Melanie Griffiths
SEA National Chair

Labour needs a radical vision for education to present to the electorate at the next General election, which will be upon us very soon. In addition to presenting the “idea” of an NES, providing a truly comprehensive and broad education from cradle to grave it needs a coherent road map to show how this will be achieved. At this year’s Labour Party conference delegates will likely have an opportunity to vote on a motion brought forward by the Socialist Education Association. The motion sets out how Labours education policy can move forward, reverse marketisation and privatisation and bring schools back into a truly comprehensive, cooperative and democratic system. Now is the time.

Labour gets it. The launch of “Democratising Local Public Services: A Plan For Twenty-First Century Insourcing” on July 20th 2019 is a game changer. John McDonnell spoke about how after the election of Thatcher forty years ago the Tories forced

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compulsory competitive tendering on councils. Over the last decades governments of all persuasions bought into the idea that ‘private’ was good, ‘public’ bad. This inevitably led to “the outsourcing scandal, which has seen private companies rip off the taxpayer, degrade our public services and put people at risk whilst remaining wholly unaccountable to the people who rely on and fund these services.”

So this break with the existing orthodoxy will be welcomed by public sector workers and citizens. Outsourcing has allowed employers to cut workers’ terms and conditions in the search for ready profits. But of course, the true motives of the elite were hidden, dressed up in waffle about ‘efficiency’ and ‘value for money’. No public service escaped, but I would argue that no service has been damaged more by the pursuit of this neoliberal agenda than education.

In the education system the key buzzword was ‘freedom’ for schools to spend money as they saw fit. This, it was argued, would allow individual schools to better meet the needs of their pupils and target money more efficiently. It hasn’t been like that.

Before the 1990s the Local Education Authority (LEA) was the employer of teachers in schools and those who provided the vital services that allowed them to run – cleaners, cooks, advisory teachers, caretakers, educational psychologists, supply teachers, payroll and personnel services, IT support and so on. Strong LEAs acting as a central service provider had some downsides for sure. Sometimes bureaucracies were entrenched and inflexible, but as experience has demonstrated the pros clearly outweighed the cons.

Firstly, these arrangements encouraged fair recruitment practices and ensured that staff were suitably qualified. LEAs provided Teachers’ Centres where staff could go for advice, meetings and training. These created opportunities for teachers from different schools to meet and share good practice. Schools were not in competition with one another. Schools and staff from within an LEA and sometimes between LEAs worked together.

Sharing practical services also had advantages. For example, support staff like caretakers and cleaners tended to enjoy considerably better pay and conditions. But above all, centrally provided services were able to avoid unnecessary duplication of back office functions and economies of scale. This meant better value for the tax payer and left school leaders more able to concentrate on the task at hand: educating children.

But in 1988 the misleadingly named Education Reform Act (ERA) took the first steps in trashing this “cooperative” integrated education system and that agenda has been pursued by all governments since. The ERA transferred many of the powers (including some financial powers) and responsibilities from LEAs
A RADICAL VISION...

to heads and nominally governing bodies. It also gave the option for headteachers to go further and turn the schools they manage into Grant Maintained (GM) schools. GM schools got their funding directly from central government, bypassing the Local Authority (LA) completely. The funds given to GM schools were then deducted from Local Authority budgets.

Once headteachers were given control of schools' budgets and the “opportunity” to opt out of using Local Authority provided services, the floodgates to outsourcing were opened. Scenting profitable opportunities, a host of consultants and companies targeting the lucrative education market were ready to pounce.

This change to the way money was provided for central services had a devastating effect on Local Authorities. Once a certain tipping point was reached, it was no longer viable to provide many school services as the Authorities could no longer be sure of finances year to year. Inevitably, over time central services diminished, Teachers' Centres closed, central service staff were made redundant, years of capacity, experience and expertise lost. This in turn made it much easier to convince schools to opt out entirely and become semi-privatised Academies and join unaccountable Multi-Academy Trusts. Meanwhile the business model operated by the private companies that filled the gap relied on cutting conditions and wages to boost profitability. And make no mistake the potential for profit is huge.

Thatcher must be dancing in her grave!

So what should a radical reforming Labour government do to tackle outsourcing in education?

