

Full Report

Pathways for Growth and Prosperity

A Blueprint for Skills
Development in
Greater Manchester

A Framework for Improving Learner Pathways
within the Greater Manchester Post-16 Technical
and Vocational Education Landscape

Delivered in partnership with



About This Report

Initiated by the Greater Manchester Further Education and Higher Education Leaders Group, this report represents a collective effort to provide thought leadership on the future of Greater Manchester's post-16 education landscape. It brings together partners from across the region's post-16 technical and vocational education landscape with a shared ambition to strengthen pathways, improve system alignments, and support economic growth.

Preparation of this report, and supporting project activities, has been led by a dedicated project team of researchers, academics, and professional services colleagues from Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Manchester, and the University of Salford, with additional support from Think Consultancy. Together, these organisations have contributed analytical expertise, policy insight, UX capability, project management support, and practical knowledge of the region's skills system.

Along with oversight from the Greater Manchester Civic Universities Board, strategic oversight was provided by a cross-sector Steering Group, comprising leaders and system partners from GMColleges, The Manchester College, Salford City College, Trafford and Stockport Colleges Group, Manchester Metropolitan University, University of Manchester, University of Salford, the Royal Northern College of Music, the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce, and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. The Steering Group ensured that the project's work remained grounded in the realities of delivery while offering a forward-looking perspective on system change.

Further details on participating organisations are provided in the [Acknowledgements](#) section of the main report.

The insights and recommendations presented in this report were produced through data sharing and analysis, stakeholder interviews, workshops, and collaborative design sessions delivered between November 2025 and February 2026. This collective approach ensured the report reflects the experiences, needs, and expertise of those who deliver, support, and benefit from Greater Manchester's post-16 education system.

Foreword

In Greater Manchester, we recognise that we are stronger when we work together to deliver for our citizens and the organisations that sustain our economic growth and prosperity. As post-16 education providers, we have a long-established track record of collaboration and have repeatedly demonstrated the power of partnership working. Strengthening our collective action is essential to delivering the skills, knowledge, pathways, and opportunities our residents need to thrive, and we are committed to delivering on the aspirations set out within this report.

By bringing together the region’s Further and Higher Education institutions, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce, and a wide range of employer partners, the report draws on the breadth of insight, expertise, and ambition available across our region to shape a more coherent, connected, and learner-centred post-16 education system – reflecting the shared direction set out in the Greater Manchester Strategy. These partners have contributed openly by sharing data, experience, and perspectives to develop a shared understanding of current strengths and challenges within the post-16 technical and vocational education system. This process has been characterised by an open dialogue and a willingness to work together to identify shared priorities and co-design solutions that deliver collective benefit.

Our collaborative ethos within Greater Manchester aligns closely with national policy direction. It reflects the ambitions of the Government’s Post-16 Skills White Paper, including the national objective for two-thirds of young people to participate in higher-level learning (Level 4+) by age 25, and supports wider missions on growth and opportunity. Our work also aligns with Skills England’s ambition for “better skills for better jobs” and contributes to the workforce capabilities required to deliver the UK Industrial Strategy and the potential of Greater Manchester’s Frontier Sectors. Expanding access to higher-level learning is central to what the Government has described as its ‘defining mission’ – growth. Our collaboration positions Greater Manchester to respond proactively and effectively to that agenda.

Importantly, the recommendations presented here also align to the evidence and priorities outlined in the refreshed Greater Manchester Local Skills Improvement Plan, providing a system view that complements and strengthens the region’s approach to meeting employer demand and shaping future workforce capability. We believe that our response to both regional and national policy drivers showcase how we as local partners can translate high-level ambitions into practical system-wide change. In this way we aim to trailblaze for the rest of the country in defining a new vision for the post-16 education landscape and the collaborative ecosystem that supports it.

While this report marks an important milestone, it is not an end point. It sets a strong foundation for continued joint action, and we remain committed to working together to refine, implement, and embed the changes needed to support long-term growth and opportunity.

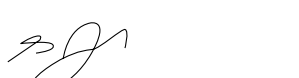
Delivering a learner-centred, responsive, and aligned skills landscape will require ongoing collaboration, transparent decision-making, and a willingness to adapt as regional and national priorities evolve. As providers, we are committed to that journey.

By endorsing this report, we commit to a shared ambition for a regional post-16 system that:

- Enables every learner to understand and access the pathways available to them, supporting them to access quality jobs.
- Equips employers with the talent they need to grow and thrive.
- Contributes to a flourishing, inclusive Greater Manchester economy.

We look forward to continuing this collaboration as we consider and take forward the recommendations together.

Signed on behalf of...

 Professor Malcolm Press Vice-Chancellor, Manchester Metropolitan University	 Professor Duncan Ivison President and Vice-Chancellor, The University of Manchester	 Professor Nic Beech Vice-Chancellor, University of Salford	 Dr Greg Walker Acting Vice-Chancellor, University of Greater Manchester
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 James Scott Group Principal, Trafford and Stockport Colleges Group	 Anna Dawe Principal/CEO, Wigan & Leigh College	 Cllr Eamonn O'Brien Leader of Bury Council and Greater Manchester Combined Authority Portfolio Lead for Technical Education and Skills	

User Guide

Recognising that this report will be accessed by a wide range of users and for multiple purposes, a set of user guides have been developed to help different audiences navigate the content effectively. These include:

- [A Reader Guide](#): Provides an overview of the report's structure and explains the purpose of each section, helping users quickly locate content most relevant to their needs.
- [A Thematic Guide](#): Summarises key findings and recommendations across the report's thematic areas, enabling readers to scan the material and identify priority content at pace.



Reader Guide

This guide provides an overview of the report’s structure and explains the purpose of each section, helping users quickly locate content most relevant to their needs.

Report Section	Summary
Executive Summary	The executive summary provides a high-level overview of the report, summarising the key sections outlined below.
1. Background	Section 1 sets out the project’s purpose and context. It outlines the aims, objectives, and scope of the work, and explains how the project aligns with regional and national policy priorities.
2. Methodology	Section 2 describes the project’s approach, including the datasets used, the qualitative methods applied, and the analytical framework underpinning the findings.
3. Current Understanding	Section 3 presents the findings from the analysis. It provides an overview of learner pathways in Greater Manchester, supported by data insights on priority sectors and feedback from stakeholders on their experiences of the current system. These insights form the evidence base for the opportunities and recommendations outlined in the sections that follow.
4. Opportunities	Section 4 introduces the blueprint for a more coherent post-16 technical and vocational education landscape in Greater Manchester. It summarises the opportunities co-developed through stakeholder workshops to improve learner pathways and system alignment.

Report Section	Summary
5. Recommendations	Section 5 sets out the four overarching recommendations designed to strengthen learner pathways across the Greater Manchester post-16 technical and vocational education landscape. These are supported by a detailed proposed action plan in Appendix A .
6. Implementation and Governance	Section 6 outlines how the recommendations could be delivered and governed, recognising the maturity of existing governance arrangements across Greater Manchester.
7. Benefits	Section 7 summarises the anticipated benefits for learners, employers, providers and the wider system, highlighting how improved pathways can support progression into quality jobs and contribute to regional growth.
8. Acknowledgements	Section 8 acknowledges the partners, stakeholders, and contributors whose insights and collaboration have shaped the project.
Appendices	The report is supported by several appendices. Appendix A provides the proposed action plan for implementing the recommendations. Additional appendices offer further detail on the data analysis approach (Appendix B and Appendix C) and the learner mindsets that informed the blueprint (Appendix D) and the blueprint for an ideal future state (Appendix E)

Thematic Guide

This guide summarises key findings and recommendations across the key themes, enabling readers to scan the material and identify priority content at pace. Further detail on the overall approach and methodology can be found in the [Executive Summary](#) and [Section 2](#).

Key themes include Information, Advice and Guidance, Curriculum and Programme Development, Student Experience, Data Insight and Data Sharing, and Employer Experience.

1. Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

Key Findings:

- Information, advice and guidance (IAG) is provided by a wide range of organisations, demonstrating strong sector commitment, but is currently delivered in different ways ([Section 3.2](#), page 50)
- Learners and those supporting them would benefit from clearer, more accessible guidance – particularly around post-Level 3 pathways and labour-market information – to help them confidently explore a full range of progression options rather than relying on familiar routes ([Section 3.2](#), page 50)
- Several barriers and frustrations exist across the learner journey, particularly around finding accurate information ([Section 3.5](#), page 77)

Opportunities:

- Establish a GM-wide strategic careers group to deliver a single, coordinated approach to pathway IAG ([Section 4](#), page 86; [Appendix A](#), page 116)
- Expand the GMACs Beeline platform to include IAG on Level 4+, creating a single regional source of information on education pathways ([Section 4](#), page 86; [Appendix A](#), page 119)
- Better support transitions from FE to HE and ensure consistent access to student-led IAG to support students at key stages in their journey ([Section 4](#), page 86; [Appendix A](#), page 118)

Recommendation: Develop a strategic approach to improving learner understanding of pathways ([Section 5.2](#), page 94)

2. Curriculum and Programme Development

Key Findings:

- Interviews with employers and students found that the curriculum doesn't stay up to date with industry needs, meaning learning can be outdated and learners don't always have the skills they need to thrive in employment ([Section 3.5](#), page 77)
- Current learning models – largely built around full time, on campus study – don't fully cater for learners who are from disadvantaged backgrounds, have caring responsibility or are in full-time work and have limitations and concerns about cost, time and location barriers ([Section 3.5](#), page 77)

Opportunities:

- Strengthen employer insight across Greater Manchester by leveraging existing forums and sector groups to capture emerging skills needs to ensure ongoing alignment with workforce demand ([Section 4](#), page 87, [Appendix A](#), page 122)
- Develop a GM-wide employer engagement framework to standardise expectations and quality across providers and sectors, delivering a coordinated approach to industry engagement and curriculum design ([Appendix A](#), page 120)
- Support students throughout their learning to better articulate and label their soft skills ([Section 4](#), page 87, [Appendix A](#), page 124)
- Create a flexible and modular learning ecosystem across the region that allows students to learn in a way that suits them, this could include developing a credit transfer agreement across Greater Manchester, allowing learners to access modules from multiple institutions ([Section 4](#), page 88, [Appendix A](#), page 126)

Recommendation: Systematically Embed Employer Voice into Curriculum Design, Approval, and Delivery Across Greater Manchester ([Section 5.3](#), page 98)

Recommendation: Curriculum and Programme Development to Accelerate Growth in Sectors Important to Greater Manchester's Economy ([Section 5.4](#), page 102)

3. Student Experience

Key Findings:

- Learners are often confused about pathway options and tend to default to traditional Level 6 degrees rather than exploring alternative pathways due to misconceptions ([Section 3.2](#), page 50)
- Five learner mindsets were identified which describe learner's needs, barriers and frustrations at pivotal moments in their learning journey ([Section 3.5](#), page 77; [Appendix D](#), page 146)
- Several barriers and frustrations exist across the learner journey ([Section 3.5](#), page 77), leading to a series of problem statements being identified that focus on key barriers in the student experience ([Section 3.5](#), page 77)

Opportunities:

- Improve exposure to HE during learner's time in FE to build confidence in their choices ([Section 4](#), page 86; [Appendix A](#), page 120)
- Better support transitions from FE to HE and ensure consistent access to student-led IAG to support students at key stages in their journey ([Section 4](#), page 86; [Appendix A](#), page 118)
- Boost confidence in job applications through building employer-led sessions on applications ([Section 4](#), page 87; [Appendix A](#), page 120)
- Support students throughout their learning to better articulate and label their soft skills ([Section 4](#), page 87, [Appendix A](#), page 124)
- Create a flexible and modular learning ecosystem across the region that allows students to learn in a way that suits them ([Section 4](#), page 88, [Appendix A](#), page 126)

Recommendation: Develop a strategic approach to improving learner understanding of pathways ([Section 5.2](#), page 94)

Recommendation: Systematically Embed Employer Voice into Curriculum Design, Approval, and Delivery Across Greater Manchester ([Section 5.3](#), page 98)

Recommendation: Curriculum and Programme Development to Accelerate Growth in Sectors Important to Greater Manchester's Economy ([Section 5.4](#), page 102)

4. Data Insight and Data Sharing

Key Findings:

- GM's university applications and acceptances and university/Further Education enrolments are increasingly aligned with priority sectors ([Section 3.3](#), page 56)
- 40% of graduates remained in GM, with the highest retention in health innovation and life sciences ([Section 3.3](#), page 62)
- Cross-sector convergence around skills in AI, data, cloud, compliance, risk management and project coordination, along with business and professional skills and digital fluency ([Section 3.3](#), page 65)

Opportunities:

- Strengthen locally collected FE progressions data to ensure greater consistency and enhanced insights on learner destinations ([Section 4](#), page 88, [Appendix A](#), page 114)
- Establish an annual, GM-wide data-sharing processes across FE and HE providers to maintain an aggregated, system-wide view of learner demand, progression, and outcomes aligned to priority sectors ([Section 4](#), page 88, [Appendix A](#), page 114)
- Develop a fully-integrated GM-wide data ecosystem to ensure consistent standards, seamless data sharing and unified tracking of learner journeys ([Section 4](#), page 88, [Appendix A](#), page 114)

Recommendation: Strengthen System-Wide Data Consistency and Integration Across Greater Manchester ([Section 5.1](#), page 92)

5. Employer Experience

Key Findings:

- Cross-sector convergence around skills in AI, data, cloud, compliance, risk management and project coordination, along with business and professional skills and digital fluency ([Section 3.3](#), page 65)
- Students expressed confusion around job applications and whether their skills and experience matched the job description ([Section 3.5](#), page 77)
- Employers in specific sectors noted that students didn't feel work-ready and have the skills they needed to thrive in the workplace ([Section 3.3](#), page 65)

Opportunities:

- Develop and implement a GM-wide approach to careers inspiration that ensures all learners have equitable access to relatable role models and exposure to a wide range of careers ([Section 4](#), page 86; [Appendix A](#), page 116)
- Boost confidence in job applications through building employer-led sessions on applications ([Section 4](#), page 87; [Appendix A](#), page 120)
- Strengthen employer insight across Greater Manchester by leveraging existing forums and sector groups to capture emerging skills needs to ensure ongoing alignment with workforce demand ([Section 4](#), page 87, [Appendix A](#), page 122)
- Develop a GM-wide employer engagement framework to standardise expectations and quality across providers and sectors, delivering a coordinated approach to industry engagement and curriculum design ([Appendix A](#), page 120)

Recommendation: Systematically Embed Employer Voice into Curriculum Design, Approval, and Delivery Across Greater Manchester ([Section 5.3](#), page 98)



Executive Summary

Purpose of Report

This project, initiated by the Greater Manchester Further Education and Higher Education (FE/HE) Leaders Group and delivered with partners across Greater Manchester's (GM) post-16 and employer landscape, set out to explore how universities, colleges, and employers could better collaborate to create a more coherent, connected, and responsive local skills landscape. The work positions GM as a national leader in shaping a modern post-16 technical and vocational education system that better meets the needs of learners, providers, employers, and the regional economy.

The project supports key regional and national priorities, including the refreshed Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP), the Greater Manchester Strategy, and the principals adopted within the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper, reflecting the growing emphasis on higher-level skills as a driver of productivity, growth, and opportunity. Government and Skills England have identified significant shortages in higher technical occupations and have been clear that greater collaboration across Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) is required to address local economic priorities.

At a national level, ambitions to significantly increase participation in higher-level learning, particularly at Levels 4 and 5, create both a challenge and an opportunity. Meeting these ambitions will require clearer pathways, stronger employer alignment, and coordinated effort across the system.

This project responds directly to that need, building on established initiatives and mature partnership working across GM to develop a shared vision for a more resilient, flexible, and future-focused post-16 system.

Methodology and Approach

The project used a mixed-methods approach to understand how GM's post-16 system can work more collaboratively to meet current and future skills needs. The methodology was co-created with partners to ensure a shared evidence base and collective ownership of the findings. To support analysis, the project team adopted a set of priority sectors that reflect both the Industrial Strategy and the Greater Manchester Strategy. These were Clean Energy & Net Zero, Construction, Creative Industries, Defence, Digital & Technologies, Financial Services, Health Innovation & Life Sciences, Professional & Business Services, and Sustainable Advanced Materials & Manufacturing. The project's priority sectors were also cross-referenced against other regional and national frameworks to support system coherence and consistent insight across GM.

Key elements included:

- **Data Analysis:** A comprehensive review of learner progression, skills supply, and labour market demand across FE, HE, and employer datasets, aligned to the identified priority sectors.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Interviews and co-creation workshops with employers, learners, GM FE Colleges, GM HE institutions, and system partners to understand strengths, challenges, and opportunities within the current system. Recommendations were developed through iterative engagement with stakeholders, ensuring that proposals are practical and evidence based.
- **Policy Review:** Analysis of relevant national and regional policy frameworks, including the refreshed LSIP, Greater Manchester Strategy, Local Industrial Strategy, and Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper, to ensure alignment and identify external drivers of change.

This approach provided a robust and shared foundation for identifying where the system is working well, where alignment could be strengthened, and how partners can collectively build a more coherent, flexible, and future-focused post-16 offer for learners in GM.

Key Findings

The project has, for the first time, combined GM FE and HE supply data with employer demand data, creating a level of system-wide insight not previously available. However, variations in how institutions collect and record data limit comparative insights, and so the following insights should be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive.

- **Pathway Information:** Information, advice and guidance (IAG) is provided by a wide range of organisations, demonstrating strong sector commitment, but is currently delivered in different ways. This presents an opportunity to better align messaging and create a more seamless learner experience. Learners and those supporting them would benefit from clearer, more accessible guidance – particularly around post-Level 3 pathways and labour-market information – to help them confidently explore a full range of progression options rather than relying on familiar routes.
- **Applications:** University demand is well aligned to GM priority sectors. GM residents now account for 24.6% of applications (up from 19.3% in 2019) and 30% of acceptances. Around 6% of HE acceptances for subjects aligned to priority sectors come from GM FE colleges.
- **Enrolments:** University enrolments in priority-sector subjects rose by 29% since 2019/20, with strongest growth in Defence (+76%), Digital & Technology (+71%), and Health Innovation & Life Sciences (+43%). At Level 3 in FE, Health & Care, Sport/Leisure, and Creative remain the largest subject areas, though Sport/Leisure and Creative indicate potential oversupply relative to employer demand. Alternative post-18 pathways remain small in scale: Level 4 and 5 enrolments represent just 2% of Level 6 volumes, and only 35% of higher-level Apprenticeship starts are by under-25s.
- **Learner Outcomes:** 40% of graduates stay in GM, with highest retention in Health Innovation & Life Sciences (51%). Retention is lower in sectors with nationally distributed labour markets, such as Sustainable Advanced Materials & Manufacturing (29%), Digital & Technologies (33%) and Defence (37%). No region attracts more GM-trained graduates than GM itself. Graduate destinations suggest scope to expand Level 4 and 5 technical provision, particularly in Professional & Business Services, where many roles align more closely with higher-technical than degree-level pathways.
- **Employer Demand:** Labour-market analysis and employer feedback shows strong cross-sector demand for AI, data, cloud, compliance, risk, and project coordination skills, alongside a continued emphasis on business, professional, and digital fluency competencies.

These insights informed a set of problem statements used as the basis for focused ideation workshops aimed at identifying design principles for addressing skills gaps within the city region.



Opportunities and Recommendations

Based on the themes generated from the insights, four overarching recommendations have been identified to improve learner pathways within the GM post-16 technical and vocational education landscape. Figure 1 presents the core recommendations, with the corresponding opportunities for delivery shown in the outer circle. Further information on the four overarching recommendations can be found in [Section 5](#) of the main report; [Appendix A](#) sets out opportunities for delivery and a proposed action plan to support the implementation of the recommendations.

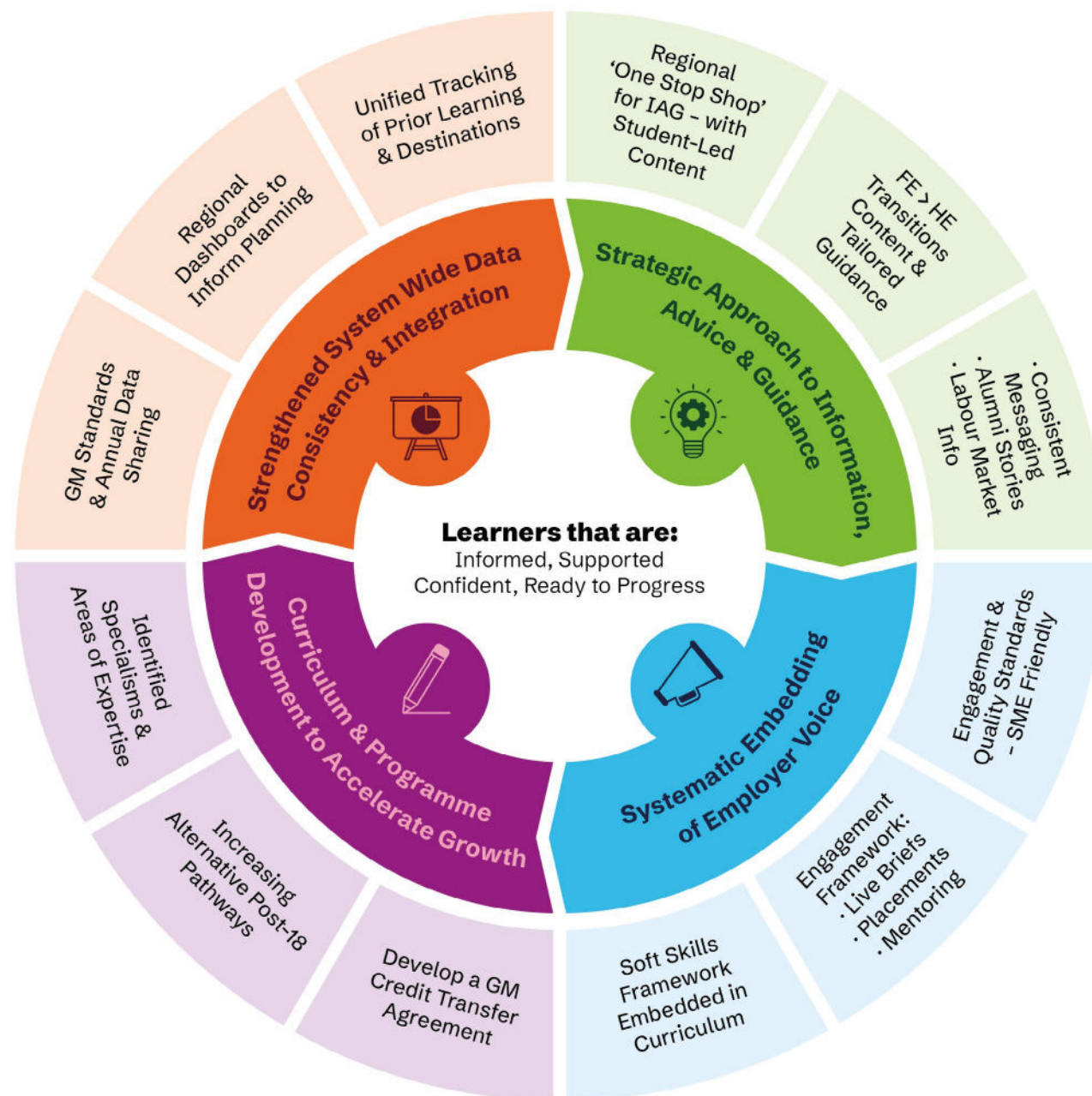


Figure 1 – Overarching recommendations (middle circle), with the corresponding opportunities for delivery shown in the outer circle

Given the scale of system change required to deliver some of the recommendations, it will be important to prioritise early actions that can be delivered in the short term to demonstrate progress and sustain momentum. Indicative quick wins include:

- **Enhancing FE Destination Data Consistency:** FE providers to agree minimum data requirements for destination reporting by October 2026, enabling more consistent and robust FE progression insights ahead of the next data collection phase in February 2027.
- **Enabling Ongoing Data Sharing:** Agreement between partners on principles for ongoing data sharing to support regional insight and strategic planning, including clarity on data ownership, stewardship responsibilities, and how aggregated reports will be produced, shared, and made accessible to providers – by November 2026.
- **Expanding High-Quality IAG:** Development of an update plan by September 2026 to support the phased expansion of the GMACS Beeline platform beyond Level 3, creating a single regional source of information on technical and academic pathways, including Level 4 and above.
- **Strengthening Employer Insight:** A mapping of existing GM employer boards, sector groups, and committees completed by September 2026 to identify gaps in coverage and improve representation across priority sectors, localities, and employer types, including SMEs.
- **Coordinating Employer Engagement:** Draft a shared employer engagement framework, informed by existing activity, to support more consistent and streamlined engagement across providers by November 2026 to support with curriculum planning cycles.
- **Clarifying Level 3 to HE Pathways:** FE and HE providers to complete a joint mapping of reformed Level 3 qualifications to HE entry requirements by November 2026, ensuring clear, agreed progression routes into Levels 4–6 ahead of the defunding of Applied Generals.
- **Progressing Credit Transfer Discussions:** Agreement to establish a GM Credit Transfer working group, led by the FE/HE Leaders Group, as an early step toward longer-term system change, by October 2026.

Benefits and Expected Impact

This strategically significant initiative poses several high-level benefits, including:

- **Clearer and More Coherent Pathways:** Providing learners with clearer, easier-to-navigate routes into high-skilled, high-growth occupations.
- **Stronger Alignment with Employer Needs:** Ensuring that curriculum design keeps pace with emerging employer needs through enhanced partnership working and more effective use of labour market and learner demand/progressions data.
- **Improved Learner Progression and Outcomes:** More flexible, modular, and responsive provision, supported by consistent, high-quality IAG, will enable more learners to progress through the pathways that are right for them, and into high quality jobs within GM's priority sectors.
- **A more Efficient and Collaborative System:** Underpinned by a coordinated approach to data sharing, engagement, and pathways designed to reduce avoidable duplication and maximise the collective resource and expertise across partners.

Next Steps

Building on established relationships, structures, and positive progress already underway across GM, partners are considering the supporting arrangements required to enable effective governance and delivery of the recommendations as the work moves into implementation.

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1. Background

1.1 Context and Purpose

Higher-level skills are critical to Greater Manchester's (GM) future economic success, ensuring employers can develop the talent that allows them to grow, and that more GM residents can share in the prosperity that results. This strategic initiative directly supports the Government's missions on growth and opportunity and aligns with Skills England's ambition for "better skills for better jobs", as well as contributing to the workforce elements necessary to deliver the UK Industrial Strategy.

Expanding access to higher level learning is central to what is described in the recent Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper as this Government's 'defining mission' – growth. A third of productivity growth is attributable to skills, meaning that education and training providers have a pivotal role to play not just in expanding access to opportunity, but also to driving growth itself.

Despite rising participation in higher education, Skills England has diagnosed critical skills shortages within higher technical occupations which constrain economic growth. Government policy – in common with past Governments – seeks more flexible, diverse, occupationally-focused post-16 and post-18 education and training pathways. Ministers have also been clear that, in contrast to the competitive learner demand-led quasi-market that has characterised further education (FE) and higher education (HE) in recent decades, greater collaboration is now expected between providers to respond to local economic priorities such as those within Local Growth Plans and Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIP).

Overarching this sits the national objective announced by the Prime Minister in Autumn 2025, that two-thirds of people by the age of 25 will participate in higher level learning (Level 4 and above), compared to 51% now. Within this, the proportion participating in Level 4 and 5 learning is targeted to double (to 10%) by 2040.

Taken together, this represents a significant challenge and opportunity for FE and HE providers in GM. This requires closer working to ensure that learners have clear pathways into the high skilled occupations, and that the education and training delivered in GM meets employer needs, maximising opportunities for growth and prosperity for communities and residents across the city region.

The project explored how FE and HE providers can collaborate more effectively to build a stronger, resilient, responsive, and more connected skills landscape across GM. It is grounded in the collaborative work of the GM FE/HE Leaders Group, co-chaired by FE and HE leaders, who have collectively shaped the project's purpose and direction.



Figure 2 outlines the principles which underpinned the project.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

At its core, the project set out to map clear, accessible learner pathways and identify how a more integrated system of provision might benefit learners, employers, and education providers. It responded to a shared ambition among HE and FE leaders, industry and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), to realise a world-class, joined-up education system that drives productivity, innovation, and inclusion. It builds on the strength of partnerships that already exist between FE and HE within the city region, including the increasingly mature GM Colleges and GM Civic Universities Board collaborations, the trailblazing FE Innovation Fund, and the collective work across the GM system to develop the LSIP. Figure 3 illustrates the main project objectives and the continuous nature of the work. [Appendix A](#) is the project output which details the opportunities available across GM to improve learner pathways, providing a proposed action plan to support the implementation of the recommendations set out within this report.



Figure 3.1 Project objectives

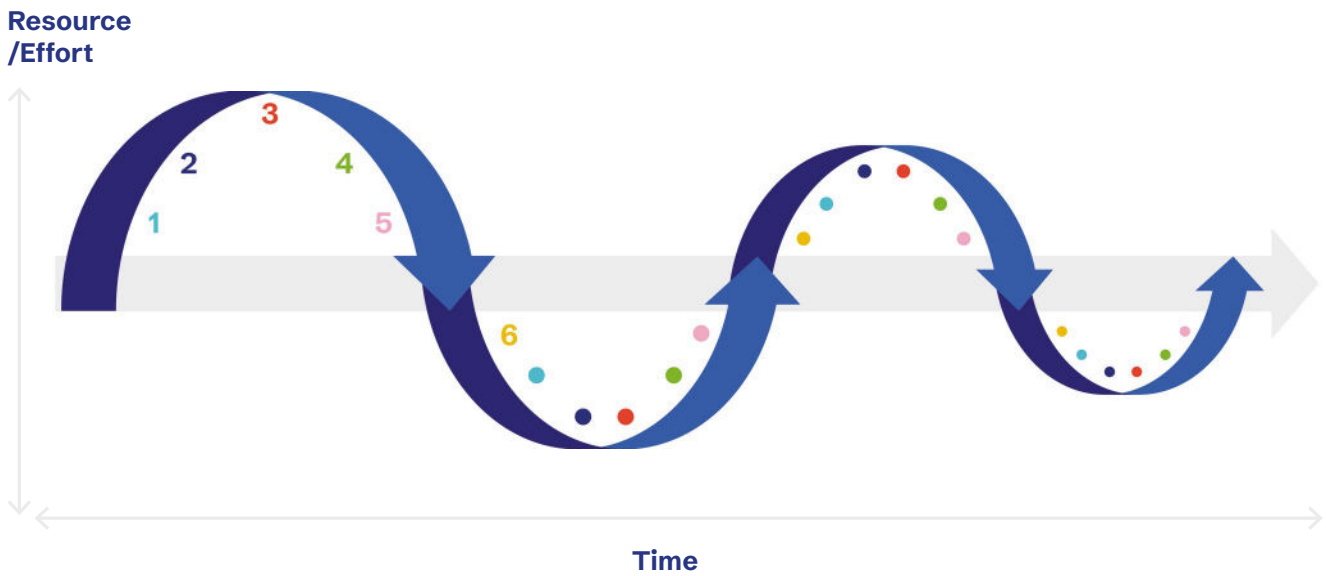


Figure 3.2 - Spiral diagram illustrating the continuous nature of the objectives and how the amount of effort required to complete each activity reduces overtime in line with system developments and a continued collaborative approach



1.3 Project Scope

The scope of the project focused on institutions within GM that deliver technical education, with a focus on higher level skills (Level 4+), enabling a targeted analysis of the skills system most directly linked to regional priority sectors. Sixth form colleges and school sixth forms were excluded to ensure the project remained manageable within the defined timeline and resource available, as their inclusion would have significantly expanded the remit.

However, the project recognises that achieving a fully connected and collaborative post-16 education system will ultimately require the inclusion of sixth form colleges and school sixth forms alongside other skills providers, such as independent training providers and alternative academic qualifications (AAQs). Their future involvement will be essential to developing a comprehensive, system-wide approach to pathways, progression, and regional skills planning.

The project also focused on GM data to maintain a clear and defined scope. A potential future phase could extend the analysis to neighbouring regions, such as West Yorkshire and Cheshire, given the significant flow of learners into and out of GM from these areas.

1.4 System Approach

The project adopted a whole-system approach, ensuring that key regional partners and stakeholders were actively engaged throughout. Initiated by the GM FE/HE Leaders Group, the project was delivered in association with the GM Civic Universities Board and in partnership with GMCA, the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce (GMCC), GMColleges – the primary interface with GM FE colleges – and the region's FE and HE institutes.

To develop a comprehensive understanding of learner pathways, the project engaged directly with over 90 stakeholders across GM, including learners, providers, and employers operating within priority sectors via focus groups and 1-2-1 interviews. These insights were critical to identifying barriers within the current system and surfacing opportunities for improvement.

Engagement also extended to national organisations, including Skills England, to ensure the work was aligned with emerging national and regional policy developments. This broad, collaborative, approach helped highlight opportunities for greater coordination across the system, as well as areas where activity is currently duplicated, reinforcing the importance of a strategic, unified approach to pathway visibility and development.

Further details on participating organisations are provided in [Section 8 - Acknowledgements](#).

The project also took learning from wider publications, including the Association of Colleges and Universities UK report, *Delivering a Joined-Up Post 16 Skills System*¹, and the Edge Foundation's report, *Tertiary Pathways in Practice*². These reports reinforce the importance of adopting an integrated, whole system approach to supporting learner progression, employer engagement, and regional economic growth. Building on their insights and recommendations, the following design principles influenced the work of this project.

¹ [Delivering-a-joined-up-post-16-skills-system-report.pdf](#)

² [Tertiary pathways in practice | Edge Foundation](#)



Principle 1

Ensuring a robust evaluation framework

A connected system requires mechanisms to measure its effectiveness. Consistency in data collection across FE and HE would enable the development of shared metrics and improve the system's ability to track learner progression and outcomes. Analysis undertaken by the project team identified significant variability in data collection methods and data availability across partners, meaning that the results provide indicative insights rather than definitive conclusions. This report sets out recommendations to address these inconsistencies and overcome the associated limitations, supporting a more coherent and evidence-driven approach in future.

