

Trigger warning: please note that this episode does, in places, reference suicide.

Ep.6: Put people first: a recipe for getting adult learners into work

In the final episode of Series 3, we're putting learners front and centre. What comes after an adult education course? What guidance do learners need? And what impact can education have on people's identity and sense of purpose?

To answer these questions, we're speaking to Jason Richards, an adult learner and winner of the New Directions Award, part of the [Festival of Learning Awards](#) 2023. After suffering brain damage and becoming homeless during the pandemic, Jason was on the brink of taking his own life. An adult education course and the employment he gained as a result restored Jason's pride and purpose, and in his words, he "wouldn't be here now" without the support he received.

We are also joined by The Rt Hon. the Baroness Morgan of Cotes, a former Secretary of State for Education, Chair of the Careers and Enterprise Company, and an Ambassador for the [Skills and Education Group Foundation](#).

We look forward to your company as we conclude our focus on adult education.

About Baroness Morgan

Baroness Morgan is the former MP for Loughborough and served in the government for eight years where she held various senior Ministerial and Cabinet roles including Secretary of State for Education and Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

During her time as Secretary of State for Education, she brought forward legislation that enabled college staff to go into schools to speak to students about their post-16 options. She recently became Chair of the [Careers and Enterprise Company](#) and is also Chair of the [East Midlands Institute of Technology](#).

About Jason Richards

Jason Richards is an adult learner who won the Festival of Learning's [New Directions Award](#), sponsored by the [Skills and Education Group](#), in 2023.

Jason was recovering from severe brain damage and years of homelessness when he found training opportunities and a new sense of direction through [Newground Together](#).

Jason's success in learning led not only to an offer of work, but a new sense of purpose and the chance to reconnect with his family.

Transcript

Joe Mcloughlin 0:01

Hello, and welcome to series three of Let's Go Further, a podcast from the Skills and Education Group that challenges the way we think about skills and education. I'm your host, Joe Mcloughlin. And in this series we're discussing adult education, and asking is it as relevant today as it was more than 100 years ago when it was first established. In this final episode of the current series, we're reflecting on what comes after an adult education course, and what guidance learners need to maximise the opportunities provided by their studies. Joining me are Jason Richards, who after suffering brain damage and becoming homeless during the pandemic, leaving him on the brink of taking his own life, was supported into adult learning and work and who recently became the recipient of the Festival of Learning New Directions Award. We're also joined by The Right Honourable Baroness Morgan of Cotes, a former Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities, and more recently, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Outside of politics, Nicky is Chair of the Careers and Enterprise Company and an Ambassador for the Skills and Education Group Foundation. Welcome to you both. Jason, I'd like to start with you. Can you share a little bit of your story with us?

Jason Richards 1:12

I had an infection 12 years ago maybe something like that, it was in my brain. It started off as an abscess and then it got into my head and I ended up with swelling and bruising and then over time it just degraded you know the swelling, put pressure and that was that. Just lost my memory. I ended up homeless ended up in a hotel room during the last bout of lockdowns. Couldn't even remember my kids, December 21, I gave up and decided to

end it at that point. Then housing associations, Together Housing got involved, helped pick me up put me back on my feet, got me training in facilities management, which is basically caretaker training, then gave me a temporary contract, 12 months doing a job. That's it in a nutshell, really.

Joe Mcloughlin 1:30

And so as you say, with the memory loss leads to homelessness leads to strain on the family relationships leads to sort of pressure must have been quite scary.

Jason Richards 2:06

I don't think fear is the right word, confusion I think is a better word. I mean, the relationship collapsed completely. A lot of my life has gone basically, one thing led to another and I ended up homeless. The council got involved and stuck me in a hotel room. So I was stuck in a tiny little hotel room for months and didn't have any memory. So it was, it wasn't easy. I knew who I was because I had birth certificates and everything else. So I knew what my name was. I knew where I was born, I knew who my parents were. But I didn't have any memory of it, if you know what I mean, I just had that piece of paper, I had no idea what was going on. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know what to do next. Eventually, I found out I had sons - I'd forgotten them. So obviously, you know having to reconnect with them. If I remembered what had happened before then maybe fear would be the right word. Because obviously you feel what you don't understand don't you. But there was nothing to understand. It was just black, it was just confusion more than anything.

Joe Mcloughlin 3:09

So in into that sort of situation and into that blackness, you said the council kind of managed to find you a find you a flat, get you set up in a flat.

