

Post-16 education: NEU DGS candidates speak

We print here extracts from interviews conducted by **Dan Whittall** with the three candidates for NEU DGS. (He did this while Gavin Williamson was still Secretary of State). Dan posed seven questions. Given that balloting started in September, we put the full text of all the interviews (ie including responses to questions 1, 5, 6 and 7) on the *PSE* website <http://post16educator.org.uk> in advance of the magazine publication date. They are still accessible there, including via the direct link <http://post16educator.org.uk/pseneu>.

This October, members of National Education Union will elect a Deputy General Secretary. The winning candidate may ultimately go on to become the first elected General Secretary of the NEU, taking over from Mary Bousted and Kevin Courtney who have been Joint General Secretary since the amalgamation of the NUT and ATL. With over 450,000, the NEU is the largest education union in Europe, so this election offers an opportunity to discuss the challenges and opportunities facing the post-16 sector. Dan Whittall spoke with all three of the candidates on behalf of *Post-16 Educator* in an attempt to get a sense of where each candidate stands in relation to post-16 education and organising.

2. What do you think are the biggest challenges facing the post-16 sector at the moment?

Gawain Little

I think the biggest threat is funding. Post-16 funding has been inadequate for far too long and the cumulative effect has a knock-on for staff, students and the sector as a whole. Within NEU campaigns for education funding, we need to raise the voice of the post-16 sector so that it cannot be ignored by politicians and policy-makers.

I also think there is an immediate and specific threat to terms and conditions in sixth form colleges arising from this. As inadequate funding and deficit budgets lead to more and more mergers across the sector, the terms and conditions we have managed to maintain in sixth form colleges, and the national negotiations with the Sixth Form Colleges Association, come under greater threat. We have seen the impact that incorporation in the 1990s, and the separation of FE pay and conditions from schoolteachers' has had on our members in FE. We have also seen how sophisticated targeted balloting and action in the sixth

form college sector has brought pay back in line for our members. We need to be fighting to improve pay and conditions in FE to match those in compulsory education, not watching the breakup of pay and conditions in the sixth form sector. This will mean organising collectively and taking action to force employers to the table where necessary.

Martin Powell-Davies

At root, education policy, particularly post-16, has always been governed by the perceived level of need from government and big business to spend resources on producing a sufficiently well-educated workforce. An increasing reliance on a predominantly low-skill, low-wage economy, alongside a government looking to cut debt piled up during the pandemic, will inevitably mean the existing challenges of post-16 underfunding, coupled with a narrowing of the curriculum, will only get worse.

The NEU has pointed out that post-16 funding has been cut harder than any other sector. In July, the 'School Funding in England' Report, published by the National Audit Office, confirmed that squeeze, finding that funding per student had fallen by 11.4 per cent in real terms between 2014-15 and 2020-21. For staff, those cuts will continue to threaten further job losses, excessive workload and real terms pay cuts. HE and FE staff will also face similar challenges, alongside increasing casualisation.

These are challenges that must be fought through using our collective strength.

Niamh Sweeney

There are certainly challenges. Without a doubt the biggest challenge has to be funding. Whether we are talking about Sixth Form Colleges or Further

Education Colleges the funding level per student has not kept in line with inflation, does not reflect the true cost of delivering specialist high quality education and has meant that class sizes have risen, courses have been cut and pay levels have not kept pace with schools, which makes the profession less attractive to experts from industry.

Post-16 funding per student is still significantly lower than that given to 11-16 establishments and dramatically lower than other European countries. That combined with funding in FE being linked to outdated Ofsted grading, lagged funding so colleges don't actually receive the funding when the student starts and complexities connected to funding level 2 programmes and VAT, leave college leaders in staggeringly difficult positions trying to balance the books rather than teach from them.

Mergers, amalgamations and academisation also threaten the identity of the sector and are in danger of narrowing student choice. For too long post 16 education and training has been used by successive governments as a bit of a plaything. They tinker around the edges and make grand announcements about skills and training, but they don't really take the time to understand it, the professionals working in it or the students for whom it can be life changing. Money is thrown at advisory groups, special projects and corporate branding and then they don't go anywhere. I am still cross at all the time and money wasted on the 14-19 Diploma.

3. What are your thoughts on the Government's new T-level qualifications, and how do you think the NEU should respond to them?

Gawain Little

I am concerned that T-levels represent yet another attempt by government to raise the status of technical and vocational qualifications in exactly the wrong way. I believe we need a complete rethink of post-16 qualifications to consider:

- whether specialisation takes place too early within our education system;
- how we can ensure a broad and balanced curriculum within which students have the opportunity to focus and develop a range of skills and competencies;
- what practical moves can be made to break down the 'academic/technical-vocational' divide, including looking at parity of funding; and
- how we can develop 14-19 pathways in education that provide opportunities to all students, rather than forcing them down narrow paths based on an outdated view of education.

Martin Powell-Davies

The Government's insistence on pushing ahead with T-levels, while scrapping many applied general qualifications, is another example of education policy being imposed against the objections of post-16 educators.

