

**The Evolving Roles of Public and Private Higher Education
Partnerships in Shaping Minds and Societies**

**Sarwar Khawaja,
Chairman,
SK Hub-Oxford Business College,
UK**

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving landscape of higher education (HE), focusing on the increasing prevalence and impact of public-private partnerships (PPP). These partnerships combine the strengths of public and private higher education institutions (HEIs), are reshaping the roles of public and private HEIs, enabling them to better meet the demands of the 21st century by fostering innovative approaches to education, enhancing access, and addressing pressing societal challenges.

The analysis highlights the potential benefits such as increasing accessibility, fostering economic growth, social and cultural development and regional development. A notable case study featured is the collaboration between Oxford Business College (OBC) and Public Higher Education Institutions (PuHEIs), which has demonstrated significant societal impact in Nottingham. By offering tailored academic courses aligned with regional needs, this partnership has not only increased employability by equipping individuals with market-relevant skills but has also contributed to a reduction in local crime rates. Through targeted education initiatives, OBC has empowered diverse learner demographics, including mature students and individuals from underrepresented backgrounds, thereby fostering social inclusion and economic mobility.

Particular attention is given to the positive impact of OBC's Nottingham campus, established in 2021, on reducing crime in the local area.

This paper underscores the transformative potential of public-private higher education partnerships in shaping individual lives and advancing societal progress, making a compelling case for their strategic importance in addressing contemporary global, regional and local challenges.

Keywords: Higher Education, Public-Private Partnerships, Accessibility, Social and Cultural Development, Regional Development, Crime Reduction, Societal Progress

Introduction

Higher Education (HE) plays a critical role in the socio-economic development of societies, acting as a catalyst for transforming individual and society collective advancement (Pee & Vululleh, 2020). HE is the cornerstone for building the individual scientifically, culturally, socially and cognitively, and contributes to the development of society through the extension of all disciplines required by the labour market (Alshaer et al., 2017). It equips individuals with the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies to thrive in the modern workforce and contribute meaningfully to economic growth (Ama & Emetarom, 2020, Hannum & Buchmann, 2005; Kayyali, 2024, Nwachukwu, 2024, Szirmai, 2005). Furthermore, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) serve as hubs of knowledge creation and innovation, pushing the boundaries of human understanding and driving technological progress (Aithal, 2023, Aithal et al., 2024).

The interplay between HE and societal development has long been acknowledged as a cornerstone of progress (Altbach et al., 2019). Traditionally, Public Higher Education Institutions (PuHEIs) have dominated this space, prioritising access, equity, and societal benefits (Qureshi, 2023). However, the demands of the 21st century, characterised by globalisation, technological advancement, and evolving labour markets, have necessitated innovative approaches. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) in HE have emerged as a response to these challenges, leveraging the distinct strengths of both sectors to create synergistic outcomes (Teixeira & Dill, 2011).

In the context of the United Kingdom, HEIs have become key drivers of change, actively shaping the knowledge economy and addressing regional challenges through research and partnerships. A report by Universities UK (2024) highlights the immense potential of HE as a blueprint for societal transformation, emphasising the importance of partnership, local economic prosperity, social mobility, and cultural enrichment, innovation, and adaptability. Further, the report emphasises the need for HEIs to adapt and evolve to meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

This paper examines the transformative potential of PPPs in HE, particularly their roles in accessibility, social and cultural development and regional development. It also evaluates their contribution to societal progress through specific case study of Oxford Business College (OBC).

The Structure of Public and Private Higher Education

HEIs can be broadly categorised into Public Higher Education Institutions (PuHEIs) and Private Higher Education Institutions (PrHEIs) (Qureshi, 2023, Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021). PuHEIs are primarily funded by the government and are often tasked with fulfilling national educational objectives, such as promoting equitable access to education and supporting research that benefits public policy. PrHEIs, on the other hand, are funded through tuition fees, donations, and private investments. In some cases, PrHEIs may receive government subsidies, but they generally operate under market-driven principles and have more autonomy in curriculum design and governance (Altbach, 2016).

The demand for HE is growing at an unprecedented rate globally (Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021), driven by factors such as population growth, economic development, and an increasing emphasis on the role of education in fostering socio-economic mobility and innovation (Altbach et al., 2009; Buckner, 2017).

