

Conservative Conference 2021: Build back higher: how the Government and universities can work together

Event hosted by: EPI & Sheffield Hallam University

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Panellists

- Natalie Perera, Chief Executive, Education Policy Institute (chair)
- Rachel Wolf, Founding Partner, Public First
- Larissa Kennedy, National President, NUS
- Professor Sir Chris Husbands, Vice Chancellor, Sheffield Hallam University
- Alun Francis, Principal and Chief Executive, Oldham College
- Lord Lucas, Editor in Chief, Good Schools Guide

Summary

This panel discussed how the government and universities could work together to tackle key issues facing the UK. The discussion focused on securing high academic standards for all, developing a coherent skills system, supporting lifelong learning and empowering universities to respond to national challenges, such as the levelling up agenda.

Opening remarks

Professor Sir Chris Husbands, Vice Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University, said that was no doubt that universities had had a relatively privileged decade in policy terms. Good things had flowed from this: wider participation; a stronger civic role and more important role in civic infrastructure; and important research.

He went on to say though that the policy agenda was changing, and important questions were being asked about the way in which the skills pipeline was working, routes to higher skills, as well as wider questions of funding. What was important was the place that institutions played in an advanced economy which would develop higher productivity and wider participation, the foundation of the Levelling Up agenda.

He said that universities, as higher education (HE) institutions, and further education (FE) institutions had a complicated structure, with universities receiving loans and FE institutions receiving grants. He called for a more coherent skills supply system for young people. He said there was a worry for those who didn't end up at university and there needed to be a way to collaborate to make sure all students could achieve their goals.

On access, he mentioned **the premise of the Robins Report which set out a principle that HE courses should be available to all who were qualified to do them**. Although this was an important principle, he said that there was a case for **minimum entry thresholds** which would help to generate a more balanced school system – on this, he noted the UK's lower GCSE attainment levels than many other countries. He said there would be no route to an advanced economy without a strong HE sector.

On funding, he said that the current funding model had many critics but it was built on a firm important principle - that **no one should be deterred from going to university due to cost**. A large proportion of student loan would be written off for this purpose. He said though that this would lead to unsustainable problems, and **that there needed to be a system to reduce the cost of unpaid student debt through policy changes without diminishing the sector's role in helping aspiration**. There needed to be a settlement with Government, he added.

Rachel Wolf, Founding Partner for Public First, spoke about levelling up and said the essence was Michael Gove's definition – "You should not have to leave the place you love, to live the life you want". She spoke of Sheffield University as one of the drivers of Civic University Commission and the importance of it.

Her main point was that there were underdeveloped local skills, and that we should be asking **what the role of universities was in levelling up**, if the concept was to create opportunity in the place people wanted to live.

She said to do this, first it had to be about local skills and opportunity. This came down to mid-level skills such as technical training which the UK was in short supply of due to low funding and few opportunities. She said that the challenge for the Government was putting in place a policy, while for the universities, it was **showing how this could be delivered at scale**.

Secondly, she said there needed to be a stronger link to devolution. Long term she argued that levelling up would not be possible without local power and local decision making. Universities needed to rethink the role that they would play in this. Lastly, she spoke of jobs. She said that technological advancement was creating opportunity, through initiatives such as net zero.

She concluded that ultimately, there needed to be thought about the extent to which universities were articulating and being funded to develop tangible technological innovations. Universities were intrinsic to places, but there was vastly more they could do. They could demonstrate how living somewhere didn't need to be a limit on opportunity and future.

Larissa Kennedy, President of NUS, said there was now a "dual opportunity" – students were facing disruption, the ramifications of which would be felt half a decade on, if not more, but on the flipside, education was going to be a lifeline to so many. **Although HE and FE had their distinct purposes, we needed to see a holistic journey**.

Kennedy said that the Government were being bold in this moment, to set an agenda for HE that was looking towards fully funded and accessible education. It would be vital that the Government and universities worked together on this.

She mentioned research at NUS which showed that 1 in 10 students needed to access foodbanks through the pandemic to survive. Rather than cutting costs or corners, this was the moment to invest, ensuring people had the local access to skills and opportunities for the country moving toward net zero.

She said that while lifelong education had been on the Government's agenda for some time, **HE needed to be more agile for modern students**. On access, it was important to harness the lessons from the pandemic, especially with regards to what was possible for disabled students. This needed to be fully funded, and there was a need not to see these issues as separate, but as a collective support package.

