

Harrow
Monitoring
Group
publication

The rise and fall of tertiary education in Harrow

*educational vision, political decision-making and one of the most
significant reorganisations in Harrow's educational history, 1980–2010*

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Foreword

This paper examines one of the most significant educational reforms ever undertaken by the London Borough of Harrow: the introduction of a borough-wide tertiary education system during the 1980s and its subsequent dismantling two decades later. Few local government decisions have had such a profound impact on generations of young people, teachers, schools and further education institutions.

The subject is of particular personal interest to me because I had first-hand experience of Harrow's tertiary education system during the period under review, serving under one hat or another within the educational process and provision. That experience provided me with an appreciation of both the aspirations that inspired the reforms and the practical realities of implementing and operating them. However, this publication is not intended to be a personal memoir or an account based upon recollection alone.

Instead, it is a documentary history informed principally by Harrow Council archives, committee reports, consultation papers, official records and other contemporary sources. My personal experience has helped identify important questions and provide context, but the analysis and conclusions are grounded in the documentary evidence wherever possible. Where interpretation is offered, it is clearly distinguished from established historical fact.

The history of tertiary education in Harrow deserves renewed attention. Although thousands of former students passed through Greenhill College, Weald College and Elm Park College, the borough's tertiary system now receives little public discussion. Yet it represented one of the most ambitious reorganisations of secondary and further education undertaken anywhere in London. It reflected a bold attempt to rethink the relationship between academic and vocational education, broaden educational opportunity and respond to changing demographic and financial pressures.

The subsequent decision to restore sixth forms to secondary schools was equally significant. By 2010, Harrow had returned to the more familiar 11–18 school model adopted across most of England, bringing to an end more than twenty years of tertiary education. Whether that reversal represented educational progress, financial pragmatism or changing political priorities remains open to debate.

This paper does not seek to romanticise either system. Both were products of their time, responding to different educational philosophies, economic realities and political circumstances. Instead, it asks a series of questions that remain relevant today. Why was the tertiary model introduced? Was it primarily driven by educational innovation or financial necessity? Did it succeed in widening opportunity and improving curriculum choice? Why was it eventually abandoned? Did students benefit more from returning to school sixth forms, or did Harrow lose important educational strengths in the process?

The study also examines a broader issue that extends beyond education itself. The introduction of the tertiary system occurred under Harrow Council's traditional committee working, where decisions were subject to extensive committee scrutiny and public debate. Its eventual reversal took place under the executive Cabinet model introduced by the Local Government Act 2000, where decision-making became concentrated within a smaller group of portfolio holders. This contrast provides an

opportunity to consider how different systems of local governance may influence major public policy decisions.

As Harrow continues to reshape public services in response to financial pressures, demographic change and evolving educational needs, there are valuable lessons to be learned from this period of the borough's history. Understanding why these decisions were made, and evaluating their long-term consequences, can help inform future policymakers, educators and residents alike.

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Executive summary

Between the early 1980s and 2010, Harrow experienced one of the most comprehensive reorganisations of post-16 education undertaken by any London borough. Faced with declining school rolls, financial pressures and changing educational priorities, the council replaced traditional school sixth forms with a borough-wide tertiary education system, creating Greenhill College, Weald College and Elm Park College in 1987. These institutions combined academic and vocational education within specialist colleges designed to provide a broader curriculum, improve efficiency and promote greater parity between different educational pathways.

The introduction of tertiary education followed several years of planning, consultation and political debate. Council committees, advisory bodies and the Tertiary Sub-Committee examined demographic trends, funding arrangements and curriculum planning before recommending a fundamental restructuring of post-16 education. Supporters argued that larger specialist colleges would widen subject choice, improve teaching quality and make better use of scarce resources, while opponents expressed concerns about the loss of school identity, increased travel, larger institutions and reduced pastoral support.

The paper argues that both supporters and critics advanced legitimate concerns. The tertiary system undoubtedly expanded curriculum choice and strengthened vocational education, but it also represented a major cultural change for schools, teachers and local communities. Importantly, many of the original educational arguments remain relevant to current debates concerning curriculum breadth, specialist teaching and educational equality.

The national Further and Higher Education Act 1992 fundamentally altered the model by removing further education colleges from local authority control. Harrow's colleges became independent corporations funded through national system, reducing the council's direct influence over post-16 education.

From 2008 onwards Harrow progressively restored sixth forms to secondary schools through the Harrow Sixth Form Collegiate, completing the transition by September 2010. While this reversal was widely supported and accompanied by comparatively collaborative consultation, questions remain about the relative importance of educational considerations and financial incentives, particularly the return of sixth-form funding to school budgets.

This paper concludes that Harrow's experience illustrates the complex relationship between educational philosophy, local government finance and political decision-making. Rather than viewing either model as an unequivocal success or failure, the borough's history demonstrates that educational approaches are shaped by changing demographic, financial and governance pressures as much as by pedagogy. The lessons remain highly relevant for future debates on post-16 education, curriculum design and local government accountability.

Timeline: Harrow's tertiary education era

Key milestones in the development, operation and reversal of Harrow's tertiary education system.

Date	Milestone
Early 1980s	Review of post-16 provision amid falling school rolls, financial pressure and concern about small sixth forms.
January 1982	Advisory Body on Post-16 Education receives a specific mandate to examine tertiary reorganisation.
1984–1986	Detailed planning and statutory consultation through committees, working parties and advisory arrangements.
September 1987	Greenhill, Weald and Elm Park Colleges open as Harrow's principal public post-16 providers.
1992–1993	Further and Higher Education Act 1992 removes colleges from local authority control; incorporation takes effect in April 1993.
1999	Greenhill and Weald Colleges merge to form Harrow College.
2008–2010	School sixth forms are progressively restored through the Harrow Sixth Form Collegiate.
September 2010	The borough-wide transition back to school-based sixth-form provision is completed.

Why Harrow needed educational reform

The reorganisation of post-16 education in Harrow did not emerge suddenly, nor was it driven by ideological preference alone. It evolved over several years as councillors and education officers confronted a combination of demographic, financial and educational pressures that challenged the sustainability of the borough's existing secondary school arrangements. Understanding these pressures is essential to appreciating why Harrow embarked upon one of the most ambitious educational reorganisations in its history.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, local authorities across England experienced the consequences of declining birth rates. Secondary schools increasingly faced falling pupil numbers, resulting in under-utilised buildings, shrinking sixth forms and rising unit costs. Harrow was no exception. Maintaining a large number of relatively small sixth forms became increasingly difficult both educationally and financially, particularly as public expenditure came under growing national scrutiny.

Against this background, Harrow Council began examining whether existing arrangements continued to provide the best educational opportunities for young people. The emerging view among education planners was that simply preserving traditional pattern of provision might not serve students' long-term interests. Instead, a more fundamental review of secondary and further education was required.

Council documents from the period indicate that the objective extended beyond achieving financial savings alone. The proposed tertiary model sought to preserve the range of courses available while expanding opportunities for students to combine academic and vocational qualifications within a single institution. At the same time, the council acknowledged that the restructuring was also expected to generate revenue savings by making more efficient use of educational resources.

The central policy question therefore became whether Harrow should continue supporting numerous relatively small sixth forms or consolidate post-16 provision into larger specialist institutions capable of offering a wider curriculum, more specialised teaching and greater flexibility. This educational philosophy reflected broader national debates concerning the relationship between academic and vocational learning and whether traditional school system remained appropriate for an increasingly diverse student population.

What was a tertiary college?

To understand why Harrow undertook such a fundamental reorganisation of post-16 education, it is first necessary to understand the educational philosophy that underpinned the tertiary college movement. During the latter half of the twentieth century, a number of local authorities across England and Wales began questioning whether the traditional division between secondary schools, sixth forms and further education colleges continued to serve the changing needs of young people and employers. Their answer was the development of the tertiary college.

In its truest sense, a tertiary college combined the functions of a school sixth form and a further education college within a single institution. Rather than maintaining separate academic sixth forms in individual secondary schools alongside further education colleges offering vocational courses and adult education, all publicly funded education for students aged sixteen and above was brought together. Academic A Levels, vocational qualifications and adult education were delivered under one organisational framework, allowing students to study a much broader combination of subjects than was usually possible within individual school sixth forms.

