



The Area-Based Review in London:
Two logics of reform
Initial Report (Year 1)

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September 2016

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Executive summary

This report starts by briefly describing the national policy on the Area-Based Review (ABR) process, including its wider policy context together with reflections on further education (FE) regionalisation across the four countries of the United Kingdom. This sets the scene for a more specific exploration of the ABR approach being taken in London involving a total of 26 general further education colleges (GFEs), 12 sixth form colleges (SFCs) and five specialist designated institutions (DSIs) that have chosen to opt into the process. The London approach to the ABR process is initially based on four sub-regional reviews – West, Central, East and South London. The research captures the London ABR reform process up to September 2016.

In outlining the research methodology taken by the research team, drawn from the staff of the UCL Institute of Education's Centre for Post-14 Education and Work, the authors provide a synthesis of interim results based on findings from seminars and interviews with GFE and SFC senior staff, chairs of the sub-regional committees and representatives of the Greater London Authority (GLA) and Joint Area Review Delivery Unit (JARDU). The perspectives of interviewees and ideas from the seminars are initially reported by role or sector. Each of the various stakeholders demonstrated different views and concerns in relation to their location in the competitive London post-16 education and training market and their role within their respective organisations.

The paper notes that aspects of current national policy strengthen the role of FE colleges, but it also highlights that these institutions are financially challenged due to the impact of the emerging education and training market and cuts in public funding which will make it more difficult to develop effective specialist vocational provision that requires sustained and planned investment. The report also observes that, although the London ABR process is seen as necessary by all, the various stakeholders have differing expectations. Whilst the Government is intent on saving public funding by creating more efficient and viable FE institutions, some stakeholders, particularly those involved in local government, those closely

associated with employers and those nearest to the student experience, want to see much more emphasis on how the ABR will lead to a more coherent and transparent vocational education and training system that has learner progression and FE/employer collaboration and engagement at its heart. The authors go on to highlight the different logics within the ABR process. On the one hand, the Government clings to the idea of an education market and cost reduction that could result in a minimalist approach – fixing financial viability by creating bigger institutional formations that are better able to compete. On the other, key London stakeholders have suggested that a more planned, co-ordinated and collaborative approach is required at the local and regional levels to support improved provision and clearer progression pathways from education to employment. Both trajectories have the conditional support of London stakeholders, but it is the latter rather than the former that enjoys the greater enthusiasm. These two related directions of policy are understood through an exploration of what might be termed, respectively, Logic A and Logic B.

The report concludes with an exploration of the concepts of the world of ‘And’ rather than the world of ‘Versus’. In the current London ABR process, Logic A dominates Logic B. However, both are needed and could easily be related if they are viewed not in competition with one another within a constrained timescale (Versus), but as two related strands in a longer and more deliberative reform process, allied to strong regional oversight and skills devolution to London (And).

Part 1. National policy and the Area-Based Review process

The wider policy context

The dominant logic driving the Area-Based Reviews (ABRs) of further education (FE) colleges has been the Government policy of austerity and the need to reduce costs in post-16 education which, under the Coalition and current Governments, is unprotected in terms of public expenditure. The FE sector is already in financial crisis with many colleges now not economically viable and in 2015 the FE sector, as a whole, posted a deficit ¹. The road to economic stability is identified with creating larger FE institutions or forms of federations that can reduce ‘backroom costs’ and the duplication of provision. These larger institutional formations are seen as having the potential to respond more ably to employer needs on a sub-regional or regional basis and to create higher quality progression routes to employment for young people and adults ².

At the same time, ABRs are taking place alongside a raft of other reforms that could interact with them both positively and negatively.

School organisation – an increase in the academisation of schools and the proliferation of new sixth forms that particularly present a challenge for sixth form colleges (SFCs). Schools are not required to participate in the ABRs.

General education curriculum and qualifications – this involves a move to linearity and greater external assessment in GCSEs and GCE A Levels and the impact of 16-19 Study Programmes with their demands for GCSE English and mathematics, work experience and personal development. These reforms present a challenge for colleges that receive learners who have not always attained well in traditional examined courses, with a concern that the changes could lead to increased non-completion and failure rates; The Office for Standards in Education (Ofqual) have

¹ The Skills Funding Agency reported in 2015 that upward of 70 per cent of FE colleges in England could be experiencing ‘inadequate finances’ in 2016 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-33595027>). Accessed 12 September 2016.

² These potential benefits of ABRs were articulated in a letter from the Further Education Commissioner, Sir David Collins in a letter to Principals and Chairs of colleges, 25 August, 2016.

warned that providers should expect more 'variability' in GCE AS Level results than in previous years. In addition, colleges now have to make provision for retakes of GCSE English and mathematics post-16.

Technical and vocational education reform - the independent Sainsbury Review of Technical Education³, whose recommendations have been accepted in the Government's *Post-16 Skills Plan*⁴, has proposed the development of 15 technical routes - agriculture, environmental and animal care; business and administrative; catering and hospitality; childcare and education; construction; creative and design; digital; engineering and manufacturing; hair and beauty; health and science; legal, finance and accounting; protective services; sales, marketing and procurement; social care; transport and logistics – that learners can enter at 16 or 18. There will be a 'transition year' for those not ready to enter these routes and 'bridging courses' to change route to or from academic and technical modes of study and assessment. The outcomes of the Sainsbury Review represent a clear set of opportunities for colleges to further develop specialist pathways in close collaboration with employers. The Review also creates a clearer distinction between school provision (academic) and college/workplace provision (technical).

