

Ep.2 Let's Go Further: What should we do about social mobility?

In this episode, we are joined by Professor Lee Elliott Major OBE who discusses what we mean by social mobility, how we can improve it in the UK, and how we can better support disadvantaged learners in further education.

Lee is the UK's first ever Professor of Social Mobility. He has written several books and regularly appears in national broadcast and print media. He is also an example of social mobility himself, having come from a working-class background in West London and dropped out of school at 15, before progressing through college and university to eventually become a professor.

Transcript

Joe Mcloughlin 0:02

Welcome to Let's Go Further, a podcast that shines a light on the role of further education in transforming people's lives. In this first series, we are talking with learners, teachers, business people and professors about why further education matters to them. I'm your host Joe McLoughlin, Foundation Manager of the Skills and Education Group, an organisation that champions the further education and skills sector. In this episode, our guest is Professor Lee Elliot Major from the University of Exeter. Lee is the UK's first ever Professor of Social Mobility and his work is dedicated to improving the prospects of disadvantaged young people. He has written several books and regularly appears in national broadcast and print media. So, to quote the title of one of Lee's books, what should we do about social mobility? Lee, good afternoon. Thanks for joining us.

Lee Elliot Major 0:54

Good afternoon.

Joe Mcloughlin 0:56

I suppose I'd like to begin with just a bit of a broad question really, and ask you what your education was like?

Lee Elliot Major 1:02

This topic is as much as a sort of personal passion as a professional interest. And, you know, I come from, I guess you'd classify as a working-class background, I suppose, West London. For various reasons, I ended up living on my own at age 15, and effectively dropped out of school. So, I, I had to go back and retake my A levels at College, Richmond College, which is a tertiary college. I've ended up becoming an educationist, but it's quite unusual. And it's very

unusual to be a university professor and to have someone who's had my sort of background. So, if you look at me at age 16, you know, if you if I was one of those statistics that we talk about in these national debates, you'd have just oh, this guy doesn't have much of a chance in life. But I did really through friends, extended family, teachers, people helped me, and I always think we sort of forget this, a lot of what social mobility about is people helping other people, we might get back into that later. But it's really through the help of others that I returned to college. And then I went to Sheffield University, I read physics there, I stayed on to do a PhD. I then became the eternal student, because then I did a master's at Imperial College. And then I went into journalism. I was I was on the Guardian for many years. And then at the Sutton Trust charity, where I became Chief Exec eventually, and then Professor over the last four years. So, I've, I've had a very unusual career in many ways. But the common I suppose theme throughout is a sort of commitment to social justice, stroke, social mobility, i.e. that your background, shouldn't determine what you do in life, irrespective of what that is in life, whether you become a teacher, or a social worker, or a politician, you know, my view is that should be down to your interest, your hard work, probably a bit of luck, but certainly not who you come from and where you live. And sadly, in the UK, that's too much the case. And even more the case, now, probably than when I grew up, the chances that I had as a young person, I'm very conscious that I suspect, if I'd been growing up today, I maybe wouldn't have got to where I got to.

Joe Mcloughlin 3:26

I was just thinking about the kind of what you were saying about social mobility and about it needs to be about talent and ability and interest, right. Whereas a lot of the narrative around it seems to be very clear and clean around, this is where you start, and this is where you end up. And if that is generally if that is a financially stronger position, or a socially stronger position that's viewed as socially mobile, even if you yourself, don't necessarily kind of like what you're doing or appreciate what you're doing. I know that in other interviews and other podcasts, you sort of unpacked the idea of mobility as a we need to broaden our understanding of it as a stable job that you're passionate about something that kind of gets you out of bed in the morning and you're very, very happy to do rather than it just being about earning more money or having a bigger house or what however it is you define it. So, I just wondered if you could talk a bit more about that more about that in detail.

Lee Elliot Major 4:16

So, I think that we as a country have bought into a very individualistic notion of success and a very academic one as well. I think we've been influenced a lot by American culture, and modern capitalism is sort of predicated on this thing called the American dream. Right. So, and in some ways, that's a very great concept, the idea that, you know, you can make it anywhere from anywhere. The problem is, I think, with the American dream, it's become sort of bastardised over the years into a very individualistic notion, you know, that I am going to on my own,

