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INTRODUCTION

FROM THE CHAIR OF LDEA

In the last 10 years the Liberal Democrats lost support from many teachers. However, recently we have been encouraged by communication with a few teacher organisations. Prior to COVID-19 the LDEA worked with the National Education Union (NEU) to run a joint fringe meeting at our Spring Conference.

Although, the event was cancelled due to COVID-19, we have maintained contact with the NEU with plans for an online fringe meeting and a joint-hustings for the party leadership election. In addition, we are also working with the NAHT and ASCL for an online fringe meeting.

In early summer party HQ carried out a poll asking members their priorities for questions to the party leadership candidates. This confirmed that education is still among our party members' top priorities.

The general public do not normally put it among their top issues during elections. I think most would agree that it is one of the keys to dealing with inequality, the nation's need to improve productivity and people's quality of life.

It is therefore in the context of these wider issues that we need to place education policy, eg for our campaigns in the local elections next May.

Many research reports in recent years have stated that teachers on their own cannot bring about the changes needed to improve opportunities; it requires an upward revamp of all local public services. I hope that Lib Dems will also mention FE and life-long learning in their campaigns, not only schools and universities.

We now have a new membership secretary, but we are also looking for others to join our committee. The current crisis meant we were not able to hold our annual general meeting in March - that will now take place online, probably on the evening of Friday 18th September. If you have comments to make, do contact us in LDEA or contribute to our social media pages. Meanwhile, I hope you enjoy reading this booklet.

Nigel Jones
Chair, LDEA

WHAT GOOD CAN COME OUT OF THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS FOR EDUCATION?

Layla Moran MP

Speculation is understandably rife about whether the normalisation of working from home due to the coronavirus lockdown will bring about longer-term changes to how we all work. Are the days of being chained to a desk for upwards of eight hours a day, or spending hours crammed into crowded train carriages on the daily commute, now behind us?

However, you feel about working from home, shaking up the status quo and questioning the age-old ways of doing things is always positive. So, are there also lessons we can learn from the way teachers and schools have adapted during this difficult time, which could benefit our education system in the longer term?

One obvious example would be extending free school meals into the summer term. Thanks to the fantastic campaign led by footballer Marcus Rashford, the government agreed to provide a 'Covid Summer Food Fund' which meant children who are usually eligible for benefits-related free school meals were able to claim vouchers to cover the six-week summer holiday period.

Although this scheme is by no means perfect and will not give every family the help they desperately need, it will have come as an incredible relief to

many on the lowest incomes who may be struggling even more during these turbulent times. But this is not a new problem.

Every year, vulnerable families worry about the approaching summer break, when they will need to find an extra £30-£40 per week to buy the meals usually provided at school. It has always felt strange to me that, while as a society we recognise how vitally important it is to ensure children from the poorest families get at least one hot, balanced meal a day by providing free school lunches, we leave them without any equivalent support for 13 weeks of the year.

So now a precedent is being set we are making sure that children from the most disadvantaged families will have enough food this summer – and we must not allow this sensible and compassionate change to be reversed next year. Let's campaign to make sure this is a permanent change. Let's make this the new normal.

Another aspect of our education system where I think the lockdown may have nudged us towards a sensible and long overdue change is around testing. I've argued for a long time that the way we currently measure 'success' in our education system – via a handful of limited, high-stakes tests, held at fairly arbitrary junctures throughout school life - is seriously flawed.

At best they can capture a narrow snapshot of knowledge on a subject. At worst they completely misrepresent a student's understanding, because the student simply had a bad day, was unlucky with the questions that came up, or their style of learning just isn't suited to the format of written exams. That is to say nothing of the stress and worry which is heaped on pupils and their teachers as these tests approach.

In the absence of exams this summer term, grades will be determined looking at coursework, mock exams and other work from across the year. Now this system in itself has a lot of flaws and has led to new worries about how fair these grades will be for pupils who had been expecting to sit exams in the traditional way and were preparing accordingly. So, I am certainly not advocating that we ditch exams and replace them permanently with the exact process used this year. Something which had to be developed virtually overnight is unlikely to be the ideal outcome, but I hope the fact it has been done this way once can help end the obsession with exams in our system. It will show that it is perfectly possible to take a longer-term view of how a young person has managed throughout the school year and assess them fairly on that basis. My hope is that this precedent can at least plant the idea of longer reform of assessments.

We are all longing for an end to the turbulence and anxiety of this awful pandemic, and many of us are looking forward to a return to the normality and sociability of schools and offices. My hope is that as we move forward, we can learn lessons which will improve our working patterns and our education, to everyone's benefit.

