

A Year in Higher Education 2021

Articles and blogs on higher
education from LSBU

Introduction



Although the higher education sector continued to face challenges against the backdrop of the pandemic over the last year, without doubt many of us took relief from the return of some semblance of normality in the autumn when students arrived back on campus for in-person teaching.

While the sector had anxiously awaited the 2021 Budget, with the expectation of a new financial settlement for higher education fees and funding, including a full response to the Augar Review, this ultimately failed to materialise, and the Government has now promised to deliver a Higher Education White Paper in early 2022.

The budget did, however, provide further support for the Levelling-Up agenda, with total spending on skills increasing by £3.8 billion by 2024-25; new funding announced to help 500,000 adults improve their maths skills; and a commitment to maintain the target of a £22bn investment into research and development funding, albeit with a delayed target.

The Lifetime Skills Guarantee, announced last year, became available in April for adults who have not already achieved a qualification at Level 3, potentially increasing the pipeline towards Level 4 qualifications, where we have the greatest skills gap.

Meanwhile, the Office for Students ran a pilot scheme (for which LSBU successfully bid) to test the efficacy of Short Course Funding, ahead of the introduction of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement in 2025. And, on the research side, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills has released a new UK Innovation Strategy and an (R&D) People and Culture Strategy in support of the R&D Roadmap.

The University continued to make policy interventions designing a new Social Mobility Index (published by the Higher Education Policy Institute), which ranks universities by their contributions to improving social mobility. With Aston University, we also published a paper on the ways that Universities of Technology can support the Levelling-Up agenda.

In addition to these, you will find on the following pages a selection of articles and blogs that LSBU has put forward in response to the educational issues of the year. I do hope you enjoy reading them, as we look forward to 2022.

**Professor Dave Phoenix,
Vice-Chancellor and Chief
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University Group**

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Will Higher Technical Qualifications foster greater collaborations between Universities and Colleges?

HEPI, 20 January 2020

Most significant in the Prime Minister's speech at Exeter College in September last year was the suggestion that further education colleges will be given access to the main student finance system 'for a specific list of valuable and mainly technical courses'.

These courses are almost certainly Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) – the Department for Education's new kitemark for existing and new qualifications at Level 4 (and potentially 5 and even 6), which meet the occupational standards established by employers with the Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education (IFATE).

The Government hopes that opening up the finance system will create greater competition within the sector, streamlining the student finance system. It may also help bridge some of the regulatory gaps between higher education and further education by giving an impetus for providers to create new articulation agreements for those learners who wish to continue studying to Level 6, after completing their Level 4.

Bridging further education and higher education is particularly pertinent to my institution, London South Bank University (LSBU). For the first time, our new Corporate Strategy encompasses the whole LSBU Group, which in addition to the University, includes a further education college and a Multi-Academy Trust. To mark its publication, we hosted a roundtable on the topic of HTQs, chaired by former Universities and Science Minister Lord David Willetts; and attended by colleagues from professional bodies, sector organisations and think tanks as well as the Department for Education and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education.

The group reflected on previous attempts to create new Level 4 and 5 qualifications – including Foundation Degrees under New Labour. It was generally agreed that, while introducing HTQs might solve a supply-side issue by creating a high-profile kitemark, student numbers are unlikely to increase unless there is also an effort to stimulate demand. Part of this demand should include providing maintenance loans for all those studying at Levels 4 and 5. Part-time students do not currently qualify and this could potentially exclude many mature students from studying a HTQ as a way to upskill. In addition, it was felt that these Level 4 HTQs would be more attractive if they were to provide not only the skills requirements of the employer but also meet the educational and content requirement that will enable onward progression so the qualification isn't seen as a 'dead end'.

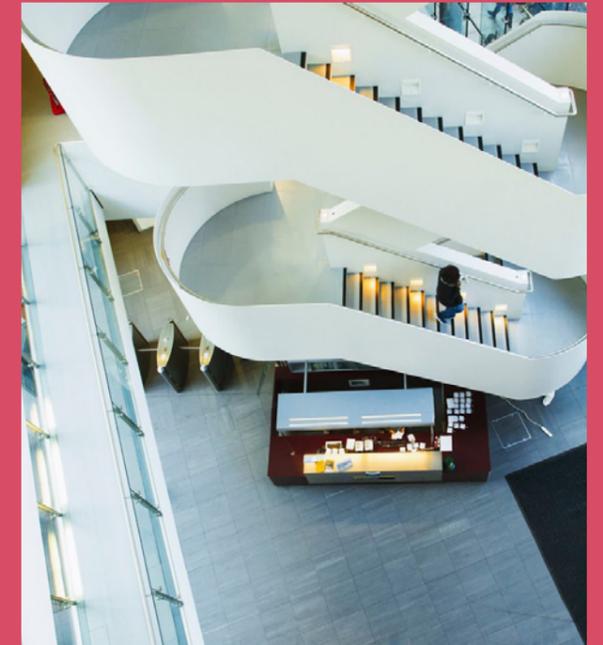
Above all, it was agreed that without significant increases in the numbers of learners achieving Level 3 to qualify for admission to these qualifications, substantial growth would (or could) not materialise. Therefore, the Government must not, in encouraging further education providers to focus on technical education, inadvertently encourage them to neglect the vital pipeline leading up to Level 4 by losing sight of their roles as providers of lower level and community education.