Principle 2

Understanding regulatory differences

FE and HE operate within different regulatory frameworks, which may create barriers to seamless integration. A whole-system approach requires examining these differences to identify friction points, assess their impact on alignment, and explore opportunities for coordination or mitigation where appropriate.

Principle 3

Improved information, advice and guidance

Consistent, high-quality careers advice is central to helping learners navigate pathways across institutions and into employment. Cognisant of this, the project explored the feasibility of shared resources – considering what opportunities exist to connect services, reduce duplication, and ensure alignment of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) across the system.

Principle 4

Strengthening pathways to employment

Widening access to employment opportunities within the city-region requires coordinated action between providers, employers, and system partners (e.g., GMCA and GMCC). This project explored how as a system we can ensure that learners are better equipped with the sector-specific and softer skills needed to thrive in the workplace and that employers have access to a workforce that continues to meet their needs.

Principle 5

Developing collaborative partnerships that preserve learner choice

Effective partnership models should enhance opportunities for learners while protecting and expanding their ability to choose the pathway that best suits their aspirations. The project, therefore explored approaches to strengthen collaboration among institutions and employers while ensuring the system remains flexible and responsive to individual learner needs.



1.5 Strategic Alignment

Building on established initiatives such as the GM Institute of Technology, GM Higher, and strong cross-system collaboration, this project represents a significant opportunity to shape a more coherent and responsive post-16 education system that meets the needs of GM's learners, employers, and economy both now and in the future. It is hoped that the project will act as a catalyst for the long-term system transformation required to align the interests of learners, providers and employers in line with the Government's growth aspirations.

To support this ambition, the project ensured strategic alignment at every stage, reflecting both regional and national priorities.

Regional Alignment

- **Greater Manchester Strategy (2025-2035):** The Greater Manchester Strategy (GMS) sets out a long-term vision for a thriving city region, underpinned by inclusive growth, social mobility, and improved access to opportunity. A central ambition is to create a clear line of sight to high-quality jobs, ensuring residents can access the skills, education, and pathways needed to benefit from the future economy. This project directly supports that aim by improving understanding of the relationship between education provision, skills development, and labour market demand across GM. The project aligns with the GMS focus on clearer and more inclusive employment pathways, strengthened academic and technical routes, and skills provision that responds to employer demand and priority growth sectors, including digital and AI, health innovation, advanced manufacturing, and the low-carbon economy. It also supports the GMS recognition of universities as vital economic and innovation assets by strengthening alignment between universities, further education, employers, and future workforce needs. The GMS further acknowledges that access to skills and opportunity is shaped by wider place-based factors such as housing and transport. Together, these priorities support social mobility, inclusive growth, and talent retention by helping people both access opportunity and build long-term futures in GM.
- **The Greater Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc) Sector Gateways:** The GMS sets out an ambition for a “world-leading technical education system” with parity of esteem between technical and academic routes, and clear line of sight to high-quality jobs for the region's residents. Central to this is the MBacc, GM's regional technical education offer, which provides enhanced IAG on technical routes through education to the region's young people and works with employers to increase the number of work placements available for those in education, among other things. Instructively, the MBacc has identified seven ‘sector gateways’ for young people which reflect the

GMCA's assessment of future workforce and regional needs. These sectors, which inform our work, are outlined in [Section 2.1](#).

- **Local Skills Improvement Plan:** To ensure that the project's findings contribute meaningfully to GM's ambition for a more responsive, employer-driven skills landscape, GMCC and GMCA were engaged as key partners from the outset, and this report was developed alongside the refreshed LSIP (Summer 2026 publication). This partnership helped ensure that employer voice was embedded throughout all engagement activities and that the project aligned to the sectors identified by the LSIP as critical to GM's productivity, innovation, and long-term inclusive growth. The GM LSIP identifies the following 8 sectors as priority areas: Construction, Logistics, Health and Social Care, Engineering and Manufacturing, Digital and Technology, Creative and Media, Hospitality, Financial, and Business and Professional Services. By aligning the analysis with the LSIP's priority sectors, and the associated priority skills in each sector, the project ensured that emerging recommendations are transferrable, actionable, and trackable against the LSIP.
- **Greater Manchester Digital Skills Project:** To ensure that all findings from regional skills projects are included, we worked closely with the Digital Skills Project Team to share findings, align recommendations and ensure that any work done to-date is built upon within this project.
- **Greater Manchester Green Skills Project:** We consulted with the Green Skills Project Team to ensure that key learnings from their project, including what went well and what to avoid, helped to shape our process and methodology. The team were informed regularly about key progress updates and recommendations.



National Alignment

- **National Industrial Strategy:** The Industrial Strategy, published June 2025, identifies poor adult participation in FE and a lack of clear routes into high-demand occupations as key sticking points. The Industrial Strategy recommends a more integrated and employer-responsive post-16 education landscape to tackle these sticking points. This report aims to respond to these needs in the GM context. The Industrial Strategy also sets out eight priority sectors for the UK, known as the IS-8, which have informed our work.
- **Skills England Assessment of Priority Skills to 2030:** Building on the eight priority sectors identified in the Industrial Strategy, Skills England also includes two additional sectors in their assessments of skills needs due to their importance in the Government's 'Plan for Change' – these are Health and Social Care and Construction. Published in November 2025, Skills England's Assessment of Priority Skills to 2030 is their third large data report on skills needs. It looks at future employment demand across the ten sectors set out above, and it finds that two-thirds of the projected extra demand in priority occupations to 2030 will need workers with a career entry level 4 qualification or above. This report has been noted in our analysis and our choice of sectors for this project was informed by the ten set out by Skills England.
- **Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (2025):** The Government set out an ambition for “a more sustainable, more specialised and more efficient sector, better aligned with the needs of the economy.” The White Paper places a strong emphasis on regional integration, employer collaboration, and data-driven planning for Skills. It also points to the need for closer collaboration between local and regional authorities, colleges and universities, and employers and Skills England, drawing on resources such as LSIPs and Skills England's Assessment of Priority Skills. The White Paper's priorities are intended to support a system that can deliver the Prime Minister's goal that two-thirds of under-25s will participate in Level 4+ learning by age 25 (currently 51%), supported by a sub-target of 10% participation by age 25 at Levels 4 and 5 by 2040. These priorities have been foundational to the approach of this project.
- **Quality Council Post-16 and Regional Devolution Workshops:** These workshops have explored how post-16 systems in England can learn from Scottish and Welsh tertiary models. The sessions brought together FE and HE leaders to develop principles for an English post-16 system, looking at learner-centred pathways, coherent definitions of post-16 education, and the benefits of integrated systems, including improved mobility, shared facilities, better transitions, and stronger employer connectivity.

Complementing this project, the workshops have highlighted the importance of definitions and aligning regulatory frameworks. This has informed the recommendations of this report. The workshops have also looked at the importance of HE, FE, and private provider relationships for success – learnings that will be crucial to the successful implementation of the recommendations made by this project.

- **The UK Innovation Report:** This research benchmarked the UK's industrial and innovation performance against global comparators. Produced by the University of Cambridge, the report identified significant national skills gaps, particularly in problem solving, innovative thinking, agile mindsets, whole-system thinking, and leadership and management. It concluded that addressing these gaps requires stronger alignment between post-16 education and industry needs to equip the workforce with the capabilities essential for future growth. These findings closely mirror both regional and national priorities and have informed the development of our recommendations.

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2. Methodology

2.1 Approach

Recognising the strategic direction for GM, and the key sectors that have been identified as central to regional productivity, innovation, and long-term inclusive growth, the project team adopted a set of priority sectors that reflect both the Industrial Strategy and the Greater Manchester Strategy.

These include:

Clean Energy and Net Zero	Construction	Creative Industries	Defence
Digital and Technologies	Financial Services	Health Innovation and Life Sciences	
Professional and Business Services	Sustainable Advanced Materials and Manufacturing		

[Appendix B](#) sets out the definitions adopted for each priority sector. These definitions were selected to maintain consistency with national and regional descriptions and to support accurate alignment of subjects, occupational pathways, and skills analysis.

Cognisant that GM is delivering several interconnected initiatives designed to drive inclusive economic growth, skills reform, and innovation-led productivity, it was essential to ensure that the project’s priority sectors aligned with wider regional frameworks. Mapping these sectors to the MBacc Gateways, LSIP Priority Sectors, and the refreshed Primary Capabilities outlined in the 2025 Science and Innovation Audit³ positions the project firmly within the broader GM landscape.

Figure 4 illustrates how the project’s priority sectors align with these frameworks, alongside regional frameworks, supporting system coherence and consistent insight across the city region. To further strengthen this coherence, [Appendix B](#) also cross-maps the sectors and provides a brief explanation of how each alignment was derived. Please note that this project did not include Education and Early Years⁴ as a priority sector, as its scope focused on the IS8 sectors plus the two ‘Plan for Change’ sectors. This does not imply that related provision is absent across GM, and this sector could be incorporated into the datasets for further analysis and ongoing regional insights if required.

³The Greater Manchester Science and Innovation Audit 2025 presents refreshed analysis of Greater Manchester’s science, technology and innovation strengths and assets. It identifies the key capabilities that can drive accelerated growth in the city-region and deliver on the Greater Manchester Strategy’s vision.

⁴Education and Early Years forms one of the Gateway Sectors within the GM MBacc.

	GM MBacc Gateway Sector	SIA (2025) Primary Capability	LSIP Priority Sectors	Industrial Strategy (IS8)	Skills England Assessment of Priority Skills
Clean Energy & Net Zero	Construction & The Green Economy	Energy, Infrastructure & Transition	Construction	Clean Energy	Clean Energy
Construction	Construction & The Green Economy	Energy, Infrastructure & Transition	Construction		Construction
Creative Industries	Creative, Culture & Sport	Creative Media	Creative & Media	Creative Industries	Creative Industries
Defence	Engineering & Manufacturing	AI & Data Analytics; Advanced Materials	Engineering & Manufacturing; Digital & Technology; Logistics	Defence	Defence
Digital & Technologies	Digital & Technology	AI & Data Analytics; Software Engineering	Digital & Technology	Digital Technologies	Digital Technologies
Financial Services	Financial, Business & Professional Services	AI & Data Analytics; Business Process & Market Innovation	Financial, Business & Professional Services	Financial Services	Financial Services
Health Innovation & Life Sciences	Health & Social Care	Health Innovation & Life Sciences	Health & Social Care	Life Sciences	Health & Social Care Life Sciences
Professional & Business Services	Financial, Business & Professional Services	Business Process & Market Innovation	Financial, Business & Professional Services	Professional and Business Services	Professional and Business Services
Sustainable Advanced Materials & Manufacturing	Engineering & Manufacturing	Advanced Materials	Engineering & Manufacturing	Advanced Manufacturing	Advanced Manufacturing

Figure 4 – Alignment of the project’s priority sectors to wider regional and national frameworks

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

To explore how learner pathways can be improved across GM, and to inform future skills provision, the project drew on a broad and varied evidence base. Data was gathered from publicly available sources, including ONS Data, institution-level datasets provided by partners, and insights from stakeholder engagement activities.

Together, these sources enabled the project to build a comprehensive picture of learner demand, progression trends, and employer needs across the region, with each dataset offering distinct insights that shaped the analysis and informed the recommendations presented in this report. An overview of some of the datasets used are detailed below:

- **Lightcast (Aug 2019 – Aug 2025):** Used to understand employer skill requirements, qualification expectations, and recruitment trends across the region. This dataset provided insight into top hiring sectors, emerging skill needs, and the extent of sector diversification in GM, with reference to LSIP growth priorities.
- **Higher Education UCAS Applications Data (2019/20 – 2023/24):** Used to assess patterns of learner demand and interest in subjects aligned with priority sectors, focusing specifically on applicants from GM residents and GM FE colleges. This provided a clearer view of how learner preferences are evolving and where demand is strongest or emerging.
- **HEIDI+ Qualifications Data (2019/20 – 2023/24):** Used to analyse demand for HE qualifications in subjects linked to priority sectors, including trends by qualification level. This supported identification of subjects experiencing rapid growth and potential areas of over- or under-supply relative to sector needs, highlighting where learner demand aligns, or diverges, from regional priorities.
- **Further Education ILR Data (2019/20 – 2023/24):** Used to analyse demand for FE qualifications in subjects linked to priority sectors, including trends by qualification aim. Similar to the HEIDI+ qualifications data, this supported identification of subjects experiencing rapid growth and potential areas of over- or under-supply relative to sector needs, highlighting where learner demand aligns, or diverges, from regional priorities.
- **Further Education Progressions Data (2019/20 – 2022/23):** Used to assess progression destinations of FE learners, including progression into higher education or employment, and whether this aligns with the subject area studied. Please note, FE progression data is inconsistently reported across providers, leading to formatting and comparability issues. After standardisation, small cohort sizes limited robustness, and the data was not considered a reliable reflection of FE destinations.
- **Graduate Outcomes Data (2018/19 – 2022/23):** Used to assess the extent to which graduates remain in GM and progress into roles aligned with priority sectors, providing insight into the strength and sustainability of the regional workforce pipeline. Analysis focussed on home students in full time employment and considered typical post-study occupations, the volume of graduates entering skilled roles (SOC 1-3), the proportion using their qualification and/or subject knowledge, and the number entering GM roles aligned with LSIP-priority occupations.



[Appendix C](#) provides an overview of the datasets used to support analysis, including key transformations made to improve accuracy and consistency, and expected insights. One of the key transformations undertaken was the alignment of subjects and occupations to GM's priority sectors to enable analysis of learner demand and destinations in relation to these sectors. For university datasets, subjects were mapped at CAH1, CAH2, and CAH3 levels⁵, while further education datasets were mapped at SSA1 and SSA2 levels⁶. This mapping was informed by the sector definitions adopted for the project, and each subject was assigned a level of alignment to indicate the extent to which it provides the skills and knowledge relevant to a particular sector and supports pathways into employment.

Because some subjects align to multiple sectors, learner demand may be counted more than once. As a result, the insights generated are directional and should not be interpreted as representing precise student volumes.

In parallel, qualitative data was collected through targeted interviews with key stakeholders shaping the future skills landscape.

These included:

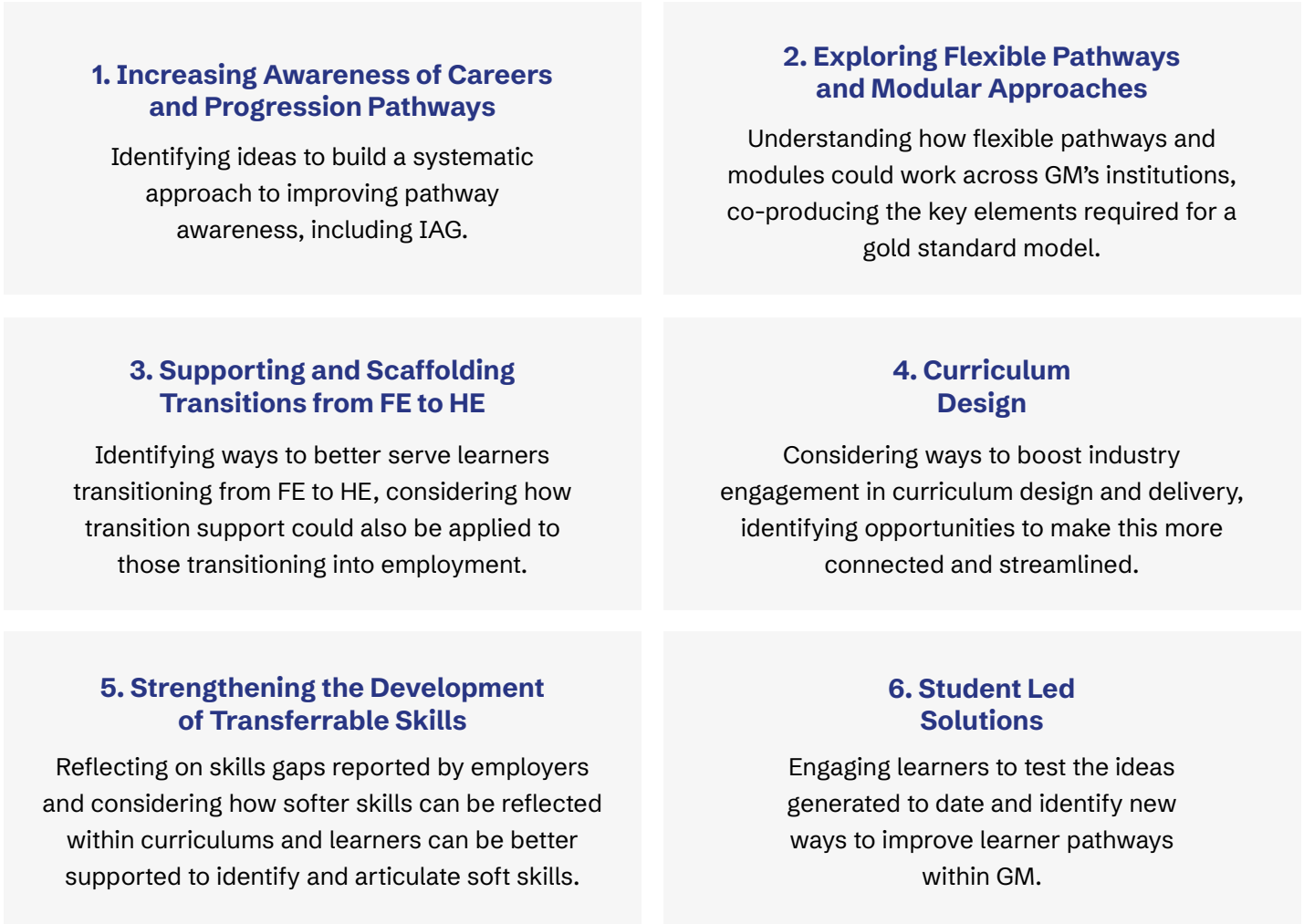
- **Employers:** To understand anticipated skill requirements, emerging job roles, current skills gaps, and ideal curriculum features.
- **GM FE Colleges, Skills Providers, and HE institutions:** To explore future recruitment plans, potential curriculum developments, and perceived skills shortages.
- **Learners:** Including learners, aged 18+, who had recently (within the last 12-months) completed, or are currently enrolled in a programme aligned with the project priority sectors and adults in the labour market, to understand their decision-making processes, aspirations, barriers, and frustrations with current learning pathways.
- **LSIP Roundtables:** Members of the project team attended each relevant LSIP roundtable to ensure that findings were aligned and integrated into the final report.

⁵ Common Aggregate Hierarchy (CAH) is a standardised hierarchical framework developed by HESA to map and group subject data consistently across the former JACS and the current HECoS coding structures. CAH provides three levels of subject aggregation (CAH1, CAH2, CAH3) to enable reliable comparison and analysis of subject-based data across institutions and over time - [Cah | HESA](#).

⁶ Sector Subject Areas (SSAs) are a classification system used to categorise regulated qualifications, such as NVQs, GCSEs, and A-Levels, into 50 subject areas based on their content. SSAs help ensure qualifications are clearly categorised, supporting consistent identification and reporting across the regulated qualifications framework - [Qualification descriptions - GOV.UK](#).



Following initial analysis of the datasets, and a thematic review of stakeholder feedback, a series of focussed workshops were developed. These were structured around key stages of the learner journey, and focussed on:



This dual approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of both current and future skills needs, enabling the development of informed, forward-looking recommendations.

2.3 Data Limitations

Figure 5 illustrates the relationship between skills supply, labour market demand, and qualitative stakeholder insights, highlighting the value of triangulating multiple data sources to build a holistic picture of GM’s post-16 education landscape. While this approach strengthens the robustness of the analysis, it should be noted that several limitations mean that the findings provide indicative insight, not definitive conclusions.

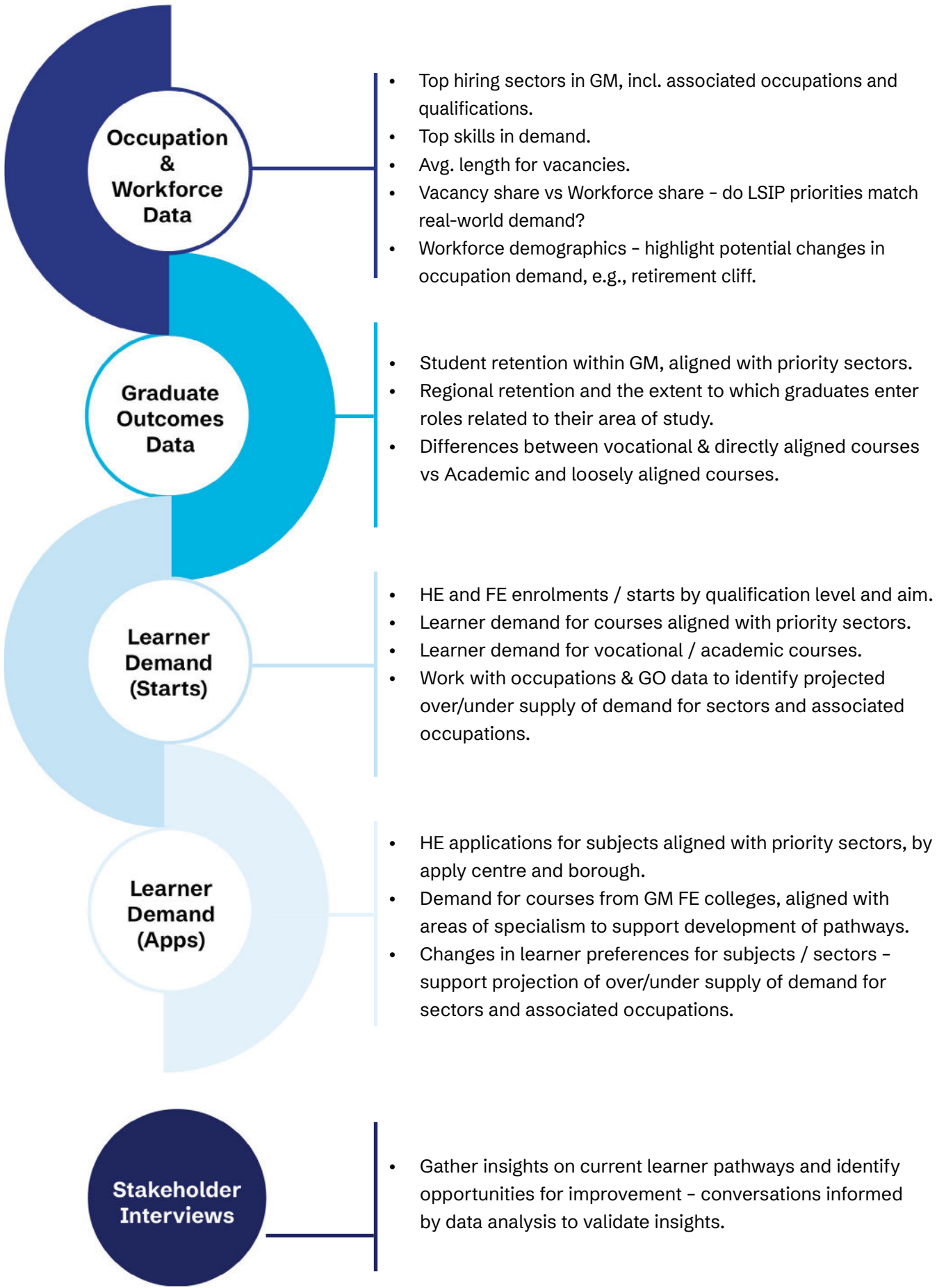
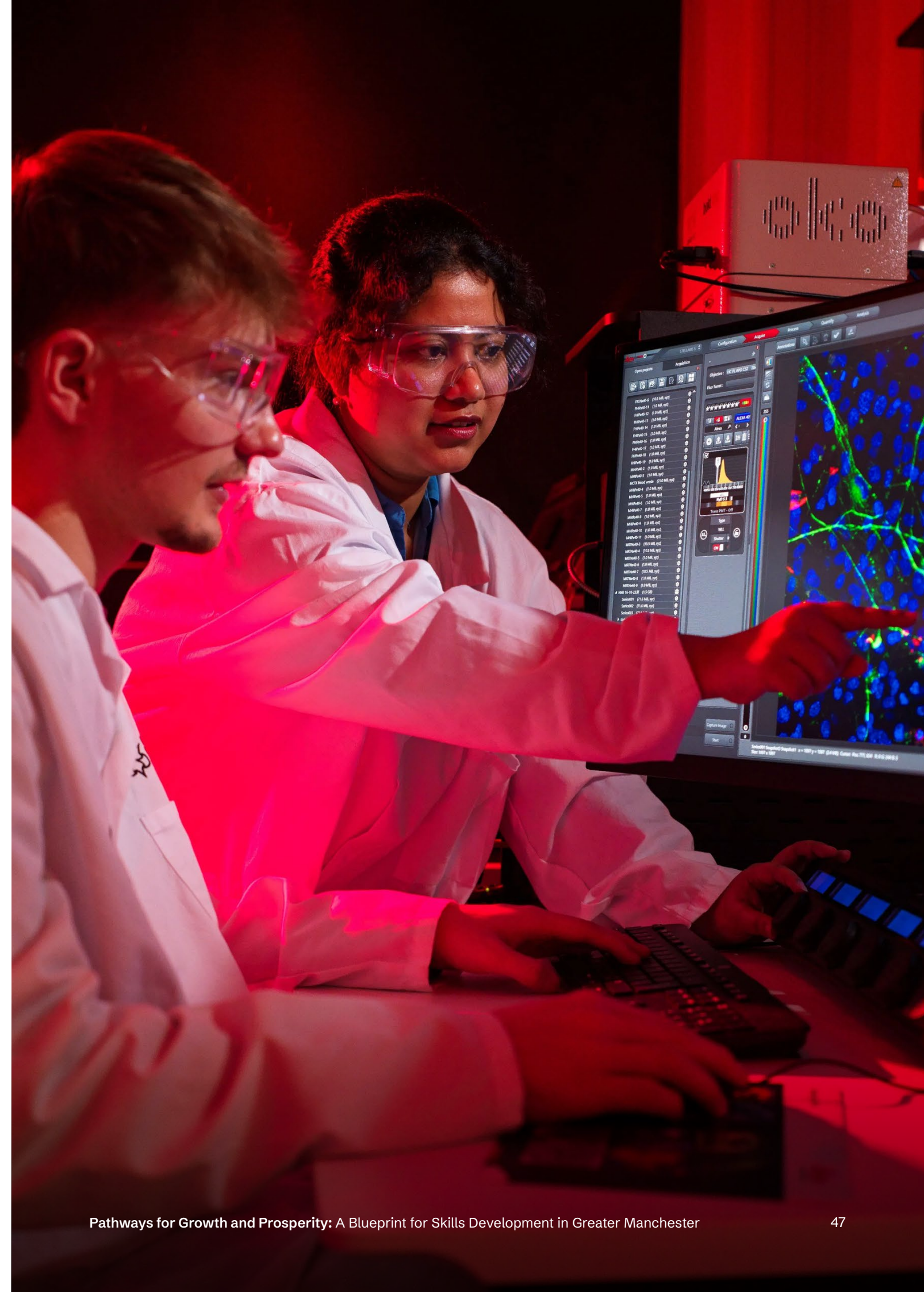


Figure 5 – The relationship between skills supply, labour market demand, and qualitative stakeholder insights

Variability in data collection methods and data availability across partners limits the ability to map end-to-end learner journeys in a way that accurately reflects learner experiences. As a result, the analysis may be partial, and risks being over-interpreted if the following caveats are not acknowledged.

- Tracking HE entrants by their prior FE subject is not currently possible, preventing clear visibility of progression routes.
- Graduate Outcomes Survey data has an approximate 50% response rate, introducing response bias and reliance on accurate self-reporting.
- FE destinations data is collected inconsistently across providers, and it was concluded that the aggregated data was not representative of actual learner volumes or longer-term outcomes.
- The process of mapping subjects to priority sectors involves an element of interpretation, and while grounded in evidence, remains inherently subjective.
- Recognising these challenges, the recommendations include actions to strengthen data consistency, integration, and progression tracking across the system. This includes proposing a systematic monitoring programme in GM, capturing prior learning and employment destinations by occupation and sector.

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3. Current Understanding

This section provides an overview of the current understanding of learner pathways across GM, focusing on four core areas:

- GM's collaborative approach.
- The availability and coherence of existing pathway information.
- Qualitative and quantitative insights at both system-wide and sector-specific levels.
- Examples of good practice alongside key challenges that impact learner experience and progression.

Together, these insights highlight both the strengths and limitations of the current landscape – including highlighting how fragmentation, inconsistent messaging, and limited visibility of labour market opportunities continue to create barriers for learners seeking to understand and navigate their options effectively. While there are opportunities for development, the project also highlights a strong sense of collective goodwill and a shared commitment among GM providers, employers, and system partners to address the region's socioeconomic ambitions.

GM is uniquely positioned to build a genuinely connected post-16 education landscape; its established culture of collaboration provides a powerful foundation for creating a more coherent, aligned, and future-focused skills system.

3.1 Greater Manchester's Collaborative Approach

GM has a long-standing culture of partnership working across education, industry, and system partners. This is evidenced through a range of established collaborative structures, including the GM FE/HE Leaders Group, GMColleges, the GM Civic Universities Board, Innovation GM, and the Employer Integration Board.

Furthermore, several cross-institution initiatives demonstrate the region's commitment to collaboration in practice. These include GMColleges' agreement with the University of Manchester and the University of Salford to place PhD students in colleges to support teaching and learning; the development of the Greater Manchester Institute of Technology; and the University of Greater Manchester and Bolton College's shared operating model, which brings together resources and provides clear progression routes through the University of Bolton Group. Collectively, these examples illustrate a strong regional commitment to working across institutional boundaries to improve learner outcomes.

Building on these initiatives, this project has further reinforced the region's strong collaborative ethos, with FE, HE, employers, and system partners demonstrating a clear willingness to work together to understand shared challenges and opportunities and design solutions that deliver collective benefit.

Engagement through interviews and workshops highlighted a shared recognition that GM's economic and social ambitions can only be achieved through coordinated system-level action. Partners expressed an appetite to collectively shape pathways that better meet learner needs and align with employer demand.

This collaborative mindset aligns closely with the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper, which emphasises:

- Stronger coordination across FE, HE, and employers
- Improved alignment with labour-market needs
- Clearer pathways into good jobs
- More flexible, modular provision supported by shared standards and high-quality IAG

GM is already making visible progress against these ambitions. Existing regional structures provide the governance, relationships, and trust needed to enable meaningful system change.

Together, these foundations position GM as a national exemplar of collaborative system leadership, capable of shaping a modern post-16 education landscape that reflects the needs of its learners, employers, and communities. The City Region could provide a testbed for establishing the best approaches for realising the aspirations set out with the Skills White Paper.



3.2 Pathway Information and Navigation

Currently, pathway information is developed by a wide range of partners, including FE providers, independent training organisations, national awarding bodies, and GMCA, demonstrating strong commitment across the system to supporting learners. However, the absence of strong coordination across this landscape has resulted in duplication, inconsistent messaging, and a less coherent learner experience. Learners have highlighted the value of clearer signposting and a more visible, trusted source of guidance to help them navigate available information with confidence. In particular, better alignment of information on post-Level 3 progression routes and improved access to labour-market insights, such as job roles, vacancy levels, and typical pay, would support more informed decision-making and enable learners to plan next steps more effectively.

Anecdotally, there were several points of confusion for learners when trying to identify the best, most relevant next step in their learning journey.

In particular:

- For learners making decisions about FE study, many stated that there were misconceptions and negative attitudes towards non-traditional routes which prevented them from choosing the best pathway for their exact needs

“**There was a lack of awareness of BTECS.** My school wouldn’t promote them and my friends said they’d just do A Levels. I thought a Levels were stronger than BTECs and no-one communicated the equivalence”

“I was offered an apprenticeship by chance at 15. **I didn’t know what an apprenticeship was.** I’d heard it in passing but dismissed it because the way it was spoken about was that it was for people who were bad at school, not going anywhere and that you’d be making tea and photocopying. School told me I’d be better off going to Oxbridge than doing an apprenticeship”

- Learners who chose a university based off recommendations from friends and family were often disappointed with the experience; they felt it didn’t meet their expectations or provide enough hands-on, real-world experience for them.

“I chose my university based on recommendations, but **I was really disappointed with the reality**”

- Learners in colleges were often unaware about different career options, or even that they could start employment early and that they didn’t have to go onto higher education.

“Teachers asked what I wanted to do, but **they pushed staying in school** and going to university. I had no idea I could start exploring careers earlier”

“During college, **roles like quantity surveying were never introduced.** It would have been great to be made aware of these roles”

- Learners who were looking at employment opportunities were often unclear about minimum entry requirements and qualifications needed to apply

“**The pathway isn’t always clear.** I might need to speak to whoever posted the job and ask if I can apply”

The lack of coordinated region-wide guidance also reinforces inequities. Learners with less support, whether at home, in school, or in the workplace, and those from underrepresented groups face greater barriers in understanding their options, contributing to uneven participation across sectors and qualification levels. Figure 6 illustrates the complexity of the current pathways available from Level 3 onwards, highlighting how, without coherent and consistent IAG, the landscape can be difficult for learners to navigate. It is important to note that employment opportunities exist at every level; learners are not expected to progress through all levels of education.