Standards-based apprenticeships - the Government's move from apprenticeship frameworks to apprenticeship standards and a levy to help secure its target of three million apprenticeship starts by 2020 can be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge arises from the fact that the focus of policy is on the role of large companies designing niche apprenticeship standards at Levels 4 and 5. However, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which have traditionally supported apprenticeships at Levels 2 and 3, have been dependent on FE colleges and independent training providers (ITPs) to access funding and support. There may,

³ Independent Panel on Technical Education (Sainsbury Review) (2016) *Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-skills-plan-and-independent-report-on-technical-education>, accessed 11 July 2016

⁴ DfE (2016) *Post-16 Skills Plan*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/536068/56259_Cm_9280_print.pdf, accessed 11 July 2016.

therefore, be opportunities for colleges to partner with both large and small companies, as well as higher education institutions (HEIs), in building the skills escalators from Level 2 to Level 6.

Devolution of key powers to local government – the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 is designed to introduce directly-elected mayors to combined local authorities in England and Wales and to devolve housing, transport, planning and policing powers to them – a process known as ‘devo deals’. The London devo deal also includes the devolution of the Adult Skills Budget, Adult Community Learning (ACL), discretionary support for 19+ learners and the creation of a Skills Commissioner for London. In addition, the London boroughs, together with the Greater London Authority (GLA), have put forward a number of plans for sub-regional development within the London Skills Devolution Plan ⁵.

Institutes of Technology – on the back of ABRs the Government may invite some colleges to become prestigious Institutes of Technology to deliver quality provision at the higher levels that are sponsored by employers, registered with professional bodies and aligned with apprenticeship standards.

These developments point to the need for FE colleges to rethink their curriculum focus and to strengthen their partnerships with employers, other education providers and relevant civil society organisations in order to exchange ideas and strategies and to develop new ways of working. The changes also strengthen the role of the London Mayor and local government as major players in post-16 education, training and employment linked to fundamental services such as housing, transport and health services.

There is also a wider question to be asked about the trajectory of policy on FE in England. The whole process signals a move towards greater collaboration – between

⁵ *Skills Devolution for London - a proposal to Government* (<https://lep.london/publication/skills-devo>) Accessed 12 September, 2016.

colleges themselves and between them and other stakeholders, notably employers and increasingly local government. At the same time, however, ABRs are taking place within the continuation of a wider marketised environment of competing school sixth forms, the entry of new providers to an education and training market and also between the emergent larger college formations. The ABRs are also occurring at a time when a sharper division is being created between academic and technical learning and the pathways to be followed post-16. At the end of this report we therefore ask questions about how far we are moving into a post-incorporation phase and, if so, in what ways?

The policy origins of ABRs

In *Reviewing post-16 education and training institutions*⁶ published in July 2015, the Government announced its plans to support the restructure of the post-16 education and training sector through a series of ABRs. It was expected that these Reviews would contribute to the Government's productivity plan, *Fixing the foundations – creating a more prosperous nation*⁷, by supporting the development of:

- clear, high quality professional and technical routes to employment, alongside robust academic routes, which allow individuals to progress to high level skills valued by employers; and
- better responsiveness to local employer needs and economic priorities, for instance through local commissioning of adult provision, which will help give the sector the agility to meet changing skills requirements in the years ahead, building on the agreements with Greater Manchester, London and Sheffield.

⁶ HM Government (2015) *Reviewing post-16 education and training institutions*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/446516/BIS-15-433-reviewing-post-16-education-policy.pdf, accessed 19 September 2016.

⁷ HM Treasury (2016) *Fixing the foundations – creating a more prosperous nation*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/443898/Productivity_Plan_web.pdf, accessed 19 September 2016.

The Government's aim is to *'move towards fewer, often larger, more resilient and efficient providers'*. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has been facilitating a programme to review post-16 provision across all areas of England. The focus of ABRs is on further education and sixth form colleges, although the availability and quality of all post-16 academic and work-based provision is taken into account and other provider organisations can choose to opt in to the process.

The official ABR process

The first wave of ABRs began in September 2015 with five further waves beginning every three months until December 2016. All ABRs were initially expected to be completed by March 2017, although implementation of their recommendations will potentially take substantially longer. Each ABR is expected to last three to four months and to consist of five steering group meetings:

- 1st meeting – background, analysis and planning.
- 2nd meeting – identify opportunities for improving and rationalising curriculum, including through technology and specialization.
- 3rd meeting – review potential for estate rationalisation and for delivering more efficient back office services.
- 4th meeting – discuss potential savings, feasible options and recommendations.
- 5th meeting – feedback on decisions from colleges, discuss implementation.

Data analysis is undertaken between each meeting. After the fourth meeting, college governing bodies are required to decide whether they agree with the recommendations for their organisation. Governing bodies can also choose not to agree with any of the recommendations, in which case they will need to provide a rationale for why the college does not support the proposals.

Reflections on FE regionalisation across the four countries of the UK

College mergers have already taken place in the other three countries of the United Kingdom (UK) under the banner of 'regionalisation'. In Northern Ireland in 2007, a

total of 16 colleges were merged to form six 'super', area-based regional colleges that kept local campuses with a focus on economic and social regeneration. The board of Colleges Northern Ireland comprises two people from each of the six colleges — the chairperson of the governing body and the director of the college — making a 12-person board. It is important to point out that Colleges Northern Ireland, although it replaces a lot of what the education and library boards used to do for the colleges, is accountable to the colleges, not for them. In Scotland in 2013 some 40 colleges were merged into 12 large regional institutions with a number of smaller ones being retained in the remote north and islands. In Wales since 2008, a total of 25 colleges have been merged into 14 organisations. In both the Scottish and Welsh cases, these reforms were characterised as 'post-Incorporation' because of the changes to college governance that accompanied regionalisation.