The first step would be to abolish the academy system, which as we have seen is particularly prone to abuses related to privatisation. For example, there is a disturbing tendency for contracts to go to friends and families of managers and governors, and for managers to pay themselves exorbitant salaries. But this in itself would not be enough, as the root problems can be traced back to the structure of school governance and procurement created by the 1988 Act. These changes must be reversed. Newly empowered and truly democratically accountable LAs need to be the default provider of school services within a particular area. Central funding and resource allocation will therefore need to ensure that local authorities can, once again, build up the skills and know-how needed.

At the 2018 Labour Party Conference a major step forward was taken with the commitment to end the academies programme and establish an integrated and locally accountable school system. Since then the Socialist Education Association (SEA) working with academic and legal experts has developed a strategy for achieving Continued on Page 4

SEA MOTION

Conference notes:

It has now become obvious that Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) and even stand-alone academies are a charter for profiteering and even at times outright corruption, with lucrative contracts handed to family and friends. It is also true that too many private companies are providing services to schools that could be better provided in-house. The result is public money meant for front line educational services finding its way into the pockets of private individuals.

Conference welcomes:

1. The commitment announced at the last conference, to consult on and establish a new regulatory framework for schools, to ensure that all schools follow the same rules, with schools being regulated by statute, rather than thousands of individual contracts.

2. The paper “Academies, autonomy, equality and democratic accountability: Reforming the fragmented publicly funded school system in England” (Wolfe and West) and the document “Restoring a democratically accountable school system” from the SEA setting out a coherent plan for implementing this pledge.

3. The commitment made by John McDonell in February 2018 when he declared Labour’s intention to “properly fund local authorities”, “bring services back in house” and “strengthen local democracy”.

Conference believes the Labour Party should now commit to ensuring:

1. Local Authorities establish reformed, democratically accountable local education committees with stakeholder representation.

2. That all publicly funded schools be brought back under the control of these new local education committees.

3. The newly empowered local education committees will be the default providers of school services and will be appropriately funded.
Response to the Labour Party consultation

Aims and Values

The Tories have an unacceptably narrow vision for the place of education in 21st century society. Labour’s vision for education should reflect both a broad understanding of what it means to be an educated citizen in the first half of the 21st century and the needs of society as a whole. It needs to take account of how our society is changing, the transformative impact of technology and the kinds of skills and knowledge that will be needed in families, communities and at work.

It is important to re-assert a broad comprehensive vision of the aims and value of education which will be underpinned by our commitment to equality, democracy and collaboration. This should include a statement of the educational entitlement which should be available to all. All policies should then be assessed against this statement and all institutions should explain and be judged against how well they contribute to their achievement. It will be important to gain support for this vision from the widest possible range of educational stakeholders.

The aims cannot be confined just to a set of narrow academic subjects or to the needs of the labour market – they must address the fundamental question of what knowledge, skills and values that our society values and which young people will need in their future lives.

It must be recognised too that learning must be lifelong. As society and the economy continues to change at a breathtaking pace, it will be essential for everyone to have access to continuing education and training throughout their lives. The importance of informal learning must also be recognised by the restoration of comprehensive youth service provision.

What should be devolved to local authorities – and what should not?

There will need to be a consistent overall framework for the NES but not a single management structure with all decisions ultimately being taken by central government or its agencies.

National bodies will not often be the best way of delivering services at a local level as the chain of accountability to elected politicians is likely to be too long and will therefore be remote from local communities. This can be seen very clearly when decisions about academisation are made behind closed doors by entirely unaccountable ministerial appointees.

Melanie Griffiths has been a teacher and trade union activist for many years and lives in Huddersfield, Yorkshire
England has an unusually centralised approach to government. This is neither particularly efficient or effective. It also contributes to the alienation of many from the political process because they feel that they have no say in decisions about their communities. In this respect it is important to recognise that the NHS is not the model for the NES to follow.

Early years providers, schools, FE providers (and sixth forms), youth services and adult education providers should be commissioned by and be responsible to local authorities. They should work within a national framework of regulations and guidance set by central government and by arms-length bodies established by but not controlled, by government.

Universities play a significant part in local economies and in some cases draw a significant proportion of their students from their local area. However their role is much broader than that, so it would be appropriate for them to be accountable to central government. An arms-length relationship with strong safeguards for academic freedoms will be essential but within a national framework of regulations, standards and funding.

