# Ep.6 Let’s Go Further: Driving the economy: why FE is key

Could a strong further education system be the key to driving the economy?  
  
In the final episode of this series, we welcome Alun Francis OBE, Principal and Chief Executive of Oldham College and Deputy Chair of the Social Mobility Commission. Through the two positions he holds, Alun is able to provide both regional and national perspectives on social mobility – how we define it, how we measure it, and how we ensure it is realistic for all.  
  
In this conversation, Alun explains the importance of creating opportunities for people of all backgrounds, and the benefits this will have for both local communities and the wider UK economy.  
  
We look forward to your company as we conclude the first series of the Let’s Go Further podcast

**Who is Alun Francis?**

Alun is the Principal and Chief Executive of Oldham College and was appointed in 2010.   During this time the college has been redeveloped with an investment of over £45m, with new facilities to support technical education from entry to degree level.

The college has developed a reputation for strong teaching and learning, and has won a number of prestigious awards for its Teaching for Distinction CPD programme and its provision for special needs learners.  It was nominated as FE College of the Year at the 2019 TES Awards and in 2020 for innovation around remote learning.

Prior to joining the college, Alun had a varied career in local government, regeneration and higher education.  He has a strong interest in the economics of what is now referred to as “levelling up” and sees FE colleges in general and Oldham College in particular as having a critical role to play in addressing this challenge.  He received an OBE for service to education in the 2021 New Year’s Honours List and in November 2021 Alun was appointed Deputy Chair of the Social Mobility Commission.

## Transcript

**Joe Mcloughlin 0:02**

Hello and welcome to Let's Go Further, your insight into the lives and work of individuals in and around the further education and skills sector and their experiences of social mobility. I'm Joe McLoughlin, Foundation Manager at the Skills and Education Group. And throughout this series, I'll be speaking to teachers, learners, sector leaders and researchers from the world of education and beyond. In this episode, I'm joined by Alun Francis OBE. Alun is the Deputy Chair of the Social Mobility Commission, and has been Principal and Chief Executive of Oldham College since 2010, leading the college to win a number of prestigious awards for its Teaching for Distinction CPD programme, and its provision for Special Needs learners. Alan has a strong interest in the economics of social mobility, and sees further education colleges as having a critical role to play in addressing this challenge. I sat down to talk with him about some other ways that colleges might do that. Alan, Hi, how are you?

**Alun Francis OBE 0:58**

I'm fine thanks. How are you Joe?

**Joe Mcloughlin 0:59**

I'm good. Thank you. You join us today in a double role as both the Principal and Chief Exec of Oldham College and the Deputy Chair of the Social Mobility Commission, I was wondering if you could start by telling us a little more about those roles. And what does your average week looked like?

**Alun Francis OBE 1:13**

The first thing is, I think it's a really interesting opportunity for an FE Principal to be on something like the Social Mobility Commission, which I don't think in the past has had people who are currently practising in the education system. And it's interesting that my Chair, Katharine Birbalsingh runs a very successful secondary school in London. And I'm involved, obviously, at Oldham College. And I do think that that's an interesting decision and a quite challenging one, because what we do is come at social mobility very much from the kind of practical point of view of what we see, every day. And of course, we have to link that up with the wider theories and evidence about social mobility and so on. But it does give a, I think it's a really interesting interface. And I certainly think that there should be a stronger interface between the practitioners and the policymakers in all fields, I think there's a very creative relationship that should be encouraged between the two. So I think that's, that's my opening observation. My role in the college obviously, we're a middle-sized FE College in a northern post industrial setting, with all the challenges that brings. So my normal week would be probably quite wide-ranging from my management meetings. In terms of running the college, obviously, we have to be very careful about finance and continue to improve quality. And there's lots of new curriculum to develop, which is very exciting. Meeting learners is a key part of my week, making sure I'm out and about in the college, talking to staff, and making sure I know what's going on. But also, particularly through technology being able to join in with the various meetings we have with the Social Mobility Commission and the other external meetings we have. So we have a lot to do with Greater Manchester, obviously Oldham is part of that wider city region. So we do a lot of collaborative work with the other colleges in Greater Manchester. And there's some very exciting projects developing there around improving productivity, innovation, and helping meet the skills needs in the city region. So the week is very varied, no two weeks are the same. And you could literally be dealing with anything from a very serious safeguarding issue through to a quite complex partnership project based on you know, something like improving the economy, and anything in between. And that's probably what makes the job interesting.

