

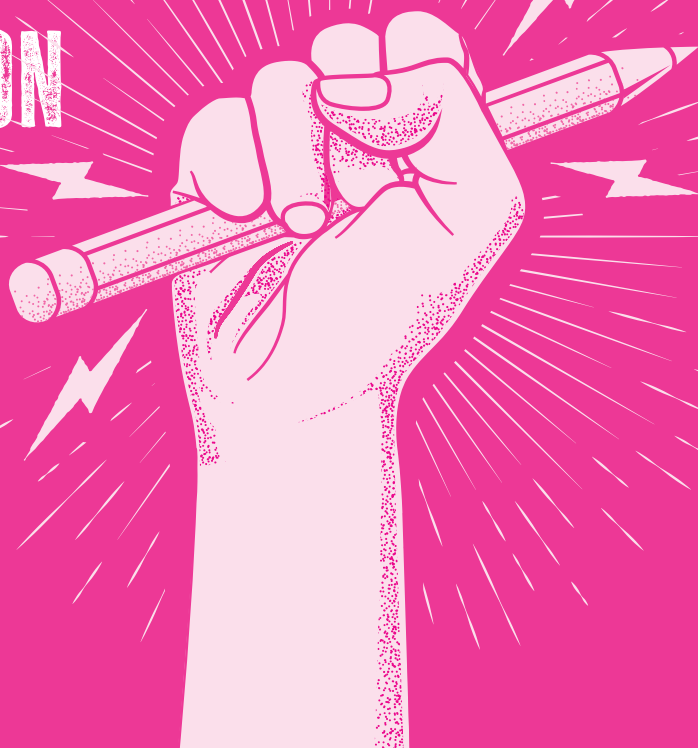
CHANGING LIVES AND TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES: HARNESSING THE POWER OF POST-COMPULSORY EDUCATION

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FOREWORD

A new government is a moment of possibility. It provides an opportunity to turn the tide on years of austerity and the so-called ‘reforms’ of public services that have served only to cut costs and make essential services operate like private businesses.

Over the summer we witnessed in our communities the devastating consequences of neglect and decline as far right and fascist organisers sought to exploit people’s feelings of frustration and isolation, in particular by scapegoating minority and racialised communities.

There can be no doubt the new government faces enormous challenges. However, there can be no rebuilding our social fabric without recognising, and supporting, the work of the college, higher and adult education sectors. In their quite different ways, each of these different elements of our education system provide the possibility of transformative change – not just for individuals but for whole communities.

In this short publication three distinguished experts, each with considerable expertise across the post-compulsory education sector, set out an agenda for ambitious change in colleges, universities and adult education. Their analysis makes clear the current system is broken – starved of funding and for years forcing educational institutions to compete rather than collaborate. They make a powerful case for increased investment, both now and in the longer term. They also make clear that across the further, higher and adult education sectors there is a need for new governance arrangements that bring coherence and co-ordination to fragmented systems, but are also rooted in community priorities and democratic

governance. Above all they make the case for a new vision for post-compulsory education that supports students to become active agents in shaping their own lives – an education that not only instructs, but that inspires. An education that replaces isolation and alienation with hope and the prospect of liberation.

This is an education service that can change lives and transform communities.

It is an education service that UCU members desperately want to be part of. One that makes a positive difference and brings about real social change.

Sadly, it is not the education service that UCU members have felt part of. All too often those working in the post-compulsory sectors have been held back from doing the work they want to do, and are qualified to do, because basic working conditions prevent them from doing so. Workloads have been rising consistently, and are not sustainable – a result of escalating demands, often driven by arcane and excessive accountability requirements. Too often professional autonomy and creativity are stifled by expectations for standardisation and uniformity. The joy of learning, and the joy of working with students on a journey of discovery are stifled. At the same time salaries are uncompetitive, pay gaps sap morale and casualised contracts are used routinely to pass the costs of uncertainty onto employees.

This publication highlights important ways we can begin to bring about the change that is urgently needed. It is not a UCU policy document, and we may not agree with every statement – but UCU is proud to publish and promote this booklet as an important contribution to a debate that we all need to engage in – how to harness the extraordinary power that exists within our post-compulsory education sector if only the conditions are created to enable this to happen? In publishing this booklet we invite you to join in the debate about the future.

