

Students Shaping the Post-16 Skills Plan



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Foreword

My own commitment to further education is both personal and political. I grew up in an FE family. My father was a factory worker who qualified to teach building trades at York College through night school and he was a passionate believer in skills development and parity of esteem for vocational education. My mother who left school at 15 to work in a chocolate factory was rescued from later mental illness by discovering adult education and became a passionate advocate of lifelong learning. My brother continued in the family business and lectures in an FE college (and is the union rep).

FE was part of my ministerial portfolio when Secretary of State in the Coalition. It was clear that Whitehall did not understand or value FE at all. The Treasury would happily have killed it off to save money. So many of my battles were about money. There were cuts, but much less than had I not fought for the sector. Some valuable programs like Community Learning were saved from the axe. I launched a big drive for more and better apprenticeships which also created a new source of income for colleges; and also HE in FE. I continued my involvement in FE after leaving office as governor of my local adult college (RACC) and as a lifetime Fellow of City Lit. I sense that the long battle to have the importance of FE fully recognised is bearing fruit.

Rt Hon Vince Cable MP

As the second NUS president to come from a further education background, I know just how important FE is. I grew up in a single-parent working-class family where education wasn't really top of my priorities. I left school with one GCSEs and I spent my teenage years starting and dropping out of countless different courses, unable to understand why I couldn't just stick to one thing.

When I became a mother, I finally found a course that was right for me and four more courses later I did something I never thought I could have achieved – I graduated from my college. Like so many different people FE gave me my second, third and fourth chance, it gave me opportunities that I could have only dreamed of as a young girl and it ultimately saved my life.

Whilst this will be a familiar story to many people already working and studying within the FE sector, it's just one set of experiences out of millions of others. Yet, we hardly ever hear from the people whose lives are affected by FE every single day. Too often, discussions about the current state of FE and policy reforms centre employers or principals. This report aims to challenge that. Everything that follows is what learners of all different ages, courses and providers have to say about their education; what they like, what they don't and what they think needs to change.

Further education serves many different, positive functions in society but it is fundamentally about the individual student. It's about time policy makers genuinely considered and acted upon what they have to say.

Shakira Martin, NUS President

Executive Summary

In response to Area Reviews, the Sainsbury Review and Post 16 Skills Plan, NUS alongside the Rt Hon Vince Cable MP have worked together with students across England to produce this report aimed to influence the political agenda and public consciousness on reforms to the FE and Skills Sector.

The project was conceived during the summer of 2016 as a response to the lack of consultation and involvement of students in the wave of reforms to the FE sector. All too often the voice of employers is placed front and center of the debate when it comes to vocational education, but we know that students, as key participants within the sector, want the opportunity to shape their learning.

The report sets out a range of policy recommendations and key critical points in relation to the Post 16 Skills Plan and changing FE landscape, outlines a clear vision for what students believe makes excellent vocational teaching and learning and finally makes the case for learner voice to be embedded throughout the vocational and technical education sector.

Key Recommendations

Quality teaching and learning

- A more applied level 2 qualification for English and Maths should be developed and promoted to support students who do not excel at GCSE English and Maths obtain a qualification that gives them a grounding in these core subjects.

- Success measures for students (and providers) shouldn't just rely on grade metrics, but look at the development of the student in the round, taking into account their growth and development.

Work Experience

- Government should ensure that colleges have adequate funding and support to deliver high quality work placements which complement and build on the learning they do in the classroom.
- The Government should provide students with financial support for travel and subsistence to ensure that cost is not a barrier to accessing a good quality, subject appropriate work placement.

Basic Skills and the Transition Year

- A much broader definition of Basic Skills other than English, Maths and digital should be adopted to encompass the breadth of skills students want to acquire to support their progression onto further study, work, independent living and to play an active part in civic society.

Apprenticeships

- Common standards should be developed for procedures in recruiting, appointing, supporting and reviewing apprenticeships. Every training provider/college should follow consistent procedures and standards for apprenticeships.
- Apprenticeships should include and lead to clear, appropriate and nationally recognised qualifications facilitated and taught by properly qualified teachers and instructors.

Financial support for adult learners

- The Government should review the current maintenance loans proposals to ensure that

financial support is available at higher level technical for all courses and qualifications delivered across the sector, not just at Institutes of Technology or National Colleges.

Lifelong learning

- A voucher style system should be created for older adults from low socio-economic backgrounds to support them with the associated costs of re-entering education and training.

ESOL

- The Government should reverse recent cuts and deliver a sustainable public funding settlement for ESOL provision.
- Responsibility for developing English language skills and ESOL provision should be given to a single government department.

Careers Information, Advice and Guidance

- The Careers Strategy must deliver a funded universal all ages all stages careers service which focuses on delivering tailored careers IAG at key intervention points during a person education and working life.
- There should be substantive careers education delivered through the National Curriculum which addresses a wide range of skills, not just careers.

Citizenship Education

- The Government should improve and expand the provision of Citizenship Education at Key Stages 3 & 4. In addition Citizenship Education should be included in the definition of 'Basic Skills' taught in colleges across all levels and included as a core component of the Skills Plan's Transition Year.