In this landscape, the private sector plays a pivotal role in meeting the demand for HE, often acting as a demand-absorbing entity, especially in contexts where public institutions face limitations in scaling their capacity rapidly enough to meet growing needs (Altbach, 1998; Levy, 2011; Qureshi et al., 2024). Globally, over 30% of HE students are enrolled in PrHEIs, underscoring the significance of this sector in addressing access issues and expanding educational opportunities (Altbach et al., 2009; Levy, 2018).

PrHEIs contribute not only to increasing access but also to driving innovation and diversifying the educational landscape. They often experiment with flexible delivery models, market-driven curricula, and international collaborations, making them a critical player in shaping contemporary HE systems (Altbach & Levy, 2005; Levy, 2011, Qureshi, 2020). Remarkably, PrHEIs represent the fastest-growing segment of HE worldwide, with their expansion reflecting both the increasing privatization of education and their ability to respond swiftly to market demands (Levy, 2012, 2018; Qureshi, 2023).

This rapid growth highlights the essential role of PrHEIs in complementing public institutions, ensuring that HE systems remain responsive to societal and economic changes. Their adaptability and innovative approaches position them as key stakeholders in the evolving global education landscape.

Globally, PuHEIs tend to dominate the HE landscape in terms of size, research output, and prestige, particularly in countries with strong public education systems such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and much of Europe (Marginson, 2016). However, private higher education is expanding rapidly, particularly in regions like Asia, Latin America, and Africa, where governments are unable to meet the growing demand for tertiary education (Levy, 2020).

In the United Kingdom, the governance and management of HE are overseen by four distinct bodies (Atherton et al., 2024), each responsible for specific regions:

1. **The Office for Students (OfS):** Serving as the regulatory authority for higher education in England, the OfS focuses on ensuring that institutions deliver high-quality education, promote access and participation, and safeguard students' interests. Its remit includes monitoring financial sustainability and overseeing compliance with national standards (OfS, 2023).
2. **The Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER):** This newly established body in Wales, also known as 'Medr,' is progressively taking over the functions of the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). CTER aims to provide a unified approach to funding, regulating, and advancing higher and further education as well as research and innovation in Wales, reflecting a shift towards a more integrated tertiary education system (Medr, 2024).
3. **The Scottish Funding Council (SFC):** Responsible for Scotland's colleges and universities, the SFC supports the provision of accessible, high-quality education and

world-leading research. It allocates funding to institutions, fosters collaboration between academia and industry, and addresses regional and national skills needs (SFC, 2024).

4. **The Higher Education Division of the Department for the Economy (DfE) in Northern Ireland:** This division oversees higher education policy, funding, and regulation in Northern Ireland. Its focus includes expanding access to education, enhancing research capacity, and aligning higher education provision with the region's economic priorities (DfE Northern Ireland, 2024).

Each body operates within its devolved jurisdiction, reflecting the UK's regional diversity in higher education policy and priorities. Together, they play a pivotal role in maintaining the UK's reputation for excellence in higher education and research while addressing local and national challenges.

Public-Private Partnerships in HE

Higher education stands as a cornerstone of societal advancement, nurturing intellectual growth, driving innovation, and fuelling economic prosperity. Historically, a clear demarcation separated public and private higher education institutions, each characterised by distinct missions, funding models, and governance structures.

However, the contemporary landscape of HE is undergoing a profound transformation, witnessing a surge in collaborations between public and private higher education institutions. These partnerships, driven by a confluence of factors, are reshaping the roles of both sectors, with significant implications for how we cultivate minds and shape societies.

The Evolving Role of Public Universities and Private Colleges Partnerships

The collaboration between Public Universities and Private Colleges has emerged as a transformative model in higher education, reflecting the increasing need for diverse and inclusive access to higher education (Khawaja, 2024). The evolving roles of these partnerships are shaped by the growing demand for HE, resource constraints faced by public universities, and the agility of private colleges to adapt to market needs (Altbach & Levy, 2005; Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021).

Public Higher Education Institutions (PuHEIs-Universities)

Public universities have traditionally been at the forefront of HE, offering a wide array of programmes and maintaining a strong emphasis on research, academic excellence, and public service. However, with the rising global demand for HE these institutions face challenges such as limited funding, infrastructure constraints, and difficulties in rapidly expanding their offerings (Buckner, 2017). Consequently, public universities are increasingly seeking partnerships to meet these challenges while maintaining their academic standards and research priorities.