Any process of transformation is necessarily a long term project. Many of the changes envisaged in this booklet will require time. But recognising the need for a long term project does not obviate the need for urgent and immediate action. The two are not inconsistent. The scale of the challenges we face demand ambition. As the authors of this report indicate, ‘more of the same’ cannot be an option.

The refugee mother desperate to make a new life for her and her children, the prisoner eager to turn around a life of repeat offending, or the first generation university student who does not know what to expect at the start of term but is nervous and excited in equal measure all need action now. They deserve the opportunity to transform their lives, and members of UCU stand ready to help them do it.

Alongside tackling poverty and inequality education is key to how we can change lives and transform communities – we all know how important this is. But it will only happen when we recognise our post-compulsory education systems are an investment, not a cost. It’s time to invest to transform.



Jo Grady
UCU General Secretary



**UCU IS PROUD TO PUBLISH AND PROMOTE THIS BOOKLET
AS AN IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTION TO A DEBATE THAT
WE ALL NEED TO ENGAGE IN.**

INTRODUCTION

The country has a new government and it has inherited a mess. Britain feels broken. Years of austerity have pared our social infrastructure to the bone and public services are desperate for support.

Under these circumstances we should not be surprised when economic hardship leads to social collapse. Communities are under pressure and many people's living standards have declined in real terms, while desperately needed public services are unable to meet demand.

Those who seek to encourage division have stepped into these difficult spaces using social media platforms and a willingness to share hate speech, lies and conspiracy theories to foment xenophobia and create fear. Far right and fascist narratives and violence this summer provides the most graphic illustration of a society that is breaking. The crises that we face are not only economic, environmental and social – they represent a growing crisis of democracy.

The challenges that the new government faces are complex and have many causes, and education cannot provide all the answers, but in this publication we argue that any solution to the problems we face must involve further, higher and adult education. We make the case for transformative change across these sectors: change that links essential investment to a much broader and radical vision of the purposes of education. In our view, this level of ambition is what the scale of our problems requires.

From the outset however, we must recognise that the capacity of further, higher and adult education to respond these challenges has been weakened by years of austerity, and ill-conceived ideologically-driven reforms that have fractured educational institutions and made

co-ordination between them almost impossible. Although everywhere in the UK is affected, this picture is somewhat more positive in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where local governments continue to play an important role in shaping local provision.

From a student perspective, education is too often reduced to an instrumental and individualised market transaction, a competition to secure qualifications and credentials to gain advantage in the labour market. Students are set targets, constantly measured and endlessly compared and ranked against each other. Funding systems create a mindset of personal cost-benefit analysis, where many students are forced to consider whether studying will provide a return on investment. It is a system that favours those who already have resources or privilege, and who can afford to exercise choice. It is also a system that reproduces and reinforces class, racial and gender inequalities and it is founded on a narrow and impoverished vision of what education can and should be.

In this short publication we make a case for a much more ambitious and optimistic vision of education. Our particular emphasis is on the further, higher and adult education sectors, in all their diverse forms, including prison education. We believe they can contribute to the social renewal and reconstruction that the country desperately needs.

Clearly education plays a vital role in preparing people for work, but we also make the case

for a much broader vision of education, one that allows people to take advantage of all the opportunities available to them, to understand the complex world they live in, and to realise their own potential to contribute to, and shape, a good society. We must go beyond the idea that education is simply an individual investment and reimagine an education which is genuinely transformative, often with an uncertain destination. This vision sees learning as a social process, values its societal benefits, and understands the contribution education makes to strengthening democratic practices.

We present short summaries of the key issues facing the further, higher and adult education sectors, and we make practical suggestions about the steps necessary to bring about transformative change. Each of these three sectors faces its own specific challenges, and each makes its own distinctive contribution. However, across all these analyses we highlight three common purposes, which we argue are foundational to the type of transformative change we see as essential.

