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Speech

Justine Greening: unlocking the potential of a new generation

From: [Department for Education](#) and [The Rt Hon Justine Greening MP](#)
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The Education Secretary addresses the Social Mobility Commission conference about transforming social mobility.



Thank you very much, Alan. And a massive thank you to the Social Mobility Commission and the University of Bath for inviting me here today.

Today, you have come together to debate and discuss social mobility – which to me has not only characterised my own personal and political life, but I think as an area is perhaps one of the most entrenched, difficult, yet important challenges that can face any government. And by its nature it is long term. And as you talked Alan, I just had a flashback to all the years I spent growing up in Rotherham where I was aiming for something better – many of the things you talked about; a better job, owning my own home, an interesting career, a life that I found really challenging, and it was a really hard, long slog. But I was willing to do it because I knew there was something better out there, and I knew there was opportunity. And I think the power of people to lift themselves is perhaps the most important thing at the centre of this agenda, and I really want to talk about that today and about how I see my role in education as being that enabler to be able to give people the power to be able to lift and shape their own lives.

And of course you have perfectly timed this conference because it comes in perhaps one of the most important weeks of our country's history for many generations. And yesterday the Prime Minister began the next chapter in our country's story as she started the process which will very much shape the country that Britain will become in the future.

So this is a very profound moment to be looking ahead. And we are the generation who made this choice on Brexit – and so it's our responsibility to make sure that that choice is the best possible choice it can be for our children. And at its core it's got to mean lifting our sights and committing ourselves to creating a society which opens up opportunity to everyone, a society in which every single child and young person, no

matter where they live or what job their parents have got, that they can go as far as their ability and drive will take them. And the work that our Prime Minister kicked off yesterday will shape our children's opportunities, the careers that they are able to pursue, the communities that they are growing up in.

Social mobility is a noble aspiration for any government. We all want a fairer, more cohesive country; we all want people to have the chance to be able to succeed. But that aspiration has not been enough to deliver the real change that we want. And in Brexit Britain social mobility is now no longer a 'nice to have', a 'good thing to do'. It is a cold, hard, economic imperative for our country.

But even without Brexit I believe we face a burning platform – one which long predates Brexit and yet is made all the more real by it. Because the global economy has been changing and will continue to change at an incredible pace. It will move jobs and investment around the globe, it tears up old assumptions about what it takes to succeed. The impacts of technology, of deepening globalisation, of demographic and geopolitical shifts are combining to now steadily transform the nature of work for all of us. Around the globe, in the coming decades, there are estimates that up to half of today's jobs are at risk of disappearing due to automation. At the same time, some experts estimate that two-thirds of today's primary school children are going to be doing jobs and careers which don't even exist today.

So it is easy to describe the challenges this reality presents. But I believe these challenges also create a massive generational opportunity for us - one which depends more than ever on our investing and lifting up this country's human capital. Especially in an economy driven ever more by knowledge and skills, not just at the top end but across more and more of the economy, overall. Globally, nationally, and regionally, the evidence is now overwhelming - education and skills are and will be the strongest determinant of economic success. Human capital is the missing ingredient in lifting the United Kingdom's economic productivity.

This government has built a strong economy. Over 2 million more people in employment than in 2010, and this year, there are more people working than ever before.

I know exactly what it's like to grow up in a family where one of your parents is out of work, and the dignity that being back in work gives to people fundamentally. And it is great news that more people are working than ever before.

But our productivity as a country lags behind many advanced economies and skills are at the heart of how we address that. Looking within our own country, there are geographical differences. Because the most productive area of the UK is three times more productive than the least. What's behind that? Educational attainment is, according to CBI research, the single biggest driver of these productivity differences across the country.

And so, looking ahead, our success is going to depend upon whether as a country we make it possible for everyone to develop the skills and opportunities that they need to succeed in the labour market. And we have to do that on a very simple but powerful assumption, which is that talent is completely evenly spread around the country – it doesn't reside in one bit and not another, it's all over the place. So we are simply missing a trick unless we finally start to level up those parts of the country where that talent isn't being tapped into. And we've got to make sure that we don't let anyone waste talent because of missed opportunities or social barriers. We have to make sure we don't let anyone's talent go to waste.