Private Higher Education Institutions (PrHEIs-Colleges)

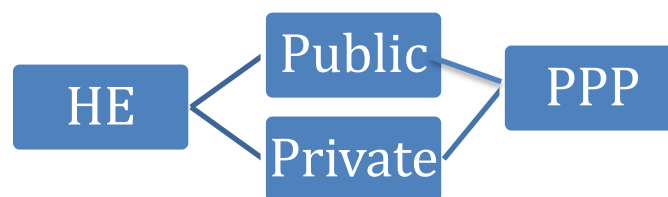
Private colleges, on the other hand, have demonstrated flexibility in responding to emerging market demands, often providing more specialised, industry-focused programmes and alternative learning pathways (Altbach et al., 2009). They excel in creating accessible and affordable educational opportunities. Different types of students, for example, traditional,

non-traditional or mature (Zia et al., 2022), there is no universally accepted definition of a 'mature student' (UK Parliament, 2021). The term broadly refers to individuals pursuing higher education after a period away from formal, full-time education (Qureshi et al., 2020; Zia et al., 2022). Typically, mature students are defined as those aged 21 or older at the commencement of undergraduate studies or 25 and above at the start of postgraduate programmes (Qureshi et al., 2020). This category can include individuals up to pensionable age, reflecting the inclusivity of lifelong learning initiatives in higher education (NUS, 2012). Majority of students are mature at PrHEIs often have greater agility in adopting innovative pedagogies and integrating technology into their operations.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)

The collaboration between public universities and private colleges combines the strengths of both sectors. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) in HE facilitates resource sharing, expand access to HE, and enhance the employability of graduates through industry-aligned curricula. Public universities bring academic rigour, research expertise, and accreditation, while private colleges contribute infrastructure, market adaptability, and community engagement (Levy, 2011).

Figure 01: Evolving Roles in Partnerships



The diagram illustrates the evolving roles within HE, focusing on public and private HE as both are integral part of, HE, and their partnerships. It highlights:

1. **Higher Education:** Serves as the foundation for personal development, societal advancement, and economic growth, with both public and private sectors addressing diverse needs.
2. **Public Higher Education:**
 - Emphasise research and academic excellence, often driving innovation and contributing to global knowledge.
 - Prioritise widening access to education, especially for underserved populations, despite challenges like infrastructure constraints and funding limitations.
3. **Private Higher Education:**
 - Specialise in market-driven education, offering courses tailored to industry requirements and emerging trends.

- Provide flexible and affordable options, catering to students seeking practical, employment-oriented qualifications.

4. Public-Private Partnerships:

- Combine the resources and expertise of both sectors to expand access to education, particularly in underserved regions.
- Foster collaboration in shared infrastructure, faculty exchange, and programme development to align education with market demands.
- Enhance global competitiveness by creating diverse and inclusive academic environments that leverage the strengths of both models.

This representation underscores the pivotal role of partnerships in transforming modern HE systems, ensuring inclusivity, innovation, and responsiveness to societal and economic challenges.

Key drivers of these partnerships include:

- **Increasing Accessibility:** Broadening educational access to non-traditional learners.
- **Social and cultural Development:** Fostering diversity, inclusion, and civic engagement while promoting intercultural understanding and social responsibility.
- **Regional Development:** Contributing to socioeconomic upliftment in local areas.
- **Crime Reduction:** Promoting social inclusion and community engagement to reduce crime rates and foster safer communities.

Increasing Accessibility

One of the critical benefits of these partnerships is their ability to increase accessibility to HE, particularly for non-traditional learners (Zia et al., 2023). These learners, often characterised by diverse backgrounds, professional commitments, or socio-economic challenges, require flexible and inclusive educational opportunities (Khawaja et al., 2022). Partnerships between public universities and private colleges combine the broad reach and infrastructure of public institutions with the market-driven and flexible approach of private entities (Altbach et al., 2009; Levy, 2018). For example, private colleges frequently offer evening, weekend, or online courses tailored to working adults and underserved populations (Qureshi, 2020, Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021). By doing so, these partnerships not only expand enrolment but also contribute to lifelong learning, a cornerstone of the modern knowledge economy (Marginson, 2016).

Public-private partnerships in HE can significantly increase accessibility for non-traditional learners, who often face barriers to participation in traditional educational settings. These learners may include working adults, individuals from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, first-generation students, and those with disabilities.

