

# 20



**Helena Kennedy  
Foundation**

social action | social mobility | social justice

## Learning Worked

Helena Kennedy Foundation Impact Report

**Professor Vicky Duckworth  
Dr Rob Smith**

**Dr Vicky Duckworth** Professor of Education at Edge Hill University. Vicky has developed considerable expertise as an educationalist and researcher in the field of Adult Literacy and Education. She is deeply committed to challenging inequality through critical and emancipatory approaches to education, widening participation, inclusion, community action and engaging in research with a strong social justice agenda. Presently, she is leading UCU funded research project (with Dr Rob Smith) which aims to understand and provide evidence of how the further education (FE) sector is vital in transforming lives and communities in 21st century Britain.

**[transforminglives.web.ucu.org.uk/about-this-project](http://transforminglives.web.ucu.org.uk/about-this-project)**

**Dr Rob Smith** a Reader in Education at Birmingham City University and Co-Director of the Centre for the Study of Practice and Culture in Education (CSPACE). His body of work explores the impact of funding and marketisation on FE provision. He has researched and written extensively in collaboration with FE and HE practitioners. His recent research with Vicky Duckworth focuses on further education as a space for transformative learning. Other research projects include Social Justice and Leadership in Further Education (funded by the Further Education Trust for Leadership) and Off the Job training – stakeholders' perceptions (funded by the Gatsby Foundation).

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# OUR 20TH ANNIVERSARY HEADLINE SPONSOR, NCFE

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It gives us great pleasure to support the *Learning Worked* report commissioned by the Helena Kennedy Foundation. Learners are facing increasing challenges in progressing to Further and Higher Education and the charity supports the most disadvantaged students to reach their learning goals and fulfil their potential.

This report aims to address the impact made by the Helena Kennedy Foundation over the past 20 years and looks at the difference the charity has made to over 1500 students since it began in 1998.

NCFE is a national awarding organisation which provides technical qualifications to learners of all ages. We've been long term supporters and friends of the Foundation and are delighted to fund this report. Learners are at the heart of everything we do at NCFE and we're so proud to support such a worthy organisation that shares our values and commitment to education and helping learners improve their lives.

We trust that you'll see this report as a great example of the ongoing achievements of the Foundation and it will inspire you as to the incredible impact that access to education can have.



**David Grailey**  
Chief Executive  
NCFE

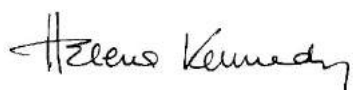
## FOREWORD

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Over the last twenty years, we have both been privileged to witness first-hand the life changing impact derived from a small amount of funding and support being given at a time of great need to some of the most disadvantaged students in adult and further education. It is inspiring and humbling, in turn, to meet HKF students each year when they first come to the House of Lords to receive their awards or return a few years later to tell us, and new recipients, what they have made of their lives.

The 'gift' of the HKF bursary, combined with our belief in the determination and courage of our award winners to overcome significant personal challenge, has to date enabled over 1500 students from FE Colleges to access higher education, obtain a degree, move into employment and progress in their chosen career – and to contribute to society in a way that exemplifies and perpetuates the spirit of 'giving back' which propelled our charity into existence in 1998.

As we celebrate our 20th Anniversary and look forward to the next decade in which support for disadvantaged students is now as every bit as vital as it was in 1998, this impact report and the recorded research on which it is based, enable the voices and stories of HKF students to be captured vividly in their own words, reinforcing the transformational power of adult and further education to change lives and society for the better.



**Baroness Helena Kennedy QC**  
President  
Helena Kennedy Foundation



**Dr Ann Limb CBE DL**  
Vice President  
Helena Kennedy Foundation



## AIMS OF THE HELENA KENNEDY FOUNDATION 20TH ANNIVERSARY IMPACT REPORT

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This impact report, entitled *Learning Worked*, is a 'live document', housed on the Helena Kennedy Foundation (HKF) website and will be updated throughout the 20th anniversary and beyond. It provides, and will continue to share, timely evidence of how the Helena Kennedy Foundation has played, and continues to play, a vital role in contributing to transforming lives, families and communities in Britain by providing financial bursaries and mentoring and supporting disadvantaged students' trajectories from the further and adult education sectors. For more than twenty years, the bursaries and personalised support offered by the Foundation have improved life chances for recipients who have completed their studies in further and higher education and moved on successfully into employment.