The Scottish approach can be illustrated by the case of Glasgow College⁸. While the idea of regionally based colleges came from Northern Ireland, the Scottish approach has been less civil service led and employs more of a stakeholder approach. This involves building a coalition of support that has taken four colleges through a series of steps that encompassed not only the staff and governors of the four institutions undergoing merger, but also partnership with the community, Chamber of Commerce and Economic Leadership Forums including key industries such as maritime training. The unified College now provides about one third of all officers on ships associated with the Clyde and promotes vocational development that is tied into the history of the city and city fathers.

The English approach to rationalisation does not employ such an evolutionary approach; nor does it make commitments to the concept of regionalisation. Instead, the language of institutional autonomy is retained, but the reality is also a new type of central steering in the role of the FE Commissioner. College governing bodies are free to reject ABR outcomes although, in doing so, they risk cessation of government

⁸ Two members of the Centre for Post-14 Education and Work undertook a visit to Glasgow College in May 2016 and interviewed several members of the college senior team regarding the college regionalisation process in Scotland and relationships with employers.

funding. The overwhelming pressure has been to reduce costs - in the order of 30 per cent - and what colleges are free to do is to explore ways of remaining economically viable through new levels of merger or collaboration or both. Ideologically, this could be seen as the weakening of competitive college incorporation as FE enters a more collaborative phase, albeit in complex forms.

Part 2. The ABR approach in London

Within this national context the Greater London Authority (GLA) has taken a more expansive view of the role of ABRs and has worked with stakeholders on an agreed overarching aim for London:

*To develop and deliver a more resilient, high quality and stable post-16 skills and education landscape in London focused on meeting business and local, social and economic needs*⁹.

This process is seen in the context of an expanding and increasingly diverse population and a vibrant but changing economy. It is also located within the overarching *Skills vision for London: a global city providing opportunity for all*¹⁰ which was drafted in conjunction with a range of major stakeholders, as well as the process of devolving the Adult Education Budget to London which is yet to be agreed, but it is anticipated will begin in 2017/18. The *Skills Vision* sets out three strategic aims, ten skills challenges for London, a set of targets and goals, principles for the London skills system and an outline offer for the young people, adults, employers and post-16 providers in London.

The London ABR now involves 26 general further education colleges (GFEs), 12 SFCs and five specialist designated institutions (DSIs) that have chosen to opt in to the process. A separate review of adult education provision is being undertaken due to interest from ACL providers.

Because of its size and the number of institutions involved, London has structured its ABR process around four sub-regional reviews – West, Central, East and South (see Figure 1. below). The reviews of West and Central London began at the end of February/early March 2016. The reviews of East and South London started in May

⁹ *Mayor's Skills Devolution Proposal* September 2015.

¹⁰ GLA (2016) *Skills vision for London: a global city providing opportunity for all*. Available at: <https://www.london.gov.uk/moderngov/documents/s55220/Appendix%2012.pdf>, accessed 19 September 2016.

2016, after the Mayoral Election. The recommendations are expected in January 2017 and the final report and proposals for London as a whole are likely to be published by March 2017.

Figure 1. Area Review process in London: an illustration



The role of the London ABR Steering Group is to oversee the sub-regional reviews and to ensure that the recommendations and outcomes of the reviews are coordinated (see Appendix 1 for detail of its composition). Prior to the start of the ABR process, just over half of the colleges in London were involved in discussions and plans for alliances, mergers and federations, some of which have already concluded and others may come to fruition before the ABR process is complete.

Part 3. Research approach

This report is based on the first year of a small-scale, three-year research project (September 2015-August 2018) that aims to capture the views of key stakeholders (GFE and SFC principals and chairs of governors; college curriculum specialists; chairs of the four sub-regional ABR committees; and the Joint Area Review Delivery Unit (JARDU) and the GLA on the London ABR process. The longitudinal approach to the project allows researchers from the Centre for Post-14 Education and Work, in collaboration with AoC London, to monitor whether and how the perceptions and actions of these key actors change over time. Snapshots have been taken during the preparatory period prior to the first official meeting of the ABR, during the process itself and will be undertaken at the end of the ABR after decisions and recommendations have been published. The nature of these snapshots has taken, and will take, a variety of forms in order to enable full engagement with the key stakeholders and to obtain as full a picture as possible of this important policy initiative.

Alongside on-going analysis of relevant national, regional and sub-regional documentation¹¹ on the London ABR, an initial scoping seminar for London college principals and chairs of governors was held at UCL Institute of Education (IOE) in October 2015. This introduced these key stakeholders to the idea of the research project, gained their support for it, allowed them to help shape the research and offered them an opportunity to express their views on the proposed ABR process.

