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**London  
South Bank**  
University

# A Year in Higher Education 2017

A selection of blog entries from LSBU



## Introduction

Without doubt, 2017 has been one of the most significant years for Higher Education policy since the 1990s.

We now have a new regulatory system with the likelihood of more detailed oversight and more competition. The negative impact of increased student fees on part-time student numbers has become increasingly apparent. There are changes to the research funding infrastructure including the creation of UK Research and Innovation, and changes to the Research Excellence Framework itself. The first Teaching Excellence Framework results saw an upset in traditional university rankings. In addition there has been wide ranging discussion of productivity and industrial strategy and the role of universities, against the backdrop of Brexit; and a renewed focus on student fees. There has also been much focus on apprenticeships and technical education with further changes coming forward in that area. At the same time the university has been promoting its own Family of Educational Providers concept.

In addition to submissions to formal government consultations, the University has published a number of blogs and articles on these and other subjects and many have been collected together on the following pages. You may be interested to read some of them.

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## Schools that work for everyone?

// **Huffington Post 10 February 2017**

This week the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) published its strategic guidance for universities when submitting their access arrangements for 2018-19. It sets out a key strategic priority for institutions to “increase [their] work to raise attainment in schools and colleges for those from disadvantaged and under-represented groups”.

This guidance responds to a Government consultation, “Schools that work for everyone” which was published last September, and which proposes a requirement for all universities to sponsor new or existing under-performing free schools. But while the OFFA guidance just strongly encourages the sponsorship of schools, the Government’s ‘Schools that work for everyone’ goes further, by compelling institutions to do so with the sanction that they face losing their ability to charge higher tuition fees (above £6000 pa). ‘Schools that work for everyone’, has understandably drawn a mixed response from the Higher Education sector. Although around 60 institutions, including London South Bank University, are already involved in sponsoring or running schools, potentially punitively forcing all universities, including those with no prior experience, to involve themselves in secondary education, is likely to be deeply counterproductive. Although a university’s support can be of great benefit to a school, financially coercing this relationship, without consideration for the best interest of the institutions, the local area or the individual learners, would seem at best to be naive.

LSBU currently sponsors an Academy and a University Technical College. Both have a distinct educational ethos and are supported or sponsored by leading local employers alongside ourselves. They are non-selective and reflect the diverse ethnic and socio-economic make-up of the area. LSBU is also engaged in a wide range of widening participation and outreach activities with dozens of local schools. Working with students from year six onwards, we go out to schools and colleges to deliver workshops and talks and to invite students to visit our campus to take part in extramural activities designed to encourage and support their university ambitions.

We have been successful in supporting secondary education; first, because the university has had strong links to the local area since its creation 125 years ago; and secondly because we continue to build on our decades of experience of widening participation, increasing the numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds attending university. Our ethos of supporting those who can benefit to further their education is deeply embedded. Even our students engage; mentoring in schools and providing local role models for those who may have no other links to the concept of degree apprenticeships or university. These mentoring opportunities also help support the development of our own students during their time with us and indeed, have led to a number of them seeking to join the teaching profession through postgraduate entry. Our approach therefore fits with our ethos and provides enhancement opportunities for our students as well as the school pupils.

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There are, of course, practical difficulties associated with opening or sponsoring new schools, including land acquisition, the need for an existing school’s (and ideally parents’) consent, and the potential lack of suitable existing schools to sponsor within a given area. The implications, regulatory, financial and spatial, of London’s 40+ universities each opening a new school every few years are significant and it’s questionable whether this would provide the outcomes the government is seeking!

However, perhaps the most problematic element of the proposal is the requirement for university-linked schools to secure and maintain Good or Outstanding Ofsted ratings. This is likely to pressure universities to end their involvement with any challenging schools they currently sponsor and the policy could even redirect the resources channelled towards wider outreach into a small number of schools with either existing high standards or a specialist focus.

In other words such a policy could have the perverse effect of coercing universities into narrowly directing funds towards several hundred well performing schools out of the 24,000 or so within the UK, redirecting support from those areas and schools that need it most. This problem is only likely to be exacerbated by the requirement to keep adding sponsored schools on a regular basis.

Universities already submit to a number of ranking and quality assurance systems including the QAA, the Research Excellence Framework and now the Teaching Excellence Framework. The risk of a university losing its ability to charge higher fees due to an Ofsted rating in a sponsored school is entirely disproportionate.

By comparison, the new Office for Fair Access guidance rightly recognises that “different institutions have different contexts and opportunities” and allows for institutions to justify different approaches where institutions “already have extensive school partnerships and work in place to support attainment in schools and colleges which might be affected by a shift in resource or focus to school sponsorship”. We have previously argued for and support this way forward:

- Instead of coercion we would suggest encouragement: Universities should be encouraged to exercise their own judgement on whether or not to sponsor schools. The government should celebrate the diversity of universities approach and recognise the need for it to fit with their individual missions.
- Office for Fair Access agreements should include reference to school sponsorship being a potential component in any access agreement with an expectation that it is specifically considered as an option, (part of a diverse range of widening participation and outreach provision) and which would be taken into account as part of that agreement.