**The Helena Kennedy Foundation** positions the adult, further and higher education (AE, FE & HE) sectors as providing vital opportunities that contribute to transforming lives and communities in 21st century Britain. To provide a frame of reference, this report draws on research with bursary recipients, their teachers, trustees and funding partners who were given the opportunity to tell their stories, linking the distinctiveness of HKF to the impact it has on individuals, society and the economy, and strongly drawing out the role of HKF in shaping the trajectories of bursary recipients. This report provides a rich source of evidence to draw upon in campaigning work to influence policy makers, the development of a socially just educational framework and to help inform and facilitate HKF's empowering, inclusive and transformative vision.

PROFESSOR VICKY DUCKWORTH AND DR ROB SMITH

# THE HELENA KENNEDY FOUNDATION: A HISTORICAL LENS

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In September 2018, I interviewed Dr Ann Limb CBE DL, founder and chair of trustees of the Helena Kennedy Foundation. The synopsis below, which charts the origins and purpose of HKF, is taken from that recording.

Ann explained that the impetus to set up a new and unique independent educational charity for students in the adult and further education sectors came as a result of the impact on her of the publication in June 1997 of the Further Education Funding Council's (FEFC) main report from its Widening Participation Committee, chaired by Helena Kennedy QC.

The report, *Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education*<sup>1</sup> highlighted, amongst other things, how further education was a key feature in our socio-economic landscape for addressing the shortcomings of an educational system that operated according to the rule:

*If at first you don't succeed... you don't succeed.*

The message was that those people who did not achieve educational success at the first attempt had the door shut tight against them. In that context, students' ability to challenge this structure and change their lives came primarily from the opportunities that adult and further education provide. In other words, these sectors of education offered opportunities for social mobility and personal development for a large number of people failed by the primary and secondary education systems.

In addition to this crucial role in offering 'second chance' educational opportunities, the report noted that there were millions of adults in and entering the world of work who did not have the skills to get a better job or pursue a new career. Further education again was the key means by which they could achieve a higher qualification.

In the first term of New Labour's period in government (1997-2001), while there was major investment in the Skills for Life initiative, the findings of *Learning Works* were largely not acted on. In September 1996, Ann had moved from Milton Keynes College, where she had been Principal for almost a decade, to her second Principalship leading Cambridge Regional College. Realising that it was unlikely that the government would be in a position to fund the recommendations of *Learning Works*, she felt the sector could take action and was inspired to found the charity.

There was further impetus for action as the New Labour government also set a target of 50% of young people entering HE. With a move towards the 'massification' of HE (Leach 2013), the issue of funding for universities became pressing. To address this, in what became a precursor of the current regime of tuition fees, a one-off, up-front tuition fee of £1000 was introduced in 1998 – although hastily abandoned a couple of years later. For students who had already struggled to get into FE in the first place, this fee was an additional (and critical) stumbling block in the way of their progression to degree level study.

These were the circumstances that triggered the establishment of a charity to take forward the recommendations of Helena Kennedy's report and, with her permission, bearing her name. The charity aimed to provide bursaries to assist disadvantaged further and adult education students to access higher education. Funded by Ann personally from the outset, sponsors and support from the further education sector and beyond were also sought.

