

# LIFELONG LEARNING

A blueprint for success

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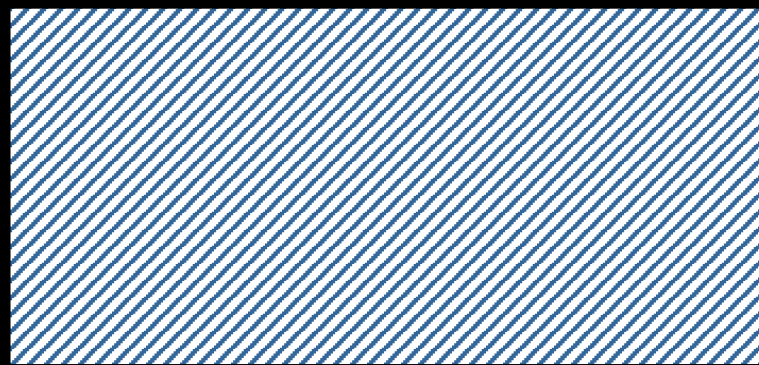
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# Introduction



**Alliance universities are enthusiastic about the opportunities presented by the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE).**

We believe this presents a historic opportunity to rethink who post-18 education is for and how it can be experienced. If successful, it will enhance social mobility and opportunity, support the levelling up agenda and ensure that employers and the economy are supported by a skilled workforce that is fit for the future.

To deliver on this, we believe change is needed in the way tertiary education is approached in the UK.

Our universities are particularly well-placed to support this transformation. We are deeply embedded in our communities with rich employer connections across business, industry and public services. Our expertise is in skills-based education and we are some of the largest providers of higher and degree apprenticeships and vocational training. Our student bodies are diverse, with large numbers

of mature, part-time and commuter students. Drawing on this expertise, we have come together to imagine how the LLE could be turbo-charged to truly deliver on its promise.

*“Alliance universities are innovators through and through. We believe in pushing boundaries to find solutions in research, teaching and for our communities. The LLE is an opportunity to reimagine the ways tertiary education supports learners, communities, employers and the nation as a whole. We stand ready to work with government to deliver this.”*

**Vanessa Wilson, CEO, University Alliance**

**This paper goes some of the way towards describing what we believe needs to happen to achieve the objectives set out by government in its consultation on the LLE.**

## To be truly transformational, the LLE must be...



**Accessible.** Everyone should be able to access the education that will best support them to achieve their goals. Everyone should be supported to understand their options.



**Demand driven.** Educational offerings should meet learner demand and align with the needs of employers and communities.



**Outcomes-focused.** There should be clear and cohesive pathways to educational and career outcomes. All study options should provide value to learners in the form of formal award and recognition, and this should be well understood by employers.

**High-quality.** Learners should feel confident that they are receiving high-quality teaching. At the same time, innovation should be encouraged through a supportive regulatory environment and targeted funding.



Under these **four themes** sit **twelve principles** and **three key enablers** which will turbo-charge the delivery of the LLE. We have also made some suggestions about **where to start.**