Children’s Services need to work closely with schools but at the same time need to be independent – so that for example they are able to ensure that safeguarding is effective.

This kind of devolution doesn’t mean, however, that institutions or local authorities can do anything they like. It will be essential for central government to set out the principles, values and legal framework of the NES and to require the whole NES to follow them.

However, over the last 20 or so years, ministers have increasingly tried to control the detail of the curriculum and of pedagogy. The DfE now sees itself as the enforcer of a very particular approach to teaching and learning. It needs to be made clear that this is inappropriate and should end. A broad national framework for the curriculum is necessary but the current level of political involvement is wrong.

Our education service should be one in which innovation and experimentation can flourish. This will not happen if the current top down approach is allowed to continue.

Government should set up arms-length systems for disseminating the outcomes of high quality research, producing curriculum guidance and for establishing and managing appropriate qualifications. It should also restore the independence of a reformed national inspectorate.

What should a modern local authority managing education look like?

Local authorities should be the basic building blocks of the system at local level. There should be a presumption of them being responsible for education as they are already democratically accountable and have the experience of managing sizeable resources.

Local authorities should have the responsibility for ensuring there is sufficient high quality provision in early years, schools, FE, adult education and youth services. So they need to have the size and capacity to do so. This is not currently the case, partly because their role and resources have been massively reduced but also because of the incoherent nature of the English local government system means there are too many very small education authorities.

A major restructuring of English regional and local government might well be desirable but would be time consuming and controversial. Therefore the establishment of the NES would need to build on existing structures at least initially.

Persuading local authorities to work together can be challenging, especially when they are led by different parties. We suggest that the Secretary of State should take the power to set criteria for recognising individual local authorities or groups of authorities as ready to fully manage educational provision. Government should take into account size, capacity, geography, collaborative and democratic structures and a definitive commitment to partnership if more than one LA is involved.

Councillors should exercise their responsibilities through an Education Committee or Board which should include other stakeholders, professionals and the wider community as well as elected councillors. This may help to reduce party political conflicts where local authorities are seeking to work together and between central and local government. Local authorities should also ensure that local forums provide opportunities for the widest possible engagement of everyone with an interest in the success of education.

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Combined authorities and Metro mayors could provide a framework within which local authorities can work together, for example where there is a cluster of small local authorities, such as Teeside. But their effectively random distribution and their dependence on central government patronage are serious issues.

Local Enterprise Partnerships as organisations can have no place in the accountability structure because they have no democratic mandate and in many areas are not coterminous with local authorities. However they could provide employer representation where that is appropriate and could have advisory input into the skill needs of local areas.

Regional Schools Commissioners would have no role because academy conversion would cease and academies (while they still exist) would revert to being accountable to local authorities.

What does “being accountable” mean and how should the process be organised?

All providers of education should be first and foremost accountable to their learners and their families. This should not just be in name only – systems are needed to enable the voice of learners to be genuinely heard.

The next level of accountability should be to the wider local community and to other local providers of education. Peer review should be central and there should be a presumption of collaboration rather than competition between providers – for example in admissions and in meeting the needs of vulnerable students.

Governing bodies remain a vital defence of the interests of children, parents and communities and they need to be representative of those stakeholders, along with staff. In some multi-academy trusts, the schools no longer have even a vestige of independence and parents and the wider community has no meaningful influence over them. We are clear that this situation must be brought to a speedy end.

Local authorities should play the central role in holding providers to account. They are in a position to access a wide range of local intelligence not just from professionals but from all parts of the local community. National government agencies are too remote to be able to do this adequately.

National government should not run entirely separate systems of accountability, whether (as now) through Ofsted or appointed Commissioners. Its role should be to ensure that local systems work well, that processes and standards are comparable across the country and that overall, outcomes for learners are high.

All providers should be able to demonstrate commitment to the aims and values of the NES. This would include a focus on collaboration rather than competition. No institution should seek to prosper at the expense of others and the accountability system should not reward such behaviour.

Accountability systems should evaluate what is genuinely important not just what is easy to measure. This will not be easy and will require going beyond simple test scores to make professional judgements based on a wide range of evidence gathered over time not just on a single short inspection visit.

Data which contributes to the narrowing of the curriculum and which judges education purely against learners’ future destinations or earnings should not be published. Information published about educational institutions should address the full range of educational aims.

