

Conservative Conference 2021: Towards recovery: the role of lifelong learning in addressing the skills gap

04 October 2021, 10:00

Panellists:

- Natalie Perera, chief executive, Education Policy Institute (chair)
- Tom Hunter MP (Ipswich), member of Education Committee
- David Hughes, chief executive, Association of Colleges
- Andy Start, Capita

Overview

The panel discussed the Government's current plans for introducing lifelong learning, as well as other elements of the skills system, including the Skills Bill, careers guidance, technical education and adult learning. They also spoke about the current and future labour market, and what the UK needed to do to ensure growth, jobs and productivity.

Lifelong Skills

Natalie Perera opened the session by introducing panellists and explained the important role of lifelong learning in the overall levelling-up agenda.

Andy Start said there was a significant challenge in the UK, and a shared one, in addressing the skills gap, particularly to tackle productivity. He warned that while AI and robotics could help improve national productivity, it would also mean a major shift in how we do work and the skills that were needed.

He welcomed the Lifetime Skills Guarantee and other Government measures, but also stressed the need to have collaboration between Government, educators and employers. Speaking from his own experience at Capita, he said it was essential for employees to be adaptable and for companies to be ready to retrain and upskill those who worked for them.

At Capita, he continued, they were seeing an increase in apprenticeship starts, they were engaging in the Kickstart scheme, and every employee had access to a suite of online training. Further to this, they were stepping up their engagement and contributions in the local community.

Increased attention

David Hughes expressed an optimism that **he hadn't seen this level of attention paid to further education at part conference ever – although he cautioned that the spending review would be the real indicator, adding "money talks"**. He also expressed positivity toward the Skills Bill and asked the audience to look at the College of the Future Commission report, which laid out a series of recommendations to improve the skills system.

He stressed that **higher education should continue to be supported and they weren't attacking the sector, but that it was important that FE was able to keep pace and be seen as equal.** This would require a mindset shift from parents and also from employers – particularly those who always asked for a degree on job advertisements.

Hughes warned **there was a risk that the post-16 skills agenda could become overly-focused on just getting people into jobs,** adding that there were many benefits to a rich skills diet, including for peoples' health.

Parity of esteem

Tom Hunt said the Education Committee was "a friend of FE" and that the FE White Paper was "very encouraging". He said **the education system so far had been one-dimensional and overly academic,** which had led to awareness of vocational and technical education being low. Therefore, he argued, **many young people had gone to university on the basis that a degree would lead to the career or employment they wanted, but this wasn't always the case.** He advocated for multiple pathways.

Speaking of parity of esteem, he said **problems occurred when an academic route wasn't suitable for some, but a technical route was seen as lesser.** He argued for a joined-up approach between providers, local authorities, national government and employers, as well as careers guidance starting earlier on in education pathways.

Reflecting on this own constituency, Hunt highlighted key areas of opportunities, such as BT's research hub and the freeport in Felixstowe. He added that the Towns Fund was allowing them to build a maritime college, to train up more boat builders for the area.

Hunt said **the focus of universities from now on should be to join up with FE colleges and business, to provide the skills needed for the local economy.** He also advocated for devolving adult education budgets to "as local a level as possible".

Q&A

Richard Griffiths, British Poultry Council, spoke about the rural workforce, which he said had been "trickling away", and asked how we increased mobility back to the rural economy.

Hunt said careers guidance was key, especially spelling out clearly why young people should be interested in these roles.

Hughes acknowledged who knew little of the poultry industry, but that overall employers were having to think more about how they attracted young people into their industry, and he argued partnerships with colleges were key to this.

A member of the audience **argued there should be greater funding for technical education at the pre-16 level. Hughes agreed, saying that it was "inconceivable" that the system stressed the academic route through its emphasis on GCSEs.**

Clare Fraser, City & Guilds, asked the panel to spell out what they saw as the 'lifelong' element of the Government's skills agenda, particularly for adult learners.

Andy Start said technical skills had been an issue throughout his entire career, adding that without continuing professional development, individuals' skills became out of date in a matter of years. It was important therefore to drive in lifelong learning as a fundamental mindset, so that people of all ages left a point in the education pathway knowing that they would need to retrain or upskill in the future.

He argued tax incentives would encourage this for employers, but that the UK needed to be more flexible with education delivery and attainment – particularly through blended learning and allowing more teachers to teach part-time.

Hughes said the Lifetime Skills Guarantee was excellent, but that it wasn't statutory, which was an issue. He also argued it took too narrow an approach, which prevented people from having to retrain more than once, or to train at Level 2. He said they would be pushing for changes in the Lords and hopefully in the Commons as the Skills Bill progressed.

Simon Parkinson, WEA chief executive, said that the AEB supported asylum-seekers, single mothers, middle-aged males needing to retrain, and asked the panel, particularly Tom Hunt, to work to do away with the stereotypes of adult education primarily being accessed by, for example, retired professionals wanting to learn Japanese – which he added were paid for directly, not out of AEB, and also brought health benefits to individuals.

Hughes agreed wholeheartedly. Hunt said, in the area he'd mentioned, AEB hadn't been focused or with a proper strategy and he reaffirmed his concern that taxpayer funding was being used to pay for adult education courses that weren't part of retraining or upskilling.