# Principles for success

**Accessible**





## 1

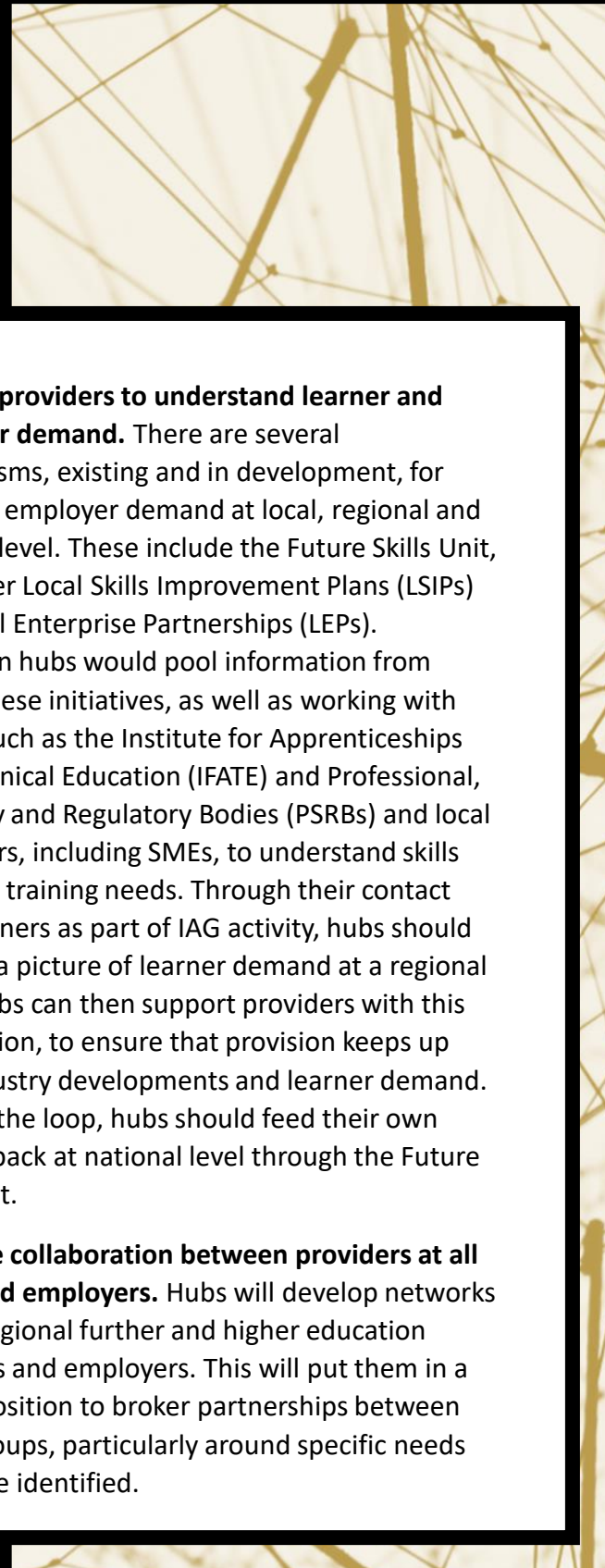
# Principle one

**Teaching modes must be accessible to students with a wide range of lifestyles and circumstances.** This includes students who may be in full or part time work, working freelance or self-employed, unemployed or have caring responsibilities. Students should be able to fit studying in around other responsibilities and should be able to access modules which meet their needs without needing to relocate.

## Putting the principle into practice:

- Teaching modes should be flexible to meet the needs of all learners, with **hybrid, in-person and digital learning opportunities available**. In-person learning enables practical, hands-on learning and ensures accessibility for those with low-levels of digital literacy or no internet access. Online learning is essential in allowing those in work or with caring responsibilities to easily slot learning into their schedules, and is easier to engage with for learners with particular accessibility needs.
- **Teaching schedules should be varied** to support those who are in work or have other responsibilities, with evening and weekend teaching available. Lectures and seminars should be recorded where possible so learners can review them later if needed, though there should be an expectation that learners will attend the majority of these sessions live.
- Mature learners, learners who are in work or learners with other responsibilities are less likely to be able to relocate to study. We do not envisage that many learners would be willing to relocate to study a single module. Therefore, **higher education providers should assess the needs of their local community and ensure that they have an offer which meets those needs. This should be facilitated by regional education hubs ([enabler 1, p.6](#)).**

# Enabler 1: education hubs



Education hubs should be developed at a regional level, to act as a link between learners, education providers, local, regional and national skills bodies and employers. They will bring together these groups to:

- 1. Provide information, advice and guidance (IAG) to learners.** Quality IAG will be the cornerstone of a successful LLE. While tools provided by organisations such as UCAS and the national careers service will be an essential starting point for many learners, in-person advice and local outreach will be needed if the LLE is to reach those who will most benefit from it. Education hubs would be responsible for coordinating schools, employers, job centres and other influencers in the region to ensure they are working to provide potential learners with accurate information about the opportunities available to them. They should also have small centres, based in existing structures such as an education provider or a job centre, where learners can come for in-person advice. Advice should cover not only a learner's initial learning opportunities, but also advice on how modules or qualifications they have already completed could be stacked to lead to a larger qualification. Learners should be able to return to their education hub again and again.
- 2. Support providers to understand learner and employer demand.** There are several mechanisms, existing and in development, for mapping employer demand at local, regional and national level. These include the Future Skills Unit, Trailblazer Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). Education hubs would pool information from across these initiatives, as well as working with bodies such as the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IFATE) and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) and local employers, including SMEs, to understand skills gaps and training needs. Through their contact with learners as part of IAG activity, hubs should develop a picture of learner demand at a regional level. Hubs can then support providers with this information, to ensure that provision keeps up with industry developments and learner demand. To close the loop, hubs should feed their own insights back at national level through the Future Skills Unit.
- 3. Facilitate collaboration between providers at all levels and employers.** Hubs will develop networks across regional further and higher education providers and employers. This will put them in a strong position to broker partnerships between these groups, particularly around specific needs they have identified.



## 2

# Principle two

**Every type of learner should be able to access both digital and in-person information, advice, guidance and support (IAG),** particularly those who may need extra assistance. High quality information, advice and guidance is the lynchpin of the LLE, and people will need access to this throughout their lives, in-person and online.

## Putting the principle into practice:

For the LLE to be successful, people will need access to high quality IAG throughout their lives. This should be done both at a national level online through platforms such as UCAS and the National Careers Service, and at a regional, in-person level through [education hubs](#), as described.

# 3

## Principle three

**The student finance system should incentivise people to study, particularly those in most need of upskilling or retraining.** It should not be financially unviable for anyone to study. In-work learners who would need to reduce work hours in order to study, or unemployed learners, may feel especially worried about covering living costs while studying.

### Putting the principle into practice:

- **Maintenance loans should be available to all learners** studying for any length of time at any level, even for standalone modules. The amount should be calculated as a percentage of the funding available for a full degree.
- In addition, we would support the **reintroduction of targeted, means-tested maintenance grants** for learners with household income below a certain threshold. The criteria should take account of any dependents the learner may have. This will address a very fundamental barrier for a large number of learners. Financial support could be made available across the board, for a truly open and accessible lifelong learning offer, or limited to subjects which are identified as priorities by employers. Examples of where this has already been done effectively include the NHS Learning Support Fund for key nursing and allied health courses .
- **The student finance system should be seamlessly linked in with other financial support systems.** For example, a person claiming universal credit shouldn't be penalised if they undertake part-time learning while job-seeking. If an unemployed person goes into full-time learning, they should be able to transition onto a student maintenance loan or grant.

## 4

# Principle four

**A flexible and innovative approach must be taken to higher education admissions.** This will ensure that learners with a range of prior qualifications and experience are able to access the education and training they need at the appropriate level to advance them meaningfully.

## Putting the principle into practice:

- Higher education providers should take a fair and flexible approach to admissions, which will **enable learners to enter education at levels 4, 5 or 6** where appropriate. Providers should assess whether on-the-job experience, for example, may qualify a learner for entry at a higher level.
- **Providers should retain autonomy to set their own entry requirements**, which will enable them to tailor their approach to setting entry requirements to reflect the demands of a specific course or module.

Providers should be encouraged to set their entry requirements in a way which recognises, for example Recognition of Prior Learning / Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), in order to open higher education up to a range of learners. Alliance universities already have highly developed systems for this, for example the [University of Hertfordshire's APEL framework](#).

# Principles for success



**Demand driven**

## 5

# Principle five

**Demand should be assessed at national, regional and local levels to ensure the nation's workforce has the right skills for the future, while accounting for varying skills and learning needs across the country.**

## Putting the principle into practice:

- It is essential that national and local skills mapping exercises feed into each other and are interpreted together. We recommend that **education hubs** should pull together insights from the likes of the Future Skills Unit, LSIPs, LEPs and direct engagement with employers and PSRBs to **support higher education providers in understanding and responding to skills needs** at national, regional and local levels. Alliance Universities, with their close industry and civil links, are experts in this area and could support this work.
- **Market research should be conducted in local communities to understand prospective learner demand.** This could be facilitated by education hubs, who would develop wide networks within their regions and would have direct contact with prospective learners.
- **Education hubs should be responsible for supporting higher education providers to deliver an offer which meets the needs of communities.** Regional hubs should work with education providers to ensure that provision keeps up with industry developments and learner demand.