• EDUCATION FOR EQUALITY

Growing inequalities of class, race and gender have fractured our society and contributed directly to the social problems that are more and more visible. Material poverty and social disengagement are at crisis levels. Hoping for a little more ‘social mobility’ or ‘meritocracy’ in this grossly unequal society does not address the underlying unequal distribution of wealth and power. If the further, higher and adult education sectors are to reduce, and not reinforce, inequality, they need to be organised differently. Above all, they need to be resourced differently. In this booklet we set out a raft of measures that can help tackle inequalities, in all their diverse and intersectional forms – but these initiatives need resourcing, and resourcing needs to be redistributive.

• EDUCATION FOR COMMUNITY

The founders of the welfare state were very clear that quality of life depended on secure universal access to key public services – health, education, housing and income support in times of need. These were seen as rights of citizenship. Access should not be determined by personal resources, nor should provision and availability depend on the vagaries of the market. Social security, in its broadest sense, arose from the certainty that foundational services could be available to all. The insecurity of the market economy was offset, in part, by the security of the welfare state. We have lost sight of these values and the welfare state now replicates all the insecurities of the market. Access to education beyond the age of 16 is now riddled with insecurities and inequalities. We present a spirited defence of the public in education as essential to both representing and building community. The country needs to return to public service values and recognise what is important about universal social provision. Public education should not have to defer to, or seek to mimic, private sector practices but should celebrate what is best about services based on public values.

• EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

It shouldn’t be controversial to argue that education is essential to underpin democracy and support a high level of political literacy and participation. We cannot educate for democracy if education itself is not experienced as democratic. All the sectors represented in this booklet have retreated from democratic and participatory forms of governance, as arrangements have become increasingly technical, bureaucratic and opaque. The voices of students, employees and the community have been marginalised, while governance has been largely reduced to the local delivery of priorities set elsewhere. This leads to the risk of educational institutions becoming detached from their communities:

in the community, but not of the community. We argue that democracy in education is an important principle; democratic governance in practice is what connects public services to their communities and those communities should have a say in their local public services. Without democratic engagement public institutions become detached from communities, eroding people's confidence and the fabric of social life.

For many years public policy for further, higher and adult education has been characterised by a narrow vision and a poverty of ambition. In our view this has contributed to the current social malaise. People have only limited access to a narrow range of educational opportunities with access still defined by class, race, gender and (dis)ability. Educational institutions are under pressure and are less able to respond to the communities they are there to serve. Education is experienced as an individualised transaction with the risk that it reproduces inequalities and alienates rather than liberates.

We believe that the further, higher and adult education sectors can make a tremendous contribution to reversing the problems generated by years of austerity and social fragmentation. But this cannot be done through piecemeal reform and without resources. More of the same only leads to more of the same – and that is simply not sustainable.

The election of a new mission-led government should be a moment of hope and possibility. Inevitably there are resource constraints, but these cannot be allowed to dilute our commitment to transformative change. As well as urgent investment today, we need a broader, more inspiring vision of what further, higher and adult education could be tomorrow. Narrow instrumentalism is not generating the rich educational outcomes people want.

Instruction without inspiration will always offer only a fraction of what is possible.

It is time for the labour movement to rediscover the reforming zeal of some of its most important figures – from Ellen Wilkinson to Raymond Williams. We cannot allow ourselves to be confined by the impoverished thinking of the recent past. We hope that our analysis will help encourage more thought and discussion. Above all, we hope the ideas we set out here will lead to action – in this parliament and beyond. The need for action is urgent and immediate, but the full scale of the changes we need will take time. Bringing together immediate action with a long-term vision is what will bring about the transformative change we need.



WE BELIEVE THAT THE FURTHER, HIGHER AND ADULT EDUCATION SECTORS CAN MAKE A TREMENDOUS CONTRIBUTION TO REVERSING THE PROBLEMS GENERATED BY YEARS OF AUSTERITY AND SOCIAL FRAGMENTATION.

TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM FOR ALL 16-18 YEAR OLDS

For many young people, the current 16-18 education system is not working and needs urgent reform, particularly in England. The low level of funding for 16-18 study means that programmes are narrower and more limited than those of upper secondary education in most other developed countries.