This model reflected a broader educational philosophy that sought to remove the traditional distinction between academic and vocational education. For decades, the English education system had often been criticised for placing greater prestige upon academic qualifications while treating technical and vocational education as a second-choice pathway. Educational reformers argued that this hierarchy neither reflected the varied talents of young people nor the evolving needs of the economy. A tertiary college, by bringing both forms of learning together within the same institution, sought to establish genuine parity of esteem between different educational routes.

Unlike conventional sixth forms, tertiary colleges were generally much larger institutions. Their greater size enabled them to recruit specialist teachers, maintain sophisticated science laboratories, workshops and libraries, invest in emerging technologies and sustain subjects that would otherwise be uneconomic in smaller school sixth forms. Students were also able to combine traditional academic A Levels with vocational or technical courses, creating programmes of study better suited to individual ability, aspirations and labour market demands.

Another distinguishing feature of tertiary colleges was their integration of adult education. Mature learners studying professional qualifications, vocational retraining or recreational courses shared the same campuses as sixteen to nineteen-year-old students. Supporters regarded this mixed-age environment as providing a more mature educational culture that better prepared younger students for higher education, employment and adult life.

Critics, however, questioned whether such large institutions could provide the pastoral curriculum and support traditionally associated with school sixth forms. They argued that removing sixteen to eighteen-year-olds from familiar school communities weakened mentoring relationships, disrupted established school identities and exposed younger students to much larger educational environments at an important stage of their personal development. These concerns would become central themes throughout Harrow's own consultation process.

Nationally, relatively few local authorities adopted a comprehensive tertiary system. Although several counties and metropolitan districts experimented with tertiary education during the 1970s and 1980s, most retained conventional 11–18 secondary schools alongside sixth-form colleges and further education institutions. The passage of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, which transferred further education colleges from local authority control to independent corporations, effectively ended the expansion of the tertiary college movement. Many institutions subsequently dropped the description "tertiary college" altogether, referring simply to themselves as further education colleges.

Against this national background, Harrow's decision to embrace the tertiary model was both ambitious and unusual. Rather than making incremental adjustments to existing provision, the borough opted for a comprehensive restructuring that would fundamentally alter the educational journey of every student beyond the age of sixteen. In 1987, Greenhill College, Weald College and Elm Park College were established as the principal providers of post-16 education across the borough, while the former Harrow College for Further Education closed to facilitate the new set-up. St Dominic's Sixth Form College, owing to its distinctive voluntary aided Catholic status, remained outside the tertiary organisation. Greenhill and Weald Colleges later merged in 1999 to create Harrow College, further consolidating post-16 provision.

Harrow's adoption of the tertiary model therefore represented far more than an administrative reorganisation. It reflected a belief that educational opportunity could be enhanced by concentrating expertise, broadening curriculum choice and integrating academic and vocational learning within common institutions. Whether those aspirations were ultimately realised remains one of the central questions explored throughout this paper.

Planning the transformation: Harrow's journey towards tertiary education

The establishment of Harrow's tertiary education system in 1987 was not the product of a single political decision. Rather, it emerged through a carefully worked out planning process extending over several years, involving working parties, advisory bodies, specialist sub-committees and repeated consideration by the Education Committee. The scale of the reorganisation required extensive analysis of demographic trends, educational provision, financial implications and organisational design before formal implementation could proceed.

Evidence from Harrow Council archives demonstrates that consideration of post-16 reform had begun well before the creation of the tertiary colleges themselves. During the early 1980s the Council established a dedicated Advisory Body on Post-16 Education under the Education Committee to examine future measures for secondary and further education. Its purpose was not merely to respond

to immediate financial pressures but to develop a coherent long-term strategy capable of meeting changing educational needs across the borough.

A significant milestone occurred in January 1982 when recommendations arising from the Council's Working Party on Review and Development resulted in the advisory body receiving a specific mandate to examine tertiary reorganisation. The body was subsequently reconstituted to include representatives from Harrow College of Further Education and Harrow College of Higher Education, reflecting recognition that successful implementation would require close coordination across the entire post-16 education sector rather than isolated decision-making within individual schools. Its work included developing proposals concerning curriculum planning, student allocation, funding arrangements and the future distribution of educational provision throughout the borough.

As planning developed, responsibility increasingly shifted towards a dedicated Tertiary Sub-Committee operating under the Education Committee. Council records from 1984 and 1985 indicate that the Sub-Committee became the principal forum for examining detailed implementation issues. Membership included elected councillors together with co-opted representatives possessing educational expertise, illustrating the committee-based approach to governance that characterised local government before the introduction of executive cabinet arrangements. The committee considered reports concerning curriculum development, projected student numbers, financial modelling and organisational arrangements before making recommendations to the Education Committee itself.

One particularly revealing Education Committee report set out three objectives that encapsulated the Council's rationale. First, tertiary reorganisation was intended to preserve the range of educational courses while extending opportunities for students to combine academic and vocational qualifications. Secondly, the restructuring was expected to produce revenue savings through more efficient use of resources. Thirdly, decisions concerning the location and nature of courses would remain subject to Education Committee approval, demonstrating the continuing role of elected members in overseeing implementation.

These records also show how policy developed through the committee system then governing local education: officer reports and recommendations moved through successive stages of member consideration before formal approval. That process is relevant to understanding how the reorganisation was shaped, while the broader comparison with the later Cabinet model is considered separately in the section on governance, politics and public policy.

The planning phase also demonstrated the Council's willingness to examine educational policy over an extended period rather than pursuing rapid structural change. The tertiary colleges were not conceived as isolated institutions but as components of a comprehensive borough-wide strategy intended to reshape post-16 education for future generations. By the mid-1980s, demographic analysis, curriculum planning and financial modelling had largely been completed, allowing statutory consultation to begin before the formal introduction of the tertiary system in September 1987.

The paper next examines that consultation process and explores the vigorous public debate that accompanied one of the most significant educational changes in Harrow's history.

Consultation and public debate

Major structural reforms in public education inevitably generate strong opinions, particularly where they affect the future of schools, teachers, students and local communities. Harrow's move towards a borough-wide tertiary education system was no exception. The statutory consultation undertaken during the mid-1980s became one of the most significant public debates on education in the borough's history, reflecting competing educational philosophies, financial realities and community expectations.

The consultation was undertaken within the framework of the Education Act 1980 and followed several years of preparatory work by the Education Committee, advisory bodies and the Tertiary Sub-Committee. Unlike many contemporary consultations that are often criticised for being relatively brief or narrowly focused, Harrow's proposals evolved through an extended process of committee consideration, technical reports and public discussion before final decisions were reached.

Nevertheless, consultation should not be confused with consensus. While the Council considered a wide range of views, the proposals challenged long-established educational traditions and generated considerable opposition from several influential groups.

Support for the proposals rested on three closely connected claims. Larger colleges, the Council argued, could preserve and widen curriculum choice despite falling sixth-form numbers; concentrate specialist staff and facilities more efficiently; and allow academic and vocational study to coexist within a common post-16 environment. These arguments formed the positive case presented during consultation and are examined in greater depth in the following section.

Opposition focused less on the abstract principle of wider choice than on what might be lost through achieving it. Parents and schools raised concerns about continuity, school identity, pastoral relationships and the removal of older pupils who contributed to mentoring and leadership. Others questioned whether very large colleges would provide sufficient individual support for sixteen-year-olds.

Practical objections also mattered. Students could face longer and more costly journeys across the borough, while the transfer of sixth-form teaching created uncertainty over posts, promotion and redeployment. Teacher-union opposition therefore combined educational concerns with the immediate employment consequences of reorganisation. These criticisms are evaluated separately later in the paper rather than repeated here in detail.

Looking back, it is striking that many of the arguments advanced by both supporters and opponents continue to feature in educational debates today. Questions concerning curriculum breadth, financial efficiency, specialist teaching, educational equality, student wellbeing and institutional identity remain central to discussions about post-16 education across England. Harrow's consultation therefore reflected issues extending well beyond local circumstances.

