

FABIAN POLICY REPORT



LIFE LESSONS

*A National Education Service
that leaves no adult behind*

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and contributions from Gordon Marsden, Shakira Martin,
Sally Hunt, David Blunkett and more*



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CONTENTS

Introduction	
<i>Angela Rayner MP</i>	5
<hr/>	
1. Progression for the people	
<i>Gordon Marsden MP</i>	6
<hr/>	
2. The numbers game	
<i>Andy Westwood</i>	10
<hr/>	
3. Keeping it in the family	
<i>David Phoenix</i>	12
<hr/>	
4. Inspiring growth	
<i>Stephen Evans</i>	14
<hr/>	
5. Access for all	
<i>Claire Callender</i>	16
<hr/>	
6. Success within reach	
<i>Peter Horrocks</i>	18
<hr/>	
7. Voices of experience	
<i>Sally Hunt</i>	20
<hr/>	
8. Learners in charge	
<i>David Blunkett</i>	22
<hr/>	
9. In the right place	
<i>Jessica Studdert</i>	24
<hr/>	
10. Principles for a purpose	
<i>Shakira Martin</i>	26
<hr/>	
Conclusion	
<i>Andrew Harrop and Kate Murray</i>	27
<hr/>	



Introduction



By Angela Rayner MP

Education has always been at the heart of Labour's offer to the British people, and as we face the challenges of this century and our exit from the European Union, we must once again place education at the heart of our programme for government.

One of the most important, and most overlooked, challenges we face as a country is the fact that there are 5 million adults living in the UK today who lack basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Politicians talk of preparing the next generation for the jobs of the future, but too often we ignore the generations who are already here. They are the people who didn't get the skills they needed the first time around, and have been paying the price for it ever since. These are the people who live in communities that many have called 'left behind', but we are yet to do the difficult work of bringing them together with the rest of the country.

Growing up in towns now removed from the high-skilled industrial jobs that once tied communities together, they have often not had the chance to acquire the skills to move beyond the low-skilled work that is now rife in these areas. These are the very people who will have spent the last decade on chronic low pay, as only one in six moved out of low pay in the last decade, and despite being those who would benefit the most from gaining new skills, they are the least likely to return to education as adults.

For years, these challenges have been exacerbated. Changes to higher education funding have left mature and part-time student numbers in free fall. The introduction of loan-based funding for further education has, by the government's own admission, led to a sharp decline in participation in FE, and the continued belief that supply-side skills initiatives will transform lives is failing to reach those who need it most.

This situation will become more significant in the years ahead. The combined challenges of our departure from the European Union, the increase in automation, and the growth of new industries will require more people to move to new jobs, for which they will also need new skills. Managing these transitions will not only help individuals gain new skills and break out of cycles of low pay, but it will also transform communities as new industries take the place of those that have been lost, and it will help our economy to prosper in the future.

This is the mission of Labour's National Education Service. Not just to underpin our economic prosperity, but to transform the lives of individuals and society, and bring meaningful opportunities to all those areas that, for too long, have been left behind.

That is why one of the most important pledges we made at the last general election was to provide higher and further education free at the point of use, for all those who need it, whenever they need it.

This will enable young people, whatever their background, to continue their studies at university or college without fear of crippling debts. But it will also ensure that those who need to return to education the most will be able to do so, and will break pervasive cycles of low-skilled, low-paid work and intergenerational disadvantage.

Time and again it has been Labour, in government, that has helped to lead the British people into new eras in our country. From the Attlee government, that built a new Britain from the ashes of the second world war, to the Wilson administration, that forged a new Britain in the white heat of the technological revolution, to the Blair and Brown governments that took our country into a new millennium.

At Labour conference we took the first step towards turning our National Education Service from a vision into a reality, outlining the key principles on which it would be founded. I have said that we will begin to consult on these principles, and the essays in this collection play an important part in this debate and how we take it forward. I look forward to the work ahead in building a National Education Service that will transform Britain into a country for the many, and not the few.

Angela Rayner is the Labour MP for Ashton-under-Lyne and shadow education secretary

Progression for the people

Labour's plans for a National Education Service build on the best traditions of improving the life chances of all of our citizens. Now we need to be bold enough to build on that vision, writes Gordon Marsden



The three-fold repetition of ideas has long been a powerful tool in politics. Think of Lincoln's Gettysburg address with its 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'. Or Labour's slogan of 'education, education, education' – a cornerstone in its 1997 landslide victory.

Too often education has been something done to the people – rather than by, for or with them. What if we were to merge the scripts from 1863 and 1997 and talk about 'education of the people, for the people, by the people?' That in essence is what we have the opportunity to do now, making that rhetoric a reality for all our citizens. A reality badged within Labour's developing idea of a National Education Service, with lifelong learning powerfully at its core – a national offer and a covenant to invigorate, enable and empower.

For more than a century the passion to transform the life chances of ordinary working people has been part of the labour movement's gene pool. When David Blunkett swiftly followed up Labour's landslide with his 1998 Green Paper *The Learning Age*, he worked closely with his former tutor Bernard Crick, whose work was shot through with the theme of empowering citizenship for all.

In the Learning Age, Blunkett placed creativity and imagination alongside the acquisition of knowledge and skills. In

so doing he echoed the great self-help movements in working class communities concerned with how people could be enriched and inspired at the same time as their working lives were improved.

Ethics, citizenship and practical improvement were twined together for figures like John Ruskin and William Morris. They inspired the passion for education in the early careers of both Nye Bevan and Clement Attlee and helped create beacons of adult learning such as the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), Birkbeck and Ruskin colleges and the Open University, Harold Wilson's great achievement, with Jennie Lee.

The issues this country faces now echo strongly the fears and challenges of progressive thinkers from the 1860s to the 1960s

The issues this country faces now echo strongly the fears and challenges of progressive thinkers from the 1860s to the 1960s. They feared, as we do today, that massive industrial and technological change would wreck social cohesion in our society and leave the struggling and the vulnerable among its chief victims. They too saw sharp divides between those

who had benefited from financial and communication globalisation, and those left behind by it. Whatever Labour does now must reflect both ethical and practical objectives to benefit all our citizens.

The initiatives laid out in *The Learning Age* were largely sidelined in government from the mid-2000s onwards. They now need to be revived in an overarching offer to all our citizens, and this is the great opportunity the National Education Service represents.

The ideas never went away – many of them were embedded in the powerful and unduly neglected 2009 book *Learning Through Life* put together by the late Sir David Watson and Tom Schuller. Citizenship and the need to relate it to learning has remained key for parliamentary groups and select committees. Aspects of that vision have permeated initiatives, fostered by local authorities and devolved administrations, as well as the work of Union Learn, a survivor from Labour in government.

That gave me the encouragement to continue addressing the lifelong learning agenda – first in a speech I gave as shadow skills minister in 2012 at Ruskin College and then developed in a chapter in the book *One Nation Fizz*, published in 2014 as a response to Ed Miliband's call for new policy ideas. I drew on my own experiences as a course tutor with the OU, seeing the



life chances that study gave to hundreds of my students, and as a Blackpool MP observing how my local further education college had been a similar catalyst for my constituents. FE is a cause our shadow education secretary Angela Rayner also espouses as passionately as she does early years education – both of them were experiences that transformed her life.

Mechanisms such as the principle of credit accumulation (whose benefits I had seen first-hand at the OU) to deliver that agenda have continued to be promoted. Learning Through Life advocated this in formal education settings and in the workplace, along with its call for a national system of learning accounts with top-ups to individuals at significant life transition points. But a combination of factors – not least the reverberations from Brexit and the need to bolster both our existing skills base and retraining older workers – are now placing these ideas politically centre stage.

Add to that the havoc the tripling of HE course fees by the Tory-led coalition in 2012 has wrought on part-time and mature learner numbers (down 56 per cent since 2010), plus the scrapping of grants and replacing them with loans for older learners in FE – participation in adult further education fell by 11.1 per cent in 2015-16, compared with 2014-15 – and you see the crisis in both sectors.

At the same time the worlds of higher, further and online and distance learning are morphing into each other much more quickly, far more rapidly than many in Whitehall have realised. If we do not address this we will not remain immune to this worldwide phenomenon – but our ability to benefit or be trailblazers will be eclipsed by our competitors in North America and Asia.

The growing sense that the current government's settlement for higher education is both divisive and financially unsustainable is palpable, especially as regards tuition fees

The growing sense that the current government's settlement for higher education is both divisive and financially unsustainable is palpable, especially as regards tuition fees. As Keith Burnett, vice chancellor of Sheffield University, put it sharply in a Times Higher Education article in June: "with total debt forecast to hit £200 billion in six years and to pass £1 trillion by 2045, it will dwarf credit card debt..."

As for the wider perspective of lifelong

learning into which both HE and FE remain key points of entry, the position remains gloomy. Whitehall officials and ministers, as we saw in the passage of the recent Higher Education and Research Act, sometimes have to be dragged kicking and screaming to acknowledge lifelong learning, not just as a general public good, but as a force for community cohesion and economic growth.

