



THE  
**TRAFFORD**  
**COLLEGE**  
GROUP

# **Higher Skills Strategy**

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## 1. Background

The Trafford College Group (TCG) Higher Skills Strategy 2021-2024 sets out the ambitions and aims for provision at Level 4 and above. This Strategy is set within the context of a changing policy landscape for higher level provision and a commitment by the current Government to focus on “skills” as a key driver in supporting the levelling-up agenda and responding to the nation’s productivity challenges. Several national policy initiatives have already been articulated in the recent Skill White Paper, with the development of higher-level skills provision one of the main objectives within this.

This Strategy also aligns to the overall strategic priorities of TCG as articulated in our overall TCG Strategic Plan 2021-2024.

## 2. Sector Context

With the Government removal of student caps in 2012-2013 and the strategy to raise widening participation in HE, the sector is now experiencing its highest ever levels of economic challenge. In the so-called post-92 sector, not only is this from similar institutions but also from those within the Russell Group, as student tariff points reduce to compete for numbers, foundation offers have been created, and significant ‘incentive’ schemes are offered to entice.

University education has expanded dramatically over the last few decades. The participation rate for 18- and 19-year-old students involved in higher education in England is slightly under 50%. However, although degrees are increasingly ‘normal’, universities have narrowed the types of learners they serve. Part-time learning, and flexible learning options more widely, have both reduced and students are typically undertaking full-time three-year studies between the ages 18 and 21.

In this ever-increasing marketised economy, educational institutions offering HE are competing for student numbers. The roots of *HE in FE* is a local, vocationally driven, accessible offer to all. HEIs, particularly those post-92 institutions, whose original roots were very similar, now find themselves attempting to reside in a similar space. Within this, many HEIs are refocusing strategy on local skills needs and the community, and in doing so, providing a further layer of competition for FECs – particularly in GM.

There is also the context of a qualifications landscape that is shifting rapidly, with the Augar Review into post-18 education and the introduction of new Level 4 and 5 Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) following the implementation of T levels. This is partly a recognition that the focus on traditional three-year degree programmes is not always the answer to the skills challenges facing the UK economy, and there needs to be a high-quality technical Level 3 / 4 / 5 offer that complements the more established route of A Levels followed by Degree.

This recognition has arguably been accelerated in the context of BREXIT and COVID-19. On the one hand, the nation is facing a significant skills shortage as a result of BREXIT, which is already being felt acutely across several sectors. On the other hand, this does provide opportunities for individuals to up-skill and re-skill, not least those who may require or are looking for a new career due to the economic challenges likely to occur as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This latter crisis has resulted, however, in new thinking and opportunities around ways of working and ways of learning – not least in terms of higher-level provision. It is likely that going forwards, individuals and employers will demand more flexible and innovative methods of education and skills delivery as the norm.

At a regional level, recent research by Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) indicates a slightly lower proportion are choosing to pursue undergraduate studies in FE in GM than is typical elsewhere (about 8% in GM rather than the estimate of 10% of undergraduates nationally); possibly due to the size and scale of local HEIs, with the likes of MMU, Salford and Bolton competing in the same space. Increasingly, TCG market challenges are with local HEIs, as opposed to FECs. Combined, these 3 local HEIs have around 20,000 local GM students completing under-graduate qualifications.

Over the past 12 months, there has been a shift to increased collaboration between the Greater Manchester Colleges Group (GMCG) in response to the many policy changes and challenges faced by the sector at a national and regional level. This newfound shared purpose includes a commitment to working together on the development of a clear Level 4/5 technical offer serving the needs of the GM city region as articulated in the GM Strategy. The early stages of this collaboration have seen joint bids to pilot development of sector clusters and capacity building for Level 4/5 technical provision. Further, a newly established joint group of GM College Principals and GM University Vice-Chancellors has commenced collaborative thinking around the regional higher education landscape, progression arrangements and how we can better support the needs of GM students drawing on our collective strengths.