Jason Richards 3:18

Basically the council just stuck me in a hotel room. I had some very limited interaction with a homeless group as part of the council, every once in a while they'd ring up and check on me and arrange for a food parcel or whatever. But it was very limited. There wasn't much in the way of support. It was during the lockdowns so, you know, they had regulations in place that meant that people couldn't...they didn't want people on the streets, which is understandable. But at the same time, I'm still a human being, why just shut me away and forget about me? That was very painful. It was actually Together Housing, a housing association that actually helped me. I guess the council must have notified them. They found me a

flat. That picked me up on my feet, that put me back on the right track, they helped me, supported me and everything else. Them, nobody else.

Joe Mcloughlin 4:12

And did they did they find you the course as part of that work?

Jason Richards 4:18

Yes, New Ground, that's like Together Housing's kind of training group, they were the ones who actually retrained me and gave me a chance. And you know, gave me a life back, everybody else had turned their back on me at that point.

Joe Mcloughlin 4:32

And when you say gave you your life back, it I mean, it's clear they sort of support with the housing find you support with the course, but it's when you're learning on that course, it's not just about the qualification, is it kind of what else are you getting out of it? Or what else did you get out of it?

Jason Richards 4:47

I'd lost what I was. I'm a man that should be working. I should be doing something with my life. But I didn't have a life to do anything with and that course, what they'd gave me, that gave me back my pride, that gave me back who I was. And that is more important than any qualification, where you can finally realise who you are, finally realise what you are. That's an incredible feeling.

Joe Mcloughlin 5:14

No, absolutely. And just to be just to be as kind of clear as possible, then what course was it that you were doing and kind of how were they working with you to kind of support you?

Jason Richards 5:23

It was a facilities management course at City and Guilds. Basically, to put it in simple terms, it's basically caretaker training, learning to look after facilities, cleaning, general maintenance. Looking after tenants, it was a phenomenal course, but not because of the skills, but because it gives you purpose, basically, a really strong purpose to live. Because what you're doing is helping others. I mean, you're looking after people's homes, you're looking after people's environments. I mean, that's, that's a that's a brilliant purpose.

Joe Mcloughlin 5:55

And so, alongside this, the training then and alongside kind of finding a purpose, what are the kind of range of advice or guidance were you getting from the course leaders and the teachers there?

Jason Richards 6:07

It was always one to one, you were treated as a person, you know, if you had a problem, you could talk to the tutors. If you didn't understand something, you could just simply speak. And, you know, it's hard to describe really, because a lot of the world we now live in, you're treated as a number or a name or...but on that course, you were treated as a person.

Joe Mcloughlin 6:32

It must have been a great feeling, especially after you said, obviously being put away in a hotel room somewhere and being forgotten about, it must have felt, must have felt great to be seen again, or recognised again.

Jason Richards 6:44

Yeah. But it was more than that, you know that important interaction we all need where you can just sit down and talk to somebody, I didn't have that. And then when Together Housing got involved, I mean, I had a support worker, lovely woman called Jude. She was again part of one of the charities that Together Housing were...she supported me got me flat furnished, she got other things for me, she helped me live again. She helped me start to build a life. And she treated me like a human being. You know, she phoned me up regularly, made sure I'm okay, you know, talked to me, she'd pay a visit, we'd sit and talk, and that interaction, you can't put a price on that. The sheer feeling that people actually cared that shook me, you know, that knocked me for six. Because finally, I mean I'm a person again.

Joe Mcloughlin 7:40

So from that basis, having found the training, having found the purpose, having built up some new relationships that led to led to work for yourself was it, it was a contracted caretaker role?

Jason Richards 7:53

Yeah, it was a temporary contract working for Together Housing over in Elland as a caretaker, because part of the course also had work experience.

And I did the work experience at Elland and from that, they gave me a temporary contract, a 12-month contract. And that was incredible. Just to be back on my feet, to be working to be a man again, to feel like a man again, to feel like I was again a person.

Joe Mcloughlin 8:21

Where do you think you'd be without the support and the course?

Jason Richards 8:25

I wouldn't be here now. I'd already decided before...while I was locked in a hotel room, I decided that I couldn't live anymore. If they if Together Housing hadn't got involved, if I hadn't got that support, I wouldn't be here now. I would have ended it. And that's the truth.

Joe Mcloughlin 8:44

Jason thank you. Nicky listening to Jason's story there and kind of picking up on his final points. What are your what are some of your initial thoughts?