If we see any good coming out of this incredibly difficult time, I hope it will be that we can all be a little more compassionate, a little more understanding of each other's needs and circumstances, and a little more questioning of whether the way things are, is really the best they can be.

Layla Moran was Parliamentary Spokesperson for Education and now for Foreign Affairs.

BREXIT AND COVID-19 AN EXTRAORDINARY YEAR FOR OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM

Lucy Nethsingha

It has been an extraordinary year for the education sector as well as the rest of the country. For me personally much of the year was dominated by the Brexit debate, with the battle to prevent an incredibly damaging hard Brexit dominating everything.

It is important to remember that this battle is not over. With a hard Brexit looking extremely likely the implications for education, as well as for other sectors remain extremely damaging. Brexit will mean the end of the Erasmus programme for UK students, and is likely to lead to a reduction in the number of European students at UK universities. It will also mean reduced funding for arts and culture, which will reduce opportunities for British pupils.

There are huge concerns in professional organisations for doctors, lawyers and engineers on whether alignment on professional qualifications will continue. Divergence, or non-recognition of UK qualifications by the EU will also have grave implications for these sectors, and for NHS recruitment in particular. Nurses and doctors will not be willing to come and work in the UK in their early careers (as many do now) if the professional qualifications they gain here are not valid should they wish to return home.

The Brexit debacle remains a key issue for the country, but there is no doubt

that the focus from February has been the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools, colleges, universities and councils, have had to move to new ways of working in record time. The ability of institutions to move quickly to on-line working has been impressive but has taken a huge toll on staff and students.

The biggest worries are rightly about the implications for the most vulnerable pupils, and, in particular, those with less access to home learning, either because of problems accessing on-line learning or poor support or space at home.

Those in poor or over-crowded housing, or whose families cannot afford home broadband or computers for home learning are obviously at a major disadvantage. It is important to remember, however, that while poverty is the most obvious, and probably the most significant, factor restricting children's access on-line provision, issues like rural access to broadband, or the need to care for relatives, or special educational needs also put young people at higher risk of falling behind at this time.

The failure of the government to get secondary schools open again before the summer break was disappointing, and there is much to learn from the impressive response from Lib Dem Education Minister Kirsty Williams, who achieved much better results in Wales than by the English Department for Education.

A key and repeated failing for the English education minister has been making unrealistic demands, which then prove impossible to put into practice, leaving the system with no back-up plan. As I write this in mid-August, I fear we are about to see the pattern repeated in the autumn term.

In the spring the Education Minister demanded that all primary schools re-open full-time with all pupils, but with a requirement for social distancing. He failed to understand that it was simply not possible for schools to re-open with all children, and social distance, as there was not enough classroom space.

Weeks were lost while schools attempted to follow the impossible advice and when the demand was eventually dropped to re-open for all pupils, the opportunity had been lost for part-time opening. Had the advice been to plan for part-time opening from the start all pupils could have returned to school for at least some lessons during the summer term.

We now appear to be heading in the same direction for secondary schools this autumn. Schools have been instructed to prepare for full-time opening, and are doing so, but this will mean crowded classrooms and corridors, and is likely to mean opening like this is short-lived in some areas, with shutdowns more likely.

Had schools planned properly for pupils to come in rotation, reducing over-crowding, it is likely they would be able to manage infection control more successfully, and thus stay open for all pupils for longer. I hope I will be proved wrong, and the rise in infection rates will not accelerate during the autumn.

Finally, I must add that teachers have done an incredible job in moving to on-line teaching during the lockdown. The move to on-line working has meant re-planning whole curricula, and an incredible learning curve in understanding how to teach large groups in on-line forums. We owe them our thanks!

Lucy Nethsingha is the Lib Dem LGA Children and Young People's Board Lead, and was an MEP from June 2019-January 2020.

CLOSING THE GAP

John Howson

Discrimination in its many different manifestations is still a major issue in education as we celebrate the 150th anniversary of state schooling in England.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only limited the celebrations we might have enjoyed around Forster's Education Act of 1870 but has also helped remind us of the inequalities in educational achievement that still exist.

Many factors are involved in the unacceptable difference between the outcomes of our school system for the richest decile of the population and those at the other end of the wealth scale.

Whether it is exacerbated by factors around race, gender; class, as identified by access to wealth, whether physical or social, still looms large in determining the education success of too many children. The challenge to provide internet access to children without computers and broadband at home would be recognised as similar to the challenges educationalist faced a century ago in relation to the then scholarship system for access to secondary education.