make lots of money become famous, you know, you see it in all the modern TV programmes you know, you get the winner that wins it or when everyone else is a kind of loser in these sort of talent shows. I think that that that encapsulates the culture in which we exist. And I think there's a real push back on this, when I give talks about social mobility, you know, across the country, most people say to me, I don't particularly want lots of money, I want a decent house, I want a life where I can see my friends, be with my family, lead decent lives. And, by the way, give back to others. You know, I certainly are getting that more and more particularly from younger generations, I think there's a real backlash against what we see as success, right. So now other countries that I've visited, and given talks at, including and these are some of the usual suspects, like the Scandinavian countries, but also places like Canada and Australia, I do think that there is a more sort of notion of collective success that people are seen as successful if they have somehow given back to society, and I just think we've got the balance wrong. And there's many people doing great things for society in this country, but I don't think we reward them as much. So, whenever you get into these debates about social mobility, inevitably, you get into debates about inequality as well. And I always say it's two sides of the same coin, for me, you know, your chances of climbing the social ladder are always going to be higher, if the rungs of a ladder are, are nearer together, right, if inequality if inequality is less, but also, it's about choice, it's about whether you want to climb up that ladder. In one article in the Daily Mail, the headline was from bin man to Professor because I once was a binman in between my student terms, I always say that to students is that I was very proud to be a binman, that was a service that was a service, right? That was a public service. And so, you got to be just careful, I think how you judge success. But you know, certainly in education, I think we also have this this sort of implicit hierarchy. And that and that is, the more academic you are, the more status you get, when you know, you meet so many people that are talented in different ways, right? Whether we're going to call it vocational, creating.... this country, I think we're very good creatively, vocationally, but the school system, in my view doesn't support that, that that talent. And I don't think we give it enough credit in public debates, either.

Joe Mcloughlin 7:33

Great. Yeah. And certainly, that kind of thing about having a wider acceptance of skills, or kind of different types of knowledge is something that resonates with us, I mean, sort of, certainly over 50% of our, of our applicants to our grants programme this year, have been on vocational courses, and are genuinely passionate, genuinely committed, genuinely interested in working in their local community on those things. And they just for whatever reason, they just didn't find a home at school, or do you know what I mean, they weren't, it just didn't, didn't fit for them or work for them in the same way.

Lee Elliot Major 8:02

I mean, I'm very passionate about schooling now. And you know, and I give lectures to teachers about disadvantaged and how you can help poorer children,

but I struggled at school, you know, I dropped effectively dropped out of school for all sorts of reasons. There's a lot happening in my back at home. For many young people, I now try and support and give advice to you know, the reason I do that is because I sort of because of my background, you know, I understand what it was like, if you don't have for whatever reason, the Mum and Das who are supporting you. And I happen to be very academic, so I could kind of get away with it, right? Because I could do that, that now a lot of my friends just had different talents. But because they weren't able like me to sort of memorise things last minute, they struggled at school. So, I really, I really feel for young people. And I make a point of helping as many people who are doing, for example, B techs and thinking about alternative routes, as those young people I help to navigate the university system, because I think they're equally valid.

Joe Mcloughlin 9:06

So sort of having said all that, then kind of what do you what do you see the kind of role of further education and skills providers in sort of social mobility to being and do you have a say, if you had one sort of blue sky policy to help or one great idea that would help improve things for learners in further education and also staff in further education kind of what would you what would you recommend?

Lee Elliot Major 9:27

Before we come to that I mean one of the things I would say, you know, I worry about our political leaders is that because, so few come from different backgrounds that there often isn't as much understanding or empathy for the diverse routes, which young people follow. So, most of our leaders come from a very narrow range of academic backgrounds, right? If you had more diversity at the top, you then get better policymaking in these areas. But anyway, that's just another point. What would I do an obvious one for me, you know, I was one of the champions of the pupil premium when it first came on board 10, over 10 years ago now. I mean, I think it's a national scandal in many ways that we've got extra funding in terms of schools, you know, up to age 16, right. But once you get into further education, colleges, there isn't the equivalent amount of money. Now, I would probably double the pupil premium in schools, to be honest with you, given my research and others showing the extent of needs out there now, particularly in the cost-of-living crisis, particularly post pandemic. But you know, if anyone's serious about social mobility, if any minister is serious about social mobility, you would be funding FE at higher levels, and you would be doing it in my view, targeting the disadvantaged learners. So, I would, I would, I would have a pupil premium in FE, and it would be at realistic levels so you can help young people. On top of that, I wouldn't, you would need some sort of guidance about how you use that best, you know, and I do loads of work with teachers about, you know, what are the best bets for using that money, I think we probably could do more of that, in FE, to be honest with you, you know, a lot of my lectures tend to be with teachers that are going to go into the school sector. A lot of the principles that I talk about probably just as much apply to FE. I think the only other priority for me would be early years, you know, I would

probably have a return to some something like the sort of Sure Start centres that we had, you know, 25 years ago, but that those two would be top of my priority list.