Data which is unreliable and misleading as is the case with much current performance data should also not be published. Consideration should be given to publishing information on an area basis so that all schools share the responsibility for all pupils.

How can accountability work for academies and colleges?

Currently academies and FE colleges are not locally accountable. This needs to change. There is too much evidence of the inadequacy of national government’s attempts to hold these sectors to account both in relation to educational standards and to financial probity.

SEA has set out in a separate paper how academies can be brought into re-established local structures.

Arrangements for accountability in the FE sector are currently weak. They are heavily reliant on Ofsted together with a high level role for the FE Commissioners’ Office. The extent to which colleges are embedded in local structures is hugely variable. They need to be better integrated into both local planning and local democratic accountability structures.

Accountability in the Early Years

Most nursery provision is in the private or voluntary sector (in 2015 there were only 400 maintained nursery schools in England). Local authorities have a responsibility to ensure that the
appropriate number of places is available, provide information for parents and give ‘advice, guidance and support’ to providers. They also distribute central government funding for the 15 and 30 hours of early years education.

The private and voluntary nursery sector is not currently subject to any form of public accountability (other than Ofsted inspections). This means there is an absence of accountability over governance, admissions and exclusions. There is no complaints and appeals system for parents.

Maintained nursery schools have an outstanding record of success, especially in areas of deprivation, whilst outcomes in the private and voluntary sector are far more variable. The long-term aim of increasing the provision of maintained nursery schools with universal entitlement should be followed.

In the meantime, consideration should be given to devolving to local authorities appropriate powers to oversee and regulate the private and voluntary nursery sector. At the very least, they should be charged with the responsibility of providing a robust complaints/grievance and appeals process.

Do we need different arrangements for different sectors of education?

The NES needs to be seen as an integrated operation from cradle to grave. However, it is necessary to recognise that the travel to learn patterns vary between sectors and this will affect how planning and accountability are structured.

For example, early years provision needs to be very local and available to every community. By contrast post 16 education is more specialised and institutions are likely to draw on a wider catchment area. And universities in many cases draw students from across the whole country.

With the probable exception of higher education however, the responsibility for ensuring coherence and progression across the NES should lie with local authorities. Separating responsibilities for different sectors of education would be a recipe for confusion and inconsistency. That will mean ensuring that local authorities are large enough to have oversight of further and post 16 education. But they will also need to establish systems for ensuring the accessibility of early years provision at very local levels.

What are the resource implications?

The establishment of the NES cannot be done on the cheap. There will be an inevitable pressure to focus resources onto front line services. However it needs to be recognised that management, governance and public engagement are all essential elements without which the initiative will not realise its potential. They will need adequate resourcing.

Although most funding will come from central government, decisions about the allocation and use of resources should be delegated as far as possible to local authority then institutional level. Seeking to make all funding decisions at national government level is inevitably crude and likely to cause unfairness and anomalies.
Politics

Policies for the Labour Manifesto 2019

Political events are moving at an unprecedented pace and it now seems very likely that we are looking at an early election later this year. So the development of education policy needs to speed up rapidly. We are likely to be producing a manifesto within just a few short weeks. Since 2017, there have been a number of significant announcements building on the last manifesto. But as a matter of urgency the party needs make sure that we have a comprehensive set of policies worked through and ready for delivery.

Announcements since 2017 have included welcome commitments on academies and on testing in schools. If the Telegraph is to be believed an announcement on taxing private schools is coming and there are rumours of something on Ofsted. There will no doubt be continued promises on funding not just in schools but in early years and further education as well. And we will clearly maintain the commitment to the abolition of fees. Perhaps above all, SEA was delighted to see the recognition that equality and social justice rather than social mobility need to be at the heart of our programme.

However there is much to do. For example, the Lifelong Learning Commission has produced an interim report which identifies clearly the disastrous state of adult education but is some way from producing specific actions. The policy announcements on academies remain unclear about what the planned destination is and in particular what local democratic accountability would actually look like. There is an urgent need both to complete the picture and to demonstrate how together our policies will deliver a coherent and equitable National Education Service.