A minority of successful students who leave school with high grades can navigate their way through this, but the majority don't benefit from this phase of education as much as they should. Inequalities are reproduced and reinforced.

Over half of all publicly-funded students aged 16-18 are studying in Further Education or Sixth Form Colleges. Colleges serve a more representative cross section of the population than school sixth forms and on average their students face more barriers to success. The College sector is therefore central to tackling the structural inequalities that blight our society and communities. However, in comparison with schools and universities, it has historically been – and remains – particularly underfunded.

COLLEGE SECTOR CHALLENGES

Colleges are very committed to meeting the needs of all young people and helping to overcome the impacts of social inequalities, but they face major challenges in doing so.

There can be no escaping the inadequacy of funding for 16-18 study, particularly compared to secondary or higher education. This funding gap inevitably impacts on the range and size of programmes which can be offered. It also means the sector struggles to provide competitive

pay levels and working conditions, compared to other sectors and this contributes to the crisis in recruitment and retention. Initiatives in Scotland and Wales (and, hopefully, soon in Northern Ireland) to close pay gaps between the further education and other sectors are to be welcomed, but need to be replicated across all four nations.

The sector has also been subjected to a raft of market and qualification reforms which militate against coherence in the system and tend to reinforce inequalities. 16-18 programmes are narrower and pathways more segregated than in most other comparable countries. More selective or 'academic' providers are in an unequal competition with colleges which have a more inclusive, comprehensive intake. The options available to young people are defined more by the qualifications available in their locality and the selectivity of different providers than by the need for a coherent overall study programme, and this often leads to a postcode lottery of choices which simply reproduces existing inequalities.

Often those from marginalised and racialised communities are most impacted, with consequences that in turn widen the inequalities in higher education. Young people are expected to make choices at 16, or even younger, which

can be difficult to reverse later. These problems are compounded by a ‘binary’ approach defining routes and qualifications as either ‘academic’ and ‘technical’. 16-18 programmes, and the students themselves are categorised using this binary definition which limits options and disadvantages many. Incoherent or partial reform, such as the current defunding of some Applied General qualifications (eg: BTECs) which overlap with T Levels. create new gaps in provision and further deepens inequalities.

Within the system, there are many forms of selection and segregation with a range of different providers of different sizes, with different offers, applying more or less exclusive entry requirements, all operating in a competitive market with little coordination. This gives an illusion of ‘choice’ but often works against equality, efficiency, sufficiency and quality of provision. It restricts real choice and narrows options.

Some of the issues identified above arise from problems embedded in the qualification system. We hope that these can begin to be addressed by the Curriculum and Assessment Review (which includes 16-18 provision) announced by Bridget Phillipson and chaired by Professor Becky Francis. Although the review’s brief is limited in scope, it does offer the opportunity to start addressing some of the issues we identify here.

Beyond this, there is also a broader democratic deficit in the system resulting from numerous structural reforms that have taken place over many years. The reality is that there is very little local or sub-regional coordination of 16-18 provision, with problems of incoherence exacerbated by wasteful inter-institution competition and hierarchies of status. Meaningful democratic input in decision making is conspicuously absent and this leads to both

inefficiencies and inequalities. For example, some courses which attract lower numbers, and subjects such as performing arts or languages, are at risk because students are dispersed across different providers.

All these issues, combined with the impact of poverty, growing material inequality as well as racism, classism and sexism are narrowing opportunities and widening achievement gaps.

LOOKING FORWARD: ACTIONS AND IDEAS

- There is a need for more coherence with pre-16 and post-19 as part of a whole system approach to education across the full life course, with less selection, less segregation into separate academic or vocational tracks, and drawing on the full range of publicly funded providers: schools, colleges, universities and adult education.
- It is important to set out a deeper and broader definition of what core curriculum all 16–18-year-olds should have access to, regardless of their support needs, their level of study, or their programme, whether classroom based or work based apprenticeships. Such a core could include: personal and social development, skills and knowledge for citizenship, democratic participation, study skills, relationships, sex and health education, political and cultural literacy, project work, enrichment and social action, as well as English and maths. It must include a critical engagement with, and use of, new technologies in ways which empower and liberate students and teachers rather than routinising or narrowing the educational experience.