Finally, we discussed collaboration. HTQs, in addition to meeting an economic function, are seen as a way of tidying up some of the 'contested ground' of Level 4 and 5 – sitting as they do between higher education and further education. Although the complex quality assurance regimes across Levels 4 and 5 still need simplifying, providing a joint finance

system could encourage collaboration between further education and higher education; many learners undoubtedly would benefit from longer in the more actively supportive further education environment before making the jump to the more self-directed learning typical of universities.

The group reflected on college and university mergers, both more formal – such as the Bolton College-University merger or the LSBU Group – and 'looser' arrangements such as the education providers within the West London Alliance. It was agreed that the most important element of successful collaboration is that each institution is able to retain the distinctiveness of its provision and retains a clarity of vision rather than seeing to be all things to all people.

The Skills White Paper, having been delayed to this year, provides an enormous opportunity to expand post-16 technical education and provide new routes for the 'forgotten 50 per cent' who do not follow the route of GCSEs to A-Levels to Bachelor's Degrees. For it to be successful, the Government must ensure that learners who choose a technical path are supported to do so. This means providing the necessary finance, including maintenance loans and ensuring that they have routes to higher level study if they choose to upskill after a period in industry.



Providing maintenance loans to sub-degree students would cost peanuts – but make a real difference

Wonkhe, 18 February 2021

Would £15 million a year sound a reasonable investment to provide students and businesses with support to help our economy to recover from the pandemic and in the longer term start to combat our productivity crisis?

That's all it would take to provide part time students taking higher technical qualifications or other level four and five courses with maintenance loans to give them a chance to fund their living costs and end a stark unfairness in the student support funding system.

The Prime Minister's speech at Exeter College last year and the Skills for Jobs white paper made it plain that the Government sees skills (and particularly technical skills at levels four and five) as a crucial component of the UK's economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic and securing its future prosperity outside the European Union.

A grand plan for skills

From next September, the Government will roll out the first of a new set of level four and five higher technical qualifications. Significantly, and very positively, the white paper confirms that students

studying these HTQs at colleges will, for the first time, be able to access the student finance system for their tuition fees.

The current student loan system will also be replaced with a new lifelong learning entitlement which will enable students to draw from the equivalent of four years' post-18 education funding in chunks down to individual modules. This should help to dispel the common notion among potential learners that they are wasting their loan entitlement if they don't apply for a bachelor's degree in the first instance.

Level four and five qualifications are a particularly attractive option for mature learners. They are a less significant commitment than a bachelor's degree in terms of time and money, and still lead to salary gains while leaving the option open to progress to a level six qualification at a later date. Research by NIESR has shown that in certain subjects, learners with level four and five qualifications can even out-earn their degree-educated peers.

Unfortunately, the 2012 increase in tuition fees caused a big reduction in these

learners, with the number of part-time mature students studying at levels four and five declining by 67 percent between 2009-10 and 2016-17.

Creating more flexibility and fairness in the loan system and opening it up to colleges could be a first step in tackling this decline and provide a route into higher level study for tens of thousands of potential learners. Colleges have a greater geographical spread than universities, making them more accessible to mature learners who have less mobility due to work and family commitments. The more managed learning experience of the FE environment may also be beneficial for those students who have been out of formal education for some time.

However, the potential for this vital reform is hampered by one key omission. The white paper appears to limit the loan book extension to tuition fees, and will not include loans for maintenance. This is already the case for part time level four and five qualifications at universities and is almost certainly the reason that nearly all of the students studying part time at these levels at my institution, London South Bank University,

do so as apprentices or employer-sponsored students.

The pound in their pockets

The coronavirus crisis is causing major structural shifts in our economy. Many of the lost jobs in sectors such retail, hospitality and tourism are unlikely to return. When coupled with automation and the rapid pace of change in technology which could make 10-35 per cent of UK jobs redundant in the next 20 years, there is a clear need for greater access to retraining and short course support.

Research by MillionPlus into the attitudes of mature learners and the barriers they face has shown that maintenance costs are identified as their main financial preoccupation. Without maintenance support, it is simply unrealistic to expect individuals, who may have mortgages and dependents to support, to give up work or reduce their hours in order to study for an HTQ or another level four or five qualification.