A manifesto for 2019 will need to start from a clear analysis of what is wrong. SEA believes that:

- International evidence shows our children are less happy and more stressed than in many comparable countries.
- A funding crisis and a teacher retention crisis are developing in our schools to a level not seen since the Tory government of the 1990’s.
- Support for children with special educational needs and disabilities is inadequate.
- Our system reinforces inequality. International evidence also shows that, while our ablest children do well, too many of the others don’t achieve as well as they do in other countries.
- Too many people are denied opportunities – because of cost, lack of locally accessible provision or because the pressures faced by schools and colleges lead them to deny access.
- For too long the British economic model has been based on low wages and low skills. This needs to change especially in the context of Brexit.
- The growth of gangs and youth crime in some areas is of great concern.
- Current curriculum and examinations are too narrow and don’t properly engage or prepare young people for the challenges of adult life.
- The current approach of marketizing and privatising education is ineffective, hugely wasteful and has led to growing financial mismanagement and corruption.
- Schools and colleges are no longer properly accountable to parents, learners and local communities.

What follows are the key commitments that SEA believes the party should make in its 2019 manifesto. There is obviously a need for detail behind all these proposals and unlike the Tories, Labour should respect research and evidence and listen to both professionals and families before launching new policies. But these are our key proposals:

- **Reducing inequality** must be a central aim of the National Education Service. We need a lifelong **educational entitlement** that everyone can access and **long term support** in areas where social and economic challenges are greatest as part of a comprehensive regeneration programme.
· All parts of the education service must be adequately funded so that there is a full range of educational opportunities for learners of all ages that are free at the point of use. In particular we need to restore the provision of adult education so that everyone has the opportunity to develop new skills throughout life. We must also ensure that apprenticeships provide high quality training and offer genuine routes into employment.

· The privatisation and marketisation of education in all phases from early years to university must be ended and replaced by democratically accountable structures. Therefore, as part of an overall restructure of local and regional government, we should devolve responsibility to local authorities for ensuring educational opportunities are available to all. The workings of local authorities however need to be more open and should facilitate the active participation of staff, learners and members of the wider community. The local authorities will be the regulatory body, primary central service provider and commissioner for all educational institutions in their area.

· We must support the recruitment and retention of a fully qualified professional workforce in all phases by restoring national pay and conditions, addressing workload pressures, respecting professional expertise and ensuring high quality initial and continuing professional development is available to all employees. Specifically, we should simplify entry routes into teaching and restore the role of higher education in initial teacher education.

· The ethos of “every child matters” needs to be restored with the provision needed to support it. In particular, by restoring support for families and children in the early years. We must ensure the needs of learners with special needs and disabilities are met with adequate funding and that wherever possible they are included in mainstream provision. We need to support schools to manage challenging behaviour and ending the scandal of off-rolling. Youth services and other out of school provision which can both promote valuable informal learning and also support young people at risk of involvement in gangs and crime need to be restored.

· We should recognise that the current curriculum and assessment arrangements do not adequately support young people in gaining the knowledge, skills, creativity and personal qualities needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world and therefore to engaging schools, universities, employers, trade unions, learners and parents in a long term review of what is taught in schools and colleges and how the full range of achievements can be recognised. This should include radically reducing the pressure on both children and teachers by ending external testing in early years, primary and early secondary phases. Immediately, we should replace the EBacc by a curriculum which gives greater priority to creative, artistic and technical subjects and then review the whole 14 to 19 phase with a view to reducing the volume of testing at 16 and developing a unified curriculum framework that does not separate academic and technical courses.

· inspection and accountability need to be reformed so that they are less confrontational and more supportive and collaborative in all phases.

· We want to see a fully comprehensive system which means maintaining the ban on any new academic selection (including no expansion of selective schools), committing to phasing out selective systems and to reducing the influence of and ultimately phasing out private education. In addition, the admissions system must be reformed so as to ensure that the intakes of all schools, including comprehensives, are properly representative of their local community.
A bigger, braver and more rounded curriculum that is truly broad and balanced, is a longstanding aim of progressive educationalists. Bolstered by a National Education Service (NES) the aim of the next Labour government, if it has the courage to take on the siren voices of the right now embedded in the education establishment and the media, has to be exactly that. This means implementing, in the 14 to 19 phase, a unified developmental curriculum, where the academic and vocational are equally valued. At its heart, it should be developing the skills and knowledge in our young people, necessary to engage fully with the modern world in a critical and reflective way. Communication in all its facets, problem-solving, collaboration, critical thinking and reflection must feature. It must also be flexible and personalised, allowing young people to choose courses which suit their aspirations and interests. Finally, the assessment model should recognise the achievements of all learners, including those with special needs, rather than segregate them through crude pass/fail measures. We have been close to achieving the above on occasion, notably the Tomlinson reforms proposed in 2004 and the short lived curriculum 2000 agenda.