**Joe Mcloughlin 3:28**

So thinking more about...the word you use, there was interface. So the idea that it's kind of a rare situation to have somebody who is practising and leading, in real time, also kind of co-leading and deputy-chairing a commission on social mobility. What does that look like? Kind of how do you take what you learn and what you see day to day in Oldham, back to your meetings with the Commission, kind of how do they how do they interact?

**Alun Francis OBE 3:53**

Well, I think that in the 10 years that I've worked at this college and in my wider career, which has not all been in FE, it's been in similar related things, but not just in FE, I do think you get a very interesting insight into how opportunity works across the country. I think in particular, one of the things that you see in Further Education is those who are coming out of school with very low qualifications in school. And it's very important that those people feel that they have got opportunities, and that we create clear pathways to those. And that obviously we also have a lot of adults that come back, wanting to upskill retrain, redevelop their skills. And I just think...we also have young people that are coming flying through 16 17 18, wanting to kind of reach the top of their career and fast track into into a work or into university. These are all different forms of social mobility. And I just think that it gives us a unique vantage point in a way of understanding what the different challenges are for different people. And recognising that we must focus on trying to extend opportunity to everybody. And I mean everybody, because what we want to have a really strong economy and a good society is that people all fulfil their ability to the best of their potential as far as we can make that happen. And I think that practical insight is very important in helping shape that view.

**Joe Mcloughlin 5:09**

So thinking about the breadth of pathways available at college, what is it that they offer to learners and wider society that more traditionally celebrated routes to social mobility like getting your A levels, going to university, getting a good job don't?

**Alun Francis OBE 5:23**

It's a really good question. I think the first point I'd make is that there are different ways of viewing social mobility, I don't want to get overly technical about it but there's different ways of measuring it, we know that it's usually measuring people in terms of their progress compared to their parents. But you can measure that in lots of different ways by income, or by occupational status, by where people are on the housing ladder, how much wealth they hold, at the end of their life, all of these are different ways of looking at it. And certainly, one of the ways of improving social mobility is the one you've described, you know, the notion that you can improve your position in life through performing well at school, and at college and on to university. And that, that is the gateway into an occupation with high status, high reward, and so forth. And that's absolutely a well trodden route for many people. And it's a good route. And it's a route that has offered genuinely broader opportunity for a wide variety of people over a period of time. However, it isn't, the only route isn't the only form of social mobility, and it has become the dominant route to the exclusion of some of the others. And I think that that is now changing. But it's important to think well actually, you know, apprenticeships offer a different route, as do vocational technical courses, where they focus on perhaps a broader range of qualities than the academic route does. A range of applied skills as well as theoretical ones, a range of skills like teamwork, and being able to adapt to a workplace situation, perhaps skills that aren't always recognised so strongly in academic tests, but are an important part of the labour market and encourages really what I described at the beginning, which is we need the pathways and routes which identify different forms of talent, and give those different forms of talent, the chance to develop and grow, and then to be applied in the workplace in different settings. And I do think what's happened is we've seen the labour market...employers also realise that we need a wider range of ways for them to find the people that they want. Some of them feel they're not getting that from the traditional routes, and others feel that they never were part of those traditional routes. And so really, I suppose the pathways we offer in FE are about plugging all of those different gaps. And part of my job is to make sure they're recognised as as equally valid, and very important ways of helping people get into work and make the best of their abilities.