That way more schools can benefit from willing not press-ganged university partners and there is greater likelihood universities will continue to work in under-represented areas and with schools that require support rather than with those that simply desire support.

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# A new south London "powerhouse" for apprenticeships

//National Centre for Universities and Business 14 February 2017

London South Bank University has long been a leader in employer sponsored study. Now, with funding from our local council, HEFCE and from LSBU we are creating a new "powerhouse" for higher and degree apprenticeships in the heart of south London with a £12M investment. Today, some 7000 LSBU students are sponsored by around 1000 employers. Most of these students study part time on degree and HNC and HND courses in key areas such as construction, engineering and health and social care. When the government announced it wanted to grow higher and degree apprenticeships we were keen to bring to bear our decades of experience of other forms of employer sponsored study.

LSBU already plays a key role in the educational

and business landscape of south London. We are part of a family of educational providers which includes an Academy school and University Technical College, both of which feature engineering-oriented education and are sponsored by leading companies such as Skanska. Through our wider enterprise activities we work with hundreds of local businesses, including over 600 which have received business growth support from LSBU staff and students (funded by the European Social Fund).

LSBU's local council, Southwark aims to grow substantially the number of apprentices in the borough and we have agreed to work together to create a gateway into apprenticeships. LSBU's new Institute for Professional and Technical Education (IPTE) will provide that gateway.

It will smooth the way into part time education for those in work, initially for qualification levels 3-6; and eventually spanning all levels by offering apprenticeships through the wider LSBU group and beyond. For example, with Degree Apprenticeship Development Funding from HEFCE we are working with FE College partners to develop a series of apprenticeships to meet the needs of the automotive industry and its supply chain.

The IPTE's hub will be our historic Passmore building which will re-open in 2018. Initially, the focus will be on STEM (primarily construction and engineering) and health-related careers, but the aim is to broaden to other professional areas where there are significant local career opportunities, >>

for example in hospitality and management. The institute will provide:

- A gateway for learners on higher and degree apprenticeships and other employer supported programmes
- A one stop shop for employers seeking to get involved in sponsored study
- Careers advice and guidance for local people
- Teaching facilities to supplement access to university technical facilities
- Personal and academic support for learners

LSBU has nearly 200 students on higher and degree apprenticeships in construction and related subjects. We are now awaiting approval of further construction, engineering, health and business

management higher and degree apprenticeship standards which will fulfil the requirements of many of our employer partners. With these and other programmes we hope to grow our annual intake of higher and degree apprentices by over five-fold in the next few years.

LSBU committed to higher and degree apprenticeships just over a year ago. We have since made huge strides in terms of developing the courses and infrastructure and the employer relationships needed to make that commitment a reality. There's much to do; but, as the UK's Entrepreneurial University of the Year, we are bringing all our creativity and energy to making a success of providing the higher and degree apprenticeships that our learners, businesses and the UK need.

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## Institutes of Technology and the family of education providers

//Universities UK 8 March 2017

One of the government's key recommendations in its new Industrial Strategy is the creation, with £170 million of capital funding, of new Institutes of Technology. The aim is to increase the provision of higher-level technical education, an area where we are currently placed 16th out of 20 OECD countries.

Over the last 60 years policy makers have created Colleges of Advanced Technology, Polytechnics, Centres of Vocational Excellence, National Skills Academies and National Colleges. And from these we have learnt one thing – that new buildings are not the solution to our professional and technical skills problems.

Instead we should be looking towards the institutions that already exist – our 150+ universities and 200+ further education colleges, as well as schools, local employers, LEPs and local authorities. Rather than creating from scratch, we need to see how they can come together to create local solutions to local technical education needs. This will not necessarily speak to all institutions, but to those with a similar ethos which feel they can deliver more together than the sum of

their parts. Using existing infrastructure will make the promised £170 million capital funding go much further. While this funding is unlikely to be sufficient to create new institutions across the country or even regional institutions with a particular industry focus, it is enough to facilitate some local solutions which could then form the basis of national ones.

The main failing of technical education, which has been highlighted time and again, including in Lord Sainsbury's Review, and the House of Lords Overlooked and Left Behind report, is the lack of clear pathways for progression. The academic route for learners – GCSE to A-Level to university – is clear. However, professional and technical skills routes are beset by disconnection, especially at Levels 3 to 5. We need schools, universities and colleges to work more closely together to provide, in further education, the same clear pathways found around higher education.