### **3. The Trafford College Group Context**

At a local level, TCG has experienced a steady decline in HE student intakes over the last 3-years; with the commitment to better consider our marketplace and strategic direction, supported by stakeholder events and targeted growth in priority areas, as we continue to provide a local, accessible, and transformational offer for our students. A further local dimension has been the establishment of University Academy 92 in Trafford, offering degrees in Sport, Media, and Business and with an increasing appetite to develop a foothold in the traditional space of apprentices and short courses for business.

The TCG “higher skills” offer consists of different types of provision. There is extensive delivery of an existing traditional Level 4 / 5 offer consisting of BTEC Higher Nationals across STEM related disciplines including Applied Science, Building Services Engineering, Construction, Computing and Electrical & Mechanical Engineering. TCG delivers a range of foundation and full degree programmes in the sectors of Arts & Media and Education, Early Years & Childhood Studies. In addition, there has recently been the re-introduction of a foundation degree in Sport. Foundation and full degree programmes are currently validated by Sheffield Hallam University. TCG also delivers a number of professional programmes at Level 4/5 including Accountancy, Advanced Beauty Therapy, Counselling, Human Resources (CIPD) and Procurement & Supply Chain (CIPS). Over recent years, the TCG apprenticeship offer has also developed into Level 4/5 provision, with large volumes of apprentices on Leadership & Management programmes, and higher technical STEM related disciplines moving more into an apprenticeship offer.

The TCG higher skills market consists of three main areas: adults, employers, and young people. Adult learners looking to up-skill and develop new career opportunities for themselves form the largest market for the offer. These are typically individuals looking for a more local, flexible, and affordable offer with a very specific line of sight to a career. The employer market consists primarily of higher-level apprenticeships at Level 4/5, but also consists of sponsorship of individuals to undertake a part-time higher education course alongside their role – although this has reduced in recent years as employers have taken more advantage of the apprenticeship route. The progression of young people (18/19-year-olds) within TCG from advanced level study into higher level courses at the college remains relatively small; and young people from other institutions accessing our higher-level provision is practically non-existent.

## 4. The Vision for Higher Skills at Trafford College Group

Our vision is to develop the higher skills offer within the Trafford College Group to:

- Provide an excellent quality, accessible, value for money and employment-focussed offer
- Allow our students to achieve their full potential, progress in their chosen career and increase their potential for higher earnings in response to the growing demand for higher level skills
- Ensure that our employer's benefit from a skilled workforce that will enable growth, generate innovation and increase their productivity

We will work with our key partners, with a focus on employers, to ensure that our curriculum provides opportunities and challenges for our students and leads to improved career outcomes and life chances. We will engage employers on all aspects of curriculum development, delivery and review. We want to offer economically relevant, high quality, flexible learning opportunities and a curriculum that will meet the needs of local adults, employers, and community.

We will support social and economic regeneration and contribute to measurable business success and community cohesion through the provision of flexible, innovative, and responsive high quality training opportunities, working in partnerships with employers, local communities, and key agencies and training providers. We will ensure that we meet the need of our student body through regular review and enhancement of our mechanisms for student engagement.

We will create a high-quality learning environment which captures outstanding practice including a culture of continuous improvement, by providing inspirational, teaching and learning which is responsive to the needs, interests, and experience of our students and leads to success. The quality of learning, teaching and assessment will be enhanced through sharing of good practice both internally and across other regional and national providers.

We will commit to, and proactively support, to widen participation and increase access to lifelong learning opportunities in education and training by creating an inclusive and enabling approach and ensuring that high quality higher education is accessible to a wide range of groups that include:

- The provision of progression opportunities to existing college students
- The targeting and engagement of students from cold spots (areas with low higher education participation rates or non-traditional higher education students),
- The provision of a local higher education offer for regional sixth form leavers
- Up-skilling and re-skilling opportunities to individuals within the community and further afield, and
- Opportunities for employees to gain and accredit higher level learning through part-time and bespoke routes including higher and degree apprenticeships.

