



FE WHITE PAPER 2021: IDEAS TO ACTION

ESSAY COLLECTION

ABOUT FETL

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- Innovating constantly to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers;
- Preparing for the long term as well as delivering in the short term; and
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FOREWORD

Dame Ruth Silver

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson launched the UK Government's long-awaited Further Education (FE) White Paper, Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth, in January. It has had a mixed reaction from within the FE sector, with some welcoming the recognition it gave to the role of FE and skills and the scope they found in the paper for its development, while others were disappointed that it did not do more to support engagement with people furthest from formal education or employment or to articulate its reforms with other sectors and systems.

The devil, of course, is in the detail, and perhaps more so for this White Paper than for others, given how much remains to be worked out in consultation and delivery. This is why the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) commissioned this collection of essays. We wanted to hear the voices of the deliverers, and gain the perspectives of the sub-sectors that make up the world of FE and skills. Their knowledge will be critical to ensuring the White Paper does not repeat mistakes of the past and that it delivers, in the end, meaningful, workable solutions to the problems we face.

The essays capture the views and insights of a wide range of colleagues, including sector leaders, practitioners and policy and curriculum specialists. They raise many issues with which the Government will have to deal, from the need to increase and stabilise funding to the importance of making sure the reforms

add value to what is already there rather than replacing it; from the urgency of doing more to support young people, especially around employment, to the need to redesign the skills system to prioritise and incentivise collaboration over competition.

The essays demonstrate the delivery challenges ahead and the need to think holistically in our response as a sector. There is some promise in the White Paper, as the essays acknowledge. Certainly, it was good to see FE and skills located firmly at the heart of efforts to improve social mobility in Britain. Welcome too were the pledges to establish parity of treatment between FE and Higher Education, and to realise FE's contribution to economic growth and enhanced productivity. There were positive interventions in the form of the 'flexible lifetime guarantee' and 'local skills improvement plans', acknowledged in a number of the essays, though many questions about how these will be delivered remain unanswered. I also welcome the emphasis on education for decent employment and the recognition of how important this is in giving people freedom, agency and independence.

However, in some respects, the White Paper did not go far enough, as the essays highlight. There was no pledge to reverse the funding cuts of the past decade, no fresh new ideas about 'levelling up' and no sign of a move away from the narrow focus on funding for job skills and employability as 'wider' FE dwindles. Instead, the White Paper continues with putting 'employers at the heart of post-16 skills', while the question of how to increase employer engagement and investment in staff development and training, where we lag well behind our European partners and competitors, was quietly brushed under the carpet.

Of course, the employers' voice is important and it is good to see their role brought into the foreground, as my colleagues recognise. However, while employers' engagement is critical I am not sure they should be in the driving seat of skills policy. Even if they could spare the time and resource to embrace this role, I am not sure the timings are right. With so many employers currently preoccupied with closure, redundancy and bankruptcy,

not to mention Brexit and our still emerging trading relationship with the EU, it seems unrealistic to ask more of them in terms of designing courses and curricula. The White Paper needed to be just as interested in what learners and their communities want and need, and in how the outcomes of skills partnerships can be grounded in local democracy. I was pleased to see these themes picked up in the essays.

Another concern with the White Paper was that there is, on the whole, a lack of articulation with other areas of policy such as devolution, and very little sense of how these reforms will complement – or make redundant – the existing policy architecture such as Skills Advisory Boards and Local Enterprise Partnerships. Nor is there much sense of how the Department for Education will work with other departments, particularly the Department for Work and Pensions, to ensure the agenda is delivered in a joined-up way that makes sense on the ground. Just as fundamentally, there is not enough on how the reforms in the White Paper will link to reforms in other parts of the education system, especially universities and schools.

Hopefully, the White Paper marks the beginning of a conversation, for it is critical that the whole sector has its say and that each part of the sector is heard. That is why FETL commissioned these essays because we know the Government does not yet have all the answers. The Government, we must hope, knows this too and is willing to embrace the insights and ideas that these essay contributors and others can offer. After all, delivering the promise of the White Paper and making it work best for FE and the communities it serves is all our business. It starts here.

Dame Ruth Silver is President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership

ADVICE TO GOVERNMENT

The essays in this collection contain the insights, expertise and experiences of a range of practitioners from leadership teams through to curriculum specialists and policy experts. Their contributions outline their respective visions of how and where FE can play a significant role in strengthening our society and economy in future. Although each contributor brings a unique perspective to their essay, the following messages have emerged as key themes from the collection as a whole. It is hoped that these themes can help guide policymakers as they begin to roll out their new and bold agenda for the FE sector.

- 1.** The national network of FE colleges in cities, towns and communities across England already forms the backbone of our skills system and this should underpin all our collective efforts to increase skill levels in every part of the workforce. In this context, it is important that the Government focuses on adding value to this network of providers instead of duplicating existing provision. The devolution agenda and an outcomes-based accountability system are potentially important components of a push for a more localised 'place-based' approach, as learners should not have to travel long distances to develop the skills that matter to them. A place-based approach will also help colleges to support those living in 'left behind' communities.
- 2.** Any redesign of the skills system in the coming years needs to make sure that collaboration between FE providers is prioritised over competition. This will provide the right conditions for colleges to become more specialised in terms

of their curriculum, expertise, staffing and resources, which should result in a greater focus on quality over quantity when it comes to determining each college's offer. The creation of Local Skills Improvement Plans as well as the advent of Institutes of Technology could potentially support efforts to encourage greater collaboration and specialisation across the FE sector. Improved governance and oversight of colleges will become even more crucial as this more collaborative agenda moves forward.

3. The employer-college relationship, which sits at the heart of the FE White Paper, needs to be viewed as a two-way street in which colleges are there to both stimulate and respond to the needs of employers in their local areas. This is the most effective way to create mutually beneficial partnerships between employers and colleges, and it is these partnerships that will give learners the best opportunities to progress throughout their career. The proposed 'College Business Centres' could therefore become the centrepiece of innovation and collaboration in each locality, with Local Skills Improvement Plans helping to articulate what employers - particularly SMEs - need both now and in future.
4. Funding has been a longstanding concern in the FE sector, but recent years have given greater cause for optimism that colleges will now receive the funding they need and deserve. Almost all the White Paper's proposals will depend, at least in part, on colleges having access to sufficient funding on a stable long-term basis in order to deliver the right courses, equipment and buildings in their local area to meet employer demand. In this regard, the National Skills Fund and the new Lifelong Learning Entitlement have considerable potential, but their success is still dependent on effective implementation and long-term funding commitments.
5. More needs to be done to support younger learners to ensure that the range of schemes being offered to them across government departments is helping, rather than hindering, their efforts to embark on their chosen careers.

Initiatives such as T levels, Kickstart and apprenticeships can all contribute to improving the prospects of young people, particularly as the economy begins to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Even so, the schemes on offer must be easy to navigate and understand as well as being targeted at the right learners – otherwise there is a risk that precious government funding could be squandered and young people's aspirations could be curtailed. Improving the quality and availability of careers support for learners of all ages will be vital in this context.

6. The recent investments from Government in adult learners, such as the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, has been widely welcomed, yet there are still more challenges that must be addressed if these initiatives are to reach the adults who need them the most. Reskilling and upskilling will be crucial elements of our post-COVID skills system, but it is not yet certain whether the Government is investing in the right way to achieve this goal. The Government must also be careful not to assume that every learner is able and willing to improve their skills. For example, many adults face significant financial and logistical hurdles to participating in training courses, which must be carefully considered by policymakers as they design new schemes and reform existing ones.
7. Given that we live in a time of rapid technological change, more emphasis needs to be placed on encouraging innovation and embedding digital skills more broadly. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a transformation in the way that learning is delivered across the country. It will now be necessary for colleges to build on the events of the past year with a forward-looking approach to technology and inclusion that ensures the FE sector can connect learners to the right course at the right time, in a way that suits the learner's needs at any given moment.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Amanda Melton

Following a languages degree and an early career in IT, Amanda retrained as a teacher in FE. She was appointed Chief Executive of Nelson & Colne College in March 2012. In 2015 the College took on Lancashire Adult Learning, and in December 2018, Accrington and Rossendale College. Amanda is a Trustee of Pendle Education Trust, supporting poor-performing schools in East Lancashire. Amanda is a Director of Lancashire LEP, and chairs the LEP Skills Advisory Panel. In March 2019, she was appointed as Commissioner for the Independent Commission for the College of the Future. Amanda was awarded a CBE for services to further education in 2020.

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David Akeroyd

David joined Barnsley College in August 2019 as Vice Principal of Technical and Professional Education. His immediate focus was ensuring that the college was prepared for the delivery of T Levels across all three routes from September 2020, along with managing the Transition Programme and making sure the funds provided by government were utilised to provide inspirational learning environments for the students of Barnsley. David was promoted to the position of Deputy Principal, Development and Productivity in October 2020 and will continue to focus on providing students with the opportunities to develop the skills needed for the careers of the future across the Sheffield City Region. David has been involved in Further Education since 2008 and held senior leadership roles in Liverpool and Bradford prior to joining Barnsley College.

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After starting his career in the regional press, Stephen became education correspondent at the Cambridge News in 2008. In 2010 he joined TES as a reporter and was twice named the winner of the Award for Outstanding National Education Journalism at the Chartered Institute for Public Relations' Education Journalism Awards. In 2015 he was appointed Tes' Further Education Editor, taking responsibility for editorial coverage of the sector. In 2020

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Tracey has spent 20 years in the world of Further Education, having started her career as an apprentice in the late 1990s. All her subsequent roles have been in employer training arms, business units and work-based learning provision, progressing in more recent roles to managing all aspects of employer engagement activities. Tracey has gained a BA (Hons) in Marketing from the University of Bolton and an MBA that was completed part-time. In her current role at Hopwood Hall College, she leads the employer services team, overseeing partnerships, stakeholder management and business development activities to support the provision of adult education and apprenticeships. Her extensive and wide-ranging experience in employer engagement across the FE sector is complemented by her research work in academic settings.

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Robin is an experienced C-Suite executive serving the FE and Skills sector for over 27 years, a former College CEO, a trustee and a non-executive director of educational establishments and technology associations. Robin is a board member of a large FE college in London and the UK Executive lead for Jisc FE and Skills Policy, Engagement and Services. This involves leading on Jisc's strategy for building providers' digital capacity and capability, while also leading on the strategic engagement with government departments as well as regional and combined authorities. Robin's work at Jisc also includes the strategic engagement and collaboration with other relevant UK sector agencies and commercial digital suppliers.

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As winner of The Chartered Governance Institutes' Governance Champion of the Year award, an alumnus of their Governance Leadership Program, and a certified trainer, Fiona works as a dynamic influencer and supporter of educational governance. She is the founder of Governance4fe, National Head of Governance Development at the Education and Training Foundation, a published author for the Further Education Trust for Leadership, and a member of the British Educational Leadership, Management, and Administration Society. Fiona has also spent 20 years working with boards in corporate settings, local government, and the third sector (with the last 15 years primarily working on governance in education).

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THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLEGES FOR THE ECONOMY AND REGION

Amanda Melton

Amanda's essay explores the importance of colleges to the businesses and regions they serve. It also looks at how the new 'Local Skills Improvement Plans', plus a new approach to governance and accountability, can deliver real benefits for learners if backed by the necessary funding.

Half term provides some much-needed thinking space. The arrival of the long-awaited 'Skills for Jobs' White Paper in the midst of a busy new year restart that includes lockdown, lateral flow testing and sustaining learning has not allowed sufficient time to do justice to the importance of this document. The nearly two years in which I contributed to the Commission for the College of the Future gave me a certain number of expectations for the White Paper, some of which have been met in full.

I am optimistic that this White Paper for skills points to a commitment of policy and funding, and that the Commission's aspiration of the Further Education (FE) college sector playing a lead role in our national recovery plans is coming to life. I think that was the point of the Commission, and so of the White Paper. It's not about what the White Paper will deliver for colleges; it's about what colleges could be enabled to do for businesses and people everywhere, as well as how colleges can be encouraged to act in the interests of the economy and the regional population rather than their institution.

College leaders do understand this in the main – driven as they are to improve the skills of the regional population, linked to the regional economy. But without a compelling vision for a long-lasting central role for a networked group of colleges, and without the appropriate investment in people and infrastructure, institutional supremacy becomes the overriding obsession. This is completely understandable when economic survival relies on winning, at the expense of others. Competition, and not collaboration, becomes the norm.

I recall the earlier meetings of the Four Nations College Alliance – which brings together a group of college leaders and senior civil servants from across the four nations of the UK – at which the significance of articulating an account of the FE sector as an investable proposition was first voiced. So much has happened since then to further illustrate the role of colleges as ‘anchor partners’ everywhere. I am still very firmly of the view that our national network of FE colleges located in towns across England form the backbone of our skills recovery system. That network of colleges is not a fully formed answer to the skills challenge, but it is certainly where the latent capacity lies to develop an answer for people, productivity and place.

In this response to the White Paper, I wanted to focus primarily on the governance and accountability theme. Prior to its publication, much was made of the possibility of colleges returning to the public sector. After all, our colleges are considerable public assets funded in the main through public contracts and serving a considerable public purpose. For me, the return to public ownership was neither a possibility nor a sensible direction of travel. Much of the strength of the FE college sector lives in the diversity of colleges responding to the needs of their specific local situation. Public ownership creates a considerable risk of homogenising colleges, so that diversity could be lost.