At London South Bank University we are already putting these ideas into practice by creating a '>>

Family of Educational Providers'. This is a cluster of specialist like-minded but distinct institutions within a formal group structure. The aim is to provide pathways through secondary, further and higher education and lifelong learning. The LSBU family currently includes a multi-academy trust: South Bank Academies, containing a University Technical College and an Engineering Academy. We are also progressing talks to bring in a local further education college. In September we will be opening an Institute for Professional and Technical Education which will provide a Level 3 gateway to the Level 4–6 higher and degree apprenticeships and other technical qualifications being delivered by the university as well as providing a 'one-stop-shop' for local employers.

This approach will treat learners as individuals in a framework with both horizontal and vertical links. This will enable them to undertake the learning they need when they need it, not just at prescribed moments on an educational obstacle course based on institutional, qualification and funding systems. Students should have

the flexibility to choose the level, style and aim of learning that best suits them when they need it – able to transfer comfortably between technical, vocational or more academic pathways.

I'm pleased that the Department for Education has already indicated that the funding could potentially be used to fund these sorts of collaborations. The next step will be the creation of funding mechanisms and systems of quality and governance which allow these structures to operate effectively. If this can be achieved we can bring technical, professional and academic education together, and at last begin to put them on an equal footing.

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# Technical education would not need whole-sale reform if universities built more bridges

//Times Higher Education 16 March 2017

One silver lining to Brexit is the UK government's recognition that if the country is to thrive outside the European Union, it needs to address the years of neglect suffered by technical education.

In last week's Budget, the government responded to this challenge by announcing what prime minister Theresa May called "the biggest overhaul of post-16 education in 70 years", including a £500 million investment to create new technically focused "T levels" as an alternative to traditional A levels.

The evolving nature of the modern economy means that employers are demanding more highly educated candidates than ever before. According to the Office for National Statistics, UK productivity is stagnant, growing just 0.4 per cent in the last

reported quarter, which is lower than prior to the 2008-09 downturn. In this context, I agree that we need to review our applied and technical education in order to better prepare for the workplace those failed by the current academically focused education system.

But the government's wholesale redesign of technical education – which also includes pre-existing commitments on apprenticeships – is not necessarily the best solution. Schemes that fail to understand barriers to access or the requirements of individuals are likely to come up short.

Educational opportunities in England have never been more diverse. Choice abounds, as qualifications and institutions are constantly reformed. The 2016 Sainsbury Review of technical education,

which guided the Budget announcement, called for a simplification of vocational choices, but what hasn't been grasped is the need for more coordination and flexibility in the system. How can individuals truly choose the best educational route for them if they haven't sampled different forms of learning?

Providers from across the sector – schools, colleges and universities – need to put aside their narrow interests and collaborate to facilitate such flexibility. At London South Bank University, we are aiming to create what I have termed a "family of educational providers". This already includes a university technical college and an academy school, and we are currently undertaking discussions to bring in a local further education college, Lambeth College. >>

The college focuses on technical and adult education in support of career development and progression, and would allow us to provide more collaborative links across sub-degree qualification levels.

The family concept enables cross-institutional working, helping learners to build a portfolio of skills and educational experiences. It benefits students by facilitating a flexible pathway through education, enabling them to choose the level, style and aim of learning that best suits them at the time. They are able to transfer comfortably back and forth between technical, vocational and academic pathways, based on a parity of esteem between all those routes. This will encourage the lifelong learning that everyone agrees will be crucial to preserve employability amid a rapidly evolving jobs market. We are already seeing strong increases in student attainment in both the university and schools, and we believe our collaborative approach is a driving factor in this improvement.

While this model will not be right for every university, college or school, our approach feels particularly appropriate for us, given London South Bank's role as an anchor institution in southeast London and our

experience in delivering professional and technical education. My aspiration is that our institutional family will ultimately include a further education college, several academy schools, a university technical college, specialist professional and technical educational options and even adult and special needs education. It would amount to a wide range of specialist organisations, each focusing on their strengths for the benefit of the community.

We must, of course, acknowledge the institutional costs involved in moving towards increased flexibility. Real change will not be delivered without considerable investment of time and expertise in areas such as law, management and governance. At London South Bank, it has taken us more than two years of work even to get this far.

Nonetheless, I believe the investment will be worth it. The creation of institutional groups or families of this kind can genuinely put the needs of the learner first – and thereby address the country's skills deficit without a wholesale redesign of the education system. It is something the rest of the sector should seriously consider.

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# Education for a career must take precedence over training for a job

// **WonkHE 30 March 2017**



If the UK is going to be a successful global trading economy outside of the EU, then now more than ever we need to address the historically neglected professional and technical skills shortages hampering employers and dragging down national productivity.

Brexit may, in fact, have the unlikely benefit of forcing policy makers to confront these issues for the first time. The recent budget gave one of the strongest suggestions yet that this may be the case, as Philip Hammond announced “the most ambitious post-16 education reform since the introduction of A-levels 70 years ago”. While his aim may be well intentioned, I would urge caution in the implementation of new ‘T-Levels’, which may simply add another layer of complexity to an already complex system, and reinforce the damaging artificial divide between technical and academic education.