The job of our education system – from the earliest years through to adulthood – is to help people to develop the skills they need to thrive in the future economy, and to be able to translate those skills into real, smart choices and great opportunities.

And when I talk about social mobility, I don't just mean helping the most disadvantaged to do better and I

don't just mean closing the attainment gaps in schools, absolutely vital though both of these things are. I am talking about something that to me is much more profound in nature.

By social mobility I mean stripping away the barriers that anyone faces, so that everybody all over the country, and of many backgrounds, can go as far as their talents mean they're able to, that they get the best and most stretching education or training, and make the transition into and upwards through a great career.

Our success in building a post-Brexit Britain, which transforms social mobility and opportunity, will depend on whether, once and for all, we can learn how to invest in and how to value human and social capital in a way we have long known how to value physical capital, and seen investment go into it. Our economy, and our society depends upon it.

Today, while much progress has taken place, our education system still fails to enable far too many children to reach their full potential.

The facts, as many of you will know, are really stark.

Children from high-income backgrounds who show signs of low-academic ability at age 5 are 35% more likely to become high earners than their poorer peers who show early signs of high ability.

A child living in England's most disadvantaged areas is 27 times more likely to go an inadequate school than a child in an advantaged area. And graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds who do make it to the top jobs still earn, on average, over £2,200 a year less than their colleagues who happen to have been born to professional or managerial parents – even when they have the same educational attainment, the same role and the same experience.

Why does this happen? Well there are a number of factors that don't help. One of them is that we have been perpetuating a postcode lottery of education funding which creates inconsistency and doesn't let us target resources effectively. In spite of holding every single school to the same accountability framework, we struggle to get the teachers and leaders who transform lives in front of the children who most need their support and who are most likely to be in the most challenging schools.

We fail to equip far too many of the young people who undertake technical and vocational training with the skills that they need to be able to thrive.

And once in work, we don't always harness the talents of millions of adults in the workforce who have the potential to keep progressing, but whose progress stalls because their development at work stalls.

And these facts add up to much more than an attainment gap in our education system – they add up to an attainment gap at the heart of our economy. And it's a gap that we simply cannot afford to let continue.

But – and this is a big but – I truly believe that there are reasons to be optimistic. Because if we have a burning platform driving us towards new solutions for social mobility, we also have a better chance than ever before of finally galvanising the efforts that we need to be able to level-up opportunity. Thanks in no small part to many of the people in this room, their expertise and experience, we know more than ever about what we need to do and how. And that work is already beginning.

I am making social mobility the driving focus of the Department for Education, and I am focused on 3 core priorities – one of which directly taps into what we are talking about today. Firstly, tackling geographic disadvantage, secondly, investing in long-term capacity in our system, and thirdly, making sure our

education system as a whole really prepares young people and adults for career success.

So firstly – a central theme of today’s conference: tackling the educational disadvantage which gets concentrated in certain parts of our country.

Our school-led system is driving improvement across England – we now nearly have 1.8 million more children who are now in good or outstanding schools than in 2010. But, there are still 1 million children in schools that Ofsted has rated as not good enough – that is 1 million children growing up right now that are not getting the start that they need to make the most of themselves. And they are disproportionately located in areas of disadvantage.

Now I grew up in one of those parts of the country where we want to see more progress – Rotherham, just outside Sheffield, and it’s fantastic that we have someone that’s involved in a lot of that work in my home region coming to be part of the panel today. I passionately believe that none of us should accept a reality in which your chances of going to a good school or a good college, accessing great early years or later on skills provision, depend on where you live. That’s simply something none of us should accept.

And we will never tackle the causes and consequences of a divided country unless we get drill down into the factors which have concentrated poor educational outcomes and lack of capacity to improve those things in certain parts of the country.

So we are introducing the National Fairer Funding Formula for schools, which is finally going to address the historic and unfair postcode lottery in how our school funding is distributed in England. It is difficult, but it is absolutely at the heart of how we need to level up our country.

