

Investing in FE: The key to a healthier, more prosperous society?

3 October 2021, 17:00

Panelists:

- Natalie Perera, chief executive, Education Policy Institute
- David Hughes, chief executive, Association of Colleges
- Jo Bibby, director of health, Health Foundation
- Tom Hunt, MP for Ipswich
- Donna McLaughlin, director of social value, Northern Care Alliance NHS Group
- Bradley Littlewood, youth representative

Overview

The panellists debated the interrelation between education and health inequalities, including its role in the levelling-up agenda. There was agreement that public health should be included in discussions on lifelong learning and future skills funding, especially after the pandemic. There was also debate on the importance of providing multiple options for further education and the role of employers.

Interrelation between education and health

Natalie Perera, chief executive of the Education Policy Institute, introduced the event on the link between poor quality employment and negative health outcomes, which she said had worsened over time. She said this debate was directly linked to the levelling up agenda.

Jo Bibby, director of health at the Health Foundation, began by noting that while the average life expectancy in the UK was 81 years, this varied based on circumstances. She said that while someone in the richest 10 percent had a life expectancy of 84 years, as high as the average person in Japan, someone living in the lowest 10 percent of deprivation had a much lower life expectancy, the same as someone from Antigua and Barbuda.

She added that good health was also important for participating in the jobs market and economy. She said that 47 percent of people with a limiting condition were in work, compared to 81 percent of those without. She said this demonstrated the interrelation of health and work, and emphasised the importance of investing in people's health as well as the economy.

Bibby said it was key to give people the best possible life chances, noting that further education and apprenticeships gave people purpose and an income. She said the number of young people in work or training varied greatly across the country, adding there was a need for greater investment in further education and apprenticeships to improve life chances right across the country.

Levelling-up wherever deprivation occurs

Tom Hunt, MP for Ipswich, said that we could not talk about investing in further education without talking about the education system as a whole. He said the focus over recent years had been on getting A-Levels and going to university, with inadequate emphasis on apprenticeships or alternative pathways. He said there were significant differences in opportunities between areas, social groups and ethnicities.

Hunt noted that the Government had skills improvement panels in place that helped to shape the curriculum at FE level, noting that a pilot scheme had just been launched. He said this could serve as a prime example of levelling up being not just about the north and midlands but wherever deprivation occurred.

He said our approach needed to be uniform and should focus partly on devolution and funding, noting that strategies would need to differ based on local needs and opportunities.

Opportunities and investing in people

David Hughes, chief executive of the Association of Colleges, said there was snobbery in the higher education system and noted that vocational skills were just as important. He said we needed to think deeply about how health inequalities and education worked together.

On the labour market, he said the bounce-back from the pandemic had been remarkable but also exposed weaknesses, such as the shortage of HGV drivers and skills gaps in the economy. He said this required both a local and national approach, which should be joined up while meeting local needs. He said approaches were currently too disjointed.

He added the importance of mental health support in schools and colleges and said the Treasury should better understand the value of long-term investments in people. He said it was not enough to invest in town centres alone, but instead we should also invest in the people who could build the economy by investing in their skills.

Bradley Littlewood, youth representative, said he was there to represent those without a voice. He said he had witnessed the impact of mental health on young people, commenting that many people were slaves to mental health challenges, and it was our moral duty to free them.

Economic and social power of employers

Donna McLaughlin, director of social value at the Northern Care Alliance NHS Group, said that employers should challenge themselves to think about their economic and social power. She said the last 18 months had amplified challenges that we already knew existed, such as structural inequalities in health. She said employers should ask themselves what powers they had and how they could be deployed differently.

Fundamental to this was relationships with further education colleges, she said, noting **the importance of welcoming further education students in the same way as those from university**. She said a third of NHS jobs could be supported via FE training.

Q&A

An audience member asked about FE, vocational training and **if the Government needed to rethink its strategy that required nurses, police officers and other professions to have a degree.**

Hunt agreed that it should not be a requirement for either of those professions to require a degree and said we would need to think carefully about the signals that it sent, especially if such requirements inhibited our ability to attract the right people for those jobs.

Littlewood said that **many young people were pressured into university by their parents**, especially at a time when role models such as police officers and nurses were required to have a degree. He suggested **that employers should support the costs of such education, given that they required applicants to hold degrees and doing so inflicted considerable costs and debts on students.**

Bibby said **there were some nursing roles where it was entirely appropriate for someone to have a degree and others where it was not, which made it important not to lump all professions into one group. She said it was also important to look at alternative ways of attaining degrees** and said information and support for young people in schools on alternative pathways was inadequate.

Hughes said that we were unique in this country with **our obsession with higher education, which he said was an incredibly expensive and elitist approach.** He said that while people got a lot out of university, we required a much more diverse range of options including the ability to learn in work or part time.

McLaughlin raised schemes that enabled people to transition into work later on in their career, including those who had cared for a critically ill child that had developed caring skills and could pursue work in the NHS.

Hunt noted that **many of those who achieved academic success at universities often left their area and did not return, meaning that investing in higher education did not always help to improve an area.** He said people should not feel they have to escape their area to achieve and by keeping talent locally we would help to collectively raise an area up.