There have always been individuals in government who have recognised its value, such as when John Hayes fought strongly in 2010-11 to preserve the Union Learning Fund from those in the Treasury who wished to get rid of it. But DfE originally planned to cut for 2018 the meagre £12m a year it gives ULF by a third. Only a last-minute intervention in the Chancellor's Budget in November following pressure and protests has restored that £12m – not increased it. ULF deserves better than that – not threatened candle end economies snuffing out skills opportunities for thousands of workers.

The May government's approach to education risks an equality of misery and dashed hopes for both younger and older people. The projections for the numbers of workers who will need to work longer and retrain for the 2020s articulated in the Leitch report on skills a decade ago remain frighteningly relevant. We risk not just one

lost generation but two. That is why we need a systematic, radical plan of action covering the whole age spectrum. One that recognises the changing patterns of work, including the gig economy and the changes wrought by automation, and the need for proper work-life balances.

That means valuing skills input to education right from late primary education into the teenage years, giving people second chances in their 20s and continuing opportunities to retrain, and developing new career pathways right through into their 60s. But we need now a comprehensive lifelong learning road map, spelling out a clear narrative of progression, social justice and mobility. One that shows people at every stage of their age cycle Labour has a strategy for them, in contrast to the silos and barriers Conservative-led governments have erected since 2010.

And the overarching framework for that is our National Education Service, first set out as a concept by Jeremy Corbyn during his leadership campaign in 2015, which I heard him articulate with great passion, and not least over lifelong learning, at the parliamentary Labour party's hustings then.

It is a vision for lifelong learning around which now there is convergence of views in

a broad swathe of reports in the last couple of years: Matthew Taylor's report on the future of the workplace backing learning accounts to 'improve the lives of the country's citizens', parliament's Higher Education Commission report this autumn, the parliamentary based Skills Commission report on the FE sector, the NUS Shaping the Post 16 Skills Plan, the APPG's Adult Education – Too Important to be Left to Chance, the WEA's Improving Lives and Communities through Learning – and numerous interventions by select committees, the Open University and others. We have also seen recently very welcome alarm calls over how government cuts in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) threaten a hugely important section of our citizenry – EU nationals and refugees – who have skills and talents we need.

The broad range of support for aligning higher and further education in this process across a wide range of stakeholders, including business, unions, the third sector and others, should give us confidence. The Institute of Directors' 2016 lifelong learning report says how vital this will be "as global credit transfer systems develop that will allow student consumers to use courses offered by one institution (both online and in house) to count towards their qualifica-

tion from another". While Baroness Wolf said only last month: "We need to get away from a system dominated by the view that you must take out a three-year, full-time loan...Government should try to move the allocation of resources to citizens and give them a lifetime entitlement that is truly universal."

Alongside this must come the recognition that how we deliver those new mechanisms must be shaped by radical ideas about the role of sector and place. This is an approach pioneered by John Denham and his team at DCLG in 2009-10, but fitfully pursued by ministers since then. Yet we now have a range of elected metro mayors and a Labour mayor of London all of whom potentially have vehicles for taking things forward. As I wrote in an apprenticeships pamphlet for the Smith Institute in 2013, co-authored with Roberta Blackman-Woods, on how local authorities were making a difference: "The age of relying on government micromanagement and modernisation to deliver what we need has reached a bit of a dead end."

Locally based initiatives involving Labour-led councils, co-operatives, unions and other groups offered ideas for the great social reforms of the 1945-51 Attlee government. And if we really want to

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achieve the 'education of the people, by the people, for the people', it will need to be a horizontal approach in ever strengthening circles of cooperation based on travel to work, regional and sub regional groupings. As the Skills Commission said: "Devolution settlements should include additional powers across all areas of skills provision. Funding should be based on an area's capability and ambition."

Those should be the principles that a Labour government should operate by. Some of those possibilities are shown by the letter that the existing seven elected mayors have already sent to government asking for both powers and devolved funding across all skills areas. There is something irrational about this government's grudging willingness to contemplate this for adult skills but not for apprenticeships. Where there is a competence to deliver such initiatives to galvanise economic growth we should welcome these initiatives as essential elements in a vibrant industrial strategy that will deliver productivity as well as transforming the lives of individuals and communities, wherever there is an 'appetite' for such devolution.

Our NES will be guided by strong principles of local accountability to all citizens. It will enshrine the principle of education having an intrinsic value not merely an instrumentalist one. It will also give due parity of esteem and support (long overdue) to educators and support staff as well as encouraging the input and initiatives of learners themselves.

When I wrote three years ago about skills and life chances I said: "We are not wanting in people with interesting ideas and mechanisms for delivering them but that government departments would still have a significant role in helping deliver a transformation in lifelong learning under Labour. The key though lies in the plural. It cannot simply be the responsibility of BIS (now BEIS) or DfE)." Whether it is about community cohesion (DCLG), healthier,

productive lives (Department of Health), rehabilitating offenders and promoting citizenship (Home Office and Ministry of Justice) or getting people more skilled to be economically active rather than simply stuck in dead-end work (DWP), our approach must be holistic.



The devil is always in the detail in any transformation in public policy. But that must not cramp the boldness of our ambition

The devil is always in the detail in any transformation in public policy. But that must not cramp the boldness of our ambition. That is why we used the Higher Education and Research Bill debates last November to advocate our new clause 15 to establish a standing commission on Lifelong Learning and Adult Education. In its terms of reference, establishing benchmarks for participation, quality and qualifications, the potential for personal

The watchwords for lifelong learning should always be "progression, progression, progression."

learning accounts, a national credit, accumulation and transfer system, linking devolved budgets to adult education and employment, we put forward that ambition. Buttressed now with our major manifesto commitments on fees in both HE and FE, and pledges to reintroduce maintenance grants, educational maintenance allowances and the commitment to set up a commission in our manifesto that should now be a central part of our NES offer to the British people.

The watchwords for lifelong learning should be "progression, progression, progression". This ensures we focus on output, and even more importantly outcome, not just the input which for too long has been treated as an end in itself. We need a double helix – a metaphor appropriate for our developing digital world – a structure which accommodates accumulated learning, flexible to respond to the rapid changes of the 21st century, but which is wrapped round and made stronger by funding systems that reflect our vision of education as a public good and not simply a private consumable.

What I wrote in 2014 was that the revolution in lifelong learning "could take us along a path as potentially significant of the NHS in 1948". The new National Education Service has echoed that comparison. It's fitting the Fabian Society of which I've been privileged to be a lifelong member and which has contributed so much to Labour thinking should be doing so now again with this collection. For, as Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Hamlet: "The readiness is all."

Gordon Marsden is Labour MP for Blackpool South and shadow minister for higher and further education and skills

The numbers game

The free education a National Education Service would offer must still be valuable if the funding is to stack up, writes Andy Westwood



“Just as Nye Bevan and Attlee’s Government created the National Health Service in the aftermath of World War II, the next Labour Government will create a National Education Service. We will offer cradle to the grave education that is free at the point of use.”

– Jeremy Corbyn,
Speech to the Association of Colleges,
14th November 2017

At the 2017 general election, Labour pledged to create a ‘cradle to grave’ National Education Service (NES). More specifically the party pledged to restore the education maintenance allowance for 16 to 18-year-olds from lower and middle income backgrounds, replace advanced learner loans and upfront course fees with direct funding for further education courses. But the most high-profile commitments concerned higher education, where Labour promised to reintroduce maintenance grants for university students, and to abolish tuition fees. Finally – and much like the promised major review of tertiary education promised by the Conservatives – Labour also proposed setting up a Commission on Lifelong Learning tasked with better integrating further and higher education.

According to Labour’s own calculations accompanying the manifesto, the additional costs for each element, per year

amount to some £11.2bn for universities and £2.5bn for skills.

In evidence submitted to the House of Lords inquiry into the economics of higher and further education, the Department for Education sets out the costs and funding for both sectors in 2017-18. This totals just over £8bn for further education, including £7.1bn of grants and contracts including for colleges, training providers and school sixth forms. Existing loan outlays of £0.3bn would need to be converted into NES grant spending and would make up some of the additional commitment Labour would need to find. Extra spending would also be needed to restore EMAs for lower and middle income earners.

For higher education, there is currently £15bn of student loan funding including maintenance loans and around £2.8bn of grants including £1.5bn of teaching grant, £1.1bn of remaining student grant (currently being phased out) and £0.2bn of delivery costs. This gives an overall total of £17.8 billion of funding for higher education (including maintenance loans) in 2017/18, but the current cost to government makes up just £7.6bn of that.

It is clear that moving from what the government is currently spending to funding the the proposed National Education Service will involve considerable cost. Some such as Paul Johnson at the Institute for Fiscal Studies have suggested it is near

impossible to properly cost these commitments, but it seems helpful to at least try and establish the broad parameters. A rough baseline figure could be calculated as current government expenditure plus Labour’s additional funding promised above.

In HE, then, existing grant funding of £2.8bn plus Labour’s additional promise of £11.2bn and the existing expenditure in FE of £8bn plus Labour’s promise of an additional £2.5bn for skills, gives a baseline annual NES budget of somewhere around £24.5bn in 2017 prices. That is reasonably similar to the overall spending set out by DFE for 2017-18 albeit via a very different set of mechanisms. The main difference is that the NES increases current expenditure significantly by replacing off balance sheet loans with direct grants of various kinds.

The additional spending promised by Labour for HE looks low with £11.2bn compared to £15bn per year. That might mean their sums aren’t quite right or that there will end up being less funding for students or universities either via less funding per student or fewer students overall.

