



Navigating the Post-16 Skills Landscape: UVAC Summit Highlights Opportunity and Collaboration

Prof Liz Cleaver

UVAC Associate (Development) and Executive Leaders' Network convenor

The initial flurry of activity surrounding the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper is now settling. Just over a month since its publication, the core messages and priorities are rapidly embedding themselves across campuses throughout the sector.

In this evolving environment, the inaugural meeting of the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) Executive Leaders' Network at Birmingham's ICC, served as a timely and energizing forum. The event underscored both ongoing and emerging opportunities presented by the new skills landscape for professionals operating within higher education spaces, while also highlighting some persistent common challenges.

Opportunity and Challenge Intersect

Opening reflections delivered by UVAC's Chief Executive, Dr. Mandy Crawford Lee, and James Farr, Managing Director of event sponsor Think, immediately established the day's central theme: opportunity and challenge are intrinsically linked.

With government ambitious to boost higher-level learning among young people by one-third, just as current UCAS application rates begin to dip, institutions willing to innovate are positioned to thrive. Provocations from Mandy and James challenged universities to rethink how they can connect learners more directly to skilled occupations, leverage existing capabilities and relationships forged through growing apprenticeship provision, and strategically embrace technology to deliver flexible, high-quality education. The necessity of seamless collaboration across the Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) sectors, balanced with the need to grow and maintain strong local roots while achieving national reach, was framed as essential for expanding pathways into high-quality careers.

Collaboration Isn't Optional

The conference room buzzed with animated, cross-sector dialogue as leaders from universities, industry, and sector organisations explored how to navigate the UK's shifting skills landscape effectively.

The first panel focused on 'Identifying priorities in the shifting skills landscape' and featured expert insights from Jane Hadfield (NHS England), Patrick Milnes (British Chambers of Commerce), and Becca Thurston (YTL UK & Wessex Water). One message rang loud and clear: collaboration isn't optional - it's essential.

From critical health settings to large-scale construction and infrastructure projects, employers universally need education providers to offer seamless, flexible, and high-quality training routes from age 16 upwards. As the speakers addressed audience questions, the consensus was clear: significant progress is underway, but key staging posts and destinations still need to be navigated and clearly plotted on the sector's strategic map.

Strategic Planning: What Now? What Next?

The second session showcased member-led perspectives on 'Strategy, Place and Planning'. This segment acted as a key stimulus for group discussions focused on the immediate challenges and unique opportunities inherent in addressing specific regional skills gaps and specialisms.

Presentations from Sammy Shummo (London South Bank University), Dr. Jonathan Eaton (University of Cumbria), and Prof. Claire Pike (University of East Anglia) sparked lively debate. Key takeaways included the benefits of implementing a 'systems approach' to developing education pathways (spanning technical sixth forms to universities and employers), the potential challenge posed by 'regional memory' (where earlier 'initiatives' in deprived areas of the country have not delivered on their promise), and the reality that even the best-laid plans can falter if employer demand doesn't match expectations (a reality many institutions are grappling with). There was also discussion about the need for institutions to refocus their 'civic plans' using a collaborative lens, to align to Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs).

The Power of Partnership

In such a fast-moving and intensely competitive landscape, genuine partnership - learning from and actively working with one another – is proving increasingly vital cement for the building of a coherent skills system that truly meets the complex needs of learners, employers, and their communities.

Reflecting on the event and future strategic steps, it is clear that this collective, partnership-oriented approach mirrors the core philosophy of UVAC itself. As the largest higher education membership organization in the country focusing specifically on technical, vocational, and professional education, UVAC's mission is to convene, support, and champion our members, utilizing the undeniable power of partnership to influence and drive purposeful, impactful change.

The new UVAC Senior Leaders' Network is designed to be a vital engine in translating these ideas into concrete action. Looking ahead toward 2026, we will work with our member institutions to grow this network into a powerful, collective voice, shaping both policy and practice to ensure universities remain centrally positioned to contribute to the skills agenda – regionally and nationally.

Find Out More

For further details regarding the Senior Leaders' Network, or if you have subjects you feel would be valuable to discuss in a future meeting, please contact the Network Convenor, Prof. Liz Cleaver, directly via email at liz@ecleaver.co.uk.