## 6

## Principle six

**Employers must be embedded in every stage of the process.** This should include opportunities for employers to be involved in the direction and delivery of learning.

### Putting the principle into practice:

- **Local employers should have a strong influence over the education and training offered.** Local **education hubs** should regularly conduct local employer engagement exercises to keep up with emerging skills needs and to help employers understand the range of qualifications on offer.
- **Employers should have the opportunity to be involved in the design of provision,** and both employers and higher education providers should be responsible for identifying areas of potential for the co-development of modules and courses. Alliance universities are already doing this successfully in a number of areas such as degree apprenticeships and skills bootcamps.
- **Employers should have the opportunity to be involved in the delivery of modules and courses.** There should be an ambition for modules to include contact with employers. This could range from work placements being included as part of a module, to employers contributing guest speakers or mentors.
- **Employers should be encouraged to contribute to the skills and training of their employees.** Employer investment in employee training is low in the UK: **investment per-employee is only half the average across the EU, for example.** There is a risk that the LLE could further disincentivise employer investment in training, with employers instead asking staff to use their LLE entitlement. Employers should be encouraged to see funding staff education and training as a way of incentivising staff to undertake training that meets their needs. The relationships developed with employers through education hubs could be one route through which to encourage this, especially if employers can see that education offers are aligned to their needs.
- As part of this, **LLE funding should be considered alongside other skills funding mechanisms such as the apprenticeship levy.**



## 7

## Principle seven

The LLE should support learner choice. A range of clearly communicated pathways through tertiary education should be available through the LLE to meet a range of learner and employer needs. Learners should be able to choose the route that is best for them, facilitated by clear advice and guidance.

### Putting the principle into practice:

- We believe there are three primary motivations for learners when choosing to study: skilling, upskilling and reskilling (p. 16). **There should be options available through the LLE which cater to each of these.**
- All standalone modules funded through the LLE should be part of a pathway to a qualification. However, this may not require the module to be lifted straight from an existing qualification. Providers should be given the freedom to adapt and develop modules in response to demand and to ensure that learners studying standalone modules have the best possible experience.
- Learners should have access to clear IAG which helps them understand how they could stack their learning.
- To maximise learner choice, modules or full qualifications at **levels 4,5,6 and 7 should be covered under the LLE.**
- To facilitate flexibility and learner choice, greater flexibility will need to be introduced to the funding system. This includes **removing Equivalent or Lower Qualification (ELQ) rules** which prohibit access to student funding for second degrees or certification, **removing rules requiring a study intensity of 25% or greater** of a full-time equivalent course, and **removing the requirement to follow a full course for a specified qualification.**

1. **Skilling:** supporting learners who have not previously engaged in post-18 education, or who are at the beginning of their career journeys to gain the skills they need to enter the job market. There may be two motivations for learners at this stage:
  - a. **Interest and personal development:** to study a subject they enjoy, while developing a broad skills base of value to a range of employers. This would include the majority of traditional academic subjects such as maths, English, history, or chemistry. Learners would study these to enhance understanding in an area of interest and to open up a range of career possibilities. Demand for these modules is likely to be largely for full degree courses from a single provider, studied full or part time. However, if demand is identified for standalone modules in these areas, providers should offer these. Standalone modules in these areas should be stackable to gain a full qualification.
  - b. **Professional qualification:** This applies to qualifications that are needed for specific careers, for example in healthcare, teaching or accounting. We expect demand in these areas would primarily be for full degrees or degree apprenticeships. Delivering this type of study through standalone modules is challenging given the requirements of practical placements and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs). In the short term, providers could offer **'taster modules'** to help learners decide if the career is for them. Taster modules should count towards a full qualification. In the longer term, providers should work with PSRBs to explore innovative ways of delivering and sequencing these qualifications more flexibly.
2. **Upskilling:** continuing professional development (CPD) supporting learners to progress in their current career. We envisage that demand for this type of learning would mainly come from people who are in work, or who have other responsibilities, and that there would primarily be demand for these as standalone modules, smaller qualifications or bootcamps. Subject examples might include computer programming, design or construction modules. Those in medical professions, teaching or similar may also take **'top-up' modules** to ensure their knowledge base is up to date. This type of learning *should* be eligible for the LLE to support learner choice, self-employed people and freelancers, but **employers should be strongly encouraged to invest in this training for their employees**. Standalone modules in these areas should be stackable, leading towards larger qualifications, and providers should consider how they can include these as an entry route.
3. **Reskilling:** supporting learners to change careers through skills-based training and education. Subject areas of interest for these learners are likely to be vocational. We envisage that demand for this type of learning will vary depending on the learner. Some learners may choose to take a career break and study full time for a qualification, while others may choose to study part time or to take a series of standalone, stackable modules alongside work. Some learners may choose to take a short break and study intensively through bootcamp-style courses. These options should all be available through the LLE.