We have set out more proposals to create more good school places, for more parents. We are challenging ourselves to leave no stone unturned. We want to lift the ban that stops communities choosing new selective school places, and harnessing the resources and expertise of universities, of independent schools, we want to see fantastic faith schools that have often felt that they can develop.

We are strengthening the capacity of the education system in all parts of the country to improve schools that might be struggling – but in doing so we have started to learn a lot about what it takes to turn around failure and now we need to get that expertise and capacity to the places which need it most, through our [Strategic School Improvement Fund](#), and by galvanising and spreading the expertise of our very best school leaders and academy trusts.

But ultimately the choices that we make in Whitehall will only get us half way, I believe, to where we need to be. And if we are really serious about tackling geographic disadvantage, and changing that and turning it around, we have to get out of Whitehall and into communities. I want my department working and learning with local areas as they tackle their own barriers to opportunity.

My department is now working with 12 opportunity areas – these are the social mobility ‘cold spots’ identified by the commission last year, where we are building and supporting partnerships with schools, businesses, community groups, local councils, to diagnose, innovate, invest and improve educational outcomes and life chances. And already these opportunity areas, though new, are teaching us a great deal.

In Oldham, in Scarborough, in West Somerset, we are finding that even when take-up of early education looks promising, too few children are arriving at school ready to learn. That even when many young people are achieving good grades at school, too few are making the best choices they can about what routes to pursue after school. Often that despite local perceptions about poor job opportunities, there are often many

new jobs being created locally and yet some young people are not being equipped with the knowledge or the right training to take them up. So these are opportunities on their doorstep but not ones that young people can access. And we are finding that when you scratch beneath the surface, these educational challenges on the ground often look quite different to the narratives that we tell each other about what's happening.

And that's the point of these opportunity areas – a chance to bring together national and local expertise, the activity and resource to be able to change lives, and to do so by learning how to take that work to other areas of the country.

So my first priority is to get under the skin of what drives educational disadvantage in certain places and get resources where they are needed most.

Secondly, we can only transform social mobility if we commit to doing that as a long-term, generational mission for our country and that means prioritising long-term capacity building in our education system, which can deliver lasting benefits.

And as with all sound investment, when we invest in human capital the payback is long term. So for me that means, above all, investing in our workforces – in teachers and school leaders, in the early years professionals and children's social workers, in the teachers and leaders in further and higher education.

We know that disadvantaged pupils benefit most from great teaching - over the school year, the poorest students can gain 1.5 years' worth of learning if they are taught by very very effective teachers. So it's about teaching quality. And that's why we are strengthening qualified teacher status and offering incentives to ITT providers who are delivering really innovative teacher training models in the areas that need it most.

For those teachers further along in their career, we've strengthened the National Professional Qualifications for school leaders. Working with teachers, these will be rolled out from September this year. And we are investing £75 million in the Teaching and leadership innovation fund that will nurture this next generation of leaders for our education system.

And from our recently published workforce strategy, again, working with teachers, for the early years to our bold ambitions for the FE workforce, we will put long-term investment in the people in our education system, and we are going to invest in the tools and evidence they need to succeed. That's going to be at the heart of our social mobility plans.

And the third and final pillar brings us back to where I started, with skills and technical education. Because closing the attainment gap in the education system will not be enough to build the future we need unless we go much further to enable all young people and adults to translate their educational attainment and potential into career success.

And with further and higher education and training now back inside the DfE, we have got a powerful opportunity to make sure that our education system is building the workforce that our country, and British business, needs. And let me be clear – this has to be a central measure of our success. Education matters not just because it enables people to realise their unique potential – it matters too because it enables our economy and our country to fulfil its potential as well.

We know that today, young people from low-income homes with similar GCSEs to their better-off classmates are one-third more likely to drop out of education at 16. They are 30% less likely to go and study A levels that could get them into a top university.

Today, British employers scour the world for talent we can and should be nurturing at home ourselves. So that's got to change.

So from the quality of our careers advice to the value of apprenticeships, from opening up our world-class higher education to supporting adults to continue learning and retraining throughout their lives, we will make sure that our education system is rising to the challenge of the future economy that we are going to become.