Technical education has long suffered from a strange paradox. Despite the dire need of employers for individuals with higher level skills in technical and vocational areas, these educational paths of study command lower social esteem as well as policy priority (and subsequently funding) than their academic counterparts. If new technical qualifications are to avoid the same fault, they must adhere to core educational principles. Only if technical qualifications have general education at their heart will they be widely recognised and prepare people for careers in the modern economy.

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In Germany, where technical study is both deeply entrenched and respected, they have a dual vocational training system which splits learners’ time between the classroom and on-the-job training. It is critical that the educational component and delivery of the UK’s new T-Levels are strong, if they are to be successful. Only then will learners be prepared for a career, not just for their next job.

## **Aligning a fragmented technical education sector**

In the UK there has never been a more diverse range of educational opportunities and qualifications available. However, it is widely recognised that this diversity has not provided benefits, but complexity and division. For all of the reforms to qualifications, including these proposed T-Levels, there has consistently been little thought given to creating a structure which truly meets the needs of the individual learner.

Instead we have clung to a linear age-based system which pushes individuals from one threshold to another and provides no flexibility if learners realise that the education path they are on is not the right one for them, or if they wish to move to higher levels of study later in life. To address these issues we need not only to consider the nature of the qualifications but should also be focusing on encouraging greater collaboration between schools, colleges and universities. By adapting existing structures, learners could sample different forms of learning. We could create an education system which offers opportunities for all learners to build a portfolio of qualifications, skills, knowledge and social capital, determined by their needs, rather than those of institutions.

The recent area reviews of post-16 education and training institutions, as well as the drive to ensure universities sponsor schools, have provided an opportunity to do this. At London South Bank University we are creating a new ‘Family of Educational Providers’, a group of specialist, like-minded and distinct educational institutions within a formal group structure. The LSBU Family already includes a Multi Academy Trust with a University Technical College and an Engineering Academy. We are now in talks with Lambeth College about their inclusion, to improve the provision of local technical education.

Instead of being restricted by arbitrary age-based milestones, this group will provide horizontal and vertical links between institutions, allowing individuals to transfer comfortably between technical, vocational or academic pathways and to access the learning they need, when they need it. Our model allows each entity (schools, college and university) to achieve excellence in their own sector, whilst providing a new framework to ensure that learners who do not follow the ‘traditional’ path of study are equally supported by the education system.

Bringing institutions together and embedding co-ordinated working should go a long way to address some of the complexities of the present technical and vocational education system. Education institutions, whether universities, schools, or colleges, would do well to consider how, in their own individual contexts, new collaborative links might be built.

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# Creating a parity of esteem

//LinkedIn 7 April 2017

With the proposed creation of 'T-Levels' in the Budget last month, the Government once again expressed a need to address the lack of parity of esteem between higher and technical education – the notion that a 'technical' qualification is somehow inferior to an academic one.

Less than half of our young people follow the 'traditional' academic route of GCSEs, A-Levels and then university. The others – the majority – have, historically, been largely overlooked by policy makers. This has been to their severe detriment and to the detriment of our technical training. Meanwhile, the evolving nature of the modern economy means that employers are demanding higher skilled candidates than ever before, and these remain in very short supply.

Those learners who choose not to follow the 'traditional' path are presented with a bewildering array of

qualifications, multiple types of educational institution and the different and unequal funding approaches of Britain's post-16 education landscape. This is the result of historic evolution with occasional government upheaval, which has left complexity, contradiction and little that could genuinely be called a system. It means that fewer than 10% of these learners reach or surpass Level 4 (equivalent to 2 A-levels or first year degree level study) in technical courses, which is considerably lower than in other countries. While there are 1.6 million students at F.E. Colleges studying levels 2 and 3 (GCSE and A-Level equivalent), only 2.4% of them achieve levels 4 and higher.

In many cases this problem begins when, in order to burnish their reputation, schools cling on to their 'best' students, taking them through A-Levels before guiding them to selected universities.

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At the same time, other pupils are despatched to sixth-form and FE colleges where the availability of funding often drives decisions focused on the bottom line rather than learner needs.

At London South Bank University we believe that parity of esteem can be achieved in part by bringing Higher and Further education closer together. Clear pathways across the 3-4 divide are at the heart of successful professional and technical education. We need schools, FE and HE providers to work more closely together to provide clarity of route, which in turn will help to close the gap on parity of esteem. Students must be able to see that a comparable level of progression is available along both academic and technical routes – technical study doesn't have to end after two years in college but can continue up to Level 7 (the equivalent of a Master's degree) or even beyond.