Democratic Engagement

- The Government should lower the voting age to include 16 and 17 year olds in the franchise, allowing them to vote across the UK in regional and national elections and referendums.
- Providers should offer students the option to register to vote when they enrol on a course or apprenticeship.

Student Voice

- Student and Apprentice panels should be created to sit alongside employer panels to co-lead on the design of standards and assessment plans for the 15 proposed new routes through technical education.
- The board of the Institute for Apprenticeships should create a reserved place for a representative of college-based learners and apprentices. This should be done in conjunction with the establishment of "learner panels" for those who are undertaking classroom based learning, that would sit alongside the already established "apprenticeship panels".
- Mechanisms for student representatives to communicate with local decision makers need to be in place as the devolution of skills policy and funding to local authorities increases.

Introduction

In response to Area Reviews, the Sainsbury Review and Post 16 Skills Plan, NUS alongside the Rt Hon Vince Cable MP have worked together with students across England to produce this report aimed to influence the political agenda and public consciousness on reforms to the FE and Skills Sector. The report sets out a range of policy recommendations and key critical points in relation to the Post 16 Skills Plan and changing FE landscape, sets out a clear vision for what students believe makes excellent vocational teaching and learning and finally makes the case for learner voice to be embedded throughout the vocational and technical education sector.

Although the Skills Plan goes some way to bring about much needed broad reforms to the sector, it does not address the breadth of what further education delivers for communities and for the individual student. Key demographics of peoples learning in further education are clearly omitted from the Skills Plan's direction and recommendations, which fails to talk about skills in its broadest, most holistic sense – instead addressing the direct needs of the market. The exclusion of any strategy and policy that directly focuses on adult learners, ESOL students and SEND students is a clear indication that the Skills Plan hasn't gone far enough to address the needs of the sector and its impact in the community in its entirety.

All too often the voice of employers is placed front and centre of the debate when it comes to vocational education, but we know that students, as key participants within the sector, want the opportunity to shape their learning and make their voices heard when it comes to shaping what their learning looks like.

It is clear from the conversations we have had during this project, and with students in further

education more generally, students want to see a fairer, more sustainable vocational and technical education system in England which puts them at the centre of policy making.

Students and young people voted overwhelmingly to remain part of the European Union last year. As Government begins its negotiations to exit the EU, any policy recommendations for further education and skills must be viewed through this uncertain lens. The impact on the sector is likely to be huge, from funding to placement and progression all at risk. As the UK becomes a less open place to work and study for European nationals, who, for a long time, plugged a gap in the UK's higher technical skills hole, the double edged silver lining of Brexit will produce a very real need for serious investment and policy reforms with real longevity to address our changing workforce and provide young people with the skills to work locally and internationally.

About the Project

The project was conceived during the summer of 2016 as a response to the lack of consultation and involvement of students in the wave of reforms to the FE sector. NUS worked with college students' unions to deliver a series of round table discussions which fed into national and local policy making during the Government's Area Review program. However with such large reforms going on in the sector, with little public interest or scrutiny, NUS partnered with Vince Cable to consult students on the changes to the sector and produce a series of recommendations for Government to take forward.

Across late 2016 we organised a series of discussions with student representatives across England to ask them what they thought of key issues present in the Skills Plan, and also what they thought of some issues affecting students that were clearly missing from the plan. In addition we held an evidence session where student representative and sector experts

discussed policy changes proposed by the Skills Plan in depth, critiquing a range of proposed changes to the sector and the impact constant policy change has had over the last several years.

This work has resulted in the policy recommendations for both Government and providers found in this report. They are by no means an exhaustive list of what students want to see as further education begins yet another process of reform, but they do begin to place students, rightly, at the centre of the debate.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank students, apprentices and staff at Dudley College, City of Liverpool College, ASSET Training Liverpool, Oldham College and Morley College for their participation and support in the discussion of key policy questions relating to the Post 16 Skills Plan and beyond.

Additionally we wish to thank Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College for hosting our discussion day, and the following sector and student experts for their time, knowledge and input: Andrew Harden, UCU; Mark Dawe, AELP; Ann Hodgson, UCL; Ian Ashman, AoC; Shane Chowen, Learning and Work Institute; Ruth Levin, Unison; Sarah Lazlo, Derwen College; Jenny Bates, Oldham College; Jack Stoker, Newcastle College; Robin Ferguson, Derwen College; James Davies, Cardinal Newman; Marc Jones, Vision West Nottinghamshire College; Kyron Caunt, Vision West Nottinghamshire College; Sarah McCluney, National Society of Apprentices; and Jessica Foster, Canterbury College.

About us

The National Union of Students (NUS) is a confederation of 600 students' unions, amounting to more than 95 per cent of all higher and further education unions in the UK. Through our member students' unions, we

represent the interests of more than seven million students. NUS represents students and students' unions to ensure that education is transformative, skills and learning are accessible and every student in the UK is empowered to achieve their potential.

NUS membership includes student representative bodies from around 300 further education, sixth-form and specialist colleges in England, representing the overwhelming majority of learners in further education across the country.

In 2014, NUS established the **National Society of Apprentices (NSoA)**, giving a voice to 200,000 apprentices nationally and supporting the development of local apprentice voice structures through the 200 providers and employers currently engaged with the society.