Kenneth Lindsay, in his study in the early 1920s found the percentages transferring to secondary education varied from 27 per cent in Bradford to 7 per cent in Warrington. In London, one school in Lewisham, then a prosperous

suburb, won as many scholarships as the whole inner-city area of Bermondsey put together.

Such extremes still exist, although they are harder to measure. Five out of 10 of the most deprived council wards in Oxfordshire are served by two secondary schools; both are inadequate, and one has been so for a number of years.

In the education sector, we have the added factor of special educational needs. While some conditions may affect children anywhere, in the council wards with the most recorded deprivation, children's progress either when starting school or in attainment at GCSE are both below the national as well as local averages, outcomes replicated across much of England for children in the most deprived neighbourhoods.

The lack of any coherent planning that took the deprivation factor into account when planning the education response to closing schools to most secondary age pupils for six months this year, will undoubtedly affect challenged communities more than most.

Creating good practice for home schooling and the use of technology would have been a sensible move and remains so if there is a risk of a second winter wave of the virus. Leaving every school to muddle along is exactly the sort of response that increases the gap in outcomes between the most affluent and most challenged families in society.

As a Liberal Democrat, I am fiercely independent and in favour of supporting the individual but I also recognise, as many Tories don't seem to do, that there is such a notion as society: universally we need to recognise that resources are not evenly distributed. In education, as much as other areas of life, we need to demonstrate that we, as Liberal Democrats care about closing the gap. We cannot let another generation be failed through no fault of their own.

Being born into a pandemic is not a reason for the state to fail any of its young people, and certainly not damage their life chances by failing to provide high quality education to meet the tragic circumstances of the age. The state must also review its notion of school funding that is based heavily upon equal shares for all, regardless of need.

Professor Cllr. John Howson has been a teacher, civil servant and chair of Teach Vac (a free national vacancy service for schools & teachers), vice-chair of Oxfordshire County Council; he is currently chair of the County's Attainment Working Group.

MODERN LANGUAGES: A SUBJECT IN TERMINAL DECLINE?

Peter Downes

Three years ago, I wrote an article for the LDEA magazine flagging up concerns about the future of Modern Languages (MFL) in the school curriculum.

Sad to say, the situation seems to have changed further since then and not for the better. Exam entries at GCSE have fallen even more in German; entries in Spanish have increased slightly and it has overtaken French as the most widely taught foreign language. Post-16 languages have declined with the abolition of AS Levels; the entries for French are half of what they were in 1995.

Languages in primary schools was first mooted in 2004 and then, in 2010 Mr Gove decreed that they should be compulsory in primary schools and that pupils should learn one language which they would continue in the secondary school. Why did he decide that? Easy – that is what he had done in prep school and public school, so it was obviously good for everybody.

He was warned at the time by many experienced practitioners that this would not be easy to implement –lack of specialist language teachers in primary schools, shortage of time given the pressures to achieve good scores in the SATS, etc.

I tried to salvage something from this by proposing that languages in primary schools should comprise a basic ‘discovering language’ course, teachable by non-specialists and not requiring language specific continuity from primary to secondary, given that secondary schools draw pupils from at least 5, often over 20 different primaries.

Expecting them all to get to the same point in the same language would be impossible. I even got a grant from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to develop teaching materials and spent 14 years of my ‘retirement’ travelling around the country to schools and conferences, trying to persuade them to take a more practical and relevant approach. I failed! The typical response I got was –‘Yes, we see your point, your ideas are very interesting and we agree with you but the Government says we must do one language for four years.’

The latest data from primary schools indicates that apart from a few isolated pockets of excellence, the national picture is very few primary schools are teaching foreign languages in a structured way, and that 97 per cent of pupils in secondary schools start again from scratch in Year 7, mostly taking a language they didn’t take in primary school.

We live in a constantly changing scene and one new element which affects the learning of languages is the increasing number of children who are being brought up bilingually because one or both of their parents comes from a country which does not have English as its first language.

We already have some experience of this with Welsh schools, but it is becoming more widespread. Some school governors may regard having a significant number of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) as a 'problem'. In practice, it turns out to be an advantage as a child exposed very young to two language systems appears to have a sharpened brain and for the purposes of the topic of this article- a greater propensity to learn another language more easily.

One interesting sub-topic in MFL is the gender factor. In summary, girls are better at languages, enjoy studying them and are more likely to continue beyond 16. There are far more female teachers of languages than male. This gender imbalance, which is more marked in MFL than any other mainstream subject has been scrutinised and confirmed recently by the Education Policy Institute who produced a report on this topic.