- **Flexible Learning Options:** Partnerships can facilitate the development and delivery of flexible learning options, such as online courses, evening and weekend classes, and blended learning formats (Qureshi, 2020, Zia et al., 2023). This allows individuals to balance their educational pursuits with work, family, and other commitments (Smith et al., 2022).

- **Targeted Support Services:** Collaborations can enable the provision of targeted support services, such as admission, induction (Zia et al., 2022), academic advising, free English classes, financial aid counselling, and career development programmes, tailored to the unique needs of non-traditional learners (Brown, 2022).
- **Prior Learning Assessment:** Partnerships can facilitate the implementation of prior learning assessment (PLA) policies, which grant academic credit for prior learning experiences gained outside of formal education. This can accelerate degree completion and reduce the cost of education for adult learners (Rose et al., 2023).

Social and Cultural Development

Partnership between public and private HEIs also contribute significantly to social and cultural development. These partnerships facilitate the inclusion of diverse student populations and promote intercultural dialogue, aligning with global goals for sustainable development. Public-private collaborations often host joint research projects, cultural events, and community outreach programmes that enrich the societal fabric. For instance, partnerships can lead to the co-creation of curricula that emphasise ethics, social responsibility, and civic engagement, fostering a generation of graduates attuned to the needs of their communities (Teixeira et al., 2019). The resulting social capital strengthens community ties and promotes inclusive societal growth.

Public-private partnerships can contribute to social and cultural development by fostering diversity and inclusion in higher education, promoting civic engagement, and facilitating intercultural understanding.

HEIs are central to social and cultural development, promoting values that enhance social cohesion, civic engagement, and cultural continuity. Through rigorous academic inquiry and interaction with diverse perspectives, HEIs encourage critical thinking, empathy, and respect for diversity—qualities essential to a cohesive and inclusive society. By fostering these values, HEIs contribute to a well-informed citizenry equipped to engage thoughtfully with complex social and political issues. Research indicates that individuals with HE are more likely to participate in democratic processes, volunteer, and engage in community service, which strengthens social bonds and supports the democratic fabric of society (Putnam, 1997; Mouritsen, 2003, Campbell & Horowitz, 2016). These aspects of civic engagement, cultivated within educational environments, empower individuals to contribute positively to societal well-being.

- **Diverse Learning Environments:** Partnerships can create more diverse learning environments by attracting students from a wider range of backgrounds and experiences. This can enrich the educational experience for all students and promote cross-cultural understanding (Johnson et al., 2018).
- **Community Engagement:** Collaborations can encourage community engagement by connecting students and faculty with local organizations and initiatives. This can foster civic responsibility and contribute to social and cultural development in the surrounding community (Rodríguez-Zurita et al., 2024).

- **Global Perspectives:** Partnerships can facilitate the integration of global perspectives into the curriculum, preparing students to navigate an increasingly interconnected world. This can promote intercultural understanding and contribute to a more tolerant and inclusive society (Wilczewski, et al., 2024).

Regional Development

Another significant benefit of public-private partnerships in HE is their impact on regional development. These partnerships act as catalysts for local economic growth by creating employment opportunities, fostering innovation, and addressing skill gaps in the workforce (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). For instance, the establishment of educational campuses in underserved regions can stimulate the local economy through direct investment and indirect benefits such as increased demand for housing and services (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Public-private partnerships in higher education can play a vital role in regional development by promoting economic growth, workforce development, and community revitalisation.

- **Knowledge Transfer:** Partnerships can facilitate the transfer of knowledge and technology from universities to local businesses and industries, stimulating innovation and economic growth (Anderson, 2020).
- **Workforce Development:** Collaborations can align educational programmes with the needs of local employers, ensuring that graduates have the skills and knowledge required to succeed in the regional workforce. This can reduce unemployment and contribute to economic prosperity (Rodriguez & Cavallo, 2024).
- **Community Revitalisation:** Partnerships can contribute to community revitalisation by attracting students and faculty to the region, supporting local businesses, and contributing to the cultural vibrancy of the community (Taylor, 2023).

Public-private partnership (PPP) in HE can resolve several issues related to education provision, financing, management, access, and quality (Mgaiwa & Poncian, 2016).