There are of course a significant number of variables involved in these necessarily broad calculations. First is the level of demand that might result from these changes.

Participation in 2014/15 in England of some 3.5 million students in FE and 1.5 million in HE might be expected to increase as those falling out of the system in recent years, especially adults studying part-time, return in larger numbers. This will bring additional open-ended costs to NES spending.

But there are also some important variables that might work in the National Education Service’s favour – though some are likely to be more politically palatable than others. The first concerns the money that might be raised through the recently introduced apprenticeship levy. Employers with an annual wage bill of more than

£3m have been required to pay the apprenticeship levy of 0.5 per cent of their payroll above this level. In 2017-18, some £1.9bn will be spent on apprenticeship training (including from employers via the levy). Labour has said that it will broaden the scope of the levy to fund other types of training and the NES may also choose to increase the levy pot by extending it to more employers or introducing a higher contribution rate.

The second variable in Labour's favour is political and concerns their frequently used 'free at the point of use' promise. This might be appealing political language, not least because of its associations with the NHS, but in education spending it can potentially have a very different meaning. Income contingent loans for tuition and maintenance, in both further and higher education, mean that very few people are currently paying up front. Instead they repay their loans after passing a salary threshold (recently increased from £21,000 to £25,000 for full-time, undergraduate HE loans). This means that ministers can claim that studying is free at the point of use already.

A National Education Service, 'free at the point of use', might then suggest that deferred payment mechanisms could be considered as most FE and HE tuition costs already fit that description. It seems unlikely that Labour and the NES would perform a huge policy u-turn by using this to retain the tuition fee system. However it does provide potential wriggle room on the timing and sequence of abolishing various fees and reintroducing grants of different types, whether to students or institutions.

Separate to the commitment on HE tuition comes the pledge to increase spending on research to 3 per cent of GDP by 2030. This is not strictly part of the plans or costings for the NES, but will be particularly important to universities and colleges in terms of overall funding and also to Labour's own plans for an industrial strategy.

This research commitment will involve significant public spending too, although as with apprenticeships, it also depends on the exact breakdown between public and private investment.

Much store is set by Labour on the success of its industrial strategy. Essentially it must deliver ambitious economic growth to allow many of Labour's spending plans to be realised. That is a tall order both in absolute terms – the UK's long term productivity performance has been poor and future growth is being revised downwards by the OBR – and in the speed in which any improvements might be felt positively in the public finances.

But more prosaically this means that whilst the inputs – free tuition, unlimited access, restoration of grants – are important to Labour's concept of a National Education Service, its outputs matter just as much. So there are remaining policy questions about what 'free tuition' actually gets students and how their learning then drives greater value in the economy.

Colleges and universities not only need to be properly funded, they also need to be providing the best possible skilled workers, graduates and research for the economy to absorb and utilise. That needs more than just a leap of faith

To put it another way, additional growth (and tax income) must come from Labour's industrial strategy so that it can underwrite increased public spending, including for FE and HE. Colleges and universities not only need to be properly funded, they also need to be providing the best possible skilled workers, graduates and research for the

economy to absorb and utilise. That needs more than just a leap of faith.

At last month's Association of Colleges' annual conference, Jeremy Corbyn said:

"Increasing productivity is not about squeezing out every last drop of energy from working people, it's about investing in people's lives, investing in their education, their skills and their futures – as well as the infrastructure and technologies of the future."

And this investment in skills of course brings value to the economy. As Diane Coyle, professor of economics at the University of Manchester, puts it: "Productivity is most simply defined as the value of what a worker can produce in a given period of time. That does not mean getting people to work harder. It means enabling them to work smarter. Higher productivity involves people using less effort to get the same results, either because they have better machines and equipment, or have found a better—faster or easier—work process: that is, more know-how."

We can make some rough estimates about the cost of a National Education Service based on Labour's spending pledges. We can also discuss whether Labour's calculations are based on reasonable assumptions. But the challenge will be ensuring the economy will be strong enough to pay for it. Much more thought will now need to be given to how free tuition pledges and a National Education Service follow through to smarter, more productive working. Higher and further education may end up being free – but they will still need to be valuable.

Andy Westwood is vice dean for social responsibility at the University of Manchester. He is also a visiting professor of further and higher education at the University of Wolverhampton

Keeping it in the family

Bringing schools, colleges, universities and employers together in a new way could be the key to providing learning that meets the needs of every community, writes David Phoenix



Imagine if, instead of an education system, we had an education service – a service built around learners, providing them with the most appropriate education in the manner which best suits them as individuals. Instead of following funding, ticking boxes and chasing dubious performance measurements, educational providers could respond to learners, their communities and local employers and provide the courses, the pathways and styles of learning most suited to their needs.

The idea of a National Education Service is an attractive one, and one that I support; but it needs definition. Whilst operating in a national framework it must meet local needs. It must realign regulatory and financial structures to operate for the benefit of the learner society alike.

In England we have a complex educa-

tion system which has evolved over time, becoming increasingly fragmented and complex; often seeming to be driven by institutional priorities rather than the needs of the individual. A learner's path through the education and skills system is complicated by non-educational factors such as funding rules, institutional measurements, the complex framework of qualifications, and a lack of impartial information and advice.

What many policy makers regard as the 'educational norm' is not matched by the reality. More than half of our young people do not follow what too many regard as the 'traditional' GCSE/A-level/university academic route; but those who are neither A-level students nor NEETS (not in education, employment or training) have been largely overlooked by



A learner's path through the education and skills system is complicated by non-educational factors such as funding rules, institutional measurements, the complex framework of qualifications, and a lack of impartial information and advice

policy makers. Research identifies that we will need many more people educated to at least Levels 4 and 5 (HNC and HND level) and that the pace of change will require people to reskill more frequently. This requires more accessible part-time study for the adult population, yet most of our systems are targeted at 'traditional' full-time routes. For older learners, changes to the student funding system have reduced part-time student numbers by more than 60 per cent with a damaging effect on the ability of those from lower social groups to enter further and higher education.

In summary, educational opportunities have never been more diverse or more complex; but this diversity is not matched by flexibility for the learner and there is no overarching framework to help guide learners through the different stages of their career. National qualifications and systems are focused on age groups rather than learner requirements, and in areas such as technical qualifications there remains a bewildering array of options – although the introduction of T-levels aims to simplify this. Educational routes look like a spray of diverging tightropes with limited chances for learners to change direction or add to their learning. Yet there are plentiful opportunities to fail, especially when the qualification or teaching approach does not fit the learner's need, experience, preferred style of learning or, in many cases, their future aspirations.

Learners of all ages need clearer educational routes which take them easily and successfully from school to work or to further or higher education. They also need easy access back into and between types of education as part of lifelong learning, whether that is a few or many years after they have left secondary education, perhaps after years of work or parenting.

London South Bank University is aiming to provide these opportunities

by creating a “family of educational providers” – an initiative which could form a partial model for the delivery of a National Education Service. This family is a group of like-minded but distinct educational organisations working together in a formal group structure. This structure protects the specialist educational environments required by schools, further and higher education as well as continuing professional development providers. At the same time family members are aligned operationally which helps ensure collaborative working and value for money. The purpose is to provide smoother educational pathways and signposting to a full range of academic, technical and vocational opportunities in a way that benefits individual learners, local businesses and the local community. Family members share an educational mission and work to a common educational framework or ethos. They believe that learning opportunities should be determined by the needs of individual learners, not by the needs of institutions. We already have the support of our local borough councils, leading employers and a number of local learning providers as we progress the development of this system.

Our family approach aims to offer structures which enable students to benefit from the level, style and aim of learning that best suits them when they need it, breaking down the academic/ technical/ vocational and age-based divides. We do not believe there is one size to fit all: different communities will have different needs, different existing infrastructure and different ambitions. But, as an example, a local family might comprise:

- **Primary schools** – preparing pupils for the styles of learning used by the family
- **A multi-academy trust** – comprising a university technical college and academy schools with a shared ethos, ena-

bling students to transfer comfortably between one and another and between technical, vocational or more academic pathways

- **Post-16 further education facilities** – offering a wide range of academic, technical and vocational qualifications
- **Specialist professional and technical educational institutions** focused on the needs of local employers
- **Organisations for adult education and continuing professional development**
- **A university**, perhaps with a focus on professional and technical education
- **Independent careers advice and guidance** with outreach in libraries and elsewhere

Alongside individual learners, employers will be key beneficiaries. The family will provide employers with coordinated and easy access to the widest range of education and training including up-skilling in maths and English, apprenticeships at levels 1-7, and high-level continuing professional development. The family will offer a wide range of accredited qualifications including the familiar – GCSEs, A-levels, T-levels, BTECs, City and Guilds, HNCs and HNDs, bachelors and masters degrees – but also less familiar ones focused on particular local employer needs.

The members of the family will receive operational and educational benefits. They will be able to share specialist teachers and resources and ensure that high-quality facilities are used as extensively and effectively as possible, particularly around STEM education. Shared back office functions will provide some efficiency but, more importantly,

will mean a joined-up service for learners, employers and staff.