**Joe Mcloughlin 7:45**

Moving back to that the definitional issue, because this is something I've heard you speak about before about how, you know, you have this concern that everyone uses the phrase social mobility, and everyone broadly agrees it's a good thing. But the risk is that the word gets bandied around so much that its sort of...the meaning of it becomes slightly unclear whether it's a measure of financial improvement or job stability or generational progress against your parents...on a day to day basis, or a weekly basis, kind of what's the...in your head, what's the working definition, kind of that you're that you're operating in line with kind of what do you see is, as the thing you're aiming for?

**Alun Francis OBE 8:22**

It really opens up a whole set of interesting challenges. I preface my answer by saying that, one of my worries is that the term has become popular in the last decade or so, because everybody would describe what they're doing as contributing towards social mobility, because it's become a kind of so widely used in policy that it's a way people then will justify or support the case for funding in their particular area by saying yes, but we contribute to social mobility so therefore we need to be funded. And when you dig underneath that, the problem is that actually, depending on the definition that you're using, they may or may not be contributing to social mobility, that doesn't mean that what they're doing is not good, or not valid, it's just the term has become one of those terms that you can have people feel the need to respond to, to, to kind of claim their place in the, in the world of good public services really. And often in the private sector, too. I don't think there is a single definition of social mobility. But economists look at it one way, sociologists look at it a slightly different way. There's differences between long and short mobility between absolute and relative mobility, I won't bore you with all the details on all of this, you know, there's...it's how you measure change over generations and all the rest of it. But I think the best working definition is that social mobility is actually about the fact that opportunities in our society are not fixed by your background. So if you compare us for example, to a feudal society, you know, you were born into an occupation, and you couldn't do an occupation that your parents didn't do, because that was the rigid structure of a feudal society. In our society, we're supposed to have a more open set of opportunities so that it's much more about identifying your talents and finding the best place for applying those. And of course that's influenced by your background, but it shouldn't be determined by your background, they are two different things. So I think that leaves my definition is an open one in the sense that it's very much about all people trying to find the best of their ability and finding their place in the world in adult life in a way that we all benefit from people playing to their strengths.

**Joe Mcloughlin 10:19**

A little earlier on when you were talking about your role as principal and Chief Exec of Oldham college, you describe the college as a medium-sized further education college in the northern part of England, in a post industrial area, obviously, kind of in a lot of the conversations around social mobility, they always feel like quite individual stories. So you know, it's the it's the kid from the poor background that did well and moved forward, there seems to me at least, there's never a lot of conversation around the place that they leave behind, or the you know, the, it's great to move forward and move on with your life. But what happens to the place that you leave behind? So I'm just curious, kind of given that you're so rooted in such a place? Could you talk a little bit about the importance of bringing up local communities alongside successful students?

**Alun Francis OBE 11:06**

I think this is the heart of really, I suppose what we might describe our current social mobility dilemma, because the model that you've described earlier, the, you know, people working their way through education, being able to access good university places, which for many professions, is the gateway into professional training. That model, really, to some degree for places like Oldham is one that encourages people to leave, 'leave to achieve' is the kind of catchphrase and actually there's nothing wrong with it. But there is, if that's all there is, if that makes sense. So if taken on its own merits. Of course, we want people to have opportunities to do anything in their life. So wherever you grow up, the fact is that if you do well, you go to a good university that can open up all kinds of opportunities for you all over the world. And that's right, that that should happen. But when you look at geography, there's two things I think that stand out, one is that actually, places like Oldham don't have as many people following those routes, perhaps as other parts of the country. I'm not saying Oldham is isolated on this, I think, you know, a lot of towns like Oldham, in similar situations would have similar figures. But equally, there is the problem about what happens to those who are left behind. Because there's a kind of assumption, well, you know, social mobility is about elite academic skills, it's fine if those people are kind of creamed off. But actually, it's not just about them, it has to be everybody. There's lots of lots of different ways of being successful. There's lots and lots of different careers, there's lots of different skills required. And we need to think then, okay, so what about those people who stay? And what skills does this town need? And what would make the town be a better place? And what would help the economy grow, and so forth. And so there is a real part of social mobility that's about that. And we've got, you know, lots of examples of local people who've done exactly that and been very successful in their own merits. I don't think that's always measured by wealth. Some people aren't measured, you know, that you can point to them and say, Look, they're very wealthy as well. Other people are successful because of what they've achieved in other respects. So I think I think it's a flexible view of social mobility, one that does recognise the importance of place, quite profoundly, because I do think it's a big, it's big in terms of shaping people's opportunities. But it's also important that we recognise the need to bring more opportunities to those places. Otherwise, you do end up with the situation of some people effectively being left behind. And I think that is a huge challenge for policy at all levels, is making sure that everybody has those opportunities, no matter where they live.