Baroness Morgan 8:53

Well, clearly, Jason has been through a huge amount. And I think he's right that there are others, probably many others who perhaps not in exactly the same situation, but who find themselves out of work through ill health life circumstances. And they will have somebody like a Housing Association, or I've literally just come before recording this podcast, from the mental health charity that I set up in my former constituency, where I chair the Board of Trustees, where we work with people of all ages over 18, but particularly those who are former veterans, many of them find that actually after leaving the armed forces, that they struggle to get their lives sorted out and to find work. And I think Jason's other, you know, very clear message is how important work was to him in terms of respect, purpose.

He talks about, you know, the connections that you make through work and feeling like you know, you've got those connections part of society. So I think that just shows that what we, what we do in terms of work, how we get there is incredibly important. And at various points, whether it's a Housing Association, whether it's a charity, so actually those who really work with individuals to understand what they'd like to do, what experiences they've got, and what they've done before, is the most effective way of really making a difference to individual lives.

Joe Mcloughlin 10:20

Thinking about that pathway from adult education through to work and through to finding a purpose and, respect and all the kind of important things. I wanted to ask you what the current career guidance and kind of lifestyle guidance provision is, for people after the age of 16. What do colleges schools councils employers have to do?

Baroness Morgan 10:40

There is provision for those who are still in full time education. So particularly up to the age of 18, or perhaps for young people with particular learning disabilities that might go up to the age of 25. So the Careers and Enterprise Company, which as you said, Joe, in your introduction, I now chair the board of, which is funded by the Department for Education works very closely. And it came out of an idea, again, from my former constituency in the Midlands of bringing together schools, colleges, employers, the world of work, to work together, we now fund careers hubs, we work with the local enterprise partnerships or devolved administrations right the way across England, because of course, education is a devolved matter, to try to make sure that...we say every young person identifies their best next step. But I think what Jason's example shows is that people need advice at all ages. And even if perhaps somebody sets out knowing what they're doing or gets their initial qualifications, life changes, the demands of the workplace change. And so there is the National Careers Service in England, I think many employers will invest in their workforce they'll take on apprentices. And often there was a review last year done by somebody called Sir John Holman, who was looking at adult careers provision. And again, when people come into contact with the system, the state, usually via perhaps the job centre, because they have lost their job or something's happened, then there is some provision and some support available. But I think we would all agree it's not systematic, and one of the things we have seen through young people's careers provision is that actually, you have to think of it and what we've tried to do at the Careers and Enterprise Company is think of it system wide. So really strengthening the whole system, from putting money into supporting careers leaders in schools, having volunteer enterprise advisors from employers, then having the careers hubs, working with local authorities and others. And you have to keep being very persistent about what works, what inspires that young person to think that's something I might like to do, and then to know what steps they need to take in order to get there. And I think that Jason's story, and as I say, many others, will say that actually, that need doesn't go away, necessarily when somebody is over the age of 18. And how do you make sure that if they do need advice on the next step, it's there.

Joe Mcloughlin 13:11

There's a few times you mentioned about the range of guidance, the range of options available, and the phrase you kind of kept using was younger learners or younger adults. I suppose am I right in asking, or I get the impression that you don't at the moment think it's fit for purpose for adults, for those past, say, 25?

Baroness Morgan 13:29

I think it's harder actually to do it with adults. Because obviously, when we're dealing with younger learners, they are in school college full time education. So therefore, they are easier to be in contact with to organise events for to suggest, you know, careers events, or other types of provision that might suit them. Many older people will come into contact with the system when they are going through the job centre, perhaps when they're claiming a benefit if they've lost a job or been made redundant. But it's difficult if somebody's not in contact. And that's where the National Careers Service website comes in. Making sure that people know where to go when...if a life event happens. And they need to look for some alternative employment. Or of course, it might be that actually, they're not happy with doing what they're doing. Or they can see that actually new technology is coming and it's going to perhaps replace what they're doing. And therefore they need to upskill. So I think what Sir John Holman's review was saying was that actually what we've done with younger learners, we probably need to do as a country for those in need of careers education over the age of 18.

Joe Mcloughlin 14:37

Just picking up on the kind of final point there around, you know, some of the big issues at the moment, whether it's the rise of new green technologies or artificial intelligence or automation in the workplace. It's clear and kind of previous guests in this series have stressed that over the next 10, 15, 20 years, hundreds of 1000s of more adults are going to be returning to training either in the workplace to upskill, or to or to develop new skills to find new work, how would you like to see kind of future governments supporting this? And what kind of guidance do you think that would look like?