It reminded me of my first personal experience of the gender factor. Way back in 1972, I moved from teaching in a boys' grammar school to a co-ed comprehensive. I walked into the classroom to meet the A Level French set of 18 to find 17 girls and one boy!

I assumed there had been some timetabling error and that somewhere else in this large building there was a group of boys expecting me to turn up so they could continue French to A Level. I was wrong! This intrigued me and is a topic I have followed up for many years.

Although there is some evidence to suggest that the language acquisition component of the brain is more developed in girls than boys (eg. females talk more than males!), there are some intriguing details in the research. For example, the uptake of languages for boys is higher in all-boys schools than in mixed schools. So, it may be that boys do not like being taught in the same class as girls for languages.

The co-ed comprehensive school I was working in at the time allowed me to experiment by setting French in one part of the school (it was very large with 2700 pupils) and then comparing their results with mixed classes taught elsewhere in the same school. The findings were clear – the boys in the single-sex group did better (allowing for basic VRQ scores) than boys taught in the mixed groups.

Moreover, the girls taught in their single-sex groups also did better than their co-educated counterparts so both boys and girls appeared to benefit from not being taught together for French.

(See reports by C. Beswick and A. Barton, referred below)

It is, of course, not 'politically correct' to propose setting by gender in a mixed school and the idea has not caught on.

Teresa Tinsley recently carried out a study of schools where boys do relatively well to find out what the key factors for success appear to be (see reference below).

Soon the UK will sever formal links with the European Union. Will Brexit hasten the decline in language learning? English is the global language so why bother going to the trouble of learning a foreign language. Britain will be 'Great again' etc, etc, etc!

I close with a telling anecdote from the business world. A distinguished and experienced person from the commercial world in another country is alleged to have said: 'If you want to buy something from me, speak in English. If you expect me to buy from you, speak in my language.'

Peter Downes taught languages in a grammar school and then in comprehensive schools, including 21 years as a headteacher. He was President of the Secondary Heads Association (now ASCL) and later of the Association for Language Learning. He is a primary school governor and a Cambridgeshire County Councillor. He is a Vice President of the LDEA.

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Part 1. Schools that are beating the odds. Bobbie Mills, Education Policy Institute

Part 2. What makes an odds-beating school? Teresa Tinsley, Alcantara Communications

POST-16: GIVE THEM THEIR HEAD

Tom Barney

By the 1970s there was a trend towards post-16 provision in sixth-form and tertiary colleges. That trend now seems to have been reversed. And this reversal is an example of a general retreat from giving liberty and responsibility to the young, which we should resist.

When schools established or re-established sixth forms this has often been in the name of greater parental choice. But by the time a young person reaches 16 it should surely be their own choice of where and what they study.

Choice in what to study deserves more attention than, politically, it has had. It probably affects the experience of study more than the choice of institution. And it is a matter in which a college scores over a school sixth form.

It will contain a larger and more diverse body of students, and they will have an equally great variety of requirements. Because a demand will exist, a college will be able to offer a greater range of subjects, including some not traditionally studied in schools, and very likely more than one syllabus in the same subject.

Subjects can be more freely combined, science with arts subjects, or A levels with a vocational course, because staff devoted to post-16 teaching can be more flexibly used than a school's staff. Laboratories will be better equipped, and a college can provide a larger, better-stocked library than any school.

There will be a wider range of extra-curricular activities, and better opportunities for taking part in the arts and in sport for those who want them. But the restoration of school sixth forms has threatened A level provision in the colleges. What price choice?

Post-16s should also be given the power of choice: that is, control over their lives. They will have more of this in the adult atmosphere of a college. It seems wrong that people who are no longer children should remain in schools, with the consequent constraints.

It is sometimes argued that the presence of sixth formers in a school shows younger pupils what they can aspire to. But where a school has no sixth form the role of exemplar and authority passes to year 11: I have seen this happen more than once. This is good for year 11, who tend to rise to the maturity required of them, and it must have a consequent effect on the maturity of students entering colleges at 16, who are now better prepared for their greater responsibility. This is good for the young generally, and so for society generally.

Yet far from giving greater responsibility to year 11, we are tending to treat even post-16s as people to be protected and sheltered, at a time when we ought to be welcoming them to adult life.

Most of them will celebrate their 18th birthdays before year 13 has passed and become adults even in the eyes of the law; but they will still be subjected to irksome and unnecessary restrictions.

One logical conclusion of this trend is to me the infuriating sight of university applicants visiting campuses in the company of their parents. At that stage they certainly should be handling the application process, and negotiating public transport to attend interviews, by themselves.