The cost of providing maintenance loans would be modest, which means this vital reform is well within

reach. By nature of being shorter courses, the Resource Accounting and Budgeting (RAB) charge on them is lower and mature students who are already in work can begin making payments back immediately. At the same time, more technically-trained individuals within our economy will almost certainly lead to higher productivity and tax receipts which offers huge medium and long term benefits to the UK.

At present rates, providing maintenance loans to the 3,815 students enrolled in HNC and HND part-time programmes at English HE providers in 2018-19 would add approximately £15 million per year to the loan book. If the number of students studying these courses doubled – as the Government seems keen to encourage, it would still only cost £30 million.

This small financial commitment would show the Government commitment to providing learners and businesses the support they need to help our economy to recover from the pandemic and combat our productivity crisis and fulfil the vision set out in the white paper.



The Gradual Reshaping of the Education Sector

HEPI, 24 February 2021

The 'policy avalanche' on 21 January, for which the tertiary education sector in England was bracing itself, has now been written off by many (particularly within higher education) as a non-event. But while there were few eye-catching headlines, taken together with other recent proposals, the White Paper represents a further step in the Government's re-exertion of control over tertiary education. This could lead to a stronger system that supports opportunity but it might equally force a move away from an approach based on independence and student-choice to one that limits options and undermines social mobility.

Some of the proposals will clearly provide a positive step for Further Education, particularly the much-announced boost of capital funding and the opportunities arising from the proposed Lifetime Skills Guarantee. This Guarantee will provide adults without a Level 3 qualification with the funding to study for one – potentially increasing the pipeline towards Level 4, where we have our greatest skills gap. There is also discussion of a four-year learning entitlement, allowing more people to engage in learning and in a more flexible way. This could – especially if provided with maintenance support – help us to recover ground in the collapse of mature and part-time learners that occurred after the increase in fees. As such, these changes have the potential to enhance social mobility. By working with business to generate new Higher Technical Qualifications, they also open up the potential to reimagine aspects of higher education and create a framework that helps universities adapt to meet the needs of a rapidly changing world.

A Conservative government would normally be associated with a drive to remove

regulation and free up providers to innovate. However, current indications suggest that we are about to move into a period of greater central control of tertiary education, which has the potential to limit choice and stifle innovation. For example, the Level 3 qualifications available through the Lifetime Skills Guarantee are being prescribed by government and have to be 'in a subject area with strong market outcomes and alignment with government priorities'. Alongside these new funding rules, the Government is seeking new powers to intervene directly in the running of colleges which – when added to the direct control of Academy Schools – appears to indicate growing centralisation of education as a direction of travel. While some of the Government's drivers may be more ambitious, it is clear that behind the increased control and restricted course choice is a desire to reduce cost.

The marketisation of higher education over the last decade has greatly increased the range and diversity of providers. It has not, as governments then and now hoped, led to a reduction in the sticker price of a degree at larger more established institutions. The removal of student number caps, which occurred shortly after the changes to fees, has however enabled a larger than ever proportion of school-leavers – often from lower socioeconomic backgrounds – to enter higher education (although we have simultaneously seen a collapse in mature and part-time learners). Rather than drive down the cost of higher education, marketisation has therefore led to an ever-larger bill to the Treasury; and as the demographics change and more people wish to obtain a university education, this is fuelling concerns about affordability.

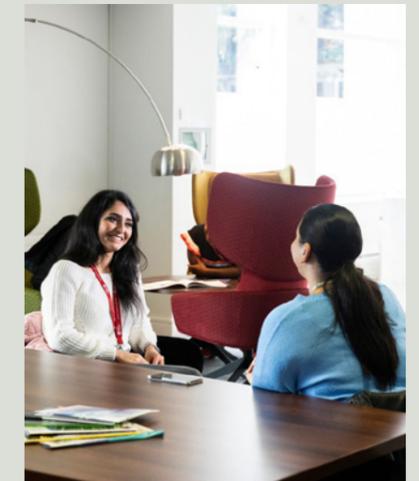
Unfortunately, in the Government's eyes, these new young students are not necessarily choosing the 'right' courses for university study – those the Government believes will maximise their earnings and provide the associated loan repayments. This frustration is evident in Gavin Williamson's recent statement to the Commons about 'slashing the taxpayer subsidy for such subjects as Media Studies' – while forgetting the £70 billion contributed each year to the UK economy by the media industry.

The current proposals could be seen as an attempt to mitigate the financial challenges by pushing learners away from three-year degrees – in particular Arts and Humanities degrees – towards shorter courses in technical subjects, ideally delivered in further education, which the Government sees as a cheaper option. It seems that this market shaping might in the future further extend to the introduction of minimum higher education entry thresholds, as a mechanism for restricting numbers of students embarking on degree programmes. This is a move that in one stroke would delegate technical

education to second best and put in place a principle that enables Treasury control of student numbers so that their chance of undertaking a degree would depend on the demographics and funding available in their planned year of entry.