Likewise, leadership in colleges benefits from significant diversity of thought, bringing a great strength to this very adaptive sector and mission. We do not want identikit leaders when colleges

exist in so many different contexts. Colleges are not schools and cannot be directed or measured in the same way, yet colleges are not businesses either, despite a large workforce, innovative culture and complex financial and service models. Colleges enjoy varying degrees of entrepreneurial capacity linked in the most successful examples directly to the innovative activities of significant employers. Even so, colleges are there to provide a public service. They exist to help employers become more productive, help individuals fulfil their career hopes and help localities to be educated, healthy, connected and prosperous.

From a governance perspective, the key challenge that leaders and boards face is balancing institutional aims and wellbeing with the aims of a wider skills system delivering a productive economy. This requires acting in the interests of the regional and national economy and population, which may be out of kilter with the interest of individual institutions.

So how does this play out in the different elements of the White Paper and indeed of the Commission for the College of the Future?

1. Capital funding

There is no question that all college assets must be brought up to the high standards expected from employers and learners if technical education is to be seen as a realistic alternative to university. Learners deserve access to high quality resources wherever they live. Access to outstanding local provision of a general nature, with some specialist facilities, should be expected everywhere. This provides great opportunities to ‘level up’ those towns and colleges where aspiration and productivity need a significant boost. The same can be applied to the workforce: funding must encourage high levels of professionalism (and pay) across the sector to attract and retain excellent staff, providing recognition and status on a par with other parts of the education system. Ensuring that all colleges have a strong reputation will be central to all these goals.

But there must be some sense made of the substantial specialist capital investments made regionally. There is no point in colleges investing in the same resources when sitting cheek by jowl, with strategic involvement from the same employer spread over separate endeavours with multiple providers in close proximity. From a governance perspective, effective implementation should result from strategic conversations between providers and employers to unlock greater regional investment as part of a coherent vision. There are so many existing plans around – town deals, transformation funds and T levels to name just three of the numerous rounds of capital funding in process. There must be some regional level of governance and accountability to make sure the investment delivers coherently.

2. Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) and College Business Centres (CBCs)

LSIPs could unlock the potential for greater returns on investment and employer engagement if they are approached collaboratively and funded adequately to enable reshaping (both growing and shrinking) of provision across an area - initially through Strategic Development Fund pilots. Furthermore, LSIPs provide the framework for the 'college networks' identified in the Commission's final report.

As a Local Enterprise Partnership director, and chair of a Skills Advisory Panel, I am pleased to see ownership of the development of the LSIPs residing closely with colleges / providers and employer bodies rather than third party organisations including Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). I do not think you are going to get the right ownership of the implementation unless the bodies co-delivering the training and skills are there at the inception. I also hope the pilots will provide routes for sectoral investment in regions, ensuring that provision and resources are complementary and not duplicated.

The proposed LSIPs, if done well through genuine collaboration, could be a vehicle for boosting all that is already good in

employer-college partnerships. There is a clear appetite for this, but unless there is a duty to work collaboratively as a network of colleges (as proposed by the Commission) on both local plans and delivery centres, it will not work. Employers need to find the front door but they do not want too many front doors to pick from, so colleges need to work together to create a complementary and sensible offer. In short, LSIPs will need teeth.

The reference to 'Improvement' in the LSIPs jarred with me at first – too much like talk of Ofsted and quality, which should be taken as read. However, on reflection, creating a strategic skills improvement framework for a region is a compelling proposition related not only to the skills of the population, but also the FE workforce and the quality of the delivery. An indicator of a joined-up network of provision is a coherent workforce plan that encourages shared learning, integrated workforce and investment in people. I am not sure it is possible for institutions to build the required workforce across a region when competing for skilled staff instead of building a longer-term pipeline. This sort of collaborative workforce planning will require a new approach to accountability and governance addressing performance, CPD and pay.

3. Multi-year funding focussed on outcomes

I was sad that Covid-19 buried the three-year funding formula we could have expected from this White Paper. Nevertheless, I am delighted that the reference to 'future multi-year funding' made it through the various editing phases. Funding is also highlighted in relation to high-level strategic outcomes and a system that acts to "trust good providers to spend their money on provision that best meets national and local economic need and hold them to account for the outcomes they deliver."

The White Paper proposes a new approach to accountability, with more autonomy to use funding as colleges deem appropriate in line with the newly established LSIPs. This is part of the Government's central ambition to put employer voice at the heart of the system. It will be important to ensure that this

relationship is a 'two-way street' – with colleges and other providers stimulating as well as responding to employer demand. The ambition for an accountability approach that focuses 'less on process and more on the effectiveness of provider performance and the outcomes they achieve' must be welcomed as an important shift. In practice this must embed the role of other providers (particularly schools and universities) too, ensuring a coherent and connected wider system.

A trusted relationship with government needs to be earned, and this is our call to show how we can directly deliver the changes needed to secure best value and relevant high-quality training without the complex performance management we have experienced to date. The White Paper's mention of new intervention powers for the Secretary of State will balance out the introduction of the trusted relationship. There is also an ambition for a more strategic relationship between government and colleges with simplified processes. For example, the White Paper describes an intention to 'develop a clearer line of sight with all colleges, so they can showcase their achievements as well as have the confidence to ask for help at an early stage if it is needed.'

Consultation on more developed proposals will arrive shortly. My sincere hope is that future long-term funding commitments will drive greater collaboration rather than competition, as leaders collectively consider the skills needs of individuals and employers over institutional market share in each part of the country.

My overwhelming sense of this White Paper is of a route map for skills that we can get behind. We know there is still work to do to iron out many wrinkles, but there is certainly a galvanising energy to make things better. After the last year or so, we have never needed it more. As an FE college leader, I take great satisfaction from knowing that we can make an enormous difference for our learners, towns and employers, and will trust that the new dialogue with policy makers and funders is coming.

HOW TO FUND THE FUTURE

Ian Pryce CBE

In this essay, Ian concentrates on the funding proposals in the White Paper such as the new National Skills Fund and Lifetime Skills Guarantee as well as the proposed simplification and streamlining of college funding. He considers whether the Government has identified the right issues and touches upon some potential unintended consequences emanating from their proposals.

The FE White Paper is to be commended for recognising the importance of colleges to our future economic prosperity. Our autonomy is accepted, with references throughout to trusting providers to "spend their money in ways that best meets national and local needs". The word "their" is crucial. The money belongs to the college and we account for how we spend it. However, this autonomy is contradicted by the machinery envisaged to determine need. The White Paper proposes a quasi-soviet collective involving Chambers of Commerce, advised by a Skills & Productivity Board, producing a 'local skills improvement plan'. In essence, this gives everyone a get-out-of-jail card. If people do not enrol, colleges can blame the plan; the planners can say the colleges failed to deliver.

The big omission, though, (the dog that does not bark) is the individual - the student, the apprentice, the public. The central assumption throughout the White Paper is that if colleges and employers figure out the perfect programmes, and if government

extends credit whenever you choose, and if funding rates are fixed to encourage us to put on more 'high value' courses, and if people are just given the right advice, then 'they' will come. Students will flock to qualifications that are untested; sometimes to institutions with no track record. They will have complete faith in the wisdom of employers and those local skills plans. The central question is therefore whether the incentives will work. Even if all the arguments and prescriptions are right, can we rely on humans to act in an economically rational way?

There are certainly some well-considered and attractive propositions: the Lifetime Skills Guarantee; the £2.5 billion National Skills Fund; and new proposals to simplify and streamline our funding. Let's take each in turn.

The proposed Lifetime Skills Guarantee is more flexible than anything we have seen before and gives FE students similar access to finance as university-level students. This is a big plus in terms of social justice. However, the Guarantee covers more than just access to credit without a credit check. Perhaps the most welcome aspect is the proposal to allow all adults to access their first full Advanced Level qualification for free, and to hint that people might be able to attract such funding even where they possess a higher-level qualification but want, or need, to retrain.

The ambivalence on this latter question seems to reflect a worrying view that being educated at a level above that of your employment is almost a sin. The White Paper points out early on that only 66 per cent of graduates are in high-skilled employment in a tone that seems to begrudge having lent the other 34 per cent money to do a degree. The idea that we can always retrain at an even higher level is bizarre, and why restrict anyone wanting to get better educated when we know all the social benefits and social cost savings that follow?

As a College Principal, the Guarantee excites me, but implementation needs care to make sure it works in the real world. If you offer someone a lifetime guarantee it might be reasonable for them to ask "whose lifetime?". The lifetime of

governments is now five years and you cannot hold successors to your promises. How will people weigh up the risk of changes in the small print? Equally, a college takes on risk if it does not get all the money. We do not want to be short-changed. You would not bother making car loans if buyers could give the car back without penalty.

Having said that, the omens are good. Brits have historically expected their 'big' education to be as free as their healthcare. It was only in 1998 that Tony Blair introduced modest loans for those going to university and only in 2012-13 that tuition fees rose to £9,000. At a student level, that change has worked well. Universities are much richer and more secure. Students can be more demanding and there are far greater numbers of disadvantaged learners in the sector. The problems are more for government, which has seen only half the loans repaid. This has prompted calls for a re-think and a look at some form of graduate tax. It would seem odd to extend loans in FE if there are questions about their efficacy in HE. Having said that, loans for FE programmes would likely be smaller and, given fast returns, much more likely to be repaid - especially if students remain in work while they study.

One obvious question is: will loans work? The fact that colleges do not turn away those wanting high level technical courses suggests there is no real public demand. That may be due to the unavailability of finance, but perhaps people have priorities other than higher earnings.

Overall there is much to commend in the general idea of a Lifetime Skills Guarantee if it brings new money to the system. It is declining funding and complex bureaucracy that has seen adult participation in FE plummet by a third. If taxpayers are unwilling to see more invested in the system, loans bring in extra money from individuals benefiting from their training. On the flip side, guarantees of free training do tend to push up demand and distort resources, leading to rationing elsewhere. The ambitions of the White Paper demand a bigger, better-resourced system.

On that note, a significant sum, £2.5 billion, is touted for a National Skills Fund. It recognises that the future workforce is largely made up of the current workforce, and that the modern world requires upskilling and retraining. Sensibly the White Paper seeks to reverse the decline in adult participation, rather than make serious inroads into the 36 million people now in work.

It is heartening to see the acceptance that this will need extra investment. We know the fall in participation is down to cuts in funding, signalling adult education was not valued. More money will signal a re-appreciation of lifelong education, even if the way the money is to be used is tightly targeted. It must be right, if we are being ambitious, to focus on raising the country's educational centre of gravity, shifting far more people up to levels 3-5. It must also be right, especially post-COVID, to prioritise digital skills. The plans for digital bootcamps are serious, despite the silly name. Given that these skills are going to be fundamental to the way we live, and a lack of them will have serious repercussions, perhaps we could instead focus on 'digital wellbeing', the word de jour?

Finally, the recognition that we need to be more creative with course design is a big positive, enabling clear progression through levels. Even the renewed passion for allowing chunks of learning to be assembled into a qualification (credit accumulation) shows ambition, though we must be careful in assuming real people are equally passionate for credentials, and we tend to lose knowledge and skills if we do not use them. Perhaps this should be a low priority.

When it comes to simplification and streamlining of funding it is hard to avoid a sense of *deja vu*. Simplification has been on the agenda ever since the introduction of the FEFC funding methodology in 1993. Although some of the funding calculations were complex in the 1990s, this was largely because of the inherited variation in per-capita funding, and the need to converge it. At its heart, the funding was simple: funding followed the learner - a fundamental philosophical change. Suddenly those highly politically-astute Principals who had secured huge budgets

for few students saw their politically naive colleagues lauded as champions of efficiency for surviving on so little! The new methodology was also cost-neutral (funding reflected delivery costs) and colleges had complete autonomy whether they achieved their allocation by delivering 16-18 or adult education.

Since then, we have seen layer upon layer of complexity. Allocations have been separated by market – 16-18, adult, apprenticeships (by age) – and then split further by geography (mayoral combined authority allocations). In addition, some courses have no funding but students can take out loans, and funding rates are different for 17, 18 and 19-year-olds studying the same course.

The White Paper shows a desire for simplification but does not propose anything that sweeps away these hurdles. Mayoral combined authorities will continue to have funding autonomy, which makes a national course offer much harder and means colleges must spend more on marketing to communicate which courses can be taken depending on where you live rather than where you study. There is also a promise to use the funding rates to incentivise “high value” courses, breaking the link to the actual costs of provision. Such a move leads to ongoing tinkering, yet there is little evidence that people respond to these fee signals. If something really is high value, you might actually reduce demand if government is seen to coerce the buyer ('too good to be true' effect). There seems to be no appetite at all to allow colleges to move money between different markets. Allocations for young people, adults and apprentices will continue to be set separately.

If simplification is a great idea in theory but hard to deliver, streamlining is also a good idea, and the White Paper is to be commended for correctly identifying the problems, particularly when it comes to adult education. The proposal for multi-year funding settlements is superficially attractive but needs much more thought. If colleges know in advance their future funding, there may be no incentive to meet growing demand if that is not

factored in. Guaranteed long term budgets almost certainly end the days of funding following the learner, a huge change in philosophy.

This year most colleges have over-recruited 16 to 18-year-olds, knowing they will get more money next year. If the budgets had been fixed for three years would any college have taken on so many extra students (and costs) if the settlement would not be changed? In the same way that the best bidders tend to win funding bids rather than the best projects, multi-year funding may lead to a misallocation of resources with colleges fighting for leaders who are best at negotiating big allocations. It may even remove funding mobility. The current national system naturally moves funding to where students enrol. Economic growth could easily be inhibited by restricting funds in areas of high growth to protect areas in decline, especially if these areas are electorally sensitive.