Joe Mcloughlin 11:42

And are there any, are there any older sort of funding policies that you'd bring back? So, I mean, I remember when I was doing my A Levels EMA was a was a big, big thing for kind of keeping post sixteens in education, is there kind of things there that you'd look to bring back? Or...

Lee Elliot Major 11:57

I think that's a good question. You know, I was involved in some of the discussions about the use of the Educational Maintenance Allowance. It was reviewed again; this was probably over a decade ago now and the feeling was that wasn't as impactful as it could have been. And as you know, it got scrapped. My sense now, and I haven't got evidence behind this, to be honest with you. But my sense is because of the cost-of-living crisis because people are up against it now, I wonder whether we need to think about having to reintroduce that help. I get reports now, from colleges and schools of young people unable to get the bus to afford the bus to college. I gave a talk at Exeter College recently; I did a lecture for A level students there. And it was interesting talking to the staff there the college is a very big college just about the difficulties they're facing, their pupils are finding in in getting to college. So yeah, maybe we need to consider a reintroduction of that. I think we probably need to do some analysis on that. But yeah, that's certainly something to look at.

Joe Mcloughlin 13:06

Yeah, certainly. So, for us, we had applications from 344 learners, the biggest request amongst them all was travel, whether that was paying for bus fare, or whether it was driving lessons, or Road Tax, or MOTs. It seemed to be the thing people most needed money for wasn't the actual education itself wasn't the course content, or the tuition fees, or the books or anything like that. It was the stuff around education that enables education to happen if that makes sense.

Lee Elliot Major 13:34

One of the things I wanted to do was investigate travel, you know, does where you live, determine how easy it is to pay for travel to get to college, right? Because we found in the southwest, we did a review of social mobility obstacles, specifically in the southwest. And because it's a big rural coastal region, there's real issues around travel. Right. But what we found was that it's almost a lottery that the local authority you happen to live under, some of them provide, you know, some funding, some of them don't. And I talked to the government about it, and they said it's the responsibility of the local authorities. But as far as I

understand it need to do some more research on this. It seems to be a bit of a lottery now, right, which can't be fair, you know, I think we should have an entitlement up to age 18. It was at age 16, that it changed. I think up to age 16, basically, there is, you know, you get it for free mainly. After 16, it suddenly, that assumption seemed to go, you know, we should help young people up to age 18. Having two children aged 17 and 19 myself, I can tell you, they haven't grown up properly yet at that age. I mean, they're still in many ways, young children, and yet we have this kind of convenient government thing which says, oh, they're all adults, at sort of 18 actually, we're not going to help them after age 16. I think that really is a big impact impediment to life chances, you know, and it's something we should look at, I would probably extend that to 19 to be honest with you. I mean, a lot of young students that I mean, honestly, they're still growing up. Right. You know, it takes I think some people estimate is it that age 25 by the time your brain stops developing, I think we certainly should look at travel across the country.

Joe Mcloughlin 15:21

I just, I just wanted to circle back to the, the metaphor of the ladder, which you you've used, and lots of people have used kind of when talking about mobility, and it's that it's the two things right, it's, you've got to help people climb it. So, you've got to help the climber and put the climber in the best position they can. But you can also, if possible, make the rungs of the ladder closer together. Because the fear is, if you just let the climber shoot up and support the climber to shoot up and get away from where they came from, it leaves the places where they came from in just the same situation. So that person has been well served. But the wider the wider community is left struggling; I was just wondering if you had any thoughts on how we can support kind of wider communities while supporting individuals?

Lee Elliot Major 16:04

Yeah, I mean, I have used the metaphor of the ladder a lot. I mean, I do umm and ahh about that, to be honest with you, because, you know, it's kind of by implication sort of says oh, those at the top are better than those at the bottom, right. I mean, when sociologists first came up with the social class categorizations, it wasn't meant to be hierarchical, believe it or not, it was it was just really describing people from different backgrounds. And I think because society has become so unequal financially that you know, you've got these huge gaps now, but you know, a lot of people can move down the ladder and have great lives. You know, I've got lots of friends who, you know, had mum and dads in busy jobs, who've said, no, I don't want that hectic life. I know I'm going off on a tangent here. But you know, I would classify myself as an awkward climber. You know, I'm someone who comes from a background and essentially lost their connections with that background, you know, you know, my brother famously sort of sort of said, oh Lee you sound like Tony Blair, and that and that, you know, from where I came from, yeah, where people have got quite a sort of London accent, that was you've become posh, you know, you're the blue

