

# A broad highway that all can travel – to higher and further destinations

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Back in the 1890s Kier Hardie, Labour's first MP, characterised education, not as a one-off event, but as a continuous journey – 'a broad highway that all can travel'.

[With half young people in the UK attending university for the first time in 2017-18, how broad is the highway for those journeying through further and adult education?](#)

Way back in 1995 while I was still working at the CBI, the employers' organisation produced their report, '*Realising the Vision: A Skills Passport*,' stressing the importance of lifetime learning and the acquisition of core skills. [It encompassed a bold vision proposing a training framework where the three major stakeholders – government, employers and individuals – shared training obligations. The CBI wanted the Department for Education and Employment to establish a core skills task force which would develop and implement a strategy for core skills at every level.](#)

Fast forward to 2015 and the [Association of Colleges were warning that adult education might cease to exist by 2020](#) if austerity cuts continued on an annualised basis. Prof Ewart Keep of Oxford University's department of education, stated this assessment to be, "alarming, but realistic", and NIACE's CEO added that England was facing "a skills crisis".

In that same year the government announced its commitment to creating 3 million new apprenticeships by 2020. However, following the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017 numbers fell dramatically, with employers complaining about increased costs, the new scheme's complexity and the move away from frameworks which

had been considered vital by some in accommodating niche skills development. [Apprenticeship numbers retreated by a decade with 742,400 people participating in apprenticeships in 2018/19, the lowest annual level since 2010/11.](#)

It is against this backdrop that four papers tackling adult education were published over the past year, something in itself which is unprecedented. There has been nothing since the [Leitch review of Skills](#) in 2006 and then four major reports all arrived at once. Whilst there has always been a focus on ensuring people have the opportunity to train and retrain, the new *Skills for Jobs* White Paper is focussed on linking education to industry more effectively through the type of dual track approach taken in Germany – training in the classroom and by employers in the workplace with both regarded with equal parity of esteem.

[The Augur review of Post-18 Education was published in May 2019](#), highlighted that Post-18 (or ‘tertiary’) education in England “is a story of both care and neglect, depending on whether students are amongst the 50 per cent of young people who participate in higher education, or the rest.” In stressing the urgent requirement to address this disparity it was “a matter of fairness and equity... likely to bring considerable social and economic benefits to individuals and the country at large.”

The report noted the blatant inequity in the funding systems – over 1.2m undergraduate students at universities received £8bn public funding, while 2.2 million full and part-time adult further education (FE) students received just £2.3 billion of public funding.

[Labour’s Lifelong Learning Commission reported in November 2019](#) publishing ‘*The Future is ours to Learn*’. This report highlighted that millions of working-age people were not qualified to Level 3 (A-level equivalent) or above, noting the impact of this on earnings potential. CBI warnings were also quoted with 75% of businesses expecting to have job openings for workers with higher level skills in the coming years, with more than half of businesses (61%) concerned there would not be enough skilled people to meet demand. The report, in positioning lifelong learning as a social justice issue, recommended the introduction of a universal, publicly-funded right to learn through life, whilst proposing models of credit accumulation and

transfer (CAT), enabling people to accumulate and transfer achievements.

[At the same time in November 2019 a group of adult educators set up the #AdultEducation100 recognising the historic importance of the 1919 Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee's Final Report, in setting out a vision for lifelong learning for the next century.](#) They too concluded that adult education “must not be regarded as a luxury for a few exceptional persons here and there”. It was, “a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be both universal and lifelong.’

In January 2021 the government produced its *FE White Paper: Skills for Jobs Lifelong learning for Opportunity and Growth*. [Summarised in a House of Commons Briefing Paper](#), it recognised the impact of years of underfunding, with declining student numbers becoming acute in recent years along with critical vocational skills gaps. It stated that of the 1.75m funded further education learners in 2019/20, 0.88m were involved in classroom-based learning, 0.58m in adult apprenticeships, 0.36m in informal community learning courses.

In launching the White Paper, Secretary of State, Gavin Williamson emphasised government’s intention to, “build a world-class German-style further education system in Britain and level up skills and opportunities.”

This approach requires much greater leadership at local level. Whilst adult education is a devolved matter to combined authorities and nations, with relentless budget cuts over the past decade, it’s been noted that the German dual system requires [‘a high level of complex coordination between the employers who pay the trainee’s wages, the federal states that fund vocational training schools tailored to the needs of local industry, the unions that feed into the curriculum, and the chambers of trade and industry that carry out the exams at the end.’](#)

Professor Fergus McKay, based at the Lifelong Learning Centre, University of Warwick, in welcoming the White Paper, stated, “At the heart of the White paper is an economic vision of lifelong learning that is based on collaboration between ‘education and industry’ supported by the state.”

The White Paper recognises the impact of Covid and withdrawal from the EU on jobs in having a key role in increasing access to skills development. New initiatives announced included the National Skills Fund, the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, Kickstart and digital boot camps.

Skills gaps have certainly been a continuing feature for employers across the West Midlands in critically impacting on productivity and growth. [IDEA research](#) has consistently found skills gaps cited as manufacturers' top competitive priority. Technicians are most often required, with equal emphasis on the need for design and production engineers along with skilled crafts people and modern apprenticeships. Over a third of companies are unable to meet current needs and see greater requirements for emerging skills needs.