My personal preference would be to make sure the environment for colleges is more stable so there are no sudden shifts in demand. The White Paper is good on this, emphasising a different form of accountability that is much more fit-for-purpose than the current micromanagement of funding claims and tedious returns. Funding guarantees are likely to lead to an unhelpful stasis rather than an energetic stability.

It is important for colleges to realise the ambition in the White Paper. It wants to see the less skilled become skilled technicians, propelling productivity and prosperity. It wants to help them fit that education and training more easily into their lives. It wants to see much greater flexibility in how we deliver skills and qualifications. It wants to help those in an employment cul-de-sac to start over. It wants to give colleges and others the security to plan longer term. Amen to all that.

In the end, though, the success of the White Paper hinges on whether the public wants this just as badly. I would have liked to see more reflection on why we are where we are. For example, the White Paper makes the valid point that only 4 per cent of under 25s have a higher technical qualification compared with

33 per cent having a degree, then points out that getting higher technical qualifications brings a very significant income boost. No college I know turns away students applying for these courses. The White Paper unwisely assumes it is down to ignorance and affordability. In the end, if we do not give people what they want, the country will not get what it needs.

THE NEW DIRECTION OF TECHNICAL EDUCATION

David Akeroyd

David's essay focuses on the technical education proposals within the White Paper, discussing T levels, higher level skills and Institutes of Technology. He is a keen advocate of technical and professional education and sees many reasons to be positive about the new direction of travel.

After what seems to have been a long period of anticipation punctuated with many opinions and positioning reports, finally the FE White Paper has landed. On the face of it, the FE sector is being placed front and centre of the skills provision across the country, and rightly so. After spending many years as a secondary option, this White Paper shows the potential impact that taking a route into technical and professional education can have on any individual. Is that news to us in the FE sector? I think not!

Surprisingly, the Government's skills agenda has not focussed on productivity and the effective financial return to 'UK PLC' from the investment in training. This has led to the flagship T Level programmes for 16 to 18-year-olds but no real update or change for adult learners, aside from a drive to ask adults looking to re-skill to take out a loan to fund their studies. The White Paper suggests an increased role for employers in the learning programmes of the future – wasn't that the point with T Levels following on from the apprenticeship reforms though? The difference this time is the link with the local Chambers of Commerce, which should provide an opportunity for local employers rather than the large multi-nationals that were the drivers of previous agendas.

This essay will discuss the recommendations around technical education - I will leave the funding and governance elements to others. My current role is around Development and Productivity and my previous role was as Vice Principal for Technical & Professional Education, so the subject is very close to my heart.

Chapter Two of the White Paper talks about 'providing the advanced technical and higher technical skills the nation needs' – a perfectly credible and necessary objective in my opinion. Let us look at the whole T Level agenda first. To be clear, I am a true advocate for the value of technical and professional education. I have spent years on a personal quest to re-educate today's parents that the 'vocational education is for other people's children' mantra is damaging to the opportunities we provide as a nation for the next generation. The perception that BTECs and similar courses were somehow an easy option and less valued than A Levels needed to be challenged, and I firmly believe that, given time, T Levels will be seen as a like-for-like level of programme for any young person.

Even so, one challenge facing the development of T Levels is the claimed links to businesses and how, therefore, these new programmes are automatically going to meet the needs of every young person and in turn their employers. While these programmes have the support from very large companies, what about the SMEs that I believe will be the real driving force behind rebuilding the economy post-COVID? From my conversations with many relatively significant local medium-sized employers, they do not feel that the T Level is the panacea to skills at higher levels that it is sold to be. They tell me week after week that the most important thing for them when they look to employ is attitude and behaviour. That is not to say that they do not want some skills, but certainly not at the exclusion of the so-called softer skills. The T Level programmes, with their variety of assessments, specialist input and most importantly the extended work placement, should be the answer to these questions but the White Paper pushing closer links with the local Chambers of

Commerce should also allow these important employers to have a voice in the skills delivery of the future.

It is also crucial that the T Level programmes allow a degree of flexibility to meet the needs of local businesses. The good and outstanding colleges will be making sure that they deliver the best possible programme for learners. At Barnsley College, we pride ourselves in the social and cultural capital that our students build whilst studying with us. This does not appear anywhere in the T Level standards but, trust me, these are absolutely the areas of development our young people need in order to be a success in their chosen careers.

Having said all this, do I think T Levels are the right way forward to a world-class Advanced Level Technical Education? Yes, I do. We need to make these programmes the flagship for the sector and I would urge the Government to secure high-quality delivery over fast-paced transformation. We have one chance to get this right and to bring technical education into the forefront of the skills agenda for the future – please do not risk it by going too fast. What do I mean by 'too fast'? I believe the colleges offering T Levels should continue to have to meet minimum standards before they are able to offer these routes. I shared my views on this with Apprenticeships and Skills Minister Gillian Keegan around the risks of widening eligibility to 'Requires Improvement' and 'Inadequate' providers last year and I do not want this agenda to be derailed by focussing on quantity over quality.

The proposal in the White Paper to grow the Institute of Technologies (IoTs) is not new. The desire to increase the number of IoTs is sound and the need for collaboration across the region is a very positive principle. IoTs are the flagship centres for the delivery of Higher Technical Education in a STEM subjects, so they should serve as a 'kite mark' for high-quality delivery that learners can choose, safe in the knowledge they will have a great experience. The location of the next tranche of IoTs will be vital to the 'levelling up' agenda. I would suggest that the Government provides funding for an IoT in every region as soon as possible to

ensure that no learner needs to travel long distances to reach this opportunity. This is particularly important in areas of deprivation across the country. For many people, the cost of travel is prohibitive to learning, especially in the technical skills agenda where learners may already be employed and are looking at these programmes as a way to upskill rather than enter the workforce.

What's more, the IoTs should be closely linked to the wider Higher Technical Education reforms. The current proposals around Higher Technical Education concentrate on the reduction in qualifications and increasing the quality and currency of the programmes – sound familiar? It sounds like the T Level reforms to me. It is encouraging that the drive to improve the quality of Higher Technical Education centres on the need for future talent across industries. The key will be to ensure that flexibility is available for local tweaks to the national offer. I would welcome the opportunity for the best FE colleges to be able to accredit Technical Learning at Level 4 and 5. I do not mean via the very lengthy FDAP process as this is only viable for large 'HE in FE' providers. I would propose that colleges are able to write programmes around the HTQ offer that they need for their regional economy, and that the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and the Office for Students make this process supportive to drive innovation and high-quality local provision.

What about the National Skills Fund and the Lifelong Learning Entitlement? I agree with the proposal to allow adults to re-enter education throughout their lives. My challenge would be why wait until 2025? The economy needs these highly trained adults ready with the new skills needed for future productivity growth. The National Skills fund is welcome, but I am not convinced there is enough local knowledge in the qualifications on offer. What is required will vary from one region to the next, and the flexibility should be provided to mayoral combined authorities to drive the local skills agenda through this funding.

I welcome the principle around placing employers at the heart of post-16 skills. FE providers are fantastic as 'anchor institutions'

in the way they engage with the local economy, but it could be argued that this engagement is around delivering apprenticeships for local employers. The White Paper suggests a much closer relationship between education and business to support the wider innovation and productivity of the local economy. For this to be effective across the sector, there will need to be funding outside of programmes and apprenticeship funding to allow colleges to engage beyond immediate income-generating activities. It is important to consider the difference between 'at the heart of' rather than as the 'driver'. I make this distinction as, from my experience, employers are keen to be involved as a guiding partner in the design and delivery of the skills needed in their sector, but surely it is our job in education to be the 'driver'.

There is nothing particularly revolutionary in the White Paper, as it builds upon the work that the sector has been doing for many years. I think the difference now is the focus on FE and the political and financial investment that will come as part of this policy. The momentum around Advanced and Higher Technical education is positive and the high-level proposals should bring about the expected outcomes in technical skills and then ultimately employment and productivity. Nonetheless, I caution against the incessant drive towards Level 3 being the minimum requirement for every sector. I was reading recently about the skills gap in the construction trades. I might argue that to successfully enter a career in these areas a Level 2 skills-based programme is ideal, with evidence around behaviour and skills being potentially more important than the actual qualification. Promoting Level 3 and above, I would argue, might be better secured through an apprenticeship programme. We must not lose sight of the need for skills development and learning below Level 3.

We may also see obstacles created by a protectionist perspective from the different stakeholders. Local Enterprise Partnerships may see working with the Chambers of Commerce a potential risk to their existence, while some HE providers are likely to rail against the desire for FE providers to become the key deliverers for Technical Skills at Level 4 and 5. Some colleges who are

unable to join an IoT bid may see the establishment of these new institutions as a risk to their delivery.

Many other obstacles will no doubt arise over the coming years. As always, if we continue to concentrate on what is right for the learner, none of these obstacles will stop the evolution proposed in the White Paper, and I will be supporting it fervently as we move forward.

A LOCAL AND NATIONAL LENS ON COLLEGE BUSINESS CENTRES

Chris Payne

This essay by Chris looks at the FE White Paper from the perspective of a major college group, NCG. It demonstrates how the White Paper can and should apply in the real world, with a focus on how the new 'College Business Centres' can drive local and regional economic growth.

At the start of the 20s, Britain faced a restructuring of its relationships on the continent, the effects of an unprecedented pandemic and was led by a flamboyant and controversial Prime Minister. As we now know, the 1920s came to be seen as a decade of wasted opportunities, which did not drive the promised homes for heroes and teed up the slide into recession and war of the 1930s. Thankfully the prospects for the 2020s do not seem quite as bleak, but there are important lessons that we might learn from our ancestors. In particular, the need to renew bonds of community and opportunity through training rather than simply sitting by as jobs, and often industries, disappear.

Along with Brexit, COVID-19 has heightened the pace of change on issues that were already affecting our way of life - not least an ageing population and increasing automation of jobs and services. Those of us in Further Education (FE) might well reflect on our role in the country's future in light of the recent FE White Paper. If we are to meet this critically important challenge, there are things we must understand, avoid and get right as we begin to unpack the Government's new direction for the sector.

What is that direction? Many of the warm words about parity of esteem and a 'German style' technical revolution have been heard before, but for me the White Paper lays down clear defining lines that can benefit FE. One of the sector's strengths has always been that it will - flexibly, quickly and with minimal fuss - do whatever is required. New diplomas, apprenticeships, local partnerships - we continually pick up the slack in the grey area between the better-defined schools and Higher Education (HE) sectors. The White Paper makes clearer the Government's sense of the sector's role, which is not an end in itself but a foundation block upon which we can build, making sure we don't lose the many features that we know FE does well.

Focusing on pathways to employment and technical education through to Level 5 will give a real clarity to a sector not well understood by many. It must not be, however, at the expense of losing the community and civic heart of the majority of our colleges in the work they do to promote 'first steps' and supporting those most disengaged and disadvantaged. It is up to us to shape this new future in a way that gives our communities what they need and deserve, while giving people the skills that can provide a boost for the local and national economy.

From the messaging surrounding the White Paper, we can see that the link with employers is key to how ministers view the role and future of FE. This will hardly be news to those of us working in colleges, who see every day how local teams engage with businesses of all types and sizes. We have heard this rhetoric before from ministers of all parties; nonetheless, we should embrace this additional political firepower and look at the opportunities it may yield.

One piece of the White Paper that rightly captured some attention was the idea of College Business Centres. In delivering this aspiration, we should avoid the tendency to think about employer partnerships as being between one employer and one college. Multi-partner projects, which bring together employers from the same sector (though not necessarily those performing

identical functions), can create a much more enticing proposition - especially for the SMEs who find it harder to engage in this kind of work. It also helps to generate a more holistic learning experience, with students able to experience more than one part of an industry. For all the focus on the immediate needs of today's employers, we need to remember that we are training people for careers and not just jobs.

We have two great examples of this from the NCG stable. First, our Energy Academy: a campus of Newcastle College that is focused on creating an employer-led approach to delivering training from Level 2 up to degree level for the North East's renewable and offshore energy sector as well as identifying and responding to skill shortages in the industry. This sees NCG joining forces with major local employers such as the Port of Blyth to develop and deliver tailored training and qualifications to support the needs of business. In fact, the partnership with the Port of Blyth has resulted in an extension of the Energy Academy facilities, with 80 students now based in industry facilities at the Port to complete their practical training. Many other partnerships, such as that with local manufacturer Barrier Ex, involve staff regularly visiting the Academy to speak to students and pass on their skills and knowledge. Skills training includes welding, solar technology and CAD design as well as wind turbine maintenance training through the world's most advanced Hybrid reality (iHR) system.

The Academy is positioning itself to play a major role in the offshore wind sector, following the Government's additional focus on renewable energy in the lead up to the UK Presidency of the G7 and COP26. More importantly, it is creating real career opportunities for students in a sector that is thriving in its region. Indeed, the Academy Head, Alan Goundry, recently joined the Government's green skills task force to ensure that FE is represented.

The second example arises from the reboot that NCG has been undertaking on our apprenticeship strategy. This has resulted in the creation of a new 'synergy' hub on our main Newcastle campus.

The hub will not only be the flagship centre for our apprenticeship delivery across the North of England – from Cumbria to the North Sea – but it will also be an entrepreneurial home for employers looking for skills solutions, with a particular focus on STEM. It will incorporate innovation zones, workspaces for start-ups and a curriculum design office to bring together our academic experts with their industrial counterparts to co-design the next generation of courses. NCG has invested into the digital facilities within the hub to deliver more qualifications in these key sectors, created with the help of a Digital Advisory Board and in collaboration with industry, such as the new Level 5 Web Application Development diploma in partnership with the Code Institute.