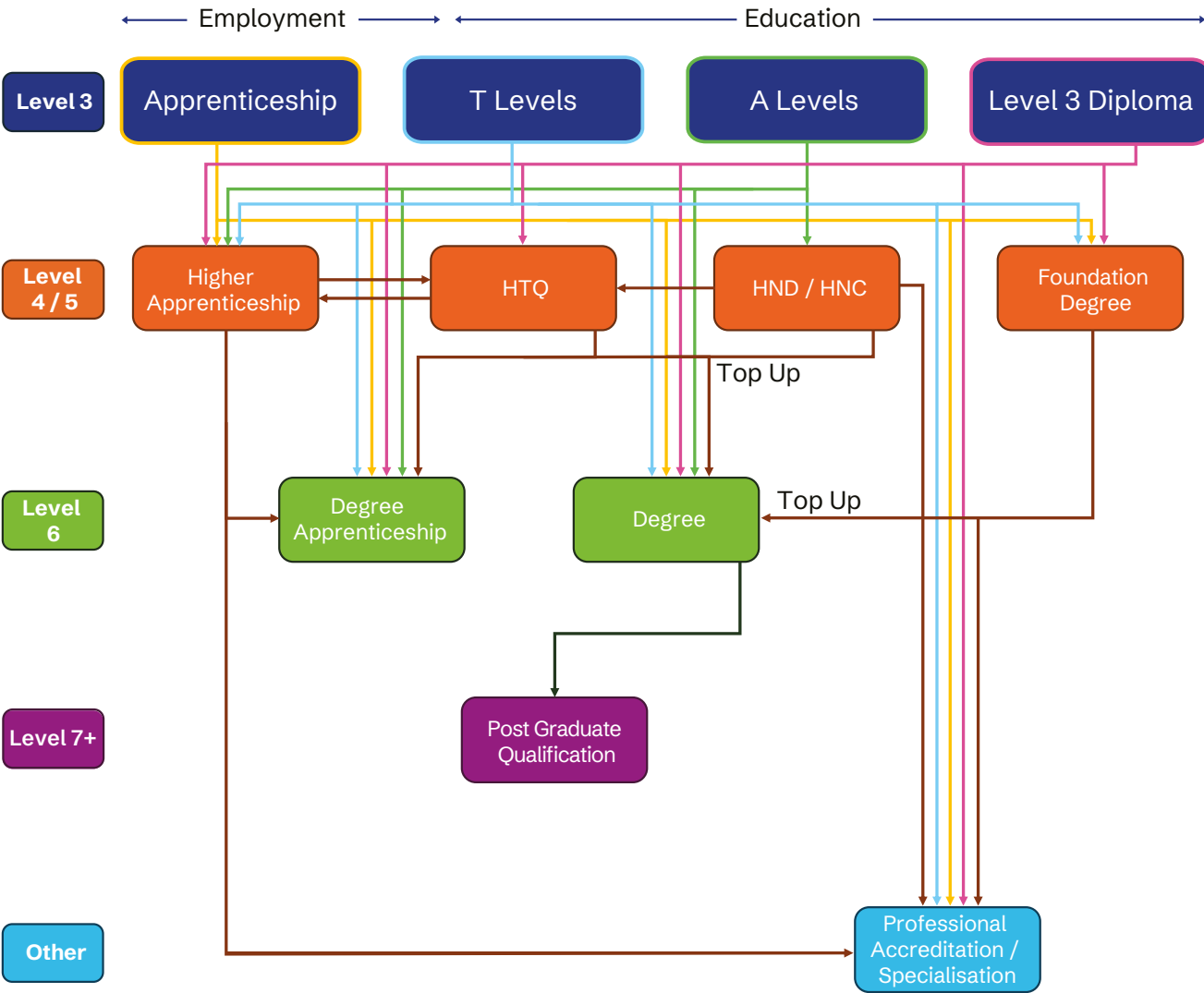


Figure 6 - The current pathways available from Level 3 onwards

The landscape illustrated in Figure 6 is set to change from September 2027, following the announcement that Government will introduce a new range of V Levels, offering what it describes as a ‘flagship vocational qualification’ to sit beside A Levels and T Levels. A total of 18 V Levels are planned, linked to the occupational standards within Skills England’s Occupational Maps. Each V Level will be approximately the size of a single A Level, allowing learners to take both in combination.

The 2027/28 academic year will also see the de-funding of a range of existing Level 3 qualifications of 1080 or more guided learning hours (GLH) – commonly referred to as ‘Applied Generals’ – in subject areas where these programmes overlap with existing T Levels. Defunding of most current vocational and technical level 3 qualifications of over 1080 GLH within existing T Level subject areas will take place from August 2027; defunding of level 3 vocational and technical qualifications under 1080 GLH will take place in stages from 2027 to 2030.

Combined, this represents a significant change to the FE qualifications landscape with implications for access. Roughly 1 in 5 undergraduate students (age 18) enter university without any A Levels, and a further 8% enter with a mix of A Level and vocational qualifications. Therefore, it will be important for FE and HE providers to understand and then communicate the role these new Level 3 qualifications will play in providing access to higher-level study. They may also require HE institutes to support transition into Level 4+ study differently in the future.

Further pathway changes could be seen in the structure of 3-year degree programmes, as the Post-16 White Paper is clear that, while greater participation in HE is supported, ‘the traditional 3-year degree is not the only option for young people’. Within this context, the white paper announces plans to consult on making funds for student support conditional on institutions including break points in degrees. Subsequently DfE has stated that institutions must deliver learning that is of value within the labour market in each year, enabling students the option to take a break at the end of year 1 or 2, equipped with a Level 4 or 5 qualification that allows career progression, before choosing if, and when, to return to complete their degree.

3.3 Data Insights

The project has, for the first time, combined GM FE and HE supply data with employer demand data, creating a level of system-wide insight not previously available. Because HE data is more systematically structured and consistently reported at national level, current insights on applications and learner outcomes primarily draw on HE datasets. This provides a robust starting point for system-wide analysis. Looking ahead, incorporating FE application data will offer an even richer picture of learner demand across the post-16 system. The recommendations set out practical steps to enhance FE progression reporting and move towards a more comprehensive, integrated evidence base over time.

3.3.1 System Level Insights

Participation Rates

- There is rising participation in both FE and HE among young people in GM:
 - DfE destinations data shows that FE colleges (excluding sixth-form colleges) are now the destination for just over 40% of GM pupils completing Key Stage 4, up from 36% five years earlier. Combined with population growth, this has increased the number of Key Stage 4 leavers progressing to an FE college from 10,837 to 13,887 (as of early 2024), with colleges reporting further significant enrolment growth in Autumn 2024 and 2025.
 - DfE participation data also shows a steady rise in HE enrolments over the past decade. Participation among young people who attended secondary school in GM now matches the national average of 46%, having increased sharply from 31.7% in 2009/10 to 43.4% in 2019/20, broadly in line with national trends.
- Although participation rates have largely plateaued since the pandemic, population growth has driven continued increases in absolute numbers:
 - The number of GM residents entering HE has risen from 10,516 in 2009/10 to 14,348 in 2023/24.
 - This overall growth masks significant local variation, with participation highest in Trafford (60.9%), substantial improvement in Manchester (rising from 28% in 2009/10 to 50.6% in 2023/24), and persistently lower participation in Salford (35%).



Applications

- GM’s university applications and acceptances are increasingly aligned with priority sectors.
- For subjects aligned to priority sectors, GM residents made up 24.6% of university applications in 2023, up from 19.3% in 2019, and now account for 30% of offer acceptances.
- 6% of all offer acceptances for these subjects come from GM FE colleges: highest for subjects aligned with Health Innovation & Life Sciences (9%), lowest for those aligned with Sustainable Advanced Materials & Manufacturing (4%).
- Figure 7.1 reveals the proportion of GM-based student acceptances from each borough between 2019/20 and 2023/24 (1 in 4 GM-based acceptances from Manchester); Figure 7.2 offers additional context and presents acceptances per 1,000 residents by borough, which broadly supports this pattern when accounting for population size, with higher rates seen in boroughs such as Manchester, Bolton and Oldham. Figure 8 illustrates the annual number of acceptances for HE Subjects that align with Priority Sectors and the % of acceptances from GM-based learners.

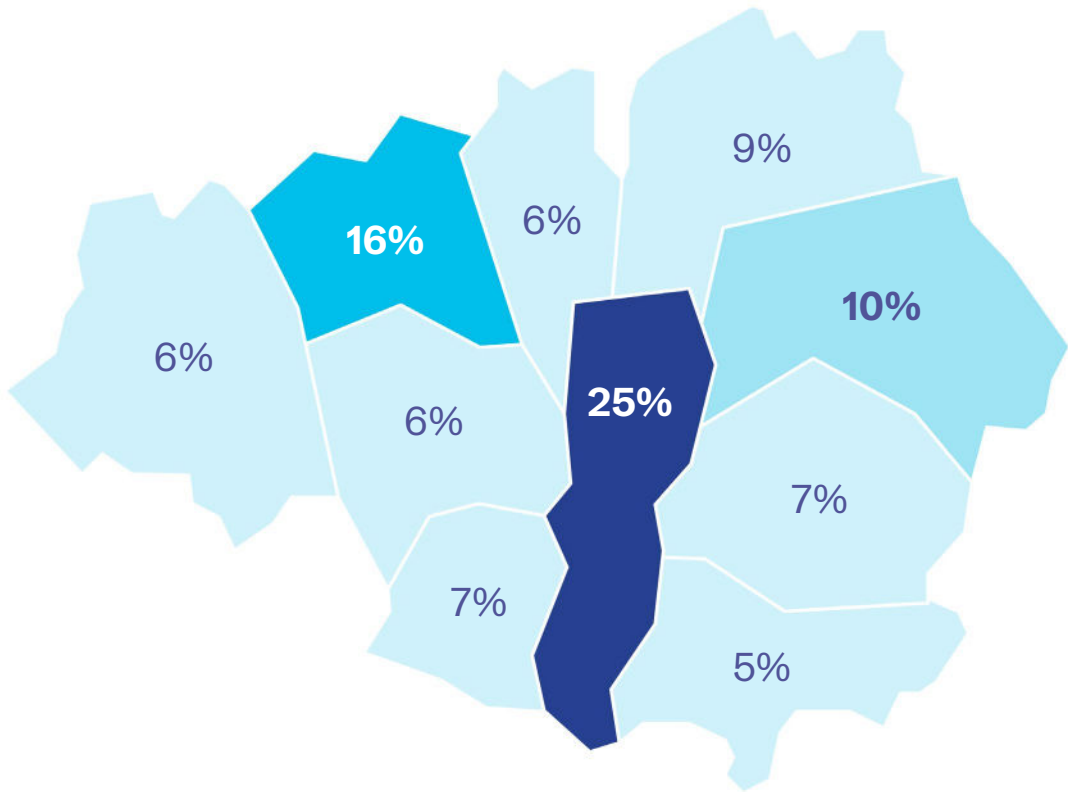


Figure 7.1 – Proportion of GM-Based student acceptances by Borough, 2019/20 to 2023/24



Acceptances per 1000 people by Borough

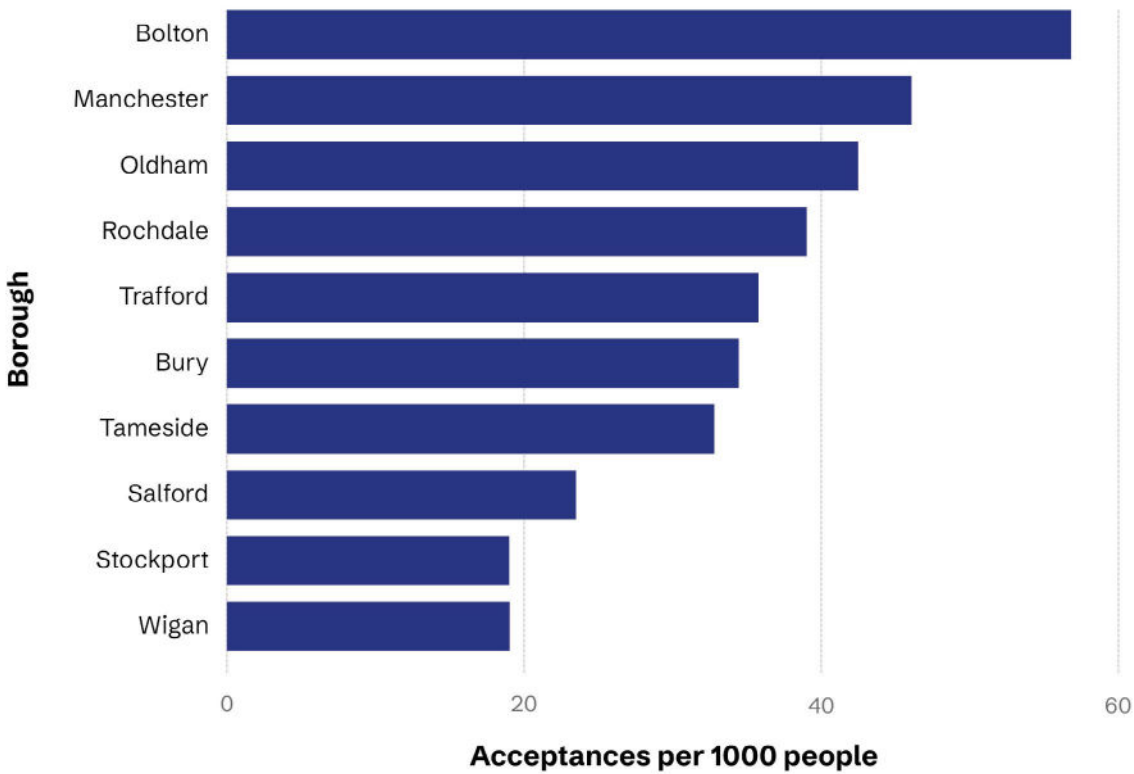


Figure 7.2 – GM-Based student acceptances per 1,000 residents by borough, 2019/20 to 2023/24

University Offer Acceptances in GM Priority Sectors (% from GM Students)

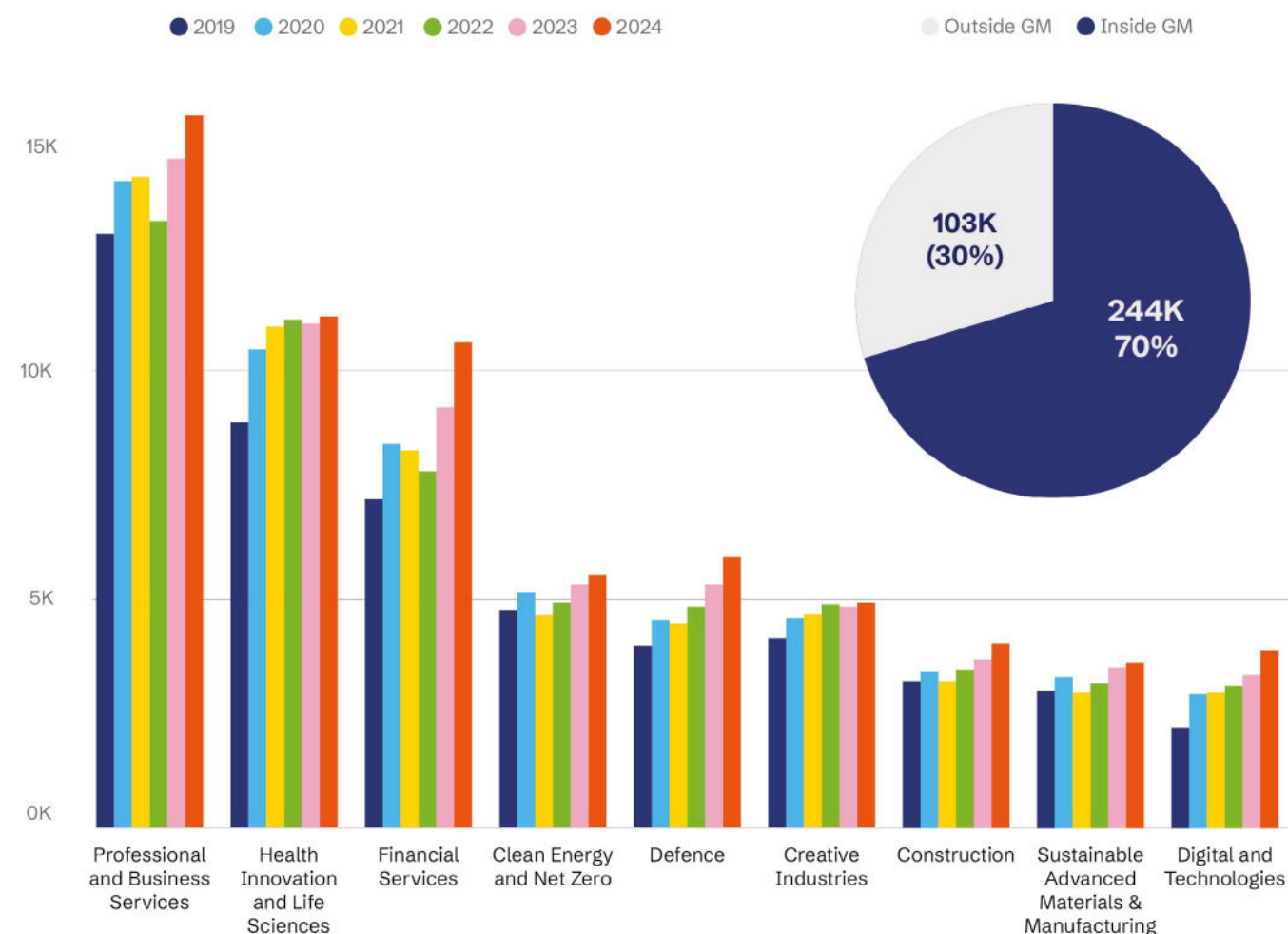


Figure 8 – Annual number of acceptances for HE subjects that align with Priority Sectors and the % of Acceptances from GM-Based students

Enrolments

- Between 2019/20 and 2023/24, enrolments for university subjects also aligned more closely with the priority sectors grew by 29%.
- The strongest increases were in Defence (+76%, from 1,489-2,621), Digital & Technology (+71%, from 3,994-6,821), and Health Innovation & Life Sciences (+43%, from 4,527-6,469). Note that there are a handful of subject areas that are strongly or directly aligned to more than one GM priority sector – examples include Engineering (in Clean Energy and Net Zero, Defence, Sustainable Advanced Materials and Manufacturing) and Software Engineering (in Defence, Digital and Technologies).
- At Level 3 in FE, Health & Care, Sports/Leisure, and Creative subjects have the highest level of enrolments, though the latter two appear oversupplied relative to the volume of employer demand for occupations in these sectors, particularly advanced or high skilled occupations.
- Alternative post-18 pathways to the established Level 6 bachelor's degree remain relatively small in scale. For example, the quantity of Level 4 and 5 learning aim enrolments – a government priority for growth – is low and falling at GM universities, representing just 2% of the volume at Level 6. While Apprenticeships at Level 4 and above have grown, starts for young people remain low relative to the post-18 bachelor's degree pathway. Almost half of total Apprenticeship starts at GM FE colleges and universities in 2024/25 were at Level 4 and above (2,849). But of this number, just 35% (1,001) were with learners aged under-25 – concentrated in delivery by universities in Construction, Digital, and Health occupations.
- Figure 9 illustrates the annual enrolment figures and % changes in enrolments for FE subjects that align with priority sectors (incl. A-Levels, T-Levels, Diplomas, and Apprenticeships) and Figure 10 illustrates annual enrolment figures and % changes in enrolments for university subjects that strongly or directly align⁷ with priority sectors.

⁷HE subjects that strongly or directly align with priority sectors refer to those subjects that support core functions, skills, or knowledge within a sector, or that commonly lead to sector-related roles.

	2019/20	2020/21		
Clean Energy and Net Zero	3,154	2,988	↓	-5%
Construction	3,401	3,178	↓	-7%
Creative Industries	3,850	3,536	↓	-8%
Defence	1,488	1,150	↓	-23%
Digital Technologies	1,282	1,209	↓	-6%
Financial Services	874	1,024	↑	17%
Health Innovation and Life Science	5,741	4,716	↓	-18%
Professional and Business Services	6,120	6,290	→	3%
Sustainable Advances Materials & Manufacturing	3,286	2,932	↓	-11%

Figure 9 – Annual enrolment numbers and year-on-year percentage change for FE subjects aligned to priority sectors (A Levels, T Levels, Diplomas, and Apprenticeships). Colour gradients indicate enrolment volume by sector and year (red = lowest, green = highest). Arrows show year-on-year changes in enrolment.

	2019/20	2020/21		
Clean Energy and Net Zero	1,237	1,206	→	-3%
Construction	5,937	6,233	↑	5%
Creative Industries	12,751	13,800	↑	8%
Defence	1,489	1,902	↑	28%
Digital Technologies	3,994	4,987	↑	25%
Financial Services	3,998	4,563	↑	14%
Health Innovation and Life Science	4,527	5,067	↑	12%
Professional and Business Services	20,080	23,841	↑	19%
Sustainable Advances Materials & Manufacturing	3,024	3,248	↑	7%

Figure 10 – Annual enrolment figures and % changes in enrolments for HE subjects that strongly or directly align* with priority sectors. Colour gradients indicate enrolment volume by sector and year (red = lowest, green = highest). Arrows show year-on-year changes in enrolment.

2021/22			2022/23			2023/24		
3,371	13%		3,327	→	-1%	3,436	↑	3%
3,870	22%		3,270	↓	-16%	3,614	↑	11%
4,323	22%		4,653	↑	8%	4,486	↓	-4%
1,402	22%		1,038	↓	-26%	1,206	↑	16%
1,226	1%		1,419	↑	16%	1,555	↑	10%
1,018	-1%		1,031	→	1%	1,043	→	1%
5,789	23%		5,347	↓	-8%	5,938	↑	11%
6,944	10%		6,952	→	0%	7,218	↑	4%
3,385	15%		3,320	→	-2%	3,486	↑	5%

Figure 9 continuation

2021/22			2022/23			2023/24		
1,180	→	-2%	1,132	↓	-4%	1,030	↓	-9%
6,680	↑	7%	6,792	→	2%	6,829	→	1%
13,719	→	-1%	14,709	↑	7%	14,859	→	1%
1,927	→	1%	2,371	↑	23%	2,621	↑	11%
5,531	↑	11%	6,230	↑	13%	6,821	↑	9%
4,623	→	1%	4,562	→	-1%	4,555	→	0%
5,626	↑	11%	6,121	↑	9%	6,469	↑	6%
24,316	→	2%	24,256	→	0%	24,878	→	3%
3,401	↑	5%	3,605	↑	6%	3,575	→	-1%

Figure 10 continuation

Graduate Outcomes:

- Post-study retention measured 15 months after graduating shows that 40% of graduates remain in GM, with the highest retention in Health Innovation & Life Sciences (51%). This sector also represents one of the region’s largest labour markets, accounting for 33% of all job postings across the nine priority sectors and is dominated by high-volume frontline and clinical roles that offer clear early-career entry points and stable demand.
- Sustainable Advanced Materials and Manufacturing, despite contributing 9% of job postings (4th highest sector), has the lowest graduate retention at 29%. Digital and Technologies show a similar pattern: although it represents 8% of postings, retention is just 33%. Defence also sees a slightly below average retention rate of 37%, although the overall share of job postings in GM is much lower at 0.3%.
- In sectors where Graduate retention is below average, graduates often relocate to regions with larger, more accessible specialist labour markets. For sectors such as Defence, Sustainable Advanced Materials and Manufacturing, and Digital and Technologies, the London, North West (outside GM), and South East regions continue to attract graduates due to the concentration of major employers, national agencies, and specialised R&D hubs. However, it is worth noting, that no single region attracts more GM trained graduates than GM – as detailed in Figure 11.

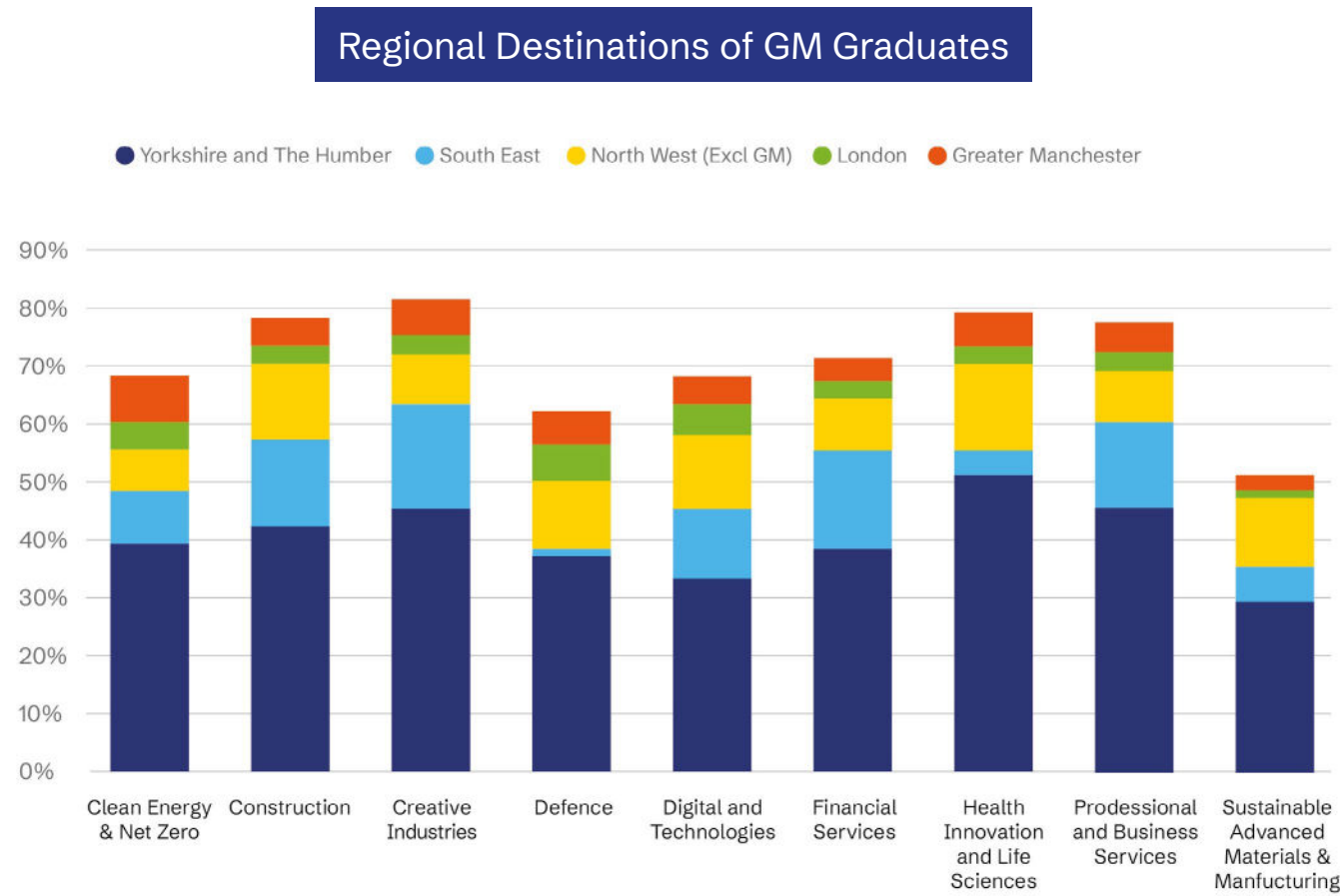


Figure 11 – Average regional destinations of GM graduates in full time employment between 2018/19 – 2022/23 based on the occupations that graduates entered (SOC3)⁸

⁸For Defence and SAMM around 6% of graduates obtained employment in the West Midlands



- Graduate destinations indicate potential scope to expand Level 4 and 5 higher technical provision, particularly in Professional and Business Services, as many graduates enter associate professional and higher-technical occupations where the skill requirements usually more closely align with Level 4 and 5 qualifications than bachelor's or master's degree-level pathways.
- Figure 12 illustrates the annual graduate retention for GM's priority sectors, based on the occupations that graduates enter (SOC3 Code) and Figure 13 illustrates annual alignment of graduate destination (Occupation) with subject studied.

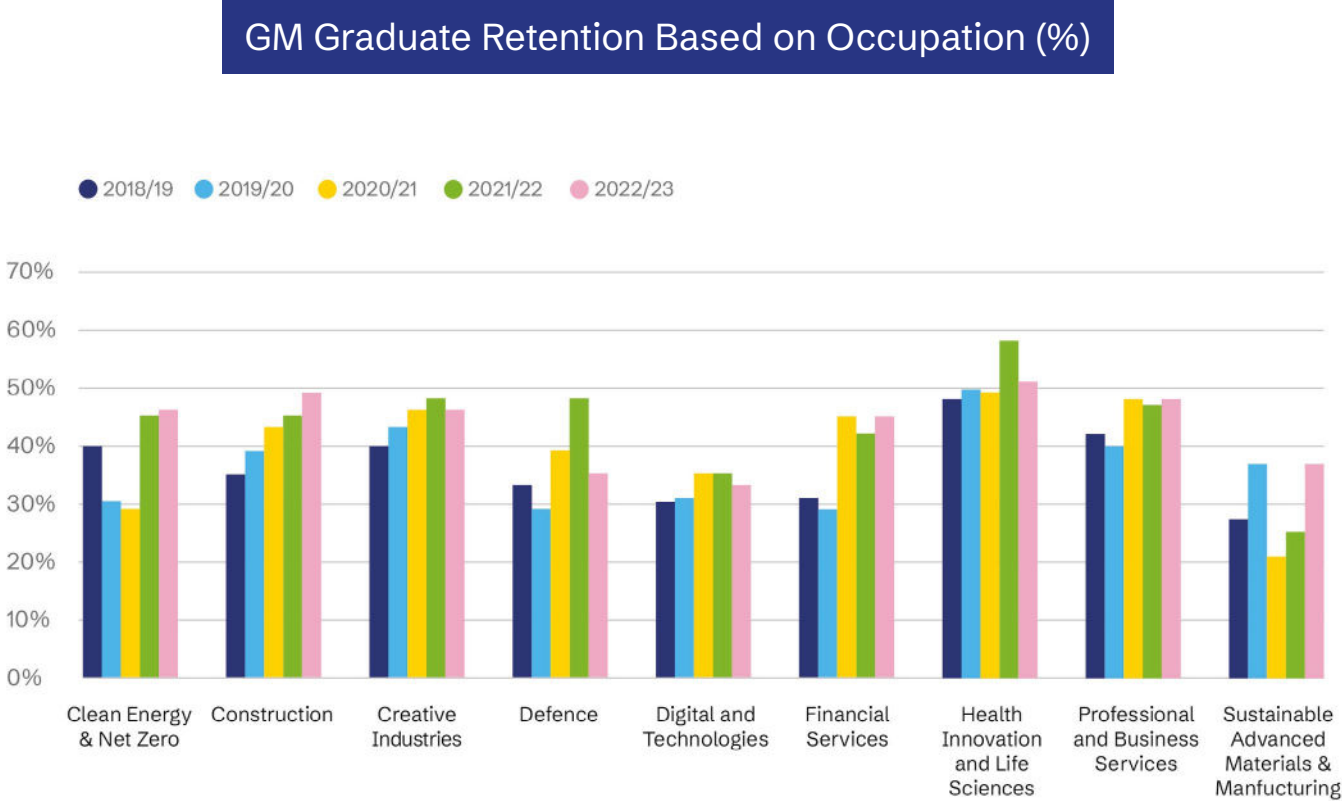


Figure 12 illustrates the annual graduate retention for GM's priority sectors, based on the occupations that graduates enter (SOC3 Code) and Figure 13 illustrates annual alignment of graduate destination (Occupation) with subject studied.

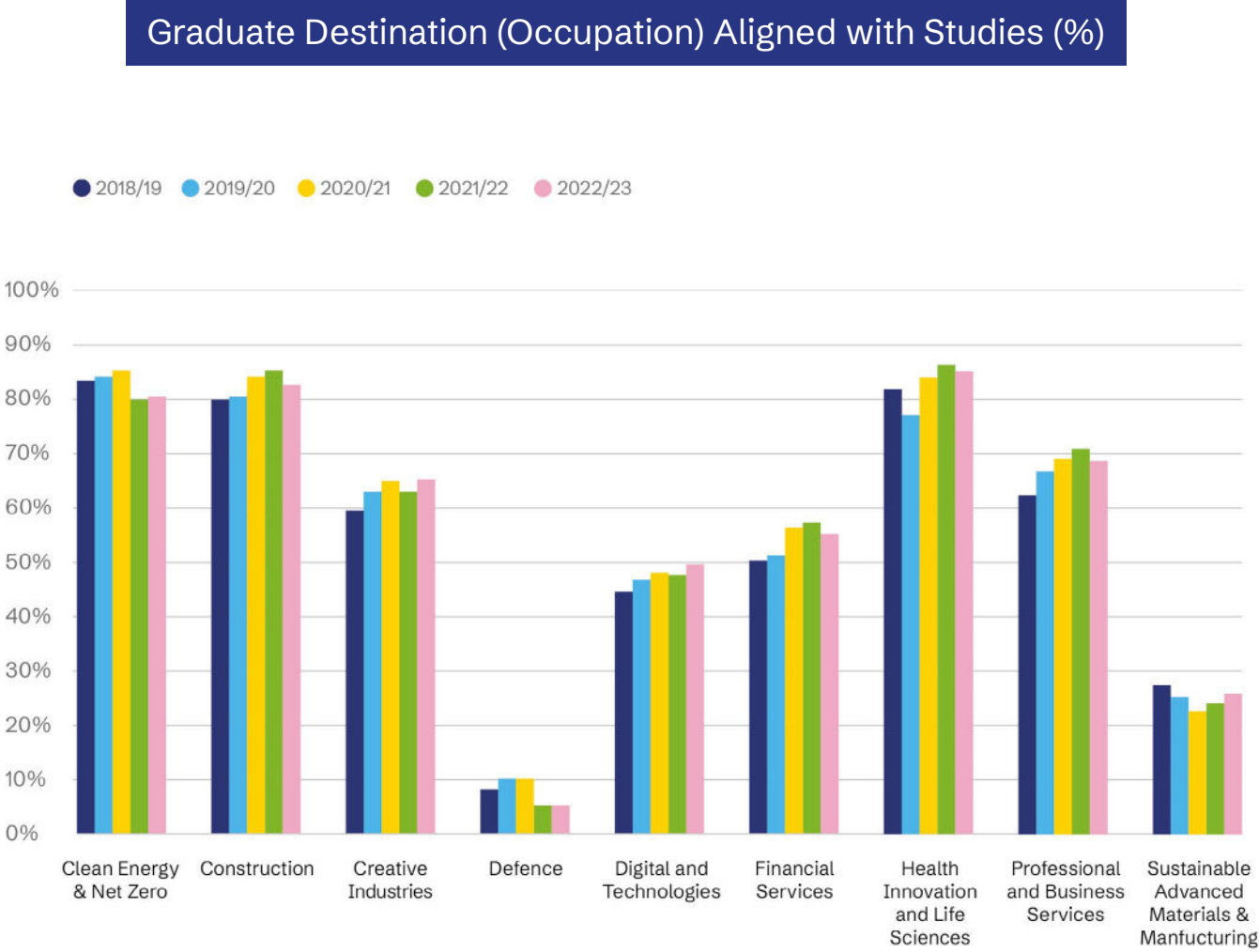


Figure 13- Annual alignment of graduate Destination (occupation) with subject studied

Employer Demand

- Analysis of job-posting data (2019-2025) shows strong cross-sector convergence around AI, data, cloud, compliance, risk management and project coordination skills (Figure 14).
- Across all sectors, employers also consistently emphasise the importance of business and professional skills and increasing expectations for digital fluency and responsible AI use.