Shakira Martin is the current President of the National Union Students. After serving as Vice President (Further Education) for 2 years, Shakira was elected President in April 2017. She successfully completed a Diploma in Education and Training whilst sitting on the NUS Black Students' Campaign Committee as the FE representative. Shakira is the second President in NUS history to not have gone to university before taking up the post.

Sir Vince Cable was Secretary of State for Business Innovation and Skills 2010-15. He is currently MP for Twickenham (and earlier from 1997-2015) and is Leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Research Findings

What makes high quality further education?

Quality Teaching and Learning

Students care about the quality of education they receive, and staff care about the quality of education they deliver. Yet, with constant policy change, financial restraints and uncertainty in the sector, it is imperative that a high quality education is delivered. In FE, a high quality education extends beyond the classroom and into the workshop, the workplace and the community. Students, whether in an FE College, on a placement or in the workplace on an apprenticeship are entitled to receive the very best vocational education from their provider. At its best, high quality vocational education not only passes on skills and expertise in the subject area, but a passion to pursue a lifelong vocation in a chosen field.

Whilst speaking to students across England during the Area Review consultation period, they raised similar themes about what high quality vocational education looked like. In the classroom they talked about the specific need for teachers to be qualified and capable in both education and the industry in which they teach, with up to date experience in their chosen field. Standard measures of success were also criticised, with recommendations for more student centred measurements that took into account the students abilities when they entered FE and the personal progress they made, taking into consideration personal barriers they may have faced that impact on their own attainment. Additionally measuring learners 'soft skills' such as developed confidence, participation within the

college and surrounding community and civic skills should also be included when measuring student success.

Staff resourcing and class sizes were also prevalent topics for discussion with students stating that they believed class sizes should be of a manageable size so teachers can deliver a more personalised education, with support staff able to support and enable students with either learning difficulties or who struggle to engage in a classroom environment so teaching staff can concentrate on teaching the whole class.

"All students used to do one hour of pastoral tutorials and one hour of 1:2:1's. Now that's changed with only 16-18 year olds getting a 1:2:1, but not after...The number of staff has reduced, that's the major barrier."

Staff member, Oldham College

Students also expected to be able to access high quality, industry ready learning resources for their chosen area of study. Up to date IT equipment, learning on equipment used by industry professionals and well-resourced libraries and study spaces were all referenced as key to support students engage and progress with their learning. When asked about online and digital learning, students were clear that it should be used alongside existing teaching methods, not as a cheap alternative to teaching staff.

Work Experience

In the Post 16 Skills Plan, there is a focus on work experience as a core component of all level 3 provision. Students recognise that quality work experience not only supports them to gain skills to get a job, but to discover what they want from their future employment.

NUS recently published Practice Made Perfect¹, a survey of over 1000 further education students to get their views on the expectations and experiences they had of work experience. With almost half of the students surveyed having had to arrange their own work experience placement and 61 per cent of students received no financial support at all with their placement it is clear that if work experience is to become an integral part of all level 3 vocational learning, colleges will need to be supported to deliver placements effectively for students.

"To have quality work placements, there needs to be a quality relationship between provider and employer – a long term relationship where the provider supports the employer to understand the importance."

Andrew Harden, UCU

87 per cent of students agreed that they gained an understanding of what it would be like to work in a specific industry once they had undertaken a placement and many students found their work experience to be a positive experience, however there are still improvements that can be made to enhance the experience for all. Additionally, a significant minority of around one in ten did not feel that their work experience was beneficial.

Students see work experience as an incredibly worthwhile opportunity, offering a crucial understanding of the work environment, knowledge development and skills. However, there were clear shortfalls around financial support, evaluation of learning and accessing experience opportunities themselves.

Basic Skills and the Transition Year

With regard to developing and improving basic skills, students want to see a reimagining of what constitutes basic skills. English, Maths and digital are all undoubtedly vital skills which should be embedded into a student's learning, however students clearly wanted to see an expanded offer that addresses 'soft skills' and capacity building within the individual. Students believe that colleges should offer the opportunity to learn basic life-skills that have not been taught in school, such as cooking, money and financial management and social skills. Students also want their education to provide them with wider, more practical skills for life after leaving college, which don't just improve employability, but deliver political education, social education including sex and relationship education and civic education.

"We talked about the educational curriculum at sixth form. You're taught all these things but we don't end up knowing about life skills like having a mortgage and handling finances."

A level student, Dudley College

The Skills Plan's proposed transition year is welcomed as a valued stop gap for some students. However, for it to be effective it has to be tailored to the needs of individual students, with the student feeling empowered and supported to be able to shape it throughout the year. Allowing students to act as co-creators in their transition year is likely to lead to more engaged students as it promotes a sense of belonging, which can be critical to student retention and success.

For some students trying to progress through further education, compulsory Maths and English GCSE resits can cause a real barrier. Repeated retakes are demoralising and demotivating for students as they are continued to be taught and assessed in the same methods that have failed them previously. Students have repeatedly told

us that the GCSE retake policy is not working for them and that they prefer to learn these core subjects through much more applied and course specific ways.

Apprenticeships

"I see apprenticeships as training. It's an education. I don't think the prestige is where it used to be but it is moving. The day release and being off site is really important."

Apprentice, ASSET Training.