A progressive 14 to 19 curriculum must:

**Develop** the knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions to enable young people to be responsible citizens and independent thinkers. Students should be prepared for employment, competent to make choices and learn throughout their lives.

**Prepare** 19 year olds to progress to employment or continue in education, with useful social and learning skills and qualifications that are valuable and understood by both employers and education institutions;

**Be engaging** to retain young people at risk of leaving education, employment and training.

The Tories initiated the Sainsbury review which they have accepted in full. Currently, Labour has accepted it too. The Sainsbury Review was flawed from the beginning as its terms of reference only included ‘technical education and qualifications’ as opposed to ‘academic’ GCSEs and A levels which would continue their role in selecting the elite to run the establishment, untouched. Further, it only considered post 16 study and was therefore prevented, unlike Tomlinson, from recommending courses and programmes pre-16 to provide progression onto more vocational routes post 16. It is now the case that pupils at Key Stage 4 have to meet tough entrance criteria based on success in academic GCSEs to be able to study A level. If they do not meet them they are ‘guided’ into vocational courses like BTECs or into apprenticeships. Vocational courses are often not, therefore, a positive choice for students but a fall back reluctantly undertaken because they have ‘failed’ in their academic courses. The government’s insistence on ever higher proportions of pupils taking the EBAC combination of subjects at GCSE will further reinforce the perception that vocational courses are only for those not bright enough to succeed academically.

The new Tory T levels, proposed for post 16 study and arising from the Sainsbury review, maintain and reinforce the existing academic vocational divide. There are many similarities between the Tories’ new T levels and the ill-fated ‘diplomas’ which New Labour, at great expense, failed to make a permanent feature of 14 to 19 education in the noughties. The same employment areas with slightly amended names will become available for study at T level e.g. Business and Administration. Again, as with the diploma, when students opt to take a T level they will find there is no room for other options. Like the old diplomas they are all encompassing and will contain elements of English and Maths no doubt ‘relevant to the sector’, taking students to higher skill levels than GCSE. Again, similar to the diploma, colleges and now some schools, have to show they have the expertise and resources to deliver the T level and have to gain approval before offering it.

In New Labour’s case the Diploma, which ended
up covering vocational subjects only, arose out of a cowardly political decision not to implement the Tomlinson report which would have meant incorporating A levels and GCSEs as well as vocational qualifications into the new diplomas. An imaginative implementation of Tomlinson would have allowed students to mix and match academic and vocational elements. Fear of the right-wing media’s reaction, in the lead up to an election, was the reason. The right focused, as they continue to do, on Labour being soft on standards. What they presented as the abolition of A levels, they claimed, was strong evidence of this. The achievement of students more suited to vocational study was not their concern. Instead of incorporating A levels into Tomlinson’s new diplomas, new Labour would allow A levels, so strongly rooted in post 16 academic education in the minds of middle-class parents and favoured by the Russell group, to simply ‘wither on the vine’. Ed Balls claimed diplomas would become the ‘qualification of choice’. The NUT at the time were right. They saw the decision as a clear reversal by the government saying ‘the decision to ditch Tomlinson’s 14-19 reform proposals was fundamentally wrong’. It was wrong because it would perpetuate the academic vocational divide and the low status of vocational education. The proposed new diplomas, unlike Tomlinson’s originals, were not as inclusive either. The new Labour foundation diploma was still well beyond the reach of many SEN learners. It was also wrong too, because the chance of creating a qualification framework accessible throughout life, which would have been so suited to a National Education Service, was missed.

In contrast, the day after its publication, the Tories announced that they had accepted the Sainsbury Review in full. Its recommendations are being progressed via the government’s Post-16 Skills Plan. Accordingly, there has been no consultation about the merits or otherwise of the Sainsbury recommendations (including it has to be said in the Labour Party).