Group A: AI, Data, Cloud & Digital Engineering Skills

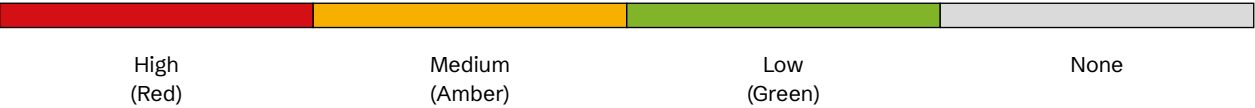
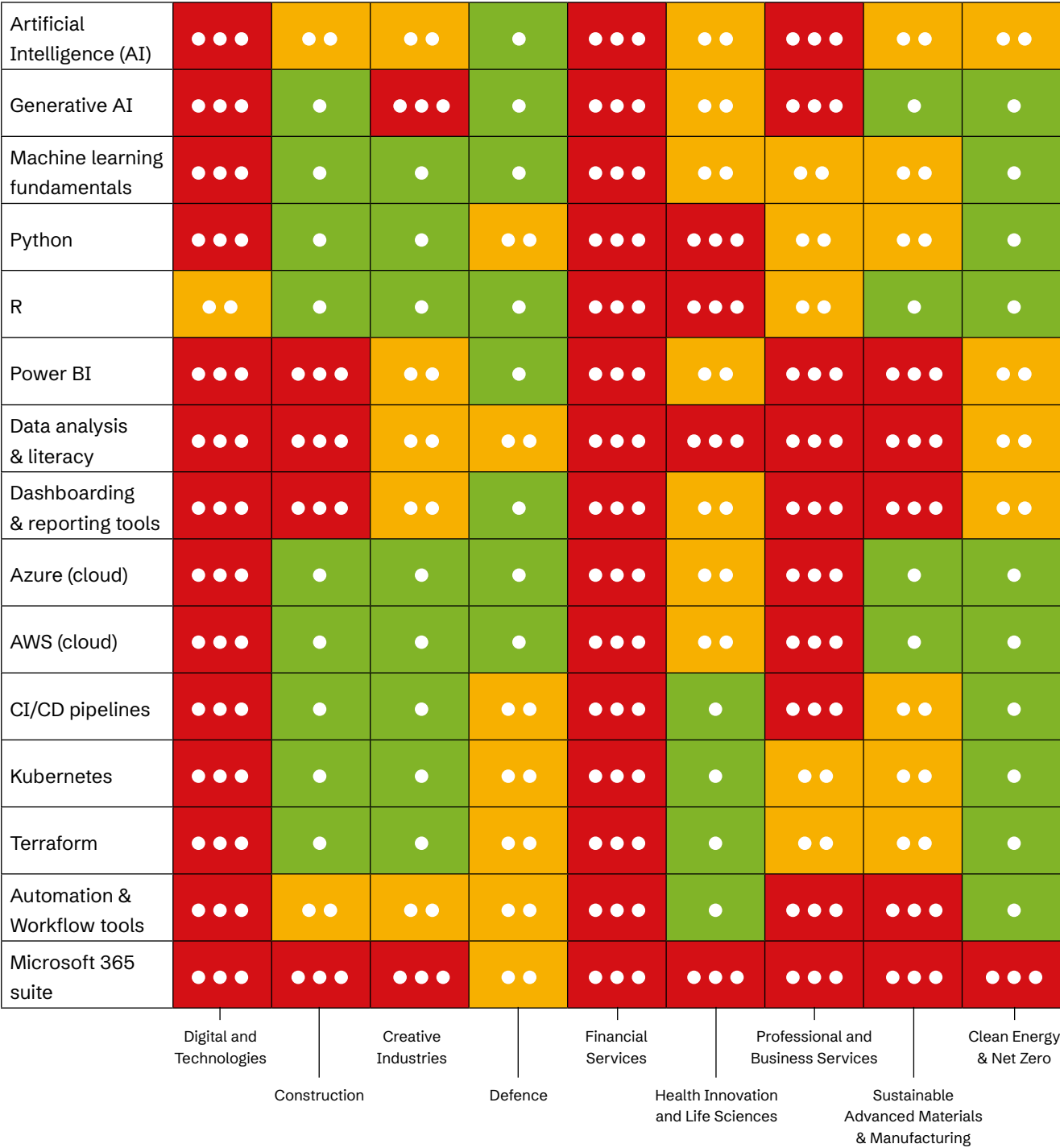
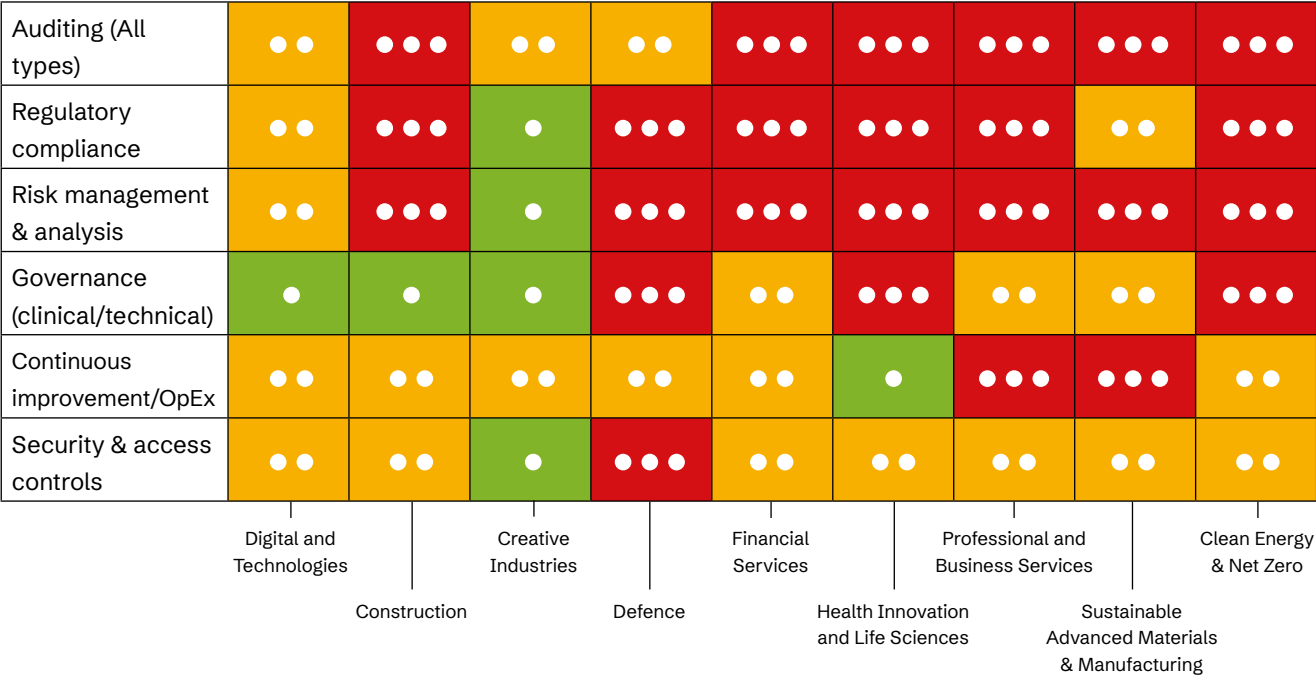


Figure 14 – Cross-sector convergence around key skills requested by employers across GM's priority sectors

Group B: Governance, Safety & Compliance Skills



Group C/D: Commercial & Hybrid Operational Skills



3.3.2 Sector Specific Insights

Clean Energy and Net Zero

Skills needs associated with the transition to clean energy and net zero tend to focus on the upskilling and reskilling of the existing workforce, rather than large-scale career-entry recruitment. This trend is mirrored across education and training pathways, where net-zero requirements are gradually being embedded into training related occupations – particularly in sectors such as Construction, Engineering, and Environmental Management. Although the precise scale and timing of future skills needs remains uncertain, demand for core technical competencies, especially in engineering, systems maintenance, and conservation, is expected to remain strong.

Employer feedback reinforces this direction of travel:

“Dual delivery for current and future technologies is key - we need skills in future energy through hydrogen and renewables alongside existing industry needs. This skillset is expensive but key”

“Employers will value sustainability knowledge and skills across every sector. Sustainability, climate change and ESG knowledge through to more technical skills like monitoring energy usage, AMS systems, building design, environmental sustainability and waste management”

Despite these emerging needs, enrolments in key engineering disciplines across GM FE and HE providers, including Chemical, Electrical, and Mechanical Engineering, have declined by approximately 4% in recent years, counter to the broader trend of growth across all subject areas. This misalignment between future skills demand and current learner pipeline highlights a growing strategic risk for the region as it accelerates towards a net-zero economy.

Construction

High-volume demand for skilled labour in Construction is primarily at Levels 2 and 3, reflecting the sector’s reliance on trade-based roles. However, employers also report significant shortages in more senior and specialist positions, creating pressure across the talent pipeline:

“We’re seeing lots of gaps in junior roles; we need to do long-term succession planning”

“We also struggle with skills shortages at senior levels - we recruit foreign nationals frequently to cover the gaps and have rising visa sponsorships”

Apprenticeships, the main entry route into many construction occupations, are growing across GM FE colleges and universities, and T Level volumes have increased sharply, now exceeding Level 3 Diploma enrolments by around 2:1. At higher levels, Architecture, Building and Planning enrolments in HE have been rising steadily, and an above-average proportion of graduates report both working in the sector and requiring their qualification for their role (83% working in a role aligned to their studies, and 61% requiring subject and/or qualification for the role), indicating relatively strong alignment between training and employment.

However, this picture is uneven. Civil Engineering HE enrolments show little sustained growth, despite ongoing employer reports of staff shortages. Meanwhile, sub-Level 6 higher technical enrolments at GM universities, including HNCs and HNDs, have halved since 2019, albeit from a low base, reducing the supply of higher technical skills critical to project delivery, infrastructure development, and supervisory roles. Some of this demand may have been displaced into higher level construction apprenticeships which, while provided by GM universities, have grown more rapidly at Levels 4 and 5 in colleges in recent years.

Creative Industries

Creative Industries are characterised by high levels of freelancing, project-based work, and fluctuating demand, making pathways into the sector less linear and more unpredictable than in many other fields.

Employer feedback highlights both skills gaps and a preference for practical experience over formal qualifications:

“Our biggest gaps are in sales, marketing and advertising skills, as well as TV and film production”

“We believe people don’t need specific qualifications as long as they have lived experience, interest or transferable skills. We’ll teach them from the bottom-up”

Despite this variability, creative subjects remain extremely popular across FE and HE. In HE, enrolments in Design Studies and Computer Games and Animation have grown strongly – Design Studies by 22% (from 3,614 to 4,392) Computer Games and Animation by 77% (from 542 to 959 between 2019 and 2023). In FE, A Level enrolments in related subjects continue to rise, and most Creative Diplomas show strong demand, with the exception of Performing Arts.

Graduate retention in GM from creative subjects is broadly in line with the regional average. However, only 42% of graduates report that their qualification and subject were required for their job, compared with an average of 52%, reflecting the sector’s emphasis on portfolios, practical experience, and transferable skills rather than formal subject-specific entry requirements.

Defence

There is a positive picture of growth in enrolments within subject areas that are closely linked to defence industries, such as Software Engineering and Aeronautical and Aerospace Engineering (though the latter is relatively small in scale – 900 enrolments in 2024). The sector shares many of its skills needs with Sustainable Advanced Materials and Manufacturing.

However, GM graduate retention in these related subjects is low (37%), as is the proportion of graduates reporting their subject and/or qualification are required for their work (32%). This perhaps reflects the comparative lack of large defence engineering employers in GM when measured against some other parts of the North-West.

Digital and Technologies

This is a rapidly expanding and strategically important sector in GM, but its fast-moving technologies present significant challenges for FE and HE providers attempting to keep curriculum and delivery models aligned with industry needs.

Employer feedback highlights rising demand for advanced technical capabilities:

“We need **higher-level technical diagnostic skills** as automation increases. We need data-centre maintenance skills as there will be more technology repair roles”

“AI skills in graduates lag behind because of education’s attitudes towards AI – there’s some reticence due to the perception of cheating. They’re definitely lagging behind”

Learner demand reflects these shifts. Since 2019, digital course uptake has grown strongly across FE and HE: Level 3 Digital Diplomas are up 30%, A Level enrolments have doubled, and HE Computing enrolments have risen by 69%. Notably, 10% of GM HE Computing students studied at a GM college, demonstrating strong local progression pathways.

Despite this, graduate retention (33%) and the proportion of graduates reporting that their role requires their subject and/or qualification (36% for those retained in GM, 50% overall) remain below the GM average. This suggests that while learner interest is expanding, graduate destinations and early-career alignment lag sector growth – highlighting opportunities to strengthen industry links, employer-engagement models, and clearer transition pathways into digital roles within the region.

Financial Services

This sector has traditionally relied on recruiting young people, typically high-performing graduates in subjects such as Maths, Economics, Finance, and Accounting, into roles that require professional qualifications. National employer feedback indicates increasing convergence with Digital Technologies, driven by the growing prominence of FinTech, which is reshaping the skillsets required across the industry.

Enrolments on relevant A Level subjects at GM FE colleges have grown, as have T Levels in Accounting and Finance. Across HE, subjects such as Maths, Economics, Finance and Accounting have seen modest overall growth in enrolments over the past five years, although this aggregate trend masks more significant year-to-year variation.

Despite strong learner interest, GM graduate retention in this sector is slightly below average (38%), and the proportion of graduates reporting that their qualification and/or subject were required for their job varies widely across disciplines – averaging 53% but falling to 17% for Leadership and Management graduates.



Health Innovation and Life Sciences

Employer feedback highlights consistent concerns about the transition from academic learning to workplace readiness, particularly in roles requiring both technical and commercial capability:

“There’s often a **gap transitioning** from academic technical competence to broader commercial acumen. Students come out with theory and technical depth but not the **wider business interest**”

“We really **struggle to recruit** sales and procurement talent with technical and commercial ability – universities aren’t producing those combinations”

“**Skills** like decision-making, presenting to various audiences and extracting key messages from data **are weak**”

GM has sizeable programmes supporting entry into health careers, with strong graduate retention and a high proportion of graduates working in roles that require their degree. However, Health Innovation and Life Sciences – covering Medical Technology, Pharmaceuticals, Biotechnology and related specialisms – form a distinct and increasingly critical subset of the wider health sector.

HE enrolments in relevant subjects such as Medical Technology, Biomedical Science, Healthcare Science, Biomedical Engineering, Microbiology and Cell Science, and Biotechnology remain relatively small but have grown significantly, rising by around 40% between 2019 and 2024 (from 3,611 to 5,044). In FE, A Level science enrolments have also grown strongly, although Level 3 Science Diplomas have shown no equivalent increase. Together, these trends suggest rising interest in the scientific pipeline while also highlighting gaps in applied, technical and commercially-orientated skills required by employers across the innovation-driven areas of the sector.

Professional and Business Services

Employer feedback highlights varied entry requirements and evolving expectations within the sector:

“Entry-level requirements are **relatively low**. If you’ve got GCSE Maths and English you can apply to work for us. It’s behaviour that’s more crucial for us”

“We need people who can use **AI to synthesise information**, do research and sense-check the results. Graduates will need to use it in a business context with a critical eye”

A high proportion of graduates from subjects aligned with this sector progress into associate professional occupations, most commonly in business and sales. These roles typically require Level 4-5 skills and knowledge, yet there is comparatively little education and training provision at these levels, creating a misalignment between employer needs and the current supply of learners with higher-technical skills.

Overall graduate retention in these subjects is around the GM average (45%), though only 37% of graduates reported that their qualification and/or subject were required for their job. This suggests that while graduates stay in the region at reasonable rates, many transition into roles where subject-specific knowledge is not a prerequisite, indicating a mismatch between training pathways and occupational outcomes.

HE enrolments have grown strongly: Law by 42% and Business Management by 34% between 2019 and 2024. Business Management is now the most popular HE subject area at GM universities, with 111,000 enrolments over five years, predominantly at undergraduate level. In FE, Level 3 Diploma volumes have fallen, whereas A Level enrolments in subjects such as Law and Business Management have increased significantly, signalling strong early-stage learner interest but shifting preferences in qualification type.

Sustainable Advanced Materials and Manufacturing

Employer feedback highlights several critical skills gaps within the sector:

“Our **biggest gap** is in chemical engineering graduates. They’re low quality and that’s likely to be because it’s not **aligned with what industry need** now, let alone in the next 3-5 years”

“We’re **missing data and data science skills** - most of our processes are shifting towards digital, so we need people who are confident in digital tools and data analysis to make engineering processes faster, safer and more efficient”

“The industry is facing a big challenge around the **lack of training** in composite skills”

Despite strong employer demand, graduate retention in subjects aligned to this sector is low (29%), although a higher-than-average proportion (56%) report that their qualification and/or subject were required for their job – indicating that those who stay largely enter roles directly related to their studies.

Enrolment trends show modest overall increases, but volumes remain low and uneven across disciplines. Between 2019 and 2024, HE enrolments in Chemical, Process and Energy Engineering fell from 1,237 to 1,030, while Production and Management Engineering remained stable at around 470. In contrast, some specialist areas saw growth: Polymers and Textiles increased from 68 to 88, and Mechanical Engineering rose from 1,723 to 2,123. Within FE, related engineering enrolments declined overall, even as T Level participation grew – highlighting a gradual shift in learner preference but not yet compensating for the decline in traditional engineering pathways.

3.4 Examples of Good Practice and Challenges

Data gathered as part of the evidence base for this work highlights examples where the existing pathway from education to skilled employment appears to work well, as well as cases where improvements can be made. The clearest example of existing good practice is within the Health Innovation and Life Sciences sector, where in GM:

- A higher-than-average proportion of university students come from GM FE Colleges (11% in ‘Subjects Allied to Medicine’).
- Graduate retention (50%) and the share of graduates reporting their qualification and/or subject is required for their job (65%) are both above the all-subject average.
- A large majority of graduate destinations are into the key healthcare professions, requiring Level 6+ knowledge and skills.
- Demand from students is growing – at Level 3 via A Levels and within HE at undergraduate level.

One defining characteristic of health sector courses within HE is the high level of employer involvement in shaping and delivering the curriculum, and within Life Sciences lab work typically simulates real training. Employers also play a critical role in providing clinical placements as a cornerstone of each student’s programme.

In contrast to health, where employers routinely meet skills needs via the recruitment of trained graduates, such a tradition is less evident in sectors such as Digital and Technologies. The sector generates high and rising demand for FE and HE courses among young people in GM. A high proportion of GM university students come from GM FE Colleges (10% in Computing subjects). It is a critical sector to the growth of GM’s economy, with occupations that are in widespread use at employers in all sectors.

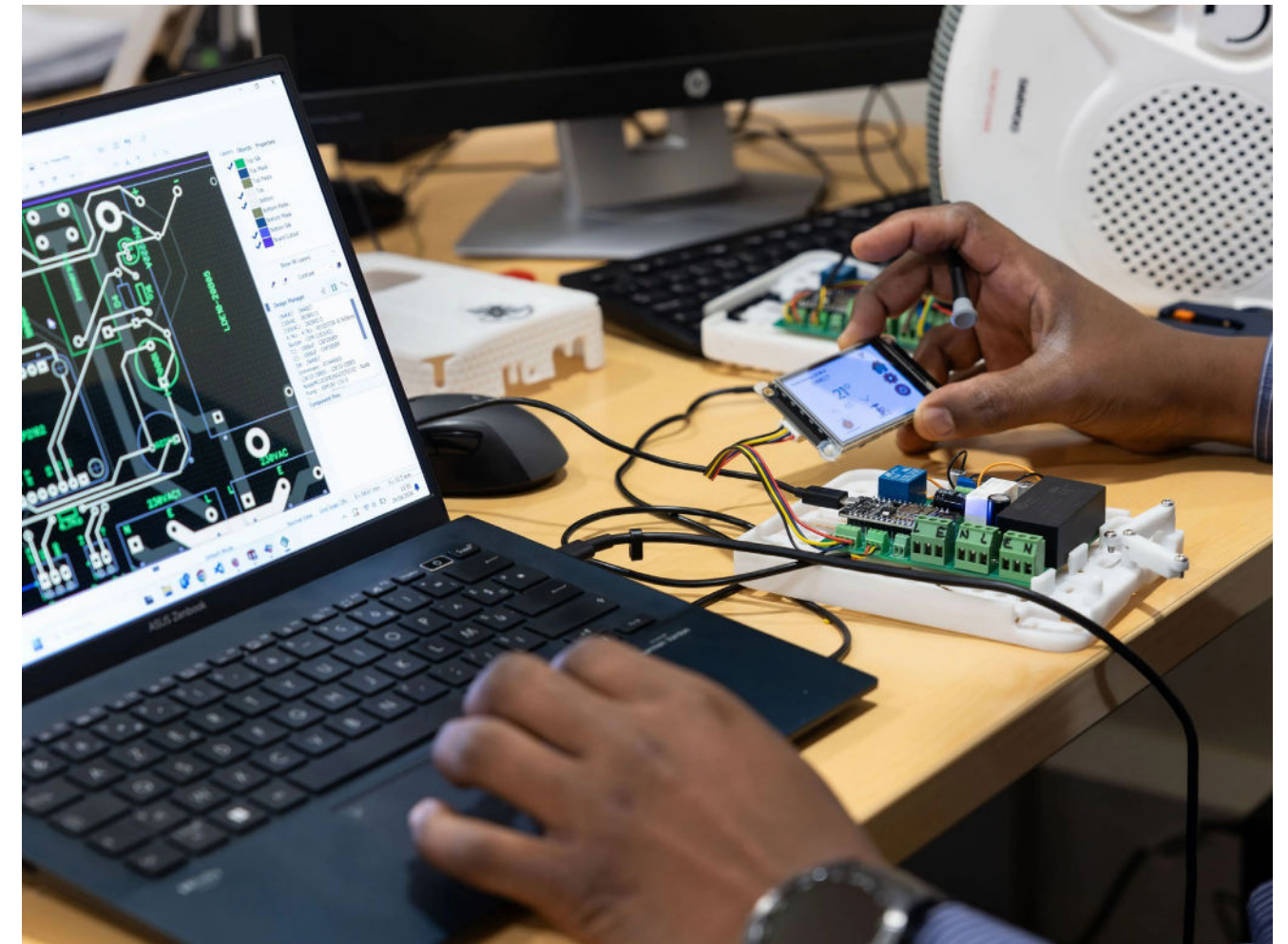
However, the data suggests that graduate retention in this sector is below average (33%), as is the proportion of graduates stating that their job required their subject and/or qualification (50%). Employer feedback highlights dissatisfaction with the perceived relevance of the HE curriculum in digital subject areas, amid fast-moving technology and practices. Though work-based learning would help ensure that more people gain the skills employers need, a large majority of digital apprenticeships are used by employers to train existing staff aged over-25, rather than recruiting young people at 16, 18 or 21.

3.5 Learner Mindsets and Problem Statements

Based on the insights gathered through interviews, five key learner mindsets were identified. These mindsets help skills providers and employers understand learners’ needs, barriers and frustrations at critical points in their journey, ensuring solutions are grounded in real experiences and support a more learner-centred system.

Each mindset captures experiences at pivotal moments and is not fixed, evolving as circumstances change over time. All ideation workshop participants engaged with each mindset to ensure ideas responded to authentic needs, and each was represented in the student co-creation workshop. The mindsets have been validated by both institutions and learners and reflect the experiences of individuals currently, or recently, engaged in GM’s education landscape. Future iterations could expand to include learners outside the scope of this project, such as disengaged learners or those pursuing entrepreneurial pathways.

The five mindsets, along with current learner needs, barriers, and frustrations are outlined in Figure 15. [Appendix D](#) provides further information on each mindset.



Learner journeys: current state journey map

Mindsets	The undecided	
Milestones	Students who are attending school and are undecided about their future career	
1. Explore	- Attend career fairs and talks - Use ChatGPT, Social media and Google to research my options	No understanding of what careers are available, career pathways, what career suits my skills and what skills I need to be employable
2. Understand	Understand the pathways and requirements for jobs that interest me	Misconceptions about courses can mislead students
3. Assess	- Reflect on skills, strengths and interests - Compare aspirations against realistic pathways and requirements	- Limited careers advice with someone who understands all the pathways - School doesn't have awareness of non-academic routes
4. Plan	Choose course	- Courses don't seem hands-on enough or offer industry exposure - Constantly changing curriculum reform adds to confusion
5. Get experience	- Arrange work experience - Do work experience	- Limited support/connections to arrange - Balancing part-time work with study
6. Review	Review learning from research, fairs and work experience	May feel that they still don't know what work is like
7. Plan next steps	Decide next actions after review (further research, subject choices and experience)	May feel that some options are simply not possible
8. Access support	- See careers advisor / visit careers fairs - Reach out to peers / family - Check if institution has any resources	As in Assess section
9. Manage practicalities	- Arrange work experience (applications, timing, permission etc.) - Check institution resources and eligibility requirements	
10. Core decision	- Choose course - Commit to preferred pathway	May not feel convinced they're making the right decision and concerned about cost and time implications

Career followers	
Students who are attending college or university and following a particular course or topic of interest	
- Attend networking and careers events - Research pathways to role (e.g. web and social media) - Seek out vacancies in role/sector for research purposes	- Limited understanding of how to get into the desired job - Unclear job postings make eligibility unclear
- Understand the required skills for specific roles - Reach out directly to those in desired career	Limited understanding of how to get into the desired job
- Reflect on skills, strengths and interests - Compare aspirations against different pathways and current skillset	- Employers want experience to hire - Unclear job postings make eligibility unclear - Can I go straight into x job or do I need to study more?
Where possible, choose course units/modules to support desired pathway	Courses don't feel employer-ready/hands-on enough
- Organise industry placement or work experience - Complete work experience	Limited support/connections to arrange
- Review learning from research, fairs and work experience - Reflect on what felt interesting, suitable and unsuitable	
- Decide next actions after reviewing (e.g. further research, experience or training) - Seek out vacancies in sector/role to apply to	Limited vacancies in desired role/sector
- See careers advisor/visit more careers fairs - Reach out to peers/family for advice - Check if college/university has resources - Reach out to professional connections for advice	Network may also have limited knowledge of pathways
- Arrange work experience (applications, timing, permission etc) - Check college/university resources and eligibility requirements for further training or support	
- Making training choices where applicable - Commit to a preferred pathway - Apply to roles if timing is correct	Not confident on ability to succeed at interview

Mindsets	Career upskillers	
Milestones	Employees who are in work and looking to improve their skills for use in their current role	
1. Explore	- Research training options/types (e.g. web and social or through employer) - Define skills needed for upskilling e.g. time management	Unclear where to go for additional skills courses
2. Understand	- Look at current employer options available to them/their role e.g. short courses, degree apprenticeships - Talk to colleagues about their roles/pathways	Frustrated that options are limited and don't meet my learning needs
3. Assess	- Understand if employer will fund course - Asses skills/job requirements for entering training options and current personal skillset	Unclear about whether they can balance work and study
4. Plan	- Obtain manager support - Organise PDR	
5. Get experience	Look at out-of-the-box ideas to fill gaps e.g. volunteering, shadowing	Limited support/connections to arrange
6. Review	- Review progress to date (achievements and challenges) - Offer constructive feedback on performance - Identify skills gaps - Agree objectives for following year and discuss career aspirations	
7. Plan next steps	- Decide next actions after review (further experience, research or planning) - Refine career direction based on insight gained	
8. Access support	- See learning and development team for advice - Reach out to peers/family for advice - Check if employer has any other resources	Network may also have limited knowledge of pathways
9. Manage practicalities	- Arrange experience (applications, timing, permissions) - Check employer resources and eligibility requirements - Plan finances - Plan time commitments	
10. Core decision	Choose and apply for training pathway with employer support	

Career changers		
Employees have left their current role and are looking to change career		
	Research different pathways to different roles (e.g. through web or social media)	Unclear pathways, very confusing
	- Reach out to those in desired careers to better understand pathways and experiences - Look at demand in different areas (e.g. job postings) - Understand skills/qualification requirements for different roles	Uncertainty about whether there will still be market demand after they have completed their qualification
	- Assess skills/qualification requirements for roles against current personal skillset/role - Assess which skills/knowledge are transferable - Assess pay needs and salaries for different desired roles	Financial concern about taking a financial risk and leaving current role
	Seek out vacancies in new sector/role to apply for	
	Look at out-of-the-box ideas to fill skills gaps e.g. volunteering, shadowing	Limited support/connections to arrange
	- Review learning from research, experience and assessing tasks - Reflect on what feels like the least risky choice	
	- Decide next actions after review (further experience, research or planning) - Refine career direction based on insight gained	
	- See learning and development team for advice - Reach out to peers/family for advice - Check if employer has any other resources - Speak to more people in target industry	Network may also have limited knowledge of pathways
	- Arrange experience (applications, timing, permissions) - Plan finances - Plan personal and professional time commitments (e.g. job seeking and leaving/starting new roles)	
	- Refine job vacancy options - Apply to preferred roles if timing is correct	

Mindsets	Promotion seekers Employees who have reached the ceiling in their current role and have to receive additional qualifications to progress	
Milestones		
1. Explore	- Research industry-wide opportunities - Research progression frameworks if applicable	
2. Understand	- Reach out to those in more senior positions to better understand roles and skills requirements - Understand market value of different skillsets including personal skillset - Understand what differentiates you from other promotion seekers - Understand further training offers (e.g. employer provision)	
3. Assess	- Assess skills/qualification requirements for promotions against current personal skillset/role - Assess skills gaps for areas to increase differentiation against peers	Frustration that lots of the course content they've already done in their role
4. Plan	- Refine training pathway choices - Obtain support from manager - Organise PDR if necessary	Limited choice in courses doesn't meet their learning needs
5. Get experience	Look at out-of-the-box ideas to fill skills gaps e.g. volunteering, shadowing	
6. Review	- Review learning from research, experience and assessing tasks - Reflect on what feels interesting, suitable and feasible - Conduct PDR if necessary, focusing on career goals and achievements/challenges	
7. Plan next steps	- Decide next actions after review (further experience, research or planning) - Refine career direction based on insight gained	
8. Access support	- See learning and development colleagues for advice - Reach out to peers/family for advice - Check if employer has any resources - Speak to more people in target roles	
9. Manage practicalities	- Arrange experience (applications, timing, permissions) - Plan personal and professional time commitments (e.g. balancing further training with work)	
10. Core decision	- Choose preferred pathway - Choose/apply to preferred training options	

Figure 15 – An overview of the five mindsets, including current learner needs, barriers, and frustrations



A series of problem statements were then developed, informed by the insights and mindsets outlined above. The problem statements were then used as a focus for ideation during the focussed workshops outlined in [Section 2.2](#).

Problem Statements

- The curriculum doesn't stay up to date with industry needs, meaning learning can be outdated and graduates don't have the skills they need.
- Students can sometimes struggle to transition from FE into HE.
- Learning isn't flexible or modular, which creates barriers for students, particularly around cost, time and location.
- Students are lagging behind in their soft skills, meaning they aren't prepared for the world of work.
- Pathways into particular careers are unclear and create confusion.
- Students aren't aware of the opportunities available to them after study.

Each of the proposed recommendations, and the suggested actions for delivering them, are outlined in [Section 5](#) and [Appendix A](#).

All recommendations:

- Focus on addressing these problem statements.
- Have been tested and co-created in collaboration with subject matter experts and students.

[Back to the Reader Guide](#)

4. Opportunities

Based on the insights gathered from the data analysis, stakeholder interviews, learner mindsets, user journey mapping, and ideation workshops, we have developed a focussed opportunity map that highlights where the greatest opportunities for pathway development lie.

A high-level summary of the co-created opportunity map is presented below. It is aligned to the core problem statements identified and sets out an emerging vision for an integrated, future-ready post-16 education landscape across GM. This provides a directional view of how the system could evolve to better meet the needs of learners, employers, and skills providers.

To ensure clarity and avoid repetition within the main report, the detailed opportunity map can be found in [Appendix E](#). This appendix consolidates the full range of insights, including overarching recommendations, ideas generated through workshops, and key pain points identified in user journey mapping. Together, these elements articulate a comprehensive blueprint for an ideal future state, considering:

- The ideal front-end experience for learners, employers, and skills providers.
- The activities that need to take place in the background to enable these changes.
- The anticipated positive impacts of the opportunities.

In addition, [Appendix A](#) provides further detail on how these opportunities could be developed and delivered in practice.

A blueprint for an ideal future state (Overview)

Problem Statement:

- Pathways into particular careers are unclear and create confusion
- Students aren't aware of the opportunities available to them after study.