We must also ensure that education is at the heart of our technical and skills pathways, and not just of academic study; so that training leads not just to a job but also to a career. Only when the skills route is seen as the beginning of a career pathway and not just a means of getting a job will we have parity of esteem between academic and technical pathways. Unfortunately, this continues to be a challenge – in the new apprenticeships programme for example, we risk failing to provide a framework which delivers this. Educational providers have been made only peripheral to the development of many apprenticeship standards. Everyone would I think agree that there was a need to involve employers more fundamentally in apprenticeships; and the introduction of the apprenticeship levy and creation of the Institute for Apprenticeships has clearly done that. However, as is often the

way, the pendulum has perhaps swung too far. It is time to find a balance where education and education providers are able to contribute fully to the development of apprenticeships and play a key role in this exciting new chapter. For there to be parity of esteem between academic and technical education there needs also to be parity of opportunity. Only by having at its core a strong educational component that is the basis for long term career development will our technical education demand the respect and parity of esteem it deserves.

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## How an educational framework can improve graduate outcomes

// LinkedIn 2 June 2017

I read with interest the recent report by the UPP Foundation and the Bridge Group on the earnings gap between students from higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds in higher education. It shows that university attendance is not the great 'social leveller' that it is often made out to be - as students from richer backgrounds continue to enjoy better graduate outcomes than their counterparts from poorer ones.

The identified causes for this difference in outcomes include:

- The role of career education/employer contact prior to university and the lack of effective career guidance services in many institutions;
- The tendency for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to participate less in extracurricular activities.

LSBU has one of the most diverse student populations in the country: 97% come from state schools, 70% are mature learners, 53% of our undergraduate students identify as BME, and 46% are the first in their family to attend university. We recognised the need to provide more focused career support, including opportunities around placements and internships and just as importantly, indeed potentially even more importantly the need to provide extracurricular activities that build confidence. Over the last three years, LSBU has therefore implemented a new Educational Framework, informing its entire educational provision, with the aim of addressing these issues.

The benefits of implementing this educational framework have been tangible and significant. From a relatively low starting point we have now progressed to a point where 82% of our first-degree, full time

students are in highly-skilled employment or further study within six months of graduating, with this year's data placing us clearly in the top quartile of all universities for graduate employment. Interestingly, whilst graduate employment has grown across all groups of students, the approach we have adopted has led to graduate employment rates for those whose parents do not have HE qualifications improving even faster than for those who do.

The Educational Framework which has driven that success is made up of four elements:

1. Providing knowledge;
2. Creating opportunities to apply that knowledge;
3. Generating the confidence to apply it through engagement in extracurricular activity; and
4. Ensuring the knowledge is current to the professional environment into which the learners progress through links to industry and the professions.

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Beyond solely providing relevant knowledge, it is crucial that we provide the opportunities to apply it. By having to apply knowledge you get to fully understand it. We therefore work in partnership with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies as well as employers, to involve them in the design and delivery of our courses so that students leave with the skills most valued in the workplace. More than half our courses have professional accreditation in addition to their academic status and we have committed to offering a placement, internship or another professional opportunity to each student during their studies.

All of LSBU's academic Schools provide numerous opportunities to engage in practical application of the knowledge they teach including: the LSBU Legal Advice Clinic and the Business Solutions Centre which provide students the opportunity to advise local residents and businesses on a drop in basis under the supervision of qualified academics.

But this does not go far enough. Many of our students lack social capital and we work to

help them overcome this through programmes of extracurricular activities, exposure to the workplace and volunteering, student engagement with entrepreneurship, as well as opportunities to join or lead an ever growing number of student societies and sports clubs. This approach is intended to help develop social capital and the professional qualities prized by employers - enterprising skills including creativity, team-working, leadership and self-motivation. Our employability and enterprise staff work with also students to refine their CVs, LinkedIn profiles and application forms as well as providing mock interviews.

This work has not just involved staff but partnership with our student body. Over the last three years the university has done much to invigorate its students' union with

the aim of ensuring that it can and does provide a wider range of extramural activities including extensive volunteering opportunities. We have seen substantial leaps in student engagement as a result which is contributing to advances in confidence and achievement.

Improving social mobility has been one of the central aims of London South Bank University since we were founded in 1892 with the aim to "promote [the] industrial skills, general knowledge, health and well-being of young men and women belonging to the poorer classes". As an institution we are rightly proud that we don't just take a handful of the most gifted applicants from lower socio-economic backgrounds, but instead we raise aspirations and life chances by providing the opportunity for all those who can benefit.



# How to stop the continuing decline of part-time students

// **Huffington Post 6 June 2017**

UK employment is now at its highest level since 1975 with almost 75% of 16–64 years olds now in work. At the same time however, we have more unfulfilled job vacancies than ever previously recorded (777,000) and a severe skills shortage, especially in STEM occupations. Research by Engineering UK suggests that an additional 1.8m engineers and technically qualified people are needed by 2025 and these issues will only be exacerbated by the potential effects of Brexit.

The Government has, reassuringly, begun to show signs that it recognises this skills crisis with the publishing of the Industrial Strategy Green paper, the introduction of the apprenticeship levy and a renewed look at technical education through T-Levels and Institutes of Technology.