One issue that arose from this initial seminar was a concern that those responsible for the curriculum within colleges were likely to be less aware than principals and chairs of governors about this policy, despite the fact that their expertise would be crucial in information gathering and decision-making. It was, therefore, decided to hold four seminars (one in each of the London sub-regions) for those responsible for the curriculum in London colleges in order to allow them to meet their counterparts

¹¹ The sub-regional data used during the London Area Review process is very limited because it is not in the public domain as a result of the data-sharing agreement made in each sub-regional area.

in the sub-regional area, to raise their awareness of the ABR process and to capture their perspectives on it from a curriculum development point of view¹². These seminars were held on college premises between January and March 2016 and involved 42 participants from 29 of London colleges. While the ABR process had not started at this point, there were already a number of discussions taking place at principal and chair of governors' level about possible mergers, strategic alliances and federations, which heightened participants' awareness of (and, in some cases, nervousness about) the significance of this reform. Each seminar began with a presentation from a principal in the sub-region who had gone through a merger process and was able to point out some of the challenges and rewards. The rest of the seminar was devoted to a discussion of issues and opportunities related to curriculum development and quality improvement activities. Notes were taken at each seminar and used as the basis of a composite report, which is drawn upon in the Findings section of this report.

The third strand of research involved individual interviews with the principal (and in some cases the chair of governors) of one GFE and one SFC from each of the four sub-regional areas (eight colleges in total); a representative from the GLA and JARDU (two interviews in total); and three of the four chairs of sub-regional ABR committees (the fourth chair declined to participate). All interviews were semi-structured and carried out by one researcher from the UCL IOE Centre for Post-14 Education and Work, except in the case of the sub-regional chairs, where two researchers were deployed because of the significance of these interviews. This fieldwork was carried out between April and July 2016 when the ABR process was already underway. Notes were made at these interviews and were shared with interviewees to ensure accuracy. In all cases participants have been assured of anonymity, although in the case of the regional chairs this is likely to be more difficult and they were informed about this issue. Interviewees are given the

¹² This strand of the research was funded by the Education and Training Foundation via AoC London Region. The rest of the research has been funded by the UCL IOE Centre for Post-14 Education and Work.

opportunity to comment on or amend the report that results from these first three strands of the research project prior to this publication.

The second year of the project will see a seminar in October 2016 held at UCL IOE where the findings from the report of Year 1 will be disseminated and discussed. All those participating in the research to date will be invited along with representatives from all London colleges via the AoC London Network. This seminar will be used to further shape the research for Years 2 and 3.

A second series of interviews with the same set of interviewees will be held in Spring 2017 after the publication of the official London ABR report in order to gather participants' views about the decisions and recommendations. This will be followed by a seminar/conference in July 2017 to disseminate the findings to date. Research and dissemination activities in Year 3 have yet to be determined.

While there are obvious limitations to a small-scale project of this nature, particularly in terms of sample size, it is the only independent research that is being undertaken on the London ABR process. There is, however a Parliamentary Inquiry into 'Post-16 Area Reviews' to be undertaken by the Education Sub-Committee on Education, Skills and the Economy¹³. This research thus constitutes a unique opportunity to describe and analyse a potentially historic change in the way that FE colleges operate in the Capital and offers lessons both on the process and outcomes for London and for England as a whole.

¹³ Parliamentary *Post-16 education area reviews inquiry* (<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-skills-and-economy/inquiries/parliament-2015/post-16-education-16-17/>). Accessed 12 September 2016.

Part 4. Interim findings from social partners

Introduction

This section of the paper synthesizes results from the London ABR seminars and interviews with GFE and SFC senior staff, chairs of the sub-regional ABR committees and representatives of the GLA and JARDU. The views of interviewees and the seminars are initially reported by role or sector. Previous research has suggested that each of the various stakeholders is likely to have a different view and concerns in relation to their location in a competitive post-16 market and dependent on their position in the organisation. In each case we have reported perceptions of the issues being raised by ABRs and stakeholder views regarding the ABR process.

GFEs

GFEs in London have been acting in advance of the ABR with a number of mergers and collaborations under discussion or even concluded. According to interviewees the ABR is seen as possibly adding colleges to this process rather than altering the merger/collaborative logic already under way. What is being developed is a set of FE groups or blocs that might make greater geographical and specialist sense than presently. However, it could be argued that this clustering process is being developed locally without a strong agreement on a Pan-London vision; the mechanisms of strategic oversight or a close understanding of current and future employer and learner demand.

Perceptions of the ABR

GFEs in London see the ABR as bringing about necessary change and each college, in its differing way, sees the ABR as its agenda. However, if the ABRs are seen in narrow terms – simply concerned with financial viability – then this is perceived by principals and chairs of governors to affect some colleges more than others.

As previously stated, most GFE colleges in London are already involved in discussions about mergers, collaborations, strategic partnerships and various forms of collaboration. The ABR is broadly seen by research participants as a catalyst for this

(rather than a cause) and they see the ABR process as providing greater impetus to examine finances, core missions, structures and areas of college specialisation.

There has been, however, considerable institutional variation in terms of practical responses to the ABR process according to factors such as college financial health, Ofsted outcomes and prospects for growth. In terms of the colleges involved in the study, the differentiated responses at the time included: a focus on a merger process that will lead to a large and high performing group of colleges; a college that seeks to retain independence focused on a strong relationship with its borough and local HEI and improved collaborations with surrounding colleges; a college that is coming out of special measures, is busy rationalising its organisation and prepared to talk with surrounding providers about areas of specialisation; and a college that is particularly concerned about a large journey-to-learn area and the mergers and collaborations that might ensue. Other than institutions talking to each other and varying degrees of collaboration being discussed, presently there is not a dominant organisational trend. There is, nevertheless, a perceived rationale for more sectoral and regional foci with collaborations being both area-based and according to vocational specialism, which has been stimulated by a sharing of data between colleges, in many cases for the first time.