- All young people should be guaranteed a study programme based on a clear definition of social purpose which goes beyond work readiness. Such a Young Person's Guarantee should provide opportunities for achievement and progression at all levels while supporting student engagement and motivation. This means taking a more holistic and coherent approach to all 16-18 study programmes rather than seeing them as a collection of qualifications.
- Qualifications and assessment should serve the needs of learners and support achievement and progression, as well as reduce the workload, pressure and financial burden of excessive external assessment. This includes valuing those wider benefits of education not always defined by qualification outcomes.
- The college sector needs a review of democratic governance so that communities have a meaningful say in shaping local provision. This also requires a more coordinated, collaborative approach across the system, so that local and regional partnerships can support a Young People's Guarantee and protect vulnerable subjects such as niche vocational skills, languages and performing arts.
- All these initiatives require well resourced, financially secure and resilient colleges which can pay their staff well and have the capacity for innovation and experimentation to be able to respond to the challenges in their local communities and economies. This should be supported by national collective bargaining and fully funded pay awards.



THERE CAN BE NO ESCAPING THE INADEQUACY OF FUNDING FOR 16-18 STUDY, PARTICULARLY COMPARED TO SECONDARY OR HIGHER EDUCATION. THIS FUNDING GAP INEVITABLY IMPACTS ON THE RANGE AND SIZE OF PROGRAMMES WHICH CAN BE OFFERED.

RE-IMAGINING THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

It is widely recognised that the UK's higher education is on the edge of a crisis. The Office for Students has identified that 40% of English universities are running with deficit budgets, with the very real possibility that some institutions may collapse.

UK universities are world-leading – but cannot be expected to maintain those standards following years of austerity and neglect. Inadequate funding, combined with clumsy efforts to create a quasi-market, have forced universities to ‘patch up and make do’ by chasing international student recruitment. This never was a sustainable model, but the folly of this approach is now obvious to all as international student recruitment is falling sharply, exacerbated by the Tories’ ‘hostile environment’ that deters many from wanting to study in the UK. More widely, fees-based funding continues to distort the sector, by limiting access for many, while also driving student course choices in ways that are not always in students’ best interests. A fees-based model stands at odds with the principles of equality, community and democracy that we set out in our introduction.

The result is a system on the brink. The industrial action experienced in universities is a symptom of a sector in which, according to an article in the *New Statesman* (8 April 2024), staff morale is ‘at an all-time low’. These problems are now compounded by course closures, job losses and increased precarity for huge numbers of staff. The consequences for teaching and research quality are obvious.

It is time to reinvent and reinvigorate the great tradition of the public university – but in a way that is fit for purpose in the complex and challenging times in which we live. We present this process of re-imagination around three key themes, supported by one foundational element.

First, is the need to re-think the role of universities in **research**. Pushing intellectual boundaries, questioning received ideas and creating useful new knowledge are the core activities of a university. At a time when global and societal challenges require the harnessing of all our intellectual capacities for the collective good, research capability in universities is being eroded. Key disciplines that enrich all our lives are increasingly threatened, particularly in social sciences and the arts, by the accountancy logic that dominates higher education institutions. University-based research suffers from neglect, short-termism and a narrow conception of what knowledge matters. It is driven by an accountability system (the Research Excellence Framework) and management by metrics that is profoundly distorting and threatens academic freedom. There is an urgent need to boost research capability, and across the many and varied disciplines that enhance our lives economically, socially and culturally. This in turn underpins teaching that is genuinely research-informed – the defining feature of a university education and its potential to transform.

Second, is the imperative to re-discover universities' **community commitment and civic mission**. Universities have huge potential to make a decisive and defining contribution to their communities. This is an established tradition that too often has been lost as universities have been forced to prioritise income generation over community value. Universities need to reconnect with their local and regional communities, working in partnership with other education providers, so that higher education institutions can play a full role in social and community renewal.