These are the real forerunners of College Business Centres, but they are expensive to establish and maintain to a high standard. A key challenge for government as we move into the new world will be to find mechanisms to fund business centres that do not rely on colleges having to 'top-slice' their student funding to do so. More generally, the aspirations of the White Paper will require the resources to make it work. The 2021 Spending Review will show us how the Government's plans match up to their accounts. A halfhearted funding arrangement - or a continuing lack of clarity about things such as the National Skills Fund - will be another missed opportunity.

When we think about how the White Paper can become reality, we should also resist the urge to just think of employers as people who feed into, or support, programmes of work. At NCG we have had considerable success with employer co-creation of qualifications. Last year we launched an innovative Foundation Degree in Engineering with Applied Digital Technologies, which we call 'Digital Diffusion'. The two-year course is tailor-made to meet the demands of a sector in transition thanks to the contribution of Procter and Gamble and the expertise of engineering specialists SMD and MSP. The course supports the North East's Local Industrial Strategy for Advanced Manufacturing and prepares students to meet the needs of local businesses as firms across the region seek to embrace emerging industrial digital

technology. By successfully fusing engineering principles with digital know-how, the course equips a new breed of highly skilled future employees.

As a national organisation, NCG has seen the benefits of a collaboration between our geographically dispersed colleges and how this has allowed us to develop a much deeper level of experience and support. Indeed, the pandemic has contracted our organisation as we have had to go online to innovate, essentially removing the geographic barrier.

We focus on pooling of expertise around what we call our 'Communities of Practice'. These bring together specialist leads from individual colleges - who in smaller settings might be the only expert on that subject within their college - together with their peers across the Group. This has been shown to work, not just for teaching specialists such as our health lecturers collaborating on their future curriculum, but also for our wrap-around offer (tutorial, student engagement) and business support services. The Community facilitates group problem solving and the sharing of good habits and ideas. It can also help to facilitate sectoral - as opposed to just local - engagement with those employers with sites and interests in different parts of the country. We see similar communities being a potential solution to the challenges of regional collaboration – bringing together like-minded and forward-looking sector professionals to tackle the issues presented by skills improvement plans.

Like any national organisation, NCG looks for a consistency of service across our group. Unlike a national chain, however, that doesn't mean we want to see identical products delivered in an identical way - quite the opposite. I often say to colleagues that we are more like a boutique hotel chain than Premier Inn. Each centre offers its own unique experience, relevant to its market and community and created by its own high-quality team. Centres also draw not just on the practical back-office functions of a wider group, but also on the expertise of colleges elsewhere.

Local direction and engagement are as important outside the group as they are internally. The White Paper acknowledges that provision needs to continue to reflect local circumstance and need. Again, being a national group has helped here, as it means we can provide local colleges with more precise market intelligence. The implementation of Local Skills Improvement Plans could make these kinds of tools available to a wider group of colleges. We have challenged ourselves to make sure we are employing the best sector specialists and giving them access to top resources through leveraging our collective strengths. It is now time for the sector to do the same through innovative regional collaboration.

We know that the road ahead will not be without challenges. The proposals in the White Paper should be viewed as a beginning and not an end. There is much more that needs clarification - for instance, how will the Government's warm words about the simplification of funding regulations and data collection burdens be delivered in practice? There are also some noticeable absences where further progress can be made - for instance, how the sector can be strengthened through support for research capacity that will bring us in line with HE and help achieve the 'parity of esteem' politicians seek.

The prize for success in the delivery of these aims - a reinvigorating of our often-overlooked sector and a generation of young people truly equipped for the challenging and sometimes scary world they are entering - is worth the journey. If we all work together and put aside our tendency to out-compete each other, the sector can collaborate and truly shine.

DID 'PLACE' GET LOST IN THE WHITE PAPER?

Stephen Exley

Stephen's essay explores how the pandemic has changed our relationship with 'place' for both working and learning. He also sets out how a concerted focus on 'place' across the FE sector has the potential to transform opportunities for those in 'left behind' communities.

For a policy to be successfully put into practice, the stars must align. It must be 'on message' and link to the key priorities of the government of the day. It must be politically expedient and bring clearly demonstrable benefits for the electorate. It must also tap into the zeitgeist of the age and feel like an integral and necessary element of the society that surrounds it. For the FE sector – never the bride, and at best used to making up the numbers on the reserve bridesmaid list – it felt that its big day was finally dawning.

So why does the White Paper feel like a missed opportunity? For me, a key reason is the almost total absence within it of a simple concept which has, over the last 15 months, come to the fore for politicians and the electorate alike (albeit for very different reasons): place.

Place

First, let us examine the political context in which the White Paper was published. Place, here, is closely linked to the Government's "levelling up" agenda; an ambition to address high levels of inequality across the UK. As the Equality Trust has pointed out, the average income of the top-earning 20 per

cent of households is more than 12 times the amount earned by the poorest 20 per cent. According to the IFS, productivity and earnings in London are a third to a half higher than the UK average, while the lowest figures are reported in Wales, which lies approximately 15 per cent below the UK average - and around 40 per cent below London.

For the Government, however, levelling up is not just about social justice – it makes good electoral sense. The Boris Johnson-led Government's 2019 General Election success in the 'Red Wall' constituencies left its new wave of MPs representing communities largely made up of those described by David Goodhart describes as the "somewheres". "They have lost economically with the decline of well-paid jobs for people without qualifications and culturally, too, with the disappearance of a distinct working-class culture and the marginalisation of their views in the public conversation." Goodhart wrote.

As Professor Andy Westwood has recently highlighted, place and levelling up are at the heart of policy moves being made by several government departments. Spending on R&D is being doubled, with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy refreshing its industrial strategy and UKRI developing a place-based R&D strategy. Place is most overt in the agenda of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), as symbolised by its plans to open a second headquarters in Wolverhampton with 500 posts to be stationed in the region by 2025. MHCLG is by no means an outlier in shuffling civil service jobs out of London: a new national infrastructure bank is being established in Leeds, the Department for Transport is getting a second home in Birmingham and even the Treasury is setting up a campus in Darlington.

In his foreword to the White Paper, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson is at pains to stress: "It is our mission to make sure that opportunity is there for everyone, wherever they live, to level up every inch of the country." He is right to make this link. In newly Conservative constituencies such as Bishop Auckland,

Dudley North and Workington, voters are far more interested in their local college than the gilded citadels of Higher Education. Yet the White Paper fails to capitalise on this and make common cause with these key cross-government policy agendas. "Levelling up" is mentioned just once in the entire document, Westwood notes. And when outlining the new 'local skills improvement plans', the White Paper is more focused on involving chambers of commerce than combined authorities, city regions, local authorities or LEPs. Absent or marginalised are the concepts of productivity, the civic agenda and revitalising local high streets - all which should surely be natural territory for a department that instead seems more intent on stitching together its pet projects such as T levels, Institutes of Technology and apprenticeships.

Placelessness

As a result of the pandemic, the importance of 'place' has become even more important to individuals, but in a far more local context. The enforced spread of homeworking means that, for millions of us, our workplace is currently within the same four walls where we eat and sleep. Daily train and car journeys are a distant memory; commuting is now simply the time it takes to walk to the spare room-cum-office. Chats with the colleague at the next desk have been replaced with video calls. Social interaction is now played out using Zoom and Skype, Teams and Slack.

What happens next, of course, remains open for debate. Many argue that the homeworking genie is out of the bottle; the expectation that workers will spend five days each week in a shared office is for the birds. More than half (53 per cent) of workers surveyed by Boston Consulting Group said they would prefer a hybrid model, splitting their time between their office and a remote location. Not everyone agrees; Goldman Sachs CEO David Solomon has insisted that homeworking is "an aberration that we're going to correct as soon as possible". What cannot be disputed is that, for many of us, priorities are changing when it comes to where we live. The journey time to our employers' HQ is becoming less of a factor in our decision making, especially

when the number of visits there is likely to stay significantly reduced for many.

So, if more people could carry out their job from anywhere, could a mass exodus of better-paid workers to parts of the country with lower property prices, coupled with employers increasingly focusing their talent recruitment strategies around flexible and remote working, inadvertently end up narrowing geographical inequalities? If we are to truly level up the country, what is needed is, in the words of former shadow HE minister Emma Hardy, "social mobility without geographic mobility". In other words, you shouldn't have to leave your hometown to get a good job.

It would be naïve to assume that the growth of homeworking will make this possible in the short term. Even so, utilising improved infrastructure and digital investment to open up a wider range of careers to young people living in left-behind communities, meaning they are no longer limited to employment opportunities on their doorstep, could be a powerful part of the solution to how social mobility can be enabled through policy.

The White Paper makes the merest nod to the possibilities offered by remote learning, pledging to "make essential digital skills provision more accessible and flexible by building on the innovation in online learning implemented during the coronavirus pandemic", allowing learners to "gain essential digital skills at a time and place that suits them". In reality, offering digital learning opportunities could be just the start of a technological revolution focused on widening educational and employment opportunities for young people in left-behind communities.

The implications for the FE sector would be profound. Would a shift to more blended learning on a permanent basis necessitate an overhaul of campus utilisation? Do students need to be trained in how to work from home? Do we need as many colleges as we currently have? As far back as 2016 Peter Lauener, then chief executive of the former Skills Funding Agency, suggested to me in an interview that colleges could be allowed to keep

the proceeds from selling off campuses to invest in learning technology. Could this be an idea whose time has come?

This suggestion is at least partly mischievous. These, and many more resulting questions, require detailed and ambitious policy thinking, and it is ambition that appears to be lacking from a White Paper which feels like it is doing little more than treading water until the next Comprehensive Spending Review unlocks the funding needed for more sweeping changes.

Outside Westminster, however, big picture thinking is happening. The Independent Commission on the College of the Future, for instance, put forward a radical new vision for colleges as part of a more joined-up, all-age education and skills system. EDSK's Further Consideration report, published by FETL, made provocative suggestions such as splitting FE colleges into different categories of institution and creating new area-level FE directors to oversee regional provision. FETL has made innovative and challenging thinking about FE its trademark since it was founded. It will be badly missed. With major challenges – and even bigger opportunities – ahead for the sector, it is time for the Department for Education to pick up its mantle, think big and aim high. The stars are aligned for FE: this opportunity must not be allowed to pass.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE EMPLOYERS AT THE HEART OF A SKILLS SYSTEM?

Tracey Wood

Tracey's essay looks at what 'employer engagement' means in practice for both employers and providers. She also discusses the role that apprenticeships and the wider skills agenda will play in delivering the White Paper's push for more collaboration in supporting local employers.

Having worked in Further Education (FE) for 20 years in various Business Development roles within colleges, there is no doubt I have shared similar responsibilities and frustrations when dealing with external relationships and partnerships. My roles have been within employer engagement teams, business development divisions and sales teams, and while the names vary, they all share a common theme of engaging employers with a college's offer.

Initiatives and incentives entice employers to increase their skills base, boost productivity and contribute towards economic growth. The FE sector has been under scrutiny by government for some time, and recent policies have proposed solutions to address issues such as economic growth, productivity and employability through identifying skills gaps in the labour market. Much emphasis has been placed by government on employers to engage with the FE system, in particular the drive to become involved in the development of qualifications and support delivery of them. 2017 witnessed the launch of the apprenticeship levy reforms to 'place employers at the heart of the system'. How we work with employers has evolved and the

concept of building 'long term partnerships' with employers has been the key to creating successful provision, improved outcomes and enriched experiences of learning. In theory, this is something we should all be capable of achieving and excelling in.

I eagerly read the new White Paper, hoping for answers and solutions to help bridge the skills gap and drive employer-responsive provision. 'Skills for jobs' - it has all the right slogans to make the skills system work for employers. Some may question if this is any different to past reviews or papers - is history repeating itself? I understand why some would say yes, as we are still trying to address the same priorities within the employment and skills agenda. However, the spirit in which the White Paper has been written feels different as it is supported by investment, commitment and a vision for quality as opposed to quantity. Priorities have been set to 'place employers at the heart of the skills system', with employers co-designing and co-delivering Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs), strategic development funding, apprenticeships, traineeships and business centres.

To ensure provision is "responsive to local labour market needs", LSIPs will be led by accredited Chambers of Commerce with input from employers and education and training providers. I am in full agreement with this strategy; plans developed at a local level can have a quick and meaningful impact. Labour market data at a local or regional level gives an oversight of trends, yet it is the information shared at grassroots level by local working groups that can identify skills needs quickly and respond with impact.

It is no secret that larger employers plan workforce development and recruitment needs 'strategically', finding it easier to articulate their needs and source appropriate training. A key challenge for the LSIPs is the mechanism to identify and draw out solutions to meet the needs of smaller firms. Experience has taught me that smaller firms are much more reactive than proactive, particularly in the current climate. That said, they are more resilient and quicker to adapt and transform. For example, the hospitality industry has tried to adapt, moving businesses online and developing delivery

systems, which has changed their training needs. The LSIPs must therefore be flexible and allow for true responsiveness.

What is the Chambers' role? Is it to represent smaller businesses or employers in general? There have been some great collaborations with Chambers of Commerce, but their involvement has been in waves - possibly due to funding at the time - so providers and partners must have plans with clear actions, accountabilities and responsibilities. Creating such plans with 'shared services' doesn't come without its challenges, as we have our own desires for organisational survival and growth that lead providers to pursue our own self-interest and act competitively as opposed to collaboratively. This leads to a dilution and duplication of training and services at a local level. Perhaps it is time to rethink our operating models as partners in our sector?

