

Union manifesto vs. reality

Labour's cautious education reforms against UCU's call for transformation

Kate Pritchard

Changing Lives and Transforming Communities: Harnessing the power of post-compulsory education

John Holford, Eddie Playfair and Howard Stevenson, London, UCU, 2025.

19pp, free: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/13731/Harnessing-the-power-of-post-compulsory-education>

Changing Lives and Transforming Communities, a manifesto-style union publication, sets out a comprehensive vision for transforming post-compulsory education in the UK. As mentioned in the foreword by UCU general secretary, Jo Grady, this is 'not an official UCU policy document. However, the UCU have published and promote it as an important contribution to a debate which needs to be engaged with' (p4).

The authors argue that Britain faces a crisis of social fragmentation and democratic decline following years of austerity. They propose that further, higher and adult education sectors are essential to social renewal and reconstruction, but these sectors have been severely weakened by underfunding and market-driven reforms. Published in September 2024, the document is explicitly written for a 'new mission-led government' (p7) and seeks to shape educational policy at a moment of political opportunity following Labour's election victory. This vision positions educational reform not as an end in itself but as a crucial means to address wider social problems, from democratic decline to community breakdown and persistent social inequalities. The authors frame this vision of change as both an urgent necessity, given current crises, and a historic opportunity under a new government which traditionally aligns with the more collective, democratic and community-focused vision outlined in this publication.

Equality, community, democracy

The introduction establishes three foundational purposes that should guide transformative change across post-compulsory education sectors. 'Education for equality' recognises that growing inequalities of class, race and gender have fractured society and contributed to social problems. This requires educational institutions to be organised and resourced differently, through redistributive funding, rather than simply promoting meritocracy within an unequal system. 'Education for community' calls for a

return to public service values and the welfare state principles that guaranteed universal access to essential services as rights of citizenship. It is a defence of public education against market insecurities, and celebrates services based on public value rather than private sector practices. 'Education for democracy' argues that education must underpin democratic participation and be experienced democratically itself. This would require institutions to move away from technical, bureaucratic governance toward participatory forms that meaningfully involve students, employees and communities in decision-making – thus connecting public services to their communities and strengthening the fabric of social life.

Post-compulsory education is then split into three distinct areas: further education (FE, 16-18), higher education (HE) and adult education. The first section highlights how the FE sector faces a fundamental funding crisis, receiving significantly less funding per student than either secondary schools or HE. This chronic underfunding forces colleges to offer narrower, more limited programmes compared to upper secondary education in other countries. The college sector serves a more diverse and disadvantaged student population than school sixth forms. FE remains the most underfunded part of the education system, despite over half of all publicly funded 16–18-year-old students studying in either colleges or sixth form colleges (p8).

The authors contend that the qualification system perpetuates structural inequalities by enforcing a rigid binary division between 'academic' and 'technical' pathways. This inflexible categorisation restricts student choices and systematically disadvantages many learners (p9). Young people are forced to make irreversible choices at 16 or younger, often based on what is available to them locally rather than on their actual needs or interests. This creates a 'postcode lottery' that reproduces existing inequalities (p8). The system features excessive competition between providers of different sizes and selectivity levels, with little coordination, giving the illusion of choice while restricting real options (p9).

A comprehensive approach

Market-driven reforms have created a fragmented landscape with numerous forms of selection and segregation, while democratic governance has been systematically dismantled, reducing local or sub-regional autonomy and coordination (p9). This has led to wasteful competition, status hierarchies, and the marginalisation of subjects like 'performing arts and languages' that attract smaller numbers when students are dispersed across competing providers (p9).

The authors call for a comprehensive approach that creates greater coherence across the entire education system from pre-16 through to post-19, with less selection and segregation into separate tracks (p9). They propose defining a core curriculum that

all 16–18-year-olds should access regardless of their chosen subject, including personal and social development, citizenship skills, democratic participation, relationships, sex, and health education, political and cultural literacy, project work and critical engagement with technology (p9).

