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What the next Labour government should do about education

Jane Lethbridge

As the market economy introduced since 1979 collapses, the UK looks more and more like a 'failed' state, and there is now a realistic prospect that a Labour government may soon be elected. This likelihood is increased by Keir Starmer and Gordon Brown's proposals for a reform of the economy and the constitution. These presage a new form of the state, reversing Thatcher's privatisations of industry that were supplemented by Blair's 'modernisation' of public services. Since 2008, the resulting market state could no longer be financed by global capital to which it was deliberately indebted, and its dysfunctions have only been aggravated by repeated austerity.

A Labour government - or even a Labour-led coalition government - will therefore face several crises simultaneously: looming climate / environmental catastrophe, the energy and cost-of-living crisis, the failure of Brexit, and the results of twelve years of austerity that have almost destroyed public services. The purpose of this article is to identify three key policy areas relating to post-16 education and training that *PSE* readers can discuss and campaign for:

- creating an economy that focuses on green jobs and wellbeing;
- reconstructing the education system;
- building a national care service.

1. Creating an economy that focuses on green jobs and wellbeing

The growing recognition that the functioning of the capitalist system is contributing to the global climate / environmental crisis is accompanied by extensive debate about how to build a different type of economy that is not just driven by the pursuit of economic growth. At the same time, a Labour government will have to develop an economic policy which tries to address the structural weaknesses of the UK economy that have become more extreme over the last 40 years, such as an over-dependence on services, a decline in productivity, and unequal regional growth. These issues are not mutually exclusive and could open a new way to reduce the inequalities that are entrenched in many regions of the UK.

Alternatives to economic growth are being framed around the 'everyday' or 'wellbeing' economy. The concept of a 'wellbeing' economy is being explored by the Scottish government. They define a 'wellbeing' economy as inclusive, promoting sustainability, prosperity and resilience, where businesses can thrive and innovate (Public Health Scotland, 2022). This would support communities to access opportunities that deliver local growth and wellbeing.

Similarly, the recently published Labour Party industrial strategy argues for improving wages and working conditions in the 'everyday' economy which supports aspects of daily life in the UK. Arguing that the UK needs 'a new business model', Starmer recently presented the case for a social partnership between trade unions, business and government which would work towards increased growth and productivity across regions. This new social partnership would have to be dependent on replacing the existing shareholder model with a stakeholder model that is focused on reinvestment rather than paying shareholder dividends.

Further and Higher Education (FE/HE) will be central to the creation of a 'wellbeing' economy, as well as implementing the Green New Deal. Over 4.6 million students aged over 16 are studying in these sectors. FE/HE are well positioned to lead a process of **needs assessment** for training and education in local and regional strategies. The Green New Deal must work towards public ownership, rapid decarbonisation and climate justice. These goals would have to be supported by education and training.

FE/HE institutions will have to become **equal partners** with public, private and not-for-profit organisations. Mapping out the nature of existing partnership working and identifying where there is a lack of collaboration will form the basis of new ways of working. Local and regional planning forums must be created to plan, design and evaluate the 'wellbeing' economy.

Having identified the **education and training** required for a transformed economy, there are several areas where research is essential. HE/FE already work with local businesses, which puts them in a good position to contribute to a new 'wellbeing' economy. One of the challenges will be how to apply digital expertise in a local setting. The focus of a Green New Deal has been on the creation of and support for new forms of alternative energy. The existing energy crisis could be ameliorated by an effective national scheme of making housing energy efficient, which would depend on the creation of new expertise by architecture, planning and surveying departments. New flood defences will depend on generating new ways of managing rivers and water resources, which will have to inform planning guidance, infrastructure design and construction.

2. Reconstructing the education system

One immediate implication of rethinking economic growth is that a new set of educational policies will be needed. One of the first actions that a Labour government must take is to abandon the current human capital approach to education, which argues that education is primarily to help people into work. It would

be replaced by a policy which recognises that people learn throughout their lives, and that a system of life-long learning would inform their paid and unpaid labour, leisure and citizenship. A recent publication by the New Economics Foundation entitled *Closing the Divide: How to really level up the UK* (reviewed in PSE January-March 2022), which sets out how to move towards an 'everyday economy', recommended:

full devolution of the adult education budget, the lifelong learning loan scheme, and underspent apprenticeship levies to Combined Authorities to build their skills systems and make them responsive to future needs of the local economy.

A new system of life-long learning would have to be supported by an extensive public education campaign to help people rethink the place of education in their lives, accompanied by an extensive re-orientation of schools and FE/HE. The National Curriculum must be abolished and replaced with a curriculum designed to support education as a life-long process, enabling well-paid employment and the many other activities with which people are involved throughout their lives. Teachers at all levels will have a central role to play in developing a new curriculum.

An educational system based on entitlement to free lifelong learning would have to be more democratic. Increased local government involvement in the provision of education services would enable local people to contribute to planning and designing schools and colleges at local and regional levels. Academy chains would be brought back into local government control. Student loans would be abolished, with students able to access grants for further and higher education throughout their lives. This would reduce the pressure to continue education immediately after leaving school. Encouraging further and higher education to work more closely together would also strengthen a lifelong learning educational system.

3. Building a national care service

There is a political consensus that social care services are in crisis, but there has been a consistent failure of several governments, both Labour and Conservative, to deliver accessible social care services free at the point of access. The next Labour government can no longer avoid creating a National Care Service. It will have to nationalise privatised care services, implement a reconstruction of local government and expand the social care workforce.

One of the biggest challenges facing a new publicly managed and delivered care service is the creation of a sustainable workforce, which is professionalised, trained and well-paid, with low turnover rates. In the

UK, there are 1.62 million social care workers (2021-22) but 165,000 vacant posts, an increase of 55 per cent since 2020-21. Two million social care workers will be needed by 2035. The vacancy rate was 10.7 per cent in 2021-22. The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) issued the last workforce plan in 2009. Further and higher education have a key role to play in expanding the social care workforce and helping to make social care a valued profession.

A new system of further and higher continuing adult education and training would have to be introduced which will encourage young people to consider care as a career and afford opportunities for older people to be re-trained. There are many ways of encouraging young people to work in this sector, for example making links between social care services and social work departments, internships, placements and voluntary work. As young people experience the nature of social care work, this will break down some of the stereotypical images of care work and allow them to decide to continue with further training.

Regional care research and training centres would be set up and some social care services would operate as dedicated teaching care centres. These would work in partnership with schools, higher and further education, not-for-profit organisations and social enterprises. Social care workers in training would gain experience of care delivery in different settings, similar to other health professionals. Existing care workers would be involved in continuous professional development as part of a regional care training and research strategy. Regional care research centres would work to identify and develop future care services, working in partnership with service users and carers.

Conclusion

With the failure of the market state and the prospect of a Labour government, FE/HE has the potential to play an important role in shaping new economic, education and social care policies, based on a new system of lifelong learning. Many FE/HE institutions are already involved in working with local institutions, but they will have to move away from a market-orientated, competitive approach if they want to play a leading role in the 'wellbeing' economy. A more collaborative, partnership approach that works with local communities and businesses as well as different levels of government will be needed.

References

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For further information, contact the Secretary:

Kirit Patel

19 Greenhill Road

Middx HA1 1LD

CAFAS website: www.cafas.org.uk