While unsurprisingly welcomed by the Association of Colleges (which may well see benefit in the assumption that FECs will deliver the new T-level qualifications) there have been wider criticisms including of the implication that certain routes are associated with particular qualifications, the requirement for students to choose routes at 16 and the suggestion that students who want to transfer onto ‘academic routes will have to spend time ‘transitioning’ from one pathway to another. Currently students can choose a combination of advanced vocational (often BTECs) and academic qualifications. In 2017 the number of university students with BTECs has doubled since 2008 to more than 100,000. At the government insistence rigorous external examinations now form part of the qualification, so this puts paid to the argument that BTECS are chosen because they are an easy option. The rushed introduction of T levels and the recent refusal to continue funding BTECS looks suspiciously like cutting off a route to university favoured by students coming from families without university experience. It also looks like a deliberate attempt to reduce student numbers, university places and even the number of universities.

T-levels have been criticised as being ill-thought out and for which schools, colleges, students and employers are ill-prepared. The simplistic claims made in the Sainsbury Report that T-levels will lead to certain jobs have also been debunked as unrealistic and far-removed from the real world in which vocational qualifications are already studied by many students and where so-called academic routes often include vocational and technical education and vice-versa.

“Students, parents and employers will not buy-in to T-levels which are cobbled together and are only targeted at young people. Quite rightly, qualifications in the UK are not age-dependent and need to be fit for study for people of all ages including those who want to return to improve their career options later in life. The challenges of improving the UK’s productivity and skills base will not be met without a lot more work, resources and joined-up thinking.”

T-levels in some subjects are being piloted but concerns continue to be raised e.g. about the requirement to undertake lengthy, local industrial placements – a particular challenge in rural areas the DfE’s refusal to fund students’ transport costs – and more recently the DfE’s proposal to withdraw support for BTECs which are effectively being considered by Ministers as ‘competitors to T-levels. Damian Hinds also forced through their early introduction against civil service advice.

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The SEA’s position

Labour’s support for separate vocational and academic pathways has frequently been referred to since the 2017 election. For example, both Jeremy Corbyn and Angela Rayner referred to the value of separate pathways at the launch of Labour’s Life-long learning Commission. Labour’s apparently unquestioning support for the Sainsbury Reviews recommendations, including the development of T-levels and the Tory idea that vocational courses are only delivered by colleges and not by schools, other providers and universities – or by collaboration between institutions – is also problematic.

The first T-levels are due to be launched in 2020. Other than criticising the timetable for implementation, it appears that Labour is effectively supporting the Conservatives ‘two-pathway’ agenda without considering the options or whether and how this agenda aligns with a ‘cradle to grave’ NES or the Party’s ambitions to deliver a green economy. To ignore this issue would be to once again mean that Labour would miss the opportunity of a lifetime.

The Tories are being far more ruthless in introducing T levels than New Labour was with its diplomas, which were always second best any way. Hinde has even overruled the civil service who have pleaded with him not to go ahead in 2020 because the relevant preparations have not been completed. The introduction of T levels will cement the partition between academic and vocational study up to age 18 and beyond because students will not be able to take A levels alongside them. The abolition of applied general qualifications like BTECS will prevent students pursuing a mix of vocational and academic qualifications post 16.

Despite its age the Tomlinson agenda which would have:

- revolutionised assessment reducing the number of exams taken
- allowed for students to take assessments when they were ready rather than at a particular age
- allowed for students to take either specialised vocational or academic courses, as well as a mix between the two, from age 14 effectively abolishing the vocational/academic divide once and for all
- included all learners
- provided a qualification framework accessible throughout life.

Recommendation

The SEA should propose that Labour

1. Immediately cancel the implementation of T levels should it be elected soon, and continue the current mix of academic and vocational qualifications until a new review can be completed

2. Remove the EBAC ambition from performance tables

3. Immediately set up a new review which essentially builds on and updates Tomlinson for the NES. No need to reinvent the wheel. The review must be of the whole 14 to 19 phase within the context of the NES. It must meet the needs of all learners. It must end the academic/vocational divide. It must have a ‘climbing frame’ approach to assessment recognising the level a learner reaches however high or low that is. It must allow learners to ‘climb’ higher at later points in their lives.

The SEA will organise a seminar entitled “Tomlinson for the Twenties” to help facilitate this radical agenda.