At the same time, the Government is seeking to influence universities – encouraging them to move away from teaching subject areas it sees as unproductive for students and the economy. The Secretary of State's funding letter, released the same day as the White Paper, instructs the OfS to reduce high-cost subject funding for those subjects which are not considered 'strategically important' such as performing arts, creative arts, media studies and archaeology.

We can see further evidence of Government influencing student choice in secondary education. The Post-16 Skills Plan could see the removal or limiting of Applied General Qualifications in favour of a blunt choice between A-Levels, to prepare students for higher education, or T-Levels for entry into the workplace or progression to new Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) at Levels 4 and 5. Currently



only around 60 per cent of students arrive at university with A-Levels alone, with most of the remainder progressing through Applied Generals or a combination of the two. Limiting this combined option has the potential to curb the higher education ambitions and options of many pupils (and their parents). While this may not be the Government's intention, there is a significant risk that this could be a consequence of such a policy. Interestingly, the T-level pilots have seen large numbers of academically high achievers studying for these qualifications. This is a potentially beneficial development if technical education is to be seen as a positive choice (as opposed to a fallback option) for learners. However, with the potential of Applied Generals being phased out, there is a significant risk that a wide range of pupils will be left unsupported. Furthermore, as students do begin to progress through T-Levels and pick out their Level 4 qualifications, they may find their choice limited because providers are being encouraged to shift their provision entirely to the approved HTQs – 'from 2023, [government] will look to reduce funding for non-approved higher technical qualifications'.

The proposals presented by the Government have great potential but if the implications are not fully understood, there will be significant unintended consequences. Given the strong link between socioeconomic background, achievement rates at school and prospects upon graduation, there is a cause for concern that, taken together, these policies may push some learners into courses they may not have chosen – a far cry from student choice. For some of them the choice of higher education might be removed altogether if the OfS's recent proposals to remove benchmarking / contextualisation in regulating quality and standards result in disincentives for higher

education institutions to admit students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds

There is an argument to be made that, given the level of taxpayer investment involved in higher education, restricting student choice is entirely reasonable, as per the proposals for the 'free' Level 3 courses. Whatever one's point of view, it remains worth noting that we are in an era of growing government control of education. The risk is that this drives us down a path of least resistance with central initiatives leading to a narrowing of educational options at an ever earlier age. For example, while T-Levels theoretically do not prevent learners from accessing higher education, if they are not developed in collaboration with universities, colleges and schools they are likely to limit the options both pre- and post-qualification – and for many this will occur at just 15 or 16-years old.

In Germany's education system – beloved of so many Education Ministers – and elsewhere, those on a technical route actually study a wider range of subjects even than many of our GCSE pupils. In designing England's new educational landscape there are two principles that we must keep in mind.

1. These new qualifications need to be seen not in isolation but as part of an individual's educational journey and designed with an understanding of both secondary and tertiary education pathways. They should create not restrict opportunity.
2. If the Government is to deliver on the place-based rhetoric and levelling up agenda, it needs to ensure a risk-based system of oversight is brought into operation rather than trying to manage all things centrally.

David Phoenix responds to Peter Scott on the Social Mobility Index

9 March 2021

'Designing a Social Mobility Index', published with HEPI, [can be read here](#)

I would like to thank Peter Scott for taking time to provide comment on my new paper; and I'm delighted he agrees that the next step is to focus on improving and strengthening it. Debate was one of the things London South Bank University colleagues and I hoped to accomplish in creating this English Social Mobility Index for Higher Education. I am pleased to see that it has had some success in this regard.

One of the legitimate criticisms of higher education league tables is that they focus principally on input measures, such as the prior educational achievement of entrants or institutional spend (however well applied). The second, again legitimate, criticism is that they treat the higher education sector as homogenous. They take no account of the diversity of the sector and of institutions' distinct missions. Indeed league tables have the potential to drive everything to a vanilla middle ground stifling innovation and undermining the distinct missions and offers that a diverse sector provides. However, whilst each institution will want to determine and pursue its own distinct mission, it remains valuable to understand how that approach and its delivery sit in relation to one's peers, and understand why performance may differ. In this context, the challenge of league tables lies not solely in design, but in how they are used.

As part of the key outcome measures for LSBU's new corporate strategy, we wanted a way of assessing our higher education contribution to social mobility. Having failed to find a useful UK measure, we looked

overseas to the US Social Mobility Index for Higher Education. Taking this as a model and using the English data available, we established a measure that worked for our own strategy. In so doing though, we also quickly saw the potential to develop something that would provide a measure against which all UK universities could measure their contributions, combining the social distance travelled by their graduates and the number of graduates transported. The result is, we hope, an English Higher Education Social Mobility Index (English SMI) which can help universities and others to measure their success in achieving positive social mobility for their graduates, according to their mission. This index, like all measures of its kind, is determined by the data available and the choices made on matters such as definitions and weightings. As such, what we have created is by no means either perfect or indeed the only possible version of such a measure. And these points are, we believe, well-rehearsed and developed as part of the report.