Baroness Morgan 15:13

Jason very powerfully used the words about investing in people. And I think that's right, I would like to see, you know, Chancellors of the Exchequer in the future when they stand up and deliver budgets or autumn

statements really talking, and when we talk about the economy and wanting to grow it and needing a strong economy for everyone, so that we can afford to, to make all the payments we need to as a country, then actually saying, it's not just about investing in machinery, it's about investing in people. It's about helping people, as you say, Joe, to gain those skills in those new technologies. And so I think supporting employers, whether that's through some form of incentives in order to train their existing workforces, but also to encourage them to take you on in the past, governments have given for example, National Insurance breaks, if you take on a new employee, and keep them in that role for a minimum period of time. But I think also, if people are investing in their own careers, so one of the other organisations I'm involved with is the East Midlands Institute of Technology, which is about going to be about universities and colleges, in Loughborough and Derby working together, with employers, and employers saying, these are the skills we're going to need for the future. So training both younger learners new to the workplace, but also helping people who are returning or people who want to, to change their roles, to have access to those courses as well. The government's launched the Lifetime Learning Allowance, but I suspect that more education's needed about how people can claim that and spend it, and also working with employers themselves through working through Chambers of Commerce, the local enterprise partnerships, while they exist, local authorities and our mayoral combined authorities as well, to make sure that everyone is aware of the support that that is out there to help as I say, existing employers and potential new employees to gain those skills, those new technologies.

Joe Mcloughlin 17:11

The way you describe that there Nicky, it sounds like there's a big national picture, or ideally, we'd like to see a big national strategy that responds, but one that responds to and works locally.

Baroness Morgan 17:23

The government has also legislated in the last couple of years for something called Local Schools Improvement Plans. And that in many parts of country has been run by the chambers of commerce, but that's not exclusively, and they are identifying exactly what are the local skills that are needed? In this particular regional this area? Do we have enough people with those skills? If we don't, how are we going to support employers, colleges, universities and others to help to find those skills? Otherwise, employers will find it difficult to recruit the skills that they that they actually need. And so I think you're right, I think it's a...national programme, but it has to be broken down into local areas, because

obviously people are living and working perhaps or coming out or studying or like Jason, they've been through different life events they find themselves in, in Jason's case, you mentioned being in a hotel. But in other housing, I've had, you know, constituents in my former role as a as a member of parliament, who need to get back into the workplace. And so knowing the local employment market, what is needed, which jobs are going to be vacant, is really important for making sure that you match those two things up.

Joe Mcloughlin 18:36

Jason listening to some of the things that Nicky said there, how do you react to some of those suggestions for kind of future work? Do they kind of appeal to you? Do they sound interesting to you?

Jason Richards 18:47

They do, but I think one of the biggest problems is actually implementing it. I struggled for months getting training through the job centre, which I was told routinely wasn't available, even though when you go in a job centre, there are posters all over the place, saying free training, just ask for it. In order to implement something like what Nicky was saying you need to really make sure that groups like the job centre, etc, etc, etc are on the ball and dealing with it. They're not giving that training to the older generations.

Joe Mcloughlin 19:21

What was it about your experience at the job centre that didn't work in your situation? Jason?

Jason Richards 19:27

To be honest, they were piling jobs up on me that just were not actually suitable for somebody in my situation, but they seemed so hell bent on shoving you into work that they weren't considering whether the work they were getting was actually suitable for you. They didn't care. It was all about, you know, getting people into work. So I think maybe the job centres are more focused on figures than actually focused on finding that that work for people that training for people to get them into jobs, which are long term where, you know, they can actually have a life where they can actually earn a living. I think it's more focused on, you know, making sure the figures are right, making sure that there's enough people getting into work rather than actually whether it's suitable work. So it does need to change. There's a lot that needs to change.

Joe Mcloughlin 20:19

And when you hear that, Nicky, what do you what do you think of what Jason's saying there?

Baroness Morgan 20:25

Well, I think Jason's experience is very instructive for anybody in the Department of Work and Pensions, who run the job centres. And I think he's right about the variable experiences that people will have. And I mentioned the, the Holman Review, which happened last year, in that it was very clear that there was work for the job centres to do. It's not just about finding people, any work, it's about finding people, the right work, for the reasons that Jason set out at the beginning of this podcast about how important work is. So absolutely, you know, more to do more to do as our workplaces evolve as technology changes, but also, as you know, everybody's an individual with different needs.

