

THE LIFELONG LEARNER REIMAGINED

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Thank you for attending this launch event of the Lifelong Education Commission at ResPublica. We have an excellent panel of speakers who I am delighted can be with us today, including Professor Julia Black, the President-Elect of the British Academy, Professor Edward Peck, Vice Chancellor of Nottingham Trent University, David Hughes, the Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges, and Professor David Latchman, Master of Birkbeck College. I am extremely grateful for their time and contributions.

Today, 19 February, marks the third anniversary since the then Prime Minister Theresa May launched the Post-18 Review. Known eponymously as the Augar Review, it reported back in May 2019, with the government's interim response finally published just over three weeks ago.

Three years ago, speaking at Derby College, you may recall that the Prime Minister warned against “outdated attitudes” that allowed academic qualifications to be viewed more favourably than technical ones, and that a new review would look at “the whole post-18 education sector in the round, breaking down false boundaries between further and higher education, to create a system which is truly joined up.”

In the past three years, much has already been announced that seeks to incentivise further and technical education routes, with the establishment of T-Levels, the announcement in Budget 2020 of £1.8 billion capital funding for Further Education colleges, £3 billion for a National Skills Fund, in addition to the Lifetime Learning Allowance and the Lifetime Skills Guarantee that is set to launch by 2025.

These policy and funding announcements are extremely welcome and point strongly to a clear direction backed by investment, of where the government intends to travel.

There is a danger, however, that in the narrow focus of post-18 education being defined as simply reinvestment in only Further Education alone, we will seek to answer tomorrow's challenges with yesterday's solutions, and compound the siloed nature of post-18 provision that three years ago Theresa May sought to end.

Yes more Further Education is needed, but it should not be the sole focus of the government's attention, if it wishes to level up skills across the entire UK population and create an education system that delivers the outcomes that we need it to for the 2020s and beyond.

Post-18 Education provision must be as ambitious as the aspirations of those adults seeking to retrain and reskill, as well as seeking to provide opportunity to those who are denied career progression due to low skills. Its ambition must be felt not merely in Further Education, nor apprenticeship provision, but in Higher Education also, and in the re-imagining of what flexible learning can look like for those in work, or indeed those out of work, yet with commitments that make full time or linear forms of study impossible.

In the past, education reform has been at its best when it has been boldest. And it has been at its boldest when it seeks to empower the individual learners themselves, creating new freedoms to learn and access to qualifications previously unavailable.

Whether Harold Wilson's Open University, Keith Joseph's shift from O-level to GCSE provision, or Ken Baker's reform of Polytechnics to achieve full university status, the driver of success has not been to maintain or enhance the status quo, but to fundamentally reappraise it, to challenge its purpose and the limited outcomes it delivers, and to bend the arc of reform towards the outcomes we must achieve for the future.

Today, three years seems an even longer time ago than perhaps it might if the normal ebbs and flows of the political current were present. The COVID pandemic and its future impact, both economic and societal, will be the defining feature that shapes the 2020s.

The sheer scale of change to the workforce that will result from the pandemic has yet to be felt, but its impact will not be limited to increased unemployment. Entire sectors face the threat of either closure or at least restructuring and downsizing. Thousands of people now face having to change their career. Others may have decided, in the face of changing working patterns, that this is also the time for a career change.

The demand for education from what in the past has been depressingly termed ‘mature learners’, will be unprecedented. Added to this the demographic increase in the number of post-18 students that will be an important feature of the 2020s education landscape, demand for learning will be unprecedented. Can we step up to meet and match that demand?

To reach all learners, it is clear that we will need to invest in a wider lifelong approach to education that places equal importance to part-time, flexible learning, an approach that above all works for the individual learner, and not merely the needs of the current system.

To do this, we need a reimagining of post-18 education reform in the terms I have spoken: a reimagining that doesn’t accept merely an expansion of the status quo, but seeks to first recognise the scale of the change coming, to then understand the nature of the challenge that presents, and to recognise the outcomes that must be achieved.

To help contribute to this reimagining, today, alongside ResPublica, I am pleased to launch the new Lifelong Education Commission. The Commission will exist not simply as a one off policy report, but rather as an organisation that will seek to continue to produce multiple reports and papers, seeking to influence the policy debate on what Lifelong Education as the driver for a new vision of post-18 education has the potential to achieve, not only by breaking down false institutional boundaries and creating a joined-up system, but by reimagining how qualifications and funding reform can increase the number of learners, and deliver successful learner outcomes.