Peter Scott has highlighted these points in his article about our paper; and I would concur with the general scepticism he expresses about league tables. He has also highlighted perhaps a more serious or controversial question. Is it right to compare different 'kinds' of contribution to social mobility? Is, for example, helping to provide a relatively small number of disadvantaged students to achieve great things inherently better or worse than taking a large cohort from disadvantage into making a perhaps more modest contribution to the community, their families and the UK economy?

Given that every higher education institution would, we hope, seek to make a contribution to the social mobility of its students; then a measure that weighs that contribution, however it is made has, I think, some merit. Principally, that merit is in helping us all to measure what we are doing, whilst allowing us to do it in the manner to which our institution – taking account of its place in history and geography – is best equipped, rather than seeking all institutions to do all things. When so many measures treat all higher institutions as apples, whether they are apples, oranges or bananas, this one seeks to enable the diverse parts of the higher education sector to measure themselves against what they seek to achieve, in the context of what they set out to do. I think that is the strength of our approach and not a weakness.

Finally, I would add that we are not precious about this model; and if any institution would like to take and adjust the weightings or other aspects to provide what they believe provides a more useful insight into their own contribution to social mobility, we will be happy to provide the underlying model. The main aim is to simulate debate and to try to get institutions to reflect on the outcomes their approaches to social mobility are achieving compared to their peers



Universities of Technology are key to the levelling-up agenda

Wonkhe, 11 May 2021

'A Truly Modern Technical Education', a report by London South Bank University and Aston University [can be found here](#)

Universities of Technology are key to the levelling-up agenda.

A favourite pastime of Education Secretaries in England – stretching back as far as the end of the Victorian era – has been promising to deliver a system of technical education to rival Germany's.

From the foundation of the polytechnic institutions in the 1900s to their expansion in the 1950s and '60s alongside new Colleges of Advanced Technology, these attempts have left us with dozens of institutions that were originally founded with technical education, and sometimes applied research, as their core focus.

It is a frequent assertion that technical education is no longer available in England. However, the vast majority of these technical educational institutions have continued to deliver on their original missions – educating highly skilled technicians; collaborating with business to unlock innovation in new products and services; and building management and leadership skills and capacity through their business schools – to be truly, albeit quietly, Universities of Technology.

What has undeniably happened to many of these institutions (including our own – Aston University and London South Bank University), however, is that national funding structures and reputational measures have caused them to broaden their offer, fuelling a homogenisation of higher education. This creates a missed opportunity for true diversity in the sector that would encourage institutions to have a narrower focus in some areas, in order to truly excel in others.

The chronic underfunding of STEM subjects creates significant challenges for Universities of Technology to maintain delivery of technical courses. It disincentivises providers to expand student numbers on existing technical courses or to introduce new ones. The predominance of funding for blue skies research has similarly discouraged them from doing even more of the vital applied research which turns innovation and knowledge into enterprise. The structure of student funding around the three-year residential degree has caused alternative routes including sub-degree Level 4 and 5 courses and those

designed around part-time and mature learners to wither.

However, as the UK deals with the fallout of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe now is the right time to address these long-standing issues.

The Government, through its Skills for Jobs White Paper (and potentially the response to the Augar Review when it comes) has indicated a willingness to help address the missing middle of Level 4 and 5 in our skills system. Its plan for a new Lifelong Loan Entitlement will enable learners to use their student loan entitlement in smaller chunks and to step on and off the educational ladder at levels of attainment of their choosing. They are also addressing the longstanding under-investment in technical education through a doubling of the teaching grant for STEM-based subjects.

The levelling-up agenda, combined with the increase of spending on R&D to 2.4% also – and perhaps most importantly – provides an opportunity to greatly increase support for the missing middle within R&D – Applied Research. While blue skies research at large research intensives

can lead to fundamental breakthroughs in knowledge, these findings and these institutions are rarely accessible to SMEs, which make up 99% of UK businesses and are more evenly spread across regions and sectors. One example of Applied Research would be LSBU academics working with a consortium of 16 SMEs in association with Transport for London to develop a low carbon smart energy grid which will deliver low carbon heat, mobility and power to an estimated 33,000 residents and 70 businesses in Islington. Another would be the Knowledge Transfer Partnership between Aston University and Aurigo to develop a machine vision solution to improve the operational safety and performance of autonomous vehicles.

With the proper support there is a huge amount of untapped economic potential in Universities of Technology to greatly expand this work and drive local innovation, economic growth and job creation, in turn reducing regional and local inequality.