Ultimately, the Council concluded that the long-term educational and financial advantages outweighed the concerns expressed during consultation. The proposals proceeded, leading to the establishment of the borough's tertiary colleges in September 1987.

Evaluating the consultation

The consultation should also be viewed within the changing civic environment of Harrow during the 1980s. Local communities were becoming increasingly accustomed to the principle that public authorities should engage directly with residents and organised community groups rather than rely solely upon traditional representative channels. The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 was important in this respect: its community consultation provisions required arrangements for obtaining local people's views on policing and encouraged the development of formal consultative mechanisms. At the same time, Section 11 of the Local Government Act 1966 enabled local authorities to obtain government grant support for additional provision required because of the differing language or customs of Commonwealth immigrant communities. Although Section 11 was a funding mechanism rather than a statutory consultation requirement, its operation formed part of a period in which councils increasingly engaged with minority communities and voluntary organisations in the development and delivery of local services.

This wider development is particularly relevant to Harrow's tertiary debate because there was direct overlap between elected-member involvement in educational reorganisation and the borough's developing arrangements for community engagement. A councillor who played a significant role in shaping tertiary education, including membership of the Working Party on 16+ Education and chairmanship of the Education Committee during the critical planning period, was also closely involved in the Council's community liaison arrangements and in police-community consultation. The same councillor had chaired the Schools Sub-Committee and subsequently the Community Liaison Working Party, placing him at an important intersection between education policy, community relations and areas of Council activity in which Section 11-supported provision was relevant.

This overlap does not mean that the consultative mechanisms associated with policing or Section 11 were formally transferred into the tertiary reorganisation process, and neither should be presented as the statutory basis for educational consultation. It does, however, provide evidence of a wider municipal culture in which elected members responsible for major educational decisions were also gaining practical experience of engagement with community organisations and residents. In a borough undergoing substantial demographic and social change, expectations surrounding public participation were themselves evolving: communities increasingly expected opportunities to express their views on major decisions affecting local services before those decisions were finalised. Harrow's extensive debate over tertiary education can therefore be understood partly within this broader development of local democratic participation and community engagement.

With the benefit of four decades' hindsight, the consultation itself can be assessed with greater detachment than was possible for many of those directly involved at the time. Measured against the standards of the period, it appears to have been relatively comprehensive. The proposals were developed over several years rather than weeks, scrutinised through multiple committee arrangements and debated publicly before implementation. The committee system of local government required reports to pass through successive stages of consideration, enabling elected

members from different political perspectives to question officers, amend recommendations and debate policy in public meetings.

An important distinction nevertheless exists between procedural consultation and substantive influence. While numerous stakeholders were consulted, there remains an open question as to how far the strategic direction had already been established before the formal consultation process was completed. Declining student numbers and financial pressures had convinced many education planners that maintaining numerous under-populated sixth forms was becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. If those underlying demographic and financial assumptions were accepted, the range of fundamentally different outcomes available to decision-makers may already have been relatively limited.

This observation should not be interpreted as criticism of the consultation itself. Rather, it illustrates a recurring challenge in public policy: consultation can substantially influence the design, modification and implementation of change without necessarily determining whether the underlying change occurs. The economic circumstances facing local authorities during the 1980s placed significant constraints upon the range of realistic policy options available. Consultation nevertheless provided an important means of testing those options against educational experience, professional opinion and community concerns.

The process also succeeded in exposing the educational trade-offs inherent in the proposed reorganisation. Supporters emphasised efficiency, curriculum breadth, specialist provision and educational innovation, while opponents stressed community identity, continuity, pastoral support and the value of established school relationships. Neither perspective can readily be characterised as wholly right or wholly wrong. Rather, they reflected different conceptions of what constituted an effective educational system and different judgements about which benefits should be given greatest weight.

In retrospect, perhaps the greatest strength of the consultation lay in its willingness to engage openly with these competing visions. Rather than treating tertiary reorganisation as a purely technical exercise, the debate recognised that education concerns people, communities and opportunity as much as institutions and finance. Whatever judgement is ultimately reached about the tertiary model itself, the consultation ensured that consideration extended beyond buildings, budgets and administrative arrangements to the broader purposes of public education.

The educational case for tertiary colleges

The decision to establish tertiary colleges was not simply an administrative response to declining student numbers or tightening budgets. Although financial considerations undoubtedly influenced policy, the reorganisation was also supported by a coherent educational philosophy. Advocates believed that larger specialist institutions could provide a richer learning environment, greater equality of opportunity and a curriculum better suited to the increasingly diverse aspirations of young people.

The strongest educational argument concerned curriculum breadth. Small sixth forms inevitably faced practical limitations. Maintaining specialist A Level subjects often depended upon sufficient

student demand, and low enrolments frequently resulted in courses being withdrawn. Consequently, students' educational choices could be determined as much by institutional capacity as by personal aptitude or ambition.

A borough-wide tertiary college fundamentally altered that equation. By bringing together students from across Harrow, colleges could sustain a much wider range of academic subjects while simultaneously offering technical and vocational qualifications that would have been impossible for most individual schools to provide. Importantly, students were no longer restricted to choosing between purely academic or purely vocational pathways. Instead, they could combine qualifications from both traditions, creating programmes tailored to individual interests and future career aspirations. This flexibility represented one of the most innovative aspects of the tertiary model.

The concentration of specialist teachers also strengthened educational provision. Rather than expecting individual schools to employ experts across every advanced subject, tertiary colleges enabled highly qualified staff to teach larger numbers of students within their own disciplines. Subjects with relatively small enrolments, including certain modern languages, advanced sciences or specialist technical courses, became more viable because student demand could be aggregated across the borough.

The tertiary environment itself represented another educational advantage. Unlike school sixth forms, tertiary colleges operated within an atmosphere that more closely resembled higher education. Students experienced greater independence, interacted with adult learners and assumed increased responsibility for organising their own studies. Many educationalists argued that this better prepared young people for university, employment and adult life than remaining within the comparatively designed environment of secondary schools.

Supporters further believed that integrating academic and vocational education would help challenge long-standing social assumptions regarding educational prestige. For generations, technical education had frequently been perceived as a second-choice option despite the growing demand for skilled technicians, engineers, designers and other professionals requiring advanced vocational qualifications. By educating all post-16 learners together, tertiary colleges sought to demonstrate that different educational pathways possessed equal value while serving different talents and ambitions.

Whether these aspirations were fully realised requires careful evaluation, and subsequent sections will examine both the achievements and limitations of Harrow's tertiary experiment. However, it would be mistaken to interpret the reorganisation simply as a cost-saving exercise. The educational vision underpinning the reforms was ambitious, intellectually coherent and consistent with broader national debates concerning curriculum diversity, lifelong learning and equality of educational opportunity.

The arguments against the tertiary model: were the critics right?

The establishment of Harrow's tertiary college system represented one of the most ambitious educational reforms undertaken by any London borough during the 1980s. Yet from its earliest

conception the proposals attracted determined and often passionate opposition. While supporters emphasised educational innovation and financial sustainability, critics questioned whether the restructuring would ultimately serve the interests of students, schools and local communities.

Four decades later, sufficient time has passed to evaluate these criticisms with greater objectivity. Some fears proved largely unfounded, others contained elements of truth, while a number reflected the inevitable uncertainty that accompanies major public sector reform.

Loss of school identity

Perhaps the strongest emotional argument centred upon the identity of Harrow's secondary schools.

For generations, many schools had operated as complete educational communities serving pupils from early adolescence through to university entrance. Sixth form students occupied positions of leadership as prefects, mentors, sports captains and ambassadors for their schools. Their presence contributed significantly to the culture, traditions and aspirations of younger pupils.

Converting schools into 11–16 institutions inevitably altered their character. Critics argued that removing the oldest students would diminish opportunities for younger pupils to learn from positive role models and weaken the sense of progression that had traditionally characterised secondary education.

They also contended that sixth forms contributed significantly to the wider school community by enabling younger pupils to interact with older students who often acted as mentors, prefects, sports leaders and ambassadors for their schools. In a borough such as Harrow, where schools increasingly served diverse communities and many families had siblings spanning different year groups, retaining pupils from the age of 11 through to 18 was seen by some as strengthening continuity, fostering a shared sense of belonging and reinforcing relationships between schools and the communities they served.