Regulatory structures in education operate primarily horizontally with divisions between ‘layers’ – primary, secondary, tertiary. For a new kind of vertical framework to work, some of these horizontal structures in which education is encased need to be relaxed. And with increased devolution there are likely to be further calls for more locally driven delivery. For a local approach to be successful, we need increased local accountability within a national framework that is flexible enough to allow communities to focus on individual learner needs, whilst maintaining quality assurance and financial oversight. We need to move away from some of the current silos and constraints that are overly prescriptive and stifle the innovation this is seeking to create. This means looking at education more holistically – and universities have a key role to play in that.

Bringing institutions together within a family in the way we are doing could allow for locally tailored provision, within a national service with a strategic approach to education and skills. And it would mean we did not have to throw out the best of what we do. As *Overlooked and Left Behind*, the House of Lords’ report on improving the transition from work to school, says: “It is important that existing structures, which may be imperfect, should be refined and improved rather than added to.” A National Education Service could be a tremendous step forward in education and skills, but it must be created through consultation and thoughtful and evidence-based adjustment and not in another headlines-driven overhaul.

Professor David Phoenix is the vice-chancellor of London South Bank University and the chair of the association for modern universities, MillionPlus

Inspiring growth

A National Education Service will require increased investment for adult skills. But the money must be matched by a new culture which allows lifelong learning to flourish, argues Stephen Evans



Lifelong learning can transform lives and drive economic growth. It's more essential than ever with an ageing population and changing economy. Yet the number of adults participating in learning is falling, and the UK is starting from a poorer skills base than many other countries. How can a National Education Service put lifelong learning at its heart?

Going nowhere

It is a truth almost universally acknowledged that lifelong learning is a good thing. Politicians extol its virtue as an engine of social mobility and economic growth. They talk about the combination of an aging population and changing labour market, and remark that people will need to upskill and reskill more often during their working lives.

All of this is true; many of today's school leavers will have 50-year careers. And the pace of economic change means that both the types of jobs available, and the skills needed in existing jobs, are changing. The number of jobs that may be automated is debated, and technology will create new jobs too. But the skills needed will differ so we cannot expect what we learn at school to last us a lifetime: learning should not stop at the school gates, and education needs to inspire us to learn throughout our lives.

Participation in learning also has proven links to improving health and wellbeing, citizenship and community, and financial and health capability. Most of our big challenges as a nation require more adults to learn, at least as part of the answer: learning helps us with the challenges and opportunities we face as individuals and communities.

So it is worrying that the skills base of the UK workforce ranks mid table at best: 25th out of 32 OECD countries for intermediate skills; and 9 million adults lacking functional literacy or numeracy skills. This holds back productivity (and as the economist Paul Krugman said: "Productivity isn't everything, but in the long run it's almost everything"), living standards, health and wellbeing, and communities and citizenship.

The number of adults participating in most forms of learning has fallen significantly over recent years

Yet the number of adults participating in most forms of learning has fallen significantly over recent years. There are 900,000 fewer adults in publicly funded further education than five years ago. This

includes falls in participation in English and maths, community learning, and basically everything outside apprenticeships. Apprenticeships have grown but there are real concerns about quality and access: two thirds of them go to existing employees and those aged 25 and over.

Stepping up

So we have an economic and social imperative to increase lifelong learning. How can we do that? The funding matters – we need an effective supply of courses and learning opportunities for people. But we need to raise demand too among people and employers, building a culture of lifelong learning. I argue there are five priority areas essential for a National Education Service.

First, is to build a social partnership approach – government on its own will not be enough. If we want to increase learning at work, we need to engage employers. This means listening to what employers need and ensuring funding follows this in a flexible way. But it also means working with trade unions – thousands of union learning reps in workplaces up and down the country play a crucial role in expanding access to learning – and civil society. Could we learn from the establishment of the Low Pay Commission when the national minimum wage was introduced and have a similar approach for learning and skills policy – a Lifelong Learning Commission?

Second, as part of that social partnership we must empower people, both to raise their demand for learning and because not all learning is about employment. Currently, people too often have to try and fit into government funding structures, rather than vice versa. Today it can be difficult to find a learning opportunity, under a National Education Service you should always be able to find one that is relevant and that fits learning around your work and family life and that should

be a clear promise to people.

Putting people in charge of their own learning is likely to build greater engagement and more active choices. One way to do this would be to give every adult a personal learning account. This would detail the learning they have done, and their entitlements to future learning. It could include a government top-up if individuals invest in their own learning, as well as free entitlements for those on low incomes and for basic skills. Singapore provides an example: recognising the importance of human capital to their economy, they gave every adult aged 25 and over a S\$500 FutureSkills credit (worth around £280), in effect a voucher to spend on approved learning.

Linked to this, there should be effective advice to make the right choice, including through a revitalised National Careers Service, its remit expanded to provide greater help for those in work.

Third, we need a lifelong learning strategy. We've had almost as many skills strategies as skills ministers over recent decades. But unless you know where you want to go, how do you know which turn to take? A lifelong learning strategy could set out this vision and the role of the National Education Service.

It should be a pan-government strategy: learning isn't just about colleges or qualifications, and education can have a wide range of benefits, so lifelong learning should be a golden thread running through every area of government policy. Why not require every policy being developed to consider the role lifelong learning could play?

Our work has shown the role unions, employers, housing associations, local authorities, and the voluntary sector can play in engaging people in learning. For example, working with Rochdale Council we showed how community learning, organised into a Citizens' Curriculum of the key skills needed for life and

work, can help health, criminal justice, and council services save money by increasing awareness of and engagement with preventative services. This included increasing registration with primary care services, reducing the number of people attending A&E. The result was a £3.68 saving for every £1 invested.

Fourth, we must invest in learning for adults. The declines in adult participation in learning are associated with falls in public investment. And we were falling short of an ambition for 21st century Britain even before these cuts.

1. Basic skills. An immediate priority should be increased investment in English, maths, digital, and English for speakers of other languages. We have called for an extra £200m per year, doubling current levels of investment, so that all adults who need these skills have the chance to access them, setting an ambition for all adults to have these skills by 2030.

2. Intermediate skills. Labour has committed to ending the FE loan system, which requires some adults learning intermediate skills to take out university-style loans. This would cost £325m per year, but given that almost half of this money will not be paid back (as people's earnings are too low) and that participation in learning covered by loans has fallen by one third since their introduction, the potential prize is clear. It is these intermediate skills, along with basic skills, that the UK is particularly short of and which will be ever more essential in a changing economy.

3. Higher skills. The expansion of participation in (mostly full-time) higher education by young people has masked big falls in the number of adults learning higher skills later in life, including part-time. Reversing this decline, particularly if tuition fees are to be abolished as Labour proposes, would be expensive. And

The power of lifelong learning to unlock potential, drive prosperity, and promote inclusion is clear

some form of maintenance support would be essential given the higher living costs this group faces compared to young people (e.g. family commitments). However, perhaps a bigger focus could be growth in higher apprenticeships, which are funded through the apprenticeship levy, a tax on the payroll of large employers.

Fifth, we need to focus more on outcomes. The apprenticeship levy and the ambition to grow apprenticeship numbers are welcome. But they risk distorting behaviour to hit the government's target of three million apprenticeship starts by 2020. If the ultimate purpose is to improve productivity and people's job and career prospects, why don't we talk more about that? Otherwise we might hit the target, but miss the point. Could we widen the focus of the levy to workplace skills more generally? The same applies elsewhere: qualifications are probably the worst measure of learning apart from all the others; but we have shown in Rochdale that you can measure the social benefits of learning too.

The power of lifelong learning to unlock potential, drive prosperity, and promote inclusion is clear. A National Education Service for adults must mean increased investment: adult skills have faced large cuts since 2010. But investment on its own is not enough – if we build it, they may not come. Investment must be underpinned by building a learning culture, driven by social partnership and empowering people.

Stephen Evans is chief executive of the Learning and Work Institute

Access for all

Part-time study is in crisis, with student numbers falling as fees rise. Drastic action is needed to widen participation, writes Claire Callender



Labour's proposed National Education Service seeks to integrate the disparate parts of the education system by providing services from the cradle to the grave. It incorporates an education system that offers opportunities for people to upskill and reskill over their lifetime by providing free lifelong learning. According to Labour's Towards a National Education Service, this "will deliver productivity and growth to the whole economy while transforming the lives of individuals and communities." This emphasis on lifelong learning is welcome. So often in UK skills policy documents, proposals focus on initial education and training rather than the needs of adult learners. Arguably, improvements in economic performance, innovation and productivity ultimately depend more on enhancing the skills of the existing workforce than on improving the quality of new entrants to the workforce. Most of the workforce of 2030 is already working now, and past the stage of initial training.

Part-time study is an economic, practical and often the preferred option for both employers wanting to upskill their workforce, and for individuals wanting to re-skill or improve their existing skills. Its wider social and economic benefits, and the benefits to individuals, are well documented. Part-time study can achieve greater social equity by helping individuals escape from low pay and low

productivity and by widening higher education participation. It gives people a 'second chance'. Compared with full-time undergraduates, the majority of part-time students are women, aged over 25, have family responsibilities, while a sizeable proportion have no or low entry qualifications. Four out of five work, mostly in full-time jobs in higher-level occupations in the service and public sector. They fit their studies around their jobs and domestic commitments.