Those representing the GFEs also discussed the pros and cons of the FE market, including the distinction between student demand and employer need. Several of those interviewed explained how they attempt to match perceived learner demand to existing college provision, given funding pressures. At the same time, some recognised that it has been more difficult to construct a market that involves both more specific employer demand for skill and student perception of need. Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG), therefore, was identified as a key issue with GFEs concerned about how aware young people are about the vocational specialism they wish to pursue in relation to trends in employer demand for skills.

The ABR process

It was generally accepted by these interviewees that change has been accelerated by the ABR process but, so far, not necessarily facilitated by it. Moreover, there are differing views about how the ABR process in London has progressed thus far. For some, the process itself has been seen as slow and cumbersome, leading to few outcomes of value. On the other hand, some have criticized the rushed process of the ABR with regards decision about whether some colleges should decide on merger. As to the ways forward, as of September 2016, there is little consensus as to how to proceed. For example, one college has argued for a more bottom-up and gradual approach, whereas another would like to see more challenge and direction. Furthermore, regarding the way of moving forward, there were a series of problems raised by principals and chairs of governors - what happens to 'fractured colleges' (those in various conditions of difficulty, in particular related to finance and/or quality) and how do GFEs deal with leaders and or college governing bodies who may have strong views about the role and mission of their particular college that prevents them from seeing the bigger London-wide picture? There were, nevertheless, some points of broader agreement and this concerns the need to address competition from school sixth form for 16-18 year old students and the need to bring 11-18 schools into the ABR process ¹⁴.

SFCs

Perceptions of ABR

SFCs feel on the edges of the London ABR because of its focus on GFE finances and vocational specialisation. They are caught up in a different debate about whether or not to become academies and see themselves as having a local rather than a regional mission. For this reason, SFCs see their relationships with schools as important and are seeking various forms of partnership and collaboration to

¹⁴ These points of divergence and convergence were not only reflected in the interviews but also, for example, from submissions of evidence to the ABR from particular London colleges.

enhance provision and reduce unhelpful competition. Merger is not a live issue, but there are concerns about GFE takeovers.

Moreover, the SFCs across London are very different one from another, with varying degrees of institutional confidence. In our small sample was a Catholic SFC dealing with its relationship to the Diocese; highly competitive local schools; two multi-level colleges that resemble tertiary colleges and one very focused on a vocational mission in its social and geographical setting. In their different ways these SFCs are all interested in building collaborative networks or partnerships that directly help to provide learners with a wide choice of general as well as broad vocational education.

The ABR process

For these SFCs the ABR process has been marginal, confusing and with high transaction costs, especially when its priorities are not central to their mission and they are being affected by funding cuts, Ofsted inspections and consideration of whether to become an academy. Furthermore, their experience of the ABR has been variously perceived; being seen as more top-down in Central and South sub-regions, but more bottom-up in East and West.

SFCs would like to see the greater involvement of schools in the ABR process and for it to address the size and effectiveness of sixth forms to help overcome the prevailing 'narrowness of curriculum choice' in local areas. Small school sixth forms are belatedly becoming a focus of government concern with the introduction of a set of criteria for establishing new sixth forms and SFCs also perceive that some local authorities are showing more interest in post-16 general education.

However, in the current ABR process there is no overall post-16 strategy and SFCs feel there is a lot to be done to develop provision in general education and to preserve minority subjects through collaborative relations. SFCs appear to be responding to the ABR process by seeking a more Pan-London vision and sub-regional strategic thinking. There is an initiative to form a London Sixth Form Partnership, based on six SFCs, to support the development of high quality provision

and improvements in teaching and learning. There was also an emerging view from these stakeholders that SFCs would welcome a sub-regional focus on post-14 provision that also includes general education; this may be beginning to happen in East London, it was suggested. On the other hand, some SFCs (those economically stronger) simply want to be left alone unless the ABR process becomes more relevant to their needs.

Local authorities, the GLA and JARDU

Local authority perceptions of the ABR

The London ABR is seen as important and a valuable and unique opportunity to look at colleges, provision and how to match this to employer and skills demands as well as to those of young people. Colleges are seen as well placed to support the development of skills, communities and local economies and to respond to a local authority priority about improving the life-chances of young people.

The ABR process has allowed local authorities to more easily recognise the important role FE has to play economically and socially; its 'dual mandate'¹⁵ and how it can be realised. The ABR can thus counterbalance the traditional local authority focus on schools and its somewhat negative perception of colleges. However, the prevailing view is that colleges are too competitive when they should be more collaborative. They are seen to be relatively knowledgeable about each other from a competitive perspective, but less knowledgeable and engaged with the local economy. This makes little sense to local authorities and what they perceive to be the needs of their residents and local businesses.

¹⁵ FE's dual mandate refers to the obligation 'to deliver higher level technical and professional qualifications that help drive forward the economy alongside the responsibility to help provide second chances for those that haven't succeeded during their time in the school system' - AoC (<https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/Dual%20Mandate%20Consultation%20Response.pdf>). Accessed 12 September, 2016.

The challenges of London

There is a widespread recognition, particularly among local authority representatives, of the complexity of London and the importance of factors such as transport and housing and travel-to-learn and earn patterns. Sometimes, they indicated, learners have to travel too far for specialist provision (often concentrated in the centre) and this problem might be exacerbated if college mergers go ahead.

FE colleges in London are seen as having a relatively weak relationship to the regional economy compared with other parts of the country. It has been too easy for them to respond to a vibrant full-time student market (aided by FE funding mechanisms) to grow and to reduce unit costs (the 'Incorporation' logic). Local authority and college relationships vary across the Capital – some are very close, but others virtually non-existent and even hostile.