If the LSIPs are to provide a framework to help providers reshape their offer to meet local skills needs, there must be a research-led approach and mapping exercise to review the groups, services and offer within the town. I sit on several groups both locally and regionally, and often find duplication of information and services. It is possible that with the right representatives with clear responsibilities, we could align provision and innovate to respond to local needs. I stress the words 'clear responsibilities' as experience has taught me that these groups and boards often become diluted and become provider-led opposed to employer-led with a 'scatter gun' reactive approach. It is possible such plans, services and systems are already here amongst us, as local authorities, economic development divisions, business to business services and Chambers already exist.

Looking through an employer lens at the present skills system, the information is overwhelming and daunting. A small employer in need of training, recruitment or apprentices will use the fountain of all information - Google (cough, cough) - and search for 'training near me'. The pages are flooded with the same information, services, funding and incentives. We should be placing ourselves

at the heart of business, viewing things from an employer's perspective, truly understanding their business operating models, so that we as a skills provider can best serve them.

Perhaps the Chambers of Commerce will be the driving force or a critical partner? As the White Paper states, membership of a Chamber is voluntary, unlike in other countries. This is a difference we cannot ignore. Are we at risk of further duplication of services, confusing employers? I do believe they could be part of the solution, but it will be partnerships and clarity of language when communicating to employers that will be key to the success of each LSIP. On that basis, is this the time to rethink what collaborative partnership working really means?

The White Paper also invites us to access a Strategic Development Fund to establish College Business Centres, which are intended to work with employers in a designated sector on business development and innovation. While reading this, my eyes lit up, my thoughts racing.....business centres.....employer hubs.....conference facilities..... the possibilities are genuinely exciting. I welcome this opportunity because, like many others in similar roles to myself, I believe we have been missing some opportunities for delivering better facilities and equipment for employers. In addition, employer endorsements of College Business Centres will be critical, as this will help ensure that LSIPs simplify the support available to employers locally within a coherent system and strategy that promotes quality. There is still the challenge posed by a lack of clarity around whether the goal is delivering qualifications versus skills, or training versus accreditation. Sometimes the need for skills and training can conflict with a government's desire to fund and measure qualifications and accreditation.

However, the term 'business centres' could be misleading or misunderstood by employers (it reminds me of the 'Business Link' era). Innovative and collaborative projects with real partnerships of purpose and alignment are needed to support each sector, but again there is a risk that it becomes all things to everyone.

Having sector specialisms would prevent duplication, so there is a real opportunity to transform our approach, but can we change and respond within the timescales set? There are some examples of best practice across our sector such as Blackpool and The Fylde College's partnership with Western Lancashire Chamber of Commerce to develop the Young Chamber programme. Other colleges continue to respond in different ways to the growing need for an employer-led curriculum, commercial expertise and business operating models. While I strongly support the focus on employer engagement, steering towards specialisms is where we are best placed to serve local business and communities.

It is reassuring that apprenticeships are still high up on the Government's agenda, but the White Paper often refers to existing incentives such as reserving funds via the apprenticeship service. The levy 'matchmaking' service is something we embraced in Greater Manchester and opens opportunities for smaller businesses to access funding to support their training and assessment costs. Nonetheless, we need to stop the 'hard sell' of cash incentives. It is long-term support that is needed to cover apprenticeship salaries and overhead costs to ensure an employer can afford the apprentice for the duration of their training. We have also acknowledged that smaller employers need far more support registering and navigating these systems. Like most providers, responsibility for this support has fallen to employer engagement teams and has been, in some cases, a painful exercise. The time needed to support employers is stretching resources that are already stretched.

Apprenticeships are a vital part of developing skilled employees and should not come into conflict with other routes to improving skills. An employers' needs and business circumstances should determine which option is best. Apprenticeships are not a 'quick fix' to address staff shortages but an investment for business growth. If prior learning generated from traineeships and 'bootcamps' could reduce apprenticeship durations, this would create further flexibility for progression. Frustrations arise when employers must wait for 'start dates' and 'intakes',

and this is where curriculum flexibility is needed. On the other hand, the White Paper emphasises the need for more employer involvement in the development of qualifications and training. In fact, employers are put in the driving seat - a role they may not want. 'Employers' are mentioned over 200 times, yet the term 'employer engagement' has many meanings and is no doubt different within each institution.

From experience, we have often adopted a transactional approach to employer engagement. Considerable time and effort is spent informing (selling) employers about the latest 'incentive' or initiative - apprenticeships, Kickstart, traineeships etc – when in truth this relationship needs to become much more transformational on both sides. We are also assuming employers will happily step up to the plate and provide their resources and energy on a voluntary basis in a period of post-COVID business survival. Experience has taught us that many employers, particularly micro / small businesses, do not wish to have a high level of engagement with providers and prefer to keep the relationship transactional. There is, though, an enormous opportunity for all parties to align themselves to form true partnerships of purpose. We cannot underestimate how much work would be required to create sustainable partnerships between all stakeholders, but the benefits would be worth the effort.

Employers are often unaware of the numerous changes in the FE sector and the true benefit that their investment in skills can make. Providers have invested in resources to engage and entice employers to be in the 'driving seat'. However, in my experience, employers prefer to work alongside rather than in front of providers. Employers and educators need to engage more with each other, but in my opinion the Government is not recognising that this is a two-way street. A lot of work will be needed to change employers' perceptions about their contributions and where they fit. It is time, our time, to change how they perceive the skills system and view themselves as members of the education community as opposed to being a customer of the system.

Thanks to the White Paper, LSIPs, Business Centres, apprenticeships and traineeships have outlined a vision for colleges to utilise and increase local capacity and expertise. This can only be achieved by creating partnerships with purpose in which everyone's roles, responsibilities and accountabilities are clear to ensure that services are aligned instead of being in competition. Employers may not have the technical capacity or competence to design qualifications or curricula, but they know what their business or sector needs to grow and can provide the education sector with cutting-edge knowledge and skills. As a result, I believe this is a huge opportunity now for the FE sector that will rest on how we interpret and respond to the challenges ahead.

DIGITAL SKILLS AND CONNECTIVITY: THE FUTURE OF FE

Robin Ghurbhurun

This contribution from Robin imagines a potential future in Further Education, with digital skills, content and connectivity at its heart, and what this might look like. It also considers what additional steps are needed to make this a reality.

The pandemic has given FE providers a significant jolt and accelerated their move towards making better use of technology for teaching and working. Against this seismic shift, the 'Skills for Jobs' White Paper lays the groundwork for capitalising on that momentum but lacks real ambition for a digitally enhanced future.

Marking the first significant changes to the sector since the start of the FE reform programme in 2010, many people, including myself, were hoping for more compelling proposals. Nevertheless, I'm keen that, as a sector, we engage with the art of the possible; it's time to take the initiative and reimagine the future.

Yes, we must continue to press for much-needed strategic and sustainable funding commitments – also lacking in the White Paper – but I'm certain there's a will among FE and skills providers to not only meet the demands of an economic recovery, but also those of the 'fourth industrial revolution' or 'Education 4.0'. So, I believe the sector is perfectly poised to meet the White Paper's aims, namely to:

- help regenerate communities and local economies;
- boost business, innovation and the development of technical skills; and
- provide on-demand learning opportunities to everyone, no matter their age, background or circumstance.

Imagining a successful college a few years into the future - here's how it could ideally work:

The college business centre - a growing innovation and enterprise hub, with a mix of established companies and new start-ups - is preparing to welcome a new tenant. Already home to a precision engineering firm developing batteries and braking systems for the burgeoning electric car industry, an Artificial Intelligence (AI) centre of excellence supporting immersive 5-D data modelling for the construction industry, an autonomous vehicle testing facility and a cyber security consultancy, the business centre will soon be home to its first start-up.

Emerging from flagship proposals in the 2021 White Paper to better link colleges with employers, the business centre was set up three years ago to align with a new Local Skills Improvement Plan, focused on upskilling and reskilling adults through national skills funding delivery.

Using money from the Government's Strategic Capital Transformation Fund, the centre is housed in a building owned outright by the college. It is a refurbished former industrial unit next to the campus that was bought cheaply in the recession following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Selected by the college as partners because of their commitment to innovation and staff development, their local employers are well-equipped culturally and geographically to attract trainees and apprentices whose developing skills are in demand across the local economy. In addition, co-locating regional businesses with national reach offers access to skills, commercial expertise and the latest equipment for customers and learners.

Trainees and apprentices can study part-time for their qualification alongside T-level learners at the college. There are work placement and work experience opportunities at the business centre too, which are also open to higher technical and school students.

The start-ups are incentivised to provide further opportunities for learners; space is offered at lower-than-commercial rents to start-ups that work in partnership with learner-led enterprises.

All companies at the business centre benefit from high quality premises, while the learners get real-world experience using high-specification equipment so they can develop the technical know-how and soft skills that employers want, such as collaboration, presentation and communication.

Key to the success of the business centre is a state-of-the-art, digitally enabled, intelligent building. It's connected to the ultra-fast and secure national research and education network, Janet. It also has Wi-Fi through Jisc's 'eduroam' service and collaborative / meeting rooms with high-specification video conferencing facilities.

The business centre was carefully planned so that it meets the college's strategic aims as well as having the full support of the board and the availability of central funding.

Developed from the outset with experts in e-infrastructure, cyber security, data analytics and digital hardware and software, the concept is aligned with a curriculum that has been reshaped to ensure learners can take advantage of the opportunities presented by partner businesses and the local employment landscape.

Digital content

The start-up moving to the business centre comprises an enthusiastic trio of former college learners who, in 2021, completed a T-level in Digital Production, Design and Development. While at college, they noticed some of their fellow learners were frustrated with the lack of digital content available

to support their learning. This gave rise to an idea...

They realised that learners on courses lacking good quality digital content could be at a disadvantage with reduced education and employment opportunities. This curtails their ability to log in and study at a time, place and pace to suit them, and it diminishes their chances of developing digital skills that employers want. Colleges that lack online content as part of a 'blended learning' offer will consequently be less competitive.

While there's no substitute for real-world experience, virtual reality is useful in allowing learners to practice on equipment or in situations that might otherwise be hazardous, expensive and time-consuming, such as repairing an offshore wind turbine, using welding equipment, conducting dissections, or driving heavy machinery.

The trio's fledgling company is now working with a regional consortium of colleges, industry experts and leading games design academics from the local university to create high quality, immersive curriculum-mapped digital content.

Once through the quality assurance process, the training packages are available via a centralised search-and-discover digital content platform. All UK providers have secure access to this platform and benefit from free content or preferential rates, while the content is also available commercially to employers and overseas providers.

Connecting with communities

Since the Government's emphasis has shifted to lifelong learning, the college is catering more than ever for learners of all ages and in all situations – from school leavers to older adults looking to move up the job ladder, upskill and reskill, change career or learn something new.

To facilitate this, the college offers on-demand modular provision across the key industrial pillars funded by the National Skills Fund. To compete, it is plugging into a wide cross-section of the community. Physical presence on- and off-campus is always important, but reliable, resilient and affordable connectivity also has a part to play in opening learning to the widest possible audience.

Because the college and the business centre have such good connectivity, the staff and learners do not need to travel in daily. Helping to enable this flexible working ethos, eduroam has been extended across the town, which allows local learners and staff to work and study remotely from home. It also levels the playing field for anyone experiencing disadvantage because it removes the financial burden of broadband and data costs. What's more, college users can log on seamlessly with single-sign-on, which automatically authenticates their user account.

In the high street is a college satellite centre offering English, maths and free essential digital skills training for the community, in the community.

Playing a part in regenerating the town's high street, which was severely impacted by the pandemic, the satellite operates from a large former retail outlet with cafe, where the kitchen and counter facilities are retained and run by catering students. This offers them real experience, and income for the college to off-set rents.

The centre is so bright and comfortable that it is busy with coffee-and-cake drop-ins, not just learners, which boosts the college's image as a welcoming place for all.

Priority access to an area equipped with a range of devices and headsets is offered to jobseekers, those with special educational needs and those experiencing disadvantage regardless of age. There is support from a technician in-person during peak periods, and online via a chatbot at other times.

Digital skills training sessions covering topics such as web and software design, machine learning and cyber security are offered as dip-in-and-out modules that can be completed at the learners' pace and evaluated through online assessment. A range of timeslots for English and maths classes are available because the classes link remotely with those on campuses across the UK. Alternatively, the availability of eduroam means that learners living locally and with access to their own devices can log in from home if they'd prefer to study in the evening or at weekends.

Personal learning record

Most courses at the college are modular. Credits are accrued for each module, assessed remotely and / or in-person, accumulated over time and recorded in a cloud-based, personalised 'lifelong learning passport'.

Developed by government in collaboration with sector and employer bodies, this passport shows basic details to identify the learner, describes where, when and what they studied, and verifies qualifications and grades via secure links to awarding bodies' databases. It also details learning modules accrued that do not necessarily add up to a formal qualification as well as employer-ratified work experienced placements.

The passport holder can use it as a CV and, within certain limitations, personalise the design and look. They can upload documents, such as references, plus images, video and audio clips to demonstrate their skills and give examples of their work.

Blended and online learning

Mirroring the satellite centre, the college has several immersive classrooms. These optimise teaching and extend teaching expertise to multiple cohorts simultaneously in geographically separate locations. They also allow learners the choice of participating in person, remotely or at suitable time through recorded sessions. With their wrap-around big screens, high-specification web cams and interactive surfaces, these rooms have the wow factor, too.

Some of the more academic subjects are purely online, delivered with a mixture of resources available through the virtual learning environment (VLE) and the option of live or recorded lessons. Performing arts and practical vocational courses at the college are taught using a blended approach, with high-speed low latency network connections allowing learners from other colleges to collaborate in practice and performance and on project work.

This flexibility helps the college to expand its reach (and therefore its income) to those who have caring or work commitments, and those living too far away to commute including international students. Online learning is also more attractive for learners whose social anxieties make travelling to, and attending campus, prohibitively stressful.