Opportunities:

A GM-wide strategic careers group

Connecting to the All Age Careers Strategy, a GM-wide strategic careers group/board – responsible for delivering a single, co-ordinated approach to pathways, information, advice and guidance. With the aim of avoiding duplication, ensuring consistency, and improving outcomes for both learners and providers.

A regional approach to careers inspiration

A regional approach to careers inspiration that ensures all learners have access and exposure to relatable people in interesting careers.

Expand IAG at Level 4 and above

Expand current information, advice and guidance beyond Level 3 to provide a comprehensive offer that covers Level 4+, in one single place, ensuring alignment with national taxonomies and with clear local relevance and impact.

Problem Statement:

- Students can sometimes struggle to transition from FE into HE.

Opportunities:

HE exposure during FE

Ensuring FE students are exposed to HE earlier in their journey to increase confidence in their choices before and after their final exams. Information will be housed in a single, easily accessible location and will be discoverable through key social media channels.

Supporting transitions from FE to HE

A regional approach to supporting transitions from FE to HE, ensuring consistent access to IAG at key stages. With the aim of providing content that is closely aligned with the information learners are looking to find, rather than the information institutions think is relevant.

Problem Statement:

- The curriculum doesn't stay up to date with industry needs, meaning learning can be outdated and graduates don't have the skills they need.
- Students are lagging behind in their soft skills, meaning they aren't prepared for the world of work.

Opportunities:

Boosting confidence in job applications

Employer-led sessions to boost knowledge of applying for internships and jobs.

A GM-wide strategic industry group

A GM-wide strategic industry group/board – responsible for delivering a coordinated approach to industry engagement, including curriculum design, mentorship, challenges and competitions, site visits, work placements, and skills development.

Better articulation of soft skills

Ensuring students can identify and articulate the soft skills they've learnt and developed across their study and see and understand how they translate into the workplace.



Problem Statement:

- Learning isn't flexible or modular, which creates barriers for students, particularly around cost, time and location.

Opportunities:

Flexible and modular learning

A flexible, modular learning ecosystem across the region that allows students to learn in ways that suit them. This includes offering short, industry-aligned modules that provide real-world experience and develop both the technical and soft skills needed to succeed in the workplace.

Problem Statement:

- Inconsistent Data Recording and Reporting

Opportunities:

Fully integrated GM-wide data ecosystem

A fully integrated GM-wide data ecosystem that ensures consistent standards, seamless data sharing, and unified tracking of learner journeys. The system enables systematic monitoring of learners as they move through different pathways, capturing prior learning, transition points, and employment destinations by occupation and sector. This strengthened data infrastructure provides deep insight to inform long-term strategic planning, curriculum development, and workforce alignment

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5. Recommendations

Drawing out the common themes identified through the insights generated, this report proposes four overarching recommendations to be considered and taken forward to improve the visibility of learner pathways within the GM post-16 education landscape. These recommendations aim to recognise and emphasise that every post-16 provider, together with wider system partners, has a vital role in shaping the landscape of opportunity we want to build across the region. Whether through flexible delivery from Level 3 to Level 8 in higher-skill areas, or through more connected IAG, a unified 'One GM' approach will be essential. By working collectively, we can better support learners to progress into pathways that lead to high-quality jobs and long-term prospects, helping to drive sustained growth across the city-region.

Further details on how these recommendations could be implemented are detailed in [Section 6](#).

1. Strengthen System-Wide Data Consistency and Integration Across Greater Manchester

There is significant variation in how education and progression data is collected, structured, and reported across providers in GM. In FE, progression data is inconsistent, and information on learners’ destinations, particularly their occupation, sector, or whether they remain in the region, is limited. This makes it challenging to understand full learner journeys and to demonstrate how well-skilled learners contribute to the GM economy.

Similarly, HE data varies widely between institutions, with key datasets such as Graduate Outcomes differing in format, quality, and completeness. As part of this project, substantial data transformation and cleansing was required to standardise HE datasets, create analytical flags, and bring data into a usable format to support cross-institution analysis. This inconsistency makes it difficult to compare outcomes, link HE data back to FE pathways, or build a coherent picture of learner progression across the education system.

These challenges highlight the need for a more coordinated, consistent, and integrated approach to data that can support long-term strategic planning, system insight, and alignment with employer and economic priorities.

Recommendation

Develop a fully integrated, GM-wide data approach with consistent standards, shared definitions, seamless data sharing, and unified tracking of learner journeys across FE, HE, and employment. This could be led by the GM Labour Market Insights Unit who have been created to provide a single source of truth around progressions and employment data for the region, insights should be shared across GM’s HE and FE providers as well as GMCA and Local Authorities.

This approach should systematically capture prior learning, transition points, and employment outcomes (including occupation and sector), enabling GM to understand learner journeys end-to-end and to plan more strategically for the skills needs of the future.

Short-term action should focus on strengthening FE progression data and establishing annual data-sharing processes. Longer-term development should build towards a robust regional data infrastructure supported by shared standards, agreed minimum datasets, and cross-sector governance.

Benefits of Strengthened System-Wide Data Consistency and Integration Across GM

For Learners	• Clearer understanding of post Level 3 pathways, supported by insight into real-world learner journeys and employment outcomes. • More equitable outcomes, as improved visibility helps identify and address gaps for specific groups or communities.
For Providers	• Improved ability to analyse full learner journeys, not only within their institution but across the wider system. • More informed curriculum planning, as providers gain clearer insight into demand, destinations, and alignment with growth sectors and occupations. • Enhanced collaboration between FE and HE, with consistent data enabling smoother handovers and clearer articulation pathways.
For Employers	• Improved visibility of future workforce pipeline, supporting workforce forecasting, succession planning, and targeted recruitment. • Improved alignment between provision and workforce needs, identifying areas of potential over/under supply. • Stronger evidence for employer involvement in curriculum design, evidenced through learner outcomes.
For Greater Manchester	• A unified regional view of learner journeys, enabling long-term workforce and skills planning grounded in reliable data. • Stronger alignment between education and labour-market needs, with occupation-level destination data supporting targeted interventions. • Better identification of supply-demand mismatches, enabling more effective targeting of investment and growth to address skills shortages.

2. Develop a Strategic Approach to Improving Learner Understanding of Pathways

GM's providers are operating in a challenging environment, characterised by funding pressures, resource constraints, and increasing pressure to deliver services – including comprehensive, high-quality IAG. Strong regulatory and quality frameworks underpin FE requirements relating to IAG, and inspection outcomes demonstrate that careers provision across GM is assessed as 'good', with clear strengths at institutional level. However, despite the quality of provision within individual organisations, pathway information is largely developed and delivered independently across the system. This has led to duplication of effort, inconsistent messaging, and a fragmented learner experience, rather than reflecting weaknesses in provider capability or commitment.

Learners and practitioners frequently report uncertainty about what information they can trust, where to find reputable guidance, and frustration at the lack of a single, reliable source of truth; in addition, learners frequently cited misinformation and misconceptions about non-traditional educational routes as being one of the biggest reasons for not considering alternative FE and HE provisions. Furthermore, information on post-Level 3 options is not strategically coordinated and accessing labour market information such as job types, vacancy data, or typical pay is equally difficult, making it harder for learners to make informed decisions.

These challenges do not point to poor provision, but highlight the need for a coordinated, system-wide approach that builds on existing strengths, aligns practice, and ensures equity of access for all learners across GM.



Recommendation

Develop a strategic, GM-wide approach to improving learner understanding of pathways into further study and employment – including non-university Level 4 and 5 provision and the full range of technical and academic routes. IAG should be planned and delivered strategically across GM, in line with the All-Age Careers Strategy that is under development, explicitly focusing on pathways and sectors of economic importance.

A coordinated approach will support all learners to navigate the education and employment landscape with confidence, while enabling providers and partners to contribute to a coherent, efficient, and impactful regional system. This approach could include:

- A GM-wide strategic group, building on GM-Higher, that all providers contribute to, responsible for developing a single, coordinated approach to pathways IAG – reducing duplication and ensuring consistent, trusted messaging. This includes IAG around transitions between FE and HE, supporting learners to develop the confidence to thrive as they progress through pathways.
- Expanding the GMACS Beeline website to incorporate Post-18 IAG, covering both technical and academic pathways, creating a single, reliable source of truth for learners and practitioners.
- Use of relatable alumni stories to help learners understand real-life journeys into work or further study – accessible across institutions to increase access and diversity.
- Embedded industry engagement, including live briefs, sector-led challenges, and authentic employer input, to bring clarity to how different pathways translate into real careers (cross over with recommendation 3).
- Structured mentoring from employers, apprentices, and recent graduates to provide personalised guidance and confidence-building support (cross over with recommendation 3).

Benefits of a Strategic, Aligned Approach to IAG:

For Learners	• Easier-to-navigate pathways, with a single source of truth supporting more confident and informed decision-making. • More personalised and relevant guidance, as the system collectively analyses learner needs and identifies gaps in IAG. • Smoother transitions between providers, supported by consistent content, familiar formats, and aligned expectations. • Increased awareness of career opportunities, including improved understanding of different routes to achieve their goals. • Exposure to relatable role models from varied backgrounds and pathways, increasing aspiration and reducing perceived barriers.
For Providers	• Reduced duplication of effort, as shared tools, templates, and resources minimise repeated work across institutions. • Streamlined and consistent information aligned with labour market insights across the region. • Stronger recruitment into Level 4 and 5 pathways, driven by clearer, more trusted information. • Better alignment to regional and national skills priorities, reinforcing the role of providers in meeting GM's economic ambitions.
For Employers	• Improved alignment between learner capabilities and job roles as learners understand pathways earlier, developing relevant technical and soft skills to prepare them for specific roles. • Increased visibility and awareness of employer opportunities, e.g., apprenticeships. • More diverse and inclusive workforce as all learners receive clear, accessible, and relatable IAG.
For Greater Manchester	• Greater system coherence, with learners receiving aligned advice regardless of where they study. • Stronger alignment with economic and strategic priorities, ensuring IAG focuses on areas of growth and labour market demand. • Improved progression outcomes, as learners make better-informed decisions that reflect real employment opportunities.



3. Systematically Embed Employer Voice into Curriculum Design, Approval, and Delivery Across Greater Manchester

Employer engagement across GM is currently inconsistent and often driven by individual institutional relationships. Links between employers and providers can often be transactional in nature (with the latter merely seeking to ‘sell’ a menu of training products) and/or be dependent on relationships between one individual at an FE/HE provider and an employer. As a result, opportunities for learners vary across the region, and employer insight is not embedded consistently enough to ensure that curriculum content keeps pace with evolving industry needs.

Both providers and employers have expressed strong interest in developing courses which are more industry aligned, allowing learners to gain valuable, hands-on experience with real-world scenarios and ensuring they are employment-ready by the time they leave education. Employers who already engage with curriculum design emphasise the value of these activities both in terms of learner readiness but also in generating valuable brand awareness and visibility and boosting the pipeline of high-quality new hires.

There is a clear opportunity to adopt a structured, system-wide approach that ensures employer voice, particularly from priority sectors and strategic growth locations within GM, is systematically integrated into curriculum planning, approval processes, and delivery. This would strengthen the alignment between education and labour-market needs, support innovation in teaching and learning, and improve learner readiness for the workplace.

Recommendation

Develop a GM-wide strategic approach to employer engagement that embeds employer insight into curriculum design, approval and delivery, supported by formal sector groups, shared frameworks, and coordinated activity across FE, HE, and industry partners.

This approach should be driven and overseen by GM’s Employer Representative Body – building on existing engagement structures in GM while creating clearer expectations, wider SME participation, and improved coordination across the region.

This could include:

- Conducting a mapping exercise of GM’s existing employer boards, sector groups, and committees, including their scope, membership, and key activities, with a view to understanding the current structures in place across the region. This mapping should aim to identify what exists within the region, avoid duplication potentially caused by the creation of new boards, and enable successful structures and partnerships to be built upon.

- Developing a GM-wide employer engagement framework, defining the types of activities that employer boards, sector groups, and committees should support – e.g., live briefs, placements, joint curriculum development, mentorship – to standardise expectations and quality across providers and sectors. Consideration could also be given to the incentives required to galvanise employer engagement in the education and training system via such a framework.
- Strengthening information sharing between employer boards, sector groups, and committees, ensuring approaches enhance and don’t replace local and place-based partnerships – this could include developing safe and transparent mechanisms for providers to share labour market information, curriculum needs, and learner outcomes.
- Building HE/FE partnerships focused on each of GM’s priority sectors. The purpose of these partnerships will be to provide the leadership and infrastructure required to reform the education and training offer relevant to each sector and respond quickly to emergent and new demand from employers within these sectors. We suggest that each sector partnership should have a named institution lead, an MoU for all participating providers to support collaboration, and an agreed protocol for handling substantial and/or rapid employer demand for skilled labour (such as via an inward investor). The partnerships should focus on refining the current curriculum offer in accordance with the latest sector insights, as well as ensuring new training offers can be built quickly between partners in response to new demand (drawing on available funding streams as applicable). This crosses over with recommendation 4 and should be supported by GMCA and GMCC, informed by the LSIP, but driven and owned by FE/HE providers.
- Via the sector partnerships, outlined above, build education and training propositions for existing and prospective employers within each of GM’s key growth locations (e.g. Atom Valley). The purpose will be to harness the collective capacity of FE and HE providers in GM to ensure there is a consistent understanding of current and likely future needs, using this to develop and refine programmes to ensure that the supply of skills meets employer needs. Done well, such an approach should make skills a key part of GM’s competitive advantage within its priority sectors and strategic sites.
- Developing a GM soft skills framework, informed by employer’s needs – for example, analysis of Lightcast data, and translating these needs into learner friendly language that can be embedded across curriculum delivery, assessment, and employer-led activities. Learners should also be supported to recognise, track, and articulate these skills in ways that support progression into work or further study.

Benefits of Systematically Embedding Employer Voice into Curriculum Design, Approval, and Delivery Across GM

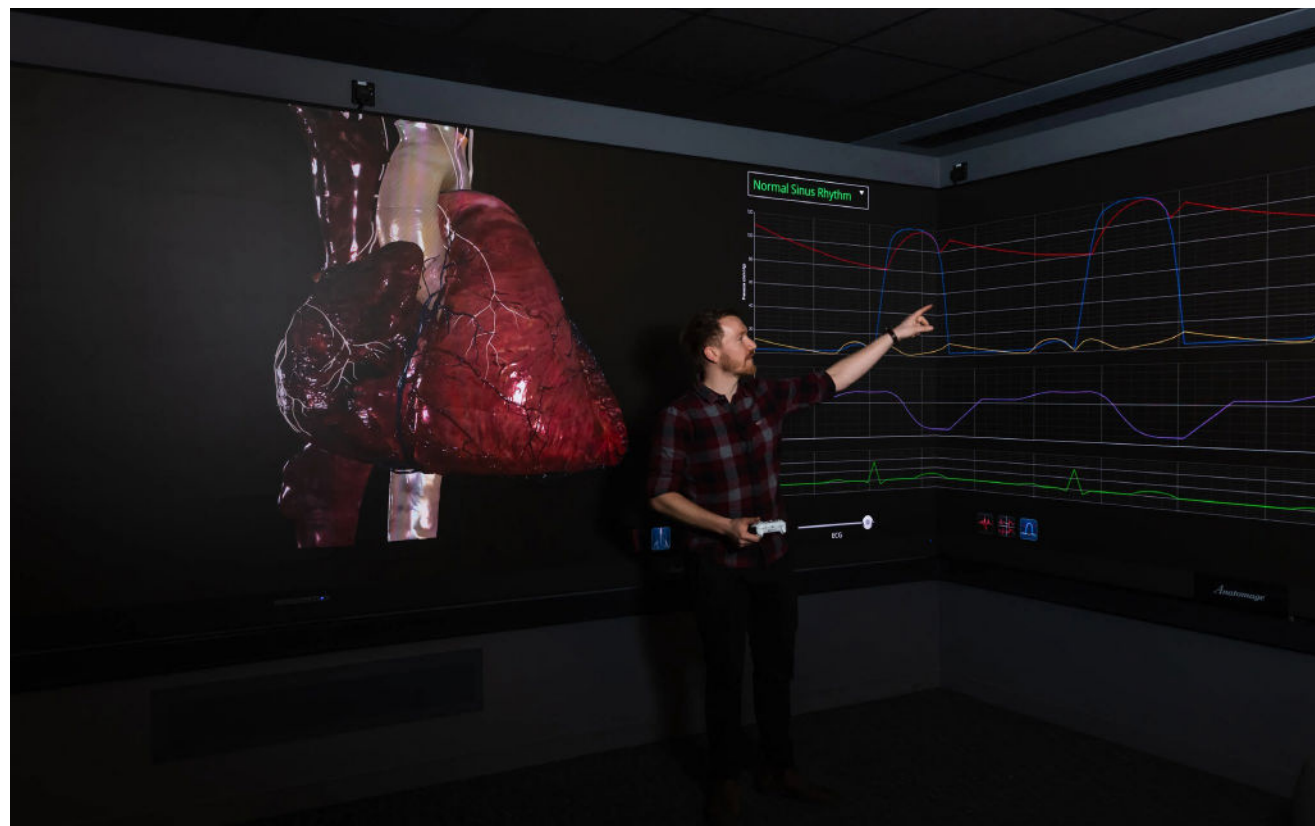
For Learners	• Increased access to authentic, work-related experiences across all providers. • Better understanding of the skills, behaviours, and knowledge needed to succeed in the workplace. • More relevant, up-to-date curriculum content aligned with real industry practice. • Stronger employability and improved confidence in transitioning into work or higher study.
For Providers	• Reduced duplication of employer engagement efforts across the region. • More consistent access to employers for curriculum review, live projects, and placements. • Enhanced quality assurance in curriculum design and approval, supported by direct employer insight. • Stronger alignment to regional skills priorities, improving progression and employment outcomes.
For Employers	• More efficient engagement through reduced duplication in requests – specific benefit for SMEs. • More responsive curriculums through established engagement mechanisms, reducing discrepancies between industry need and learner capabilities. • Enhanced reputation with learners, supporting talent pipeline development.
For Greater Manchester	• A more coordinated, consistent approach for employers to engage with education providers. • Stronger influence over the design of future talent pipelines. • Improved workforce readiness, with learners developing the skills most needed in GM's priority sectors and at its growth locations.



4. Curriculum and Programme Development to Accelerate Growth in Sectors Important to Greater Manchester's Economy

GM's current post-16 education system operates largely on a single provider, single qualification model, where learners must choose one learning programme delivered by one institution, with limited ability to build a flexible, joined up pathway that reliably supports entry to high skilled, well-paid work. This model restricts learner choice, limits cross-institution mobility and does not always provide the flexibility required to quickly respond to the emerging skills requirements across GM's growth sectors. Additionally, the current model – largely built around full time, on campus study – doesn't fully cater for learners who are from disadvantaged backgrounds, have caring responsibility or are in full-time work and have limitations and concerns about cost, time and location barriers.

Project insight suggests that significant opportunity exists to develop curriculum design and delivery across GM, especially in areas where employer demand is outpacing the supply of suitably skilled learners. Providers have shown strong interest in exploring more collaborative, flexible approaches that enable GM to meet its future workforce needs more effectively. Furthermore, notwithstanding uncertainties around learner demand, there is a willingness on the part of many providers to join up Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) provision to support learner progression through emerging landscapes. Employers have also expressed a desire for shorter, more flexible courses which would allow their employees to upskill and reskill at pace, as well as further opportunities to help shape learner programmes and curriculums.



Recommendation

Develop a GM-wide strategic approach to curriculum and programme development that increases flexibility and choice, supports learner movement between institutions, and aligns curriculum pathways to the needs of occupations within GM's priority economic sectors.

This approach should focus on unbundling the current system and enabling learners across FE and HE to access a wider range of opportunities, creating clearer, more personalised routes into high growth technical and professional roles and could include:

- Aligning HE curriculum planning to regional skills demand – as outlined in the LSIP, to ensure that curriculum content reflects the realities of GM's priority sectors and high value jobs. For example:
 - Integrating the requirements of occupations within key sectors into curriculum design, building on established practice in FE where Skills England Occupational Maps define occupational competence for apprenticeships and underpin a growing range of technical qualifications, including T Levels and HTQs.
 - Embedding employer involvement in planning, design, and delivery to ensure content incorporates current industry knowledge and remains relevant to learners.
- Introducing a flexible, modular landscape across GM, enabling learners to build skills in a way that meets their aspirations and circumstances. For example:
 - Developing short industry-aligned modules that learners can stack towards qualifications.
 - Mapping institutional specialisms to coordinate and align opportunities, reducing avoidable duplication, identifying gaps, and creating a coherent regional offer where learners can engage with modules across institutions and access specialist facilities and expertise. This could include establishing the modular provision that FE and HE providers intend to deliver as part of the LLE and promoting this coordinated regional offer to learners – supported by the GM credit transfer agreement suggested below.
 - Designing delivery models that meet learner needs, adapting location, format, and timing to support participation and ongoing engagement.

- Growing alternative post-18 pathways to the three-year Level 6 bachelor’s degree, such as by expanding apprenticeships for young people at Level 4+, growing sandwich courses that embed industry experience (with support to ensure equitable access to placements), and growing Level 4 and 5 higher technical qualifications (HTQs). On the latter, HTQs may have greatest potential as a learner demand-driven route wherever employers recruit heavily to associate professional occupations (whose skills requirements usually sit at Levels 4 and 5).
- Establishing a GM credit transfer agreement and recognition system, enabling learners to move between institutions without losing progress. This could be supported by shared credit frameworks, aligned assessments, and common recognition processes. Early pilots could explore and learn from existing regional incentives – for example the University of Manchester and Manchester Metropolitan University’s joint Postgraduate discount scheme – and assess how similar models could be extended across FE and HE pathways, particularly from T Levels into Level 4+ HE, as well as to model ‘accelerated apprenticeships’ that build on the work by Gatsby in this area.
- HE providers using LSIP intelligence to guide curriculum setting, also drawing on the occupational standards within the Skills England occupational maps to guide curriculum content. This should include the introduction of institution-level learner demand/enrolment targets aligned to grow learner volumes in subjects strongly or directly aligned with GM priority sectors. This would represent a shift from a purely learner demand-led model towards a more managed, strategically guided approach that builds the talent pipelines needed to meet employer and economic priorities across GM, while also ensuring learners are equipped with transferable skills valued nationally and globally.

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Benefits of Curriculum and Programme Development to Accelerate Growth in Sectors Important to GM’s Economy:

For Learners	• Greater flexibility to design learning that suits their ambitions, interests, and personal circumstances. • More authentic, hands-on experience through industry-aligned modules. • Increased confidence to enter and progress in high-growth sectors. • Better career destinations, more learners moving into skilled, well-paid work in GM.
For Providers	• Reduced avoidable duplication at Levels 4-6 and maximised use of specialist facilities. • Stronger collaboration across FE and HE. • Broader and deeper links with employers, helping to strengthen curriculum and learner destinations. • Improved learner progression and recruitment into Level 4 and 5 programmes. • Stronger alignment of curriculum planning with actual labour-market needs.
For Employers	• Better prepared applicants with the required skills, competencies, and behaviours to thrive in the workplace. • Reduced skills mismatches and fewer hard-to-fill vacancies through improved alignment between curriculum and employer’s skills need. • Reduced duplication in engagement as insights and feedback can be used region-wide to inform core skills requirements within the curriculum.
For Greater Manchester	• More agile workforce development aligned with innovation and growth. • A more coherent, modernised post-16 landscape that supports productivity and competitiveness.

6. Implementation and Governance

6.1 Recommendation Action Plan

As previously outlined, delivering system changes will require a unified ‘One GM’ approach, with providers and partners working collaboratively towards shared goals. Each recommendation presents a clear opportunity to strengthen GM’s skills system by improving the visibility, coherence, and effectiveness of learner pathways.

[Appendix A](#) sets out a proposed action plan to support the implementation of the recommendations outlined in [Section 5](#). The action plan provides a structured framework that translates high-level recommendations into practical, deliverable steps.

For each opportunity, it outlines:

- High-level actions required for delivery
- Indicative timescales
- The priority sector(s) the opportunity relates to
- Key delivery partners required to be involved
- Success measures to support monitoring, evaluation, and the demonstration of impact

The action plan has been designed to support coordinated system-wide implementation, offering clarity on what needs to happen, who needs to be involved, and how progress will be assessed over time.

6.2 Governance, Ownership and Ongoing Co-Ordination

Effective governance is essential to ensuring that the report’s actions and recommendations are progressed in a coordinated, accountable, and system-led way. The governance approach used during the project’s development built on GM’s existing collaborations, supporting transparent decision-making, alignment with wider GM initiatives, and a shared commitment to reducing duplication and siloed working. A similar, partnership-led approach will support successful delivery.

Detailed governance arrangements for reviewing, approving, and delivering the recommendations will be agreed outside the scope of this report, drawing on established and trusted governance structures already in place across GM. Rather than prescribing a single model, the report highlights the importance of clear accountable ownership and effective system-wide coordination, building on the maturity of existing arrangements.

Each recommendation must have an identified accountable owner, with responsibility for agreeing actions, timescales, and measures of progress. Delivery will depend on partners continuing to work collectively across existing forums, supported by coordinated oversight to maintain alignment, manage interdependencies, and maximise impact. Figure 16 outlines the proposed key delivery partners to support delivery of the recommendations.



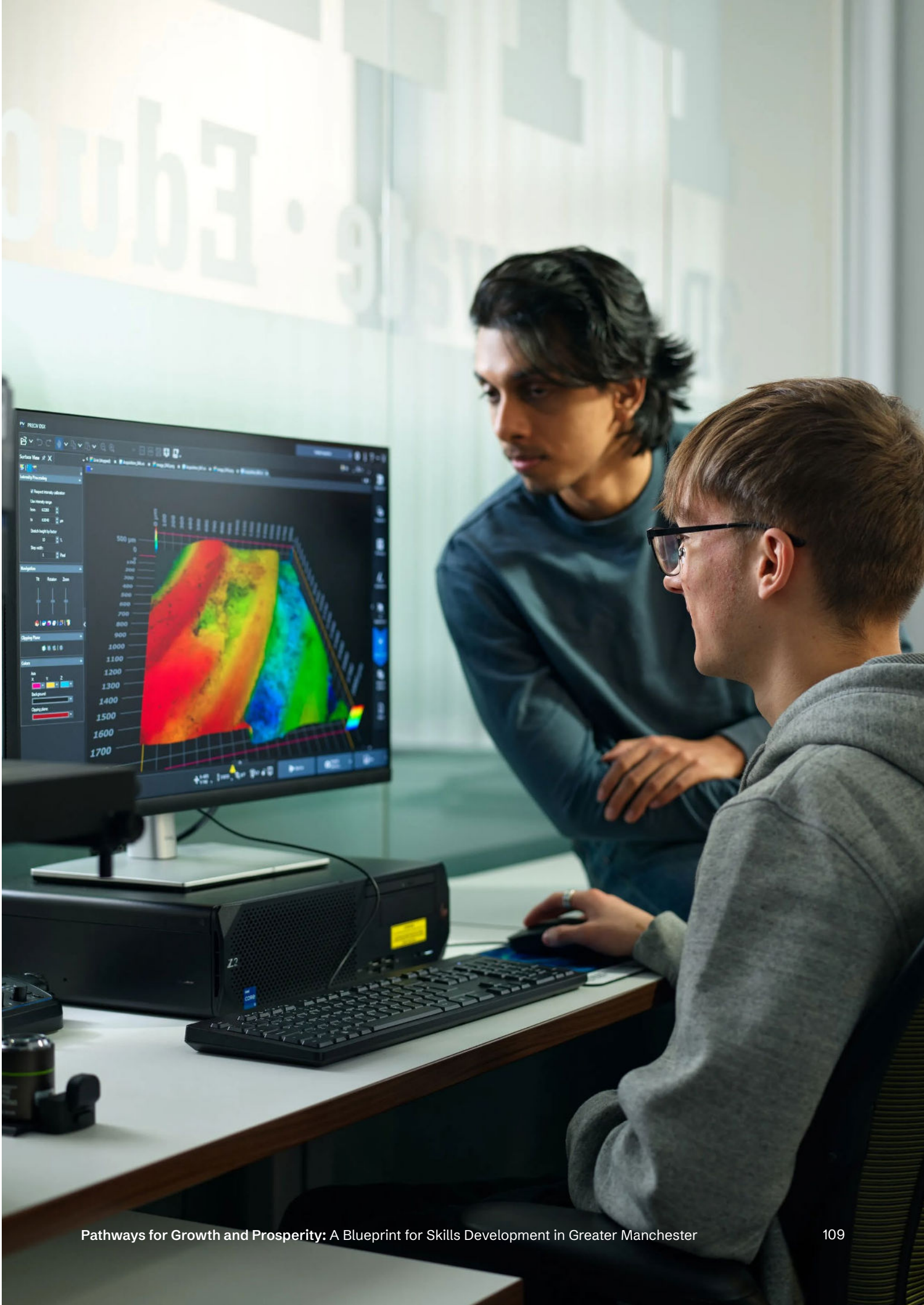
Recommendation	Proposed Delivery Partners	Indicative Deliverables
Strengthened System Wide Data Consistency & Integration	GMCA; GMColleges; GMCC; GM Civic Universities Board; GM FE & HE Providers; Skills England	GM-wide data sharing processes; Regional dashboards; System for learner tracking; Strengthened FE progressions data
Strategic Approach to Information, Advice & Guidance	GMCA, GM Higher; GM Students' Partnership; GM FE & HE Providers; Gatsby Foundation; Careers & Enterprise Company	Co-funded model to enhance GM Higher's IAG deliverability (in line with the move to Regional Access Partnerships); GM strategic careers group; GM alumni engagement strategy; Expansion of the Beeline website to incl. Level 4+ IAG
Systematic Embedding of Employer Voice	Employers; GMCA; GM Growth Hub; GMCC (ERB); GMColleges; GM Civic Universities Board; FE & HE Providers	Employer engagement framework; Employer boards/forums map; Priority sector training propositions; Draft soft skills framework
Curriculum & Programme Development to Accelerate Growth	GMColleges; GM Civic Universities Board; FE & HE Providers; GMCC; GMCA	Coordinated GM response to Level 3 reforms; GM credit transfer agreement; Regional narrative on LLE and modular learning

Figure 16 – Proposed delivery partners to support implementation of the recommendations

Ongoing coordination and monitoring will help sustain momentum and transparency, with regular progress reporting, alignment to LSIP priorities, and clear routes for escalation and accountability through established GM governance arrangements.

Together, this approach provides a proportionate and flexible framework that enables delivery while recognising the maturity and diversity of governance already in place across GM’s post 16 education and skills system.

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7. Benefits

The benefits outlined below represent the high-level, indicative advantages of this strategically significant initiative for learners, providers, employers and the wider GM system. Further work will be required to develop detailed and measurable benefits, including identifying appropriate indicators, evidence sources, and system benefit owners. The scope of this will depend on which recommendations are endorsed and taken forward.

To support ongoing benefits realisation, system partners will be required to agree to contribute relevant data and qualitative evidence, helping to substantiate, quantify and demonstrate the impact of these benefits across the region.

The anticipated benefits touched on throughout the report are outlined below.

Anticipated Learner Benefits
• More flexible, accessible and clear pathways to high skilled work in GM, enabling smoother articulation to the next level of study and reducing barriers to progression. • Strengthened student voice, ensuring learner perspectives shape provision, support and future system design. • Improved social mobility, with more equitable access to opportunities across the region and better alignment between learners’ interests and high-value pathways. • Better-managed transitions between stages of education, reducing drop-off points and improving learner confidence. • A more holistic approach to the learner journey, in which the system adapts to learners’ lives rather than requiring learners to adapt to institutional structures. • Enhanced access to high-quality learning opportunities, helping more individuals to reach their potential and remain in GM to study, work and progress.

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Anticipated Employer Benefits
• Stronger and more reliable talent pipelines through an increase in applicants who are prepared and equipped for highly skilled roles. • Better alignment between curriculum and workforce needs as learner pathways and courses are informed and connected to employer needs. • Improved visibility of emerging talent across the region, through access to learners via initiatives such as live briefs, placements, mentoring, and employer-led sessions. • Greater diversity and inclusion in recruitment through improved social mobility, removing progression barriers, and creating equitable access to opportunities. • Strengthened long-term workforce planning.

Anticipated Provider Benefits
• Improved cross-institution learning and knowledge-sharing, enabling providers to innovate and adopt effective practices without competitive barriers. • Greater institutional focus and differentiation, allowing providers to prioritise areas of strength rather than attempting to meet all learner needs alone. • Alignment with the “specialisation” ambitions in the Skills White Paper, enabling focus by subject area or industry need (for example). • Increased sharing of facilities, improving efficiency and expanding access to specialist equipment and environments. • Enhanced mobility and sharing of staff and expertise across institutions, building on the existing opportunities for PhD, postgraduate and undergraduate students to contribute to teaching and support roles.

Anticipated System Benefits
• Improved continuity of educational policy and process, reducing duplication and creating a more predictable, coherent system for learners and providers. • Development of an integrated education and skills landscape, underpinned by a shared regional vision and aligned to both learner and employer needs. • Stronger collaboration and connectivity across institutions, employers and stakeholders, supporting strategic planning, talent pipelines and long-term workforce development. • A more resilient, future-ready system, characterised by a more diverse range of programmes that are better able to respond to economic change, skills demand and demographic shifts.

Figure 17 – Anticipated benefits

8. Acknowledgements

This project was made possible through the collective commitment and expertise of partners across GM and beyond. We extend our sincere thanks to all those who contributed their time, insight, and leadership.

Strategic Leadership and Governance

- **GM FE/HE Leaders Group:** For identifying the strategic need for the project and championing its importance regionally and nationally.
- **The Greater Manchester Civic Universities Board:** For their guidance and stewardship in preparing this report.
- **The Project Steering Group:** For providing sustained strategic oversight.
- **The Project Working Group:** For supporting the operational development of the report and ensuring strategic alignment with regional and national initiatives.
- **The Project Team:** For delivering the data analysis, insight development, and stakeholder engagement activities that have underpinned this project.