Our current system of lifelong learning, especially part-time undergraduate provision, is in crisis

Yet our current system of lifelong learning, especially part-time undergraduate provision, is in crisis. Since 2010/11, the number of part-time students starting an undergraduate qualification at an English university has fallen by 61 per cent, to just 100,000 students. Last year alone the numbers declined by more than 8 per cent — the seventh successive year there has been a drop. Today part-timers make up just 20 per cent of all undergraduate entrants. The fall has been greatest among older students, those wanting to do 'bite-sized' courses, and those with low-level entry qualifications—all typically "widening participation" candidates.

Several factors have contributed to the decline. Most significant is the 2012/13 student funding reforms. These changes to part-time funding aimed to open up access to higher education, make it more affordable, and encourage more people to study part-time. They have had the opposite effect.

In 2012/13, the government withdrew most of the public funds it gave universities for teaching. Higher tuition fees, capped initially at £6,750 a year and now £6,935 for part-time undergraduate courses, replaced these lost government funds. As a result, tuition fees have doubled or tripled since pre-2012 levels. To pay these higher fees, part-time students became eligible for government-funded loans, just like their full-time colleagues. Part-time bachelor degree students begin repaying their loans four years after starting their course and when earning above £21,000 (rising to £25,000 in 2018/19). They pay nine per cent of their income over £21,000, with any outstanding debt written off after 30 years. For many who are working, this means starting to repay their loans while still studying and before they have got their degree, unlike full-time students who repay their loans when they leave university.

There are two problems with these loans. First, the eligibility criteria are too restrictive. Consequently, the majority of part-time undergraduates do not qualify for loans, mostly because they already have a higher education qualification. Instead, they face far higher fees that they need to pay upfront and out of their own pocket. Unsurprisingly, this has contributed to a fall in enrolments. Research from across the globe repeatedly demonstrates that upfront tuition fees and fee increases tend to depress higher education participation, particularly among disadvantaged students, unless accompanied by equivalent increases in student financial support.



Two misplaced assumptions inform this policy: that employers pay for their employees' fees; and that because most part-time students work, they can afford high fees. In fact, only a select minority of part-time undergraduates get such employer help. In addition, immediately after the 2012 funding changes, the number of part-timers receiving employer support fell. High fees are a barrier to employers as they are to students.

The second problem with loans is that their terms and conditions appear unattractive to those who are eligible for them. Some who are eligible for loans are not taking them out. This suggests that potential students do not necessarily perceive these loans as an adequate safeguard against the risks of part-time study. Inevitably too, some are debt averse and refuse to borrow, just like some of their full-time peers. Yet without loans, they cannot afford the high fees and so cannot participate in higher education.

For some, then, part-time study is now too expensive and unaffordable. Part-time students, who are older and have substantial family and financial commitments, are far more price sensitive than their younger full-time peers. Their unwillingness or inability to pay the higher fees upfront or via loans is compounded by wider economic factors. Their discretionary and non-essential spending,

Universities have closed their part-time courses, especially those below the bachelor degree level – typically vocational and short courses

including expenditure on study, is likely to be constrained in times of economic hardship and stagnating wages. Taking out a loan and having to pay, in essence, an additional nine per cent of marginal tax for loan repayments, or forking out more than £6,000 a year for fees, is a leap of faith when the returns on their investment are unknown and uncertain.

Indeed, evidence from international studies on the financial returns from lifelong learning in the form of higher earnings and improved employment opportunities is mixed. Yet student loans are said to be justified because of the assumed financial returns of higher education and the belief that those who benefit financially from higher education should contribute towards its cost. For all these reasons then, loans may not be the right policy instrument for encouraging greater participation in part-time study.

The decline in demand for part-time higher education study has led to a fall in supply, especially at research-intensive

universities and in short, less intensive institutional-credit bearing courses. The part-time undergraduate market is more volatile and unpredictable than the full-time market. There are no longer any financial incentives for universities to provide more costly and risky part-time courses especially when, with the lifting of the cap on student numbers, they can fill all their places with full-time students. Consequently, universities have closed their part-time courses, especially those below the bachelor degree level – typically vocational and short courses. This matters for part-time students because they are far less mobile than full-time students due to their work and family commitments. When such local courses close, their access to higher education may close too.

The part-time undergraduate sector in England has been the key victim of 2012/13 reforms of student funding. There has been a market failure. Any government committed to re-skilling and upskilling its workforce; averting the downfall of the part-time undergraduate sector; encouraging more people to study part-time; opening access; widening participation; and making part-time study affordable, will need to take drastic action. This has to tackle high tuition fees, a lack of affordability, and debt aversion. A truly National Education Service that abolishes tuition fees and provides free lifelong learning wherever and whenever a student wants to study, will go a long way in addressing this. It would also need to give part-time providers additional funds – a part-time premium – to compensate for any reduced income from lower fee income. Above all, there is a need for the political will to confront the challenges part-time study poses.

Claire Callender is professor of higher education at Birkbeck and University College London Institute of Education

Success within reach

Technology and innovation offer the opportunity to reach out to those who don't have access to the skills they need – and to bring learning to life.

Peter Horrocks explains



Imagine that you are a low-skilled or manual worker whose job is under threat from the rising tide of automation. Imagine that you feel you were let down by school and that you've never sought qualifications. Imagine that you have rent to pay and a family to feed. Where do you turn, what are your options?

In coming years, more and more people will find themselves facing a similar dilemma. Automation will sweep away millions of existing jobs, technological and economic developments we cannot anticipate will mean workers need to retrain throughout their lives. Yet there is no national mechanism to help those people and only patchy and fragmented provision of skills training.

Now imagine that there is a one-stop shop where you can find out what skills are needed in your area, what qualifications you might need to attain them, what you need to do to start training and where to look for a job once you have retrained. It is a simple concept, made all the simpler in an online world. But this one-stop shop does not exist. To achieve those relatively straightforward goals you might need to turn to a careers service, a further education college, a job centre or any one of an endless array of other potential options. No wonder that even people with existing skills and a decent level of education find the prospect daunting.

It doesn't have to be this way. For nearly 50 years the Open University has

encouraged people who have few or no prior academic qualifications to realise their ambitions. We are proud to have helped more than 2 million people make a difference to their lives – and the lives of their families – through the power of education.

I am constantly moved and inspired by the stories OU graduates tell. Faye, for example, who was brought up in local authority care and left school at 16 with no qualifications. She fell into a low-skilled manual job but knew she could do better. She challenged herself to go back to college and she attained 10 straight A GCSEs. This led to an engineering apprenticeship and years of 'learn while you earn' study with the OU, in which she clocked up four successive higher qualifications. She now has her dream job as a consultant to a global engineering firm. She describes her experience of the OU and distance learning as "life changing".

If we believe in a society where everyone can progress as far as their ability allows, surely we have a duty to support the ambitions of those who have, for one reason or another, been left behind. Often, these people have work, family or caring responsibilities which mean they cannot attend traditional colleges. Some have disabilities, others live in remote communities. For all of these, the only

If we believe in a society where everyone can progress as far as their ability allows, surely we have a duty to support the ambitions of those who have, for one reason or another, been left behind



option is online, distance learning.

With the right political will and working in partnership, we can build a truly national skills offer, as part of a National Education Service, harnessing the best of public and private sector expertise and online technology to deliver it.

An important starting point would be a national online portal for adults offering personalised advice and guidance on learning and training options. The portal could build on existing systems like the National Careers Service, jobs websites, information from local employers and councils and practical training options supplied by institutions such as the OU and FE colleges.

This would put the needs of the individual at the centre of the new service. The idea would be that anyone could visit the portal and, with minimum fuss, swiftly work out what employment options were available to them in their area and the training they might need. Crucially, the portal would also give immediate access to free short online courses so they can take their first small step to learning easily.

The courses could range from basic skills – digital, numeracy, literacy, project or people management – to more advanced content to prepare for formal study at a higher level. And we could make learning stimulating, perhaps by interactive simulations, virtual reality or augmented reality. Each course, once appropriately verified to a national standard, could be accompanied by an online badge or certificate that would allow the learner to demonstrate progress.

The OU, for example, has more than 1,000 free courses already available on its OpenLearn platform which attract more than 6 million starters a year. Often that ‘learning journey’ can be triggered by one of our joint broadcasts with the BBC like Blue Planet 2; others might arrive through our YouTube channel or courses



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developed with partners such as Money Saving Expert or Cisco.

If there were a joined-up approach with government, people could have a dynamic digital record of their study history – a learning passport – which they might wish to link to an online CV to access a skills matching service or jobs search. If we went a step further, one could envisage a ‘learning visa’ to help people navigate and apply for financial support to underpin the move from the initial free courses to more sophisticated paid-for training at a higher level. The visa might be used to promote and deliver fee subsidies, perhaps from employers or from government to help meet local skills needs.

The possibilities online are almost endless. Apart from the 24-hour access to information and training which is so vital

to people who need to learn while they earn, there could be online support from a variety of experts, be they academics or employers. Or they could consult others who are taking or have taken similar courses. There could be an automated ‘advise me’ tool to help in the initial and later stages of learning, pointing to new options as they become available.