Joe Mcloughlin 21:09

Recognising that individuality, but also sort of seeing that it's government systems, government structures, they're designed to support society as a whole, how do we make sure we unlock the potential of people individually? Rather than seeing them pushed out as numbers or pushed to the side, as Jason describes?

Baroness Morgan 21:29

Well, I go back to talking about individual charities and organisations. So you know, exactly as you say, Joe, the job centre as a whole is it's a it's a large national infrastructure. But of course, there are individuals within every job centre, but there are also in every community, there will be charities, organisations that are supporting those individuals. And it's about reaching out whether it is...could be via the local member of parliament, local councillors, and having that structure in place. And so I think that's why it is recognised in government that there is more to do for adult careers education. And I think we're expecting the launch of a new strategy next year,

Jason Richards 22:13

There is a lot of groups who, you know, obviously help and support people. But one thing I often find is that, you know, they're not all working

together and communicating with each other. If the Job Centre can't help you, then maybe they can then suggest one of the other groups that can, and I think, you know, if there's more communication going on with the various groups that are helping support people, I think that might be a good way forward. Because a lot of people don't know where to find that information. They don't. I mean, it was very difficult for me to find it initially, you know, I had to get basically help to find it. Because there's such a lack of communication. And some people, you know, they're not computer literate. So the internet isn't always an option. Some people don't actually have access to the internet a lot of the time, because it is quite expensive, I have to use my mobile network to access the internet, because I can't afford it at home. The various groups including the job centre all communicating more with each other, I think it would give people more of a chance to actually be able to improve their lives to get that help to get that support to improve their lives.

Joe Mcloughlin 23:18

Just for yourself, I suppose thinking about not worrying about society or people in general, but thinking about yourself and the sort of journey you've been on what's next for yourself?

Jason Richards 23:27

I'm not really certain at the moment, now the contract's finished. I mean, I need to find more work. And there is very little for somebody at my age, I have very little in the field that I've been trained in. There's too much focus on what companies want, and not enough focus on the skills they need to be honest. A lot of jobs these days, they want their staff to be driving, they want their staff to have driving licences. Well, you know, not everybody drives, not everybody wants to drive. So basically, you're ignoring the skill sets for a licence, rather than actually working around that, to encourage more people into work. I think there's just too much focus on small things not enough focus on the big picture and I mean the big picture is getting people into work. That should be the big picture, giving people a chance to earn a living, giving them a chance to get back into work, giving them a chance to build a life, that should be the big picture. But yeah, there's a lot of focus on the small things that really you could work around.

Joe Mcloughlin 24:35

Nicky finally for yourself, I suppose with one eye on the election next year, what sort of two or three priorities would you like to see any kind of future

government drive forward with when it comes to advice and guidance for those in adult education and getting into work?

Baroness Morgan 24:50

As I say, I think this review is important that we're going to see next year so I'd like to see you know, all parties committing to conducting the review to implementing it. I think Jason's identified some issues about the role of job centres. So I think, making sure that's included in the in the review. And I think coming up, as we've seen, as I say, with careers and education for younger people, having a nationwide, systemwide strategy has strengthened things. And that's what we need to see for Adult Career Education too.

Jason Richards 25:25

There are a lot of people who have disabilities, they need help. They need support to get back into their lives. And you know, to be able to actually feel like human beings again. But it's not just people with disabilities, it's older people as well. What so because we're older we're therefore useless? Because that's how we feel. That's how it feels. When we're just left to stagnate, we feel useless. And that's wrong. That's wrong on so many levels. I'd like them to finally you know, start realising that there are more important priorities in this life. And those priorities are people, not the systems, not decisions, but people, the government needs to start putting people first. Plain and simple.

Joe Mcloughlin 26:08

Thank you to my guests, Jason Richards and Baroness Morgan of Cotes and to you for listening. We hope you enjoyed the conversation and that it's got you thinking about adult education, its potential to change lives, and in turn the opportunities for us to make it work better for individuals and society. Equally, if you are moved by Jason's story then please note that the nominations for the Festival of Learning Awards 2024 are now open, including the New Directions Award sponsored by us at the Skills and Education Group. So if you have a learner or colleague, who you know deserves to be celebrated, then don't keep it to yourself. That's it for series three of Let's Go Further. If you have a question for us or a comment on what you've heard, please join the conversation on social media and stay tuned for series four in the spring of 2024.