This concern was not merely nostalgic. Modern educational research continues to recognise the importance of peer mentoring, student leadership and whole-school identity in fostering positive educational environments. The removal of sixth forms therefore represented more than an administrative change; it reshaped the social ecology of schools.

However, supporters countered that schools should not be judged primarily by institutional tradition but by the educational opportunities they provide. If students gained access to broader curricula, specialist teaching and improved facilities elsewhere, the loss of institutional continuity might represent a reasonable trade-off.

With hindsight, neither perspective can be dismissed. Harrow undoubtedly lost an element of school identity through tertiary reorganisation, but this does not necessarily imply that educational outcomes suffered correspondingly.

The question of pastoral care

Another frequently expressed concern related to pastoral support. School sixth forms generally benefited from well-established relationships between students and teachers that had often developed over several years. Teachers possessed detailed knowledge of pupils' academic strengths, family circumstances and personal development. Parents similarly valued the continuity provided by familiar schools.

The tertiary colleges introduced a different educational culture. Students entered much larger institutions alongside peers from across the borough. Relationships with teaching staff necessarily had to be established afresh.

Critics feared that young people would become anonymous within large institutions enrolling several thousand learners. Such concerns deserve careful consideration.

Large educational institutions inevitably face greater challenges in maintaining personalised pastoral systems than smaller schools. The risk of individual students becoming overlooked is higher unless robust tutorial arrangements are established.

On the other hand, larger colleges can often provide specialist welfare teams, careers advisers, counsellors and learning support services that smaller sixth forms may struggle to sustain. Consequently, the quality of pastoral care depends less upon institutional size than upon organisational design and available resources.

Whether Harrow's tertiary colleges consistently achieved this balance would require detailed inspection evidence and student outcome data beyond the scope of this historical review.

"Giantism" and the educational environment

Opponents frequently warned against what contemporary debate described as "giantism", the creation of very large educational institutions. They questioned whether sixteen-year-old students would flourish within environments that more closely resembled higher education than school.

The concern reflected differing educational philosophies. One philosophy regarded adolescence as a period requiring organised supervision and close pastoral support. The other viewed sixteen as an appropriate age for increasing independence and personal responsibility.

Upon reflection, neither philosophy possesses universal validity. Some students undoubtedly benefit from earlier exposure to more independent learning environments. Others thrive within the continuity and familiarity of school sixth forms.

Educational systems therefore face the continuing challenge of accommodating different learning styles rather than assuming a single institutional model suits every young person equally well.

Travel and accessibility

Practical considerations also featured prominently during the consultation. Under the previous arrangements, many students attended sixth forms within their own schools or local neighbourhoods. The tertiary model required substantial numbers of students to travel across the borough each day, increasing journey times and imposing additional costs upon families. Although Harrow is geographically compact compared with many local authorities, these concerns were nevertheless genuine. Longer journeys could reduce participation in extracurricular activities, increase student fatigue and complicate family routines, particularly where several children attended different educational institutions.

Supporters, however, argued that modest increases in travel represented a reasonable price for significantly expanded educational opportunities. Access to a broader curriculum, specialist teaching and improved facilities, they contended, outweighed the inconvenience of travelling further to study. This remains a familiar issue for policymakers today. Students routinely travel considerable distances to attend specialist sixth-form colleges, further education institutions, universities or apprenticeship providers where the educational advantages are considered sufficient to justify additional travel.

For many advocates of the tertiary model, the central question was not how far students travelled but whether the educational opportunities available at their destination justified the additional journey.

Teacher employment and industrial relations

Perhaps the most immediate consequences of tertiary reorganisation were experienced by teaching staff. The restructuring fundamentally altered staffing requirements across Harrow's schools as sixth-form teaching transferred to the new tertiary colleges. While many teachers secured posts within the new institutions, others faced redeployment, redundancy or significant uncertainty regarding their future careers. Consequently, the response of teacher unions reflected both educational principle and practical employment concerns. Although many educationalists broadly supported the objective of integrating academic and vocational education and recognised the potential advantages of larger specialist institutions, unions understandably prioritised protecting members whose livelihoods were directly affected by the proposed changes.

This illustrates an important lesson for public policy. Educational reforms should never be evaluated solely in terms of organisational arrangements or institutional efficiency. They also affect careers, professional identities, workplace morale and the communities served by educational institutions. Successful implementation therefore depends as much upon effective workforce planning, consultation and change management as upon the educational philosophy that underpins the reforms themselves.

Academic standards

Among the most persistent criticisms of the tertiary model was the suggestion that academic standards would decline. Opponents feared that combining academic and vocational education within the same institutions might dilute traditional academic excellence or divert attention from university preparation. Such concerns reflected long-standing attitudes within British education,

where academic and vocational pathways were frequently regarded as competing rather than complementary. Critics argued that larger colleges, serving students with a wider range of educational aspirations, might struggle to sustain the academic culture traditionally associated with school sixth forms.

Whether these fears materialised is difficult to establish conclusively. There is no convincing evidence that Harrow's tertiary colleges were inherently incapable of delivering high academic standards. On the contrary, the concentration of specialist teachers, broader curriculum provision and enhanced educational facilities may well have strengthened opportunities in many academic disciplines. Equally, universities across the United Kingdom have long admitted successful students from further education colleges, sixth-form colleges and school sixth forms alike, suggesting that institutional pattern of provision alone do not determine educational achievement. Ultimately, academic success depends far more upon the quality of teaching, effective leadership, student motivation and the resources available than upon the organisational model within which post-16 education is delivered.

Looking back

Perhaps the most striking feature of Harrow's debate over tertiary education is how contemporary many of the arguments advanced during the 1980s now appear. Current discussions concerning academies, multi-academy trusts, technical education, university technical colleges, curriculum reform and post-16 pathways continue to raise many of the same fundamental questions. Should education prioritise curriculum breadth or institutional continuity? Are larger specialist institutions better equipped to meet students' diverse needs than smaller community-based schools? How should policymakers balance academic excellence with equal esteem for vocational education, or financial efficiency with the preservation of local identity and school communities?

The experience of Harrow suggests that these questions rarely produce straightforward answers. The critics of tertiary education were not simply defending established traditions; many raised valid concerns regarding school identity, pastoral care, educational continuity and community cohesion. Equally, supporters advanced a coherent and persuasive vision of broader educational opportunity, curriculum innovation and greater equality between academic and vocational learning. The historical evidence therefore suggests that the debate was never a contest between right and wrong. Rather, it reflected two competing conceptions of educational excellence, each with genuine strengths and unavoidable compromises, illustrating the complexity of designing post-16 education that meets the diverse needs of students, families and the wider community.

From vision to reality: implementing the tertiary system

Agreeing a major educational reform is one challenge; implementing it successfully is another. Harrow's transition to a borough-wide tertiary education system required the coordinated reorganisation of schools, colleges, staff, students, buildings and administrative arrangements on a scale unprecedented within the borough's educational history.

Unlike many public sector reforms that are introduced incrementally, Harrow's tertiary reorganisation required fundamental structural change within a relatively compressed timescale.

Existing school sixth forms would disappear, new colleges would open, staff would transfer between institutions and thousands of students would begin their post-16 education within entirely new organisational arrangements.

The Council therefore faced the considerable challenge of transforming an ambitious policy into a functioning educational system.

Establishing the new colleges

The implementation phase culminated in September 1987 with the establishment of Greenhill College, Weald College and Elm Park College as Harrow's principal providers of public post-16 education. These colleges became the centrepiece of the borough's new tertiary structure, replacing the dispersed pattern of sixth forms that had previously existed across individual secondary schools. The former Harrow College for Further Education at Hatch End closed as part of this wider reorganisation, while St Dominic's Sixth Form College continued to operate independently because of its separate legal and organisational status.

The establishment of these institutions represented far more than a change of name. New management design had to be created, teaching departments reorganised, accommodation adapted and administrative systems redesigned. Curriculum planning became significantly more complex because colleges were expected to provide an extensive range of academic, vocational and adult education programmes while coordinating provision across the borough.