**Joe Mcloughlin 13:39**

And then thinking about opportunities where they live, what kind of what are you working on day to day at the moment in Oldham kind of how are you connecting the college with the community? How are you helping your learners branch out and kind of work locally to bring to bring everybody up?

**Alun Francis OBE 13:53**

I think you'll find there's a level of activity in every FE college that's going to be very similar to what I'm going to describe and I think there's some extra challenges for places like Oldham, which I will also talk about. So, on a day to day basis, I think FE colleges are very outward looking places. When we talk to staff about a college we describe it in terms of it's quite a unique role because everything that we want to achieve for our learners depends on partnerships. So we have partnerships around safeguarding and wellbeing, partnerships around wider community involvement. Lots of colleges do great work on charities and all the rest of it. But all of us do lots around work experience and work placements. You know, we're very strongly engaged with employers to try and ensure we're meeting their needs and that also then they see our learners as their employees of the future. So we have a lot of work we do for example, with Northern Care Alliance, which is our NHS Trust, we do a lot of work with the local authority. We do a lot of work with our local housing providers. These are all our bigger partners. It's the football club, we should never fail to remember the importance of Oldham Athletic to this town and they've just got a new owner whose very well connected to the college we're very pleased to be working with them. So there's multiple ways the college is involved in partnerships that are about creating good opportunities for learners. Also making sure our learners are looked after well, and we're helping the town, deal with some of the wider challenges. But there's also a difference for places like this in the sense that, well, I'll give you an example, which I think helps to bring this to life a bit. We've got an archive here, the college from...it goes back to the 1890s. And we discovered it when we moved some buildings and found it in a room that everybody had forgotten about. And when you go through the old prospectuses for the college or you go back through the old minutes for meetings, you realise that the relationship between the college and the local economy was quite simple. So for in Oldham, in the 1940s, the college taught things related to cotton, and engineering, because they were the two dominant sectors at the time, everything was related to that whether it's commerce or chemistry to do with dyeing fabrics, or all of the other wider skills required to run cotton engineering firms are all part of the curriculum of the college, but that's all changed in post industrial places. Because those industries don't exist, manufacturing remains a significant part of the economy, but it's quite different to 30-40 years ago, it's highly automated, requires different skill sets. A lot of the kind of mass employment associated with that has gone. The service economy has different skill requirements. And the future employment for somewhere like Oldham isn't going to just be in Oldham, it's now going to be as part of, well, for us, it's the city region, which has Manchester at the centre, and the Greater Manchester boroughs around it. And so our challenge in terms of thinking how we work with employers, and how we create jobs and how we grow the economy, is quite different. And so a lot of the work that we're doing at the moment with the other colleges is around things like helping...well partnerships with the universities and colleges around supporting innovation for local businesses, that's a whole new and interesting part of our job, but also working together to design some of the new higher technical qualifications, for example, that are part of the skills plan, T Level work placements have been part of that, too. So it's really about how we build a curriculum that is fit for the challenges we've got in the 21st century, and how we build the partnerships behind that. As well as making sure that within the college, the quality of teaching is good and learners are making progress and feel safe, and are able to do their best. So it's a mixture of those things. I hope that answers your question.

**Joe Mcloughlin 17:29**

It does. Yes, absolutely. And very kind of it's great to see the kind of the active outgoing work and the connections that the college has with the local community and how it's, you know, it's a, it's a symbiotic relationship, right? So one helping the other and helping the other and helping the other. I'm just wondering, what should we be wary of, do you think? Kind of what are the what are the limits of education do you think to deliver the kind of change we'd like to see?