As the NEU and others have warned, and as I have seen from my own FE teaching experience, specialised T-levels risk being too inaccessible for many learners, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Without the ability to take other qualifications, such as BTECs, many students may struggle to succeed at T-level, leaving them dropping out of courses without level 3 qualifications, further widening educational inequality.

The NEU needs to urgently join with other unions and concerned bodies, as well as producing lobbying materials for students, parents and staff, in order to keep up the pressure on the Government to retain a much wider range of applied general qualifications. We need to make clear to ministers that these are far from the 'second rate qualifications' that he has insultingly suggested and that there is indeed a 'real need' for them to remain.

Niamh Sweeney

I have been sounding the klaxon about T-levels since they were first mooted. I know that there are NEU members delivering them, some of my colleagues have been involved in a work experience pilot for them, but I always come back to the same question. What is the point of them?

Gavin Williamson says he wants them to be a world beating 'gold standard' qualification. Just saying that doesn't make it so! I also don't believe it is good enough for him to say there are too many Level 3 qualifications and the system is 'too complex'. I have been teaching a range of vocational / technical / general applied qualifications for 20 years now and once you explain to a parent what they are, they grasp the concept very quickly and students just get it. I also think his line about those qualifications as being 'poor quality' and 'less rigorous' is offensive to the sector, profession and young people who complete them. The expectation for students to complete 315 hours or 45 days work placement is aspirational at best. It's all well and good for Gavin to say that Rolls Royce and British Aerospace are designing programmes of assessment, but the reality is we struggle finding employers to take our Health and Social Care students for 100 hours at the moment. Most work placements are found through familial connections or are provided by Pete's Plumbers and Cool Kutz rather than large

multi-nationals. There is huge difficulty in finding work placements in rural areas, for those without 'connections' and there are costs involved in travelling to work placement, the adjustments needed for students with SEND. All this threatens the ability of students to choose the course they are interested in or passionate about.

If the Government wants our post-16 qualifications to be truly 'gold standard' for all young people then I don't think they can just look at one area of qualifications. You can't reform vocational qualifications and leave A-levels alone, especially if it's just because you don't understand them, Gavin.

How can the NEU respond? Well, I think we have also got to stop the 'othering' of those students who take, and the members who teach, vocational / technical or general applied qualifications. I'd like to see our press releases around results day reflect that actually the majority of post-16 students study a mixed economy of A-levels plus a BTEC or general applied qualification.

We also need to be much more vocal in calling out the Government on how it reports on the successes of the T-level project. Where has the money gone? How many colleges are actually delivering them? What are the results? How many couldn't be completed because of the work placement requirement? How is recruitment of students onto them for this September?

4. What are your thoughts on the relationship between the academic and the vocational in the current post-16 system, and how if at all do you think this relationship should be reformed in future?

Gawain Little

I believe we need a complete review of 14-19 education led by the profession itself. I think we need to move beyond the 'academic/vocational' divide and genuinely offer equal status and the ability for students to pick from across a spectrum of courses including academic and vocational elements. This needs to be part of a National Education Service which provides education to all from cradle to grave. As a union, we need a long-term strategy to fight for this alternative vision of education.

Martin Powell-Davies

Historically, our education system has always been marred by a class divide between academic and vocational education. In contrast, the aim of trade unionists and socialists, like myself, has always been to counter that separation and, instead, to build a curriculum that helps to educate 'fully developed human beings'.

As DGS, I would therefore fully support campaigns to enact NEU policy of 'a reformed, unified, properly-funded system of 14-19 curriculum and qualifications which [would] help bring an end to the notion that academic and technical learning pathways at 16 are an "either/or" option'. We need a teacher-led review of the whole examination system which includes recommendations that encourage all young people to be taught both more traditionally 'academic' and 'vocational' topics, rather than dividing students into separate pathways. Of course, given the present role of the examination system in grading and sifting young people for university admissions and routes into employment, for successful implementation such a change also requires working to overcome the huge income inequality between different types of work - and for those not in permanent employment at all - within our society as a whole and for a society that values education in its own right.

Niamh Sweeney

Continuing from above [ie her answer to question 3. Ed.] - there is lots NEU members, particularly our leadership members, can do to break down the barriers between academic and vocational qualifications. I worked at a school once that wouldn't allow students with predicted high grades in their GCSEs study a BTEC Level 2 as part of their programme of study. They were considered 'too good' for it, or it not good enough for them. Vocational and applied qualifications are often considered 'easy' and that simply isn't true. A whole load of 'lockdown' haircuts prove just how difficult Level 1 or 2 hairdressing is and how much we should value those who complete the qualifications to distinction level.

We currently have an 'academic' education system policed by exams. We are in the top three in the world for rote learning. Students come to me at post-16 and they are exhausted, have lost the love for learning and often don't have the independent learning and studying skills we expect them to have. Vocational / technical and general applied qualifications, like the ones I teach in Criminology and Health and Social Care not only spark their interest and provide excellent stepping stones into the world of work or higher education, but they also develop critical thinking and problem solving skills, they tackle complex subject matter that help our young people become the active, global citizens we need them to be.