Shaping Minds and Societies: Broader Societal Impact

The impact of public-private partnerships in HE extends beyond the individual student, shaping societies in profound ways:

Shaping Minds

HEIs also play a crucial role in promoting tolerance and understanding, offering environments where students encounter diverse perspectives and learn to approach complex issues with an open mind. This exposure to different viewpoints has been shown to reduce prejudice and promote inclusivity, which is vital in today's increasingly multicultural societies. Studies have found that HE not only enhances individuals' understanding of social and cultural diversity but also fosters a commitment to social justice and equity (Allport, 1954; Bowman, 2013). These values, nurtured within academic contexts, equip graduates to become advocates for inclusivity and social reform in their communities, contributing to broader societal goals of equity and cohesion.

*“...Education outcomes comprise knowledge and skills and attitudes and values.
Higher education therefore contributes both to national economic performance and
to the promotion of core values, and thus has a significant cultural dimension”
(Barr, 2012: 300).*

Academically, this statement underscores the multidimensional role of HE in shaping not only the intellectual capabilities of individuals but also their ethical and social frameworks. Barr argues that education outcomes encompass not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also the development of attitudes and values. This broader perspective recognises that HE fosters critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and ethical reasoning, shaping individuals into well-rounded citizens

The acquisition of knowledge and skills equips graduates with the tools needed to drive innovation, productivity, and economic growth, directly impacting national competitiveness in a globalised economy (Oviawe & Uwameiye, 2020). Meanwhile, the cultivation of attitudes and values plays a critical role in fostering civic engagement, social responsibility, and cultural enrichment, aligning with the broader societal goals of HE.

HEIs serve as platforms for developing critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration, which are essential for addressing complex societal challenges. Furthermore, they provide a space for ethical discourse, promoting values such as equality, sustainability, and global citizenship. This dual contribution to economic development and cultural advancement reflects the transformative potential of HE, as it bridges technical expertise with moral and social consciousness (Marginson, 2010, 2016).

Barr’s perspective highlights the intrinsic link between education and society, positioning HE as a cornerstone of national development that transcends mere economic metrics. It stresses the importance of integrating academic, professional, and ethical dimensions into the educational experience, thereby producing graduates who are both skilled professionals and responsible global citizens.

In sum, HEIs not only advance knowledge and skills but also nurture social and cultural capital, preparing individuals to engage meaningfully with society and contribute to the common good. By fostering critical thinking, inclusivity, and cultural preservation, universities enhance social cohesion and equip individuals with the tools needed for responsible citizenship in an interconnected world.

Crime Reduction

Several studies focusing specifically on the UK find a positive correlation between education attainment and lower crime rates (Brennan et al., 2016).

Machin et al. (2011) find that criminal activity is negatively associated with higher levels of education, quantifying the social benefit resulting from crime reduction that would follow from a 1% reduction in the percentage of individuals with no education qualifications. The potential for higher education to produce a significant social benefit by reducing crime is also found in Feinstein, et al. (2008) who show how, among other effects, graduates are overall the least likely to commit crimes. A more fine-grained analysis (in terms of the type

of crime that higher education has a stronger impact on) is presented in Sabates (2008). It is found that the increase in educational attainment between cohorts is associated with reductions (at decreasing rates) in conviction rates for most offences (burglary, theft, criminal damage and drug-related offences) but not for violent crime. The average increase in educational attainment between cohorts is associated with 0.106% drop in average conviction rate, but while the decrease occurs for most offences (burglary, theft, criminal damage and drug-related offences) but violent crime conviction rate is not affected.

A Case Study of Partnership: Oxford Business College

Oxford Business College (OBC) has established itself as a leading independent provider of higher education, forging strong partnerships with renowned UK PuHEIs.

Oxford Business College (OBC) is a private institution for higher education located in Oxford, England. Established in 1985, OBC offers a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs in business and management. The college is known for its focus on providing students with practical skills and knowledge relevant to the business world. OBC is a member of the Independent Higher Education (IHE)

Partnerships and Recognition OBC has established partnerships with several reputable universities, including Buckinghamshire New University, Ravensbourne University London, and The University of West London. These partnerships enable OBC students to earn degrees from these recognized institutions. In 2023, one of OBC's senior staff members received the Rising Star Award from IHE, further demonstrating the college's commitment to academic excellence.