Project Partners

We are grateful to our core partners: the GMCA, GMCC, GMColleges, GM Digital Skills Project, GM Green Skills Project, Manchester FE Colleges (a special thanks to our Steering Group representatives The Manchester College, Salford City College, and Trafford and Stockport Colleges Group), and the region’s HE institutes for their contributions, insights, and willingness to collaborate.

Project Collaborators

We also thank the individuals from across GM who generously supported evidence-gathering activities through workshops and interviews. This included students, providers, and employers from priority sectors, whose perspectives were essential in understanding the lived experience of learner pathways and identifying opportunities for improvement. We would also like to extend our thanks to the students from GM institutions who attended our ideation workshops. They provided valuable feedback on the ideas developed to-date and supported us in co-creating additional ideas to better meet their needs.

Supporting Organisations

Special thanks are extended to the following organisations for their support in engagement and analysis activities: Amazon; Amey; Arm; Bolton College; Bowmer & Kirkland; Bury College; Damar Training; Farrat; FDM Group; GAMMA Board; Gateley Vineden; Gatsby; GM Higher; Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce; Greater Manchester Colleges Group; Greater Manchester Combined Authority; Greater Manchester Institute of Technology; Greater Manchester Students’ Partnership; The Growth Company; Hopwood Hall College; Kaplan; Lovell; Manchester Metropolitan University; Marsh; Media Stream AI; National Rail; Natwest; NHS; Oldham College; Oldham Council; Royal Northern College of Music; Salford City College; The Manchester College; Tameside College; THINK; Trafford & Stockport Colleges Group; University of Greater Manchester; University of Manchester; University of Salford; Victrex; Wigan & Leigh College.

All contributions have been invaluable in building a clearer picture of the post-16 education landscape and surfacing opportunities for more coordinated, effective pathways across GM.

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Appendix A: Recommendation Action Plan

Overall Theme	The Opportunity	GM Priority Sector	Timescale	Suggested Actions Required to Realise the Opportunity
Strengthen System-Wide Data Consistency and Integration Across Greater Manchester	1: Strengthen locally-collected FE progressions data to ensure greater consistency and enhanced insights on learner destinations – particularly their occupation, sector, and whether they remain in the region. Improved and standardised data will enable a clearer understanding of the contribution FE learners make to the GM economy.	N/A	By the end of 2026 – ready for implementation in 2027 survey	Agree a level of consistency between FE providers, confirming minimum data requirements as part of the destination reporting.
				Work with destination reporting organisations to update the survey to include the agreed reporting requirements.
				Agree mechanism to share aggregated findings/analysis to support wider labour marker insights.
Strengthen System-Wide Data Consistency and Integration Across Greater Manchester	2: Establish annual, GM-wide data-sharing processes across FE and HE providers to maintain an aggregated, system-wide view of learner demand, progression, and outcomes aligned to priority sectors. This would support consistent regional insight, strengthen strategic decision-making, and enable ongoing analysis of trends, even where data limitations exist	N/A	By Nov’26 to incorporate 2024/25 GO data	Agree purpose of continued data sharing and the expected insights.
				Obtain agreement from providers to continue sharing agreed data to support regional insights and strategic planning. Consider, as part of this, data ownership – who will be responsible for collecting and combining datasets – and how aggregated reports will be shared with and made accessible to providers.
				Develop / maintain regional dashboards
Strengthen System-Wide Data Consistency and Integration Across Greater Manchester	3: Develop a system that systematically captures prior learning, key transition points, and employment outcomes – including occupation and sector – to provide a full end-to-end view of learner journeys. This enhanced insight would support more informed policy development, curriculum planning, and investment decisions across the skills system.	N/A	Longer term development – next couple of years. Suggest learning from above opportunity to inform requirements	Early engagement of Skills England to understand current position regarding work to improve the tracking of learner transitions and destinations (latter by GO and LEO data), using our experience on this project as the starting point for the discussion.
				Develop an agreed specification for improvements sought to FE and HE data – critically important to track sector and occupations, as well as enable better prior learning data to allow end-to-end view of journey.
				Use GM lobbying – including via Mayor – to elevate the lack of reliable occupational destination data as a key limitation on GM’s ability to exercise system leadership on skills.

This table provides the framework for the project’s recommendations, setting out a clear and actionable plan that stakeholders can review to fully understand each proposal. It enables informed decision making by supporting acceptance and endorsement, or a transparent rationale for choosing not to progress a recommendation.

Caveats and Considerations	Associated Risks	Proposed Delivery Partners	Proposed Success Measures
Suggest that a core set of questions and basic shared methodology are used by all providers – including gathering information about sector and occupation where a former learner is in employment.	- Limited engagement or buy-in from providers will result in continued variations of data quality. - Various organisations are used to support destinations reporting for FE – variation or inconsistencies in survey questions or methodologies could limit the opportunity to form a regional coherent view of learner destinations.	- GMColleges - GM FE Colleges - GMCA	Improved visibility and tracking of learner destinations by sector, occupation, and region.
As part of this project, substantial data transformation and cleansing was required to standardise HE datasets, create analytical flags, and bring data into a usable format to support cross-institution analysis. In lieu of a system or approach to systematically capture learner pathways and outcomes, this would continue to be a manual task.	- Inconsistent participation or data submission across institutions may undermine the reliability of a regional dataset and limit the ability to form a system-wide view. - Data-sharing agreements and governance processes may be slow to establish. - Capacity and resource constraints within provider data teams may affect their ability to contribute to an annual cycle of data-sharing and validation. - Risk that insights are not fully utilised if strategic planning processes are not adapted to incorporate annual shared data outputs.	- GMCA - GM Civic Universities Board - GMColleges - GM FE Colleges - HE Institutions - GM Students’ Partnership	- Improved visibility and tracking of learner destinations by sector, occupation, and region. - Clearer insight into regional skills needs – supporting more accurate and effective workforce planning.
Previous national attempts at destination tracking have been limited, making it difficult for local areas to build an accurate picture of learner progression. Skills England’s move into DWP creates new opportunities, as DWP has historically shown stronger interest and capability in analysing employment and earnings outcomes than DfE. GM could support this work by contributing analytical capacity from GM universities and GMCA, though this would require clear governance, defined scope and national commitment. Robust destination tracking depends on national data-sharing between Skills England, HMRC and HMT, using systems such as NI numbers, PAYE and DWP records. Without coordinated national frameworks, meaningful tracking will remain difficult.	- Lack of engagement from Skills England. - National systems prevent adequate capture of prior learning and career progression data and fixing this is not a priority for Government.	- Skills England - GMCA - GM Civic Universities Board - GMColleges - GM FE Colleges - HE Institutions	- Access to destination data that does not rely on subjective surveys. - Access to prior attainment data that allows pathways through FE and HE to be tracked. - That this project can be repeated but with better data that allows improved targeted findings and recommendations, supporting improved outcomes for residents and employers in GM.

Overall Theme	The Opportunity	GM Priority Sector	Timescale	Suggested Actions Required to Realise the Opportunity
Develop a Strategic Approach to Improving Learner Understanding of Pathways	4: Establish a GM-wide strategic careers group, aligned with the All-Age Careers Strategy, to deliver a single, coordinated approach to pathways, information, advice and guidance (IAG). The group would develop high-quality IAG informed by robust evidence and data, using this insight to highlight available progression routes and showcase examples of previous learners who have successfully followed different pathways. This would reduce duplication across providers, ensure consistent and trusted messaging for learners, and create a coherent system where pathways information is aligned, accessible and high quality. By bringing partners together around shared priorities, the group would strengthen the connection between education, labour-market needs and regional strategy – ultimately improving outcomes for learners, supporting provider efficiency, and enhancing GM's overall careers landscape.	Clean energy and net zero Sustainable advanced materials and manufacturing Defence	TBC	Confirm a lead convening organisation: - Identify and formally appoint a lead body (e.g., GMCA) to provide overall coordination. - Define responsibilities of the lead body – including setting strategic direction, ensuring consistent practice across the system. Secure institutional and cross-sector buy-in: - Engage senior leaders across FE, HE, schools, training providers, and GMCA to endorse a unified approach. - Confirm resource / representation from each institution. Determine scope of the group, including: - Terms of reference for the strategic function and range of activities of the GM-Wide careers group. - Agree document storage, sharing, and collaboration system (e.g., SharePoint).
	5: Develop and implement a GM-wide approach to careers inspiration that ensures all learners have equitable access to relatable role models and exposure to a wide range of careers. Building on the suggestion of a GM-wide strategic careers group, this approach would coordinate alumni engagement and engagement with employers. It would reduce duplication, expand access to diverse role models, including people from varied backgrounds and pathways, and create a consistent, high-quality offer that helps learners understand real career routes and feel confident about their futures.	Sustainable advanced materials and manufacturing Defence Digital and Technologies (if it's about getting into careers)	TBC – informed by above opportunity	Develop an alumni engagement strategy: - Identify key activities that alumni could support e.g., online talks. - Outline roles and expectations for engagement. Design alumni incentive scheme. Implement an appropriate system or programme for managing alumni information: - Consider how alumni can sign up and engage. Access information for GM partners to engage alumni, incl. data sharing agreements. Identify a priority sector for an initial pilot to understand feasibility, uptake, impact, and value.

Caveats and Considerations	Associated Risks	Proposed Delivery Partners	Proposed Success Measures
Consider how this opportunity connects to the All-Age Careers Strategy that is under development, ensuring it enhances and is connected to existing initiatives. Consider a graduate / leaver pillar to the strategy to initially develop strategic approach between FE and HE. Then further learning could be taken from Stockport's Community of Practice in terms of effectiveness of embedding careers information from Year 7 onwards. Activities / remit of a strategic careers group could include: - Developing an alumni engagement strategy. - Producing centralised content templates. - Collective marketing and social media campaigns focussed on priority sectors / occupations. - Employer recruitment information – how/ where they recruit. The purpose of IAG should be to support more GM learners to progress into good jobs within GM's priority sectors. This includes making alternative post-18 options, beyond the traditional three-year BA/BSc, clear, visible and valued. IAG should also be transparent about where pathways are not working effectively and provide practical advice on what learners can do to navigate those challenges or access alternative routes.	- Limited engagement from key partners (FE, HE, GMCA) could limit the group's ability to coordinate activity or influence practice. - Duplication of existing structures if the group is not clearly aligned with current boards or networks, leading to confusion or inefficiency. - Insufficient capacity or resource to support ongoing coordination, content development, and quality assurance across the region. - Risk of over-standardisation, where local or provider-specific needs are not fully reflected. - Data-sharing or information-governance challenges that limit the group's ability to build and maintain a shared evidence base.	- GMCA - GMColleges - GM Civic Universities Board - GM Students' Partnership - GM Higher	- Consistent, high quality IAG across GM as standard templates and key messages are adopted. - Reduced duplication of careers content across partners. - Increased trust from learners in careers information. - More learners entering career pathways of interest due to enhanced IAG. - Stronger alignment between IAG and labour market needs. - More young people choosing pathways that align with growth sectors, particularly in low volume/growth subject areas
Consider how this opportunity connects to the All-Age Careers strategy, and how it could build on the suggestion of GM-wide strategic careers group. Consider how insights of Alumni involved in the hiring process can be captured as key messages and shared with learners as part of this initiative. To set up initially, consider drawing on GMCC relationships with employers in priority sector identified to support sign up to the initiative by recent graduates / college leavers.	- Limited employer or alumni capacity, particularly from SMEs, reducing the diversity of role models available to learners. - Challenges in ensuring representation, meaning some sectors, pathways, or learner groups may be under-served. - Insufficient resource or coordination capacity, impacting sustainability and quality of delivery.	- GMCA - GMColleges - GM Civic Universities Board - GMCC - The Gatsby Foundation - The Careers & Enterprise Company	- Increase in the number and diversity of employers engaging in careers activities. - Improved and equal access to careers inspiration – including increased engagement from under-represented groups.

Overall Theme	The Opportunity	GM Priority Sector	Timescale	Suggested Actions Required to Realise the Opportunity
Develop a Strategic Approach to Improving Learner Understanding of Pathways	6: Expand the GMACS Beeline platform to include high-quality IAG beyond Level 3, creating a single regional source of information on technical and academic pathways, including Level 4 and above. This would enable the use of a consistent taxonomy across providers, align pathways with Greater Manchester's priority sectors, and clearly show learners the full range of progression opportunities available. A unified, Level 4+ offer on Beeline would improve transparency, reduce duplication, and help learners navigate higher-level technical and academic routes with greater confidence.	Pilot in Sustainable Advanced Materials and Manufacturing, and Construction	Indicative by Autumn 2027	Agreement from system partners that the GMACS Beeline website is the best place to host this information
				Confirm roles, responsibilities, and resource requirements for initial development and ongoing maintenance of Level 4+ information.
				Prioritise priority sectors for updates, in line with opportunities to have the greatest impact. Develop an update plan, sequencing sector information to ensure updates are manageable and remain high quality.
				Tag HE and FE provision to the GM Gateways, informed by clear taxonomy, for inclusion on Beeline and to create a clear and navigable structure for learners.
				Develop a comprehensive communication plan to share IAG updates, incl. the addition of Level 4+ progression opportunities to Beeline.
Develop a Strategic Approach to Improving Learner Understanding of Pathways	7: Develop a regional approach to supporting transitions from FE to HE – working closely with GM-Higher to share insights based on work to-date and the Cosmos diagnostic tool to ensure equitable access to IAG at key stages – including targeted resources for underrepresented groups. Integrating this content within an expanded Beeline offer would create a single, trusted regional source of information – helping to reduce learner anxiety, build confidence in decision-making, and improve progression outcomes into Higher Education.	N/A – universal transition support	Indicative by Spring 2027	Build on existing insights gathered by GM Higher, and engage FE and HE students through focus groups, surveys, and user-testing to identify the information they most want and need at key decision points.
				Prioritise resource development based on student feedback.
				Recruit / engage students to support content creation or updates to existing resources.
				Agree process for ongoing updates / promotion of resources, including, for example, how details are spotlighted or updated on Beeline.
				Develop an evaluation / test and learn programme to validate and tweak content and programmes with students and share learning and feedback across partners.

Caveats and Considerations	Associated Risks	Proposed Delivery Partners	Proposed Success Measures
There is currently limited alignment of taxonomies across the region, with different initiatives using varying or adapted frameworks and language. Although Beeline adopts the GM Gateway sectors, consideration should be given to mapping these against wider regional and national frameworks, e.g., Skills England's Standard Skills Classification, to support future analysis of employment and skills needs. Doing so will help ensure that policy development, labour-market insight, and curriculum design remain coherent, future-proof, and aligned with emerging employer requirements. Students reiterated the importance of bringing information together rather than creating something new, hence the suggestion to develop existing infrastructure.	- Resource and capacity constraints may limit the ability of providers to update systems, materials, or curriculum planning tools in line with a unified taxonomy. - Risk of misalignment with emerging national policy, requiring ongoing maintenance to keep taxonomies relevant and up to date.	- GMCA - GMColleges - GM Civic Universities Board - GM Higher	- Effective integration of Level 4+ information into Beeline. - Consistent use of taxonomies across FE, HE, and system partners. - Improved comparability of data through common use of taxonomies and tagging of priority sectors across providers. - More young people choosing pathways that align with growth sectors, particularly in low volume/growth subject areas.
GM-Higher produce a lot of content to support students with transitions and alleviate anxieties, therefore it is important not to duplicate this work. GMCA also work with GM Higher to co-create and test content with learners, so it will be important to ensure findings are shared and disseminated across all relevant stakeholder groups. Considering student feedback and their desire to access information in one place, developments could include signposting to GM Higher's content via the GMCA's Beeline website. Opportunity to co-create resources with students, ensuring real-life experiences are reflected and tailored to different learner needs.	- Duplication in resources and effort if initiatives are not linked up and working together. - Limited student engagement in co-creation activities could reduce the relevance or authenticity of the content produced	- GMCA - GM-Higher - GM Students' Partnership	- Increased engagement with student content across GM Higher and Beeline. - Increased satisfaction with the quality of content. - Increased confidence in the decisions students are making. - More students progressing through dedicated career pathways.

Overall Theme	The Opportunity	GM Priority Sector	Timescale	Suggested Actions Required to Realise the Opportunity
Develop a Strategic Approach to Improving Learner Understanding of Pathways	8: Develop a GM-wide approach that exposes FE students to Higher Education earlier in their journey, increasing their confidence and preparedness before and after final exams. Through coordinated activity with HE providers, e.g., targeted sessions with tutors, campus immersion experiences, realistic assessment previews, and FE/HE peer-to-peer support, students can develop a clearer understanding of expectations as they progress through pathways.	Construction Sustainable advanced materials and manufacturing Defence	TBC	Closely align with GM Higher and GMCA on their newly established programme to target learner groups demographically and geographically. Develop a coordinated early engagement programme – including: • Timeline of FE/HE exposure activities • Participation expectations • Alignment with GM-Higher activities to avoid duplication
Systematically Embed Employer Voice into Curriculum Design, Approval, and Delivery Across Greater Manchester	9: Develop a GM Wide Employer Engagement Framework, defining the types of activities that employer boards, sector groups, and committees should support – e.g., live briefs, placements, joint curriculum development, mentorship – to standardise expectations and quality across providers and sectors.	All	Late 2026, operational by Autumn 2027	Map and identify existing employer engagement activities and initiatives across GM. Work with GMCA, GMCC, FE, HE, employers and SMEs to define a shared set of engagement activities that all boards and groups should support (e.g., live briefs, placements, mentoring, curriculum co-design, recruitment support). As part of this, also establish minimum quality standards and expectations to reduce variation and improve consistency across providers. Engage academic departments to co-develop processes for integrating employer briefs, real-world challenges, and project-based learning into modules and assessments. Work with co-curricular/employability teams to embed structured employer activity (mock interviews, masterclasses, skills workshops) into tutorials and enrichment programmes. Create a centralised or coordinated system for managing employer offers and provider requests, ensuring equitable access for all institutions.

Caveats and Considerations	Associated Risks	Proposed Delivery Partners	Proposed Success Measures
Work with GM-Higher to identify priority learner groups who may benefit most (e.g., first-generation HE applicants, SEND, care-experienced, LGBTQ+ students, ethnic minority groups) and ensure activities are tailored to maximise engagement and relevance. Work with GM Higher to co-create engagement activities to ensure they are relevant and resonate with what learners want. Focus on curriculum areas aligned with GM priority sectors, ensuring exposure to relevant HE pathways and specialist faculties. Activities should ideally be timetabled or included in the curriculum and include a mix of place-based and digital delivery, to reach learners who may face travel, timetable or personal barriers. Activities should be coordinated with GM Higher and institutions to avoid duplication and ensure targeted delivery complements existing support. Consider developing a co-funded model for development, for example, hiring a specific role into GM Higher who would be responsible for filling the gaps in FE around IAG activity that currently aren't delivered by colleges.	• Low learner uptake, particularly if activities are not well-timed, well-targeted, or clearly communicated to FE students. • Resource-intensive delivery, especially for HE staff. • Over-reliance on a small number of staff or ambassadors. • Lack of continuity in HE staffing, meaning changes could disrupt relationships and reduce consistency.	• GM Higher • GMCA	• Increase in learner-ready students and a reduction in dropout rates / improved retention as a result. • Increased enjoyment of learners – through reduced anxieties and increased confidence and awareness of courses and learning. • Increase in priority learner groups progressing through pathways.
Identify priority subject areas where embedding industry activity will have the greatest impact and where employer feedback (via this project and LSIP) was strongest about the need for change. Build on existing groups if well founded. Pilot approaches in these areas to assess engagement and impact – gather feedback from learners, employers, and academic teams to refine processes before wider rollout. Consider whether any activities need to be targeted, e.g., employer-led sessions aimed at increasing confidence, knowledge and skills for applying for internships and jobs to underrepresented groups, or those who would experience the most benefit. Consider regional initiatives that could be delivered, e.g., cross-institution challenge days and competitions. Pilot SME-friendly engagement options, e.g., virtual briefs. Consider ways in which incentives – reputational as well as potentially financial – might be available to help engage and retain employer involvement in such groups Need to engage employers who are passionate and motivated, wanting to make improvements. Consider extending scope of such groups to encompass R&D, innovation etc.	• Limited employer capacity, particularly from SMEs, reducing the diversity and volume of industry briefs, mentoring, and placements. • Over-reliance on a small number of employers or academic champions. • Curriculum constraints and academic autonomy, which may limit the ability to embed employer-led projects or integrate real-world challenges into modules consistently. • Mismatch between employer expectations and academic requirements, potentially reducing relevance or feasibility of implementing briefs and challenges. • Safeguarding and operational concerns	• GMCC • GMCA • FSB/CBI • FE and HE providers	• Established infrastructure of employer groups providing guidance and leadership to work, including via LSIP, to address skill needs in priority sectors. • Regular two-way flow of insights to and from the group which can help strengthen education and training delivery, as well as employer demand for skills

Overall Theme	The Opportunity	GM Priority Sector	Timescale	Suggested Actions Required to Realise the Opportunity
Systematically Embed Employer Voice into Curriculum Design, Approval, and Delivery Across Greater Manchester	10: Strengthen employer insight across Greater Manchester by leveraging existing forums and sector groups to capture emerging skills needs to ensure ongoing alignment with workforce demand. Embedding this insight directly into curriculum design and development processes across FE and HE will ensure that programmes remain current, relevant and responsive to industry expectations. Strengthening information-sharing between employer boards, sector groups and provider committees, through safe and transparent mechanisms for sharing labour-market intelligence, curriculum needs and learner outcomes, will enhance, rather than replace, local and place-based partnerships, enabling a more coherent and industry-aligned skills system.	All priority sectors	By Autumn 2027	Conduct a mapping exercise of Greater Manchester's existing employer boards, sector groups, and committees including: • Scope • Membership • Key activities
				Address gaps in representation and insight – ensuring representation across key sectors, localities, and different employer groups – including local SMEs.
				Led by GMCC / GMCA, establish coordinated mechanisms for sharing information and insights across groups to reduce duplication and address gaps.
				Create structured touchpoints where validated employer insight feeds directly into FE and HE curriculum review, design and approval cycles – Ensure employer feedback informs both technical content and soft-skills development.
				Work with GMCA, GMCC, FE, HE, employers and SMEs to define a shared set of engagement activities that all boards and groups should support (e.g., live briefs, placements, mentoring, curriculum co-design). As part of this, also establish minimum quality standards and expectations to reduce variation and improve consistency across providers.
				Engage academic departments to co-develop processes for integrating employer briefs, real-world challenges, and project-based learning into modules and assessments.
				Work with co-curricular/employability teams to embed structured employer activity (mock interviews, masterclasses, skills workshops) into tutorials and enrichment programmes.
				Create a centralised or coordinated system for managing employer offers and provider requests, ensuring equitable access for all institutions.

Caveats and Considerations	Associated Risks	Proposed Delivery Partners	Proposed Success Measures
Consider piloting approaches with selected sector groups to evaluate impact and feasibility of wider roll out. Consider whether there needs to be an overarching group to coordinate this activity, or if it is overseen by GMCC as ongoing monitoring associated with the LSIP. Consider feedback mechanisms, e.g., pulse surveys, at regular intervals to capture regular changes or emerging skills needs.	• Duplication or confusion if new groups or task-and-finish units are created without clear links to existing boards. • Ineffective information-sharing mechanisms, undermining the benefit of addressing representational gaps if insights are not easily shared or used. • Over-reliance on existing networks, resulting in continued under-representation of key sectors or communities despite mapping efforts.	• GMCC • GMCA • FE / HE Providers	• Regular and reliable employer insight feeding into regional planning, with participation increasing over time. • Positive feedback from employers and providers, indicating that new mechanisms make engagement easier, more relevant, and more inclusive. • Coherent alignment across boards, with evidence of streamlined structures and fewer duplicated meetings or competing forums. • Improved learner outcomes.

Overall Theme		The Opportunity	GM Priority Sector	Timescale	Suggested Actions Required to Realise the Opportunity
Systematically Embed Employer Voice into Curriculum Design, Approval, and Delivery Across Greater Manchester		11: Build FE/HE partnerships for each of GM's priority sectors to provide the leadership and infrastructure required to support education and training propositions for employers and potential investors in priority sectors and selected growth locations in GM. This infrastructure should also focus on building the agility required to respond promptly to substantial and/or rapid employer demand for skills (such as that yielded by a major investment in the region). This would position GM as an attractive destination for investment by ensuring that the skills pipeline is clearly articulated, responsive to employer demand, and aligned with future workforce requirements. It also creates a coherent offer that showcases the strength and breadth of GM's education and training system.	All priority sectors	TBC	Establish FE/HE sector partnerships each with a name institution lead, MOU governing collaboration, and action plan.
					Draw on existing evidence from LSIP, sector growth plans and employer feedback to set out key skills needs (mainly occupations) now and in future within each priority sector and selected growth locations (including new towns).
					Review FE and HE curriculum, including pathways, to develop a base 'prospectus' of education and training for each priority sector and potential selected growth locations (e.g. Atom Valley)' in response to skills needs.
					Identify specialisms across FE and HE providers, so that we know which institution is best placed to lead work with others when coordinating a (timely) response to employer needs.
Embed Employer Voice into Curriculum Design, Approval, and Delivery Across Greater Manchester	Curriculum and Programme Development to Accelerate Growth in Sectors Important to Greater Manchester's Economy	12. Develop a GM soft skills framework, informed by employer's needs – e.g., analysis of Lightcast data, and translating these needs into learner friendly language that can be embedded across curriculum delivery, assessment, and employer-led activities. Students should also be supported to recognise, track, and articulate these skills in ways that support progression into work or further study.	All priority sectors	End 2026	Analyse Job-Posting Data and Employer Skills Needs – drawing on information from Lightcast, LSIP insights, and employer feedback to identify the soft skills most in demand across GM's priority sectors.
					Validate findings with employers across different sectors
					Synthesise findings and develop a draft framework, including: - Cross sector skills / transferrable skills - Sector specific soft skills
					Develop a learner friendly version of the framework- translating employer language into something more accessible.
				From Autumn 2027	Ensure soft skills development is explicitly referenced in lessons, projects, and assessments.
					Integrate employer-led activities (e.g., live briefs, challenges, mentoring, mock interviews) to strengthen real-world application of the skills framework.
					Develop tools and resources for learners, e.g., skills passports, reflection templates, digital dashboards, and guidance on articulating skills in applications or interviews.
					Consider CPD for staff in how skills are reflected and taught.

Caveats and Considerations	Associated Risks	Proposed Delivery Partners	Proposed Success Measures
There will be a high degree of uncertainty about the nature and timing of employer skills needs, but we need a way of working that can respond if (for example) a major investor arrives looking for at-scale training for local people within skilled occupations at short notice. FE and HE providers have a strong system incentive to compete, though GMColleges has identified lead colleges for subjects and a similar principle should apply across HE too.	- GM FE and HE unable to respond to employer enquiries in a timely and flexible manner. - Mismatch between what employers want and what public funds will pay for, particularly within any training that is for existing workforces.	- Invest Manchester - GMCA - GMCC - Local authorities - HE / FE providers	- Skills regarded as a key competitive advantage of GM when competing for inward investment and scaling up existing businesses. - More local people trained by local providers in the skills that industry seeks. - Closer employer relationships, supporting other activity such as curriculum enhancements, research and innovations.
Consideration around existing frameworks and national initiatives, e.g., Skills England Standard Skills Classification framework, and how these can be incorporated or adapted at a regional level. Consider how learner friendly version of the framework can be embedded in pathway IAG – e.g., as part of an expanded Beeline offer. Need to not duplicate work conducted as part of the LSIP or ongoing skills conversations (Growth Hub, GMCA, GMCC) – how is this embedded as part of this work rather than additional. Consider existing frameworks that are used by providers, e.g., Skills Builder.	- Misalignment with employer needs if the framework is not regularly refreshed using up-to-date labour-market intelligence. - Over-complexity of the framework, making it difficult for learners to understand or for staff to embed consistently.	- GMCA / GMCC - Employers / Industry Partners - GM Growth Hub	- Region-wide adoption of the framework across FE, HE, and training providers. - Increased consistency in skills language. - Learners able to articulate their skills, evidenced through improved confidence in interviews, personal statements, and CVs. - Increased access to employer-led activities that apply and reinforce the identified skills. - Improved progression and destination outcomes.
Pilot the soft-skills framework in a small number of institutions and refine based on learner, provider and employer feedback. Take learning from UoGM's Skills Passport initiative and consider how this might be rolled out wider across the region.	- Inconsistent adoption across providers, leading to fragmented use of the framework and reduced system-wide impact. - Learner disengagement, especially if the framework is not presented in accessible, learner-friendly language.	- GM Civic Universities Board - GMColleges - GM FE Colleges - HE Institutions - GMCA - GMCC	

Overall Theme	The Opportunity	GM Priority Sector	Time scale	Suggested Actions Required to Realise the Opportunity
Curriculum and Programme Development to Accelerate Growth in Sectors Important to Greater Manchester's Economy	13: Align Higher Education curriculum planning and design to skills demand, as outlined in the LSIP, to ensure that technical/vocational programmes have clear visibility to the high skilled occupations that will be pivotal to GM's future growth. This would help to build stronger talent pipelines and enhance graduate readiness for the region's growth sectors, while also ensuring learners are equipped with transferable skills valued nationally and globally.	All sectors – consider starting with: Digital & Technologies Construction Sustainable and Adv Materials and Manufacturing	Depends on frequency of curriculum planning reviews	Institutions to review course offer to identify programmes that are either directly or strongly aligned with GM priority sector – informed by the LSIP.
				Review curriculum content of these courses against the requirements of relevant high skilled occupations, using the Skills England occupational standards and maps as a starting point.
				GM FE and Universities, perhaps via the IoT, undertake a review of labour market needs to identify L4 and 5 HTQs that best map to the key associate professional occupations within priority sectors, and address gaps in the HTQ offer that are identified as a result.
				Universities to undertake feasibility study with the intent to grow sandwich course provision within subjects that support priority sectors (e.g. engineering, digital), to gain vital work experience that will help secure high skilled, high paid graduate careers.
Curriculum and Programme Development to Accelerate Growth in Sectors Important to Greater Manchester's Economy	14: Develop a flexible, modular learning landscape across Greater Manchester that reduces duplication, makes better use of institutional specialisms, and enables learners to build skills in ways that suit their needs. This includes introducing short, industry-aligned modules that provide real-world experience and develop both technical and soft skills; establishing the modular provision that FE and HE providers intend to deliver as part of the LLE, and promoting this coordinated regional offer to learners; establishing a GM credit-transfer agreement and recognition systems that allow learners to move seamlessly between institutions; and designing delivery models that adapt to learners' circumstances through flexible locations, formats and timings. Together, these approaches create a coherent regional offer that maximises strengths across providers while improving access, participation, and progression for learners.	Pilot in digital	TBC	Map institutional specialisms to coordinate and align opportunities, including: • Institution strengths, specialist facilities, and unique curriculum offers. • Overlaps, gaps, and opportunities for shared provision. • Modules to be delivered as part of the LLE.
				Develop a GM Credit Transfer Agreement for providers to sign and commit to agreed ways of working.
				Agree a regional narrative, including purpose and value, for modular learning to ensure strategic framing.
				Agree technical requirements and establish governance structures to enable interoperability, for example data sharing agreements, privacy impact assessment, shared definitions, and quality assurance processes for module validation.
				Develop systems to track, transfer, and aggregate learning – ensuring technical infrastructure to enable module learning.
				Develop and deliver pilot modular approaches before rolling out at scale. This could include: • Pathways – e.g., Level 4 – 5 • Delivery – e.g., online / hybrid sessions spanning institutions. • Promotion – e.g., incorporated into pathway information on Beeline.

Caveats and Considerations	Associated Risks	Proposed Delivery Partners	Proposed Success Measures
FE providers are required to produce an accountability statement each year, setting out their curriculum offer and demonstrating how it aligns with local priorities (such as the LSIP). Although HE providers are not required to do this for funding purposes, there is an opportunity to explore whether a similar approach could be adopted voluntarily within Higher Education. Consideration given to subjects more strongly/ directly linked to sectors, e.g., provides the skills and knowledge relevant to a particular sector and supports pathways into employment, rather than full curriculum. Employer demand is critical to growing higher apprenticeships, expanding HTQs, and re-growing sandwich degrees. Hence this recommendation is closely linked to those below, which seek to significantly strengthen the engagement of employers in post-16 education. Consider sector-specific leadership and management modules within courses. GMCA could choose to set GM targets for: • Growth in FE and HE programmes that align to priority sectors. • HTQ growth and higher apprenticeship growth, to diversify the post-18 offer in GM.	• Not all graduates remain in GM, so overly narrowing curriculum design to local needs may risk misalignment with broader national and international labour-market demands. • Curriculum approval processes and academic governance may slow the pace at which curricula can respond to emerging skills needs. • Learner demand will be strong for apprenticeships but is far less certain for HTQs (relatively unknown) and sandwich courses (4 years rather than 3, potential cost implications). • Chronic national policy instability, particularly in relation to apprenticeships. • Weak employer engagement fails to stimulate opportunities for student placements, apprenticeships, and the recruitment of HTQ learners into associate professional occupations – this aligns with LSIP findings regarding placement opportunities not aligning with/ meeting learner demand.	• GM Civic Universities Board • GMCC • HE Institutions • Employers	• Evidence of HE providers incorporating industry insight into curriculum design and approval processes. • Positive feedback from employers indicating improved relevance of HE provisions to industry requirements. • Growth in HTQs, apprenticeships and other forms of non-standard post-18 provision. • Reduced dependence on the L6 bachelor's degree. • Greater curriculum alignment across FE and HE, reflected in clearer pathways into priority sectors and higher technical routes.
Consideration around ROI and ensuring provision is focussed on sectors where there is high demand in the labour market. Ensure any industry-aligned short courses are informed by insights, supported by GMCC and GMCA. Programmes to be mapped to occupation requirements / skills maps. Consider connecting with the GM Digital Skills project, using skills insights to develop targeted modules that can be accessed by learners as well as employers to upskill employees. Opportunity to use the SMMC as a convener of skills providers to pilot for a programme around modular learning/credit transfers focussed on sustainable materials and manufacturing. Consideration around system interoperability and how learners accessing provision at multiple institutions will be recorded and reported. Consider how we safeguard against avoidable future duplication of programmes/modules.	• Increased system complexity, where expanding modular pathways unintentionally creates confusion for learners navigating multiple options, providers, and routes. • Bureaucratic and political challenges associated with developing and managing multi-institution courses, including differing approval cycles, governance processes, and academic autonomy. • Difficulties in aligning or amalgamating qualifications, which may create inconsistencies in credit value, recognition, or assessment standards across providers. • Mobility and engagement risks, where learners face practical barriers, e.g., travel limitations, digital access, or timetable clashes, that reduce their ability to participate in cross-provider modular learning.	• GM Civic Universities Boad • GMColleges • GM FE Colleges • HE Institutions • GMCA • GMCC	• Successful pilot of cross-provider modular courses. • Evidence of seamless credit transfer, demonstrated through learners accumulating and transferring credit across providers without duplication or barriers. • Improved learner satisfaction related to flexibility, relevance, and accessibility of learning options, including those with mobility or scheduling constraints. • Greater alignment of provision to priority sector needs.