Digital skills – staff and learners

College teachers must demonstrate a minimum knowledge and digital skillset when new in post and attend regular CPD sessions throughout their career. Born out of the 'edtech demonstrator programme', digital training is coordinated and centrally funded via a network of provider-based edtech experts.

In addition, the college has set up an edtech mentoring programme, with digital ambassadors who provide advice and guidance. Learners are routinely asked for feedback too, thus ensuring a focus on continuous improvement.

Vocational teachers are allocated time to attend industry placements to keep them – and therefore their learners – abreast of the latest techniques and equipment so that they can lead by example to inspire their learners onto success in their chosen careers.

Conclusion

To make the most of the impetus in the 2021 White Paper, the sector needs to be more open towards wholesale technological change. That is not to say technology is a panacea for everything, but intelligent and appropriate use can help solve some of the sector's challenges and optimise opportunities.

Face-to-face teaching is preferential in many situations, particularly for the 80+ per cent of FE courses that are vocational. However, when hand-in-glove with skilled and inspiring humans, technology can help make learning accessible and engaging and it can enable collaboration across geographic divides and communities.

With the increasing use of data analytics, technology can also help providers make informed decisions to meet business goals, reduce their environmental impact and understand their learners as individuals and collectively in terms of progress, performance and outcomes.

I see real appetite for change, and Jisc, as a powerhouse of sector-specific expertise focused on lifelong learning, is already supporting providers through technological evolution and in turn helping teachers and learners.

After all, teachers and learners who are empowered and have the time and resources to become familiar and comfortable with technology will be crucial to providing those all-important skills for jobs that will grow our country's economy.

GOVERNANCE IN FE: THE NEED FOR THE RIGHT PEOPLE TO BE MAKING THE RIGHT DECISIONS

Fiona Chalk

This essay by Fiona explores the role of governance in FE in terms of what 'good governance' looks like, where college governance might be going wrong at present and how the proposals in the White Paper could play a role in strengthening governance in future to improve the performance of colleges.

With 'governance' mentioned no less than 30 times in the recent White Paper, it is important to look at what might have prompted this issue to receive such attention. It is also necessary to understand what the research tells us about the role and impact of governance on organisational performance and whether the White Paper has gone far enough to sufficiently strengthen governance in FE.

You do not have to go far in the sector to find documentation that labels poor FE provider performance as a 'failing of governance'. The key purpose of the governing board is 'to govern' i.e. to undertake the formulation of strategy and policy, the supervision of executive performance and ensure both corporate accountability and sustainability. It is therefore possible that those tasked with governance are failing to some degree in their role of stewardship. Some common reasons for this may be:

- A lack of clarity around the purpose of the Board (should the board ratify strategy, rubber-stamp decisions and

monitor financial performance, or rather, should it engage in deliberate decision-making to take the college forward?);

- The tendency for boards to recruit highly effective executives, even though governing is very different from management;
- A lack of effective induction and development, instead expecting new governors to learn on the job;
- A lack of clarity as to what outcome is expected of a meeting or each item on the agenda, because if governors don't know what they are there to achieve then you must question why they are there at all;
- A failure of governors to understand the FE sector.

So, if ineffective governance contributes to organisational failure, what does 'strengthening governance' bring? The latest research from the Good Governance Institute shows that organisations with strong governance (those scoring highest on a predetermined list of qualitative and quantitative governance measures) are 29 per cent more efficient at generating profits, 43 per cent more efficient at delivering products and services and 15 per cent less financially leveraged. Effectively governed institutions also have over three times more cash (after investing in operations) to pay off debtors, they are more than twice as resilient to operational failure and they operationally outperform those with weak governance.

Whilst this research does not incorporate the FE sector, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that similar trends could be mirrored in it. Given the perilous financial state of many colleges, together with the crisis we are currently facing from Covid-19, it is not surprising that such a focus is given to strengthening the governance of FE providers.

Turning to the details of the White Paper, how do the proposals and recommendations address universally accepted principles of effective governance?

Composition of the board: Setting clear expectations for college boards on recruitment, retention and development of Principals and board members to ensure they have the skills and experience needed for effective governance addresses this fundamental principle. The provision of greater support for college boards to build a more diverse membership, set clear expectations on the skills and experience needed for effective governance and identify ways in which industry professionals can be encouraged to join boards all reflects current thinking. It also reflects the research showing that diverse boards make smarter decisions than homogenous ones. The drive for diversity on boards, as referenced in governance codes, is not just because it is the right thing to do, but because it can genuinely improve organisational performance.

Clarity of roles and responsibilities: Developing a framework of skills and competencies for board members and governance professionals, along with the strong expectation that they undertake development through programmes such as The Education and Training Foundation's existing offer, is a positive step forward. This is because it helps to set clear boundaries and expectations on those operating in the governance space. It also addresses the inappropriate practice and expectations of new governors that they should 'pick it up as you go along'. All governors, both those new to governance and those more experienced, require on-going professional development to improve industry knowledge and hone their skills in relation to good boardroom practices. Recent research in other sectors showed that only 1 in 6 directors understand the business of the board they sit on, so you have to ask what the other 5 are basing their decisions on!

Regular reviews and reflections about the work of the Board: Requiring annual board 'self-assessments' and regular external governance reviews will strengthen the existing requirement in governance codes to undertake such reflective practices (a hallmark of highly effective boards). Those organisations with the strongest governance are three times

more likely to demonstrate they have taken action as a result of a board evaluation and four times more likely to demonstrate a clear succession plan for the board and senior leaders. They are confident enough to acknowledge that they might have blind spots and are willing take positive action to identify and address them.

How should the sector respond to the new proposals on governance?

The sector response on governance is no different to that on other areas within the White Paper, as the cry from boardrooms around the country is 'where will we find the money to implement these ideas?'. Aside from the very real challenges resulting from significant funding cuts historically, there is a need to reframe the value of governance. Too often, governors state that they do not want to direct funds away from students by spending it on their own training and development, but an investment in building effective governance should be an investment in the student.

The requirement for governance professionals to be suitably qualified and experienced is a welcome recognition of the important contribution to strategic leadership that this role should make, not least because governors serve as an officer of the organisation under law alongside the Principal and Financial Director. The need to mandate such a matter is, to some, a sad indictment of the perception of the role in some parts of the sector. It is hard to imagine, for example, a college appointing an unqualified accountant to a Director of Finance position. On that basis, why is it deemed acceptable to appoint an unqualified or inexperienced Director of Governance (or equivalent) to such an important position when one of their key functions is to ensure governors and the board operate within the law by providing independent, high quality guidance on statutory, constitutional, operational, procedural and ethical issues? It is unclear how a governance professional is supposed to adequately promote sound standards of governance and support the board and its members in evaluating their effectiveness when they themselves

have not been trained in or experienced effective corporate governance practice.

The encouragement and mandating of 'board reviews' alongside these other structural governance issues addressed in the White Paper is also welcome but come with a cautionary note. Such evaluations of governance must go beyond any tick-box exercise or audit of structural governance (composition, governing model, skills etc). Whilst such audits are useful, the effectiveness of governance largely depends on what the board does and how it behaves rather than how it looks – structure and composition are, in relative terms, less important. Research by the Conference Board Governance Centre shows that collective board behaviour has an 800 per cent greater impact on organisational performance than the characteristics of individual board members. Group dynamics underpin the board's ability to do all the components of its job – whether it is compliance and monitoring or making contributions to strategy and CEO selection. Simply assessing structural governance is rather like giving a car an MOT: while it may highlight issues for improvement, it is merely a warrant of fitness, not an indicator of driver capability.

Corporate failings such as Enron and Carillion demonstrate that a board can be less than the sum of its parts, and at worst, an incompetent group of highly competent individuals. Many such organisational collapses, whilst often noted as financial failings, can result from a deeper underlying cause: a failing of culture. The setting of culture starts with the board, primarily in its agreement of the observable behaviours required by the board and senior leadership, working as an effective team to enable the strategy to be enacted, thereby improving organisational performance.

Looking externally, regional collaborative structures are not discussed in detail within the White Paper. Instead, there will be a consultation on Local Skills Improvement Plans, so the likelihood and potential shape of any formal governance structures at a regional level is yet to be finalised. However, with collaboration not competition being the direction of travel, and with the introduction of new powers that will allow the Education Secretary to intervene where local providers are consistently unable to deliver the skills priorities for their area, boards will need to carefully consider the governance oversight of such arrangements.

There is currently a significant section of the Code of Good Governance for English Colleges that expects governors to focus on ensuring that the college is responsive to workforce trends by adopting a range of strategies for engaging with employers and other stakeholders. There is little new, then, in the White Paper for governance around stakeholder engagement that was not previously good practice. This includes being responsive to the community and relevant employment trends including building strong two-way relationships with Local Enterprise Partnerships and other employer-led local groups – all of which can be supported by ensuring that a college has a range of strategies in place for engaging with employers and other stakeholders.

While sceptics may think or say that governance is little more than a red-tape exercise that detracts from decision-making and adds little value to organisational performance, there is growing wider research and recognition that, when done well, governance can drive organisational performance. The hope must be that in FE, under this White Paper, governance can move from being a back-office bureaucratic compliance exercise to being an enabler of improved leadership, accountability and effectiveness that creates sustainable value for our students, our communities, and our country.

THE ROLE OF FE COLLEGES IN THE CORONAVIRUS RECOVERY

Anna McShane

This essay discusses the importance of creating a cross-governmental agenda to meet the urgency of the challenge caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Anna looks at what barriers the government might face in retraining and reskilling both adults and young people as well as putting forward some possible solutions.

The Further Education (FE) sector has gone through many once-in-a-generation shifts over the last 40 years, yet despite dozens of reviews, commissions, consultations and recommendations, policymakers have struggled to create an education and training system that matches the best in Europe.

An enduring challenge is the UK's low levels of achievement in numeracy and literacy. According to recent research by the Learning and Work Institute on adult skills and inclusive growth, without further investment by 2030 the UK is set to fall to near the bottom (14th out of 17 OECD countries) of the league tables ranking the proportion of adults with at least Level 2 in literacy and numeracy. It is perhaps no coincidence that funding for adult education at all levels has gone into freefall over the past decade.

The move towards a loan-based finance system has compounded the problems by providing perverse incentives for individuals and institutions to follow. Putting so much emphasis on getting learners to their one shot at a full-time three-year degree has, unfortunately, come at the detriment of almost everything else.

This has led to huge falls in the number of learners undertaking part-time courses and an overall decline in adult learning.

In light of these unfortunate trends, the Government's latest White Paper - with its promise of more flexible learning, better engagement with employers and, importantly, increased investment - is a welcome step in the right direction. It appears to address both the challenge of supplying the economy with the right kinds of skills as well as addressing the longstanding 'productivity puzzle' by having a more coordinated approach with local businesses. In turn, this is expected to underpin future growth plans by ensuring that sufficient demand for the skills being developed is in place, and then supporting the utilisation of those skills once learners find themselves in the workplace. Of course, the devil is in the detail but in general there is much for the sector and for communities in 'left behind' areas to look forward to. If the promise and rhetoric is matched with action, it could be genuinely transformative.

There is, however, one thumping great problem with the package. COVID-19 has made the challenge and its urgency so much greater than when the White Paper was originally conceived. In a pre-COVID world, the White Paper might have been enough, but the economic and social impact of the pandemic makes this an altogether more serious problem. Some 600,000 18-to 24-year-olds are predicted to be pushed out of work in the coming 12 months, while the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts unemployment could rise 6 per cent - that's twice the rate of joblessness the UK experienced after the 2008 financial crisis.

Even with a successful roll out of the vaccine by the summer, early hopes of a quick recession and an even quicker recovery now seem optimistic. The OBR is predicting the worst recession for 300 years. The worst-affected individuals will likely be in sectors already hardest hit by the pandemic such as hospitality, retail and leisure.

A single White Paper was never going to be able to deal with the post-COVID crisis with the scale or speed needed. On the

contrary, this will require significant funding and a more joined-up approach between the Treasury, the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We need to see the same ambition shown by the Government when it introduced the furlough package in Spring 2020, with an approach to skills and training that matches the growing unemployment crisis we face.

With the end of the furlough scheme later this year and the next tranche of students leaving school, college and university in June, we are setting ourselves up for unsettling levels of joblessness. Just as children being out of school for months at a time has had a detrimental impact on their wellbeing and performance, so too does being out of work for any length of time whether on furlough or through unemployment. The Government is rightly focused on catch-up for children as one of the main political priorities over the next few months, but it needs to bring that same urgency and determination to support those adults who have been stuck at home through no fault of their own. These individuals will have potentially lower self-esteem and confidence after living through enormous anxiety over the last 12 months, with little power to change their circumstances.

Many people will be losing hope and the furlough scheme cannot simply be a system for delaying inevitable job losses. The impact of recession coupled by the rapid changes in work brought on by the pandemic mean that some jobs will never return, and others will change dramatically. As a result, there is now an imperative to help those most at risk of losing their jobs, who will need not only support to transition back into work after a long period of worklessness but will also most likely need support to move into new and more stable sectors.

One possible solution would be to link the furlough scheme to skills development. This would see a revision to the furlough scheme in the sectors most vulnerable to mass redundancies so that recipients would be expected to undertake skills training. For this approach to be successful, policymakers would need

to recognise the barriers to retraining and re-skilling for adults; primarily, the reluctance of adults to seek advice and training in the first place and the need for funding to build capacity quickly in the system to deliver this support.