Apprentices involved with the National Society of Apprentices (NSoA) have discussed what makes a good quality apprenticeships. They believe that it is both a means of enhancing individual future employment and a prosperous economy and, equally importantly, as a way of developing and growing themselves in the broadest sense. Members of NSoA believe that apprenticeships should offer a means of earning and learning; of being both employee and student.

Additionally, the Skills Plan's proposal for employment based technical education (apprenticeships) with at least 20 per cent college-based education is welcomed by apprentices providing there are stricter definitions of what is delivered during that 20 per cent.

What our student and sector experts say

"My assessment helps me to see that I'm improving. They are happy I'm getting stuff from my assessors. The questions I get are linked to what I casually do in my working. I'm assessed on what I do in my day to day role. I learn the background knowledge and what I do practically. Every other week I work with my manager to see my development."

Apprentice, ASSET Training

"We're always writing. We could do with a more physical teaching style. People learn by doing sometimes and we need the variety."

Student, Oldham College

"Teachers could have more training in diversity. They're teaching LGBT+ students, students from different races – they need to be able to navigate that and control behavior in the classroom appropriately to support students."

Student, Oldham College

"Perhaps all children should have lots of work experience in lots of environments to learn life skills – but it needs to be structured and supportive. It needs to be in a learning context."

Adult learner, Morley College

"The transition year is potentially good and potentially problematic. The year is separate for academic and technical so you have to divide people off. Government have no idea who will be in that bracket. With the Skills Plan being about higher levels, getting the transition year right is really important."

Dr Ann Hodgson, UCL

"The work placements are the challenging part of this. It works in social care and childcare, we had an absolute commitment from the employers to support the work placement. The second thing that made it work was we employed a full time member of staff who looked after those relationships."

Ian Ashman, AoC

"The 3 million apprenticeships is easy, the only thing stopping us hitting this is the budget. Whether they are quality apprenticeships is the issue...When it comes to skills and competency, there needs to be assessment as you go along."

Mark Dawe, AELP

Why lifelong learning matters

The Need for Lifelong Learning

There is a glaring omission from the Post 16 Skills Plan that doesn't explicitly address the complex learning needs of adults returning to study. The focus of the plan is clear on progression through both academic and vocational routes into higher level qualifications, which we can presume adult learners can enter should what they require be accredited progression through their chosen vocation, or to get a solid foundation in a new vocational or academic field. With an aging workforce, the retirement age getting later and later and a rapidly changing employment market, the Skills Plan does little to address these challenges.

"The strategy doesn't address lifelong, adult learning. Unison is concerned about retraining later in life. There isn't enough in the reforms."

Ruth Levinson, Unison

The knowledge learnt at school, college and university is now not always enough to carry someone through their working career to retirement therefore a flexible approach to lifelong learning and reskilling must be on offer.

However, for many adults, returning to or progressing through education means so much more than just a qualification. Attending an evening class at a local college to learn a craft or a new language for example builds confidence, self-esteem, companionship and capability – although all these things add to an individual's

employability, the benefits of informal adult education extend far further.

We saw during the recession and as the nature of work delivered in the UK changes, businesses and industries collapse and close, leaving large numbers of adults within communities jobless and under skilled to re-enter the job market in other roles. Many colleges were quick to respond to the needs of their community with programmes rolled out to workers where industries has closed and dedicated advice teams delivering city wide job speakers support.

Barriers to Education

"It's difficult to measure the effect adult learning has on people, so therefore it's difficult to justify why we should have adult learning. It's undeniably expensive for many people to access adult education."

Student, Morley College

For many adults, returning to education often carries a significant personal cost, whether that's explicitly financial through loans, fees and a distinct lack of maintenance support or costly in terms of balancing time with caring responsibilities, work and community commitments.

There are some distinct groups of adults who have particularly suffered due to recent changes in FE policy and funding. Specifically funding for ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses has dramatically reduced since 2008 causing large waiting lists in some colleges. Speaking the language of the country you reside in is an integral component of not just being able to enter the workforce, but also to engage in the community around you and access support and services as you need.

Cost is still prohibiting some adults from re-entering education. Although there are now loans in place to pay course fees, the additional costs such as childcare and the loss of earnings or benefits incurred by returning to study still create barriers. The Learning and Work Institutes 'Midlife Career Review' report² highlighted in 2015 that "although longer, and generally healthier, life provides many opportunities and rewards, a growing retired population, and a declining number of people of traditional "working age" creates a real economic challenge." Clearly policy reform is needed to support adults in midlife to retrain or re-enter the workforce. This not only means supporting and reviewing career and work options through programs such as those featured in the Midlife Career Review, but also reviewing the current maintenance loans proposals to ensure that adults can access adequate financial support at all FE providers, not just Institutes of Technology or National Colleges.

Lifelong Support

With employees less likely to take a job for life, to support the development of staff through training and upskilling, employers must adopt a 'pay it forward' model of investment for the development of their workforce. All employers should be supported to take responsibility for investing and developing their staff, with clear learning and development strategies that didn't just cover qualifications, but also skills and competency based training relating to their field of work. As more and more people switch employers and sectors with regularity during their working life, work based learning, development and training needs reframing as a positive investment that benefits the economy and workforce as a whole, not just the employer.

