**Social Ecosystems:
a place-based and inclusive approach to
Working, Living and Learning**

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Introduction

This article explores the concept of social ecosystems that seek to link Working, Living and Learning in localities and sub-regions. Social ecosystems can thus be regarded as an inclusive spatial and place-based approach to skill development intended to present a new vision of ways in which different social partners work together to produce better jobs, more sustainable living, supported by a highly grounded concept of lifelong learning. At the centre for social ecosystems lie civic anchor institutions that suggest new ways of conceptualizing the role of further education as a collaborative rather than competitive force.

The New Low Skills Equilibrium – the challenge of polarized working, living and learning

The UK, or more precisely England, remains caught in a chronic 'Low Skills Equilibrium' (LSE). This describes a set of system factors that have historically depressed both demand for and the supply of skills. Factors include an imbalanced financialized economy with too few large companies; short-sighted business models; poor training and skills utilization in workplaces; academic elitism and a fragmented low-status vocational education system.

Over the past 30 years, the LSE has evolved to take on a particular spatial and divisive character with the development of 'hot spots' of economic dynamism in financial and technology services (FinTech), combined with low-skill service development (e.g. Amazon) and continued deindustrialization. The result has been spatial exclusionary developments whereby FinTech becomes concentrated in the centre of cities, acting as a magnet for a graduate and often highly paid workforce that drive up property prices and rents. Conversely low-level services, such as warehousing, are pushed to the periphery and low-income populations are also increasingly displaced because they cannot afford to live in high cost cities. There represents a double crisis – polarized forms of working and polarized forms of living.

Added to which we now have polarized skills policy. Theresa May's Conservative Government, with its 'soft economic nationalism', has belatedly recognized the need for a more strategic approach to skills development marked by a 'Vocational Turn' in skills policy - new Standards-Based Apprenticeships and its focus on Degree Apprenticeships, T-Levels qualifications and upcoming reforms to Levels 4 and 5; and Area-Based Reviews and the development of further and higher education Technical Institutes. However, the

Government's approach towards vocational learning can be regarded as elitist because, in its efforts to raise the status of vocational education and training, it is largely focused at Level 3 and above. Levels 1 and 2 appear to have been cut adrift and with that the prospects of a large number of young people.

New opportunities - the Local Spatial Turn in England

At the same time, however, a 'Local Spatial Turn' is taking place. This describes a renewed policy emphasis on regional and place-based developments, including the devolution of the Adult Skills Budget, the growing role of combined and regional authorities supported by 'Devo Deals' and the emergence of regional economy and skills plans with an accent on local and sub-regional co-ordination. Allied to this has been the creation of larger and more area-based further education college groups as the result of the Area-Based Review process in England. The Local Spatial Turn is being driven, in particular, by elected local government in large cities. While it is important not to over-estimate the power of these developments under the current government – much of governance remains market-oriented and driven from the centre – they provide a platform for thinking about 'place-based' conceptions of skill development linked to new kinds of work, sustainable living and a renewed vision of lifelong learning. This is the main aim of the Social Ecosystem concept.

Social Ecosystems – a place-based approach to Working, Living and Learning

Exclusionary entrepreneurial ecosystems and inclusive social ecosystems
The social ecosystem concept arose out of critique of elite entrepreneurial ecosystems comprising large companies presently driving FinTech developments and that have an essentially parasitic relationship with the public realm. FinTech entrepreneurial ecosystems utilise high-value urban spaces, existing public infrastructure and business support from government while drawing on graduate outputs from prestigious universities. Reflection on their space exploitation and displacement effects stimulated an envisioning of an alternative ecosystem concept - a social ecosystem that is inclusive, place-shaping and driven by a profound social and educational commitment to an area.

Social Ecosystems could be thus be conceived as local place-based **social formations** that connect the **worlds of working, living and learning**, comprising local anchor institutions and horizontal networks and involving a variety of social partners in the public realm and private sector (e.g. further education colleges, universities, employers, local authorities and voluntary bodies). The purposes of social ecosystems are to **nurture inclusive and sustainable economic, social and educational development** in diverse communities, localities and sub-regions. Social Ecosystems are **supported** by an enabling national state, devolved local state and **mediated** through common mission, ecosystem leadership and socially designed digital technologies.