Ian Duckett, Pam Tatlow and James Whiting
August 2019.
The questions of 'what is education for?', 'who controls it?' and 'how do they control it?' are not new. During the 1970s, and as part of a wider discussion around workers' control and industrial democracy, the Institute for Workers' Control initiated a discussion of these questions, some of which are still open today. Kathryn Hinton poses many questions that are still to find a satisfactory answer. It is worth our time and effort to visit them and the analysis of education she presents in the 1970s.

When she writes "The only thing that education may be doing is providing a filter and labelling system that satisfies most of the establishment", do we think the same might still apply today?

From the archives

What have the Unions been doing?
The teachers unions have been consistently, like other unions, too concerned with securing salary increases, in order to keep up with inflation. During the last few years the militancy of these unions has increased quite significantly and this has put pressure on the unions to remain aware of this reality. The teachers unions have been facing increasing pressure to increase their influence on the education system and to negotiate salary increases.

The question of what is education for? is still open today. Kathryn Hinton poses many questions that are still to find a satisfactory answer.
The Socialist Educational Association is a Socialist Society, affiliated to the Labour Party. It began in the '20's as the National Association of Labour Teachers. SEA was renamed and broadened to include all socialists with an interest in education. It played a major role in developing the concept of the neighbourhood comprehensive school in the '60's. The aims of the SEA are:

- To promote comprehensive education, based on equality of opportunity and lifelong access, well resourced, free and under local democratic control.
- To influence development of progressive education policies within the Labour Party and to work with other like-minded bodies.
- To promote an international and inclusive perspective to education.

We have now set up SEA Cymru, a Welsh branch, affilliated to Welsh Labour.

Since devolution, education in Wales has diverged from that in England, in many ways (except finance) to Wales' advantage. Examples include the Foundation Phase, 14-19 education, the absence of academies, trust and ‘free’ schools, the Welsh baccalaureate, maintenance of an inclusive, cooperative and comprehensive ethos. We welcome the Donaldson curriculum initiative, the development of Additional Learning Needs policy, and the provision of free breakfasts in primary schools. We need to elaborate a policy for Welsh education that defends and nurtures what has been achieved, but which also specifies what further needs to be done.

Membership is open to all who have an interest in education and are eligible for Labour Party membership. Individual members are welcome (£25 waged, £12 unwaged pa) (Couples £35 or £18). CLPs and branches, including TU branches, are welcome to affiliate (£30 pa). Membership includes the right to attend meetings and conferences in Wales and of the National SEA, and includes a free copy of the journal for analysis and debate, “Education Politics”

Please contact to Mike Newman 17 Gileston Road, Cardiff, CF119JS. We will forward membership requests to the National Membership Secretary. Or contact via newmanmike2@aol.com (or via 029 20 382 369)
SOCIALIST EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION - MEMBERSHIP FORM

I WANT TO JOIN / REJOIN THE SEA AND PAY THE FOLLOWING SUBSCRIPTION —

Single: Waged £25 ☐ or Unwaged £12 ☐       Couple: Waged £35 ☐ or Unwaged £18 ☐

DECLARATION: (please tick one):
I am already a member of the Labour Party ☐
Or I am not a member of another political party (and therefore eligible to join the SEA) ☐

CONTACT DETAILS (BLOCK CAPITALS)

First name 1       Last name 1
First name 2       Last name 2
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Postcode       Phone
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Please complete and sign this form and send it to:
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c/o 44 Bruce Road,
London E3 3HL

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c/o Unity Trust Bank PLC,
Nine Brindleyplace,
Birmingham B1 2HB
Sort Code: 60 83 01
Account No: 50726172

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Please note: Membership begins on payment of subscription.
Comprehensive Future & SEA conference fringe meeting

The Problems with Private and Selective Schools

Tuesday 24 September | 18:30 - 20:00
Brighthelm Centre, North Road, Brighton

Speakers:
Thelma Walker MP
Dr Sol Gamsu, Durham University
Dr Marlene Ellis, Exeter University
Melissa Benn, writer and campaigner
Chair: Dr Nuala Burgess

Comprehensive Future and the Socialist Educational Association have partnered for our fringe meeting: ‘From social mobility to social justice: the problems with private and selective schooling.’