eyed boy sort of thing. On one level, it was meant with a fondness but on another level, it's sort of, you know, it's like, you're no longer part of us. And if I'm honest with you, I mean, you know, my mum, she's passed away now, bless her, but I think she never quite understood what I did, you know, because in her mind, I ended up in this very middle class world, right, you know, talking on the TV and on podcasts, and, and she was very proud of it. But also, it was, it was an alien world in many ways, right? So being socially mobile isn't necessarily a complete success story, right. And what I found is for me, and for many others in studies, you see that you make sacrifices, because you leave the community, you're from, and then you kind of never quite feel at home in the community that you kind of ended up in. That metaphor of the ladder, maybe I shouldn't use it as much as I do. I don't know, maybe it's more escalators or something else that's a bit closer to reality.

Joe Mcloughlin 18:24

So, I just wanted to talk a little bit more about the importance of bringing up local communities alongside successful students because a role of a lot of the colleges we work with, they describe themselves as hubs for business development, local government initiatives, they offer training to a wide range of learners that work locally, improve the economy, deliver services in the local area. And then they themselves also offer Child Care counselling services, discounted catering, hair, and beauty or lifestyle service to learners. And I was just curious, because compared to my experience of university, where I went through - I had a good university experience, but I didn't, I never, I never felt particularly attached to the place. I had a good education. I had good friends, but I didn't feel particularly attached to the place. I was just wondering if you had any thoughts on the importance of bringing up local communities alongside successful students and how we might do that?

Lee Elliot Major 19:14

I think this is one of the areas where universities could learn from colleges, I don't think universities do enough in terms of their civic roles. One of the programmes I'm involved in piloting is using undergraduates as tutors in local Exeter schools. But what I was thinking if that pilot works in a very local level, if we want to expand that to the region, and indeed, eventually the nation, the whole country, you'd have to engage with big colleges local college is the only way you're going to get to young people in those places, but in general, education can act as a sort of anchor institution for communities. So, I'm a real big supporter of this. The only thing I would challenge colleges and some schools, we're doing some pilots with schools acting as community hubs now as well, is just make sure that you are learning from the evidence of what works. What are the best bets, given the sort of global evidence, I think the locality is always unique. You've always got a unique mix of things there. But my challenge to people is, have you looked at the evidence of what works? You know, but certainly my view, is that education is more than just teaching, you know, now some people challenge that I think you've got, you've got to give the resource to



back it up. But I think in the reality of the world we're in with the profound social and economic inequalities that we're experiencing, I think education is going to have to play a role. So, I love the idea of colleges being sort of community hubs.

Joe Mcloughlin 20:52

Yeah, absolutely. So, going back to that idea of, I think, as you said, previously, kind of community colleges on the American model?

Lee Elliot Major 21:00

Listen, it's probably never going to happen, is it? But I honestly think we should rebrand FE colleges as community colleges, because I think that encapsulates them more. And sadly, the FE moniker is associated for me with underfunding with FE being the sort of Cinderella sector, you know, that's not given enough attention. Couldn't we just rebrand if I can use that and call them community colleges? Because I think that's a much better description in many ways.

Joe Mcloughlin 21:32

As we kind of round out the chat. Now, I just wanted to ask you, if there was a couple of things, we should be wary of. So, I know you've spoken in length in your book about the enemies of social mobility, but in this context, so one, what would be an enemy of social mobility? And then particularly in this context, how do you think that kind of that antagonistic relationship plays out?

Lee Elliot Major 21:52

You know, when we came up with that title, enemies, we really, so this is from our book, social mobility, and its enemies, available, still in all good bookstores published by Penguin, and, you know, it was a broad idea of enemy so it's everything from you know, inequality, for example, I think we talk about in the book to the vested interests of particular politicians. And, you know, I do worry, you know, I'm, I'm really pleased that the new Social Mobility Commission has sort of said, it's going to prioritise some of these areas over the more sort of, you know, academic side of things, you know, we should be spending as much time on this area as the university access debates that we have in the press and in public. You know, we should be spending as much time thinking about apprenticeships, skills. And you know, my worry is, is that, particularly when we have a political system that seems so short term, and so sort of, you know, so much upheaval, that you don't get the sort of long-term strategies that we need, to address some of these fundamental issues. And I say that because I think, you know, we were talking earlier about culture and valuing what we value in society, I think that's a long-term challenge. You know, I think that's a 510 year at least, programme, you know, and by the way, I would probably Yeah, call, call it community colleges, I would then think about serious advocacy over several years about the funding that they receive. Coming back to what I do

with schools, I'd love to work more with colleges about it in terms of the just the teaching as well, you know, I do best bets for the classroom, or for disadvantaged learners, we should be doing more on that.