In focus groups we have run at Public First, there was no real sense that COVID had accelerated a drive for retraining and reskilling. COVID had generally reinforced a sense of 'staying put' and weathering the storm, with a feeling among participants that they were lucky to have any job and should count their blessings. Most said the pandemic had reinforced a sense they had of 'lost agency'. Only a handful of those we spoke to had used their time on furlough to investigate retraining in any meaningful way. The idea of returning to college or any kind of formal education is an anathema to many of those we met – both older and younger – because it felt like a backward step. Many had never got on in the classroom in the past and thought it would be demeaning to be surrounded by teenagers.

This is backed up by research from the Social Market Foundation on the role of adult education in improving outcomes for low-income households. They found that there was a real scepticism among many targeted individuals that any form of adult training would have a tangible benefit in improving their job performance or creating opportunities for career advancement. They also found that for many adults, it was not fees per se that was the significant barrier, but rather the foregone earnings and time-costs of education. Learning new skills is an investment but also a risk that needs to be understood better by policymakers. With fast-changing employer needs and increasing automation, the risks to individuals of learning new skills that may soon be obsolete has never been higher.

Our FE colleges could play a pivotal role in making sure we get this right. With a presence in almost every community across the country, they are well placed to take a lead. In addition to the move towards each college having a business centre, as outlined in the White Paper, funding should be made available for a 'Jobs

Booster Hub' in every FE college by May 2021 to coincide with the winding-down of the current furlough scheme while also aligning it with the new 'retraining and development furlough' outlined above.

The Jobs Booster Hubs would be staffed by mentors who could support individuals in finding the most appropriate training for local jobs markets. The approach would need to be matched by flexibility in the courses that it funds, going beyond the Level 3 qualifications offered through the recently announced 'Lifetime Skills Guarantee'. Some will require basic skills training, while others will be seeking quick and responsive catch-up support.

A rapid expansion of the courses available through a widening of the funding net would allow providers to pivot quickly to increase the breadth of their programmes. The new entitlement to Level 3 courses from April will help but given our historic poor performance in basic skills and the fact that many of those losing jobs will be in low skilled sectors such as hospitality, retail and leisure, this entitlement should also include an extension of the high value Level 2 courses that are currently only available freely to 18 and 19-year-olds.

Many of those who lose their jobs will not need extensive full-time provision but quick, responsive catch-up support to prepare them for the workplace and help them transition into new sectors. Rapid learning courses such as the upcoming 'bootcamps' have shown themselves to be highly effective and may be more appealing to those keen to get back into work.

There will also be a need for the FE sector and Government to start collaborating, through Local Enterprise Partnerships, to draw up a list of other short courses that adults can access freely while on the 'retraining and development furlough'. These courses should be focused on building confidence in the workplace, career progression and linking to sector shortages in their areas. This will not be a silver bullet; we know it can take years for new jobs to reappear once a recession has ended. Regardless, through proper joined-up thinking between Government and the FE sector we can

find ways to maximise the likely benefit of training and minimise long term unemployment. By sharing our understanding of the jobs markets in growth sectors such as infrastructure, healthcare, life sciences, digital and the green economy, we cannot delay the inevitable but we can still begin to build back better.

If the Government is serious about 'levelling up' then it cannot wait for the plans it has put in place in the White Paper to slowly come to fruition over several years. We cannot repeat the mistakes of the 1980s and the generations it left behind. If there was ever a time to invest in the skills of our people, it is now.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A CROSS DEPARTMENTAL APPROACH TO COLLEGES

Stephen Evans

Stephen's essay looks at why joined-up policymaking and delivery will be crucial in determining the impact of the White Paper, with government departments and other organisations needing to work collaboratively rather than in isolation to ensure the Government's proposals match their potential.

In skills policy in England, there is nothing new under the sun. Almost any idea you can think of has probably been tried and you are unlikely to need to wait too long for it to be tried again.

It is easy, therefore, to be cynical and weary. But, while no White Paper alone can 'solve' England's learning and skills challenges, might this one provide a step forward on that journey?

Why learning and skills matter

Increasing participation in learning and improving skills are essential to our future prosperity, fairness and social inclusion.

The economic, personal and community arguments for why this matters are well rehearsed. Global economic changes, like advances in technology, are increasing the importance of skills – raising the bar for getting into work and on in a career. The pandemic has likely accelerated some of these trends, such as increased homeworking and online shopping. At the same time, we are living longer with longer working lives. Put the two together, and we will all need to update our skills and change jobs and careers more than in the past.

The coronavirus crisis has had a significant impact. The number of people claiming unemployment-related benefits has doubled in the year since February 2020, with young people and older people particularly hard hit. Unemployment is costly to individuals in lost income and, in the case of young people, the long-term effects on their career prospects. It can also be bad for your health. Getting people back to work is therefore an urgent and pressing task and learning, upskilling and retraining can contribute to this.

But the benefits of learning are about so much more than the economy. Learning can aid health and well-being - vital for our ageing population and increased prevalence of long-term health conditions. Our research shows learning, including community learning, can improve wellbeing and save the health service money. Learning can also help people be active citizens and engage in their communities too.

In other words, whichever big challenge you look at, learning and skills should have a key role to play in everything from how you boost our poor rate of economic growth, how you get people back to work after the pandemic, how you 'level up' opportunities between communities, how you improve health and wellbeing, and so much more.

However, a decade of cuts, coupled with falling employer investment in skills, have left far fewer adults taking part in learning. Learning and Work Institute's survey of adult participation in learning shows record lows and stark inequalities between groups and areas. As participation falls and progress stalls, we risk falling further behind other countries, making little dent in helping the nine million adults with low basic skills or the low proportions qualified to Levels 3-5.

Chances for change

The good news is that the Government is now talking about where to invest rather than what to cut. The White Paper reconfirms existing plans to invest more through the National Skills Fund, but that falls far short of the extra £1.9 billion per year as part of a 10-year plan that we have argued for.

Will the White Paper increase the likelihood of sustained and increased investment in the 2021 Spending Review? Only if the Treasury is convinced that greater investment is central to the big challenges the country faces and will deliver value for money.

Two areas of the White Paper could offer some hope on that front.

The first is a planned simplification of funding. Skills funding is incredibly complicated, with a galaxy of funding streams, funding bodies and eligibility criteria. There have been promises of simplification before and complexities are usually introduced for a reason. But it feels unlikely the current system is optimal, we can surely make it easier for learners and providers.

The second is an intended switch to focus more on the outcomes of learning. We helped the Local Government Association develop its 'Work Local' proposals. Similar to Canada's Labour Market Agreements, these would see employment and skills funding streams handed to local government. Local government would have freedom in how to invest these, committing to delivering certain levels of outcomes (such as people into work). The intention is that this would lead to more joined up learning and employment support.

I hope the White Paper's outcome agreements will take this broad approach: looking at employment and skills funding, not just the adult education budget; looking at all employment and skills providers, not just colleges; and looking at a broad range of economic and social outcomes, not just finding jobs.

If they do, then it will give providers more freedom in how to deliver learning and support. It could also make it easier for organisations to work together and should provide a clear demonstration of the impacts of learning on a range of outcomes.

The White Paper could allow us to simplify and focus on outcomes, but we need a broad and ambitious approach.

Joined up policy making

However, there are too many big questions the White Paper does not answer or sometimes does not even ask.

How to boost economic growth, including through science and investment, is a key challenge of our time. Skills can both contribute to growth and help to translate science and innovation into productivity improvements. Both rely on employer demand for, and use of, skills.

The White Paper has lots of mentions of employers but most are about putting them 'in the driving seat' of various bits of the skills system. It says little about how we will increase employer demand for, and investment in, skills, nor how skills policy will link with other efforts to improve productivity and the industrial strategy.

Similarly, one of the Prime Minister's main themes is a commitment to 'levelling up' across the country. So, increasing growth in areas where it is lowest, or which feel left behind, is clearly a government priority. But the White Paper does not talk much about how learning and skills policy fits with this agenda or other place-based approaches, nor does it distinguish much between employers of different sizes, sectors or regions.

Another challenge of our time is to tackle the rise in unemployment during the pandemic, yet the White Paper does not talk about how to build skills into employment support in ways that could help more people into work and promote good work.

Looking at the White Paper as a whole, 'levelling up' gets two mentions: one in the Secretary of State's foreword, another as a stated goal of a future plan to simplify funding. Unemployment gets one mention, as a reason why traineeship funding has been increased. The Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Health and Social Care and the National Health Service are not mentioned at all. Nor are Restart, Kickstart or Jobcentre Plus – the multibillion-pound centrepieces of the Government's 'Plan for Jobs'.

Too often, the White Paper gives the impression of having been written by Department for Education officials in isolation. That is unlikely to convince the Treasury of the case for more investment or lead to lasting change on the ground.

We need a wider vision and longer-term strategy with sustained increases in investment – the Spending Review needs to deliver this.

Joined up delivery

Most Governments end up frustrated that their excellent (in their view) ideas are not sufficiently translating (again, in their view) to delivery on the ground. The £111 million boost to Traineeships, announced in July 2020, is a case in point. It took the Department for Education almost six months to even decide which providers to allocate this money to, and there will now be a race on to spend it by July 2021 – not a good recipe for ensuring value for taxpayer money and not good enough for the young people who have been left waiting for help.

Similarly, the White Paper declares the recent apprenticeship reforms a success. The growth in higher apprenticeships is welcome – I'd like to see even more – and I'm in favour of learning through life and workforce development. Even so, the number of young people and career starters doing apprenticeships has fallen from low to very low, and the quality and narrow focus of some apprenticeships suggests we are not at the 'mission accomplished' stage.

In both cases, I agree with the policy intent: expanding traineeships was the right thing to do and introducing an apprenticeship levy and new standards were good ideas. The problems lie with design and implementation. The traineeships money appears to have been bogged down in a convoluted and delayed procurement process, while the impact of the changes to apprenticeships were both predictable and predicted by many. What's more, both are isolated from other employment and skills initiatives.

All of this says that publishing a White Paper is only ever the start. Even if your policy intent is spot on, it will succeed or fail in its design, implementation and delivery. You stand a better chance of getting those right if you are clear about your objective and you engage with people and stakeholders openly and early.

We need an open and collaborative approach to designing and implementing the ideas in the White Paper and beyond, and to ensuring delivery works in practice.

Where next?

There's lots to welcome in what the Government says but real and lasting change requires a broader, more joined up vision. Here are six areas we should focus on:

- 1. 10-year investment plan.** We need a sustained increase in investment and to plan for the long-term. We have argued for an extra £1.9 billion per year and to benchmark our skills profile against other countries. That should be guided by a 10-year plan, developed in partnership by local and national government, employers, trades unions and civic society. Learning and skills are not just about the Government – they are about us all.
- 2. Outcome agreements.** We know learning has a range of economic and social benefits. We also know the quantity of public spending is not a measure of success, whereas the impact it has certainly is. The Government should test fuller devolution of employment and skills funding to local government,

underpinned by outcome agreements, as well as developing new outcome measures for learning and skills funding.

- 3. Youth guarantee.** All young people should be guaranteed an offer of a job, apprenticeship or training place. That means proactively reaching young people who are not receiving support today and making sure the offer they get is tailored to their needs rather than determined by which bit of the system they come into contact with. At the moment, we have lots of good ideas (traineeships, Kickstart, apprenticeships, Restart) but it is not joined up or properly targeted.
- 4. Employer investment.** We need employers to invest more in skills, and for more of that investment to go on young people and those with the lowest qualifications. The apprenticeship levy is a good idea but it has displaced other training and led to reduced opportunities for young people. We should think about broadening its scope to more firms, widening the list of eligible training, incentivising a greater focus on young people and considering a 'skills tax credit'.
- 5. Support for retraining.** We need to build support that reflects longer working lives, and that requires joining up employment and skills policies. We should look at a lifelong learning entitlement that includes retraining at the same level, and how the benefit system, maintenance support or rights to time off for training could help people with living costs while learning.
- 6. Empowering people.** We need people to oversee, and invest more in, their own learning. As well as a lifelong learning entitlement, we should give everyone a Learning Account, with government funding to spend on any accredited learning and incentives for people and employers to top these accounts up. These could help target the available support (e.g. government could top up accounts for those looking to retrain or recently made redundant), give people greater choice and control over what they want to learn, and encourage greater investment by individuals and employers.

The FE White Paper is not an end in itself. It is no giant leap, but with increased investment, more ambition and greater collaboration, I hope we can make it a positive stepping stone.

RESKILLING AND UPSKILLING: GETTING IT RIGHT

Kathleen Henehan

Kathleen's essay focuses on the proposals in the White Paper for reskilling and upskilling across the workforce. She finds plenty of reasons to be positive about the direction of travel but thinks that getting the details right on new policies will require the Government to listen carefully.

Educators, economists and policy makers have long discussed the need to help workers in lower-paid industries to 'upskill' so that they can progress in their careers, or 'reskill' so that they can change sector altogether. The onset of COVID-19 and associated measures to contain the virus has added urgency to those longstanding discussions. As of January 2021, 4.5 million people remained on furlough and recent Resolution Foundation research shows almost two million workers have been unemployed, fully furloughed, or a combination of the two, for at least six months of the current crisis.

Workers in largely lower-paid sectors like hospitality, leisure and retail have borne the brunt of these labour market changes. While roughly a quarter of 18 to 64-year-old adults who worked during February 2020 had either lost their job, been furloughed or seen a reduction of at least 10 per cent in their pay, this rises to half of those working in leisure (including arts, entertainment and recreation). So too did 55 per cent of those working in non-supermarket retail and 72 per cent of those working in hospitality.