If the national skills service were to link up with the big digital players – the BBC, Google, Cisco or Microsoft – whole new areas of possibility might open up; maximising public awareness of the service, connecting learning communities and crowds together, and working with industry to identify relevant training linked to job opportunities. We could harness for the economic and public good the scale and developing technology that these organisations offer.

The beauty of this vision is that it is so achievable. It is within our power, it is within reach. Through it we can bring one step nearer that long cherished but permanently elusive political goal – a fairer, just society in which every citizen has the means to achieve to the best of their ability. A society which gives Faye and millions like her the chance to dream, believe and succeed.

Peter Horrocks is vice-chancellor of The Open University

Voices of experience

A professional workforce must be at the heart of a new National Education Service. Sally Hunt sets out how staff in higher and further education should be empowered to shape the future



Public service reform often focuses on changing how institutions are organised, or how public money is spent, but it is rare to hear much detail on how staff will be supported to do their jobs better. Yet the success of all public services, not least education, rests with the efficacy of the workforce.

It's heartening, then, that Labour's proposal for a National Education Service includes a clear commitment to support a professional education workforce. The party has set out an ambitious vision for a coherent, high-quality national education system, accessible to all regardless of age or background. It is firmly rooted in the idea that education should be a constant throughout people's lives, and that wherever you are learning you should expect to be taught by well-trained professionals.

Rejecting the market-based approach

The plans wholeheartedly reject the market-based approach favoured by the Conservatives, which has fragmented the education system in its rush to allow new, profit-making providers to compete more easily alongside established institutions. Despite numerous warnings about the threat to quality, student protections have been watered down just as student debt is reaching record levels. The recent Panorama exposé revealing fraudulent student

loan claims at private colleges highlights the dangers of this approach.

That same drive to liberalise education has also systematically undermined the professional status and autonomy of teachers and lecturers. In trying to encourage different actors into the education sector, the government has asked employers to lead the reform of apprenticeships and technical education, removed the requirement for teaching staff to have qualified status in schools and colleges, and imposed a disastrous teaching excellence framework on universities.

These changes have all chipped away at the notion that teaching is a profession in its own right. Professionalism in our education service is under attack from a culture of managerialism, a lack of respect for the expertise and commitment of staff, and the imposition of ever-increasing workloads.

Coupled with seven years of real-terms pay cuts and the rampant job insecurity which plagues our colleges and universities, it is easy to see why parts of our education system now face a recruitment and retention crisis.

Making teaching an attractive career choice

So how can the National Education Service turn things around for education

staff, and ensure that a career in education remains an appealing prospect for future generations?

First and foremost, we need to reinforce the status of education staff as skilled professionals, recognising the value they bring and increasing their agency in the workplace. Education is a vital public service and the way staff are treated needs to reflect the important role they play in our society.

That starts with investment in pay, pensions and working conditions so that the sector can continue to attract graduates to work in education. Labour must ensure that its high-profile plans to abolish tuition fees in higher education do not lead to cuts in teaching resource at universities. Staff have already suffered attacks on their pay and pensions and universities are struggling to compete with big business to retain staff in high demand subjects. A reduction in teaching income would only make academic careers even less attractive than alternatives in the private sector.

Similarly, urgent investment is needed into further education, where staff have endured a real terms pay cut of 21.5 per cent since 2009. Pay has failed to keep pace even with schools under the public sector pay cap, and 15,000 teaching staff have left the sector in the last seven years. The Association of Colleges' 2017 workforce survey found that 95 per cent of colleges said they had difficulty filling posts during 2015/16; two-thirds (64 per cent) cited low pay as a reason for recruitment difficulties. Only through additional investment will we be able to restore capacity to our colleges.

Indeed, the National Education Service presents a bigger opportunity to address the significant funding imbalance which sees the average university undergraduate attract over six times the funding of an adult in further education. A fairer funding system would encourage a greater parity

of esteem across the education system, benefiting staff and students alike.

Tackling casual contracts

Across the post-school education sector, more also needs to be done to challenge the problem of casual employment. Research by the University and College Union (UCU) in 2016 showed that 30 per cent of further education lecturers and 53 per cent of academic staff in universities are employed on insecure contracts.

The impact of these employment practices on the lives of staff is alarming – a YouGov survey for UCU showed that two-fifths (42 per cent) of education staff on casual contracts struggle to pay household bills, while a third (34 per cent) reported they had trouble getting a mortgage. There is also significant evidence that casual contracts have a real impact on the quality of teaching being delivered to students.

Professional staff scraping by on precarious contracts will inevitably struggle to fulfil their full potential. Quality teaching is underpinned by decent working conditions and job security for staff. Any reform designed to improve the education system must have this principle at its heart.

Boosting professional development

Boosting professionalism in education must also mean supporting teachers and lecturers to sustain their professional skill set. Labour's manifesto included welcome commitments to supporting professional standards and qualified status, but education staff also need a robust programme of continuing professional development (CPD) throughout their careers.

Ensuring that educators can continue to keep up to date with current pedagogy – as well as advances in their field of expertise – is crucial, especially in this age of political uncertainty and accelerating technological change.

In further education, access to CPD has become more challenging since the

statutory requirement for 30 hours of professional development per year was revoked in 2012. As college budgets have been squeezed, rising workloads have increasingly become a barrier to meaningful engagement in CPD activities.

It's a problem shared by staff in higher education – in a 2016 survey of UCU members, 43 per cent of respondents said their time spent on professional development had decreased over a three-year period, while more than 50 per cent of respondents reported spending more time on administrative tasks. So, increasing professionalism is not just about the availability of good quality CPD, but also about ensuring staff have the time to access it.

Increasing staff engagement

The current problem with workload speaks to a wider erosion of staff autonomy thanks to creeping managerialism and top-down regulation. Rather than being trusted to get on with the job and adjust their practice to meet different needs, staff across the education system are too often being asked to engage in box-ticking exercises which do little to improve the learning experience.

The teaching excellence framework is a case in point. Introduced as a mechanism to drive improvements in teaching quality in higher education, in reality it is based largely on metrics including graduate employment which have little to do with teaching. It has been widely derided by higher education staff, and UCU has raised concerns that – far from improving teaching – it incentivises institutions to target completion rates and graduate outcomes by raising entry tariffs or altering their subject mix.

The imposition of the framework ignores the views of students. In a recent survey by a consortium of students' unions, students said the quality of teachers was the most important factor in

assessing good teaching while graduate employment was ranked last.

It also undermines the professional autonomy of teaching staff, and speaks to a wider lack of engagement with teaching staff on regulation. Nobody is questioning the need for rigorous quality controls across the education sector, but education staff should have more of a say in how their work is assessed.

A different approach

Labour's proposed National Education Service is a chance to strike a different tone with the education workforce, by addressing their concerns and giving them a greater voice in how reforms are designed and implemented.

We need urgent action to improve pay and conditions, increase job security and bolster professional development in the sector so that education staff can build successful careers and deliver consistently high standards.

There should also be an independent inquiry into the teaching excellence framework and the similarly unpopular research excellence framework. Instead of these top-down measures, we need a new approach which truly enhances the student experience, encourages greater partnership and enjoys support from the sector.

Finally, we need to underpin the new service with a fair and coherent funding model which ensures that all parts of the education service are properly resourced.

Staff have an important stake in the system, and should be fully engaged in shaping the services they will ultimately be responsible for delivering. We stand ready to help foster that collaboration and ensure that, under the National Education Service, education professionals finally get the respect they deserve.

Sally Hunt is general secretary of the University and College Union

Learners in charge

Labour needs to build a flexible approach to lifelong learning. And to do so, it could learn some useful lessons from the past, argues David Blunkett



The aspiration to provide free education from the cradle to the grave is very laudable. It is however easier promised than delivered. Not least, as so much in our history teaches us, there is a tendency to deliver to the well-informed, well-placed, and well-endowed.

Aneurin Bevan once talked of the better off “sucking at the teats of the state”. This not very elegant but striking phrase has resonance when we consider the very successful ‘retail offer’ which attracted so much attention during the general election to provide free tuition and free maintenance to those in higher education.

The difficulty in delivering a truly National Education Service is not simply one of money. It is always possible to divert resources from other priorities to fund full-time school or post-school education for those accessing learning in a more traditional way – the way that most of those devising policy have experienced themselves.

But it is far more difficult for those approaching education later in life and accessing it in what would appear to many to be ‘unconventional’ ways.

My own education (and much of what I saw in my early adult life in Sheffield) is a case in point. Evening classes at further education college, day release from work (with my wages and fees paid by the employer), alongside many in the city who

were benefiting from the construction and engineering levies which paid for both part and full-time tuition alongside apprenticeships, on-the-job.

Today, many people access learning throughout life in all kinds of ways. At present shadow education secretary Angela Rayner is a classic example of someone coming to adult learning from what can only be described (and as I was very similar I can say this) as an incredible back story. Angela, like me, understands that when it comes to lifelong learning there will be many and varied routes by which people re-enter the education system and where the traditional offer does not necessarily fit the bill.

Online learning, linked with tuition and associated either with the workplace or the potential for in-work progression, offers a flexible and meaningful road to success but it does not fit with simplistic funding channels or neat solutions.

Crucially, a modern Labour party approaching the third decade of the 21st century must not, if it is to succeed, offer a top-down approach.