I recognise that there is no one single vision of post-18 education, yet I hope the panel discussion today, with their vast experience in a range of different yet complementary areas of focus, can lead to an appraisal of the areas of focus which the Commission should seek to investigate for the future.

The Commission will establish itself with the appointment of number of commissioners, who will lead on a specific area of focus in turn, leading to a report and recommendations for reform. Commissioners will be appointed for the duration of each report.

The first of these reports will look at flexible learning and how qualification and funding reform should be expanded to ensure that all learners can access the opportunity to reskill, particularly for mature and part-time learners, for whom the Lifetime Skills Guarantee may not currently apply.

Mature and part-time learners are an area of policy that receives little focus yet deserves close attention. While the focus in the media tends to assume all students are in their early 20s, this ignores the fact that in 2020, 506,495 undergraduate students were 30+, and another 289,360 aged between 25-30.

Meanwhile, the number of undergraduate students in part-time study has dropped from 32,980 to 19,945 in the past five years, with the number of part-time postgraduate students dropping in the past year by nearly 10,000 to 74,555. The pattern of decline in part-time study is also mirrored in the reduction in wider Adult

Community Learning, with 490,300 students accessing the Adult Education Budget, a 32% reduction since 2009.

The right to flexible learning, and the creation of modular based learning approaches, which will see a shift to the funding of courses, rather than qualifications, has the potential to transform access to learning opportunities. Yet how can these opportunities be maximised, and what barriers need to be prevented from emerging in the first place?

In the past, the funding of single modules has been disincentivised under the credit scoring system tied to access to student finance. This needs to change, along with the regulatory burden of metrics that prevent open access institutions, often with different added value approaches, from being recognised effectively in the TEF or OfS regulations. We will not be able to achieve granularity within qualifications unless a fine-grained approach is taken to flexible qualifications.

Qualification reform at levels 4 and 5 has long been a priority for the government, and I believe there is an exciting opportunity for this agenda to draw together both HE and FE into new forms of Higher Technical Education provision, where standards will drive new structures and new ways for colleges and universities to work closely together. The civic role of universities to reach beyond their traditional cohorts is, I would suggest, an exciting and innovative opportunity to not only do things differently, but to also help lead this agenda. In turn, this can help to strengthen the reputation and purpose of universities within their local communities.

Yet how can we ensure these reforms reach as many learners already in the workplace as possible? The Lifetime Skills Guarantee seeks to address the current situation of 37% of the population aged 25 who only have level 2 or below qualifications, yet there are still 26% of 25 year olds who have reached level 3, yet need to access level 4 or 5 qualifications to progress, yet only 4% of 25 year olds have actually done so. If this is the situation at 25, what about those adults at 30, 35, 40 and beyond, whose skill level may be at level 3 yet find themselves unable to progress? How can we address their needs, needs that require not only greater flexibility but an understanding of what part-time provision should encompass? Not least childcare concerns, that currently affect 36% of part-time undergraduate learners, compared with 9% full time, yet who do not have access to any parents learning allowance or childcare grant.

There are many more examples of inflexibility that point to an institutional bias that favours the course or qualification and its design over the learner. Degree Apprenticeships are another case, where time and time again, I was told of the constraints in effective delivery of these fantastic opportunities, due to lack of flexibility in regulation. Then there is the clear barrier of the Equivalent or Lower Qualification rule, that automatically rules out participation of over a third of the workforce from accessing retraining or reskilling, due to the handicap of their graduate status. A thorough review of what prevents individuals from accessing opportunities needs to ensue, if we are to allow the population access to reskill at scale, leaving no one behind.

At the same time, the pandemic has demonstrated how, in moments of crisis, the education sector has been able to step up and deliver blended and online learning to pupils and students, possibly delivering a decade's worth of change within a few months. We cannot lose or miss the opportunity to embed this learning and the opportunity that EdTech and new means of establishing communications and working patterns has on learning. It's not just about looking at what might be the so-called 'new normal', but to recognise how far we have come over the past year and how this can liberate distance learning, and with it the chance to open up

new forms of education for lifelong education, for the future. It is a chance to do things differently that must be seized.

