE provision and demand in their local area.

### HE cold spots were defined in the HE in FE project as geographic areas where:

- › attainment of qualifications at Level 4 and above was low
- › there was a lack of local higher education provision or provision from other local providers did not meet the requirements of learners or employers
- › there was a significant and unmet local skills demand for new provision (for example, an area where there was a freeport,<sup>1</sup> or a need for specific skills relating to green energy, healthcare, etc.)
- › there was an Educational Investment Area.<sup>2</sup>

This learning digest summarises learning gathered about identifying and evidencing HE cold spots, expanding student choice and developing new Level 4 and 5 courses in colleges through validation partnerships. It presents insights for stakeholders, including commissioners, colleges and validating partners, involved in developing HE provision to expand student choice. The digest reflects learning from the evaluation and is intended to support, not prescribe, practice.

<sup>1</sup> Specialised, designated economic zones, typically located around ports or airports, see [Freeports - GOV.UK](#).

<sup>2</sup> Education Investment Areas (EIAs) were the 55 local authorities in England identified by the Government as having the weakest educational outcomes. EIAs were introduced in 2022 as part of the levelling-up agenda and withdrawn in 2025, see [Education investment areas - GOV.UK](#).



## Key considerations for stakeholders

### Setting criteria around local skills needs and HE cold spots (learning for commissioners)

- › Develop clear, consistent and transparent eligibility criteria for defining HE cold spots. This should include an understanding of the type and level of evidence needed, as well as its strength and robustness.
- › Build on this to develop a shared understanding of HE cold spots and local skills gaps. This helps colleges understand what evidence to present and how to present it.
- › Produce templates and examples of evidence to minimise colleges making assumptions and support colleges to provide what is required, particularly for those with limited capacity to conduct their own evidence assessments.
- › Set realistic timelines for evidence gathering to support colleges in collecting and triangulating evidence, including gathering labour market data, consulting employers and assessing local needs.

### Understanding skills gaps and local employment needs (for colleges to consider when scoping and developing new courses)

- › Establish and maintain close relationships with local employers, consulting employers/partners about skills gaps and how these might be addressed.
- › Identify local workforce gaps, particularly in areas with limited HE provision or validation routes, mapping provision offered by other education institutions, to clearly evidence HE cold spots.
- › Review/analyse existing data (e.g. TUNDRA) to assess HE participation locally and identify potential progression into HE gaps.
- › Consult current Level 3 students about their next steps, exploring local progression barriers, such as difficulties students might have in travelling for HE or a lack of specific skills for employment.
- › Consider progression routes from Level 4 and 5 courses, particularly for colleges without existing in-house Level 6 course options.

### Designing provision to meet local needs (for colleges to consider when designing new courses)

- › Directly align new provision with local workforce needs to help ensure courses are relevant and have a clear progression route into a range of careers – rooting courses in real world need.
- › Work with local employers to co-design new courses/modules.
- › Ensure new provision is designed with local students in mind – making sure they are able to access and engage in new courses, for example offering flexible, blended delivery.

### Providing support for and building capacity in colleges so that they can address cold spots and expand student choice (for validating partners)

- › Provide dedicated support and ongoing guidance. This could focus on course and assessment design, understanding academic governance and quality assurance for HE provision. It might also include helping colleges identify cold spots in local provision and providing practical support with validation, such as iterative feedback on documents and helping college staff to navigate policy and approval timelines. Dedicated support might helpfully be sustained during the first year of course delivery.
- › Provide capacity building support for colleges (through training and resources) to establish student engagement mechanisms. This could include student forums and processes for gathering student feedback exploring how effectively courses meet students' needs.
- › Consider facilitating structured peer learning opportunities so key stakeholders in colleges can come together to share good practice. This might include shared learning on successful methods of engaging students and enhancing student voice mechanisms within college practice.
- › Consider providing more intensive support for colleges in HE cold spots and with less experience in delivering HE programmes. This is because they are likely to face more significant barriers to engaging with the validation process and successfully developing new HE courses to expand student choice.

## Case study



### The context

- › **Yeovil College** had experience of delivering HE provision at Levels 4 to 6 when joining the HE in FE (validation) project. The college's provision was already well aligned with local workforce needs, reflecting strong relationships with local employers.
- › However, Yeovil College was seeking to expand its HE offer to better address workforce needs and skills gaps in a geographic area with limited HE provision (i.e. a cold spot).
- › It identified a local skills need, and employer demand, in dental technology and in engineering.

### Developing HE courses

- › The college designed a new dental technology course. Course content was developed by college staff, with support from employers and industry partners. The process was supported by the college's leadership team and overseen by a validation lead. The new course used a blended learning model, meeting the needs of geographically dispersed students. Employers were closely involved, providing referrals and mentoring.
- › The college updated its engineering course to better meet local employers' needs. Staff worked closely with the OU to produce, and quality assure, new programme content. The college also worked collaboratively with local employers, for example holding a forum to review and discuss course units. The revised course included modules on emerging areas like robotics and sustainable aviation.

### Facilitating factors – working with local employers

- › Building on long-standing relationships with local employers facilitated ongoing engagement and collaboration.
- › Early employer consultation during the course design stage ensured employers were fully engaged in and able to influence the development process.

### Facilitating factors – partnership working with the OU

- › Information-sharing webinars provided clear details about the validation project's purpose, the application process and provided a space for colleges to ask clarification questions.
- › Early engagement and communication from the validating partner (in this case the OU) helped establish a strong collaborative relationship from the start.
- › Transparency about timelines and external dependencies helped Yeovil College navigate the process of validation (supporting scheduling, preparing staff, and aligning internal approval processes).
- › Lessons for practice: delivering HE in FE (for colleges) blended learning options help students in geographic HE cold spots (particularly those with caring responsibilities) stay engaged with their studies.
- › Colleges working closely with employers are better able to shape stronger, more relevant HE courses that reflect local job needs. This might involve a college partnership lead and also course leaders.
- › Providing clear progression routes from Level 3 courses to Level 4/5 expands student choice, offering a realistic route forward, particularly for those who would not usually see university as an option, widening access and equality of opportunity.





## Lessons for practice

### Supporting HE delivery for validating partners

- › Validating partners might flex timelines to fit around college capacity and workload, making the validation process smoother and easier.
- › Building steady, supportive relationships with validated colleges will help them feel more confident in developing and delivering new HE courses that address cold spots and local skills needs.



## What successful validation arrangements achieve

Taken together, learning from the evaluation highlights the potential of effective validation partnerships to deliver a range of benefits for colleges, students and local economies. In particular, successful arrangements can help:

- › Colleges grow more confident in their ability to deliver higher-level courses, building capacity and overcoming barriers.
- › Colleges feel sufficiently supported to develop new HE provision without becoming overburdened.
- › Students facing geographic barriers to HE join Level 4/5 provision locally and to progress in their educational journeys.
- › Students move into local jobs where there is a clear skills need, benefiting individuals and the local economy.
- › Open up new educational pathways so that learners can stay local, keep studying, and work towards higher-level qualifications.