Local authorities recognise that in the West and East of London there are more clearly identifiable sectoral specialisms, but this is not so immediately evident in the centre of London although in discussion the specialisms of digital, business, construction and health were mentioned.

Local authority views on the ABR process

Given the complexity of London, the ABR process is viewed as rather rushed, with a limited number of meetings and an (overly) dominant steering role for the FE Commissioner. The ABR has posed questions of rationalisation and back-office mergers, collaboration and different approaches to specialisation.

There is also a perception that thus far the ABRs have been focused too much on college financial viability and cost-cutting and not enough on local/sub-regional rationalisation and the improvement of technical and vocational education and training and learner participation and progression. They feel that there is an opportunity for college collaboration to serve local and regional agendas, but it has not figured prominently so far. Nevertheless, within the narrower perspective of financial viability, the ABR process has been seen as consultative and participative.

Local authorities also think that some colleges have been nervous about open dialogue, particularly those who feel financially vulnerable.

Due to its predominantly narrow financial concerns, the ABR is seen by local authorities as being conducted without sufficient holistic understanding of the structural factors affecting the economy, people's lives and post-16 provision in the Capital. There is a view that those who understand these issues are not currently being fully involved in the ABR process. It was felt, therefore, that there was a need for greater employer and community voices to balance the dominance of provider representation. The ABR process is viewed as being too short and should be extended to involve the views and priorities of the new Mayor that have yet to be articulated. Some local authority representatives also reported that they expect the legacy of the ABRs to last significantly beyond the official end of the process. Finally, the Chairs of sub-regional committees would like a more Pan-London discussion and sharing of information because of the complex ways in which London functions as a city region.

The views of JARDU and the GLA

Both JARDU and GLA see the ABR as a valuable and necessary process to take stock and improve education and training provision in London.

JARDU sees its role as a 'facilitator'; making sure the process is working and bringing it to a helpful conclusion. Its role stops when the final report is published. JARDU has clear success criteria, including financial sustainability, because of the FE role in the Government's productivity agenda. Nevertheless, JARDU recognises that the ultimate decisions rest with college governors. It is happy that mergers and strategic alliances are taking place as the ABR process proceeds and prior to publication of the final report. JARDU also recognises that London has its own vision for skills and the ABR is seen as very much tied up with the Government's devolution agenda.

The GLA interviewee thought it was a good decision to have four areas for the ABR, otherwise the London-wide process would have been too unwieldy. Even within this

devolved structure, there are big meetings, but these are regarded as necessary. The GLA also thinks that it was a good decision to have an additional meeting to try to get to grips with the complex process in London. It regards the curriculum and provision issues as the most challenging, whereas financial information is much easier to deal with. They accept that some sub-regional data is not in the public domain because it is regarded as commercially sensitive. Non-publication is justified on the grounds of reassuring colleges that it is relatively safe to participate in the ABR process.

Best possible outcomes from ABR in London

These cross-institutional bodies think that the best possible outcomes for the ABR could be:

- Better life chances for young people in which there is the development of jobs not just training – apprenticeships are therefore regarded as vitally important.
- A better recognised role for FE and a raising of its profile through developing higher status progression routes involving FE colleges, HEIs and employers.
- Developing FE centres of excellence across London and a more efficient and better connected FE system.
- Developing colleges that are more aware of their local and sub-regional mission and prepared to collaborate across areas to develop provision pathways and support young people and adults in their learning and skills development.

The London ABR seminars (January- March 2016)

Each seminar aimed to provide an overview of the London ABR process and to support college curriculum specialists and leaders in identifying the key areas for attention to ensure continuity and improvement in curriculum development, teaching, learning and assessment during and after the ABR process.

London and its evolving collaborations

The ABR was generally viewed as an opportunity to bring about positive changes and to improve the image of FE with policy makers. However, participants felt that colleges needed to set the agenda and to lead the process. Many London colleges have taken, therefore, proactive steps to formal cooperation prior to the start of the ABR. Partnerships and alliances, however, may not be limited to the geographic parameters of the ABR (e.g. London colleges may have partnerships with providers outside of London and a college can operate in a local area, but deliver provision anywhere in the region or country).

The potential costs of the ABR

Despite a positive view of the potential of the ABR, there was a widespread concern that its focus on organisational merger, cost reduction and, interestingly, staff recruitment (a major challenge in London due to an ageing workforce and high living costs) may become a distraction, taking attention away from curriculum development and support for learners. It was considered important to learn the lessons from past mergers, to maintain the quality of provision and to take care of students while the process is in train.

Establishing new patterns of Pan-London collaboration

Curriculum managers recognised that competition between organisations does not support honest and trusted discussions about collaboration. At the same time, there was also an understanding that all institutions need to consider how to remain viable. Discussions therefore focused on how existing competitors could increase their work together. The following suggest possibilities for new collaborative ways of working across London, building on what is already provided by Pan-London organisations, such as AoC London:

- *A network of personal contacts* - nurturing good personal contacts across institutions was seen as important to change the idea of 'the other' and to create relations of trust.

- *Creating joint area ‘roadmaps’ of provision* - coming to agreements to avoid duplication and deciding to close poorly performing provision – these roadmaps create a sense of common purpose.
- *Network building for sharing ideas and practices* – a number of network activities were suggested that could operate regionally and sub-regionally. These included sharing good practice on coping with government reform; Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities and, in particular, creating cross-college collaboration on CEIAG; establishing specialist networks such as the Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment (OTLA) London network for advanced practitioners in English and mathematics; collaborating around key services such as recruitment for hard-to-fill positions and using a single organisation to recruit English and mathematics teachers across London.
- *Peer Review and Development (PRD) groups* - providing collaborative critical development and quality improvement support across college boundaries.