Central to their vision is a ‘young person’s guarantee’ that would offer all young people study programmes grounded in social purpose. These programmes would extend beyond mere work preparation, adopting a holistic educational approach rather than treating education as simply an accumulation of qualifications (p10). The authors propose reforming qualification and assessment systems to better serve learners’ needs by reducing excessive testing and by recognising the broader educational benefits that extend beyond formal qualification outcomes (p10). The authors reason that the sector needs democratic governance reform to ensure communities have meaningful influence over local educational provision. This requires coordinated, collaborative partnerships at local and regional levels. However, these reforms depend fundamentally on well-resourced, financially stable colleges that can offer competitive staff salaries and maintain capacity for innovation to address local community needs. Such financial stability would be supported through national collective bargaining and fully funded pay settlements (p10).

Since the appearance of this publication, Labour’s education secretary, Bridget Phillipson, has implemented new FE reforms, some of which align with the vision outlined here in the UCU report. The decision to retain applied general qualifications (such as BTECs, which the previous Conservative government planned to eliminate) directly addresses the binary divide criticised by the authors and enables students with diverse learning styles and career aspirations to pursue appropriate pathways.¹ This reform promotes inclusivity and flexibility within FE by accommodating young people who are not suited to exclusively academic or technical routes. Consequently, more students may continue their education beyond age 16, potentially enhancing social mobility opportunities.

Phillipson has also introduced an ‘in-year funding guarantee’ that ensures funding constraints cannot prevent any 16-17-year-old from securing an FE place. Additionally, the new ‘youth guarantee’ encompasses training, careers advice and work experience to facilitate smoother transitions from school to employment or further study.² These reforms begin to address the authors’ concerns about restricted options within FE by potentially reducing dropout rates and improving outcomes for students at risk of disengagement.

The replacement of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) with Skills England represents a shift toward regional coordination and employer-led planning.³ This reform could decentralise decision-making and increase responsiveness to local economic and community needs, aligning with the authors’

advocacy. These changes suggest modest alignment with the publication's priorities at a practical level, potentially offering grounds for optimism regarding more radical proposed reforms.

Reimagining university

The publication's second section examines the UK higher education system, which the authors describe as facing imminent collapse. They highlight that 40 per cent of English universities are currently operating with deficit budgets, with some institutions confronting genuine closure risks (p11). The authors attribute this crisis to years of austerity and quasi-market creation, which have compelled universities to pursue unsustainable strategies. A critical issue is universities' overdependence on international student recruitment, which is now failing as numbers decline sharply due to hostile government policies (p11). The fees-based funding model continues to distort the sector by restricting access and influencing student choices in ways that may not serve their best interests, contradicting principles of equality, community and democracy.

This crisis reveals itself through widespread industrial action, historically low staff morale, course closures, job losses and increased employment precarity (p11). Teaching and research quality suffer severely, with university research plagued by neglect, short-termism and narrow definitions of valuable knowledge (p11). Social sciences, humanities and arts disciplines face particular threats from dominant 'accountancy logic,' while distorting accountability systems such as the research excellence framework (REF) undermine academic freedom (p11).

Universities have abandoned their civic mission, prioritising income generation over community value while dismantling democratic collegial governance traditions in favour of remote, opaque managerialism (p12). This supports the authors' argument that institutions have become disconnected from communities precisely when democratic renewal is most crucial.

The authors propose reimagining the public university around three key themes. First, rethinking research by boosting capability across diverse disciplines that enhance lives economically, socially and culturally, moving beyond narrow accountability metrics to support genuinely research-informed teaching that can transform students (p12). Second, rediscovering community commitment by reconnecting universities with local and regional communities through partnerships with other education providers, enabling higher education to play a full role in social and community renewal. And third, redefining universities as public and democratic spaces that can contribute to democratic renewal by encouraging critical engagement with ideas and protecting academic freedoms; all while modelling the democratic practices they seek to promote. The authors argue that this requires dismantling the business model managerialism

that has replaced collegial governance (p12).

The authors assert that the sector needs immediate investment to address recognised underfunding, followed by a new funding framework rejecting the current fees-based model in favour of more rational, coordinated approaches, including controlled admissions numbers (p12). Universities should be mandated and resourced to extend community engagement through ‘civic university agreements’ with appropriate accountability mechanisms and meaningful community participation in decision-making (p13).

The sector must protect criticality, social purpose, academic freedom and collective governance against rising authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism. This requires establishing a new social contract with employees through genuine national collective bargaining and adherence to UNESCO recommendations on HE personnel status (p13).