The success of these interventions remains to be seen but we can predict fairly confidently that they will not be sufficient to overcome our skills gap in its entirety because they miss a crucial component – addressing the collapse of part-time study in higher education.

Between 2006 and 2016 part-time undergraduate student numbers in England dropped by 60 per cent. The number of mature students also halved over the same period.

Part-time study provides an invaluable route into higher education, both for those who are engaged in 'learn-while-you-earn' degree apprenticeships or employer sponsored degrees and also for individuals who may not have had the opportunity to attend university straight out of school and now require the flexibility to continue their

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education part-time whilst meeting work and family commitments. It is also going to have increasing importance in achieving the need to undergo retraining as the rate of change in many sectors continues to escalate.

The provision of part-time education therefore is beneficial for social mobility, encouraging under-represented groups into higher education and allowing for the continual up-skilling of the country's workforce. Over 40% of London South Bank University's students study part time, and this is representative of the university's mission to provide professional and technical education to all who can benefit.

The cause of the collapse in numbers is largely due to the increase in tuition fees introduced in 2012, which included a requirement for part time students to commit upfront to studying for a whole degree if they wished to be eligible for a loan and to begin repayments from four years after the start of their course.

For full time students this increase has, partially, been ameliorated by the availability of loans and maintenance grants; and to give it its due, the government has acknowledged this and introduced in its most recent budget maintenance loans for people entering part time degrees, and doctoral loans of up to £25,000 to support higher-level study, starting from 2018. This is unlikely to have any significant impact on the decline however. The majority of part-time students are 'mature' learners and likely therefore to already have significant financial responsibilities and ongoing obligations to family, mortgages and work which make them unwilling or unable to take on a large additional amount of debt. This is undoubtedly the crux of the problem and inevitably it will be the least social and

financially advantage who are the most excluded.

The Industrial Strategy Green Paper has indicated that the Government is open to "exploring ambitious new approaches to encourag[e] lifelong learning, which could include assessing changes to the costs people face to make them less daunting".

If the next Government is serious in this aim and wants to re-open this channel to social mobility and career advancement then it needs to undertake a serious examination of how the burden of debt could be eased for those seeking to undertake part time study to resolve how we assist those caught between their current financial responsibilities and the desire for personal and career advancement.

Whilst apprenticeships and new forms or learn while you earn solutions should have an impact it will not meet the needs of many. The solutions could include allowing learners to defer the period of repayment or, more radically, opening up the use of the apprenticeship levy to allow employers to support a wider range of higher education courses to upskill their employees. Any such move should also see the removal of the Equal or Lower Qualifications restrictions which effectively, confine an individual to the educational path they choose when they are seventeen or, for example, would prevent a STEM graduate from undertaking a business degree to enable them to take up a directorship within their firm.

The 3 year 'boarding school model' for higher education only serves a proportion of learners. If the Government truly wants a highly skilled 'global trading nation' then it will need to support a flexible and diverse higher education sector that is able to deliver it.

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# It's time to review higher education funding in England

// **Wonkhe 4 July 2017**

The 2017 General Election threw up many surprises. For the higher education sector, what caught us most off guard was the effect of the Labour Party's manifesto promise to reintroduce maintenance grants for university students and to abolish university tuition fees – a policy widely seen as one of the key factors in increasing youth-turnout and enabling Labour to take 30 new seats.

A problem with abolishing tuition fees – frequently pointed out by Corbyn's critics – is that it is not, in socio-economic terms, very progressive. Under the current system, only the highest earners pay back their entire loan with interest. As the IFS points out, the wealthiest graduates would be the biggest winners of scrapping fees. In addition, attempts to control costs may lead to limitations on student places, thereby excluding some who could benefit from the life changing experience offered by university education.

Universities need proper funding if we are to continue to deliver the high quality education that we aspire to. If our funding is solely through fees, inflation and growing costs will lead to an increased debt burdens on students and graduates.

It's no good arguing that this isn't like 'other debt'. To a student, it is real debt. A bank

looking at mortgage applications factors in student loan repayments, and for those wishing to follow master's programmes both undergraduate and master's loans have to be paid together, further compounding the challenge.

I raised concerns when the higher fees were first introduced about the potential impact on social mobility. Since then, research by Professor Claire Callender and Professor Geoff Mason has suggested that debt aversion has the potential to put off young people from the poorest socio-economic backgrounds from applying to university.

Labour estimates that abolishing tuition fees and reintroducing maintenance grants would cost £11.2 billion per cohort. Instead of focusing on the extremes (of fees or no fees) perhaps we should examine how that money could be used to fund a more balanced HE system? Crucially, we need to start looking at the totality of fees and maintenance support.

## **Don't forget maintenance**

Reducing tuition fees will not magically ensure that higher education is accessible for all groups across society. Here, Labour's proposal to reintroduce maintenance grants for the poorest students deserves further attention.