Kennedy concluded by saying there were huge opportunities in HE. Students wanted to see more from Government in terms of support and investment, to produce fully funded lifelong and truly accessible education.

Lord Lucas, Editor in Chief of the Good Schools Guide, said that it was important that universities did things that mattered to the Government, as then they would have leverage to do some things that the Government didn't necessarily want.

He said that the problem was, individually, **universities were too small and insignificant, but that collectively they moved at the pace of the slowest partner**. He called for ad-hoc coalitions of universities to do something jointly that they wanted to do through an organisation, such as the EPI.

He said that there were few opportunities available, and that with around 18 months for the Government to live, the Minister wouldn't be able to achieve much. He said instead the Government needed to find a policy and direction that was ready made, for example lifelong learning.

He also **called for the sector to let the Government know when they were wrong**, for example with their decision to abolish BTECs. He said **the decision on abolishing foundation years was a perfect place to start to express collective concern**.

Lord Lucas concluded by asking for the relationships between universities and schools to be changed, as universities had rigid admissions criteria which had a constraining effect on what schools could teach, but that this did not apply to overseas students.

Alun Francis, Principal and Chief Executive of Oldham College, said that there was a scepticism in some places about the contribution universities could make, and how much of their influence extended into local areas, especially into a town, except for providing a route of living out of the town. It was important there was more choice and different routes to high skills.

He spoke of partnerships between FE and HE. He was sceptical about numbers being the starting point as this would lead to unhealthy competition, which would be won by HE as they had more funding. There was a need to rephrase the question surrounding R&D and knowledge, and instead focus on what universities were contributing to solving the economic and social problems being faced. At the moment, technical education systems were trying to rescue poor levels of general education rather than become good at technical education.

Q&A

An audience member asked whether more should be done to incentivise higher-returns degrees, such as science and technology.

Professor Sir Chris said that they did their best to train the most high-level degrees at universities. However, sometimes what looked like an easy degree was actually very skilful and if you looked at labour market outcomes for non-vocational courses, History and English were very strong. **There was a need to incentivise science and technology, but he argued adults should be free to choose.**

Kennedy said that, as much as we would not have survived the pandemic without these science and tech courses, we also wouldn't have survived lockdown without the arts. There was a need to think beyond the idea of directly tying education to the labour market and remind ourselves that there was power in education in and of itself.

An audience member asked whether more universities should take the Open University (OU) as an example and become more flexible in courses and timings.

Professor Sir Chris said this was part of the **design flaw in 2012 of the student fee settlement which had caused a decline in part time mature students. Something needed to be done to counter this, as getting a loan was technically difficult but shouldn't be in policy terms.**

Kennedy said that more flexibility was needed which the OU gave incredible examples of. She agreed with Prof Sir Chris that there was a flaw in the student loan system, as fees themselves were a barrier to students, and that they should be scrapped altogether.

An audience member asked if an expansion of HE had come at a cost of technical skills.

Prof Sir Chris said that it was a question of incentives and an overarching culture surrounding technical education. He said that universities were flexible but were dependent on other parts of the ecosystem, and the main issue was how early we specialised, which he argued created the shortest degrees in Europe. He said there were big questions about what bits of the system we wanted to move about, and what the consequences of this would be.

Francis said that there needed to be a more varied higher skilled system. He said that disadvantage was complicated, but that **poverty didn't stop a child learning: it was the factors surrounding this**. He spoke about skills formation and how general education could become a "stepping stone" to technical education, for example for teachers and

lawyers, but that some of those professional occupations also required a degree for entry. Universities were great for general education, but training people for work needed to be sharper.

An audience member asked if we needed a larger HE sector or a broader one. Lord Lucas said that it was important to put a proper structure of pastoral care in place so that they could progress to where they wanted to get to. Universities should be self-critical and share information to prospective students about where a course could take them.

An audience member asked how best to get devolution to work with these institutions.

Wolf spoke of Mayors being successful as they could give a wide geographical view for long term planning and allowed local government and universities to work together.

She said that **universities responded to incentives that were placed on them, so there was a need to change the incentives**, of which apprenticeships were a start. She also spoke of the issues that 16 year-olds dropping maths and science were causing. She said that there were two major weaknesses that needed to be solved – the UK system let people opt out very early, and there was not enough skills training.