That is why a decade ago the late Malcolm Wicks returned to an idea which we had endeavoured to promote at the turn-of-the-century: individual learning accounts. The idea was to offer a flexible way of helping people both to progress in work or to return to learn for broader

purposes – including switching jobs or getting a job – which put the individual in charge and allowed for the drawdown of necessary funds when and where required.

In the policy paper the Learning Age, we had endeavoured to set out a clarion call for lifelong learning. We wanted a way to encourage individuals to be able to learn whilst ensuring that both society (through government) and employers – who were benefiting – made a contribution in cash or in-kind. Sadly, the government – and I carry some responsibility for this – was not bold enough.

The Treasury objected to anything that was out of line with its own thinking – which was of course deeply affected by the experience of civil servants, few of whom if any had been through further education never mind an apprenticeship.

Instead of an imaginative and creative approach to building up accounts which could be drawn down on (specifically for education), the Treasury insisted on what amounted to a voucher system which could be redeemed for particular types of learning including programmes of learning being sold by companies and individuals. It amounted to a rip-off, and I’m afraid it set back a flexible lifelong approach for decades.

And then of course the Conservatives came up with the idea of the employer levy. This would be a bold move if implemented very differently from what has actually happened. Instead of the money being made available to incentivise employers to support and work with individuals re-entering learning, the levy paid by the largest concerns is now almost exclusively going back into the very companies who paid the levy. This is usually to cover costs that they would have incurred in the first place – but of course offset against tax.

The result has been catastrophic. We have experienced a massive further drop in part-time learning, on top of the

calamitous fall from the changes brought in 2012, and the plummeting of full-time apprenticeships particularly among younger people. The meagre top-slicing of the levy for distribution to small and medium-sized companies (and their employees) has therefore failed dismally to achieve the objectives set out, and at a time of austerity, has done absolutely nothing to encourage the take-up of post-16 further education beyond the age of 18.

All the more reason therefore for Labour to construct an education offer throughout life that is not only attractive in principle but is accessible in practice. It should be an offer which puts the learner rather than the provider in charge. It should ensure too that employers have to pay their fair share towards the gains they make from an ever-increasingly educated workforce and offer government a way of facing the challenge of increasingly dominant technology, with all the opportunities and challenges that artificial intelligence and robotics will pose over the coming decades.

Britain's dismal productivity compared to all our major competitors hides an even bigger gap between London and the south east and other parts of the UK – particularly the old industrial areas that suffered so grievously in the 1980s and 1990s.

So many young people obtaining high-level qualifications now have to leave the area in which they were brought

up, in order to match their aspiration for both job satisfaction and income with the job that will yield the result. So, this is not just a matter of liberating people to continue returning to learn. It is also about an industrial strategy that links high-level education with investment in the products and services of the future which will deliver those opportunities.

The Child Trust Fund was intended both to offer the beginning of a lifelong account which could be drawn down on from the age of 18 onwards and to deal with the other major challenge – the asset divide. For whilst it has been an understandable objective of Labour policy to narrow income inequality, it is the asset divide that really challenges social democrats for the years ahead. Those who have continue to have, those who have little have little to pass on.

Ironically, there have been many initiatives over the last 25 years which would have allowed for an imaginative and creative way of delivering lifelong opportunity with a personalised and responsive approach. The Savings Gateway which matched pound for pound savings, the more progressive use of ISAs, and of course the Child Trust Fund. All of this underpinned by the decision taken in 2005 but not implemented until the coalition government took office, to bring in auto-enrolment and therefore mandatory pension contributions by both employees

and employers. As people live longer, and as people inevitably (whether politicians dream differently or not) work longer, combining pension saving with learning accounts would make real sense, whilst being both equitable and progressive.

It would be possible to extend the levy and have a meaningful top slice which would be used to match funding from the individual (much like an ISA) with a contribution from government. Such a contribution could be in two parts. A direct cash injection for the less well-off and extended ISA tax relief specifically for a learning account, which would be universal. Proper lifelong careers advice would be necessary to avoid individuals being exploited by scam programmes.

There is of course one other factor and that is the role of the trade unions. I was very proud to establish the trade union learning fund and to encourage a direct approach by the trade unions to making learning at work and beyond work, a renewed remit. Renewed, because of course the early trade union movement contributed greatly to adult learning and to an understanding of the crucial nature of being able to celebrate pride in craftsmanship and continuing progression within the workplace. Youngsters who earned very little in their prolonged apprenticeship knew that there would be both security and modest but critical prosperity for them in the years ahead.

The craft skills of the past are now the high-level technological skills of the future. That is why emphasising availability and accessibility for all has to take precedence over free provision for those able to avail themselves of it.

And that is why an attractive headline has to be underwritten by a story that is relevant to the nation as a whole and practices what we preach on fairness and equality.

Lord Blunkett is a former Secretary of State for Education and Employment



Britain's dismal productivity compared to all our major competitors hides an even bigger gap between London and the south east and other parts of the UK – particularly the old industrial areas that suffered so grievously in the 1980s and 1990s

In the right place

A cradle to grave education service needs to be local as well as national and councils could play a vital role in making it work for their communities, writes Jessica Studdert



The NHS holds a special place within the lore of the Labour party as an enduring achievement. So it's perhaps not surprising that plans to create an equivalent for education have elicited excitement and a renewed appetite to use the full force of state levers to affect social change.

But as a framework for a National Education Service is developed, it will be important to ensure it is based not on nostalgia for a past model, but on a clear understanding of how to achieve impact now and in the future. Our whole public service infrastructure is currently grappling with the need to be more effectively focused on outcomes amid increasing and ever more complex demand pressures – pressures which exist regardless of austerity.

Over the decades since the NHS was established in the 1940s, the national model of healthcare has not overcome entrenched health inequalities. Today a hospital-led

model of provision is struggling to adapt to the demands of an ageing population. The NHS is now shifting towards a more place-based approach, integrating health with social care. And there is widespread recognition of the need to shift capacity towards prevention within communities, reducing demand on acute services.

The challenge of being responsive to modern realities is similar for education as it is for health. While the rhetorical frame of a National Education Service might pull at the heartstrings politically, what's needed in practice is almost the opposite on all three counts – local learning systems. Building a 'cradle to grave' lifelong approach means addressing how different parts of the system are knitted together in practice, from the perspective of the individual's learning journey. This would shift different services and tiers that currently operate in relative isolation towards a collective ecosystem,

Building a 'cradle to grave' lifelong approach means addressing how different parts of the system are knitted together in practice, from the perspective of the individual's learning journey

capable of flexing to respond to the varying needs of individuals and communities, focused on securing better outcomes and narrowing gaps in life chances.

The detail so far set out in this autumn's National Education Service charter looks promising: it recognises the need for education to be aligned with health, sustainability and industrial policy; the need for cooperation across boundaries and sectors; and for the national service to be rooted in communities with democratic oversight. Yet it is rather more explicit about elements which are to be nationally prescribed than it is on the nature of local accountability or the role of devolved responsibility per se.

There are several tensions at the heart of the proposals for an NES: between national inputs and outcomes for people, between national direction and local accountability, and between national standards and the different starting points of different places. How these play out in practice will be crucial in determining the impact of the service.

National policy is frequently blind to local geography, and the role of place is rarely approached strategically. As a result, separate directives from different Whitehall departments create a complex local landscape with fragmentation between services. For example, Sure Start and childcare are locally provided. Schools are increasingly academised, accountable within their chain and directly to the DfE. The further education sector has gone through a series of area-based reviews. Meanwhile universities consider themselves to have national or even international reach, although many are increasingly recognising their role as anchor institutions intrinsically part of their local economy.

Rather than interfacing with places as a whole ecosystem, education policies tend to create their own cohorts of people who pass through different services, based not on their needs and lived experience but on their age and entitlement: pre-school,



school age, post-16 and 19+. Because of these categorisations, the riskiest time for learners is at key transition points between services, where they stop being the responsibility of one and become the responsibility of another. To create a coherent cradle to grave approach, these artificial gaps in the system need to be closed, so that the learner's journey is personalised. Three elements will be especially important to get right.

First, an NES must maintain a sharp focus on outcomes for people, not the interests of the providers. There are strong and vocal interest groups within education, and frontline professionals can feel fairly aggrieved at having been buffeted by successive waves of structural educational reforms which have a habit of undermining their expertise and autonomy. Yet a system shift towards lifelong learning will involve all existing organisations operating differently and outside current comfort zones – territorialism and reluctance to adapt will need to be challenged.

Second, to shift the system around the needs of the individual, effective local accountability needs to be established that actively fosters collaboration and reorients existing resources, assets and institutions towards a lifelong approach. Local government has a chequered history in education policy – it has been a feature in recent decades for national initiatives to persistently bypass and undermine councils, and then declare them inadequate. Rather than appending new structures onto an already complex landscape, which previous Labour education policies have favoured, it makes more sense to work with what is there already. There might well be a need for measures to strengthen the democratic oversight of local government where it is opaque or unresponsive, and to create new opportunities for people to exercise their voice within the system. But the role of local government needs to be reinforced in principle, rather than neglected or sidelined. Rethinking the value local

government could add to a revitalised education offer would involve moving away from an expectation of traditional notions of the local authority role as a bureaucratic enforcer, and recognising their potential to play a more active role at the heart of a wider ecosystem.