# Principles for success



**Outcomes - focused**

## 8

# Principle eight

For the LLE to be successful, there must be **a clear credit and awards system** that is easy for everyone to understand and provides learners with recognition for their prior learning.

## Putting the principle into practice:

- QAA's 2021 **Credit Framework for England**, which sets out guiding principles around credit for providers, should be **adapted** to form the basis of a new formally recognised integrated credit and qualifications framework for England.
- **The new credit and qualifications framework should include a clear and shared terminology** for the recognition of single standalone modules at levels 4, 5 and 6 and for the full range of academic and technical qualifications on offer. A single module should have value as a standalone award, and this should carry the same title regardless of the awarding institution (eg, a Level 4/5/6 certificate). This should be underpinned by the appropriate level descriptor and estimated learning hours.

## 9

# Principle nine

There should be **options for learners to ‘level-up’** and combine credits from a number of standalone modules into a larger level 4, 5 or degree qualification.

## Putting the principle into practice:

- **The institution where the final modules are completed should act as the awarding body for the final qualification.** Providers should clearly communicate which prior modules will be accepted as contributing to a qualification from their institution, and how much of the final qualification should be studied at their institution, so that learners have a clear idea of where their modules could take them from the beginning of their studies. It should be made clear to learners from the beginning that while standalone modules can be stacked to gain a larger qualification, institutions have autonomy over entry requirements and there is no guarantee that all institutions will accept all standalone modules as contributing towards a final award from their institution. This information should be available online and through local education hubs.
- An alternative to this model would be to introduce a national awarding body, similar to the Council for National Academic Awards.

## 10

## Principle ten

It should be **easy for students, higher education providers and employers to see the learning and individual has completed** and the qualifications and awards they hold.

### Putting the principle into practice:

- A **National Learner Record System** should be established as part of the new online LLE accounts for students ([enabler 2, p. 19](#)).
- Each learner should have **an E-portfolio** ([enabler 3, p. 20](#)), which can be made accessible to all higher education providers and employers to enable them to quickly see the learning an individual has completed and the skills gained.