When I began at my tertiary college, my tutor told his tutor-group that the group's first-year students should go to a certain member of staff for a library tour. At this the second-year students looked knowingly at one another, then one of them said, with heavy irony: 'she treats you like a fully mature adult'. That, without irony, was how they plainly thought of themselves and wanted to be treated. The atmosphere of the college had worked its magic on them.

Though its organisation was somewhat raggedy, the college was the resource centre and clearing house for local post-16s, who arrived from schools all over the borough and made each other's acquaintance. The relaxed, self-organised and self-governing community they thus formed should surely be the Liberal ideal for the formation of the young as active citizens.

Tom Barney is treasurer of LDEA. He went to school in Richmond upon Thames, the first all-tertiary LEA, to which sixth forms have now returned.

COVID-19 AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Nigel Jones

Apart from the NHS and social care, one of the first issues facing society at lockdown was how to cater for children and young people.

Teachers quickly had to cope with the children of essential workers and simultaneously those who were learning at home, providing food to needy families and formally assessing those about to move on whose examinations had been cancelled. These were anxious times, with risks to teachers and questions over the future of the pupils.

In May, the National Education Union contacted myself and Layla Moran MP, because they had sent three documents to government in March and April in their attempt to represent the concerns of teachers and help to plan for the rest of the year but had received no response.

I passed their documents to our people in the Lords, so Baroness Garden in the Lords and Layla Moran in the Commons, used these to raise questions. The responses, including from the Secretary of State for Education, were non-answers but simply brief messages trying to make the Government look good.

Any government would have struggled in these circumstances, but their lack of engagement showed disrespect for the teaching profession and some Conservatives verbally bashed the unions rather than engage in a critical appraisal of teachers' concerns.

At the time of writing, schools have received guidelines for full reopening in September, but questions remain, such as how to ensure the bubbles of whole year groups can be kept separate because in many cases this is impossible.

Government has acknowledged the need to make up for lost education. They have announced £1bn for schools (around £41,000 per school), but there is nothing for 16+, nor is it targeted at those who need it most.

Yet in May, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) published detailed recommendations on how to help the disadvantaged. These included: doubling the pupil premium for years 1, 7 and 11; more funds for disadvantaged youngsters taking A levels and level 2 qualifications next summer; and doubling the funds both for looked after children and for early years.

It should be noted that it is Lib Dem policy the pupil premium for early years should be trebled permanently. The EPI also called for an 'education for recovery' package to support FE colleges and other 16-19 providers.

It was reported last year that those from disadvantaged backgrounds at 16+ were disproportionately enrolled on courses that would not lead to the highest qualifications. It is Lib Dem policy that the pupil premium should be extended to the 16-19 age group.

I am particularly pleased the EPI proposals recognise that local services outside school play a huge part (as recent research has shown) in helping youngsters achieve in education. Their report calls for 'the expansion of support for vital out of school services such as early intervention, mental health, children's services and youth services'. You can find their report via their website, published on 6 May 2020, entitled: Preventing the disadvantage gap from increasing during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the forthcoming local elections, I recommend that Lib Dems place education in the context of all those local public services that so much need to be revitalised for the sake of children in our schools, for improving the nation's productivity and everyone's quality of life.

Nigel Jones is Chair of LDEA, former teacher in schools and FE, local councillor and parliamentary candidate.

LEARNING AND TEACHING IN COVID-19: MY EXPERIENCE

Edmund Dean

I was in the unenviable position of being both a full-time student and a part-time teacher when lockdown hit.

My university lectures moved fully online. I'm hardly technophobic, but I do find online learning a struggle. Part of this is the limitations of the technology – one of my 'live' lectures, on religion and politics, had consist 60-second or more time delay between students receiving the feed and the lecturer recording it. Another lesson, an intensive, was delivered entirely in recorded lectures. Fortunately, that tutor was very diligent in booking multiple tutorials for all of us!

Technologies like Google Scholar, Academia.edu, Wikipedia, citation generators, and online libraries greatly assist learning. But the key word there is 'assist' – they don't replace the existing infrastructure, they supplement it.

The lockdown took away that infrastructure. Paradoxically, some of the new technologies of learning, such as Zoom and YouTube, have forced a more traditional teaching style, one where input from the students is heavily curtailed and lecturers lecture for ages without interruption. It also pushes front and centre an observation made even before the COVID-19 crisis – online media is simply not designed to convey and discuss ideas.

Facebook was originally designed so male students could rank the appearance of female students. Twitter's first launch encouraged us to let each other know how we were feeling or thinking in the moment; fleeting thoughts cast into the aether, without editing or accountability. Instagram spent most of its early years as a glorified food blog.