**Alun Francis OBE 17:56**

That is a great question. I'm really glad you've asked it. Because there is a danger sometimes that we think education can solve all of these problems. There's a danger sometimes that we think that the purpose of education is to solve all these problems. And actually, it's not - education's purpose is just to teach people stuff they want to know. What happens in the wider world with that, depends on a range of other factors. But what's important to say is that actually, some of the fundamental issues about extending opportunity, are economic, more than educational. So it's the it's, it's the supply of high-quality opportunities, that's very important. And how is that stimulated in places where they're in short supply? And of course, education is key to preparing people to take up those opportunities. But there is this relationship between education and the economy where it's not just a question of, well, we get everybody to a certain level of learning, and it's all going to be fine. It is that much wider engagement, that's important. And of course, the economy is more likely to grow if you have more higher skilled people. So that is a very important part of it. But it's also important to say that a growing economy and a strong economy creates the opportunities for both higher and lower skilled people to do well. And that's, that's something that I think, is a big challenge for places like Oldham and other parts of the country. So I think that's the biggest impediment. And I think the other thing I'd say is that understanding the kind of what I'd call the kind of geography of our economy, you know, the fact that different places don't have the same kinds of opportunities. Places like Oldham are very much dominated by a few really good success stories in terms of the private sector, but a lot of the better paid employment is public sector. And I think, recognising what that means then in terms of a skills agenda for a place like here is different to a different part of the country. And, you know, the challenges are different and what we're grappling with is different. So I do think understanding that in terms of policy is very important.

**Joe Mcloughlin 19:52**

Thinking about that point on the economy. I think you're right to describe it as education's role to train a workforce and then it's the wider role of investment policy businesses to create opportunities for that workforce. But given the tough economic situation we're in at the moment, I'm curious about what your thinking is around the effect that the current context will have on the mobility prospects for learners now, and in the near future?

**Alun Francis OBE 20:17**

We're in a really difficult position, aren't we, because the national economic situation is really unexpected and unprecedented. Certainly, you know, our generation have not had to deal with anything quite like a pandemic and a severely serious war of the kind that's happening. And I think that you know, that context is important to remember. In large parts of the country, one of the problems we've got is that we have this imbalance between opportunity, and we have to redistribute to create some fairness in there. I read a report the other day, where if we had no redistribution in this country through taxation and benefits and other things, then the gap between the wealthiest and the bottom households would be 11 times difference in wealth. And our current tax and redistribution system reduces that to around about 3.8 or 4, we need to be very careful and thoughtful about the people who are stuck at the bottom end life for them is tough, and for their children, opportunities are hard to come by. So we do need to make sure we're looking after people and giving their children particularly the best opportunities that we can. The long run solution to some of the problems in this country is to improve our overall skill levels. We do very, very well for those at the top. But we have a bottom 25% that we do not do very well with. I mean, in terms of basic literacy and numeracy. And people coming out of schools with very low skills at 16 and 17. Often that's connected to the fact their parents may be in a similar situation, in terms of their levels of education, achievement, and so forth. The basic skills problem in this country is quite big. And it's the foundation for us to try and uplift the skills level for everybody. And I think the investment in skills is actually the medium to long run solution to the problem of productivity, and getting growth back on track. But cutting education and particularly further education is not gonna make that any easier. And so we would, I would strongly argue that part of the solution is that a strong, vibrant further education system is actually the key to giving people the skills they need to drive the economy. And we should focus very strongly on doing that really, really well.

**Joe Mcloughlin 22:22**

This brings us to the end of this episode, and indeed this first series of Let's Go Further. We hope you've enjoyed the conversations with learners, teachers, business people and professors from the world of education and beyond. We'll be back in 2023 with more voices from across the further education and skills sector, digging ever deeper into the power of education to change lives, and improve the social mobility of learners. If you have a story to tell, then please get in touch. Until next time, I'm Joe Mcloughlin, Foundation Manager at the Skills and Education Group. And you have been listening to Let's Go Further.