## Enabler 2: A National Learner Record system

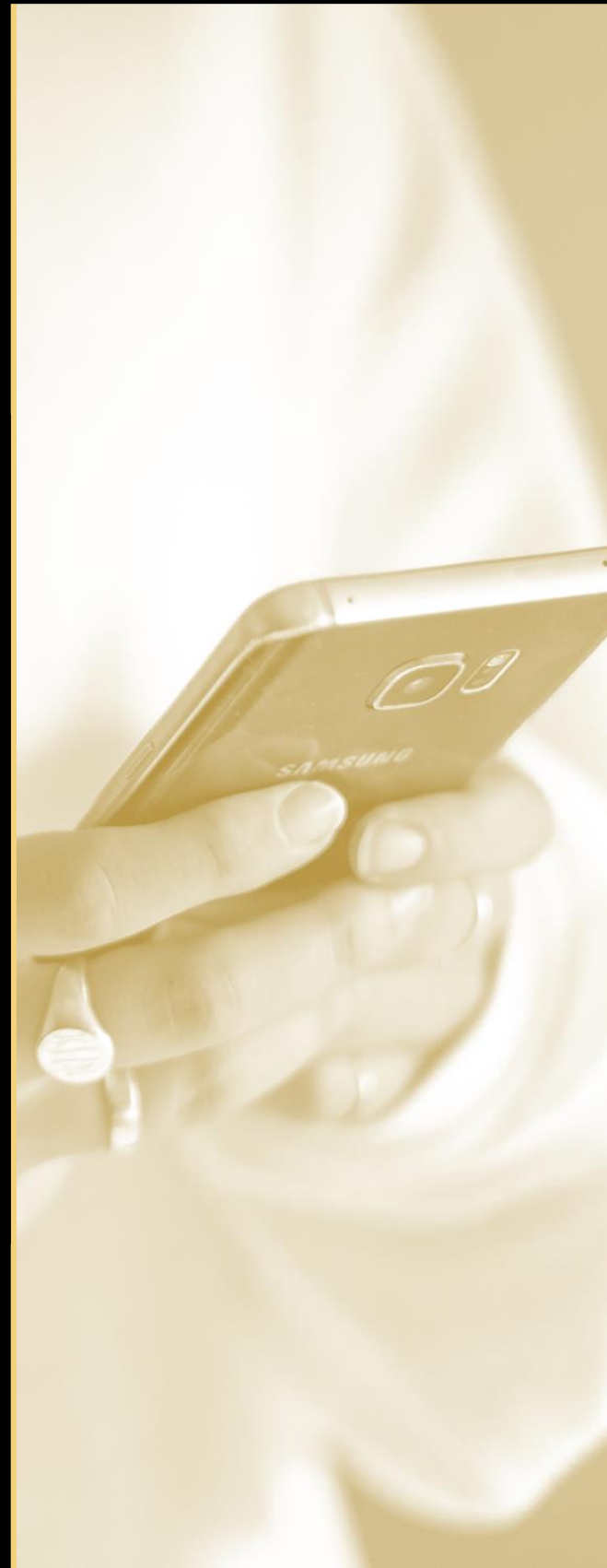
The National Learner Record system should be modelled on the National Pupil Database (NPD). It should enable higher education providers to record the number of credits a learner has completed with them using a national database which is accessible to all higher education providers and relevant regulators such as the Office for Students (OfS) and Ofsted. The system could also include support required by learners and any entitlements they may have to ensure consistent student support when moving between providers. Consideration of data protection issues will be essential when developing this.

This would facilitate a much easier transfer of learners between higher education providers, making it easier for learners to 'stack' modules leading to a more substantial qualification, enhance student support and significantly reduce the administrative burden on providers and the regulator. It would also provide a smoother process for the learner, reducing the need for them to register on multiple systems.

## Enabler 3: Learner E-portfolios

Every learner should have access to an 'E-portfolio'. This should be a clear and simple presentation of the learning an individual has completed that can be accessed by the learner and shared with employers and higher education providers when completing an application. This would enable learners to evidence the learning they have completed and the skills gained in a way which is clear and easy to understand to employers.

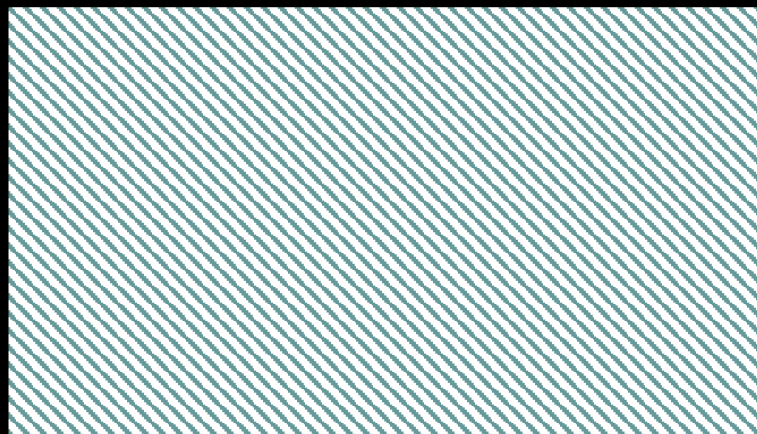
We recommend that government explores working closely with an EdTech partner to explore ways of delivering a system like this effectively.