Third, is the requirement to re-define universities as **public and democratic spaces**. At a time when many feel disconnected from democratic processes and alienated from formal politics the need to renew and reinvigorate the civic space is greater now than ever. Universities, embedded in their communities, can make an important contribution to developing deep democratic polities by encouraging and promoting critical engagement with ideas and protecting academic freedoms. However, if universities are to make this contribution it is essential that they model the democratic practices that need extending. The business model that underpins the modern university has encouraged a managerialism that is remote and often opaque. Traditions of collegial governance, in which key decisions are determined democratically by the academic community, have been largely dismantled. Re-establishing the democratic traditions in universities is essential if public democratic cultures are to be strengthened not weakened.

The foundational element that underpins all of the above is the need to establish a sustainable and resilient sector built on staff who have secure employment and working conditions that allow them to do their jobs properly. For too long the sector has functioned on the (ab)use of precarious employment contracts,

and been subsidised by low pay. There can be no sector renewal without creating the conditions in which world leading work is possible.

LOOKING FORWARD: ACTIONS AND IDEAS

- The UK's higher education sector needs investment – the current problems of underfunding are widely recognised and must be addressed both in the immediate and longer term. There are no alternatives to additional resourcing. Looking further ahead higher education needs a new funding framework – one that rejects the current fees-based model. Higher education funding also needs to be based on a more rational and co-ordinated approach. Managing admissions numbers across institutions is essential to prevent beggar-my-neighbour recruitment policies that are inefficient, unstable and threaten some institutions' survival.
- Universities need to be resourced, and incentivised, to extend and deepen their activities in their own communities – genuinely opening up institutions as resources for the whole community. The late Lord Kerslake's Civic University Commission recommended the adoption of 'civic university agreements'. Such agreements have valuable potential, but the low level of take-up highlights their limitations. Commitments to community engagement need to be mandated, with appropriate accountability mechanisms in place. This approach needs to be co-ordinated strategically with other education providers, in particular with the further and adult education sectors. It also requires meaningful community participation in decision-making about provision.

- Increasing authoritarianism, demagoguery, anti-intellectualism and misinformation all undermine academic work and scholarship. We need to defend criticality, social purpose and academic freedom as well as collegial governance. A transformative vision for higher education requires intellectual diversity, academic freedom and democratic governance. It stands at odds with intentional and mischievous efforts to conflate academic freedom and freedom of speech in ways that are unhelpful and deliberately damaging.
- A new social contract between universities and their employees needs to be established. Collective bargaining in the sector plays an important role, but too often it is hampered by employers' refusal to negotiate nationally over key terms and conditions. A revised bargaining system needs to be developed to provide for a genuinely national contract for employees in the sector. The government should reaffirm its commitment to the *UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997)* and engage with employers and unions to commit to ensuring compliance across the higher education sector, in all four nations.



THE CURRENT PROBLEMS OF UNDERFUNDING ARE WIDELY RECOGNISED AND MUST BE ADDRESSED BOTH IN THE IMMEDIATE AND LONGER TERM. THERE ARE NO ALTERNATIVES TO ADDITIONAL RESOURCING. LOOKING FURTHER AHEAD HIGHER EDUCATION NEEDS A NEW FUNDING FRAMEWORK.

RECREATING DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION FOR ADULTS

Britain has a proud tradition of radical, life-changing adult education. Much of this tradition owes a debt to the reforming energy of past Labour governments that constructed a system of education for adults that aspired to be genuinely democratic.

At the heart of this vision was the conviction that adults' quality of life should be enriched through a broad educational offer that valued personal and community growth, as well as the acquisition of occupational knowledge.

The adult education system these Labour governments built tried to ensure that adults would themselves shape the system. Adult students would have a strong say in what and how they learnt – having real agency as they worked with their tutors to frame their learning experience. Doing so, many became active creators of new forms of knowledge. The aim was to build an 'educated democracy', and this meant democratic methods had to be built into education. It also meant working with voluntary organisations and social movements, ensuring their concerns played a part in what was studied – building new knowledge relevant to the social problems of the day.

In many ways this was an emancipatory vision of adult education – offering students the opportunity to not only enhance their prospects in the labour market, but also the possibility of being able to assert more control over their own lives – in work and beyond work. It was not a vision compatible with the emerging neoliberal orthodoxy of the Thatcher years. Rather the role of adult education was restricted to ensuring people were able to compete in an increasingly precarious labour market. How (and what) people should learn was best judged by businesses.