Overall Theme	The Opportunity	GM Priority Sector	Timescale	Suggested Actions Required to Realise the Opportunity
Curriculum and Programme Development to Accelerate Growth in Sectors Important to Greater Manchester's Economy	15: FE and HE providers to work collectively, rather than through individual institutional relationships, to respond to the changing Level 3 landscape and ensure that new and existing Level 3 qualifications provide clear, credible routes into higher-level study (Levels 4-6). A coordinated, system-wide approach would give learners confidence that their Level 3 qualification offers genuine progression opportunities, strengthen alignment between college programmes and university expectations, and help maintain clear pathways into higher technical and degree-level provision across Greater Manchester.	All priority sectors	By Autumn 2026 – Ahead of defunding of Applied Generals	Interpret and understand Level 3 reforms to develop a coordinated GM response – ensuring a shared understanding across FE and HE on the implications of reforms on progression into Level 4-6 study.
				Map reformed Level 3 qualifications against HE entry requirements.
				Develop clear, jointly agreed pathways showing how updated Level 3 qualifications feed into HE programmes (Level 4-6).
				Review entry criteria, admissions processes, and course prerequisites considering Level 3 reforms and update HE policies to recognise new qualifications where appropriate, ensuring learners have credible routes into higher-level study.

Caveats and Considerations	Associated Risks	Proposed Delivery Partners	Proposed Success Measures
Consider targeted support or transition modules to ensure that reformed Level 3 programmes adequately prepare learners for HE academic and technical expectations.	- Changes to national qualifications policy, which may disrupt collaborative planning or require significant re-alignment. - Risk that Level 3 reforms create uncertainty among providers and learners, making it harder to establish stable, long-term progression pathways. - Regional competition for learners, which could hinder open collaboration or sharing of progression routes between providers.	- GMColleges - GM FE Colleges - GM Civic Universities Board - HE Institutions - Information, advice and guidance providers, including GM Higher	- Greater alignment between Level 3 programmes and higher-level study. - Improved equity in progression, with reduced gaps in Level 3-6 transitions for disadvantaged or under-represented learner groups. - Clear progression pathways from Level 3 into Level 4-6 provision are published and adopted across FE and HE.

Appendix B: Priority Sectors and Definitions

B1. Priority Sectors

Figure B illustrates how the project’s priority sectors align with wider regional frameworks, including the MBacc Gateways and the refreshed Primary Capabilities outlined in the 2025 Science and Innovation Audit. Please note that this project did not include Education and Early Years as a priority sector, as its scope focused on the IS8 sectors plus the two ‘Plan for Change’ sectors. This does not imply that related provision is absent across GM, and this sector could be incorporated into the datasets for further analysis and ongoing regional insights if required.



B2. Definitions

The table below outlines the definitions adopted for each of the project’s priority sector. These definitions were selected to maintain consistency with national and regional descriptions and to support accurate alignment of courses, occupational pathways, and skills analysis. The table also provides a brief explanation of how each alignment with cross mapped regional frameworks was derived.

GM Priority Sector	Definition
Clean Energy and Net Zero	At a high and consolidated level, Greater Manchester defines clean energy and net zero as a whole-system transition to low-carbon, renewable, and fossil-free energy solutions, enabling the region to become a carbon-neutral city-region by 2038. Data collection approach focussed on alignment with the following areas – wind, nuclear fission, fusion energy, and carbon capture usage and storage (greenhouse gas removals, hydrogen and heat pumps)
Construction	Whilst not explicitly defined in the GM Industrial Strategy, the ONS defines the construction industry as the construction of new buildings and repairs or alterations to existing properties in Great Britain measured by the amount charged for the work, including work by civil engineering companies. Data collection approach focussed on alignment with the following areas – carpentry and joinery, steel and metal, plumbing and heating, ventilation and air conditioning, project management, architecture and professional services.
Creative Industries	Aligned with the sector as defined in the National Industrial Strategy sector (2025) and adopting the overarching UK Government (DCMS) definition of the creative industries, this includes “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill, and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property.” Data collection approach focussed on alignment with the following areas – film and TV, music, performing and visual arts, video games, and advertising and marketing.

GM SIA Refresh 2025 - Primary Capability Alignment and Rationale	MBacc Gateway Alignment and Rationale	GM LSIP Alignment and Rationale
Energy, Infrastructure, and Transition – reflecting the focus on hydrogen, nuclear, smart grids, heat networks, and the infrastructure required for net-zero transformation.	Construction and the Green Economy – this includes retrofit, sustainable construction, environmental technologies, and energy transition careers.	Construction – relates to the priority around Qualified Electricians and raising industry standards to include low carbon skills essential to the net zero strategy.
Energy, Infrastructure, and Transition – supporting capabilities where low-carbon construction and retrofit innovations are required for decarbonisation.	Construction and the Green Economy – due to alignment with modern construction, retrofit, and sustainable building design.	Construction
Creative Media – underpinning Greater	Creative, Culture and Sport – including	Creative and Media

GM Priority Sector	Definition
Defence	As defined by the Department for Business and Trade, the Defence sector covers activities that directly support the production and delivery of goods or services (including subcontracted work) for a defence customer (UK or international). Defence frontier industries are priority areas which also meet our military requirements. These are areas which can contribute most to increasing the overall productive capacity of the UK economy. Although it is acknowledged that there is significant overlap with other sectors, including Digital and Technologies and Sustainable Advanced Materials and Manufacturing. Data collection approach focussed on alignment with the following areas – aerospace, shipbuilding, weapons manufacturing, electronics and cybersecurity, training, intelligence and logistics.
Digital and Technologies	The sector definition is drawn from the GM Sector Development Plan for Digital, Cyber and AI (Nov 2025): Digital refers to economic activity where specialist technical skills and infrastructure are directly employed to develop and produce digital products, goods, and services. This consists of activities including software development, digital telecoms, and data management. Data collection approach focussed on alignment with the following areas – advanced connectivity, AI, cyber security, engineering biology, quantum technologies and semiconductors.
Financial Services	Whilst not explicitly defined in the GM Industrial Strategy, the Department for Business and Trade states that the financial services sector encompasses a broad range of businesses that manage money and provide financial services to individuals, businesses, and governments. Data collection approach focussed on alignment with the following areas – insurance, pension and financial services.

GM SIA Refresh 2025 - Primary Capability Alignment and Rationale	MBacc Gateway Alignment and Rationale	GM LSIP Alignment and Rationale
AI and Data Analytics – links to cyber security and simulation. Advanced Materials – overlap with composites, graphene, and engineered materials.	Manufacturing and Engineering is the closest match due to engineering, production, and technical overlap.	Engineering and Manufacturing – relates to shortages in aerospace engineers. Digital and Technology – due to strong alignment with cybersecurity, data analytics, and AI. Logistics – relates to priorities around Logistic leadership and management priorities.
Software Engineering and AI and Data Analytics as these underpin Greater Manchester’s digital innovation strengths.	Digital and Technology – focussed on digital skills for the future economy.	Digital and Technology
Business Process & Market Innovation – reflecting how financial services are increasingly relying on innovation, digitisation, and data-driven processes. AI and Data Analytics – due to links with Fintech.	Financial, Business and Professional Services	Financial, Business & Professional Services

GM Priority Sector	Definition
Health and Innovation	Drawn from the GM Sector Development Plan for Health Innovation and Life Sciences (Nov 2025): Businesses, research centres, academics and health organisations involved in both research, supply and product development as part of the healthcare economy, as well as technology being produced for, adopted or adapted for use in a healthcare setting. Data collection approach focussed on alignment with the following areas – biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, medical devices, diagnostics and genomics, and healthcare services.
Professional and Business Services	Whilst not explicitly defined in the GM Industrial Strategy, the Department for Business and Trade states that the Professional and Business Services sector provides specialist advice and support primarily to other businesses, enabling firms in all sectors to maintain and grow their operations. Data collection approach focussed on alignment with the following areas – accountancy, audit and tax, legal services, and management consultancy.
Sustainable Advanced Materials and Manufacturing	Defined in the GM Sector Development Plan for Advanced Material and Advanced Manufacturing (Nov 2025) as: The integration of advanced science and technology within manufacturing throughout the production process, including advanced manufacturing techniques, utilisation of advanced materials and utilisation of enabling digital technologies. Data collection approached focussed on alignment with the following areas – covering automotive, batteries, aerospace, space, advanced materials, and AgriTech.

GM SIA Refresh 2025 - Primary Capability Alignment and Rationale	MBacc Gateway Alignment and Rationale	GM LSIP Alignment and Rationale
Health Innovation and Life Sciences – reflecting Greater Manchester’s globally recognised strength in medical research, biotechnology, and health-tech.	Health and Social Care – as this supports direct service roles and progression into clinical and care pathways. Although there could be some crossover with Digital and Technology due to emerging Health Tech needs.	Health & Social Care – relates to priorities for frontline health and care workers.
Business Process & Market Innovation – due to inclusion of innovation in business models, processes, and service-oriented functions.	Financial, Business and Professional Services	Financial, Business & Professional Services
Advanced Materials – direct mapping, reflecting an innovation strength of Greater Manchester.	Manufacturing and Engineering – supporting pathways into technical manufacturing and engineering careers.	Engineering and Manufacturing

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Appendix C: Data Analysis Methodology Details

Details of the datasets used to support analysis, including key transformations made to improve accuracy and consistency, and expected insights.

Dataset/Source	Expected Insights
GM job postings and employer-demand data from Lightcast (Aug 2019 - Aug 2025)	- Clearer picture of: - Employer skills demand - Employer qualification expectations. - Top hiring sectors across the region. - Extent of sector diversification across Greater Manchester (GM) in relation to LSIP growth priorities.
Higher Education UCAS Applications Data (2019/20 - 2023/24)	- A view of learner demand and a clearer picture of learner interest in subjects that align with priority sectors among GM students and GM FE college students, highlighting: - Notable changes in student applications / acceptances. - Demand from GM-based students. - Pathways into HE from GM FE Colleges.

Key Transformations
- Cleansed and standardised job titles, correcting sector misclassifications, mapping roles to SOC codes, and grouping job titles based on shared functions and skills. - Developed a cross-sector skills taxonomy to capture common, software, and specialist skills, ensuring consistent categorisation across sectors such as Sustainable Advanced Materials & Manufacturing and Clean Energy, which Lightcast does not classify independently. - The frequency of skills referenced in postings was analysed, ranked, and visualised through a Power BI dashboard, highlighting borough-level and sector-specific skills gaps.
- Separated apply-centre data from parliamentary constituency data, creating two clean master datasets to enable clearer, more focussed analysis. - Combined, cleansed and standardised partner datasets into a unified format, using CAH2 as the primary subject taxonomy to ensure consistent, detailed sector-level analysis. - Created analytical flags and lookup fields, including VLOOKUPs aligning parliamentary constituencies to GM boroughs and a flag to identify whether each apply centre is a GM FE College⁹ or not. - Mapped subjects to priority sectors using the provided sector definitions, and assigned an appropriate level of alignment (e.g., strong, direct, broad, loose)¹⁰. - Added structured columns within the master dataset to record each subject’s mapped sector and its corresponding strength of alignment, ensuring clarity and consistency in future analysis. - The volume of applications, offers, and acceptances for university subjects aligned to GM’s priority sectors were visualised through a PowerBI dashboard – highlighting learner demand trends by borough level and apply centre.

⁹GMFE colleges refer to the 9 colleges that were involved in the project
¹⁰For all HE datasets, this was used as a consistent reference. Mapping was conducted at CAH3, CAH2, and CAH1 level.

Dataset/ Source	Expected Insights
Higher Education Qualifications Data from HEIDI+ (2019/20 – 2023/24)	- A view of learner demand by subject and qualification level, highlighting: - Notable changes in student numbers – including subjects experiencing rapid growth. - Potential over or under supply of skills, based on mismatches between learner demand and priority sector needs.
Further Education ILR Data (2019/20 – 2023/24)	- Distribution of FE provision across GM priority sectors, highlighting areas of strong technical training capacity. - Depth of vocational and technical skills alignment within sectors, supporting understanding of workforce pipeline strength. - Borough-level participation patterns, highlighting geographic concentrations and potential participation gaps. - Identification of potential FE-to-HE progression pathways aligned to priority sectors. - Insight into the regional technical skills pipeline and its alignment with GM economic growth priorities.

Key Transformations
- Consolidated five annual CSV files (2019/20–2023/24) into a single Excel master dataset, ensuring field names and formats were standardised. - Cleansed the dataset by removing records belonging to institutions outside GM, ensuring the final dataset aligned with the GM-focused scope of analysis. - Mapped subjects to priority sectors using the provided sector definitions, and assigned an appropriate level of alignment (e.g., strong, direct, broad, loose). - Created analytical flags and lookup fields, including VLOOKUPS to align qualification aim the correct level of study and a flag to distinguish academic and vocational¹¹ subjects. - Inserted structured columns within the master dataset to record each subject's mapped sector and its corresponding strength of alignment, ensuring clarity and consistency in future analysis. This included adding a column for CAH1 grouping, allowing for higher level displays of data and simplified subject-area summaries. - The volume of enrolment for university subjects aligned to GM's priority sectors were visualised through a PowerBI dashboard – highlighting learner demand and trends by level of study using CAH3 as the primary subject taxonomy.
- Integrated learner start data from GM FE colleges into a single, standardised dataset, ensuring consistent formatting and field alignment across all participating providers. The resulting structure was designed to mirror the HE master datasets, enabling seamless, system-wide analysis and supporting direct comparability across FE and HE for pathway and progression insights. - Mapped Subject Sector Area (SSA Tier 2) classifications to GM priority sectors, creating a standardised framework for sector-level analysis. - Inserted structured columns within the master dataset to record each subject's mapped sector and its corresponding strength of alignment, ensuring clarity and consistency in future analysis. - Created analytical flags and lookup fields, including a flag to distinguish academic and vocational subjects. - Mapped learner postcodes and campus locations to GM boroughs, enabling place-based analysis of participation. - The volume of FE learner starts for subjects aligned to GM's priority sectors were visualised through a PowerBI dashboard – highlighting learner demand and trends by level of study using SSA2 as the primary subject taxonomy.

¹¹Vocational subjects were defined as those that teach a skillset directed towards a particular occupation or career path, whereas academic subjects were defined as those that emphasise a broader set of skills focused on reading and study, with flexible career options.

Dataset/ Source	Expected Insights
Further Education Progression Data (2019/20 – 2022/23)	Progression to employment for FE learners, and whether employment sector aligns with Subject Sector Area. <i>FE progression data is inconsistently reported across providers, leading to formatting and comparability issues. After standardisation, small cohort sizes limit robustness, and the data is not considered a reliable reflection of FE destinations.</i>
Graduate Outcomes Data Extract from Greater Manchester's Higher Education Institutes (2018/19 – 2022/23)	- The proportion of home students who remain in GM after completing their studies, particularly within the region's priority sectors. - The proportion of learners who progress into roles aligned with their area of study, indicating the effectiveness of pathways and curriculum relevance. - Identification of the most common occupations (SOC3) that learners enter post-study, providing visibility of typical early-career destinations. - The number of learners entering GM occupations aligned with LSIP priority roles (SOC4), supporting assessment of regional workforce pipeline strength. - The volume of graduates entering skilled employment (SOC1-3) and the proportion whose roles required their qualification and/or subject area, offering insight into the value and utilisation of qualifications in the labour market.

Key Transformations
- Combined and standardised progression data from GM FE colleges into a single, consistent dataset. - Mapped SSA Tier 2 subjects to classifications to GM priority sectors, creating a standardised framework for sector-level analysis. - Mapped employment industries to GM priority sectors to align with the wider sector framework used across the project. - Created an alignment indicator to show whether learners progressed into employment aligned with their subject of study. - Applied a vocational/academic flag to support analysis of technical pathway strength. - Structured the dataset to enable consistent analysis by college, year, subject and destination sector within Power BI.
- Combined and standardised graduate destination datasets from participating GM HE institutions into a unified structure to enable consistent regional analysis. - Standardised occupation data using SOC2020 classifications (SOC1 and SOC3) and mapped SOC3 codes to employment sectors and GM priority sectors to support workforce pipeline and sector-alignment analysis. - Derived employment geography indicators to identify graduates working in GM and created a retention flag to distinguish GM retention and mobility patterns. - Mapped CAH1 subjects to priority sectors using the provided sector definitions and developed an analytical flag to indicate alignment between subject studied and employment sector. - GM graduate outcomes were visualised through: - A Power BI dashboard – enabling exploration of graduate retention, mobility, and employment sector destinations. - A pivot table – enabling the analysis of progression patterns, including GM retention rates by sector, alignment between study and employment outcomes, the number of graduates entering occupations aligned with LSIP priorities, and the proportion of roles requiring graduate-level qualifications. This supported detailed interrogation of workforce pipeline trends and sector-specific outcomes.

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Appendix D: Learner Mindsets

Learner Personas

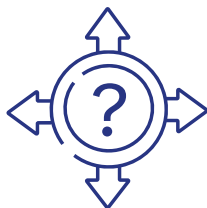
Based on the insights from interviews with learners and providers, we’ve created a series of behaviour-based personas that give an overview of different types of learners.

It’s all about mindset.

Learners will change over time and so will their needs.

These personas highlight the different mindsets a learner may take throughout their lifetime; they may only ever be one type of learner, or they may be every one of them at some point throughout their life. Each persona has a different mindset, and with it different goals and needs that are relevant to them at that exact time.

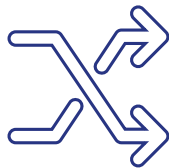
We’ve outlined five different mindsets:



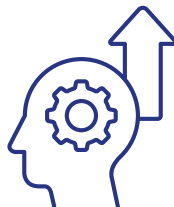
The Undecided



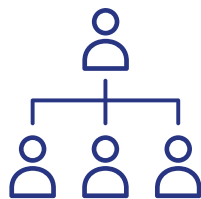
Career Followers



Career Changers



Career Upskillers

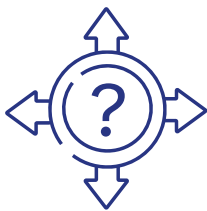


Promotion Seekers



The Undecided

Bio



People who are uncertain about the career or qualifications they'd like to do. They may have tried other jobs or courses in the past which haven't worked out.

The Undecided are unlikely to have a clear career plan or path through the education ecosystem. They may have tried other courses in the past and either dropped out or decided not to progress to the next stage. They're likely to be aged 16-19, and looking for guidance, certainty and a path that will lead to a guaranteed career they'll enjoy.

Goals

- I want to understand which careers will be suited to my skills, interest areas and the things I like doing
- I want to understand which qualifications will give me the best chance of success
- I want to understand which qualifications will give me the skills I need to be attractive to employers.

Needs

- Access to impartial advice with someone who understands all possible routes, not just university
- Reassurance that I'm making the right decision — education is expensive and time-consuming.
- Understanding what the next couple of years will look like for me.
- Job security and to know I'll have a job at the end of my studies.

Likely industries

Indicative only.



Construction



Financial services



Professional and business services



Defence

Existing ecosystem experience

"I did A-Levels. I ended up **leaving as it wasn't right for me** and stumbled across a BTEC in Construction at a **careers fair**.

Teachers asked what we wanted to do but their advice **pushed staying in school and university**. I didn't realise I could **go into a career earlier**.

Unless you have parents **with interesting jobs, you don't really know what's out** there.

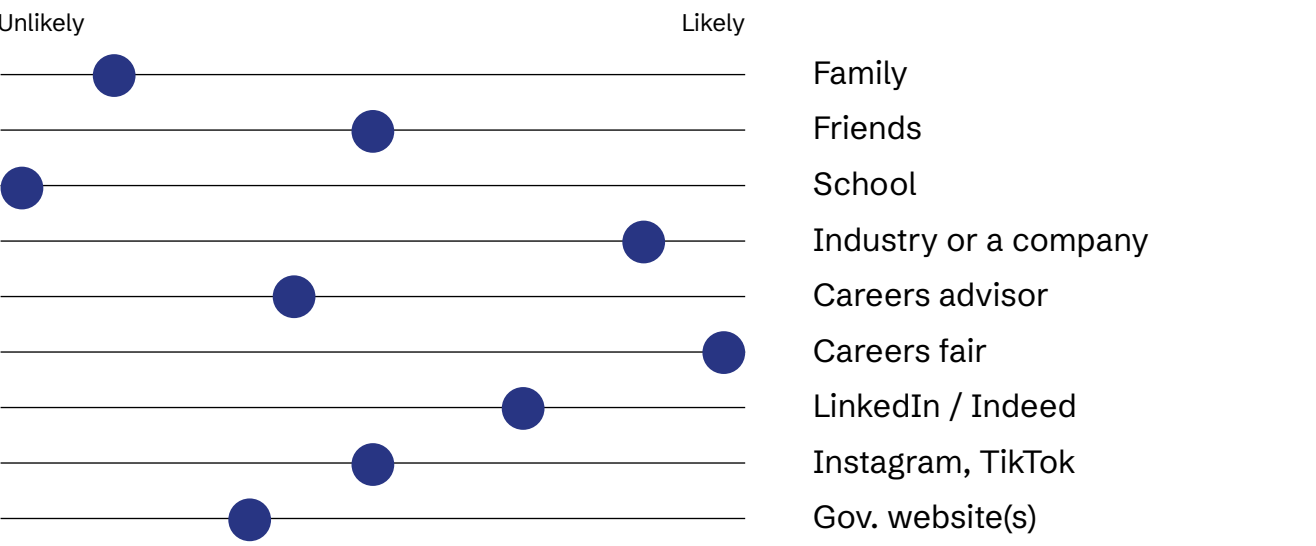
Job security was important in my decision and made me feel valued.

The MD of the company I now work at used to come into **the shop where I worked**. I spoke to him and was invited for an interview."

Frustrations

- I'm a hands-on learner and the education system didn't offer me that.
- I felt like a failure when really I just wasn't on the right course for me.
- My school wouldn't promote routes that weren't university so I felt lost and unheard.
- I didn't know where or who to go to for advice. If it wasn't for university no-one knew where to point me.
- I need industry exposure and most courses don't offer that — that's where I learn the most and that's what will get me a job at the end.

Source of course discovery



Ideal experience

Opportunities to delight

- Show me what careers are available from an early age — it's not just about qualifications
- Let me learn from educators from other institutions and industry experts with real-world experience
- Let me access facilities from other institutions that give me more hands-on experience.

The ideal future experience

“Ideally I’d have **more exposure** to **alternative routes** like apprenticeships or degree apprenticeships in college. If this was in place then students could make **broadier, more informed choices** knowing what all the available options are.”



Career Followers



Bio

People who know exactly what career they want to do and understand the path they have to take to get there. They're unlikely to deviate from their plan.

Career Followers are likely to know exactly what they want to do in life. They think they understand the qualifications they need for their desired job, but may be unaware of alternative pathways, specific courses or specialisms, or providers. They're likely to be younger, studying full time and have one or a number of target companies they're aiming to work for.

Goals

- I want to get the grades I need to succeed in my next qualification — I'm planning ahead
- I want to improve the chances of me getting a job at the end of my qualification
- I want to try and get some hands-on experience whilst I learn if I can.

Needs

- Understand the pathways I can take and the different options to get me to my end goal.
- Gain confidence in my skillset so I can sell myself to potential employers

Likely industries

Indicative only.



Financial services



Health innovation and life sciences



Digital and technology



Creative

Existing ecosystem experience

“School was **pushing me to go to university**, so I **never even considered apprenticeships**. I knew I wanted to go into public health and thought university was my only option. I did a degree but now I'm doing a degree apprenticeship in public health.

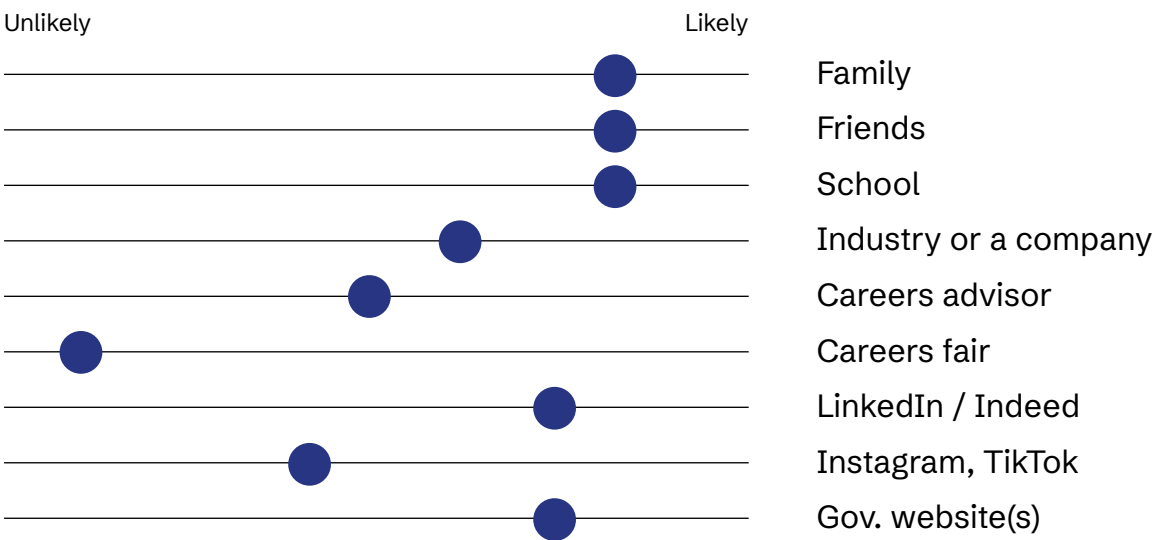
I loved the course but it **wasn't specific enough** to have key skills for certain roles — you still needed x years of experience to even apply.

I knew I wanted to focus on population health. I looked at a Master's but it was so expensive so I didn't want to do that. I wouldn't want to do a Masters if it doesn't help me because many **workplaces want experience, not just academic qualifications.**”

Frustrations

- Even though I know what career I want to go into, I'm really unclear on the path there and how to progress.
- I get annoyed that I could have done an apprenticeship, but my school and college never told me it was an option.
- Employers want you to have experience straight after finishing your studies just to even get through the application process — how is that possible?
- My studies were interesting but it still feels too broad to allow me to go into my desired career. How do I get there?
- It was a struggle going straight into employment from university — my course didn't prepare me for the real world and I didn't have many business skills.
- Job postings are so unclear and sometimes unrealistic — I always have to reach out directly to see if I'm eligible to apply.

Source of course discovery



Ideal experience

Opportunities to delight

- Make it easy to understand the pathway to the top in my job role
- Be realistic about which qualifications employers actually need me to have
- Give me relevant on the job training so that I can thrive
- Give me practical, real-world skills while I learn so I’m not just left with a qualification and nothing else

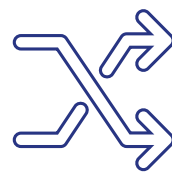
The ideal future experience

“Make careers advice more personalised, more consistent and more closely tied to industry expectations. When the guidance connects directly to real-world opportunities, it makes the transition from education to employment or HE feel smoother and more achievable.”



Career Changers

Bio



People who planning to, or are currently changing careers. They're likely to be training in something completely different to their previous job or qualifications.

Career Changers are likely to be planning or actively involved in a career change. They may have grown tired of their current career or have left for personal reasons. They are likely to be older, in their 30-40s and considering higher level qualifications in an entirely different industry. They are likely to have a particular area of interest they want to pursue — most likely a popular career choice they've heard good things about.

Goals

- Understand which qualifications are available in my area of interest, where from, and what my expected outcomes and available careers will be at the end
- Understand how each qualification will improve my employability
- Understand if and how I can build on the skills I've learnt in my previous job and education.

Needs

- I need job security and guarantees — changing industry and starting again is a big personal and financial risk, particularly at my life stage
- I need to know I'll be learning skills that I can use straight away that will make me more employable.

Likely industries

Indicative only.



Digital and technology



Construction



Professional and business services



Financial services

Existing ecosystem experience

“I’m ex-Army. When I came out I had my own shop fitting business but that was a struggle. I was always **looking for new opportunities.**”

Where I get the most help is from the lecturers. They’re really really helpful. They take the time to sit down and talk to you like a human being... the **way education and teaching is structured today is all wrong.** Everyone learns differently so we shouldn’t just be looking at equations on a board.

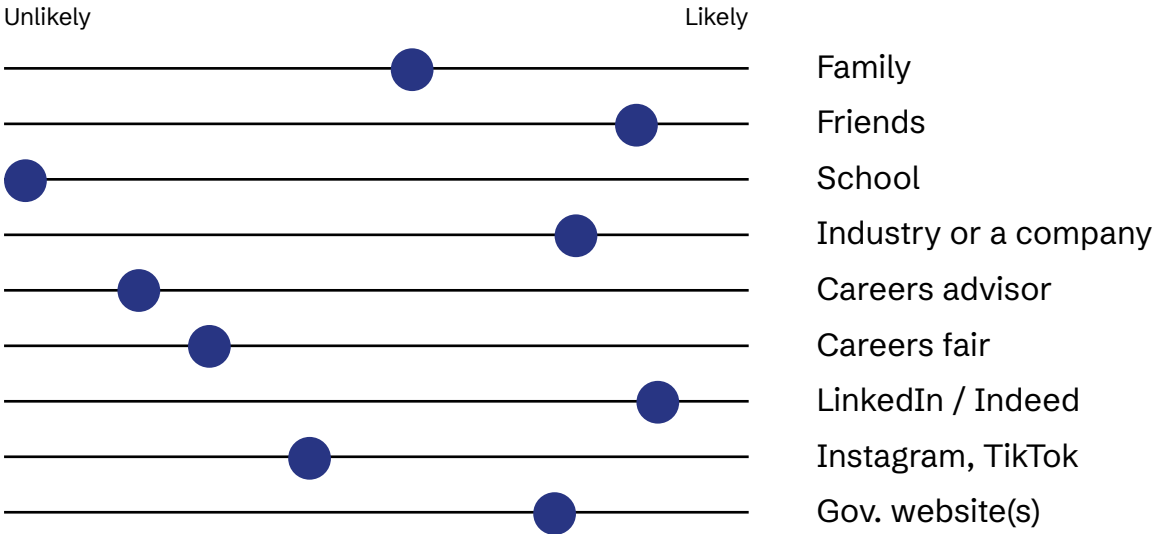
We’ve seen a lot of people, particularly women, who are on **careers breaks coming to change careers** and get into AI or engineering. They go in at a higher level because it’s **more secure.**

We get a lot of applications for the nursing apprenticeships from people changing careers — some of them have a **Level 7 in finance.**

Frustrations

- Changing career is a big risk for me, but there’s no guarantee I’ll get a job at the end.
- It’s not clear the pathways I can take after education to get me where I want to be.
- I’m competing with younger counterparts — I’m not sure how I can stand out.
- How do I even go about changing a career? Do I need to test it first or should I dive right in? Where am I going to learn these new skills?
- There’s so much pressure to make the right decision and I don’t want to lag behind my peers

Source of course discovery



Ideal experience

Opportunities to delight

- Help me to use the skills I've learnt in my past career and apply them to my new one so I can stand out to employers
- Help me find mentors in my chosen career who can talk me through the training process and the next steps. I don't want to feel so alone and it's hard to find the right person.
- Help me network and find relevant careers events for me to meet people like me.

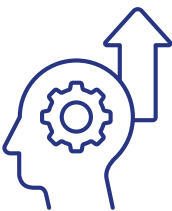
The ideal future experience

“Help me to **build a network** that's relevant to my future career and skillset. Help me **find opportunities** for work experience and people to shadow. Make it **really easy for me** to swap careers, learn, and stand out to employers.”



Careers Upskillers

Bio



People who are in employment and want to upskill. They may be looking to improve their core skillset, with a specific focus on a soft or technical skill.

Career Upskillers are likely to be planning or taking part in education or training programmes to improve their skillset or gain a promotion in their current job. They're likely to have identified a gap in their current skills, either themselves or via their employer. They are interested in shorter courses focussed on specific soft or technical skills rather than long-term qualifications and are looking to conduct their learning whilst at their current job.

Goals

- Understand which qualifications are available in my area of focus, what practical skills they'll teach me, and how I can apply these to my current job role.
- Understand if I can choose my course provider or if one has already been chosen via my employer.
- Understand the time and any cost implications.

Needs

- I need to know that this course will meet my current level of skill and knowledge, and that it won't be too basic or advanced.
- I need to make sure that I can manage the commitment to the course around my full time job.

Likely industries

Indicative only.



Digital and technology



Creative



Professional and business services



Financial services

Existing ecosystem experience

“A lot of our graduates really struggle with their **personal and professional skills**. We'll send them on a business skills course where they learn management skills, time management, presentation and negotiation skills.