# Principles for success



**Quality**



## 11

# Principle eleven

**Learners and employers should be confident that the education and training on offer is high-quality.**

## Putting the principle into practice:

- To ensure that all options available to learners are high-quality, the Lifelong Loan Entitlement should only be available for study undertaken at, or validated by, a higher education provider registered by the Office for Students. This will reduce the need for additional regulatory mechanisms.

## 12

## Principle twelve

**Regulatory and funding approaches should support quality and flexibility in higher education.**

Putting the principle into practice:

- New approaches to flexible learning and credit accumulation and transfer and an expanding demographic of learners will require a new approach to HE regulation. The recent focus on continuation and completion has incentivised providers to prioritise full time provision. Plans to include these metrics in B3 conditions could therefore disincentivise institutions from truly embracing the modular delivery and flexible entry requirements required to make the LLE a success. **Government and the OfS should work with providers to develop new metrics to assess the quality of flexible and modular provision.**
- There are likely to be significant development costs involved for institutions in setting up new ways of teaching to facilitate the delivery of single modules as standalone learning experiences. There will be additional administrative costs associated with recruiting and processing a larger number of separate student intakes on to standalone modules every year. There are also difficulties in projecting demand for standalone modules. Given this, there is a risk that providers could be financially disincentivised from developing modular provision. **Getting funding levels right will be essential in ensuring that high-quality modular provision continues and grows.** As a minimum, fees and maintenance levels should be proportionate to a full qualification, with pro-rata teaching grants for high-cost modules.

# Where to start?



START



## The foundations should be laid for the long-term success of the LLE:

- The QAA's 2021 [Credit Framework for England](#) should be adapted to form the basis of a new formally recognised integrated credit and qualifications framework for England that is fit for the LLE.
- The higher education regulatory environment, for example the [OfS conditions of registration for higher education providers](#), should be reviewed to ensure they are fit for the LLE.
- The LLE funding system and learner accounts should be developed, including provision for maintenance support.
- The Department for Education should liaise with other government departments, including the Department for Work and Pensions, to ensure support mechanisms are joined up across government.
- The Department for Education should engage with EdTech partners to explore possibilities around a national student record system and e-portfolios.

## A trial LLE should be conducted on a manageable scale. This should include:

- Establishing pilot [regional education hubs](#) in a few key areas to test their workability. These should be established through a tender process and supported with seed funding.
- Seed funding should also be made available to higher education providers in key areas to support development of a modular offer, perhaps through an extension of the OfS short course pilot.
- Pilot [regional education hubs](#) working with employers and higher education providers to conduct a mapping exercise to identify a small number of subject areas which may be well suited to modular study and could be used for an LLE trial period.
- Education hubs building consortia of higher education providers to deliver 'trailblazer-LLEs', focusing on the subject areas identified for the trial period. This will enable a trial of the education hub model, student funding model and credit transfer mechanisms before rolling out an England-wide LLE.
- Promotion of the options on offer through the trial LLE to people in local communities and recruiting a small number of students onto modules.
- Providing access to learner accounts for those registered on trial modules.
- Developing the [National Student Register](#) and [E-portfolio](#) systems, with a view to having these in place for the first modules delivered through the 'trailblazer-LLEs' to be completed.
- Conducting a review and evaluation process with higher education providers, students and employers involved in the process

Alliance universities play a vital role in powering the UK. We are leaders in technical and vocational education. We are deeply embedded in our local communities and have close relationships with industry. Solutions and innovation are at the heart of everything we do, from research to teaching.



We train

# 35%

of all nurses in  
England.

# 1/3

of our courses  
are  
professionally  
accredited.

# 20%

of our students  
are studying  
part-time.

# 33%

of our students  
are aged 25 or  
over.