There are key factors that need to be addressed to support people to retrain and upskill throughout their working lives. These include financial support and stability, job security and

progression, access to training and development when during periods of both employment and unemployment and tailored support to address individual need.

"It's about progression as an older learner and reducing the stigma [around apprenticeships]...I'm learning transitional skills, helping to move the organisation forward."

Apprentice, ASSET Training

In March 2017, Policy Connect delivered as part of its Skills Commission³ delivered a report called 'A Spotlight on...Lifelong Learning for an Aging Workforce'. The report addresses a number of structural concerns and challenges faced by older workers. Some of the content of the report echoes discussions had during our events for this report and additionally resonates with stories our members have told us. Therefore, in our recommendations chapter we have included a number from this report.

What our student and sector experts say

"Social inclusion aspect of adult education is really important – a way of giving people the skills they need. A lot of courses used to be accessed through local authorities, but that has disappeared now."

Student, Morley College

"Morley has lots of non-accredited courses which are really important to adult learners. Lots of non-accredited courses pave the way to accredited courses and should be treated the same way because courses have loads of benefits beyond the qualification you might get. But employers want a qualification from employees."

Student, Morley College

"There has been very much an emphasis on progression, but sometimes progression is just not slipping back and not deteriorating, especially for older people."

Student, Morley College

"Morley is much more vulnerable than typical FE colleges because we don't have the same number of accredited courses to subsidise us. It's very precarious because the numbers aren't increasing."

Student, Morley College

"Local areas need to function as a proper high skills eco system. Where further education, higher education and the voluntary sector work together on progression routes within the different sectors, in the locality, with employers. At local levels, which vary in size depending on where you are, need to work jointly on how you deliver technical education. I think it only works when employers and providers work together and design things that have national currency but fits with the local economy"

Dr Ann Hodgson, UCL

Making careers information, advice and guidance work for all

Careers Information, Advice and Guidance has been a hot topic for students, the sector and parliamentarians for several years now. Yet, we have seen very little to address the systematic failings of schools and colleges attempting to deliver a service on limited funds with no national strategy. Many young people are left to navigate the complicated world of qualifications, providers, further study and work alone or with minimal support.

As the landscape of qualifications, provider types and routes rapidly changes, we need a careers offer that delivers a service for all, not the disparate and patchy provision students have been left with.

Professional Support

The Government's long overdue 'Careers Strategy' must not only address the hole left by Connexions and the National Careers Service's area-based contracting postcode lottery. It must also offer a real all ages, all stages service that doesn't just deliver advice, but offers professional guidance, particularly at key points for those progressing through education.

Good decisions are based on informed and up to date choices, which is exactly what careers IAG should be helping to deliver. 68 per cent of students think that 16 is too early to be making choices which will define their future career

path⁴ and parents and teachers are the key influences when it comes to career choices for 11–16 year olds.⁵ Teachers and support staff are not trained to deliver tailored and suitable careers IAG to students within their provider, although many are finding themselves as advisors by proxy.

Students want to be supported by professionally qualified careers advisors, delivering face-to-face guidance that is tailored to their own skills, interests and competencies, supporting them to make better informed decisions about their next steps. With parents and teachers often filling the space by providing well-meaning but outdated advice that often focuses on specific traditional professions based upon their own experiences, a genuine offer for careers IAG must be created.

"It seems to me that teachers only see the A level routes as the way forward. That's their experience so that's what they know."

Student, Oldham College

The independence of qualified careers staff is a big benefit to ensuring that students get the right advice. Schools and colleges must be supported to allocate appropriate funding to commission qualified and registered careers guidance specialists to deliver this service in a strategic and student centred way. Careers professionals recognise that some students will need more support in making choices about their next steps rather than relying on one size fits all online services and psychometric testing. Providers should work with professional bodies such as the CDI⁶ to make sure the careers IAG being delivered in their institution is of high quality and quality assured.

Continuing Guidance

Both young and older people alike are much more likely to change job or career path several times over their working life. For this reason it is vital we move towards careers provision that looks at both universal skills and routes and options for employment.

employment, not just the needs of the here and now. It should also help students to understand the expectations employers have of them as they complete their courses and help the student assess the type of professional and learning environments that work for them.

The Skills Plan presents very clear vocational routes through education, where a young person is expected to make choices about the area of work they would wish to go into from a young age. It is important that careers education is delivered through the national curriculum throughout primary and secondary education. Doing so ensures pupils are exposed to, and have an understanding of, different types of work and industries, and as importantly the types of things that interest them, allowing them to make informed decisions about their future progression.

"The pre-work is missing in the schools sector. CIAG work has to be done before entry into FE."

Jenny Bates, Oldham College

As further education provision expands, impartial careers IAG must be a central component of any new application process for technical education courses. Clear and concise IAG must be in place before learners apply for courses and during the process of application. In addition, many students in higher education find the process of clearing to be chaotic and stressful; it does not often lead to HE students making informed choices. Students in FE have reservations about applying a similar clearing style model to FE courses. Firstly it will not help them make informed choices and secondly, the availability of local provision plays a large factor in what courses or apprenticeships students are able to access.