This led to a change in how people speak, and think, about adults' education. 'Lifelong learning' became a popular term but it has not ushered in a democratic 'learning society'. Lifelong learning has not become a participative process, in which adult citizens actively shape their own education, but the acquisition of 'skills' and 'competences' judged necessary for working life. Adults' agency has been reduced, at best, to 'choice': selecting courses that would 'deliver' what businesses thought workers would need to be 'employable'. Adult education was not perceived as active and transformative, but rather passive and transactional. It instructed, rather than inspired.

The 1997-2010 'New Labour' governments provided some limited cause for optimism (including the introduction of the Union Learning Fund and the establishment of Union Learning Representatives) but too often wider educational ambition was subjugated to the perceived skills needs of the economy. New Labour's claim that education was the best economic policy ensured that the impoverished vision of adult education inherited from the Thatcher years remained in place. A further consequence of these reforms was that adult education provision was increasingly determined by employer-dominated local quangos that had little real connection to local communities and almost no democratic accountability.

The reforms described here have failed us badly. British business continues to compete on low pay and precarious contracts, rather than high skills and added value. Meanwhile, adult participation in all forms of learning has declined steadily. But despite these failings, no-one appears willing to challenge the mantra that lifelong learning must be ‘employer-led’, or that remote bodies with no meaningful community input are the most effective way to determine provision.

We need to break out of this spiral of decline. Under a new Labour government with a commanding majority in parliament, there is a chance to think afresh, recognising that adult education changes lives. In many cases, from prison education to language support for refugees and those seeking asylum, it can literally be a life-line. Above all, the times we live in demand we rediscover the reforming ambition of past Labour governments to develop and deliver a new vision for adult education in the complex times in which we live. It is a vision that needs to build on the best traditions in adult education – celebrating differences and meeting the needs of students with all their diverse backgrounds and aspirations. But it is also a tradition that draws people together in a way that builds community, social solidarity and a shared identity. However, as we look forward, and aim to overcome years of cuts, it is time to reconsider what kind of educational system for adults do we want to build a better society?

LOOKING FORWARD: ACTIONS AND IDEAS

- We need to imagine adult education as not just about ‘employability’ or ‘skills for jobs’, but about the whole person, the whole community. We must reject the pernicious idea that some adult education is just for ‘leisure’ – this intensifies inequality, because only the well-paid can afford some types of course.
- Democracy, and democratic approaches, should be at the heart of adult education – educating citizens to build a stronger democracy. This can only happen when adult education is experienced as a democratic process – within and beyond the classroom. All institutions engaged in adult education need to have their governance reshaped, to make them responsive to the people: their students, their potential students, and ‘social partners’ such as trade unions as well as businesses. Governing bodies should include representatives of local authorities, community organisations, and trades unions.
- Funding must be reformed so that educational bodies are freed from the never-ending cycle of bidding for short-term funding. They must be treated as responsible partners, capable of making informed judgements about the educational needs of adults in their areas. At present, far too much time, effort and resource are wasted on bidding (often unsuccessfully), rather than on work with students and communities. Funding absurdities that make it more difficult to support part-time (vs full-time) students in higher and further education should be reversed (cf the Open University, Birkbeck); in particular, the Equivalent or Lower Qualification (ELQ) rule, which precludes people with a qualification from being supported to study for an equivalent or lower qualification in a different subject, should be abolished forthwith. Non-accredited provision should be encouraged, not financially penalised.