Managing educational continuity

One of the greatest risks during any educational reorganisation is disruption to students. For Harrow, maintaining continuity was essential. Students already studying for public examinations could not become casualties of organisational change.

The Council therefore had to ensure that timetables, staffing and curriculum planning enabled learners to complete their courses without disadvantage while simultaneously introducing entirely new institutional arrangements for future cohorts. This required careful coordination between schools, colleges and education officers over several academic years.

The relative absence of evidence suggesting widespread educational disruption indicates that, operationally, the transition appears to have been managed competently. That should not diminish the scale of the task involved.

Financial expectations

Council documentation consistently recognised that tertiary reorganisation pursued both educational and financial objectives. Improving curriculum breadth, expanding educational opportunity and enabling students to combine academic and vocational courses formed one central justification, while achieving greater efficiency through the consolidation of resources formed another. Whether the anticipated financial savings were fully realised would require detailed examination of historical budget records. Nevertheless, the documentary evidence makes clear that financial sustainability remained an important consideration throughout the planning and implementation of the reforms.

This dual purpose deserves emphasis because educational reform is rarely driven solely by pedagogical considerations. Local authorities must balance educational aspirations with fiscal responsibility, particularly during periods of financial constraint. Harrow's tertiary system therefore represented an attempt to reconcile these objectives rather than pursuing educational ambition or financial efficiency in isolation. Understanding that balance is essential to appreciating both the rationale for the reforms and the debates that surrounded their implementation.

A national turning point

While Harrow was still consolidating its tertiary arrangements, national policy fundamentally altered the governance of further education. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 removed further education colleges from local authority control throughout England, and from April 1993 Harrow's colleges became independent corporate bodies funded through national arrangements rather than directly by the Council. This marked a significant constitutional change. Although Harrow had created the tertiary system, responsibility for much of its future development now rested elsewhere. The Council retained an important strategic interest in post-16 education but no longer exercised direct governance over further education colleges. Consequently, subsequent debates concerning the future of tertiary education took place within a fundamentally different institutional and policy framework.

Measuring success

Assessing the success of Harrow's tertiary reorganisation depends largely upon the criteria employed. From an organisational perspective, the implementation was undoubtedly successful. The new colleges were established, students transferred with comparatively little disruption and the borough acquired one of the most comprehensive tertiary education systems in England. Achieving such an extensive reorganisation within a relatively short period represented a considerable administrative and managerial accomplishment.

From an educational perspective, however, the assessment is necessarily more nuanced. Successful implementation alone cannot determine whether a policy ultimately achieves its objectives. That judgement depends upon longer-term educational outcomes, student experience, curriculum quality, institutional leadership and the ability of the system to adapt to changing national circumstances. These wider questions became increasingly significant following the incorporation of further education colleges in 1993 and would eventually shape the debate that led Harrow to dismantle the tertiary model little more than a decade later. The next section examines that reversal and considers why a system that had required years of planning, consultation and implementation was ultimately replaced by the restoration of sixth forms within the borough's secondary schools.

Why was the tertiary system reversed?

The introduction of Harrow's tertiary education system represented one of the most ambitious educational reorganisations undertaken by a London borough. It required years of planning, extensive consultation, significant financial investment and considerable political commitment. Yet barely two decades after its implementation, the borough embarked upon an equally fundamental

reversal, restoring sixth forms to secondary schools and effectively bringing the tertiary era to an end.

The obvious question is why.

No major educational system should be dismantled without compelling reasons. The reversal therefore deserves the same level of critical examination as the original decision to establish tertiary colleges.

Unlike the reforms of the 1980s, which were largely driven by falling school rolls and the perceived educational advantages of centralised post-16 provision, the circumstances surrounding the reversal were fundamentally different. Demographic patterns had changed, national education policy had evolved, school autonomy had increased and funding arrangements had been transformed by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Colleges had become independent corporate bodies, while schools increasingly sought greater control over their own educational provision and financial resources.

The accountability environment had also changed significantly. Following the establishment of Ofsted in 1992 and the introduction of the new school inspection system from 1993, secondary schools, including their sixth-form provision where applicable, were subject to regular independent inspection and published reports. For parents, governors and policymakers, this provided an additional and increasingly familiar means of assessing the quality of post-16 education within schools. By the time Harrow was considering the restoration of sixth forms, the proposition that schools could once again provide post-16 education therefore existed within a much more developed framework of external inspection, performance information and public accountability than had been available when the tertiary reforms were conceived in the early 1980s. For many, this may have provided a degree of reassurance that the quality and effectiveness of restored sixth-form provision would be subject to independent scrutiny.

The official justification for restoring school sixth forms centred upon expanding educational opportunity within local communities. Council documents associated with the establishment of the Harrow Sixth Form Collegiate referred to increasing post-16 opportunities, strengthening collaboration between schools and allowing students greater choice while remaining within familiar educational environments. Consultation documents also recorded broad agreement among stakeholders regarding the overall vision.

These educational arguments should not be dismissed. There were genuine advantages associated with restoring sixth forms. Students could remain within schools where they had established relationships with teachers and support staff. Schools regained senior student leadership, strengthening mentoring and whole-school identity. Parents welcomed continuity, while teachers benefited from restored career progression within school settings.

However, educational policy rarely develops independently of financial realities.

One issue that deserves careful examination is the relationship between sixth-form provision and funding. Returning post-16 education to secondary schools also returned significant funding streams associated with those students. Under the collegiate arrangements, funding followed the learner, with

agreed mechanisms allowing resources to transfer between schools where students attended courses elsewhere. This was presented as an innovative collaborative model designed to expand educational opportunity while avoiding unnecessary duplication.

Whether financial considerations merely accompanied the educational case or became a principal motivation remains an important question for historians.

It would be simplistic to suggest that the reversal occurred solely because schools wished to recover sixth-form funding. Educational philosophy undoubtedly evolved during the intervening years. National policy increasingly encouraged diversity, parental choice and stronger institutional identities. Nevertheless, financial incentives cannot be ignored when evaluating why major structural reforms occur.

Indeed, one of the recurring themes throughout the history of Harrow's tertiary education is that financial and educational objectives frequently became intertwined. The original tertiary system promised educational improvements while simultaneously generating revenue savings. The later restoration of sixth forms similarly promoted educational benefits while coinciding with the redistribution of significant educational funding.

Public policy rarely operates within purely educational or purely financial frameworks. Rather, both dimensions influence political decision-making simultaneously.

Comparing the two consultations

The contrast between the consultation accompanying the introduction of tertiary education and that surrounding its reversal is particularly revealing.

The consultation undertaken during the early and mid-1980s proved highly contentious. Parents, teachers, unions and community groups expressed sharply differing opinions concerning the abolition of school sixth forms. Debate was often characterised by conflicting educational philosophies and concern regarding employment, institutional identity and the future direction of education within the borough.

By contrast, the consultation leading to the restoration of sixth forms appears to have proceeded with considerably greater consensus. Council documentation referred to broad stakeholder agreement, close cooperation between headteachers and the Schools Forum, and collaborative development of the collegiate arrangements. Rather than imposing a predetermined model, the consultation emphasised partnership working and locally agreed solutions.

Several factors may explain this difference. First, circumstances had fundamentally changed. Schools had experienced two decades without sixth forms and had developed clear views regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the existing arrangements.

Secondly, many practical concerns that had dominated debate during the 1980s no longer applied. Staff restructuring had already occurred. Institutional identities had evolved. Colleges were operating independently following incorporation under national legislation.

Thirdly, restoring sixth forms created opportunities rather than removing them. School leaders regained greater influence over post-16 education, teaching posts expanded within schools and students acquired additional options regarding where to study.

Consequently, consensus proved easier to achieve because more stakeholders perceived potential benefits from the proposed changes.

Nevertheless, the greater consensus surrounding restoration should not itself be treated as proof that the reversal represented superior educational policy. The political and institutional setting had changed substantially: Harrow was now operating under executive Cabinet arrangements, schools had different interests and incentives, and a governing administration could pursue its policy priorities through a more concentrated executive process. The constitutional implications of that change are examined later; here, its significance is that the two consultation exercises took place under materially different conditions.