Evolving Roles in Public and Private Higher Education Partnerships

OBC's partnerships with public universities exemplify the evolving nature of higher education in the UK. These collaborations allow private institutions like OBC to offer accredited degrees while leveraging the resources and expertise of established universities. This model benefits students by providing them with diverse learning opportunities and pathways to success.

The Impact of OBC's Nottingham Campus on Community Development

The development of OBC's Nottingham campus in September 2021 has had a profound impact on the local community. According to Nottinghamshire Police, the St Ann's area, where the campus is located, has experienced an 8% overall reduction in crime since the campus opened (FE News, 2024). This significant decrease can be attributed to several factors:

- **Increased Foot Traffic:** The presence of students and staff on campus has led to increased foot traffic in the area, deterring criminal activity.
- **Positive Community Impact:** OBC students and staff have engaged in various community initiatives, contributing to the overall well-being of the neighbourhood.
- **Economic Boost:** The campus has generated economic activity, creating jobs and attracting investment to the area.

The St Ann's community has previously grappled with issues related to drug-taking and increased anti-social behaviour.

- **Overall crime:** An 8% drop in crime in the St Ann's area where the college is located
- **Muggings:** A 73% reduction in muggings
- **Antisocial behaviour:** A 47% decrease in antisocial behaviour
- **Vehicle and bike thefts:** A 28% reduction in vehicle and bike thefts

The establishment of Oxford Business College's campus in the St Ann's area has contributed significantly to the social revitalization of the community. This transformation underscores the broader role that higher education institutions can play in fostering community development and safety. The marked reductions in crime, such as the 73% decline in muggings and the 47% decrease in antisocial behaviour, highlight the positive ripple effects of educational investment in historically underserved areas. By creating opportunities for education and employment, and by attracting a diverse cohort of students and staff, the college has helped reshape the social dynamics of the neighbourhood. These outcomes align with research emphasizing the role of higher education in promoting social cohesion, reducing inequalities, and supporting the sustainable development of urban communities. The success of the St Ann's campus provides a compelling case study for the strategic alignment of educational institutions with community development goals.

Conclusion

The evolving landscape of higher education is characterized by a growing convergence between public and private institutions. This trend is exemplified by Oxford Business College's partnerships with public universities, which offer a compelling model for the future of education. These partnerships offer immense potential to enhance the quality and relevance of education, drive innovation, and contribute to societal progress. They allow institutions to share resources, expertise, and best practices, ultimately benefiting students and communities alike.

However, it is crucial to navigate the associated challenges and ethical considerations with care. These collaborations must prioritize accessibility and affordability, ensuring that they do not exacerbate existing inequalities in access to higher education. Additionally, maintaining academic integrity and institutional autonomy is essential to preserve the core values of higher education.

By embracing innovation and collaboration, while upholding core values of academic freedom, social responsibility, and equity, universities can continue to play a vital role in shaping minds and societies in the 21st century. As these partnerships continue to evolve, ongoing dialogue, research, and critical reflection will be essential to maximize their benefits and ensure that they contribute to a more equitable, sustainable, and prosperous future for all.

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About the Author

Professor Sarwar Khawaja

Chairman, Business Development

SK-Research-Oxford Business College, UK

Sarwar Khawaja is the founder of SK HUB, Chairman of the Executive Board at Oxford Business College and the Chairman and CEO of Ealing College Upper School. Sarwar holds an Oxford High-Performance Leadership Programme at the University of Oxford—Said Business School. Recently he is appointed as a distinguished Professor of Practice in Business Administration by Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan. With a robust skill set that includes Lesson Planning, Semiotics, Tutoring, Training, Educational Leadership, and more, he contributes valuable insights to the industry. Sarwar has written more than 50 research papers published in reputable peer-reviewed journals. He has over three decades of experience leading and transforming educational institutions in the UK and abroad. He is an accomplished British educationist, thought leader, sociopreneur, and philanthropist renowned for his significant contributions to social justice and financial inclusion. As an Honorary Professor of Business Management at the Małopolska J. Dietl University in Krakow, Poland, Khawaja adds another feather to his cap, bridging the worlds of academia and social entrepreneurship. As the Chairman of Akhuwat UK Trust, over four million underprivileged individuals in Pakistan have been empowered through interest-free microfinance initiatives. His pioneering model, based on respect and dignity, is a testament to his belief that financial inclusion should be a universal right. For more information, please visit his website:

<https://ksarwar.com>

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