Teachers understand that creating a learning environment can take a lot of work – these platforms are simply not designed for it. If you told the creators early on that these would now be the major engines of public debate and the sharing of knowledge, maybe they'd be designed quite differently. Wikipedia's nascent alternative, WP Social, looks a bit more promising, but it isn't exactly eye-catching. One of my colleagues decided to hold a lesson on World of Warcraft, an online game – it's a much better platform for actually engaging with people!

Meanwhile, I'm an ESOL tutor – and my FE college, a long-time mainstay of the north London technical education scene, shut its doors in March. As of this writing, on 31 July, those doors remain shut. We hope to reopen this autumn, but it's going to be slow and gradual. I wonder if it will ever be what it was in the heyday of the 90s and early 2000s, when generous packages of EU, Westminster, local, and private sector funding were available.

We rely a great deal on the health of local government and the hospitality sector; these were already sickened by Brexit, and after the coronavirus, may never regain their former strength.

Learning a language, as many Lib Dems will know, takes constant reinforcement and support. Cloistered in the home, I fear my students are at a distinct disadvantage. They don't even understand a lot of English-language social media, yet. The internet alone won't keep them sharp. Imagine moving to a foreign country, then being told to stay indoors for four months!

With my desired masters programme unavailable, I'm hoping to do a Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) this year, instead. That will be fascinating, and I imagine, a bit frustrating! Hopefully I will also come away with some ideas about how to improve virtual learning. But we're a long way away from a truly engaging learning experience online.

Em Dean is an ESOL tutor, a migrants' rights activist, and a member of Islington Liberal Democrats. They have been Secretary of LDEA since 2019.

LEARNING IN LOCKDOWN: STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION

Sal Jarvis

Joy Jarvis¹ (no relation) who is Professor of Educational Practice at the University of Hertfordshire, draws on John Mason's work² on noticing to understand higher education teaching practice. She writes: 'Noticing involves paying attention to an event, returning to it and examining it with fresh eyes and through the eyes of others.'

But noticing is difficult. We become inured to our everyday experiences, dead to the details of the medium in which we exist. To really notice, we need tools that enable us to look afresh. Joy suggests that 'One way of looking differently at practice is to look at different practice'.

The pandemic has presented such an opportunity in higher education. In mid-March, eight weeks after starting my new job as deputy vice chancellor, education at the University of Westminster we took the decision to move all teaching, learning and assessment online. Suddenly I was presented with an unexpected opportunity to look at different practices in higher education. This paper outlines some reflections that I shared with colleagues at the university's annual learning and teaching symposium.

What follows is not the outcome of a research study, but a piece based on my reading and re-reading of varied sources of student opinions: their module

evaluations, their representations to the student union, their opinions in focus groups, and the stories of their lecturers. In what I noticed I believe there are lessons for teachers: not only of higher education, but everywhere.

Knowing and being known

It was impossible to miss the value that students placed on knowing people and being known by them. This wasn't simply about expecting staff to listen to, and respond to feedback, but about real human relationships that enhanced their experience. For example, from a series of focus groups:

'Basically, what I would like to get from my university experience that I wouldn't get anywhere else is making connections and being in contact with different students and creatives.'

'Human contact is very important. I wouldn't want only online lectures.'

'If coronavirus didn't happen there would have been lots of opportunities to meet. We hardly got to know each other and then this happens.'

Our students wanted to meet and know people who shared their passion, and they wanted to make friends. When there was a lack of interaction from 'some academics who are only uploading slides with no live teaching' this was reported to our student experience committee.

However, it was also true that online learning facilitated human contact, in some cases better than learning face to face. One student explained:

‘...for the first time I know people on my course, I feel I’ve got friends. I’ve been coming to lectures for more than a year and we all kind of come and go, but now that we are online in a group I know people properly.’

Staff, too, have noticed that some students thrive online, contributing confidently and participating in a way they never did when learning onsite. At Westminster, we now talk about ‘online/onsite’ rather than ‘online’ and ‘face to face’, because online, live learning is face to face too, and valued as such by students.

Specialist and practical teaching

Students didn’t miss everything. No-one complained that their lectures were online, and no-one missed traditional exams – except perhaps some of the professional bodies! Students were positive about recorded lectures, particularly when they were chunked into bite size sections with online activity or discussion between. Being able to review and revisit was a bonus, and students could work at their own pace.