<sup>1</sup> In recognition of the impact over the last 20 years of *Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education* by Helena Kennedy QC published by the Further Education Funding Council June 1997 [www.hkf.org.uk](http://www.hkf.org.uk)





## From Helena Kennedy Bursary Scheme to Helena Kennedy Foundation

The Helena Kennedy Bursary Scheme, as it was known in its early days, was launched in November 1998 at the Association of Colleges (AoC) annual conference. A key idea was that the charity should be a charity *for* the sector, championed and supported financially *by* the sector - its suppliers, stakeholders and its high earning college principals, like Ann herself. The *TES* headline in *FE Focus* for 27 November 1998 refers to the request Baroness Kennedy, who agreed to take on the role of President of the charity, made at the launch, for the sector to dip into its own pockets to get the bursary scheme off the ground.

Twenty years on, over 1500 students have benefited from bursaries, mentoring and support. Running for most of its first decade on donations, personal philanthropy and volunteers and maintained on very low overheads today, HKF's independence as a charity is critical. HKF has never applied for or received government money. The object of the charity is to offer financial and personal support to disadvantaged students from adult and further education. The testimonies of the bursary recipients

provide multiple examples of the challenging circumstances that they overcome. Throughout, the golden thread is how the HKF and the belief and support of further education tutors enable them to access higher education and then employment, through which they transform their lives.

The original architecture of the bursary scheme still prevails today. Crucial in this is the role of the further education tutors who understand the needs of their students. Applications can only come through a college; originally every application had to be signed off by the principal. In the first year of operation in 1998, a single bursary was paid out. In the second year, there were five bursaries. Today, nearly a hundred bursaries are awarded each year. HKF's unique scheme works through connecting the structures of pastoral support that operate at the local college level with a centralised resource of social and financial capital. In this way, it has established an innovative approach to targeting need and addressing some of the effects of disadvantage caused by a range of personal circumstances and other broader societal forces.

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The twenty-year anniversary is an important vantage point from which to look back and tell the story of how HKF came about. It is a moment to review and celebrate award winners' stories and for award winners to say how much they have benefited from their time in college and from their degrees. Looking to the future, it is also a key opportunity for the new generation of FE staff and principals to find out about the Foundation and to consider how they can participate and help promote HKF. The twenty-year anniversary is also an opportunity to take stock and to look for new ways to work with colleges to expand the number of colleges working with HKF. Clearly, the current FE/HE polycscape of Foundation Degrees and institutional partnerships across sectors has the potential to connect strongly with the focus of the Foundation.



TES November 27 1988

## Governance and funding of HKF

The Foundation is governed by a Board of Trustees drawn from a range of backgrounds and specialisms. The varied backgrounds of Board members enrich the charity and affirm its values base and include members with a background in FE leadership together with expertise in accountancy, academia, law and charitable leadership. The Founder, Dr Ann Limb, served as Chair of the Board since inception in November 1998. In November 2018, she took on the role of Vice President of the Foundation, and handed over the chair to Dr Julie Mills, Principal and CEO of Milton Keynes College.

The HKF is also supported by two important groups of people: patrons and sponsors. HKF Patrons are ambassadors who act as a public face for the charity. HKF sponsors are individuals and organisations who provide funding to enable the charity to function and bursaries and support to be administered. Many bursaries are now 'badged' with the name of the funding provider. The cost to the sponsor of each award is £3,000, with £2,250 being provided directly to the student and £750 contributing to the cost of on-going support to students provided by the Foundation. The Foundation provides to each sponsor details of the individuals being supported, together with updates on their progress throughout their time in higher education and beyond. There are also opportunities for organisations to take part in marketing and promotional activities.

# WHY IS THE DEBATE ON SUPPORTING TRANSITIONS FROM FURTHER TO HIGHER EDUCATION SO IMPORTANT?

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We live in a world of great complexity in which social inequalities have become increasingly evident, both within local communities at a micro level and between the global north and south from a macro perspective. Living in 'liquid' and uncertain times (Bauman, 2007), in which the impact of the 2008 banking crash still resonates locally and internationally (Dorling, 2011), we are experiencing political upheavals and their consequences for people and the communities we serve and beyond (Duckworth and Smith 2018a).