Working in partnership with students, the College will ensure that sound information, advice and guidance supports individuals into higher education study and, following high quality learning experiences, students' progress further into employment or continued study.

TCG values and has a strong track record of working in partnerships, and will continue working with industries, universities and other HEIs to increase participation and develop the higher-level skills needed to support economic regeneration regionally and nationally. We will promote innovation as new flexible models of delivery are sought to meet the changing needs of both industry and individuals in a rapidly changing world.

## 5. The Strategy

The TCG Higher Skills Strategy represents a response to the national, regional and local context outlined above; namely national policy changes, regional strategy and collaboration opportunities, and the need to further develop our offer for our local markets.

The strategy has the following aims and objectives:

### **1. Adapt and grow the Higher Skills offer in line with national / regional policy developments**

- Undertake a strategic and sector-based analysis of skills needs for the GM sub-region and review / develop the higher skills offer in line with the curriculum planning process
- Establish and implement a clear and effective curriculum plan for the roll-out of the new Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs)
- Develop and implement a clear and effective resource plan to support capacity building for implementation and growth of HTQs
- Ensure a clear alignment between the implementation of T Levels and seamless progression into new Level 4/5 HTQs

### **2. Maximise recruitment opportunities through improved penetration into key market areas**

- Further develop the offer for adults looking to up-skill / re-skill, including progression opportunities from advanced level programmes supported by the lifetime skills guarantee
- Improve recruitment onto higher level programmes from employers including growth in higher level apprenticeships and maximisation of employer sponsorship through the TCG Employer Responsive Strategy
- Increase progression of young people from advanced to higher level study across the Group through clearer alignment of local based Level 3 programmes and the higher skills offer
- Review and improve internal functions and operations around the higher education student journey to support increased recruitment
- Establish an effective approach to Alumni so that students can develop a lifelong relationship with TCG and opportunities to re-engage former students are maximised

### **3. Provide a curriculum that is employment-focused through effective partnership working**

- Strengthen and develop a curriculum offer that will meet the present and future employment needs through effective engagement with employers
- Work collaboratively with Sector Skills Councils, industry bodies and relevant awarding body organisations to ensure that the skills and competencies embedded within the higher skills curriculum are carefully aligned to the latest industrial practice
- Provide opportunities for students to develop and enhance their skills by spending time in industry and participating in projects that will broaden their expertise and professionalism and make them stand out
- Bring innovation and creativity into the delivery of the programmes, ensuring that learners have the digital, problem solving and transferrable skills to enable them to thrive and progress in the changing work environment

#### **4. Develop innovative and flexible models of delivery to better meet the needs of students and employers**

- Review and develop delivery models of blended learning across the portfolio, in line with the TCG Digital Strategy, to enable greater flexibility of study and ultimately improved recruitment and student outcomes
- Review and improve approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, in line with the TCG's TLA strategy, so that delivery focuses on the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours required for successful progression within sectors
- Develop a more flexible approach to entry points and the unitisation / modularisation of higher-level programmes to support increased recruitment and revenue from individuals and employers

#### **5. Support the development of regional and local collaborative arrangements to enable increased recruitment and progression**

- Review partnership arrangements, including validation, to enable growth and diversification within the TCG higher skills offer
- Engage proactively in joint bidding opportunities with GMCG around the Strategic Development Fund (SDF), Higher Technical Growth Fund and any further agreed collaborative developments around higher-level provision that align with the strategic priorities of TCG
- Contribute to the agreed aims of the joint GMCG / GM Universities Group that also align with the TCG strategic priorities
- Engage with Trafford Local Authority and UA92 to ensure a clear and agreed higher skills strategy and offer is in place to meet the local area ambitions

#### **6. Evaluation and Review**

The Higher Skills Strategy will be supported by an Annual Plan containing actions against each objective within the strategic aims. The strategy action plan will be reviewed termly by the Higher Education Curriculum and Quality Committee.