High quality, professionally delivered careers information advice and guidance should be play an integral factor in high quality vocational education. It should address the student's journey through learning and into future

What our student and sector experts say

"I used to do accounting and didn't really like it. I started just expressing it wasn't really for me, then I went to a mentor and she immediately offered me lots of options in a non-judgemental way. It was really good and I'm really happy with the new course."

Student, Oldham College

"[Careers advice]... was terrible. No help at all at school. The general rule was this – if you were getting above C grades then you were pushed to go to Oldham 6th form rather than the college."

Student, Oldham College

"In year 10 I got advice from my mum's partner and he put me onto engineering. School doesn't help enough with guidance. There was a meeting and I just got asked what I wanted to do... There were days when people came into work to talk about their work, but there's no guidance."

Student, City of Liverpool College

"I think there needs to be a change in how BTECs are viewed. My secondary school tried to tell me a BTEC in drama wasn't a good route. But I knew that was the route for me. I only wanted to study drama."

Student, Dudley College

"In school 80 per cent went to university. My school didn't look into apprenticeships. I got one first interview. But at school I was given no experience or information about apprenticeships."

Apprentice, ASSET Training

"When a student comes to the door, it's vital we give them CIAG and the vital materials they need."

Mark Dawe, AELP

Should FE do more than just train?

It is no secret that the civic and social education that accompanies a traditional higher education degree studied in a university plays as much a role in educating the student as the degree itself. Volunteering, campaigning, getting involved in student representation and democracy, running a society and engaging in programmes of cultural and critical informal education all develop an individual's social and cultural capital. These experiences not only play a role in the social mobility and employability of an individual, but also support them to be active citizens, participating and shaping the world around them.

This offer has long been an expectation for higher education students, but it is time there was also an offer in place for those studying in further education to develop their civic skills as part of their educational experience.

"Life is a great eye opener. Every student should be made politically aware, and maybe enough of them will be engaged enough to fight the corner for FE."

Student, Morley College

If students want to see policies that affect them being designed, debated and implemented then it is imperative they participate at the ballot box and continue to hold elected representatives accountable. However, voting amongst young adults has been in decline since 1992⁷ with a number of reasons being cited across the board including lack of information about the electoral process.

Citizenship Education

Citizenship education plays a critical role in supporting students and young people to engage with and influence issues they care about. Students need to know how communities and societies work and what their role is within them. The main aims of citizenship education in schools is to promote social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy. The Russell Commission⁸ drew particular focus on promoting "active citizenship" through volunteering and community engagement which, for many young people, appeals as a more effective way of engaging in civic life than more traditional democratic activity.

"They don't teach us anything like that [civic education & politics] in school. You get a bit of it here but depends on what course you're on."

Student, Oldham College

Many students feel that the current citizenship education offer is inadequate, not providing them with a better understanding of society and politics due to its focus on "essential knowledge" rather than critical concepts and skills.

Votes at 16

"I know 16 year olds who are paying tax, so why don't we get a vote? At 16 we have access to information. A lot of things affect young people so we should have a say. Votes at 16 should be combined with political education."

Student, City of Liverpool College

Teaching students and young people to understand and engage in democracy will only go so far in increasing youth engagement at the ballot box. Lowering the voting age to 16 in Scotland has already driven youth engagement. During the Independence Referendum, where 16 and 17 year olds were given the right to vote, 75 per cent of the eligible group voted.⁹ Clearly, when young people are empowered to engage and participate in our democratic systems, they do.

At its most basic level, lowering the voting age would mean that an extra 1.5 million young people who should have the right to vote, would. This is important because the makeup of the British electorate is slowly skewing towards older voters. As the country continues to age, it's even more important that younger voters' opinions are considered, and that young people get a legitimate say in their futures.

Centering Student Voice

We know that students have lots to say when it comes to shaping and feeding back on their educational experience at college and whilst on apprenticeships. To many providers, that information is invaluable to support them to make their provision more responsive and more accessible to the needs of their students.

It's not just at provider level where the student voice has helped create change. During the Government's recent Area Review process for colleges, hundreds of student leaders fed their views on quality education, access, success and learner voice into the Department for Education to support them to enable colleges to make decisions with student interests at their heart. Students clearly offer valuable insight into policy making and accountability at a national level and more should be done to enable this.

Students unions, class representative structures and student councils not only play huge role in shaping and influencing decisions made by their providers, but also provide many students with

their first active experience of citizenship and democracy. Some colleges employ Learner Voice practitioners in a range of roles to professionally facilitate student voice and representation throughout the college. These professional roles were supported by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service¹⁰, with support from NUS, until the organisation was wrapped up in 2013. As college budgets have become tighter, we have seen a decline in the amount of staff providing professional support to learner voice in providers. However, students recognise that to run effective and impactful representative structures that fundamentally put the views of students at the heart of the provider, from the classroom right up to the governing board, those structures must be professionally supported.

"The class reps system is very consultative, we're involved in policy debate and the student input is taken seriously."

Student, Morley College

As more decision making is devolved to regions and cities for education and skills, as well as key issues that affect students such as transport, it is imperative that students are able to articulate their collective voice at a local level, allowing them to shape services and provision around them.

What our student and sector experts say:

"The [EU] referendum was so frustrating because it was hard to engage with."

Student, Dudley College

"We capture learners' voices in a variety of ways. Class reps, through NUS, clubs and student staff. From a college aspect they use focus groups and surveys. The SU works with staff to make changes on your behalf."