We are at a pivotal moment where abundant evidence of social inequality and widespread demands for social justice require more than a rhetorical response. This evidence requires us to direct our focus, energy and resources as a society in general and as educationalists in particular to generating genuine and sustained social and educational change that meets the needs of all.

Despite the concerted New Labour drive to increase participation rates of under-represented groups in HE, there remain significant gaps in the participation rates of people from some socio-economic backgrounds. Indeed, although the proportion of students from poor backgrounds attending university has increased significantly over time, the chasm in the HE participation rate between richer and poorer students remains glaring (Crawford *et al.*, 2016). In this report there is a recognition of the power of further and higher education to challenge rather than reproduce social inequality. Indeed, this report identifies that while adults have differentiated, 'divided and divisive' access to education, HKF provides resource and fosters critical spaces in which individuals in further and higher education settings can challenge such inequality. The research offers a frame for understanding learners' stories of educational and personal transition from further education colleges to higher education and beyond. The research illuminates learners' narratives, the overarching aim being to recognise and understand their journeys against the backdrop of wider socio-economic, political and historical contexts (Goodson & Sykes, 2001; Duckworth 2013, Duckworth and Smith 2016, 17).

## HKF's work today

Since 2010, the introduction of tuition fees and students loans has transformed the financing situation. Widening participation is still very much a live issue and while many universities have their own bursaries, newer universities have yet to develop that tradition. That fact means there is still an important place for HKF. The Foundation continues to operate across the UK, awarding bursaries of £3000 over a three year period to students exclusively from further and adult education. Twenty years after HKF's inception, the case for supporting these students is as great now as it was then.

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Since the Foundation provided its first bursary in 1998, it has provided awards for around 1500 people. The ages of bursary recipients range from 18 to 67. Part of the research underpinning this report involved surveying current and historical bursary recipients. The survey gathered the views of almost 200 people. According to the data from this survey, bursary recipients have gone on to study and achieve degrees in a range of higher education institutions, from modern post '92 institutions to red brick and Oxbridge. The survey gathered views from bursary recipients going back to 2001. As such it was able to provide an overview of the range of careers from this sample. Respondents identified a hugely varied range of current occupations including: marketing analyst and elected borough councillor, Quantity Surveyor, film-maker, accountant, software engineer, doctor, speech and language therapist, civil engineer and neonatal intensive care staff nurse.

Drawing on other data from the last five years of the Foundation's work, in this case collected through the application process, the research team has also identified that a significant proportion – more than a fifth – of award winners have caring responsibilities. In addition, the last five years of data reveal that 13% of award winners are asylum seekers or already have refugee status. Figures on the ethnic backgrounds of bursary recipients show a high proportion of people from Black African, African Caribbean, Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi and other ethnic backgrounds. This reflects the fantastic diversity of our towns and cities and the reality that for many people from these backgrounds, further education is an accessible but essential part of the local educational infrastructure. This body of data also reveals the great range of subjects that award winners went on to study including: Psychology, History, Midwifery, Architecture, French and Italian, Medicine, Pharmacy, Economics, Adult Nursing, Law, Podiatry. The list illustrates an important point in the sense that it indicates that the HKF support package can facilitate entry to the most academic subjects at the most prestigious universities, enabling the award winners to compete at the highest levels.

Data from the survey reveal that a significant proportion of respondents identified as having a disability, from experiencing mental health issues to PTSD; from having autism to being in recovery from addiction.

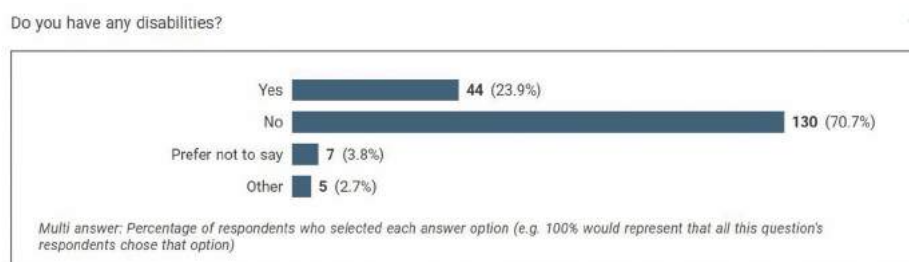


Figure 1. The number of survey respondents identifying as having a disability.