Joe Mcloughlin 23:57

So, the reason I picked on the enemies is I think it's an evocative word. And it's certainly one that resonated with me. There's a bit in it, and I know you've spoken before about tutoring, and tutoring is kind of the preserve of the middle classes who want to help their kids get on and I realise I'm guilty of it myself, because I, I tutor, so in order to earn money to help put some money aside for my daughter, and then obviously, I'm complicit in this in this structure. So, I was just curious as to how you see that playing out in the sort of schools and FE sector, whether that was about, you know, do colleges need to get braver at talking to schools about what they offer to schools need to get braver at directing their learners towards colleges?

Lee Elliot Major 24:34

Quickly on that? I mean, you know, I think I'm more and more convinced by a power of vested interest in in the country, not to change much, you know, in terms of the schooling system, generally, in terms of you know, it's a very academic system. You know, I think we fail a quarter of children every year. In GCSEs, we will have 25% of young people labelled failures because they didn't get grade four in English and Maths. My view is that there's a lot of talented young people in that group who haven't done well at school and will end up probably going to an FE college to do retakes or to think about other options. I just think we fail those children. I think it's the school system failing that I don't think it's teachers, I think it's the way that we created the school system. I also think we give too much attention to the universities in terms of public debate. But you know, there's a bit of me that feels that there is this incredibly vested interest to keep things the way they are. Because you know, people want to retain their position in society. A lot of the research we do keeps coming back to this incredibly powerful force, and it's the force of parents wanting to do the best for their children. And I think you just never underestimate that. Never underestimate it.

Joe Mcloughlin 26:02

How far would you take that Lee? I mean would you penalise schools if students left with no grades? Or do you think if colleges had to pick up, they should receive funding in proportion to the amount of extra do you know what I mean that the amount of gap there is, or how would it - I'm just curious as to how you how you might see it working?

Lee Elliot Major 26:21

Well, I would look at the curriculum in schools at a much earlier age. You know,

I personally would look at having more vocational options earlier on in the curriculum. Now some people sort of critique that say, because will this be a curriculum for the poor kids? And so, you must be careful how you do it. But now, you know, you talk to teachers, and they'll know at age 11 probably even earlier, which children aren't going to get the grades age 16, you know, and it's incredibly demoralising dispiriting for those young people. So, I would it be more fundamental for me, I don't think it's about penalising or tweaking the system. Certainly, the retakes, you know because a lot of young people must do retakes at GCSEs. There, I think, again, the record isn't great. There's a lot of them that just fail again. So, I do wonder whether we need a different approach to that, I have to say, but probably not funded that well, I suspect that that retakes provision.

Joe Mcloughlin 27:26

And then just I just wanted to end on a on a more sort of personal question. You're the country's first social mobility professor, or is it even the world?

Lee Elliot Major 27:33

Yeah, we don't know of yet. But I think there are a few because I've had a few inquiries and a few people in other universities saying, oh, we're thinking of this. So, I think there might be a few more now, but certainly, we think I am the first. Yeah.

Joe Mcloughlin 27:48

So as that sort of trendsetter, what are your kind of ambitions for the role? Like, what would you say you've spoken about some of the initiatives, you're looking at trialling in the southwest? But what are your kind of bigger picture aims for the next sort of 5 /10 years?

Lee Elliot Major 28:00

I'm a professor of practice, right? So that I'm quite different to many professors. What does that mean? That means my measures of success are very much, you know, real change within the system, but for people, right. So, it's an amazing role and I'm really pleased that it's been a success, but I just want to be able to in 10 years' time to look back and say, how many children Lee, did you help, right? Because you can talk about this stuff a lot. And you can do lots of research on it. I think the hardest thing of all, is making change happen. And I suppose some of my work is trying to get governments to change things. So, for example, you know, we're changing the way that personal statements are done for university applications now. So, I'm very proud to have been part of that change, you know, so that they can't be gamed by the middle classes. But then I, as I said earlier, you know, I also try and help young people out personally as well. So, I've got several students of different ages, who I've tried to help advise, you know, and so you're giving back in a very direct way like that. So,



come back and ask me in 10 years' time, right, but I hope I can report back and that I've made a difference.

Joe McLoughlin 29:21

Thanks for listening to this episode of Let's Go Further, which was produced by the Skills and Education. Don't forget to subscribe to receive future episodes, and you can let us know what you think about what you hear on Twitter and LinkedIn. So, join us next time for more honest, insightful, and inspiring conversations from Let's Go Further.