Education secretary Phillipson has introduced reforms aimed at stabilising and modernising UK higher education. From 2025/26, tuition fees will increase by 3.1 per cent to £9535 per year for standard undergraduate full-time home students, the first rise in seven years.⁴ This increase aims to help universities manage inflation and financial pressures.

However, inflation, combined with seven years of fee stagnation, has significantly eroded the real-term value of domestic student fees. While the sector has welcomed the increase in fees, the general consensus is that fees remain insufficient to address universities’ current financial crisis. Recent developments from the Office for Students (OfS) involve creating a clearing-style system to rescue students from failing institutions.⁵ This suggests the government has no intention of alleviating sectoral financial difficulties or challenging the market-led model, but rather embraces institutional closures as part of this system.

Emancipatory vision dismantled

The publication’s third section examines adult education, noting Britain’s former tradition of radical, transformative adult education established by past Labour governments (p14). This system was founded on enriching adults’ quality of life through broad educational offerings that valued personal and community growth alongside occupational knowledge. The approach was genuinely democratic, empowering adult students to shape their learning experiences while collaborating with voluntary organisations and social movements to address contemporary social problems (p14).

This emancipatory vision was systematically dismantled from the Thatcher era onward, replaced by a narrow focus on ‘employability’ and ‘skills’ determined by business needs rather than learner agency. While ‘lifelong learning’ became popular terminology, it delivered a passive, transactional system that instructed rather than

inspired, reducing adults to ‘choosing’ courses that businesses deemed necessary for worker ‘employability’ (p14).

Despite positive initiatives like the union learning fund, even the 1997-2010 New Labour governments maintained this impoverished vision by subordinating educational ambition to perceived economic skills needs (p14). Adult education provision became increasingly controlled by employer-dominated schemes with minimal community connection or democratic accountability (p14). The authors argue these reforms have comprehensively failed. British business continues competing on low pay and precarious contracts via high skills, while adult learning participation has steadily declined. Despite obvious failures, the unchallenged mantra that lifelong learning must be ‘employer-led’ persists, with remote bodies lacking meaningful community input continuing to determine provision.

The authors advocate breaking out of this spiral of decline by rediscovering the reforming ambition of past Labour governments to develop adult education that changes lives. Such education has often served as a lifeline for prisoners, refugees and asylum seekers (p15). The vision must build on adult education’s best traditions of celebrating differences and meeting diverse needs, while drawing people together to build community, social solidarity and shared identity.

The authors argue that adult education must be reconceptualised to serve both individual and community needs, rejecting the classification of certain kinds of education as merely for ‘leisure’, a distinction that perpetuates inequality by restricting access to those who can afford it (p15). Democracy should be central in two ways: as educational content that prepares citizens for stronger democratic participation, and as methodology that allows learners to experience education as a democratic process. All educational institutions require governance restructuring to respond effectively to students, prospective students and social partners, including trade unions. Governing bodies should include representatives from local authorities, community organisations and unions to ensure broader accountability.

The authors advocate comprehensive funding reform to liberate educational institutions from continuous short-term bidding cycles, treating them as responsible partners capable of making informed decisions about local adult education needs (p15). Current funding policies that disadvantage part-time students, and the ‘equivalent or lower’ qualification rule, should be eliminated, while non-accredited provision should be actively encouraged rather than penalised. FE colleges and universities must prioritise adult learners and their communities. Any institution claiming university status should be required to provide appropriate adult education that compensates for historical disadvantages. Adult education should address inequalities through substantial investment in embedding institutions within deprived communities via significantly strengthened outreach units staffed by professionals on stable contracts (p16).

Access to learning requires multiple improvements: employer-provided paid time off and workplace learning spaces; enhanced rights to paid educational leave; reinstated trade union education funding; learning representatives in all workplaces; mandatory employer reporting on training expenditure; and serious consideration of individual and community learning accounts (p16).