While the filling-in of these missing middles is important, so too is their joining up – a bringing together of

skills and research in the context of place. And our new report, Truly Modern Technical Education, released this afternoon, argues that Universities of Technology such as LSBU and Aston University are the ideal locations for that joining-up (and filling-in) to take place.

Levelling-up by creating new wealth and boosting productivity can only happen with the support of institutions that can apply knowledge and innovation through both research and teaching in the context of their localities. Such institutions exist up and down the country. If the Government truly wants to build-back better, then rather than coming up with yet another new way to emulate Germany, it should look closer to home and unleash the potential of its existing Universities of Technology.

UTCs could survive by extending year groups beyond age 18

FE Week, 4 July 2021

Technical education is critical for filling the UK's huge skills shortages, raising productivity and giving students opportunities to learn and build successful careers. But holes in our education system are restricting students from studying higher technical education.

The creation of UTCs in 2010 was aimed at tackling some of those challenges by offering school pupils a four-year technical education. Unfortunately, starting at 14 years old created recruitment challenges, which some UTCs have addressed by "extending down" to 11 or 13 years old. Just recently in FE Week we heard that more UTCs are extending their age range to help stay afloat. However, I believe only "extending down" present risks as well as benefits.

At South Bank UTC, we took a different path by "extending up", rather than down, into year 14 – an extra year of learning, from 18 years old. That's possible through the UTCs' membership of the LSBU Group, a partnership between London South Bank University, South Bank Colleges (including Lambeth College) and Southbank Academies Trust, which has South Bank UTC.

Most pupils at 18 years old go on to university or to work. Few go on to study standalone technical qualifications at level 4, which are the equivalent of the first year of a degree. Moreover, this year, some of our UTC students were unable to take their planned path when employers withdrew pre-arranged engineering apprenticeship places due to the impact of Covid-19.

Faced with this challenge, the UTC collaborated with other members of LSBU Group to find a solution and quickly spotted areas of overlap across the two institutions. The BTEC engineering programme covered much of the content in the higher national certificate mechanical engineering course at university. Working together, South Bank UTC and LSBU created a new year 14 to enable UTC pupils to stay on for an extra fifth year. So we are enabling pupils to gain a level 4 higher national qualification and to go directly into the second year of higher education (level 5) at university if they so wish. South Bank UTC pupils have the option to stay on for an extra year to study for a BTEC extended diploma in engineering.

By working with the university on curriculum content and enrichment activities, that additional year gives students

the opportunity to enhance their level 3 BTEC study to meet the HNC requirement at level 4. Students have the option to take the exam with the fees covered by scholarships from LSBU. Second-year entry to LSBU is possible because we identified BTEC modules that matched the university's first-year requirements. It creates a distinctive five-year programme much closer to the German model. So we equipped pupils who achieve a merit in the requisite elements of the HNC to transfer directly into the second year of our mechanical engineering degree.

"Extending up" to year 14 creates a distinctive five-year programme much closer to the German model, enabling pupils to enter the workplace with a level 4 qualification or to complete a degree in two years. Any UTC could provide a year 14, but major challenges are there for those without a strong university partnership, including funding, teaching capacity and course restrictions. That's how

our partnership enables us to go the extra mile and offer students new learning choices.

The benefits of "extending up to year 14" are huge. For pupils, it provides free access to a higher technical qualification without moving their institution or home and an accessible route to level 4 without committing to a full degree programme. For UTCs it offers a unique point of difference to other providers by enabling them to provide an easier transition from school into higher level technical education. And South Bank UTC's recruitment is strong this year, with 149 enrolled pupils in year 12.

Finally, for the Government, this model helps fill gaps in the UK education system that contribute hugely to skills shortages.

Let's recognise the importance of specialist institutions and start extending up – not just down.



Let's not forget the lessons learnt from the past 18 months

UPP Foundation, 17 August 2021

With Gavin Williamson's recent announcement that full-time in-person teaching will be permitted from September, many institutions, and students, will be eagerly awaiting the return of 'business as usual' when it comes to teaching. The loss of many opportunities for face to face activity and social interaction have emphasised the importance of the learning community and indeed the importance of being able to engage with the wider opportunities attending university can provide.

It is important when looking forward, though, that we do not forget the lessons learnt from the past.

Universities have been supplementing in person teaching with online activities for many years before the pandemic. The concept of online activities is not new. Colleagues across the sector responded incredibly well to the pressures caused by Covid and they have created real innovation in aspects of online delivery over the last eighteen months that have both accelerated our understanding of new pedagogic developments and showed the potential of some online engagement.

This experience should not be ignored as we think about what the future of higher education might look like.