The attitudes of parents and schools had also evolved. Restoring sixth forms offered schools renewed control over the education of their oldest pupils, strengthened institutional continuity and returned post-16 students to an environment already familiar to many families.

Parental expectations had changed as well. In Harrow, where academic achievement, university progression and entry into professional careers had become increasingly important aspirations for many families, a school sixth form with a strong academic identity could appear particularly attractive. For parents principally concerned with examination results and progression to competitive university courses, the tertiary philosophy of combining academic and vocational provision within common institutions may have carried less weight than it had when the original system was conceived.

The relative consensus surrounding the reversal should therefore be understood within this broader context. It may have reflected genuine educational support for restoring sixth forms, but it also coincided with changed governance arrangements, different institutional interests, evolving parental expectations and a different political climate. Consensus tells us that the balance of opinion had shifted; it does not, by itself, establish that one model of post-16 education was educationally superior to the other. That distinction is important when assessing why a system that had once been presented as an attractive educational advance could, little more than two decades later, be replaced with comparatively limited resistance.

What was lost? What was gained?

Perhaps the most difficult question arising from Harrow's educational history is whether the borough ultimately benefited from abandoning the tertiary system. The preceding evidence suggests that there is no single answer because the two models optimised different educational values. Restoration advanced continuity, school identity, local accessibility and parental choice; tertiary provision had placed greater weight on breadth, specialisation, mixed academic and vocational pathways and a more independent post-16 culture.

The trade-off was therefore not simply between a successful and an unsuccessful system. Concentrating post-16 learners made it easier to sustain specialist subjects, staff and facilities across a borough-wide cohort, whereas dispersing provision back into schools strengthened individual institutions and reconnected older students with the communities in which they had already established relationships. Collaborative sixth-form arrangements could mitigate some disadvantages of dispersal, but could not fully reproduce the economies of scale of the tertiary model.

The tertiary colleges also embodied a distinctive conception of transition to adulthood. Their mixed-age environment, greater student independence and integration of adult learning placed sixteen-to-nineteen education closer to further and higher education than to school. Restored sixth forms offered the countervailing benefits of familiarity, longer-term pastoral relationships, mentoring and leadership within the school community. Which environment better served a student depended partly on individual needs and aspirations rather than institutional form alone.

The overall balance sheet is consequently mixed. Harrow regained a model attractive to many schools and parents, but potentially relinquished some of the breadth, specialist concentration, intergenerational character and integration of academic and vocational learning that had distinguished tertiary education. The historical significance lies precisely in this exchange of advantages: structural reform solved some problems by recreating others in a different form.

Governance, politics and public policy: lessons from Harrow

Beyond education itself, Harrow's tertiary experience provides important insights into the relationship between local government arrangements and public policy. One particularly striking feature is that the introduction and eventual abolition of the tertiary system occurred under markedly different models of municipal decision-making. The original reforms emerged during the era of committee government, when responsibility for education was exercised through the Education Committee and supported by the Tertiary Sub-Committee, working parties and advisory bodies. Proposals developed through successive officer reports, committee discussions and recommendations before reaching final decisions, involving a relatively broad group of elected members and other participants. The result was an extended chain of scrutiny in which policy could be questioned, amended and debated at several stages, while political responsibility was shared more widely across the Council.

The committee model was by no means without weaknesses. Decision-making could be slow, the division of responsibility between committees and sub-committees could become cumbersome, and accountability was sometimes less immediately identifiable because authority was dispersed among a comparatively large number of participants. Nevertheless, for a reform as extensive as the removal of school sixth forms and creation of a borough-wide tertiary system, that deliberative character offered an important advantage. Members who were not part of the Council's senior political leadership could participate directly in detailed policy consideration, while specialist committees and working parties provided opportunities to test the educational, financial and practical assumptions underpinning the proposals before implementation.

The later restoration of school sixth forms occurred within a substantially different constitutional framework following the introduction of executive arrangements under the Local Government Act 2000. Cabinet government concentrated executive responsibility within a smaller group of senior councillors holding portfolios and working closely with senior officers. This offered advantages in terms of clearer political leadership, more readily identifiable responsibility and potentially faster decision-making. At the same time, however, fewer elected members were directly involved in developing executive policy than under the former committee system. Scrutiny arrangements provided an important mechanism for challenge, but scrutiny of executive policy is not necessarily equivalent to collective participation in its development before decisions are taken. The distinction is significant: one model distributed participation more widely during policy formation, while the other concentrated executive responsibility within the governing administration, subject to scrutiny and the wider constitutional responsibilities of the Council.

This paper does not argue that one model of local government is inherently superior to the other, nor would differences in governance alone explain why Harrow first adopted and subsequently abandoned tertiary education. The comparison nevertheless raises an important democratic and administrative question: would a reform as far-reaching as the abolition of every school sixth form, or, conversely, their borough-wide restoration, receive the same breadth and depth of elected-member involvement under contemporary arrangements?

The evidence examined in this paper suggests that the rigour and relative smoothness with which the original tertiary reorganisation was planned and implemented owed something to the unusually extensive process through which it developed. Over several years, different aspects of the proposals were examined through working parties, specialist committees, officer advice and consultation, exposing the emerging scheme to professional, political and community challenge. Responsibility was dispersed, but so too were expertise and participation. Complex and interdependent questions concerning curriculum, staffing, buildings, finance, transport and the interests of individual schools could therefore be examined and refined before the new system became operational.

Whether an equally complex borough-wide reorganisation would receive the same depth of collective policy development under a Cabinet system is therefore a legitimate question. Executive government can provide clearer leadership and enable decisions to be taken more efficiently, but the concentration of executive responsibility among a relatively small number of portfolio holders can make it more challenging to reproduce the sustained involvement of elected members that characterised Harrow's original tertiary planning. This does not mean that comparable rigour is impossible under Cabinet government. Rather, achieving it may depend more explicitly upon the executive creating effective mechanisms for wider member involvement, professional challenge, meaningful consultation and iterative review throughout policy development, rather than relying principally upon scrutiny once proposals are substantially formed.

The implications extend beyond education to major decisions concerning planning, housing, social care, regeneration and other local services. At a time when councils face severe financial pressures and are frequently required to make difficult choices at speed, administrative efficiency needs to be balanced against transparent deliberation and meaningful democratic challenge. Harrow's tertiary experience demonstrates that governance arrangements influence not only who formally takes a decision, but also how extensively proposals are examined, how alternative arguments are heard,

how effectively complex reforms are refined before implementation and how clearly the community can understand the reasoning that ultimately determines public policy.

Conclusion

The history of tertiary education in Harrow is far more than an account of institutional reorganisation. It is the story of how one local authority attempted to reconcile educational drive with financial reality, demographic change and evolving public expectations. The introduction of tertiary colleges during the 1980s reflected an ambitious and, in important respects, progressive educational vision. Council leaders believed that larger specialist institutions could broaden curriculum choice, integrate academic and vocational education, make more effective use of specialist staff and facilities, improve efficiency and better prepare young people for higher education, employment and adult life. Financial pressures undoubtedly formed part of the calculation, but the evidence examined in this paper suggests that the reforms cannot reasonably be characterised simply as an economy measure or administrative convenience; they were also grounded in a coherent philosophy about how post-16 education could be organised and enriched.

The later restoration of school sixth forms reflected a markedly different educational, political and institutional environment. Community identity, continuity, parental choice and school autonomy had assumed greater prominence, while national reforms to further education, altered funding arrangements and the incorporation of colleges had fundamentally changed the relationship between Harrow Council and post-16 provision. Neither model can therefore be regarded as an unequivocal success or failure. The tertiary system offered considerable curriculum breadth, concentrated specialist teaching, promoted closer integration of academic and vocational education and provided students with a more independent environment approaching that of further and higher education. Restored school sixth forms, by contrast, strengthened school communities, returned older pupils to leadership and mentoring roles, preserved established relationships between students and teachers and provided the continuity and academic identity increasingly valued by many parents. Each model addressed genuine educational needs while inevitably surrendering some of the advantages provided by the other.

Perhaps the most enduring lesson concerns the nature of educational reform itself. Institutional arrangements, funding and governance all matter, but none alone determines educational success. The quality of education ultimately depends upon effective leadership, differentiated curriculum to suit student abilities, knowledgeable and committed teachers, motivated students, appropriate resources and communities that value learning.