SU President, Dudley College

"Get students together from different backgrounds and help them understand each other. From this we can adapt the college to suit different people, using diverse thoughts and mind sets."

Student, Dudley College

"Government are busy setting up employer led panels, there aren't proposals for panels of students, so it's really important to get the views of students in. At the end of the day, success depends on the needs of students."

Ian Ashman, AoC

"When you change things in FE you don't have to worry about offending important people, the

sector has low media interest. The thing I'd add is poor policy making. Students should be involved in this. The quality of policy is a really big thing for me. SUs have a really important role in this too."

Shane Chowen, Learning & Work Institute

Recommendations

What makes high quality further education?

Quality teaching and learning

- Teachers should have dual experience and qualifications in both teaching and the subject area they are delivering. Colleges should be supported to deliver effective continued professional development for teaching staff.
- Success measures for students (and providers) shouldn't just rely on grade metrics, but look at the development of the student in the round, taking into account their growth and development.
- Class sizes should be capped at a manageable rate with additional support staff available for students who need it.
- Students should have access to industry recognised and ready equipment and learning resources should be high quality and accessible.
- A more applied level 2 qualification for English and Maths should be developed and promoted to support students who do not excel at GCSE English and Maths obtain a qualification that gives them a grounding in these core subjects.

Work Experience

- Government should ensure that colleges have adequate funding and support to deliver high quality work placements which complement and build on the learning they do in the classroom.
- The Government should provide students with financial support for travel and subsistence to ensure that cost is not a barrier to accessing a good quality, subject appropriate work placement.
- Colleges should invest more time and resource into facilitating reflection and evaluation of work experience.
- Employers should be made aware of the key aspects of a student's course and how the placement fits in with the wider learning of the student.
- Both colleges and employers should ensure that students are involved in the decisions about their work experience.

Basic Skills and the Transition Year

- A much broader definition of Basic Skills other than English, Maths and digital is needed to encompass the breadth of skills students want to acquire to support their progression onto further study, independent living and to play an active part in civic society.
- A number of key features should be included in the design and delivery of the Transition year. These included:
 - provision for resits
 - an opportunity to gain other qualifications
 - work experience
 - community or voluntary work
 - quality, impartial careers information, advice and guidance

that is provided by a professional careers advisor

- Basic Skills training – employability, English, Maths, digital, civic and social education
 - Sex and relationship education
 - Political education
 - Mental health support and confidence and capacity building
- The ambitions of the transition year speak directly to the youth work sector and profession. A key component of ensuring the year works for students is for the Government to encourage and support youth services to play a core role in the delivery of the year.

Apprenticeship specific

- Common standards should be developed for procedures in recruiting, appointing, supporting and reviewing apprenticeships. Every training provider/college should follow consistent procedures and standards for apprenticeships.
- There is access to valued qualifications where appropriate. Apprenticeships should include and lead to clear, appropriate and nationally recognised qualifications facilitated and taught by properly qualified teachers and instructors.
- Good communication and relationships should exist between employer and training provider with mandatory college visits. Support and mentoring from both provider and employers should be a core component of an apprentices learning.
- Apprentices should have a proper chance to engage fully in the life of the institution from which they receive their off the job training – to include welfare support, financial support, and study support.

- Government should enforce that the proposed 20% off the job training required for apprentices should be included as part of their working week and therefore waged, not seen as an add on for apprentices to do in their spare time.

Why lifelong learning matters

In relation to the Post-16 Skills Plan and Industrial Strategy

- The Department for Education assess and report on how adults would be able to access the “Bridging Provision” designed to support students move between academic and technical provision from level 3.
- The Government should review the current maintenance loans proposals to ensure that financial support is available at higher level technical for all courses and qualifications delivered across the sector, not just at Institutes of Technology or National Colleges.
- An independent review is commissioned to address barriers faced by adult learners in response to the Post 16 Skills Plan and Industrial Strategy that takes into account financial security faced by the learner, progression through education and in the workplace and additional structural barriers that make accessing education difficult, such as childcare.

Lifelong learning

- Government to create a joint minister for lifelong learning between the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for

Education. ¹¹

- A portion of the Government's recent budget announcement of £40 million for 'lifelong learning pilots' should explore and support employers wanting to deliver a 'pay it forward' model of learning and development for their employees which reframes L&D as a positive investment that benefits the economy and workforce as a whole, not just the employer.
- Where the Adult Skills Budget will be devolved in 2019, local areas in charge of delivery should build strategies that address both informal adult education and lifelong learning and skills and training that address social, civic and health issues, not just skills for the workplace. Where possible, these strategies should link to wider national strategies which aim to enhance lifelong learning.
- As part of the Government's announcement of 'return to work support', government should work with employers, learning providers and professional HR bodies, such as CIPD and the Institute of Recruiters (IOR), to signpost available funding and support. This needs to be visible both within and outside of learning institutions in places that older people would see them such as libraries, GP surgeries and Citizens' Advice Bureau. ¹²
- A voucher style system should be created for older adults from low socio-economic backgrounds to support them with the associated costs of re-entering education and training.

ESOL

- Government reverses recent cuts and delivers a sustainable public funding settlement for ESOL provision.