Although my institution, London South Bank University (LSBU), has 'traditional' 18-year-old students living in halls of residences, we also have a significant number of mature and part-time students (many of whom have caring responsibilities) and around a third are apprentices or sponsored by their employers. This diversity means that our students have a variety of priorities and support needs, all of

which we need do our best to take account of. We have had considerable feedback, particularly from students with additional needs, which has highlighted the inequalities that the 'traditional' approach to education can produce. In this context, developments such as the University's use platforms which provides access to pre-recorded lectures has been really valued. Students can now search for content within a video and access advanced accessibility options, which has been useful for some disabled students, particularly the use of captions, and chat functions.

It is inevitable that the changes won't suit every student.

Writing in Wonke in May, then LSBU Student Union President Hattie Tollerson explained how an SU phone bank was set up in order to contact students and find out how they had been coping with online learning. The SU found that parents with children were finding it more difficult to study; often having to share one digital device for both school and university work. More traditional first-year students highlighted difficulty in concentrating and engaging with their learning. And while many were positive about the university's response to the pandemic, there was ultimately a feeling of isolation from the university community.

There has been much media coverage about online delivery.

Questions are being asked as to why fees should be paid in full if some activity is not being delivered face to face. This is, in my opinion, too narrow a view. Clearly, if students had signed up for a campus based course

and were just getting online activity then these questions should be asked. But we can't allow an over simplistic interpretation of online opportunities to prevent us evolving these new tools when we know they have the potential to enhance learning.

It is my belief that HEIs, especially those with more diverse cohorts such as LSBU, need to move forward with a blended approach that seeks to work for as many people as possible. Indeed, this has been embedded in our corporate strategy for the last 7 years and the aim is to enable a greater degree of individualisation through the use of some online delivery – especially where that involves transmission of knowledge – but in tandem with on campus activities that enable that knowledge to be put into practice and tested in workshops, labs, tutorials, seminars etc.

Alongside finding ways to improve the student experience, we must remember that many staff have spent the last eighteen months working from home in an unprecedented shift away from the traditional 9-5 office hours. While there have been some great innovations

that have made working from home easier, they have been done at such a speed that they are far from perfect. We have created more of a hybrid system i.e. one of online and, where possible on campus activity, not a blended system where the online and on campus work have been developed to complement each other and support learning.

At LSBU, we are looking at a number of ways to facilitate a move towards a genuinely blended way of working.

To support our academic staff, for example, we are seeking to appoint an increasing number of learning technologists to provide advice in terms of creating strong online material that can convey course content in the same way that in-person lectures and seminars would. We have also brought in external consultants to trial different learning platforms so that we can assess which ones are felt to be best by both staff and students. We have also introduced a range of workshops and listening sessions to try and bring staff together, albeit virtually, to share their experiences. This is not about finding 'cheaper options'.

(The cost in development is, in fact, higher.) It is about finding the best way to support students with their learning and engaging staff in fast moving and exciting areas of pedagogic development. With around half of LSBU's course portfolio involving elements of practical or laboratory work, we will be returning to on-campus delivery in the new academic year and prioritising this type of delivery – while utilising online teaching methods where we feel they can add value to the student experience. Undoubtedly, it will take time to get the balance between online and offline working right, but the most important thing going forward is the need to continue working in partnership with our diverse staff and student bodies so we can best meet the needs of both.

Technical Education could help boost the UK's soft power and exports

NCUB, 13 December 2021

The UK exported £600 billion in goods and services last year, but only around one in ten British businesses currently export – far behind continental competitors like Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands. The Government has therefore launched 'Made in the UK, Sold to the World' to help businesses across the UK double their exports.

While this is a welcome step, and aligns well with the Government's Innovation Strategy, we need to be bolder and utilise the strengths of our Universities of Technology to strengthen both our soft power influence and our platform for exports.

There is a significant demand for technical skills in the world's fastest developing economies. Currently, only 12% of India's workforce are digitally skilled and Amazon Web Services predicts that this will need to increase nine-fold by 2025 in order to keep up with demand. In China, the Government is creating a network of overseas vocational colleges (called Luban Workshops) to train up local people in technical areas required by their Belt and Road projects. While initially started by regional government, Beijing has rapidly taken over the Luban Workshop initiative, as it has become clear that these new institutions are not only strengthening relationships with growing economies but also training their workforces using the Chinese technology and software they are seeking to export.

There is a common and long-standing misconception in the UK that our country doesn't 'do' technical education and one of the results of this is that our overseas education delegations often focus on showcasing Research-Intensive Universities rather than Universities of Technology.

Over the last 150 years, successive Education Secretaries have launched initiatives with the promise of delivering a system of technical education to rival Germany's. It is what led to the foundation of my institution, London South Bank University (LSBU), in 1892 (then the Borough Polytechnic Institute) and other polytechnics in the 50s. It is what led to the creation of Colleges of Advanced Technology in the 60s.

