

Labour Party Conference 2021 - No young person left behind: Reform, resilience and recovery in post-16 education

Organisation: Nacro and NFER

27 September 2021

Panel :

- Campbell Robb, chief executive, Nacro
- Carole Willis, chief executive, NFER
- Anne Longfield, founder of Commission on Young Lives and former children's commissioner
- Dame Diana Johnson MP (Kingston upon Hull North), co-chair of the APPG for Left Behind Neighbourhoods
- Nancy Ellis, policy lead, National Education Union

Overview

The panel discussed a range of topics including the impact of the pandemic, the importance of an integrated education system, and the relationship between background and skills shortages.

Summary

Anne Longfield, founder of Commission on Young Lives and former children's commissioner, opened the discussion by explaining that too many young people were being held back from achieving their potential and while this was the case prior to the pandemic, issues had now been exacerbated. Young people had borne the brunt of many of the impacts of the pandemic, she continued.

The education system was already failing to equip young people with the skills they needed – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, Longfield added. Explaining that this was a systemic problem, she told the room that almost one in five young people hadn't achieved five good GCSEs by the time they reached the age of 16, and for pupils on free school meals, that figure was one in three.

Campbell Robb, chief executive, Nacro, explained that Nacro educated over 3,000 young people each year, the majority of whom had faced major disadvantage and had dropped out of mainstream education. The issues facing young people over the past few years had now become more "hardened" and "baked in". Talking about low levels of attainment at age 16, he noted that funding then dropped off, leaving those young people without support.

He argued that the pupil premium plus should be continued into 16-19 to provide extra, wraparound support for young people who might have normally dropped off, which is what Nacro were currently campaigning for. "We must not forget about those 16- to 19-year-olds, and we must not rob Peter to pay Paul," he added.

Dame Diana Johnson, co-chair of the APPG for Left Behind Neighbourhoods, spoke about the work of the APPG, explaining there were 225 wards in the UK fit with this description – poor health outcomes, low car ownership levels, low educational attainment, and an increased digital divide, were some of the indicators for such an area. Their focus was to build social infrastructure and invest in these neighbourhoods in order to build communities and "grow it from the bottom up".

Dame Diana clarified that, when it came to education and skills, the APPG had held evidence sessions in which they found that there needed to be a concerted effort to generate opportunities for young people in these neighbourhoods. She noted there were limited opportunities for young people to have "tasters" of the workplace

through work experience, so they wanted to see local key businesses working closely with schools and colleges as early as possible.

She stressed that any investment couldn't be short-term, which was why they were pressing the Government to introduce 'community wealth funds' from dormant assets, targeted at the most disadvantaged communities. They were also advocating for residents, local authorities, LEPs and education providers to co-design neighbourhood-level employment and improvement plans.

Carole Willis, chief executive, NFER, reinforced the need to focus on educational recovery, particularly as 16- to 19-year-olds had the least time of any cohort in which to recover. NFER research showed that headteachers are most concerned with transition year groups, and the teacher-assessed grades would not reflect anything they'd missed. She stressed that the wrong response would be to take make young people repeat the year, but that other solutions could come in the form of a pupil premium or extension of 16 to 19 tuition funds.

On apprenticeships, Willis said that young people undertaking them were positive about their experiences and there was evidence to show their positive contribution overall. The decline in apprenticeship starts was already underway prior to the pandemic, she continued, but the pandemic had exacerbated this. Among many reform recommendations, they had suggested that the skill system needed to be more adaptable to changes in needs and demand. She raised some concern around focusing too much on 'local', as it could restrict aspirations and might miss future skills needs.

Nancy Ellis, policy lead, National Education Union, argued that one of the biggest pressures was that of a "fractured" education system, which made navigating educational pathways difficult. She suggested there should be a full integrated education and skills system, with full input from schools. A priority for NEU at the moment was qualifications, and she argued there was a "very narrow diet" at present, which needed to be addressed. This would help to answer the issue of "parity of esteem", she added.

When young people left education and enter the workforce, employers were having to "undo the damage" done by a system that didn't empower young people, teach them coping strategies, and encourage them to take risks. This work couldn't begin at 16, said Ellis, it had to start early on in children's educational pathway.

Q&A

A member of the audience spoke of their poor experience in the English education system as a SEND student and the trauma it had left them with – to the point where they wouldn't allow their child to enter the system.

Carole Willis spoke of research carried out during the pandemic around the experiences of children and young people with SEND, which had found that the same issues faced by all students were increased ten-fold for those pupils with SEND. Campbell Robb noted that her experience was shared by many others, which was indicative of a systemic problem, and that it would need all stakeholders within the mainstream system to put more in.

Nancy Ellis raised issues with the role of educators and teacher training, which she felt was headed in the wrong direction. Dame Diana Johnson spoke of the mantra under the New Labour Government of 'every child matters', which she said she felt had been lost.

Another audience member brought up wider issues surrounding children and young people that had been exacerbated during the pandemic – they asked the panel what they felt the main issues were in areas outside of the education system, but which had a knock-on impact for educational achievement.

A member of the audience spoke of the Government's plans for BTECs, which he felt were taking the system in the wrong direction. While he agreed there should be a focus on 16- to 19-year-olds, he also argued that the 19 to 24 age group needed a greater focus.

Another member of the audience asked the panel for the view on funding and prioritising holistic services for children and young people.

Carole Willis argued that mental health support teams within schools should be extended further, particularly in light of the effects of the pandemic. On BTECs, she warned that abolishing existing qualifications when T Levels remained unproven in the labour market was a dangerous move.

Nancy Ellis added to this by explaining that the NEU was part of a campaigning coalition that was calling for students to have choice and for BTECs not to be scrapped. On queries about holistic and integrated support, she said that online learning had opened the eyes of teachers and the wider sector to what children's home lives were like.

Campbell Robb stated that, if he had to pick a priority at the moment, he would focus on "comprehensive, wraparound mental health support". He spoke of the digital divide and its negative consequences on children's learning and future opportunities. He also argued that it was important to "meet young people where they are" in terms of the level of qualification – directing a young person toward a T Level, at Level 3, might deter them if they were operating at Level 2.

Dame Diana Johnson said she looked slightly "enviously" at metro mayors areas and spoke of the benefits of being able to focus funding and provision locally that combined authorities provided.

The president of the NUS, in the audience, asked whether it was reform that was needed or a wholesale overhaul. She also asked where the voices of young people and students were in these conversations. She asked the panel for their views on decolonizing the curriculum.

Nancy Ellis said it was vital for students to be engaged and involved in the debate around policy, curriculum and pedagogy. Campbell Robb reflected on the work of Nacro, going into schools and engaging with young people and providing students with a voice within the system