[The Quarter 2 Quarterly Economic Business Report from the Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce](#) also stressed the needs of businesses facing recruitment difficulties with 54% struggling to hire candidates with the right professional/managerial background and 19% struggling with technical skills, down from 29% in Q1, perhaps linked to accelerating manufacturing redundancies.

The Chamber also welcomed the Chancellor's plans to invest £1.6bn in the Kickstart Scheme in 2021-22, noting that it was targeting the funding of over 250,000 new jobs for young people across the country.

It is against this backdrop that I have [been chairing the Malvern Hills College SOS Task Group as a local councillor in Malvern Hills](#) in seeking to save our adult education provision and Malvern Hills College from closure. Our Task Group includes students and staff, local county, district and town councillors. Professor Fergus McKay, as well as a wide range of those previously involved in running adult education and local charities, are also involved.

Having found a willing philanthropic funder prepared to purchase the College from the current owners [and held some initial promising discussions](#), our Task Group is looking at how we might develop the curriculum to meet local resident and employer needs whilst also increasing arts course offerings.

The College was established in 1886 as the School of Art and Crafts. The current building was constructed in 1928 as the Malvern Technical College and School of Art – a link rarely seen in today’s curricula and reminiscent of the goals of former Polytechnics. From 1965 it became known as Malvern College of Further Education and later in 2000 as the Malvern Hills College.

The curriculum is unique in Worcestershire and the West Midlands in predominantly serving the local community with non-funded adult education courses, primarily focussed around the arts and catering to over 800 local students. Of the 89 courses promoted in the 2020 course guide, 34 cover painting, drawing and printing options, 12 are textiles-based, 11 pottery-focussed, 9 in jewellery, with other options in book-binding, stained glass making, languages, floristry and wood carving. [With half of schools stating following the introduction of the English Baccalaureate that arts provision in their school had been cut due to the government’s focus on “core subjects” we see this curriculum as having a vital and expanding role to play in our area in reaching out to younger pupils.](#)

Students at the Malvern Hills College note, ‘Art provision is important; creativity is much underappreciated and continually trodden on in favour of ‘cyber technologies’ at the moment. Artists and creatives are essential to our society and often adapt, branching into all disciplines, sharing creative problem-solving skills. Art also provides recreation and community wellbeing...’

“Malvern residents will need to travel an hour or two, as far as Bristol, Birmingham, and Cardiff to get any kind of equivalent education in the arts and other vocations. This is simply not an option for people.”

“I have attended art classes in Malvern for a number of years and have found them absolutely invaluable in supporting the development of my practice as an artist.

Since retiring from my day job I have been able to devote more time to pursuing both painting and sculpture. Earlier this year, I took part in a professional exhibition of ‘Garden Art’ ...where I sold a number of works.’

Employers too have noted the need for more ‘very creative (thinkers) producing products in a very different way,’ (Beverland, Nielsen and Pryce, Redesigning Manufacturing, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012 p156).

For this reason I’ve been delighted to meet with [Richard Shrewsbury, Head of Learning and Participation and Senior Lecturer in Music Education at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire](#) (RBC) and [local Malvern resident Jeremy Price, Head of Jazz at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire](#) in looking at a future offer for Malvern Hills College and how this might expand. They are keen to see a way of offering music and drama at GCSE and A-Level with ABRSM Grade 5 Theory tuition and in time in dance and applied theatre, alongside a suite of possible adult learning activities in these subjects.

With the majority of school pupils only able to choose one arts subject at GCSE and A-Level, Malvern Hills College would be able to offer out-of-school options in a range of arts subjects, widening choice and opportunity for young talented and creative students from all backgrounds, broadening our pool of creative talent and encouraging progression on to higher education. Adult learning options suggested by Conservatoire colleagues include Sound Lab for creative music learning, an ‘*I used to Play*’ orchestra, and *Mum and Dad’s Taxi ensemble*’ as ways of keeping the creative spirit alive.

Whilst Covid has impacted on the possibilities of live performances, [locally Severn Arts](#) has been offering musical ensemble activity for music students in non-Covid times and [Malvern Theatres](#) is renowned for its live performance, musicals and film theatres.

Jeremy Price states, “The RBC undergraduate courses have significant strands of pedagogy and community music within them, and we already send our students out into the City and regions to assist with performing arts projects. It makes sense to give serious consideration to how we could develop mutually beneficial links between our students and graduates with activity at MHC.”

The landscape for Music Services has changed dramatically. Providers of music tuition and ensemble coaching (such as [Severn Arts](#)) may well appreciate a centre from which to work, alleviating local schools of the pressure to create arts activity from dwindling



resources. A pooling of music budgets by Malvern and surrounding schools may be a more effective spend for all concerned.

The Malvern Hills College SOS Task Group senses that the government's White Paper is looking to just this sort of local consortium in providing the means for developing not only a broad highway, but in kick-starting a ribbon of opportunity for residents around the Malvern Hills.

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**Beverley Nielsen co-edited [English Regions After Brexit](#) with Dr Steve McCabe; [Brexit Negotiations After Article 50](#) with Professor Alex de Ruyter, and co-wrote [Redesigning Manufacturing](#) with Professor Michael Beverland and Vicky Pryce.**