The current Labour government has introduced the lifelong learning entitlement (LLE), promoted as one of the most significant adult education reforms in recent UK history.⁶ Launching in 2026, the LLE aims to make education more flexible, accessible and responsive to adult learners and economic needs. The LLE operates as a new funding system providing adults with loan access for higher-level education and training throughout their lives. It replaces advanced learner loans and integrates with existing student finance systems. The scheme supports flexibility by allowing learners to study individual modules rather than requiring commitment to full qualifications, enabling upskilling or reskilling without leaving employment or undertaking long-term study commitments.

However, LLE funding is restricted to priority sectors, including computing, engineering, health and social care, and economics, aimed at aligning education with labour market needs and national productivity goals. While the LLE demonstrates recognition of adult education's importance, aligning with the publication's emphasis, these reforms specifically target economic adaptation to technological and job market changes, contradicting the authors' broader educational ethos.

Addressing real problems

Overall, the publication accurately identifies genuine issues across post-compulsory education sectors. The higher education funding crisis is well-documented, with many universities facing severe financial difficulties. The chronic underfunding of further education compared to schools and universities represents a legitimate concern, supported by sector data and widespread recognition. The authors correctly analyse how market-driven reforms have generated fragmentation and competition rather than collaboration, largely an intentional consequence of policy design. Their emphasis on democratic governance and community engagement addresses real problems of institutional disconnection from local needs. The historical analysis of adult education effectively traces the decline from holistic, community-focused approaches to narrow employability training, challenging current educational perceptions.

However, while acknowledging resource constraints, the authors' proposals would require massive public investment during a period of significant fiscal pressure for the new government. Their agenda encompasses increased funding across all three sectors simultaneously, new funding frameworks, enhanced pay and conditions, expanded

provisions, and strengthened democratic governance. Such extensive structural changes would be unappealing to a government facing electoral pressure to deliver visible results within a limited timeframe.

Although community involvement in governance appears attractive in principle, practical challenges are substantial. Critical questions remain unanswered. Who precisely represents ‘the community’? How would democratic decision-making function without becoming unmanageable, or dominated by specific interest groups? The authors fail to address how institutions would balance democratic input with professional expertise or institutional autonomy, or how local democratic control would coordinate with national oversight to benefit all stakeholders.

Many specific recommendations possess merit, including increased further education funding, improved inter-sectoral coordination, enhanced community engagement, lifelong learning focus and better staff working conditions. However, more radical structural reforms requiring extensive dismantling of current systems lack clear implementation pathways, potentially undermining these proposals’ practical applicability.

The publication’s value lies in functioning as a manifesto for educational activism rather than a realistic policy blueprint. It pushes debate toward more ambitious visions of post-compulsory education’s potential. Labour’s first-year reforms have failed to inspire confidence among many education sector voters. Therefore, sector movements must advocate for radical reforms to challenge the current inadequate approach and reinstate democratic values with a social justice commitment. The authors’ passionate vision for transformation creates space for optimistic reimagining that will inspire hope and set a positive direction for those working to transform education.

Kate Pritchard is a PhD candidate at York St John University, researching the impact and prevalence of populist rhetoric on the higher education sector.

kate.pritchard1@yorks.ac.uk

Notes

1. FE Week Reporter, ‘DfE pauses post-16 qualifications reform and BTEC defunding’, *FE Week*, 24 July 2024: <https://feweek.co.uk/dfe-pauses-post-16-qualifications-reform-and-btec-defunding/>.
2. Department for Education, ‘Message to schools ahead of the start of term from the Secretary of State, Bridget Phillipson’, *The Education Hub*, 3 September 2024: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2024/09/message-schools-ahead-start-term-secretary-of-state-bridget-phillipson/>.
3. Bridget Phillipson, ‘Apprenticeship and skills training’, *UK Parliament Written*

statements – Written questions, answers and statements, 2 June 2025: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-06-02/hcws672>.

4. Department for Education, 'Higher education reform to back opportunity and protect students', DfE, 4 November 2024: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/higher-education-reform-to-back-opportunity-and-protect-students>.

5. Nicola Woolcock, 'Clearing system to rescue students whose universities go bust', *The Times*, 13 August 2025: <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/education/article/clearing-system-to-rescue-students-whose-universities-go-bust-ddrmbgx5x>.

6. Department for Education, 'Lifelong learning entitlement: what it is and how it will work', 14 August 2025: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lifelong-learning-entitlement-lle-overview/lifelong-learning-entitlement-overview>.