- Further education colleges and universities are the bedrock institutions of post-school education – but they need to focus far more of their attention on adults, and on their communities and regions. For example, the Civic University Commission pointed out that adult education should be (and historically was) an integral part of initial civic university activity, but is ‘in major decline’. As the Centenary Commission on Adult Education proposed, any organisation that wishes to describe itself as a ‘university’ should be required to provide adult education and lifelong learning, of types appropriate to their local community, compensating for past disadvantages, and utilising radical and engaged forms of education.
- Adult education can play a key role in tackling inequalities – but this requires investment to properly embed adult education institutions, and personnel, in deprived and excluded communities. Adult, further and higher education institutions should massively strengthen ‘outreach’ units to build strong educational links with their communities. These should be staffed by professionals on stable contracts, able to devote time and care to the needs of their localities, and to develop professional expertise and knowledge in methods of engagement.
- Accessing learning opportunities needs to be made easier. Employers should provide paid time off work for learning and where practicable, employers should provide learning spaces within the workplace. Rights to paid educational leave should be strengthened and extended to include all forms of education and learning. Funding for trade union education should be reintroduced. As the Centenary Commission recommended, employers must facilitate the work of learning representatives in all workplaces, employers should be required to report annually on their spending on employee education and training, Individual Learning Accounts should again be seriously considered, and Community Learning Accounts should be introduced to ensure funding is available to informal, community-based learning initiatives led by local groups.

CONCLUSION: THERE IS SUCH A THING AS SOCIETY AND EDUCATION HELPS TO BUILD IT

In this short booklet we have set out an agenda that can begin to transform college, higher and adult education. Not as end in itself, but because alongside early years and school education, post-compulsory education is essential to bringing about the wider social transformation we need.

Years of austerity and ill-conceived efforts to restructure and reduce our public services have led to a collapse of our social fabric. Efforts to encourage a sharp-elbowed individualism in relation to education, supported by systems that promote institutional competition over collaboration, have more than failed - they have proved to be deeply damaging. We are living with the consequences and the new government is having to pick up the pieces.

Contrary to what Margaret Thatcher said many years ago, there is such a thing as society. But we have had to learn the hard way that a shared identity, and the values of reciprocity and social solidarity, don't happen by chance. Community identities need to be cared for, nurtured and actively constructed – not least because we learn to play an active role in our communities when we realise that individual and collective interests are not opposites, but interdependent.

Post-compulsory education is critical to developing our individual and collective interests. There can be no 'building back better' from years of neglect without recognising the contribution of the further, higher and adult education sectors. However, in order to be able to respond to the scale of the challenge it is essential that an agenda for change combines immediate action with a longer-term vision, is supported with essential investment and

recognises that structural changes are necessary to tackle flaws in current systems that reproduce inequalities and generate inefficiencies. In this booklet we have argued that a reform agenda should be guided by three-overarching purposes:

- EDUCATION FOR EQUALITY
- EDUCATION FOR COMMUNITY
- EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

We are clear that we need a return to these fundamental values in our post-compulsory education sector. Re-fashioned for the more complex, diverse, technologically-powered age in which we live, this can lay the foundations for a much more hopeful and optimistic vision of a good society. Translating these values into action will require bold leadership, not least because the changes that are necessary cannot come from within current structures - these are too fragmented and disjointed to be able to be effective at the scale required. Now is a time when coherence and co-ordination need to be the priorities; creating structures that work together, not against each other. None of this is incompatible with community-based democratic governance of the type we highlight many times in this booklet. This is a time when all the power of our public institutions needs to be mobilised to bring about the change our society requires.

No one doubts these are difficult times or that there are tough choices ahead. However, inaction cannot be an option. The education that takes place in our colleges, universities and all the myriad locations where adults engage in formal and informal learning makes a real and positive difference for individuals and for society. But it does not happen automatically or by accident. It happens because governments have ambition, are willing to commit the necessary resources and can mobilise the combined energy of sector workers, students and the wider community in pursuit of a much more optimistic vision of the transformative power of education.

This is the ambition, to borrow from Raymond Williams, that ‘makes hope possible’ and it is what current times demand.

RESOURCES:

FORUM: for promoting 3-19 comprehensive education. Available online at: <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/forum/> [note: FORUM will shortly publish a special issue on *Reconstructing Adult Education for the Common Good* – edited by John Holford]

The Centenary Commission on Adult Education – see <https://centenarycommission.org>

The report of the *Civic University Commission* – available online at <https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Civic-University-Commission-Final-Report.pdf>

The UNESCO (1997) *Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel*. Available online at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/recommendation-concerning-status-higher-education-teaching-personnel>

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