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Grants were abolished subsequent to the fee increase of 2012, and replaced with larger means-tested loans for those who would have previously qualified (adding further to their burden of debt). The reintroduction of grants would recognise that for most students, and especially for those in London, one of the most significant barriers to attending university is the cost of living which, with spiralling rents and inflationary pressure on food prices, is often more than tuition fees. Such grants could guarantee a minimum level of support for all, with additional support means tested. At my university, one of the main reasons for student withdrawal is financial difficulties. The demand on our hardship support is ever growing. This is in addition to the many students that take on substantial part-time work alongside their full-time studies. Maintenance support is as important, if not more important, than the question of tuition fees.

The majority of students do not object to making a contribution to the cost of their education, but it's the scale of the contribution that matters. A better balance between the student (or graduate) and state acknowledges that students will benefit financially from their degree, whilst also acknowledging the wider public good of higher education: social mobility, civic engagement, productivity, and innovation.

## **Finding the balance**

The economic argument for widening access to higher education is self-evident. The UK is facing a major skills crisis, with some of the worst productivity levels in the OECD and more vacancies recorded than ever before. Skills shortages abound across sectors as diverse as engineering, hospitality and social care. On top, we have the lowest level of unemployment since 1975, and we have yet to feel the real economic impact of Brexit.

It is sadly too often underreported how tuition fee rises have contributed to the collapse of part-time higher education in England, a drop of 60% in all between 2006 and 2016. The majority of part-time learners are mature students with greater financial and family commitments than 'traditional' students, which makes them less willing to take on additional significant debt. A reduction in fees (coupled with a more flexible loan system with a pay-per-module structure) could help revive part-time higher education. This would not only allow those in work to fill our skills gaps, but also provide opportunity for those who were not able to go to university straight out of school. A reinstatement of the 'part-time premium' funding could also help universities meet the additional costs of educating students on a part-time basis, and stem the closure of part-time courses.

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The skills crisis is not just affecting the economy; it is placing strain on our public services. There is a shortage of around 20,000 nurses in the NHS; and with over a third aged above fifty the problem is set to grow. Many nursing applicants are also mature students. Although most nurses will not pay back their student loans in full, they still have the burden hanging over them whilst providing an indispensable public service. This could be ameliorated if the Government considered fee forgiveness schemes for those who continue within the profession for a certain amount of time.

As it happens the Conservative manifesto considered doing just this for teachers, in order to tackle the problem of 30% of new teachers leaving after five years.

It's clear to me is that young people have, in large numbers, rejected continuity of the current system. We also know that the current funding structure is being quietly rejected by potential mature applicants. The job is now for the universities sector and policy makers to work together to rebalance the system to meet the needs of learners, our economy, and our public services.

University education is costly, and that funding needs to rise with costs if the UK is to retain both its high quality and levels of accessibility. The model needs to ensure that benefits of higher education to the individual, state, and employers are recognised. It needs to consider funding 'in the round', including maintenance and living costs. And it must not solely think of the needs of full-time learners, but also encourage a revival of part-time study, in order to improve employee upskilling in an ever changing world.

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# Let's bridge the divide between academic and technical education

// Guardian Higher Education Network 18 July 2017

The economic arguments for widening access to higher education are widely accepted. The UK is moving towards a skills crisis that will be exacerbated by Brexit. We are facing some of the worst productivity levels in the OECD, and we have acute shortages in many sectors, with a record number of advertised vacancies. The UK's engineering industry alone will need another 1.8 million trained individuals by 2025. But we will only be able to plug these gaps if we focus on all learners, and not just those on academic courses.

The Social Mobility Commission's most recent report notes that the funding and expertise ploughed into widening participation have resulted in more working class young people at university than ever before. But that comes with the large caveat that both student retention rates and graduate outcomes for the same group have scarcely improved in the last two decades.

What is less recognised is that many widening participation strategies are inadequate because they put too much emphasis on academic pathways and thus ignore the majority of learners. This year around 43% of young people will enter higher education having studied A-Levels or BTECs. While access issues remain for many disadvantaged students, those on an academic route benefit from a clear, simple pathway to level 4 (equivalent to an HNC) on to level 6 (Bachelors' degree) and above. The same cannot be said for the rest of the school population.

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Universities' widening participation strategies have rarely accounted for those in further and vocational study. Faced with a complicated and fragmented system, only 2.4% of these learners navigate through FE colleges to higher education study at Level 4 or above, and consequently face careers which often have little chance of meaningful progression. The social impact of this failure is feeding into an ever more divided society, as indicated by the fault lines shown up in the recent general election and last year's Brexit referendum. My institution, London South Bank University, was founded 125 years ago to "promote industrial skill, general knowledge, health and wellbeing to young men and women belonging to the poorer classes of south east London". We are now pioneering a bold new solution to local educational provision which could help meet this challenge. Through a series of mergers, we are creating a family of educational providers: a group of

like-minded specialist educational providers sharing a common approach to educational delivery and linked through a formal group structure. Currently in addition to the university, this includes a technical college and an engineering academy. A tie-up with Lambeth College is also under discussion.