Harrow's experience also demonstrates that educational policy cannot be separated from the social and political environment in which it develops. Demographic change, parental aspirations, public finances, national legislation and systems of local governance all influenced the rise and eventual disappearance of tertiary education in the borough.

The fact that one model replaced another should therefore not be interpreted as proof that the earlier approach had failed or that its successor was inherently superior. Rather, priorities changed, institutions changed and Harrow itself changed.

The tertiary era consequently deserves recognition as one of the most ambitious and influential chapters in Harrow's modern educational history. Whether regarded as a bold educational experiment, a pragmatic response to demographic and financial pressures, or, as the evidence more strongly suggests, a combination of both, it shaped the educational experiences of thousands of residents and tested ideas about curriculum breadth, vocational and academic equality, institutional identity and local democratic decision-making that remain relevant today. Understanding that history is therefore not an exercise in nostalgia. It provides a valuable case study for future policymakers confronting essentially the same challenge faced by their predecessors: how to provide the widest and highest-quality educational opportunities within finite public resources, while adapting to social change and retaining the confidence of students, parents, educators and the wider community.

Epilogue – forty years on: Harrow's legacy for today's post-16 education

Historical studies are most valuable when they illuminate present-day challenges. Although Harrow's tertiary education system formally ended in 2010, many of the educational questions that shaped its creation and eventual abolition remain central to national policy today. The institutions have changed, but the underlying debate about curriculum breadth, academic and vocational pathways, specialist teaching, funding and educational opportunity continues. How should academic and vocational education relate to one another? How can students obtain genuine curriculum breadth after the age of sixteen? Should institutions provide increasingly specialised teaching? How closely should education respond to the needs of employers and the economy? How can government avoid creating a system in which academic education enjoys greater status than technical or vocational learning? Perhaps most importantly, should post-16 education be designed primarily around the needs of institutions or around the educational pathways required by individual students? These were central questions when Harrow considered tertiary reorganisation more than forty years ago, and they are again prominent in national education policy.

The historical parallel should not be exaggerated. England is not returning to the local-authority tertiary college model of the 1980s. The institutional environment has been transformed by academisation, college incorporation, national funding arrangements and decades of reform. Nevertheless, the philosophy underpinning several current policies bears a striking resemblance to arguments once advanced in favour of tertiary education.

Academic, technical and vocational education revisited

Perhaps the clearest parallel concerns the relationship between academic and vocational learning. Harrow's tertiary model sought to bring academic and vocational education within common institutions and enable students to construct programmes that were not necessarily confined to one educational tradition. Council documentation explicitly identified widening the possible combinations of academic and vocational courses as one of the objectives of tertiary reorganisation. More than forty years later, England is once again attempting to create clearer relationships between different post-16 pathways. The Government's 2025 Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper proposed a simplified Level 3 provision built around A Levels, T Levels and a new category of vocational qualifications known as V Levels. The subsequent implementation plan, published in

May 2026, confirmed the intention to establish V Levels alongside A Levels and T Levels as a distinct vocational pathway.

Particularly interesting from the perspective of Harrow's history is the intended flexibility of V Levels. The Government has said they are expected to be approximately the size of an A Level and capable of being combined with other V Levels or A Levels. The terminology is new, but the educational problem is familiar. Harrow's planners were grappling with essentially the same question during the 1980s: how could young people be offered meaningful combinations of academic and vocational study without forcing them prematurely into rigid educational categories? This does not prove that the tertiary model was necessarily superior, but it does suggest that one of its central educational principles has proved considerably more durable than the institutions created to deliver it.

The continuing search for parity of esteem

The tertiary system was partly founded upon the belief that technical and vocational education should not be regarded as inferior to academic education. Placing students studying different types of qualification within common institutions was intended to challenge the traditional hierarchy between the university-bound academic student and the learner pursuing technical or occupational education. That objective remains unresolved nationally. Successive governments have attempted to strengthen vocational and technical education through BTECs, apprenticeships, T Levels and numerous qualification reforms, yet the continued restructuring of post-16 qualifications itself demonstrates how difficult genuine parity of esteem has proved to achieve.

The current Government's policy again attempts to create clearer pathways while connecting technical and vocational learning more directly with occupational standards and employer needs. V Level content is intended to relate to occupational standards developed through Skills England and employers, while T Levels continue to provide more specialised technical routes. This renewed emphasis raises an obvious historical question: if integrating academic and vocational education was regarded as an educational strength in Harrow during the 1980s, did the subsequent separation of those pathways sacrifice something valuable? There is no simple answer. Different institutions can successfully provide different forms of education, but the underlying aspiration of allowing students to move more easily between academic, vocational and technical learning appears increasingly relevant.

Changing parental expectations in Harrow

An important local consideration also helps explain why the educational philosophy underpinning Harrow's tertiary colleges may be received differently today than it was during the 1980s. Over the past four decades, Harrow has developed a strong culture of educational aspiration. Many families place exceptional importance on academic achievement, progression to highly selective universities and entry into professional careers. The widespread use of private tutoring and supplementary education across the borough reflects the value attached to examination performance and academic success.

Consequently, some parents may attach greater importance to the academic reputation, examination results and university progression of individual schools than to the broader

integration of academic and vocational education that lay at the heart of the tertiary model. For those families, opportunities to combine vocational and academic pathways may be viewed as less compelling than access to the strongest possible academic environment. This should not be interpreted as diminishing the importance of technical or vocational education. Rather, it illustrates how educational models are judged within their social context. The aspirations of parents, the expectations of employers and the competitive nature of university admissions have all evolved considerably since the 1980s. Any assessment of Harrow's tertiary experiment must therefore recognise that the borough itself has changed, as have the priorities of many families choosing post-16 education.

Curriculum breadth versus institutional viability

Another striking continuity concerns curriculum breadth. One of the strongest arguments for Harrow's tertiary colleges was that larger institutions could sustain courses that smaller sixth forms could not economically provide. By concentrating students, specialist teachers and facilities, the Council believed that a wider range of subjects could remain viable. The underlying problem has not disappeared: every school or college faces a relationship between student numbers and curriculum viability, while specialist subjects with relatively small enrolments can be expensive to maintain. The tension becomes particularly acute when institutions compete for the same post-16 students.

This presents an inherent contradiction within highly decentralised educational systems. Competition may improve responsiveness and encourage institutions to attract students, but excessive duplication can also lead to several providers operating small classes while less popular but educationally valuable subjects disappear altogether. The tertiary model addressed this problem through concentration. Harrow's later collegiate arrangements attempted a different solution: institutions retained their own sixth forms while students could access provision elsewhere and funding could follow the learner. The approach sought to preserve institutional identity while achieving some of the curriculum advantages previously delivered through centralisation. The tension between institutional autonomy and collective curriculum planning therefore remains relevant today.

The operation of these collaborative arrangements could, however, produce some less obvious patterns of provision. In practice, schools could admit post-16 students while arranging for some of their education to be delivered by a further education college. This could be particularly relevant to unaccompanied young people newly arrived in the United Kingdom, including refugees and others with limited proficiency in English, for whom immediate participation in a conventional A Level programme might not have been appropriate. A college could offer vocational or practical programmes in which progress was less dependent upon the level of academic English required for traditional sixth-form study, alongside opportunities for further language development.

Such arrangements demonstrate both the flexibility and the complexity of the collegiate model. They could enable young people with very different educational starting points to access provision better suited to their immediate needs without requiring every school sixth form to reproduce the full range of specialist vocational and language support available within further education. At the same time,

they blurred the distinction between the institution in which a student was enrolled and the institution in which some or much of that student's education was actually delivered. The principle that funding could follow the learner was therefore not merely an administrative mechanism: it enabled schools and colleges to share responsibility for students whose educational needs could not always be accommodated effectively within a conventional school sixth-form curriculum.