The relationship between Working, Living and Learning
Social ecosystems also represent an alternative spatial view of cities. As a response to the 'supernova' tech/finance urban model that concentrates development in the centre with

mass inward commuting and negative rippling outward effects, social ecosystems can be seen as part of rebalanced 'polycentric cities'. These comprise not only a mono-centre, but also spatially distributed 'urban hubs'. The idea of 'London's Remade Towns' is an example of plans for a more polycentric global city. In each of the urban hubs, the social ecosystem concept would seek to create a new dynamic between Working, Living and Learning with the aim of achieving inclusive economic, social and educational growth.

The *Working* dimension concerns new partnerships between employers, education and training providers and local government to produce better jobs in a new sustainable and inclusive local economy. This could include attracting high-value companies to localities that work, for example, in the cultural or digital industries; developing new ecological enterprises that are part of a 'greening economy and supporting improvements in public infrastructure and services transport, healthcare and construction. An integral part of the new working dimension will be co-production projects between workplaces, education providers and civic society organisations to stimulate the development of new high-value jobs and to improve skill utilization at work.
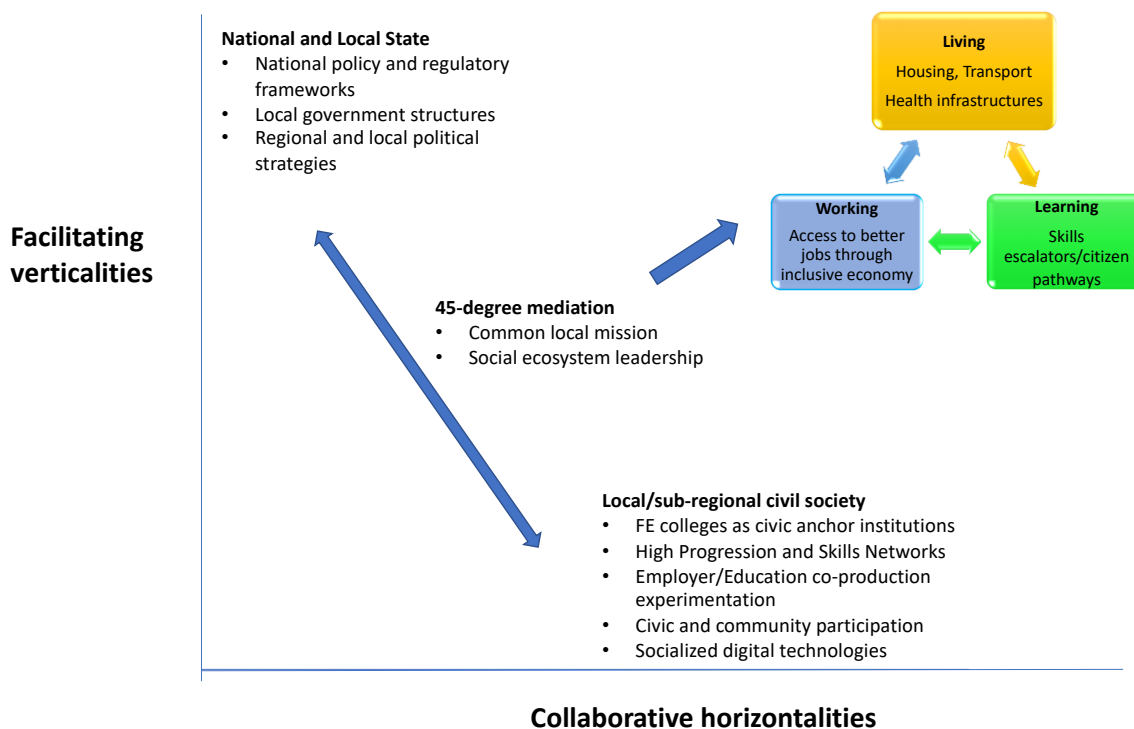
The *Living* dimension will include the local development of affordable housing; new transport systems; the regeneration of high streets; improved local health services and development of new green spaces. The aim is to build a sustainable approach to living that reinforces a strong sense of local identity; creates an attractive environment and closeness to working life. It has been shown, for example, that high streets and the centres of small towns become sustainable when more work is taking place in the vicinity.

The *Learning* dimension both drives and is dependent upon the Working and Living dimensions. One of the main objectives of the learning dimension is support the participation of local people in the new local economy. This will require a high degree of consensus amongst local civic society actors as to the future shape of the local labour market and creating pathways to it. At the same time, a life-long learning perspective will enable local people to engage in education, not only to meet the needs of better jobs, but also to lead better lives.

