



APPG for Students:

Tertiary education: Cultivating skills, employability and preparing students for the future,

Wednesday 13th March 2024

Timings: 5.30pm to 6.30pm - briefing and panel discussion
6.30pm to 7.30pm - drop-in session for Members of Parliament to meet with attending student representatives.

Location: Grimond Room, Portcullis House, Westminster, London.



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Background and reasons for the meeting

The APPG for Students held a meeting to discuss tertiary education as a whole, with a focus on Further Education and Apprenticeships, as well as how FE prepares those who want to go on to Higher Education, to do so.

The meeting examined the long-term future of education and focused on meeting the immediate skills needs in the UK. The panel discussion offered insights into current challenges and potential solutions, with an emphasis on fostering meaningful dialogue between policymakers, educators, and students.

The Panel

The meeting was chaired by **Lord David Willetts and Paul Blomfield MP** and heard from a panel which consisted of:

- **Bernie Savage** - National Union of Students (NUS) Vice President for Further Education.
- **Simon Phipp** - an apprentice.
- **Annabel May** - an apprentice.
- **Oluwasola Adesulu** - University of Law SU.
- **Eddie Playfair** - Senior Policy Manager for the Association of Colleges (AoC).



Introductory remarks

Lord David Willitts:

Welcomed attendees to the meeting and expressed anticipation for the forthcoming discussion on tertiary education and emphasized Parliament's eagerness to hear from the participants.

Bernie Savage, NUS VP for FE:

Stressed the urgent need for significant investment in FE colleges to support diverse student needs, modernize the curriculum, and enhance support services, including mental health resources and enrichment activities.

Simon Phipp, Apprentice:

Highlighted the importance of flexibility in apprenticeship programs and raised concerns about low wages and inadequate training support for apprentices. He underscored the value of integrating work experience with learning to enhance apprenticeship effectiveness.

Annabel May, Apprentice:

Annabel echoed Simon's concerns about low wages and emphasized the need for standardized application systems for apprenticeships. She called for improved governance and support mechanisms to ensure quality apprenticeship experiences.

Oluwasola Adesulu, University of Law, SU:

Oluwasola emphasized the continued relevance of higher education (HE) and cautioned against dismissing its role in delivering valuable educational outcomes. He stressed the importance of educators' input in setting standards and fostering meaningful learning experiences.

Eddie Playfair, AoC:

Highlighted the fragmented nature of the post-16 education system and advocated a more responsive and inclusive tertiary system. He emphasized the need for more consistent financial support for FE students and greater student agency in decision-making.



The current landscape and challenges

Bernie Savage, NUS VP for FE:

There's a misconception that everybody in FE is 16. But there's lots of part time learners, mature students, students with children, students with care responsibilities, apprentices out on site, and others. Exams and assessments are often outdated, the assessments are outdated. Technology in the classroom often can't be used out in the real world. Students can't access hardship funding, can't access mental health support. Since the pandemic, people have lost the sense of community and college is so well placed to actually build that back and pull students back to the forefront of their communities. It can upskill people, it can reskill people. It's for a lot of people less daunting than university. And it's also important to remember there's not one path to get to the career you want. And colleges offer so many choices, such as apprenticeships or part time. They need solid investment for long term sustainability.

Simon Phipp, Apprentice:

There's very little overlap between the job that I do and the apprenticeship, which was very disappointing. I work with both the National Society of Apprentices and the Association of Apprentices. So, I speak to a lot of apprentices. I go to lots of events. And they all tell me that the national wage for apprentices is an insult. Bear in mind that apprentices quite often have to buy equipment to do their apprenticeship. If you're employed to do a job, and apprentices are employed, then the company should be providing that equipment.

Annabel May, Apprentice:

The current apprentice wage is £5.20 an hour at the minute. So, to put that into perspective for you, a textbook for me can start at £40. So, if I was to buy two textbooks for my course, I'd have to work over 15 hours on the current apprentice wage. And that's before I've even got a roof over my head.

There's not a resource out there for equal access to apprenticeships. So, we are asking for the creation of a new apprenticeship gateway for a single application portal with standardized application system. And UCAS have started to do this. But we want to see a bigger drive on that in comparison to university.

Oluwasola Adesulu, University of Law:

I think the future of learning, skills development, and the future of education of young people in the country remains in higher education. With the emergence of things like apprenticeships and other various forms of ways where students can get into the workplace, there's been a loud conversation around the place of higher education institutions in delivering educational outcomes, and the potential dinosaur status of HE institutions. The suggestion has been that HE is the least effective in delivering useful educational outcomes. HE might have some delivery and organisational problems, but these kinds of issues are typical of any complex system that has to run efficiently for many years. The purpose of higher education for a very long time has always been about learning, skills, development and growth - these are outcomes of education itself, and it is up to active stakeholders' engagement to keep HE on track and in-focus whenever it veers off.