There is an interesting historical irony in this arrangement. Restoring sixth forms to Harrow's secondary schools did not remove the underlying educational case for collaboration or for concentrating certain forms of provision within larger specialist institutions. Schools could regain their post-16 identity and continuity while still depending upon further education colleges to provide particular vocational courses, specialist support or alternative pathways that could not readily be reproduced within every individual sixth form. The organisational solution had changed, but some of the educational interdependence that had helped justify tertiary provision remained. This reinforces a wider lesson from Harrow's experience: abolishing a particular institutional model does not necessarily eliminate the educational problems that originally gave rise to it.

Education and the economy

Modern post-16 policy increasingly emphasises the connection between education and economic need. The 2025 Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper explicitly frames reform around developing the skilled workforce required for economic growth, addressing skills shortages and improving opportunity. In June 2026 the Government went further by publishing its "Pathways to Priority Occupations" approach, intended to monitor whether increasing numbers of students enter courses associated with occupations required by priority growth sectors, construction, health and social care. The stated drive is to create a more joined-up and responsive skills system informed by both national and local labour-market requirements.

Again, the underlying principle would have been recognisable to the architects of Harrow's tertiary system. Tertiary colleges were intended not simply to provide traditional academic progression but to bring further education, technical learning and preparation for employment into the mainstream of post-16 provision. The language has changed from "tertiary reorganisation" to "skills pathways", "occupational standards" and "priority sectors", but policymakers are still confronting essentially the same challenge: how should education prepare young people both for intellectual development and for participation in a changing economy?

There is, however, an important danger in allowing post-16 education to become too closely driven by immediate labour-market demand. The skills required by an economy can change rapidly, while young people entering education today may remain economically active for several decades. Education must therefore equip them not merely for particular vacancies but with analytical ability, communication skills, adaptability and intellectual confidence capable of sustaining them throughout changing careers and economic conditions. The best elements of the tertiary philosophy arguably recognised both purposes: vocational relevance without abandoning academic breadth.

Funding still shapes educational provision

Another lesson from Harrow's experience is particularly difficult to escape: educational provision cannot be separated from money. Financial pressures contributed to the original tertiary

reorganisation, with the Council explicitly anticipating revenue savings alongside curriculum improvements, while funding considerations were also relevant when sixth forms later returned to Harrow's secondary schools. The same relationship remains visible nationally. Current 16–19 funding arrangements encompass schools, academies, sixth-form colleges, further education colleges and other providers, with funding allocated through national formulas and associated programmes. The Department for Education's 2026–27 arrangements continue to distinguish elements including national funding rates, disadvantage funding, high-value courses and T Level provision.

Financial support for individual students is similarly recognised as essential to participation. The 16–19 Bursary Fund specifically assists eligible students with barriers such as travel, books, specialist equipment and clothing. This is particularly relevant when considering one of the criticisms originally made of Harrow's tertiary colleges: students might be required to travel farther than they would have done when attending local school sixth forms. Educational choice is meaningful only where students can practically exercise it; a theoretically broader curriculum provides limited benefit if travel costs, transport availability or other financial barriers prevent disadvantaged students from accessing it.

Specialisation and the importance of teachers

The tertiary model also rested heavily upon specialisation. Larger post-16 institutions could concentrate teachers whose expertise lay specifically in advanced academic, technical or vocational subjects, allowing students to be taught by staff working extensively within their specialist disciplines rather than requiring every school to reproduce identical expertise. Current policy continues to recognise the importance of specialist capacity within further education, and in July 2026 the Government announced additional investment aimed partly at addressing recruitment and retention pressures within colleges and other post-16 providers.

This highlights another enduring lesson: organisational reform alone cannot improve education. Governments may redesign qualifications, establish new pathways, alter funding formulas or reorganise institutions, but educational quality ultimately depends upon having sufficient numbers of knowledgeable, motivated and properly supported teachers. That was true for Harrow's tertiary colleges in 1987 and remains equally true today.

The return of curriculum reform

The national Curriculum and Assessment Review provides another contemporary point of comparison. Commissioned in 2024 and chaired by Professor Becky Francis, the Review published its final report in November 2025 alongside the Government's response. Its remit extended across curriculum, assessment and qualifications and reflected renewed concern about whether England's education system provides appropriate opportunities and progression for all young people.

Although the institutional circumstances differ profoundly from those confronting Harrow forty years earlier, the recurrence of fundamental curriculum reform illustrates how educational systems continually have to adapt. No particular model remains optimal indefinitely because demography, technology, employment patterns, university participation, student expectations and public finances all change. Harrow's abandonment of tertiary colleges should therefore not be interpreted as proof

that the original concept had failed; institutions can disappear while some of the principles behind them remain valid. Equally, restoring school sixth forms should not automatically be interpreted as an admission that their earlier abolition had been mistaken. The circumstances facing policymakers in 2008 were substantially different from those confronting their predecessors in 1982. Historical evaluation requires decisions to be understood within the conditions in which they were taken while their consequences are still examined critically.

Could a modern tertiary model work?

It would be unrealistic simply to advocate recreating Harrow's 1987 system. The educational system is now fundamentally different: academies possess considerable autonomy, further education colleges operate independently of local authorities, national funding arrangements govern much post-16 provision, and students can choose among schools, colleges, apprenticeships and increasingly differentiated technical and vocational routes. Nevertheless, some characteristics of the tertiary philosophy could arguably inform future local planning.

Stronger cooperation between schools and colleges could enable students to access specialist teaching across institutions without artificial organisational barriers, while borough or sub-regional curriculum planning could help identify unnecessary duplication alongside gaps in provision. Closer integration between academic subjects, vocational qualifications, employers and higher education might similarly broaden the opportunities available to young people. None of these approaches requires recreating a single large tertiary institution. What matters is the underlying principle that educational provision should be organised around what students need rather than primarily around the preservation of institutional boundaries. In this respect, Harrow's history remains surprisingly relevant.

From Harrow's experiment to today's policy debate

The strongest conclusion to draw forty years later is not that Harrow was necessarily right to create tertiary colleges or wrong to abolish them, but that the borough confronted educational questions that national policymakers are still attempting to resolve. The tertiary system sought curriculum breadth; current reforms seek clearer and more flexible post-16 pathways. It sought greater parity between vocational and academic education; current reforms again attempt to strengthen the status and coherence of technical and vocational qualifications. It concentrated specialist expertise; policymakers today remain concerned about specialist teaching capacity and skills shortages. It also attempted to connect education more closely with employment and adult learning; contemporary policy increasingly links post-16 provision with occupational standards, employers and strategic economic priorities.

There is therefore a certain historical irony. Harrow dismantled its tertiary system, but many of the educational problems that produced it never disappeared. The institutional solution may have belonged to a particular period of local government and educational history, yet many of the questions it attempted to answer remain unresolved.

The enduring lesson

Perhaps the greatest lesson from Harrow's experience is that debates about educational organisation can sometimes obscure the fundamental question: what arrangement gives each student the greatest opportunity to succeed? Institutional interests inevitably matter. Schools need to remain viable, colleges require sufficient enrolments, teachers need secure employment and professional progression, governments must control expenditure, parents value continuity and familiarity, and politicians respond to public opinion. All are legitimate considerations, but none should become the principal purpose of the educational system. The student must remain at its centre.

When Harrow created its tertiary colleges, the strongest educational argument was that students would receive wider choices, specialist teaching and greater opportunities to combine academic and vocational learning. When Harrow restored school sixth forms, the strongest argument was that students would benefit from greater continuity, local accessibility and school-based support. Those propositions can now be examined against experience rather than political rhetoric, and that should be one of the enduring values of studying this period of Harrow's history.

The rise and fall of tertiary education was not merely an unusual episode in local government administration. It was a major experiment in determining how a diverse London borough should educate young people during one of the most important transitions of their lives. Four decades later, as England again redesigns post-16 pathways and debates the relationship between academic knowledge, technical competence, employment and opportunity, Harrow's experience deserves to be remembered. The institutions may have disappeared, but the debate they embodied has not.

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About this publication

This independent research paper was written and researched by Husain Akhtar for Harrow Monitoring Group. It examines the development, implementation and eventual reversal of tertiary education in Harrow, drawing principally upon documentary evidence, official records and contemporary research.

Harrow Monitoring Group publishes research and commentary on local public services, governance, accountability and matters of community interest in the London Borough of Harrow and beyond.

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