Although some of these institutions have been driven to widen the scope of their provision, many have maintained the technical focus for which they were founded – educating technicians and professionals and collaborating with businesses to drive innovation in new products and services. Far from dying out, 39% of students studying at UK universities in 2019 were, in fact, enrolled onto a technical course. Rather than being 'lesser versions' of the UK's research-intensive institutions, as they are so often portrayed, 'Universities of Technology' are distinct and powerful institutions in their own right, providing crucial support to UK plc. Nissan depends on the automotive engineers trained by Sunderland University, just as the construction industry depends on the fact 2/3rds of all building service engineers are trained at LSBU. I recently explored the potential these institutions have for supporting the levelling-up agenda in a report co-authored with Aston University.

The skills and expertise of these institutions are not only vital to the health of the UK economy, but they could also have an important role to play in boosting the UK's soft power as an independent trading nation. For example, LSBU is currently exploring how we can adapt our existing, award-winning, technical provision by working with overseas partner institutions to create a suite of technical programmes modelled on English higher and degree apprenticeships. We are already in talks with Zhejiang Institute of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering (ZIME) in Hangzhou Province, China about establishing a joint institute which will offer Level 5 (HND equivalent) technical diplomas in engineering and business.

Perhaps the time has come for us to stop trying to force new initiatives or create new institutions but instead to recognise the value of our existing Universities of Technology and encourage their growth as part of a differentiated education sector. The recent Skills for Jobs White Paper and the Innovation Strategy provide an excellent framework for this work so long as we don't restrict our ambition with outmoded and often poorly informed views of what the UK education sector already has the power to offer.

Lifelong Loan Entitlement: We must think carefully as we introduce modularised learning

FE Week, 21 December 2021

Despite many questions surrounding tertiary education being up in the air recently, there is one area of policy development which appears to have been etched in stone since the moment it was announced.

The Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) has the potential to revolutionise lifelong learning by allowing learners to take out tuition loans for shorter stand-alone qualifications – including Higher National Certificates (HNCs) or Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs).

If the qualification is part of an educational pathway, this would enable a learner to study a Level 4 course in the full knowledge that they have the option to return to higher education to up-skill or re-skill with a Level 5 or 6 qualification later on.

It would also create a radically more flexible approach to skills development, whereby learners could collect a basket of qualifications relevant to their needs rather than working on a linear progression to degree level study.

A learner might, for example, undertake a second Level 4 course later in their career rather than automatically progressing to Level 5. This could have a significant impact on the country's ability to address the shortfall in the proportion of our society holding a Level 4 qualification. Further, in large organisations like the NHS, it could support workforce development and retention by allowing individuals to re-skill and change specialism as required.

It's for these reasons that, as a Commissioner for the Lifelong Education Commission, I was pleased that our first report welcomed the introduction of the LLE – whilst also arguing that it should be accessible to all citizens, regardless of their prior qualifications.

Taking a more modular approach

To facilitate the benefits outlined here and drive flexibility in learning, the LLE will have to move from a model which bases funding on years of study to one which takes a more modular approach.

For example, a full year of a degree or HNC at 120 credits could consist of 3 modules of funded study, rather than one complete year carrying a large price tag.

There is logic to this approach; and it may prove invaluable to those individuals looking to up-skill in a specific professional area – particularly in the face of automation and ongoing rapid changes in the job market.

My institution, London South Bank University, for example recently submitted a successful bid to the Office for Students' Short Course Trial to run courses on retrofitting buildings, aimed at existing built environment professionals.

Given that individuals with bachelor's degrees will usually have one year's worth of funding entitlement left, the option to break this up into individual modules, or short courses would no doubt be welcomed by many.

Avoiding more educational dead ends

The higher education framework is, however, internationally defined, and so there is a risk that funding at a modular (rather

than at a qualification) level could create a significant administrative burden.

Without proper information, advice and guidance, such a model could also see learners unintentionally using much of their four-year loan entitlements on a disparate array of 'modules' or short courses which do not ultimately amount to a meaningful qualification.

Some short courses provide specific skills required by employers – and where that is the case, employers pay for them. But what of those learners taking short courses in the hope of building a higher-level qualification over time?

A degree is not simply a random collection of modules. They are composed of many core components that need to be covered and there is an interplay between modules. This is particularly true of professionally accredited degrees.

Building modules into meaningful qualifications

There is therefore a question of who will help these learners to build modules into meaningful qualifications if that is their aim?

The Lifelong Learning Entitlement has the opportunity to revolutionise tertiary education by providing a more flexible system that moves away from a focus on year-long courses or degree level outcomes.

The Government must ensure, however, that it provides the means for learners to upskill and reskill to meet their career aspirations rather than adding more educational dead ends to a system that is already full of them.

Unless an individual short course meets a specific occupational need, or is part of a properly designed educational pathway, it could be worth very little to employers and perhaps even to learners themselves.

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