Eddie PlayFair AoC:

We use the word tertiary because it implies thinking holistically about the post - 16 system. Currently, it's quite fragmented into HE, FE, schools and training



providers. And there's a lack of coordination and coherence. We don't really have a recognisable system. Providers decide what they're going to offer and who to offer it to and there's competition between providers for the same learners. We also have different funding systems and student maintenance systems - all of that is very fragmented and it means there's a lot of inequality. There's no parity between different groups. That's a real problem that needs to be addressed, and it's not just about money. Obviously more money is always welcome, but it's also about looking holistically at students, their needs, and having a responsive system.



Questions and comments from the floor:

Huma Hasan. Co -president at the University of Law:

Discussed the potential for AI and online learning to enhance education accessibility and engagement. She called for curriculum adjustments to promote lifelong learning and critical thinking skills, as well as innovative teaching methods to foster student curiosity.

Jack Stokes, President of Dudley College Student's Union:

Stressed the importance of flexibility in education and advocated for more options for students to achieve their goals. Emphasized the need for student-centered approaches to education to ensure individual success. Spoke of own experience of achieving success through the BTEC rather than A-Levels and how there was not just one path suitable for all.

Natasha Fernandes, UCB Guild Birmingham:

Natasha highlighted the importance of updating curriculums to align with current job market needs and technological advancements. She emphasized the need for modernized education to equip students with relevant skills for today's workforce.

A lifelong learner:

Shared insights into the transformative power of education and advocated for greater recognition of lifelong learning opportunities for individuals of all ages. They stressed the personal and professional growth that comes with continuous learning. Spoke about mature students and how people often thought of education as for the young, but there were lots of different types of learners and providers need to ensure there are offerings suitable for all.

A student at University College of Birmingham:

Discussed the importance of equipping students with employability skills and integrating AI and technology into courses. They emphasized the need for consistent standards across HE, FE, and apprenticeships to prepare students for the workforce.

Susana Kyei, final year LLB student at the University of Law:

Highlighted the need to address misconceptions about apprenticeships and promote the benefits of these programs. They emphasized the importance of strategies to debunk negative perceptions and raise awareness of apprenticeship opportunities.



Suggestions for change: Student engagement

Bernie Savage, NUS VP for FE:

We need to redo the curriculum and put students at the heart of education. We need an education system that provides for students, not just today, but tomorrow. Students need to be in the room and having these discussions. Students are the experts of their education. If they're not in the room to discuss these changes in the curriculum, to tell you what is working, what's not, then how is it ever going to be better for them? How are you going to improve the student experience if you haven't got a student voice in the room? Students will tell you what they need investment in, what works and what isn't.

Annabel May, Apprentice:

Some training providers don't require a union to voice students and apprentice views. So, I do my apprenticeship with a training provider, and they don't have a student's union, they don't have somewhere I can go to if I've got a problem with my apprenticeship. It's just a case of sucking it up, essentially, that's all I can do. And touchwood, it's not been that awful, so far. So, fingers crossed. But if I was struggling, there's no one to turn to.

Oluwasola Adesulu, University of Law:

HE has a lot of practice and experience in cultivating a student voice and making sure those voices are in the room. NUS is such a brilliant organisation and does this on a national scale. HE has a very significant role drawing out the student experience and voices. It's not that it can't be done in FE colleges, but HE has the platform already.

Eddie Playfair, AoC:

In most FE colleges there's a strong culture of student engagement where students are involved and listened to. It starts in the classroom, with the individual teacher in their class responding to feedback. And then there are formal structures: tutor reps, student councils and student unions. And it develops the capacity to generate student advocates and leaders.

I've been working on our response to the government's proposals for a new 16 to 18 study programmes and governments' view of a curriculum is students know exactly what they want and where they're going. But in the real world, students' interests and aspirations change, and things happen in their lives, so a cookie cutter approach just doesn't work.



Suggestions for change: technology, AI, remote learning and the curriculum

Eddie Playfair, AoC:

What online or blended learning does is enhance and expand what you can do. But this is also about AI and the fourth industrial revolution which is changing everything. It's going to change the world in which we live. It would be crazy for education not to reflect and prepare for this. Some of the things we do are outdated, just the whole idea of sitting students in rooms, hundreds and hundreds of students at the same time, taking the same exam, with pen and paper, at the same time, while the awarding bodies are marking their work using digital and high tech methods.