Institutions working together are in a much better position to widen participation than any single provider. By having a joint educational framework they can create individualised learning pathways which enable students to learn what they need, with the right learning approach for them

The close collaboration between the institutions means that pupils at both schools benefit from use of university facilities and contact with undergraduate students who provide mentoring. This helps students build their social capital, experience and confidence and fosters ambitions for >>



pursuing higher education among pupils. This is particularly important for learners whose parents have no higher education qualifications, which represent currently 46% of the students at LSBU.

Another significant barrier to widening access which is frequently overlooked is the lack of second chances and routes back into education. As Helena Kennedy QC pointed out in her Learning Works and Widening Participation in Education report [pdf] in 1997 "if at first you don't succeed... you don't succeed". If you fail any of these age-determined hurdles of GCSEs, A-Levels and bachelors, then your opportunities and choices for re-entering education are severely limited.

The family of educational providers seeks to address this in two ways – firstly by providing access back into education both through adult education courses and through an Institute of Professional and Technical Education which helps employers to upskill their

staff. Secondly, it puts aside arbitrary age-based barriers, allowing students to learn what they need when they need it.

For example, if a student was particularly gifted at subjects such as design and computer science but struggled at maths, they probably wouldn't fulfil their potential because they would be unable to get into a FE college or sixth form if they failed their maths GCSE at 16. In a learning family with shared educational objectives this learner could start their A-Levels while continuing to study for their maths GCSE, allowing them to take the exam when they were ready. If they made good progress they could even move on to taking foundation degree modules at the university.

Such an approach is not without its challenges. The biggest is recognising the differences between the specialist institutions and creating an aligned curriculum which accommodates the different learner styles.

What has been most apparent as we have moved along this journey is the regulatory, political and cultural gulf which exists between different educational sectors. But the differences are also what makes the family successful. By maintaining the distinctiveness of each institution we avoid the risk of creating a homogenous organisation which does not truly serve the different groups of learners.

The family approach represents LSBU's response to the needs of our corner of south-east London. It is not prescriptive and will not be suitable for every local area. However, I would encourage all educational providers to engage critically with the ideas in our new paper Families of Learning: Co-Creating Local Solutions to Education System Failings [pdf]. Together we can explore whether they present opportunities to meaningfully widen participation, tackle the skills shortages and boost genuine social mobility. –

## The economy's impact on part-time study

// **Huffington Post 18 September 2017**

Today's report from London Economics sheds further light on the plight of aspiring part-time students in the UK.

The report, entitled, 'How is the demand for part-time higher education affected by changing economic conditions?' has been commissioned by academic partners London South Bank University (LSBU), The Open University and Birkbeck University.

The report highlights that whilst for most prospective full time learners the student loan system mitigates the issue of tuition fees, this is not the case for

aspiring part-time students who are badly failed by the current regime.

The report shows that the drop in part-time students has been far greater than the current economic conditions in the UK would account for. It also identifies that, despite the general growth in full-time student numbers, there remains a vast group eligible for part-time study, a group of mostly mature students who, given access to a more sympathetic funding model, would take the opportunity to enhance their own social mobility and participate in the upskilling of the UK workforce.

Part-time study is a vital part of a diverse HE system. It widens participation and increases social mobility, providing choice to individuals who may not have had the opportunity to attend university straight out of school and who now require the flexibility to continue their education part-time whilst meeting work and family commitments.

Between 2010 and 2016 the number of students in England engaged in part-time undergraduate study collapsed, dropping by 60%. This has a negative impact on our economic >>

competitiveness. Part-time study, whether through distance learning, evening study or employer sponsorship, allows individuals to reskill or upskill, helping to address the UK's skill and productivity gaps. The UK has the highest level of employment since 1975 but there are also more job vacancies than ever previously recorded, especially in STEM occupations.

The decline in part-time student number accelerated with the introduction of £9,000 tuition fees in 2012. Whilst student loans are available,



many potential part time learners are older, and taking on this additional debt can be impractical for those with considerable existing family and financial commitments.

There has been significant recent interest in revisiting the existing student tuition fee and loans system. However, this debate has neglected part-time education and the role that higher fees have played in reducing part-time student numbers. Whatever the merits of the current system for full time students, it is evident that in the case of part-time students the system is almost entirely

broken. We need to look at a range of options to mitigate the negative effects; perhaps delaying the loan repayments of part-time learners, allowing them to gain the benefits of undertaking more highly qualified and better remunerated work before they are hit by the additional costs of repayment.

The question of funding for part-time study needs to be at the centre of any debate on student fees and loans and it must be an explicit consideration in the Government's proposed review of tertiary education funding.