A large share of workless adults – especially those out of work for a prolonged period – will need some help getting back into

a job. With trading in sectors that offer in-person services (like hospitality and leisure) likely be volatile and / or with a lower output than usual as long as the virus continues to spread, we would expect fewer job vacancies to go around - at least in the short term. Where this proves to be the case, policymakers will need to have measures that allow dislocated workers to build up their skills or learn new ones in order to move to a new sector.

The Government's new Further Education (FE) White Paper includes some good proposals for achieving this. For example, it confirms the previously announced 'Lifetime skills guarantee,' which includes funding some Level 3 courses for adults who don't already have a full Level 3 qualification. It also sets out a proposed 'Lifelong loan entitlement,' which would allow four years of post-18 study at Levels 4-6.

The Department for Education (DfE) has stated that courses offered under these new entitlements will lead to good employment outcomes through two main mechanisms. First, they plan to draw a link between the courses that colleges offer and local labour market skills needs through new 'local skills improvement plans'. Second, they plan to refocus FE college accountability so that it is less centred on "process and more on the effectiveness of provider performance and the outcomes they achieve." While the DfE intends to consult on the specific outcome metrics to focus on, the White Paper notes they will consider "effectiveness of employer engagement, quality of provision and the outcomes achieved, such as how well provision supports individuals to progress in their learning and secure good labour market outcomes."

But for all that is worth welcoming about the proposals, there remain a few challenges. First, there is the continual issue of equivalent or lower qualification (ELQ) restrictions. Though the initiative to offer free Level 3 courses has, in some cases, been billed as a reskilling initiative, the fact that it is only available to those who do not yet have a full Level 3 qualification makes it seem like an upskilling policy instead. To some extent, the restrictions are understandable: the DfE will have concerns about

the fiscal implications of offering up free Level 3 qualifications to a large share of the UK labour force. Still, the end of the pandemic will probably leave us with many people either needing or wanting to change sector.

In fact, a recent Resolution Foundation report found that 8 per cent of 18 to 65-year-olds responding to our survey plan to move sectors after the pandemic, with the relative share of hospitality workers looking to move (23 per cent, compared to 7 per cent of non-shutdown sectors) is higher than normal times. A substantial share of these workers is likely to have a Level 3 qualification already: figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Labour Force Survey show that in 2019, 50 per cent of food and beverage workers aged 16 to 64 were qualified at GCSE-equivalent or lower levels, with 27 per cent qualified to Level 3 (A level-equivalent) and further 23 per cent at Levels 4 and higher.

What's more, plans for a 'Lifelong loan entitlement' look unlikely to help workers retrain at Level 3: although details are to be consulted on, the White Paper specifically suggests it will be for study at higher levels (specifically, Levels 4-6) and it won't even come online until 2025. To help workers who already have a Level 3 qualification retrain for a new career the Government could consider widening eligibility of its Lifetime Skills Guarantee where, for instance, a person already qualified to Level 3 who has been unemployed for a prolonged period could access a free Level 3 course, subject to agreement with a Job Centre Work Coach or employment support advisor. Work coaches could waive eligibility rules for Level 3 provision where a person's existing current Level 3 qualification prevents them from progressing in their career.

Moving beyond questions about whether the White Paper's policies lend themselves more to upskilling than they do reskilling, there's the issue of how to measure success – or rather ensure colleges are providing courses that lead to good employment outcomes. This, as ever, will be difficult, not least because the definition of a good outcome will look different across different local labour markets and for different types of learners.

Even before the onset of COVID-19 and its attendant effects on the economy, the unemployment rate among working-age adults without a full Level 2 qualification was more than twice as high as the unemployment rate among better qualified workers. Modelling from the ONS in January this year found that over the course of 2019, there were high levels of differentiation across parliamentary constituencies, from just 1.6 per cent unemployment in North East Hampshire to 12.5 per cent in Birmingham Ladywood. To the extent that the White Paper does allow for retraining and career change, it's worth remembering that adults who've retrained for a new career often receive lower pay in the first few years of their new career than they did in their previous one - given they may have to start out at a lower level of seniority. Focusing solely on employment will also ignore the huge positive impact that colleges can have on learners' well-being more generally.

Realistically, we'd expect accountability metrics to factor in learner evaluations, 'learning distance travelled' and different employment conditions across local geographies – methods that were much discussed as part of the Teaching Excellence Framework's 'benchmarking process' in the Higher Education sector. Getting the balance between figures and context is hard: sway too far in one direction and educators will undoubtedly be penalised for factors outside their control; too far in the other and you'll struggle to generate comparable figures at all. It is a difficult challenge, and one that will require a genuinely considerate consultation process and listening exercise.

Reforms to encourage upskilling and reskilling – and which generate better levels of pay progression and career changes among UK workers – have long been needed. The past year adds a sharp exclamation point to that longstanding need. The proposals outlined so far in the White Paper do have promise but getting them right will require listening hard to areas where policy should flex and understanding what a good educational outcome looks like for different people and in different places.

HOW CAN FURTHER EDUCATION AND CAREERS ADVICE REVERSE THE WIDENING DISADVANTAGE GAP?

Dr Deirdre Hughes OBE

In this essay, Deirdre argues that providing better careers support for learners of all ages can contribute to personal and economic growth both now and in future, particularly if this is underpinned by government departments and other important stakeholders aligning their initiatives and resources.

The pandemic has widened the disadvantage gap and the Government has rightly committed itself to finding ways of closing the gap. But will the promises made become a reality and make a significant and sustainable difference to lives and livelihoods? Fundamentally, education, careers advice, skills and training must be essential foundations to build back better, as part of the national recovery plan. The rise and fall of numerous initiatives and funding announcements will therefore need to be monitored closely in the years ahead.

This article sets out several ways in which leaders and government can play a key role in efforts to reverse the widening disadvantage gap. It reflects on the White Paper and other recent government announcements. It also broadens our thinking about what a 'career' means in today's society. In essence, everyone has a career of some sort, defined as a 'sequence of life and work experiences over time'. Motivation to learn is driven not only by an appetite or necessity to find a job or better prospects, but also to find a sense of belonging, improved self-esteem and well-being. In essence, government must signal to individuals across

the UK that livelihoods and career choices matter to their well-being, communities and our economy.

Make it easier for people to afford and access training courses and job opportunities

The National Skills Fund, the Lifetime Skills Guarantee and the Lifetime Learning Entitlement enshrined in the White Paper will hopefully remove some barriers to learning. A terrific commitment, but the Lifetime Skills Guarantee is not anticipated to be rolled out until after the next General Election. This is a moment in time now when individuals' skills transfer and upgrades are essential - not three years down the line. In these uncertain times, individuals relying on good luck when searching for opportunities is not good enough. People need to find careers support to assist with their re-entry to learning and work. Clearly signposting and communicating skills shortages, skills mismatches and new opportunities to the man and woman in the street will be crucial.

With greater support from the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Guarantee could be accelerated and translated into pilots that genuinely engage adults from the outset. For instance, the practice of 'co-creation' involving local people could help shape the Guarantee through a pilot to explore what works and how this can be scaled-up across the system.

Unemployment for young people has increased by 66,000, a 13 per cent increase. Displacement from employment in high-risk sectors such as hospitality, theatre, travel and tourism, leisure and retail, where jobs and opportunities have been ravaged, have had a particularly heavy impact on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. This differential effect deepens existing inequalities and prevents inclusive growth. The Budget needed to be more ambitious for women, people with disabilities and older people whose jobs are likely to be at risk because they are unlikely to go back to work once they are unemployed.

Offer careers support to people of all ages, particularly in local communities

There is a social and economic imperative to enable people to take advantage of new opportunities that emerge in the aftermath of the pandemic. Individuals being able to navigate their way through the labour market with easy access to careers support services is essential.

In July last year, the UK's Plan for Jobs (HM Treasury, 2020) announced a further £32 million investment in the National Careers Service over 18 months. This policy statement affirmed its intention to support an all-age careers service and to revitalise the professional status of career guidance. But this has been undermined by delays in funding and difficulties resolving tensions within government policies e.g. separate and competing careers and employability initiatives funded by the DfE and DWP.

Clear and trusted information, advice and guidance for career and education choices are embedded in the White Paper. Rather than a new 'Careers Strategy' responding to the challenges of the pandemic, it seems like 'carrot and stick' measures in place. There will be extra requirements for schools to provide independent career guidance from Year 7, plans for updated statutory guidance for careers, supporting and strengthening the 'Baker clause', rolling-out more Careers Hubs for young people, more training for careers leaders / teachers and revamping the National Careers Service website.

Encouragingly, Ofsted will be asked to undertake a thematic review of careers guidance, and Sir John Holman will review the alignment of The Careers & Enterprise Company and the National Careers Service on behalf of government. One month later, the Government announced that more than 150,000 jobseekers across Great Britain will benefit from new employment support, helping them build their interview skills, find local vacancies and quickly get back into work through the DWP.

DWP also launched a 'New Job Finding Support Service' ranging

from job searches and interview practice to advice on how to switch careers. This will run in parallel with existing support available in jobcentres and by Work Coaches. It is accordingly important to note that the National Careers Service area-based advisers rely on referrals from the DWP to support the operation of their payment-by-results funding model. A key requirement is for government departments to work together – not in competition – and the various agencies and professionals to come together to strengthen joined-up careers support for people of all ages.

Experiment with places that can offer easy access to trustworthy careers support

Devolved budgets and the new 'Work and Health programme' hold new promise for locally designed careers support to be created that meets local needs. Reaching vulnerable adults to support their job search and transitions into learning and work is essential. Professional careers guidance helps people to make good choices, both for them and for the wider economy, matching skills supply more closely with demand.

It is important to attune to the emergent culture in finding new places and spaces in which to do things differently both now and in the aftermath of the pandemic. Closer alignment between careers support and mental health services, especially for marginalised and vulnerable groups, should be a priority with case studies of good practice: where can ordinary people go to access trustworthy information and quality-assured careers support? Career recovery cannot be left to chance with those most vulnerable served by those least trained and qualified to deliver.

In the White Paper, steps have been taken by the DfE to ensure technical skills provision is "responsive to local labour market needs" with the intention to pilot new 'Local Skills Improvement Plans'. Chambers of Commerce, employers, colleges and training providers in trailblazer local areas are in the mix, yet there is no reference to England's professionally trained careers advisers

who advocate on behalf of young people and adults and act as a bridge between education, training and employment. There is a real opportunity to build back professionalism and quality by co-creating information, advice and guidance to meet citizens' needs. Effective places can be either 'bricks-and-mortar' environments and / or digital for remote service delivery.

Harness digital innovation

Digital self-service facilities are increasingly a major part of the student, client and customer experience. For practitioners, remote delivery has moved from the sidelines to centre-stage in their work. New ways of working effectively online can be celebrated and showcased more. In the drive to find new algorithms for more rapid delivery, we need to keep in mind that both digital and human careers support are pivotal for achieving decent work, inclusive growth and sustainable provision.

A positive development is for AI and machine learning to capture what individuals are searching for, and for local provision to be informed by their particular needs. Digital technology also facilitates more data sharing. For example, humans and 'bots' can work well together, as illustrated through the innovative 'careerchatbot' prototype.

However, digital poverty and the North / South divide are major concerns in the UK. For example, the Lloyds' Consumer Digital Index (2020) found that 9 million people in the UK are 'digitally excluded', with no or limited access to the internet. This exclusion has been compounded by the pandemic. Digital access for all and digital competence remain big issues, including workforce development.

Support educationalists and careers advisers to make the most of their professional expertise

The partnership approach to careers support in England, compared to Celtic and EU nations, has been eroded. In contrast, the Finnish government is supporting the establishment of regional One-Stop-Guidance Centres, with targeted in-service training focusing on multi-professional and cross-disciplinary teamwork.

The White Paper sows some seeds of promise to improve the provision of high-quality professional development and support progression for teachers. It also states that “We will equip the teaching profession to support a whole-school or college approach to careers education by building careers awareness into every stage of their professional development, from initial training to education leadership.” Nevertheless, the responsibilities of those in the teaching profession are rapidly expanding, so a partnership approach is essential.

Across the EU, professional associations were found to have important roles in raising and maintaining the professionalisation of the lifelong guidance workforce (Barnes et al, 2020). It was found that member states with more structured national co-ordination have been able to integrate training and research more systemically by working with professional associations.

Launch a major careers discovery campaign

When the pension crisis hit a few years ago, the Government set out an ambitious plan to help people understand their pensions and seek additional guidance if needed. In 2020, the DWP launched plans to boost the use of pension guidance by ‘nudging’ people towards the help available.

The time has come for more ‘nudging’. People need to know where their talents and skills fit into a rapidly changing labour market. I feel that the Chancellor, the DfE and the DWP have missed a terrific opportunity that could yet be salvaged. A major career discovery / recovery campaign, using TV and social media,

and harnessing the cross-departmental resources already in place could create a new positive mindset in difficult times.

Conclusion

Many of us are familiar with the Dicken’s novel ‘Great Expectations’ - the story of Pip, an orphan boy adopted by a blacksmith’s family, who has good luck and great expectations, and then loses both his luck and his expectations. Through this rise and fall, however, Pip learns how to find happiness. We all have ‘great expectations’ for a decent life where we can maintain dignity and respect. The story of Pip reminds us of how easy it is to lose one’s expectations but to eventually find happiness through reflection and learning lessons from past experience.

This Government has worked hard during the pandemic. Its efforts to rapidly launch new initiatives and investments should not be overly criticised. The key to success going forward is to reposition careers support, set out a clear all-age Careers Strategy (starting early in primary schools) and harness the expertise of leaders from public, private and third sector organisations including professionally trained careers advisers. We should remove the blind spot that exists in parts of government: education leaders and careers advisers are a vital part of the solution, not part of the problem.

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