We see employees struggling with **data and AI skills**. Everyone is encouraged to use AI and we offer technical courses with a third party for people wanting to upskill.

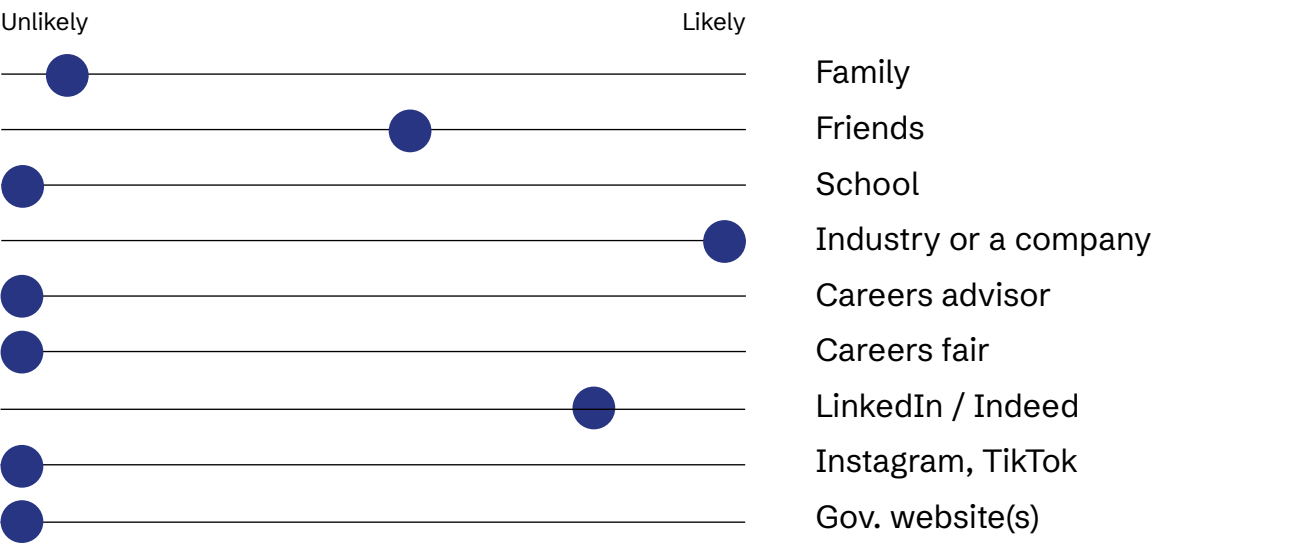
I'm working in IT but my interest is in marketing and social media and I want to learn those skills. I've **found a mentor** who works in marketing to teach me.

We tend to pick up 35-55 year olds with 10-15 years' experience for roles that academia doesn't readily provide. **We need courses for these people.”**

Frustrations

- Getting used to being open with AI is hard. In education we've always been told not to use it so we don't cheat, but now it's encouraged in the workplace. It's a lot to get your head around.
- There aren't many courses suitable for people mid-career — where do I go for this?
- I often feel like I'm on my own — why can't my employer help me find these courses or mentors?

Source of course discovery



Ideal experience

Opportunities to delight

- Make it easy for me to understand which courses I can take and importantly, how I can apply them to my role
- Help me find mentors in a similar industry where I can learn from and ask relevant questions
- Explain what the time commitment is and how much value it will add to my skillset.

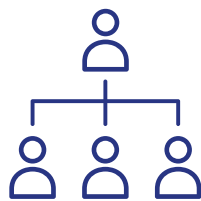
The ideal future experience

“Make it **easy for me** to see where I can go to upskill myself and matchmake me with a mentor who can help me apply it to my role. I don’t want to feel **like I’m in this all by myself**, especially if it’s an entirely new skillset.”



Promotion Seekers

Bio



People who are already in employment and are looking to upskill to get a promotion. They may have reached a ceiling in their career with their current qualifications.

Promotion Seekers are likely to be planning or taking part in education or training programmes to improve their skillset or gain a promotion in their current job. They’re likely to be looking at higher level qualifications to give them a competitive edge in their job. These qualifications are also likely to be encouraged and endorsed by their employer.

Goals

- Understand which qualifications are available, how long they’ll take and whether my employer supports and pays for them
- Understand how the qualification is relevant to my job and whether it will give me the skills I need to progress
- Understand potential pathways that may be available to me after this qualification.

Needs

- I need to know that the provider will give me the practical knowledge and technical skills I need.
- I need to understand how much time I’ll have to dedicate in my working week, and how much of my own time I’ll need to allocate.

Likely industries

Indicative only.



Construction



Clean energy and net zero



Sustainable materials and manufacturing



Financial services

Existing ecosystem experience

“I’m 46, a mature student and doing a part time degree apprenticeship and working full time because I got to the point in my current role where they basically told me **I couldn’t go any further unless I had a degree.** So here I am.

My company gave me a choice of two universities — one local and one in Exeter. I **didn’t really have much choice did I?**

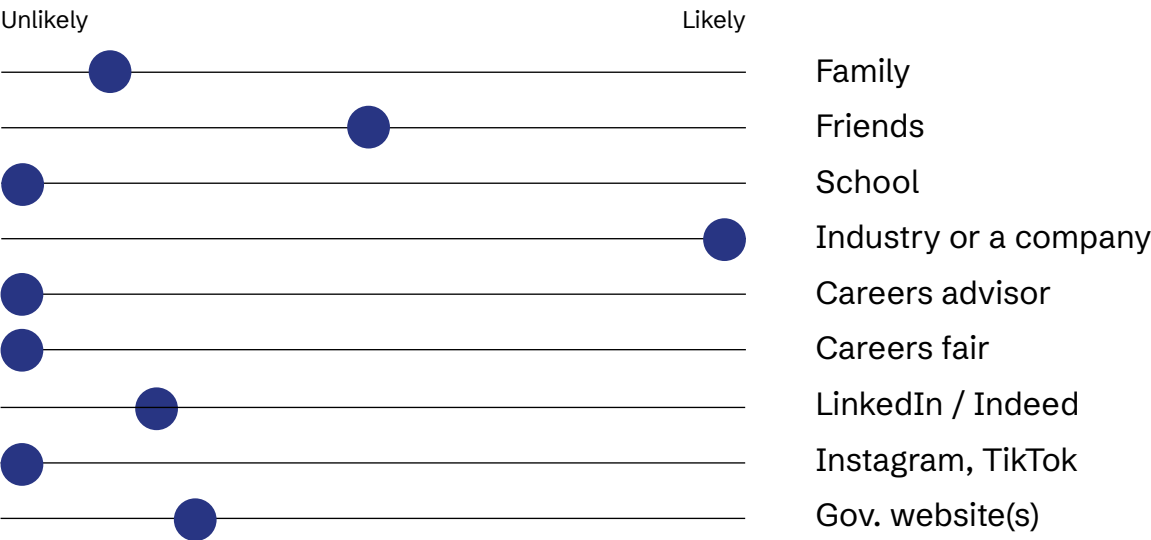
In university, the lecturers talk about stuff on slides, but I’ve done that on-site with my own hands. I know what I’m talking about — I’ve actually done it.

My employers require me to not only get an **additional qualifications but also certifications** too. It’s really hard to navigate the multiple providers.”

Frustrations

- These qualifications are a recent requirement for younger employees — that feels a little unfair.
- I mostly learn more in my job than I do on the course — it can feel like a box ticking exercise. Sometimes I have more hands-on experience than the lecturers do.
- I know I have to do this qualification to then specialise later on, but it doesn’t feel like a valuable way to spend my time.
- I have to choose a provider based on their website but they’re not always reliable — first-hand experience is key.

Source of course discovery



Ideal experience

Opportunities to delight

- Create learning opportunities that allow me to showcase my knowledge and teach some of the less experienced learners.
- I want providers to persuade me why I should choose them. I need choice, flexibility and hands-on experience.

The ideal future experience

“You’d have **flexibility to access resources** and facilities from other institutions, as well as the ability to **access industry experts** and other expert lecturers. If we’re one ecosystem why wouldn’t we do that?”

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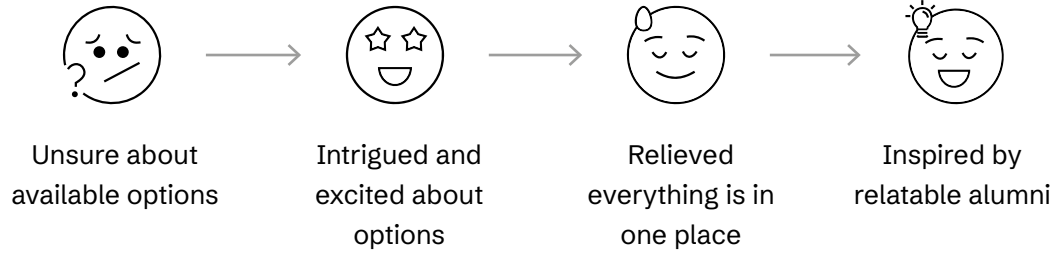
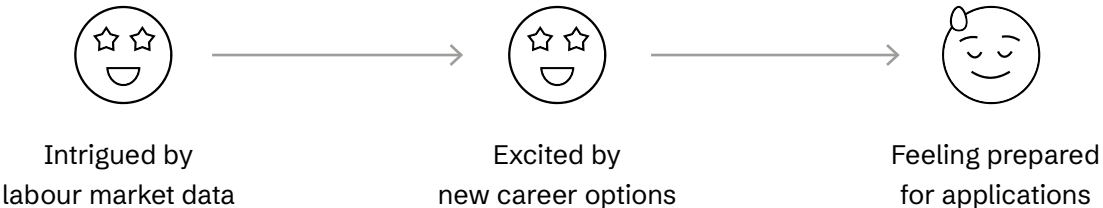
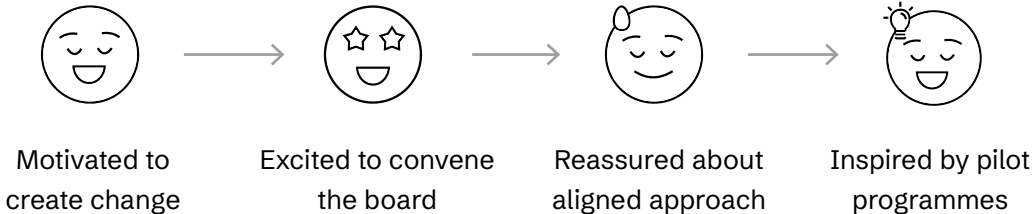
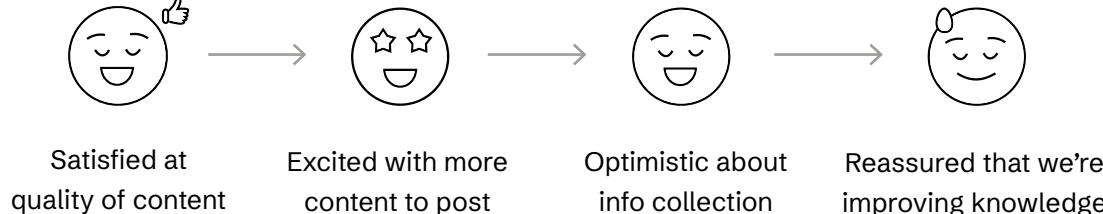


Appendix E: A Blueprint For An Ideal Future State

A GM-wide strategic careers group

Connecting to the All Age Career Strategy, a GM-wide strategic careers group/board - responsible for delivering a single, coordinated approach to pathways, information, advice, and guidance. With the aim of avoiding duplication, ensuring consistency, and improving outcomes for both learners and providers.

The opportunity map and future-state blueprint is outlined below. It brings together key recommendations, identified challenges, and co-created ideas to outline priority opportunities for pathway development, the enabling activities required, and the anticipated impacts – illustrating a more coherent, integrated vision for a future-ready post-16 education system across Greater Manchester.

Front stage actions	Researching options - Finds interesting, relatable content on careers on social media - Accesses educational content about different careers pathways across multiple providers, from one single source - Attends sessions at college led by relatable alumni from across different industries	Taking action - Analyses data on the labour market - Identifies industries of interest and shortlists potential job roles - Understands when employers are likely to start their recruitment process and plans accordingly
Thoughts and emotions	 Unsure about available options → Intrigued and excited about options → Relieved everything is in one place → Inspired by relatable alumni	 Intrigued by labour market data → Excited by new career options → Feeling prepared for applications
Back stage actions	Strategic actions - Confirm leading organisation and board - Allocate dedicated resource and budget - Add graduate pillar into the All Age Careers Strategy - Develop an alumni engagement strategy - Learn from pilot activities across the region	Content actions - Produce centralised content templates - Create collective marketing and social campaigns, including alumni stories - Collect employer recruitment information and specific careers content
Thoughts and emotions	 Motivated to create change → Excited to convene the board → Reassured about aligned approach → Inspired by pilot programmes	 Satisfied at quality of content → Excited with more content to post → Optimistic about info collection → Reassured that we're improving knowledge

A regional approach to careers inspiration

A regional approach to careers inspiration that ensures all learners have access and exposure to relatable people in interesting careers.

Front stage actions	Researching options - Alumni sees marketing campaign asking for volunteers - Student sees advert for an online event with someone with a similar background to them from an industry of interest				Taking action - Alumni signs up and provides their contact details, current industry and job role and the types of events they're interested in running - Student signs up to, and attends the online event			
Thoughts and emotions	 →  →  →  Student: intrigued by event Student: inspired by relatable alumni Alumni: excited at giving back Alumni: hopeful to make a difference				 →  →  Student: excited about the event Student: inspired and informed about careers Alumni: excited to boost awareness			
Back stage actions	Strategic actions - Identify priority sector for pilot - Build and maintain a GM-wide alumni database - Create data sharing agreements across institutions				Content actions - Create a collective marketing campaign to encourage alumni to sign up to the scheme, along with incentives - Run a cross-institution alumni event			
Thoughts and emotions	 →  →  →  Motivated to create change Excited about alumni appetite Inspired about potential impact Satisfied with data agreements				 →  →  →  Satisfied at alumni awareness Excited with alumni sign up Excited about running the event Reassured that we're improving knowledge			

Expanding IAG on Level 4 and above

Expand current information and IAG beyond Level 4+ to provide a comprehensive offer that covers Level 4 and above, in one single place, ensuring alignment with national taxonomies with clear local relevance and impact.

Front stage actions	Researching options - Speaks to tutor who recommends looking at Beeline - Visits Beeline website to understand options - Reads through mindsets and tailored advice	Taking action Chooses a couple of potential routes for Level 4
Thoughts and emotions	 Pessimistic about content  Surprised at quality of content  Happy it's understandable  Optimistic about options	 Happy there are so many routes  Optimistic about options  Excited about options
Back stage actions	Strategic actions - Update the GMACS Beeline website with additional information - Build awareness with teachers and academics of available resources	Content actions - Tweak terminology to make it user-friendly - Add detail on different mindsets and create tailored advice for each
Thoughts and emotions	 Content with single source of truth  Happy with integrated approach  Happy with teacher confidence  Confident in pathway awareness	 Satisfied at quality of content  Excited at tailored approach  Reassured that we're improving knowledge

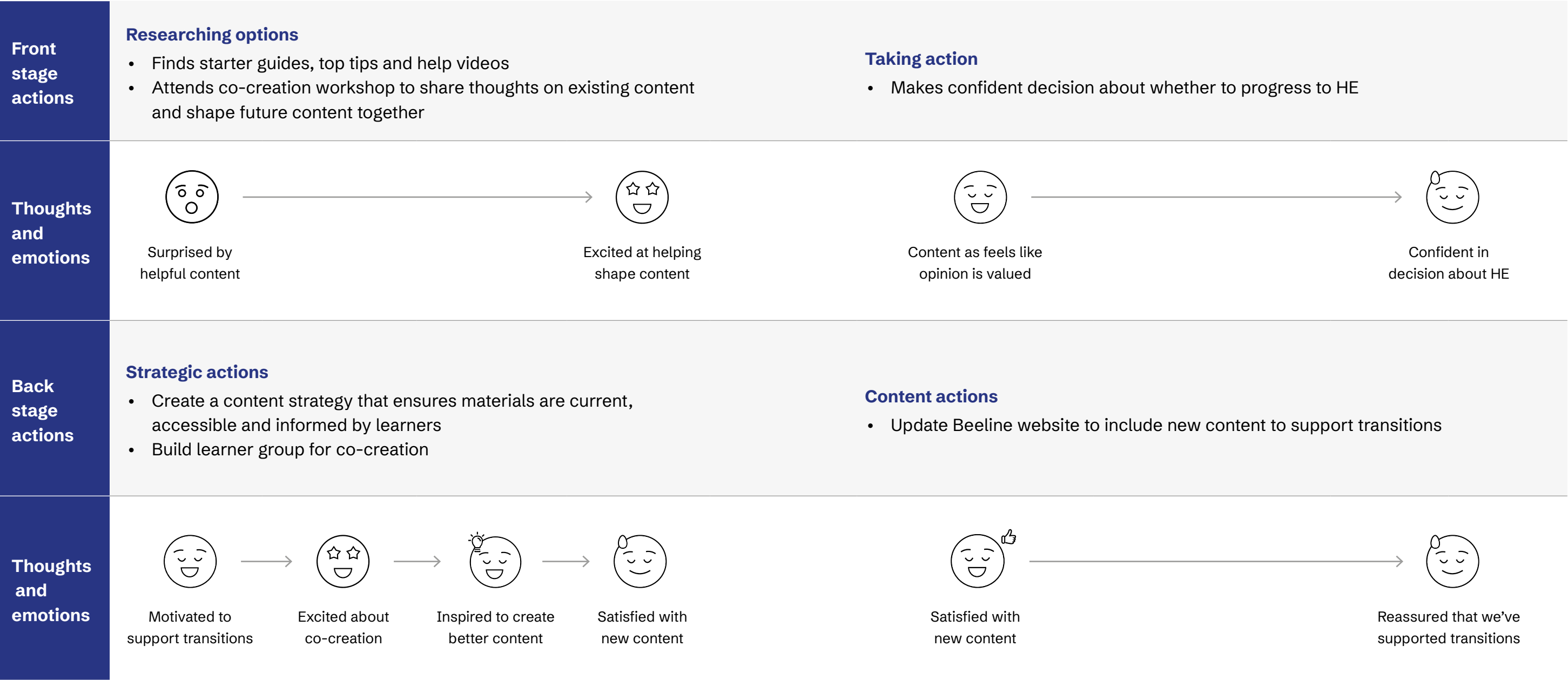
HE exposure during FE

Ensuring FE students are exposed to HE earlier in their journey to increase confidence in their choices before and after their final exams. Information will be housed in a single, easily accessible location and will be discoverable through key social media channels.

Front stage actions	FE experience • Takes part in sessions with HE tutors, including example tasks • Takes part in campus immersion days, including taster lectures and seminars • Has a one-to-one meeting with HE lecturers and tutors • Buddies up with a current HE student on my course HE experience • Receives targeted and personalised support and advice an guidance as soon as I start • Frequent check-ins with buddy and key HE point of contact	
Thoughts and emotions	 Nervous about being able to cope at HE     Nervous about starting HE  Content at how supported they feel  Reassured after support and advice  Content they made the right decision	
Back stage actions	Strategic actions • Create a coordinated early engagement programme, including expectations of engagement from HE staff • Co-design learner-centred content with students Content actions • Tweak terminology to make it user-friendly • Add detail on different mindsets and create tailored advice for each	
Thoughts and emotions	 Optimistic about impact on FE students  Energised to see level of engagement  Optimistic about learner-readiness  Confident in lowering student drop-out numbers  Relieved that learners are more prepared	

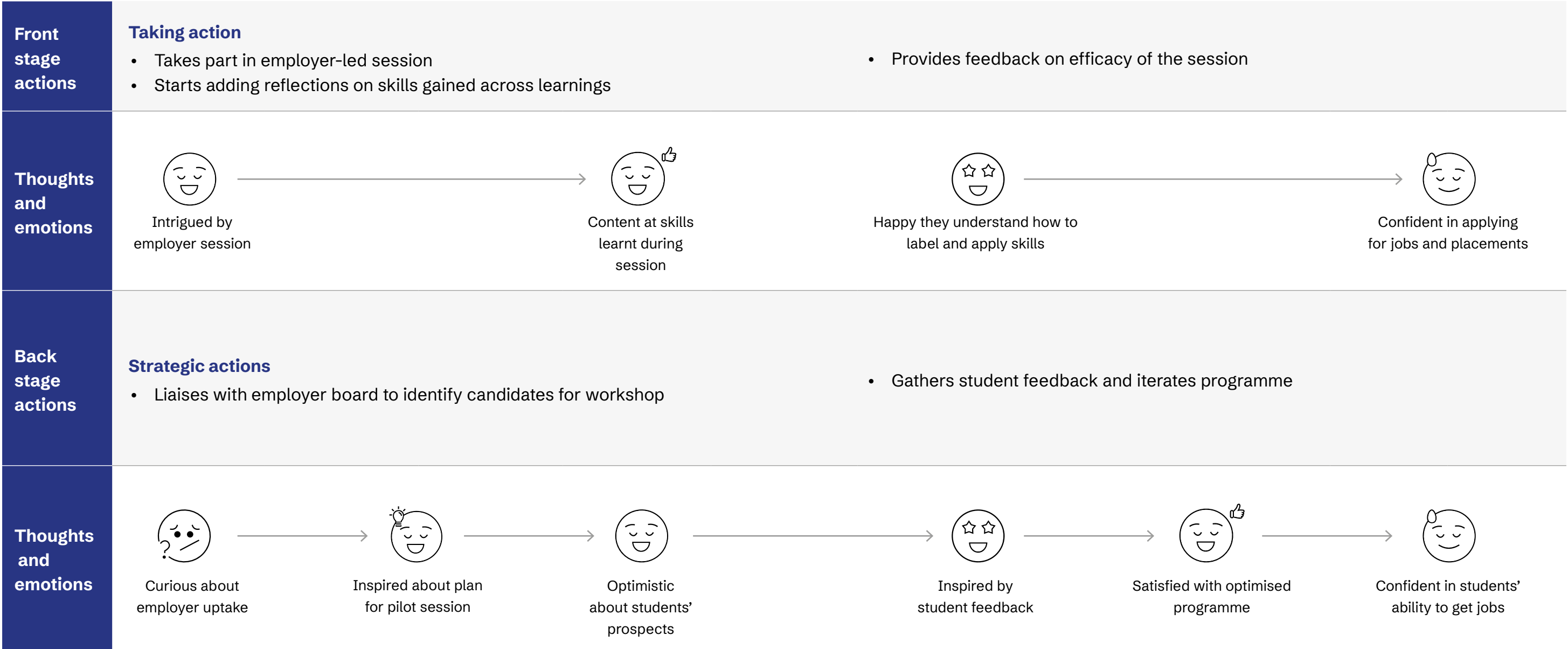
Supporting transitions from FE to HE

A regional approach to supporting transitions from FE to HE, ensuring consistent access to IAG at key stages. With the aim of providing content that is closely aligned with the information learners are looking to find, rather than the information institutions think is relevant.



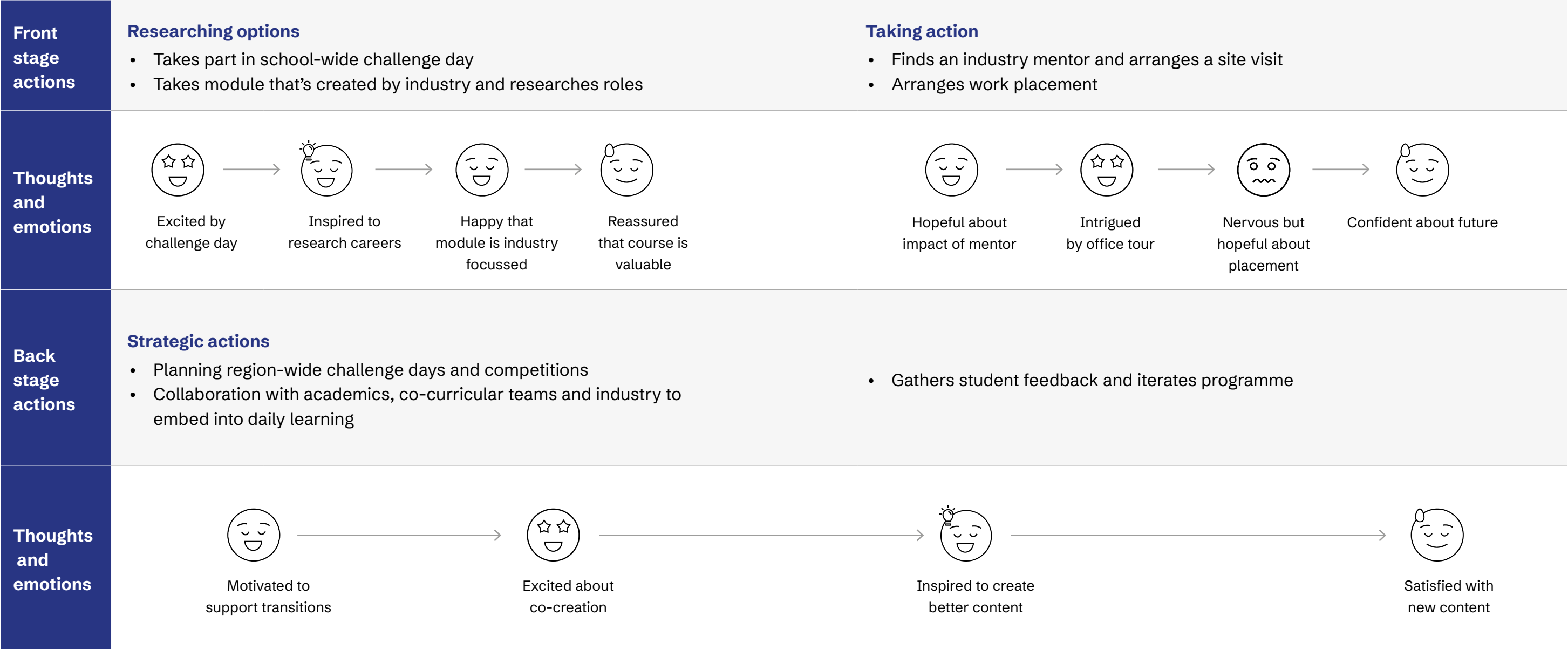
Boosting confidence in job applications

Employer-led sessions to boost knowledge of applying for internships and jobs.



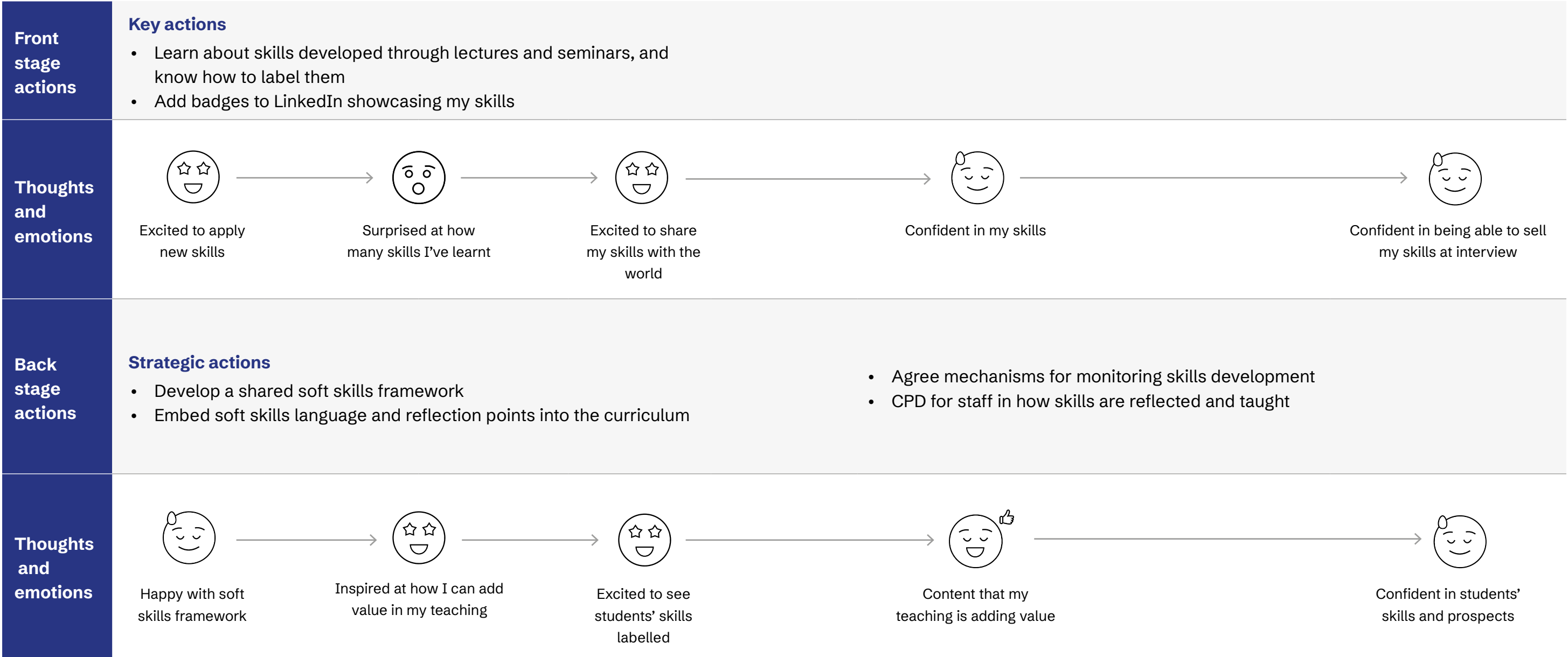
A GM-wide strategic industry groups

A GM-wide strategic industry group/board - responsible for delivering a coordinated approach to industry engagement, including curriculum design, mentorship, challenges and competitions, site visits, work placements and skills development.



Better articulation of soft skills

Ensuring students can identify and articulate the soft skills they’ve learnt and developed across their study, and see and understand how it translates into the workplace.



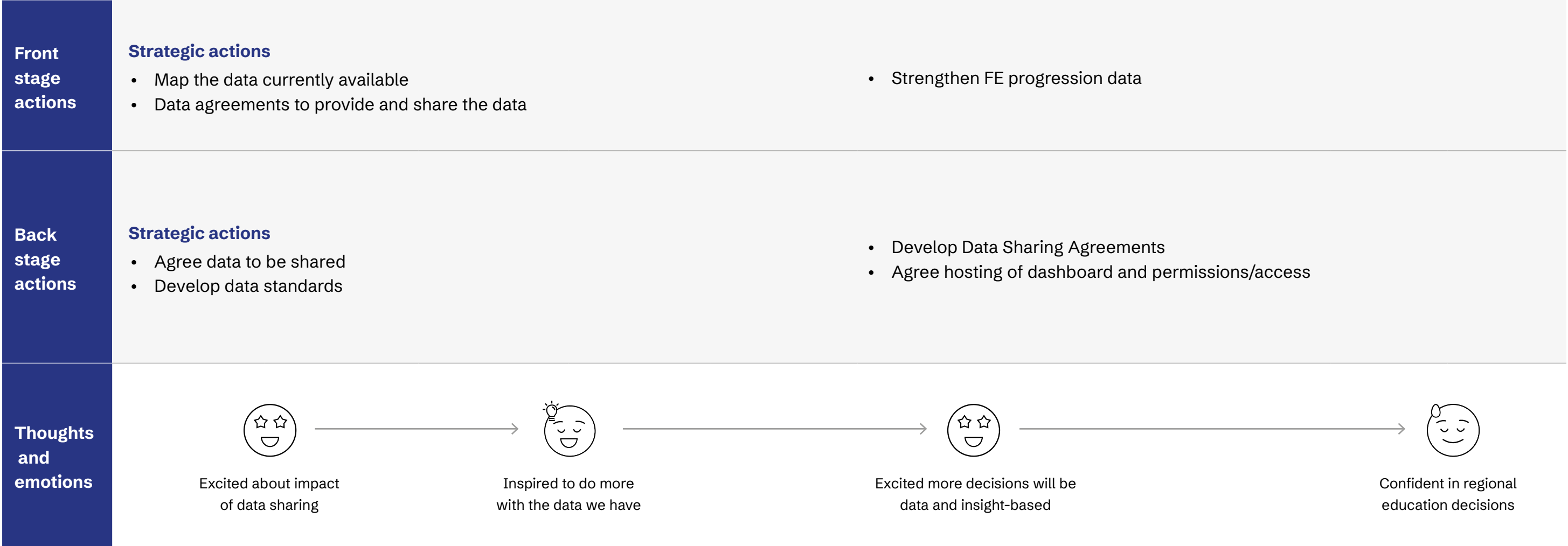
Flexible and modular learning

A flexible, modular learning ecosystem across the region that allows students to learn in ways that suit them. This includes offering short, industry-aligned modules that provide real-world experience and develop both the technical and soft skills needed to succeed in the workplace.

Front stage actions	Researching options - Researches modules to understand what’s available, how long it takes, how much it costs and where it takes place. Taking action - Signs up to online/hybrid modular course across institutions - Chooses modules that suit their exact needs
Thoughts and emotions	Curious but wary about new offering Satisfied with the course content Excited about trying a different module Happy they found a module they love Excited about career choices and prospects

Fully integrated, GM-wide data ecosystem

A fully integrated, GM-wide data ecosystem that ensures consistent standards, seamless data sharing, and unified tracking of learner journeys. The system enables systematic monitoring of learners as they move through different pathways, capturing prior learning, transition points, and employment destinations by occupation and sector. This strengthened data infrastructure provides deep insight to inform long-term strategic planning, curriculum development, and workforce alignment.



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This report reflects Greater Manchester's commitment to working collaboratively across education, industry, and system partners to improve learner pathways and support economic growth. The focus now shifts from strategy to implementation, building on existing strengths to deliver coordinated, system-wide change.

For further information or to get involved in delivering the recommendations, please contact: GMSkillsPathwaysReport@mmu.ac.uk