Just as we need to look again at what barriers within the learning system, whether legislative or regulatory, qualification based, or institutional, are preventing increased access to educational opportunity, or the need to look again at the opportunities for change that technology and remote learning can provide, so too we will need to address what is, and always will be, the greatest barrier to uptake: finance.

The introduction of postgraduate loans in 2017 demonstrates the powerful lever that finance has in releasing untapped educational ambition, with the number of taught master's students increasing from 164,545 in 2016 to 209,470 in 2020. Our student finance system has also made possible increased access to higher education on a scale perhaps unimaginable even to Harold Wilson.

The question of potential access to student finance both for further education provision, and flexible learning provision, is understandably a controversial topic, just as the issue of student finance for higher education. Yet how one pays is just as important as who pays. And it is a question that will not go away, especially with the student loan book estimated to rise from £140 billion in 2020 to £560 billion by the middle of the century. How we finance all post-18 education in the future must also be re-evaluated, if it is to both be sustainable and indeed equitable.

For currently, for an individual in higher education on Plan 2, with £50,000 worth of debt, even with a graduate starting salary of £28,500, rising to £56,900 over 30 years, they will never pay off their loan, with the eventual interest rate of 5.6% accruing eventual debt of £113,000. Nevermind that they would never pay off their debt, having seen it cancelled after reaching the repayment threshold, the eye-watering fact is that interest itself becomes 67.8% of the total debt. Last year, a third-year student will have had £1680 added to their existing debt through the application of interest alone.

If there is to be an expansion of student finance into post-18 education, the issue of the interest rate on student 'loans' must be looked at. At 5.6%, even with the taper, it remains out of all proportion with the current 0.25% rate. Now, with this debt placed on the government's balance sheet following the ONS decision, a revaluation of the interest rate for student loans would seem sensible, for the government's twin goals of improving access to education and to address the actual size of the debt owed itself.

Further to this, the Sutton Trust have demonstrated that for the most deprived 40% of students, average debt is nearly £52,000, compared to £38,400 for the top 20%, driven by access to maintenance loans. Maintenance loans now make up £7 billion of the £17 billion borrowed each year, up from £5 billion four years ago. Returning to a system of means-tested grants would help encourage learners to access post-18 education, particularly for those from backgrounds for which debt, regardless of how it actually accrues and whether it is paid off, will be viewed as a disincentive and a barrier to reskill.

At the same time, we should be investigating new methods of funding reskilling and upskilling might take place. The success of R&D tax credits in generating this activity points to an opportunity for how companies could be rewarded for investing in the human capital of their employers, especially given the opportunity to close the productivity gap that lifelong learning might offer.

The role of the state is also at question here. Elsewhere, I've written about the state acting as venture capitalist in order to revolutionise R&D activity, particularly in new technologies. How can the state demonstrate a return on investment when it comes to what should be its greatest venture, the knowledge capital of its future population?

Much talk has been made of creating a U.K. along the lines of a ‘German system’- helping to foster a manufacturing and industrial base that creates in turn greater national capacity and resilience. But even if this were to happen, are we really saying that we can turn what would need to be the majority of the population towards manufacturing? And should the state itself be involved in actively planning out strategic careers in sectors for its population?

The risk is that in attempting both, we lose the ability to be agile in anticipating the future direction of the world of work for the twenty first century. I know that this is an area of focus that ResPublica has worked on in the past, with its Skills For Jobs that Don’t Yet Exist report, but this will be a vitally important part of the future lifelong learning agenda. If we are to place our faith in education to deliver, we need to be confident what outcomes reskilling and upskilling is meant to achieve. The role of subjects such as the humanities, essential for building better communication, resilience and adaptability to change, or languages— the lack of which costs the UK supposedly over 3% of GDP in lost business opportunities and which could benefit enormously from a modular approach— cannot be left aside in the debate around enhancing national productivity, yet do not always fit into a traditional skills approach to regeneration. Again, we must be careful not to seek twentieth century solutions for a future, as we are all too painfully aware, we cannot predict let alone micro-manage.

There are no easy options, but nevertheless there are options that will deliver an expansion of post-18 education based around the challenges and outcomes that have already been identified. I hope that with your help, and indeed the help of the post-18 education community, both in the HE and FE sector and indeed employers and skills organisations, to work with this new Lifelong Education Commission, we will demonstrate the enormous potential for an expansion of lifelong education provision that can transform the UK economy, if the right freedoms to learn are established and the barriers to accessing and achieving these are removed.