To foster the development of local learning systems, local government is well placed to coordinate the range of local services that will need to be better aligned to ensure a 'cradle to grave' approach in practice. Beyond the need for existing services to collaborate more closely, it will also be important to engage a wider set of stakeholders such as employers and local businesses. There are examples of where councils are already building links and patching together parts of the system that are currently unconnected. For example, Southwark council's employment and enterprise development scheme helps SMEs take on 16 to 24-year-old apprentices. Sheffield council has developed a Skills Made Easy brokerage system across the wider city region, which connects employers to the training providers that best meet their skills needs. A national service should encourage and embed this role.

We can also begin to think more creatively about how places can be recognised more strategically as the core convening site, generating new connections and learning opportunities for people. An interesting approach is Cities of Learning, originally developed in the US and being piloted by the RSA in the UK. This seeks to galvanise mass engagement around learning and skills, drawing in learners, institutions, employers, civil society and the voluntary and cultural sectors. This approach seeks to develop and fuse a sense of place-based identity and collective ambition around learning, activating the widest civic and cultural energy around that mission.

Third and finally, to close the gaps that exist, the funding model of education

To close the gaps that exist, the funding model of education needs to be focused on creating a system

needs to be focused on creating a system. Currently, the financing of different services reinforces their separation. For example, schools are currently incentivised to provide 'value added' only from the point a child starts at school, rather than invest in school readiness during pre-school years, which is known to be critical to child outcomes. FE colleges are funded for the courses they put on, regardless of whether these are linked to actual employer demand and job outcomes. There would be merit in exploring how new place-based investment models between currently separate services could be brought together to underpin stronger local accountability. This would be based on securing better outcomes for people at transition points such as children starting school, or young adults leaving full-time education to seek employment, rather than only rewarding progression within individual services for a fixed duration.

Education policy tends to be dominated by forceful debate like no other area. Personal experience, professional passion, political ideology and academic evidence seem to fuse together to create entrenched positions and make widespread buy-in to radical reform almost inconceivable. Yet there is an opportunity to create a system of provision that is more intelligently suited to the needs of individuals and the challenges of the 21st century. While the framework might be a National Education Service, in practice it will need to foster "local learning systems" which are responsive to people and adaptive to places, relentlessly focused on improving outcomes and narrowing the gaps in life chances that persist.

Jessica Studdert is deputy director of New Local Government Network (NLGN)

Principles for a purpose

Shakira Martin sets out how a National Education Service can meet the needs of all students



Labour's National Education Service (NES) would mean radical change to the way that education – both compulsory and post-compulsory – is delivered and accessed. Scrapping the broken tuition fees systems in further and higher education, reintroducing maintenance grants and significant investment in childcare support will all improve the way students experience the education system.

But it is the basic concept itself of an NES that truly begins to address the serious policy failings of the Conservative-led government of the past seven years. The NES is the antithesis to current Conservative education policy-making: it is principled, cohesive and institutional.

The principles laid out in Labour's manifesto are the starting point. As it says: "Governments have the responsibility to make lifelong learning a reality by giving everyone the opportunity to access education throughout their lives," and "every child – and adult – matters". We must always begin with a vision of the type of society we believe in, and build on that.

Second, the NES looks at education from "cradle to grave". It recognises that putting boundaries between different kinds of study, or different institutional settings, is a major obstacle to ensuring that people can access education in a way that is appropriate to them. There is a lot more that can be done to deepen this approach: looking at the role of informal

as well as formal education for example.

Third, the NES seeks to create an institution, rather than simply drive policy change. An institution represents a vision of who we are as a community, and as a country.

The NES must work for everyone. This means challenging the popular media picture of the student who attends a campus-based university full-time at age 18, and ensuring that our system is not structured to the disadvantage of those who do not match this picture.

Transport cost and availability must be addressed too. NUS research in November 2015 found that more than half of college students cannot always afford their travel costs, while one third spend between one and two hours just getting to college. This research was conducted before the government's 'area reviews process' of forced college mergers across the country, which has forced students to travel further still.

We also need to commit to closing attainment gaps that people experience in our education system if they are women, LGB or trans, students of colour, or disabled. We have known for more than 20 years that a student's race is a determining factor in their likelihood to receive a first or upper second in higher education. The data released last month by the Equality Challenge unit puts the attainment gap between black African

students and white students at 27.4 per cent. For a National Education Service to be truly transformative equity will need to be one of its key drivers.

Class barriers must be addressed too. We should aspire to a really integrated system of careers information, advice and guidance which supports people from all backgrounds to navigate the educational system, and to find appropriate employment upon graduation. A system will best meet the needs of all when everyone is able to have a say in that system. This means looking at governance models, ensuring that students and workers are represented on governing bodies, but also that representation is ensured throughout the institution. Strong students' unions and trade union branches are critical, and should be embedded through all levels of decision-making, including but not limited to the top. We should ensure too that institutions are really reaching out into their communities. We need to open the doors of learning, share resources and encourage active engagement. This must be a significant part of any access agenda, but it also is important if we want to create a national institution which is grounded in our communities.

The NES offers great potential for a radical transformation in the way we approach and view education. It will allow individuals to reskill and upskill throughout their lives, and ensure that the UK has the skills it needs in the context both of Brexit and of ongoing dramatic technological advances.

Labour must continue to be bold and unashamedly ambitious, not just about its policies, but also about its vision. In that way, we can ensure the development of a coherent, holistic institution which recognises the importance of partnership and is truly embedded in our communities and in our national life.

Shakira Martin is president of the National Union of Students

Conclusion

By Andrew Harrop and Kate Murray

People will always remember Labour's 2017 election campaign for the party's promise to scrap undergraduate tuition fees. But Labour's pledge of free higher education was just the standout feature of a broader vision for an integrated nationwide system of education for all, free at the point of need – the National Education Service.

The proposal for an NES did not come as a complete surprise, since Jeremy Corbyn had first promised it in his 2015 leadership campaign. But until last summer's election, he had said little about what this idea would mean in practice. Now, with Labour drawing closer to power, it is time for the left to turn stirring words into a practical blueprint.

Labour has started that process by publishing for consultation a draft charter for the new NES. In this report, the Fabian Society has picked up the baton, by bringing together leading voices from the world of education to propose how Labour's new service might be brought to life.

Labour's charter makes it clear that the left's ambitions for education stretch much further than simply providing for free what is currently available at a price – or than reversing the recent collapse in participation across many forms of learning. Between them the contributors to this report argue for a National Education Service that is:

- **Accountable** – democratically accountable and open at every level
- **Devolved** – with local decision-making which delivers coherent, integrated local provision, albeit within a national framework
- **Empowering** – ensuring that learners,

employees and institutions are all enabled and respected

- **Genuinely lifelong** – with opportunities for retraining and chances to re-engage at every stage, and parity for part-time and digital distance learning
- **Coordinated** – flexible pathways for learners between providers and strong partnerships involving providers, employers, unions and technology platforms
- **Outcome-focused** – designed to meet social and economic needs, with far more adults receiving productivity-enhancing education but also recognising that learning brings wider benefits

The challenge for the National Education Service is to recreate the best of the NHS, not the worst of it. Labour must strive to establish the strong values, ethos and entitlements of a national institution, but not the top-down silos and inflexibilities. Instead the NES should be based on local networks of diverse providers – as Jessica Studdert puts it in her contribution 'local learning systems'.

To create an integrated, learner-centred NES, other contributors call for a national system of credit accumulation and transfer, across all forms of provision; families or clusters of different institutions, with shared responsibility for smooth transitions; and a personalised digital portal, that should include guidance, records of qualifications and credits, online learning tasters, application systems and networks of support.

But money still matters and Labour needs to think further about what an NES 'free at the point of use' should mean. The party's 2017 election policy was for free tuition for a first degree and for learning in an FE college, and the manifesto costings assumed no change in the quantity of provision. But free education will presumably increase demand and there is also the ques-

tion of closing the huge funding disparities across the education system. Labour's 2017 calculations are likely to be the floor for how much a future NES might cost.

A debate is needed, then, about how much funding will be required and where it should come from. And however much money is on offer, budget-setters will need to decide how many places, and at what cost, should be provided. Just responding to learner demand is unlikely to maximise national economic and social outcomes, if in many instances education is 'under-consumed', while at the same time an enthusiastic minority accesses whatever provision the system will allow.

The roles and responsibilities of employers also need to be thought through. One proposal is for the new apprenticeship levy to be expanded into a scheme for funding almost all recognised qualifications obtained through the workplace. This would be a parallel track within the NES, standing alongside the taxpayer-funded tuition delivered directly by FE and HE institutions.

And as there should be no limit on our aspirations for people's learning – even if there must be a cap on publicly funded free places – the left should explore whether there is also a role for learner accounts (or other new social security entitlements) to subsidise and incentivise learning outside the core public entitlement. Similarly, income-contingent loans might still have a place, if they can enable inclusive access to maintenance costs and second degrees.

The promise of free tuition raises as many questions as it answers and the debate about money and entitlements will continue. But the decisions Labour politicians take on funding can now be subservient to a broader vision – of a national service designed to deliver true lifelong learning and a huge increase in the skills of the British workforce.

Andrew Harrop is general secretary and Kate Murray is editorial director of the Fabian Society