Simon Phipp, Apprentice:

My course is completely online. I've got people from the south coast, London, Northumbria, Cumbria, Wales, all on the same course, all at the same time. We couldn't have that course if we had to attend because people couldn't travel four hours to a single point every week. My course is provided by the University of London. If I had to go to London every week I couldn't do it. My work wouldn't allow me to. Online learning can be really good. The new ways of doing things are not necessarily wrong and they're not necessarily the best thing for everybody, but they do work.

Chris Ademola, Apprentice:

My apprenticeship was entirely online. My learning was online, so I would meet with my tutor twice every week, but I was only able to succeed in my apprenticeship because it was well integrated. A learning provider was always in contact with my employer, so what if I was learning at that time, I was applying it in the work experience. It made learning quicker. I was able to see the real - life implication of what I was learning. Online learning can be integrated. It's not the sole way forward, but it can be applied in the right way.



Suggestions for change: Improving apprenticeships

Chris Ademola, Apprentice:

I started an apprenticeship at 16, which is a difficult age to start or get an apprenticeship. My apprenticeship was at Salford City College along with Wigan Council. What's important to help students complete their apprenticeship is having a clear induction program. Know what you're expected as an apprentice, and in return, this is what your employer or your learning provider will provide to you, or what you will gain out of your apprenticeship.

Simon Phipp, Apprentice:

My apprenticeship is due to the apprenticeship levy, so it's effectively a day training course with work funded through the levy. I found that my level five apprenticeship was very good because the flexibility between the apprenticeship and my work, so the apprenticeship helped my working knowledge, and my work experience helped my apprenticeship. The level six, the degree side is very academic. There's very little overlap between the job that I do and the apprenticeship, which was very disappointing.

Annabel May, Apprentice:

I'm doing a level five CIPD and HR consultant partner apprenticeship all the current apprenticeships on UCAS in the area that I live started from level three as well. If I wanted to progress, there isn't that opportunity on the UCAS website at the minute. Jeremy Hunt said in his budget, he wants to create the new Silicon Valley within the UK. But we need the skills and the opportunities. We also know that not all apprenticeships are excellent. Too many apprentices don't receive off-the-job training and aren't supported in the workplace. We need that new body to govern apprenticeships. And through mine and Simon's work with the European Apprentice Network, we've seen a social partnership models where the government work with employers, educators, and apprenticeships to find those cohesive solutions.



Closing remarks and reflection

Eddie Playfair, AoC:

A more tertiary system would respond better to people's needs which vary at different stages in life. It needs to be flexible, inclusive, less linear, and less time constrained. Student financial support needs to be consistent and fair. There's a big imbalance between HE fees and loan support and non-HE support, for young people and for adults. We need to give learners agency and empower them to know their choices of where and how to study. We need to incentivise participation rather than putting people off. These are big challenges - and without criticising schools, a lot of people have been turned off education by the age of 16. Colleges do a lot of salvage and repair work, not least with English and maths. We need a joined-up system, with joined up student support and maintenance.

Chris Ademola, Apprentice:

Many students don't understand the importance of education. Some feel like it's a burden and not a way of improving themselves. Students in the early years are very curious and ask profound questions. But then as we grow up, and I'm sure teachers will realize this, what students tend to ask is, is it going to be on the test? So where does that interest and enthusiasm for learning go? It's important to integrate and develop the main skills that will be able to be used in the future. With the right support - from government, employers, education providers, and apprentices themselves - apprenticeships can become bigger than they are today.

Oluwasola Adesulu, University of Law:

Learning is a negotiation between a learner and provider as to how much interest, effort, and commitment they bring to the learning environment. We need the input of educators to guide students on what the standard should be and push for better higher educational outcomes.

Bernie Savage, NUS VP for FE:

It's important to remember there's not one path to get to the career you want. And colleges offer so many choices, such as apprenticeships or part time. They need solid investment for long term sustainability. And students need to be in the room and in the discussion when decisions are made. Not in a tokenistic way, but in a meaningful way.

Simon Phipp, Apprentice:

My apprenticeship is due to the apprenticeship levy, so it's effectively a day training course with work funded through the levy. One of the big things about FE and apprenticeships is that HE I see as being for education purposes, but the older you get the less important it is to have education for education's sake.

Annabel May, Apprentice:

We need a new apprenticeship gateway for a single application portal with standardized application system. UCAS have started to do this, but we want to see a bigger drive on that in comparison to university. If I was to look for apprenticeships in Leicestershire for example, there's just 12 opportunities at the minute that I could choose from.