We've made fantastic progress in apprenticeships – over 3 million people have started an apprenticeship since 2010 and over four-fifths of them say it has improved their career prospects.

Disadvantaged young people were 30% more likely to enter university in 2015 than just 5 years ago, 65% more likely than 10 years ago - though we have to go to ensure they are accessing the very best of our world-leading universities. I know, as somebody who was the first person in their family to go to university, how much that opportunity transformed my own life.

We've now got further to go, I believe, to make sure that disadvantaged young people are not just getting in university, but that they are accessing the very best of our world-leading universities, and that's a key part of our higher education reforms.

But for too long as a country we've settled for second best for students who have been going to FE colleges. As a country we haven't paid enough attention to what they are studying, or making sure it is genuinely high quality wherever they are studying it, or making sure that it's what employers are really looking for. There are currently around 13,000 separate technical qualifications that you can take in our country. In plumbing alone a young person has the choice of 33 different courses. How on earth are they supposed to know which course is the highest quality; which is valued by businesses; which option is really the best fit for them in terms of what they want to achieve?

If we are to see genuine long-term social mobility, then we must make sure that there is a high quality and a respected system for the half of our young people who prefer to not go on to do A levels or then to go to university.

And so I am determined to transform technical education. And in this month's budget, the Chancellor announced over half a billion pounds a year of new funding to support the introduction of these new so-called T-Levels – which the CBI described, I think rightly, as a 'breakthrough budget for skills'. And the new T-Levels represent the most radical transformation of post-16 education since the introduction of A levels 70 years ago.

We are following the blue print designed by Lord Sainsbury and Baroness Wolf, replacing the current system with a streamlined set of 15 technical skills routes, designed together with Britain's best employers. And the budget funding announced will ensure that these are genuinely high quality. It means we can increase the number of hours of learning for students by more than 50% - currently it's around 600 hours per year, and it would go up to more than 900, putting us up there with the best technical education systems in the world – calibrating us on a par with countries like Norway, Germany and Denmark, who have technical education systems stronger than ours today.

So those are my 3 priorities – and the reasons why, at this momentous step to become a country outside the EU, I am optimistic that we will be the generation to transform social mobility and level-up opportunity.

I and this government will do everything that we can to deliver on these commitments. But the one final point I really want to make is we cannot and should not try to do this all on our own. I know that politicians

often call on employers to ‘do their bit’ for education – but I think too often in the past that equates to a superficial deal: the Department for Education will educate kids and get them job-ready and you, business, give them a foot in the door, and it’s over to you at that point.

And in a world where today’s teachers are educating children to do jobs and careers that none of us can necessarily yet imagine, we need a new contract with business, a new skills contract that means we work together with employers on a common plan to make sure there are the skills that our young people need and the opportunities there for them that they want.

That means bringing together government, it means bringing together business, civil society, the best and the brightest and more innovative thinking in social mobility. And so over the coming months we will be doing just that, inviting employers and everybody who has a stake as we do in unlocking the talents of our young people, into a new, deeper more strategic partnership with us. We want your help in delivering the new solutions, to equip young people and adults with the skills to drive our country forward. We know that we have got to go on this journey together.

As I said at the beginning, this is a profound moment for our country. I am not someone who ever planned to go into politics – far from it. Some of my earliest memories of politicians are of my father shouting at politicians who turn up on the news, frustrated that he felt they didn’t really talk about his life.

I always remember my mum telling him that’s it’s pointless shouting at the TV because no-one was listening to him. And she was actually right in so many ways, but I did steadily grow up to realise that nothing changes in the end without people changing it.

And that we can make a choice to have things different in the future, and it’s going to be a choice that liberates millions of young people to go for it, a choice, to build a country where the barriers to people doing anything less than their 100% potential is systematically taken away leaving the path ahead clear to them. It’s got to be a choice that puts social mobility at the heart - not just in our education policy but in how our businesses and indeed how our country more broadly runs.

And I want Britain’s business to do a better job of spotting and nurturing our home grown talent than any other country out there. Social mobility needs to become Britain’s biggest competitive advantage. So let’s open the floodgates and let’s make sure we unlock the potential of a new generation to build that new Britain.

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