- Responsibility for developing English language skills and ESOL provision is given to a single government department.
- A statutory right to ESOL if required, independent of immigration or employment status.

Making careers information, advice and guidance work for all

- The Careers Strategy must deliver a funded universal all ages all stages careers service which focuses on delivering tailored careers IAG at key intervention points during a person education and working life.
- There should be substantive careers education delivered through the National Curriculum which addresses a wide range of skills, not just careers.
- Qualified careers professionals should deliver front line, face-to-face careers information, advice and guidance; it should not be seen as an add-on role for teaching and support staff within providers. Providers should seek support from professional sector bodies (such as the CDI) to ensure their careers provision is of high quality.
- Any new application service for vocational courses must not include a cost of students

to apply and should not include a clearing process for courses.

Should FE do more than just train?

Citizenship Education

- The Government should improve and expand the provision of Citizenship Education at Key Stages 3 & 4. In addition Citizenship Education should be included in the definition of 'Basic Skills' taught in colleges across all levels and included as a core component of the Skills Plan's Transition Year.

Democratic Engagement

- The Government should lower the voting age to include 16 and 17 year olds in the franchise, allowing them to vote across the UK in regional and national elections and referendums.
- Providers should offer students the option to register to vote when they enrol on a course or apprenticeship.
- Taking part in students' union democratic activity such as becoming a course representative, being on a committee or running campaigns and events through the institutions SU's should be included as 'social action' as part of DfE's new guidance for 16-19 Study Programmes.

Student Voice

- Student and Apprentice panels should be created to sit alongside employer panels to co-lead on the design of standards and assessment plans for the 15 proposed new routes through technical education.
- The board of the Institute for Apprenticeships should create a reserved place for a representative of college-based learners and apprentices This should be done in conjunction with the establishment of "learner panels" for those who are undertaking classroom based learning, that would sit alongside the already established "apprenticeship panels".
- Apprentices should be entitled to collective and democratic representation with both their employer and training provider.
- Government should ensure that providers strategic student voice plans, outlining how the education and services at the provider are developed in partnership with students, ensuring it meets their needs.
- Providers have learner led, professionally supported students' union infrastructure in place to ensure student voice is heard across the institution.
- Mechanisms for student representatives to communicate with local decision makers need to be in place as the devolution of skills policy and funding to local authorities increases.

Conclusion

Filling in the gaps

Students not only care about their education, they provide invaluable insights into policy and practice – if they are supported correctly. The Post 16 Skills Plan, as a vehicle for driving ‘sustained and skilled employment’¹³ must have the needs of students at the very heart of it.

Although the Skills Plan is welcomed by students as a much needed focus on further education, the reforms only address technical education and the employment market as opposed to the broad spectrum of education, support and empowerment further education delivers across communities. Students from adult education provider Morley College and SEND provider Derwen College raised issues during our period of consultation that are not addressed by the Skills Plan, but are essential to the retention and success of students in specialist provision.

For many, further education isn’t just about employment, but about gaining skills and experiences to navigate their lives, engage in their communities and expand their options. For many pre-entry level students in specialist colleges, the routes into employment featured in the Skills Plan are just not a viable option unless they are coupled with the dedicated and professional student centred support. Add to this the complexity of how specialist college places are funded and we begin to alienate students who traditionally have always had a home in further education.

FE in the world

What has also been apparent as we have spoken with students across the sector is just how much they value teaching and support staff within colleges. Their professionalism, guidance and support for many students under constant pressure and policy change has, not only supported them

to achieve on their courses, but to navigate the complexities of life.

Studying further education in the UK must be as exciting and prestigious as our most advanced European counterparts, but this can only happen if we commit to developing citizens, not just workers – where students are supported to play constructive roles in both their education and in society.

The Skills Plan did not go far enough to unlock the ambitions of students currently learning in the sector, whether they are an 18 year old BTEC student or a 55 year old learning coding in their spare time. For further education to be truly understood, championed and its potential unlocked, we need to start talking about not only the role it plays for the individual, but how it cuts across society as a whole.

Endnotes

- ¹ NUS, Practice Made Perfect, 2017
- ² Learning and Work Institute (NIACE), Mid Life Career Review Final Report 2015
- ³ <http://www.policyconnect.org.uk/sc/>
- ⁴ NUS & OCR, Informing the Reforms, 2014
- ⁵ AoC, Careers Guidance: Guaranteed, 2015
- ⁶ <http://www.the CDI.net/Home>
- ⁷ Ipsos MORI, British Election Study
- ⁸ The Russell Commission, A National Framework for Youth Action and Engagement, 2005
- ⁹ Electoral Commission, Scottish Independence Referendum Research – Post-polling day opinion research report, 2014
- ¹⁰ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130802100621/http://www.lsis.org.uk/>
- ¹¹ Skills Commission, A Spotlight on...Lifelong Learning for an Aging Workforce, 2017
- ¹² Skills Commission, A Spotlight on...Lifelong Learning for an Aging Workforce, 2017
- ¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-skills-plan-and-independent-report-on-technical-education>

**For further information, contact
Policy@NUS.org.uk**

National Union of Students
Macadam House
275 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8QB
t. 0845 5210 262
w. www.nus.org.uk
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