The horizontal, vertical and the mediating role of ecosystem leadership
Supporting the relationship of Working, Living and Learning is a dialectic between 'collaborative horizontalities' and 'facilitating verticalities'; mediated by the role of common mission and ecosystem leadership (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Social Ecosystem Model and its dynamics

National and Local State
- National policy and regulatory frameworks
- Local government structures
- Regional and local political strategies

Facilitating verticalities

45-degree mediation
- Common local mission
- Social ecosystem leadership

Living
Housing, Transport
Health infrastructures

Working
Access to better jobs through inclusive economy

Learning
Skills escalators/citizen pathways

Local/sub-regional civil society
- FE colleges as civic anchor institutions
- High Progression and Skills Networks
- Employer/Education co-production experimentation
- Civic and community participation
- Socialized digital technologies

Collaborative horizontalities

Social ecosystems are driven by horizontal forms of collaborative working. These include local networks focused on economic/social development and education pathways involving a wide range of civic society actors; outward-facing civic anchor institutions such as further education colleges; joint working – co-production - between employers and education providers focused on skill utilisation; and community participation supported by socialized digital technologies.

At the same time, collaborative horizontalities cannot flourish on their own; they require assistance from above. 'Facilitating verticalities' refer to the role of national and regional government in supporting locally-based social ecosystems. This can take the form of devolved policies and budgets; encouraging collaborative forms of quality assurance and accountability and regional development plans. Rather than the national guiding the local, the responsibility of the national level is to provide broad frameworks within regions play an important co-ordinating role and also within which horizontally-based social ecosystems can thrive.

Mediating at the intersections of the horizontal and vertical is '45-degree ecosystem leadership'. Social ecosystem leadership is not the responsibility of one party; it is essentially collaborative. Social ecosystem leadership, therefore, could consist of a range of local leaders – of local authorities, of FE and HE institutions; of local business and of local civic society - bound together by a 'common mission' for the area. Common local missions can, for example, take the form of inclusive local growth strategies that explicitly connect

working, living and learning. At the 45-degree inter-section of the vertical and horizontal, ecosystem leadership will mediate upwards with, for example, regional authorities to ensure that local plans integrate into the wider regional mission and downwards with the horizontal networks and grassroots communities to encourage the maximum level of popular participation.

The role of further education as 'civic anchor institutions'

FE colleges are 'key-stone species' in social ecosystems because of the way they combine place-based skills development, socially inclusion and social cohesion. FE colleges that are explicitly committed to 'place' can be viewed as 'civic anchor institutions'.

An education-based civic anchor institution is defined by its strategic contribution to the local economy; acting as a magnet for other companies/economic organisation; and providing a 'hub' to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In their civic role FE colleges are unique in their ability to build ladders of progression for local citizens to enter further study or the labour market. In the context of social ecosystems, these can be understood as 'citizen pathways' that promote progression within education, aid transition to employment and support progression within work to higher-skill and better jobs. Citizen pathways can also assist local people to lead more active participatory lives through, for example, basic literacy schemes. These will require FE colleges to participate in what have been termed Progression and Skills Networks.

As part of their civic anchor role, FE colleges will work across the full range of skills levels – linking low, intermediate and high skills for inclusive growth in local and regional economies. In this they can extend upwards their range of provision from the lower levels to Levels 4 and 5 and partner higher education institutions. At the centre for their skills role will be close partnership working with workplaces in which further education providers will be able to lead strategic collaborations with employers (particularly SMEs) to help support both new levels of skill and improved utilisation of skills at work to help produce the new jobs that form a cornerstone of the social ecosystem.

Beyond the New Low Skills Equilibrium – an English path of development?

The concept of inclusive social ecosystems can be seen as way of addressing the polarizing effects of the New Low Skills Equilibrium at the local level. The concept could also be viewed as a moving beyond marketisation and the top-down state that has as its *modus operandi* collaborative ways of working. While the full flourishing of social ecosystems will require a facilitating state; they are not premised on a full state-led model that would not possible or even appropriate to the English context. Therefore, is it the case that social ecosystems, that operate essentially at the local and sub-regional levels in more co-ordinated ways, could be a viable path of development in a relatively large country has had a strong marketized tradition, but that may increasingly comprise a range of regional and city-based economies?