However, the loss of specialist and practical learning opportunities was deeply felt. Students’ work in studios, laboratories and other specialist spaces, using professional standard equipment could not easily be replicated online. In our Student Experience Committee student representatives reported “... concerns around the lack of access to software and hardware”

Unsurprisingly it was students on those most practical courses – the creative industries and sciences for example, who missed this most, but students on courses such as business or humanities also missed the practical learning: case studies, problem solving and other active learning if not replicated in online activities. This applied to assessment too: one focus group participant lamented: “I never wanted my assessments to be online and written.”

Barriers to learning

Finally, it was impossible not to notice the inequalities – the barriers to learning. The first, and most pressing need, was students who didn’t have a laptop or any connectivity. We bought laptops and loaned them, posted out dongles. Then there were students without study spaces, working in cramped living conditions or in a house full of children, or others who needed care.

Prior to lockdown, students came on campus to access space or computing, so these inequalities were masked – but they were still there. Many of our students commute, so while some students could study from the privacy of their own bedroom – at home or in halls – these students never could – always needing to find a space on campus. Often struggling to find the time. If we ever doubted it, education is not yet a level playing field.

Close learning

Online, distance learning has received attention during lockdown – understandably as teachers and lecturers raced to move all their materials online. However, what I notice is the value our students place on close learning: human relationships with those who share your passion, close-up activity with case studies, equipment and technical spaces; opportunities to examine and revisit learning materials; discussions with fellow students. Close learning involves relationships in which barriers can be noticed, and it implies active engagement in practical learning, not passive absorption in an impersonal lecture.

To talk about online or ‘face to face’ learning misses the point: wherever the learning of the future takes place, it needs to be close.

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Sal Jarvis is deputy vice-chancellor (education) at the University of Westminster and vice chair of LDEA. Previously she was at University of Hertfordshire where she became pro-vice-chancellor (students) and before that was a primary school teacher.

A RECENT HISTORY OF EDUCATION POLICY DEVELOPMENT, 2010-2015

‘Nobody expects the Spanish inquisition’

Rebecca Hanson

When a Cummings-fuelled Gove hit the ground sprinting in 2010, Monty Python’s comedy created a relevant narrative for those of us who had, until then, been involved in education policy consultation.

Educators with the experience and capacity to hold Gove to account were rounded up and disposed of, our networks and other habitats were incinerated, and our reputations were savaged by Cummings-managed social media feeds. The populist message of ‘disposing of self-interested elites and returning power to teachers and parents’ was used to conceal the concentration of all power into the hands of an unaccountable clique of Cummings and his lackeys – Gove, Gibb and Truss.

During the coalition government it was my absolute privilege to work with the brilliant and dedicated members of the LDEA committee and our parliamentary team to drag sane governance in education back into being, through relentless evidence-led argument in all areas of Westminster.

Gove, Truss and Gibb were moved on and politicians who cared about evidence were given the task of sorting out the colossal mess they’d created. We were just starting to detoxify the quagmire (and we should not forget that we managed to get some sensible changes through - like the pupil premium, stopping Ofsted grading teachers in 20 mins and the establishing of the Chartered College of Teaching) when we were removed from power in 2015.

2015-2019

With the pesky Lib Dems dispatched and Cummings now focusing his attention and skills on conjuring up self-interested elites, the public need to be rescued from by Brexit, Nick Gibb ruled supreme in the DfE (as the only Tory who knew his way around it) over a revolving door of inadequate Secretaries of State for Education.

Disturbingly ignorant innovations like Gibb’s multiplication tables check (a new exam for 8-year-olds with a six-second guillotine on every question and a 100 per cent pass mark which will be statutory from summer 2021), were much less common than they had been, as everyone was still struggling to cope with a backlog of chaotic changes mandated by Gove, Truss and Gibb between 2010 and 2014, the youth mental health crisis these changes had created and endless cuts.

2020-

Dominic Cummings now has unfettered power to roll out his method of ruling the UK (concentrating power into his own hands and silencing the people who can see what he's doing) across all areas of British life and is busy doing just that, stalling only briefly to allow the country a relative period of sanity while he took his 'coronavirus tour of Britain' and lackey Boris was out of action.

Once Cummings returned from his jolly, he set to work to ensure teachers and all those who represented them were savaged by the press. Just as in 2011 and 2012, raising concerns about hugely damaging or undeliverable edicts is treated as being dissent.

A brief moment of hope when public fury rightly turned in the correct direction was quickly dispelled by the confirmation of Cummings' absolute power and his untouchability.

Green shoots

The Chartered College of Teaching (CCT) is beginning to give teachers a high-calibre professional voice – as Barry Carpenter's 17 July Webinar on the Recovery Curriculum so powerfully confirmed. My advice to all who care about education is to join the CCT.