College specialisation and travel-to-learn patterns

The issue of specialisation was a key theme with a desire to see multi-college agreements to reduce duplication and develop specialisms. The following themes were discussed in relation to developing specialist provision.

- *Defining a specialism* - while a specialism may involve a focus on a particular academic discipline or vocational sector, developing specialisation requires collective discussion around issues such as economic and skill changes, the degree of granularity of a vocational specialism; the impact of policy (e.g. in apprenticeships a specialist skill may be defined in a particular way by a large company); and the development of new specialist institutions such as Institutes of Technology.
- *Student choice and travel demands* - any rationalisation of specialisms (e.g. locating them in part of a large merged college) has to be mindful of the choices and travel patterns of potential learners. It was recognised that

travel-to-learn patterns and transport networks in London have a crucial impact on study decisions. It is important, therefore, that changes in provision do not limit the offer for some young people. Students in London tend to be highly mobile and travel not only within a sub-region but across sub-regions. However, more vulnerable young people may be less inclined to travel and the cost factor has to be considered. It was suggested that data on success rates, school provision, not in employment, education or training (NEET) rates and travel routes needed to be provided to support effective decision-making.

- *Protecting and promoting niche sectors* - the rationalisation of specialisms needs to recognize that some curriculum areas, even with small numbers (e.g. specialist aspects of IT), need to continue to ensure that provision is not completely removed from a locality, particularly if there is employer-demand for that skill. It was also realized that there are alternative routes to effectiveness and efficiency other than rationalization of specialisms. For example, 17+ drop-out rates in completing GCE A Level courses can be a bigger challenge than duplication of provision with potentially bigger savings if the problem can be resolved at age 16. The importance of good 14+ CEIAG was again recognized.
- *Developing specialisms is a partnership activity* – college curriculum managers were strongly of the view that developing specialist provision is a partnership activity and, as we have seen earlier, in the Scottish case, there is a policy view elsewhere in the UK that developing specialisms is best done in collaboration with other FE providers (involving divisions of labour) and in conjunction with employers so as to gain their support and involvement.

Learners, quality, curriculum and progression

The following themes were discussed in relation to promoting continuous quality in the curriculum, teaching/learning and student progression.

- *Maintaining and developing a high quality curriculum* - included retaining qualified staff particularly those capable of teaching English and mathematics

up to 19; developing specialisms and understanding changes to learner patterns of demands (e.g. the impact of travel-to-study patterns and changes in the student population).

- *'Shielding' learning in institutions* – the importance of protecting middle managers and teachers from the potential adverse effects of the ABR to ensure that the focus stays on teaching, learning and assessment and quality improvement. There was a recognition of the need to manage the balance between keeping staff informed of the ABR whilst supporting essential operational work.
- *Focusing on progression pathways for all learners* - a key achievement of the ABR would be to improve the progression pathways for all learners and not solely those on technical routes.

Support processes during the ABR

As ABR moves forward, it was considered important to arrange support events within the growing networks. These would include:

- *Regular updates and feedback* on the process and emerging outcomes of the ABR and support with considering approaches to the implementation of the outcomes once confirmed.
- *Sharing and clarifying processes of the ABR* with colleges about to engage in such a review.
- *Managing staff morale* in relation to communications; creating a sense of local control; highlighting and signposting possible professional opportunities for staff that will come as a result of larger colleges and the sharing of staff across colleges and with universities, including through job shadowing opportunities; and even appointing a 'wellbeing manager' to support those members of staff feeling under stress.
- *Developing communities of practice* (see section on networks and collaboration).

- *Learning from previous ABRs* to assist in making informed decisions about different possible outcomes.
- *Refocusing on learner experience* at ages 16,17,18 and adults on a Pan-London scale (e.g. barriers to progression).
- *Listening to learners and employers* – it was thought that the learner voice and employer voice are still missing from the ABR process. Remediating this could include forums or seminars on employer engagement and the needs of young people.
- *Developing effective partnerships on a regional and sub-regional basis* (e.g. with local authorities and the Local Enterprise Panel).

Part 5. Discussion and conclusions

National policy could strengthen the role of FE colleges

Seen overall, there was a view that government policies – the reform of technical education, new standards-based apprenticeships, specialist college developments and relationships with employers - could strengthen the role of FE colleges as they are directed towards a more vocationally specialist future. In some ways, this trajectory harks back to a technical institutional past that existed prior to the market logic of Incorporation that led many colleges in a more generic direction from 1992. At the same time, however, colleges find themselves financially challenged due to the impact of competition between post-16 providers and cuts in public funding that will make it more difficult to develop vocational specialisation that requires substantial, sustained and planned investment.

ABRs seen as necessary but with differing expectations

Within this context of government expectations but limited financial resources, there is widespread acceptance that ABRs are necessary. Unsurprisingly, however, there are a variety of expectations that underpin this apparent consensus. The Government is intent on saving public funding by creating more efficient and viable FE institutions. Not surprisingly, this narrow financially oriented aim is high on the priority list for FE Commissioners. On the other hand, some stakeholders,

particularly those involved in local government, those closely associated with employers and those nearest to the student experience, want to see much greater emphasis on how the London ABR will lead to a more coherent and transparent vocational education and training system that has learner progression and employer engagement at its heart.