Cllr Rebecca Hanson MA (Cantab.)

MEd FCCT served on the LDEA committee from March 2012-March 2015. She has specific policy expertise in the domain of public sector regulation policy. Rebecca has spent the last 7 years trying to save highly skilled practices in primary maths teaching from Government efforts to exterminate them and is currently freesharing the training she has developed on the teaching strategies involved on her 'RebeccaTheMathsLady' YouTube channel. These teaching strategies are particularly well suited to primary teachers trying to work in chaotic circumstances where not all pupils have completed the same work before each lesson.

SCHOOL FUNDING/SEND (SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS AND DISABILITIES)

Alec Sandiford

There is a school funding emergency across the country. Schools within my constituency (Stafford and Stone) and Staffordshire are some of hardest hit.

Over the past four years, 320 of 363 Staffordshire schools have suffered cuts to funding. The figure is £60.1 million across the area and on average an £190 loss per pupil. Per pupil loss is the amount that has been lost for every pupil as a result of reduced budgets through cuts.

These cuts have put massive pressure on teachers, carers and parents- with the poorest being hit the hardest, following the cutting of £200 million from pupil premium by the Conservative government.

Forsbrook Primary School has higher class sizes than average and lower funding: £234,523 in loss of funding from 2015, and £245 per pupil loss for the same period. St Michael's Primary School in Stone has higher class sizes than the average. They have had £176,027 less funding and £378 per pupil loss. Their per pupil loss is higher as more children are entitled to pupil premium which has been massively cut.

I volunteer in a local primary school and see the pressure the cuts have made. Lack of funding, resources, restructuring and larger class sizes are making it increasingly more difficult to improve standards which impacts on

teaching staff morale. As I have three children who are educated locally, I have a vested interest in improving the educational standards within my constituency – and nationally.

With all of that in mind, the most vulnerable pupils are impacted the most. Parents and carers with low incomes feel the financial pressure and pupils with SEND suffer more than most. As of 2019, there were over 1.3 million pupils with SEND in England, which is 15 per cent of the entire pupil population. Many of these pupils are currently out of the educational system.

Since 2015, the number of young people with SEND in Staffordshire has increased by a third. During the same period, funding for those with SEND has dropped by 17 per cent due to government funding cuts. These are additional cuts on top of existing ones.

Funding cuts has made it impossible in some cases, for schools to maintain provision for a child which causes huge disruption to the individual and peers alike. Teachers are put in the impossible and unfair position of prioritising their resources.

This could mean a member of teaching staff is required in a classroom undertaking one-to-one teaching in order for the class teacher to engage and educate the other pupils. Whichever way, all pupils' education is suffering overall, as no teacher should

be forced to choose whose education is more important and no child chooses to require additional help and support.

When I first moved to the local area within my constituency, I felt, first-hand, the pressures schools are under. All six local schools were over-subscribed which led to my wife and I home educating until places were found. After a long battle, places were secured.

With our eldest son having autism we then realised financial difficulties heap huge pressure on help and support for any child. Luckily, our local school helped hugely in acquiring a place at a specialist school. Our son needed more help and support which put staff under pressure because of funding cuts. Also, the over-subscribed classes led to him massively struggling and his educational experience was negative.

I demand better than this, parents and pupils deserve better than this. The Liberal Democrat policy is to reverse all cuts to the education system, returning to 2015 levels as well as safeguarding all funding for SEND. We need to fight to protect and increase funding as well as ensure constituents are helped with educational issues and offer support.

For those with educational needs and awaiting diagnosis or help, pressuring the government and local authorities into ensuring those with SEND receive a diagnosis within weeks and months rather than 2-4 years which is the

norm. This is reinforced by a report by Norman Lamb, the former health minister. Current NHS guidelines state that any child thought to be autistic are meant to be assessed within three months.

As a Liberal, I believe that education should be inclusive and all have the right to education and improving their standard of life, life chances and opportunities. All children have something special to give and offer society. All talent should be harnessed. By solely being test driven and basing all education on academic achievement, children are alienated, and a two-tier system is created. As a party, we should be campaigning on the toxic practices of off rolling. This is indeed illegal but still occurs regularly throughout local authorities and schools.

Alec Sandiford is a carer and currently studying for a Bachelors of Law degree at university. He stood in the 2019 General Election and remains the parliamentary spokesperson and vice chair for Stafford and Stone Liberal Democrats. He is also a parish councillor and will be standing for the party in 2021 as a county council candidate. He is membership secretary of the LDEA.

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