Different logics within the London ABR process

A key question is how FE evolves in the context of a more vocationally specialised and possibly more divided education and training system. On the one hand, the Government clings to the idea of an education market and cost reduction that could result in a minimalist approach to ABRs – fixing financial viability by creating bigger institutional formations that are better able to compete. On the other, an interpretation of policy suggests a more planned, co-ordinated and collaborative approach if the different technical and vocational elements are to be optimised at the local and regional levels to result in improved provision and clearer progression pathways from education to employment. While aspects of the first approach are seen as necessary, most participants recognized that the second is the real prize. These two related directions of policy could be understood through an exploration of what might be termed Logic A and Logic B.

Logic A – an adaptive institutional and competitive approach

Logic A is primarily institutionally focused. This is currently the dominant logic in ABRs. The key features of Logic A are as follows.

- A central focus on FE economic viability with discussions about mergers, FE estates and longer-term cost savings.
- A partial system approach with the relative exclusion of schools; general education; the marginalisation of sixth form colleges and little input from wider stakeholders.
- A review process conducted as a ‘sprint’ over a course lasting only a few meetings so that the economic aims of the ABR trumps the progression aims.
- Insufficient consideration of the needs and voices of employers and learners.

- The overall objective is to preserve the competitive spirit, albeit with larger and more federated players.

Viewed from a UK-wide perspective, this represents a particularly ‘English’ solution to the role of FE compared with developments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Logic B – a system-wide and collaborative approach

Logic B concerns a focus on the wider systemic aims of ABRs. The key features of Logic B are as follows.

- A focus on the improvement of vocational specialisation and progression pathways for all; protecting and developing the curriculum and the engagement of wider social partners, particularly employers.
- Space for the involvement of employers and economic strategists that understand the unique features of the London and its skills base.
- A Pan-London approach based on a holistic citywide picture and strong cross borough and sector frameworks.
- Strong sub-regional ‘skills ecosystems’ within a Pan-London view of the distribution of vocationally specialist provision.
- A longer and more inclusive ABR process that has time to consider the collaborative provision questions that are yet to be addressed.

Logic B thus represents a shift from the Incorporation/competitive logic towards a more democratic and devolved social partnership approach.

The world of ‘And’ rather than the world of ‘Versus’

Of course these two logics coexist within any ABR document one cares to read. The problem is that in the current London ABR process Logic A dominates Logic B. Both are needed and could be easily related if they are viewed not in opposition to one another within a constrained timescale (Versus), but as two related strands in a longer and more deliberative process, allied to strong regional oversight (And). This

combinational approach has been broadly the experience in the other countries of the UK, albeit with much stronger central direction towards a collaborative approach.

Logic B is also dependent on the success of some features of Logic A, in particular strong viable institutions. However, Logic A cannot be successfully completed solely on the basis of economic viability and competition. College mergers and collaborations need firm lines of sight to the needs of learners and wider social partners such as employers. According to our interviewees, that line of sight is not clear in the ABR meetings conducted to date and the clock is ticking.

If the economic logic has shifted somewhat following the Brexit vote (austerity out economic and skills stimulus in), then there could be a strong case for strengthening the Logic B process.

- Relaxing the ABR timetable to allow the space for the learner progression and employer engagement challenges to be fully addressed with a greater focus on implementation rather than policy formulation.
- Within this 'space' the strengthening of London oversight and, in particular, more proactive roles for the GLA, London Councils, the Learning and Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and the Mayor.
- Within this stronger Pan-London framework devolving details of 'system building' down to and across sub-regional levels where the practical collaborative plans can be worked out with the needs of learners and other social partners in the foreground.

Conclusion

The overriding conclusion arising from this research is the need to extend the ABR process and to regard the current deliberations as simply the starting point for a longer-term and sustainable strategy for education, training and employment beyond the age of 14 rather than seeing it as 'job done'. This longer process could

include not only a wider number of social partners and a focus on learner progression, skills and economic development, but also the time to evaluate the effects of mergers and strategic alliances on viability. Both these processes – Logic A and Logic B – would also be better understood within the context of upcoming skills devolution to London.

Appendix 1. Composition of the overarching London Area Review Steering Group and the Sub-Regional Steering Groups

The London region steering group comprises:

Chair: Mayor of London

Deputy co-chairs: A borough leader and Local Enterprise Panel (LEP) business representative

Members:

- Sub-regional chairs (borough leaders)
- Deputy Mayor
- FE Commissioner, Deputy FE commissioner, Sixth Form College (SFC) Commissioner, Regional Schools Commissioner
- Borough Chief Executive
- Special Educational Needs (SEN) representative
- Principals (4 FE and 1 SFC from across the sub-regions)
- College governor representative
- Specialist Designated Institution (SDI), and Adult and Community Learning (ACL) representatives (if opted-in)
- LEP business representatives
- Joint Area Review Delivery Unit (JARDU), BIS and DfE representatives
- Learner voice representation
- Observers: GLA, London Councils, Skills Funding Agency (SFA), Education Funding Agency (EFA), Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), Association of Colleges (AoC), Holes, London Work-based Learning Alliance, HE representative and Skills Expert).

Each sub-region has a steering group, which comprises:

- *Chair*: Borough Leader on behalf of the sub region
- *Deputy Chair*: Business representative
- *Commissioners*: FE Commissioner, Deputy FE Commissioner, Sixth Form College Commissioner, Regional Schools Commissioner
- *Local authority*: CEO, Skills Director, SEN expert
- *Participating institutions*: Chair of Governors and Principal
- *Business*: representative from large/small business
- *Central government*: BIS, DfE, SFA, EFA
- London-wide perspective: JARDU