This high proportion reveals the values-based ethos of the HKF. By connecting at grass-roots level in a network of local colleges, the Foundation has been able to pinpoint specific needs and address these in a practical and timely manner.



Responses to the question below reveal how HKF does not only offer financial support:

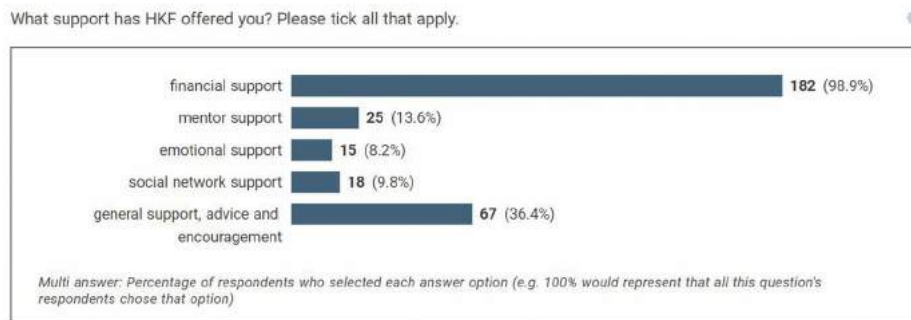


Figure 2. Support received from the Foundation as identified by survey respondents.

In fact, a large number of survey respondents and case study participants mentioned the importance of the informal support – by email and telephone – that they received from the HKF team.



Figure 3. The geographical spread of bursary recipients in the last five years

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On their own these numbers provide only a surface glimpse of the full, deep impact of the Foundation's work. In a policy environment currently dominated by the use of accessible and often crudely used metrics, these figures also stand for a range of incalculable social benefits.

Behind these figures are a myriad of powerful narratives about individuals overcoming challenging circumstances. In a great number of these cases, HKF played a crucial role through its offer of financial, personal and emotional support, enabling award recipients to realise their aspirations of studying at university. In this way, the HKF helped create the circumstances in which award recipients could bring about important changes in their lives and shape their futures.

### Funding for transitions

Education catalyses every stage of the journey to a better life, especially for the marginalised, poor and the most vulnerable. Further and higher education can facilitate a learning journey which leads to hope and choice. For these students, further and higher education offer a transformative potential: a life-changing opportunity. Within this context, this report provides evidence that HKF is a vital lever in the validation of learners' biographies and in the opportunity it offers for them to continue their learning journey in higher education and onto employment. HKF provides 'care' for the individual to develop levels of confidence and self-esteem that feed into agency and empowerment; these are essential to learner progress in FE and HE settings where a lack of self-confidence is often the greatest barrier to progress.

The project has gathered valuable feedback from HKF recipients that can help in strengthening the charity's sense of what works and why, with a view to proposing further developments to the funding of HKF in order to foster and reward transformative education while maintaining appropriate levels of accountability. An important theme that emerged repeatedly in the interviews carried out with bursary recipients centred on the finding that for adults who have felt marginalised and discarded, self-belief and the belief of others is vital if they are to be successful as learners (Duckworth and Smith 2018b).

### Evidence

This study used a mixed methods approach which included a qualitative lens to gather the narratives of bursary recipients, significant figures in HKF's history and others and to explore their views. A broader frame for analysis was made possible through accessing other sources of evidence from the HKF archive. In addition to this, the research included surveying HKF beneficiaries in order to capture data about the award winners' experiences of higher education and the impact of the award on them as students and individuals. A series of in-depth case studies reveal the "ripple effect" (Duckworth and Smith 2018a) of the HKF awards – a dynamic impact that extends into their families and often beyond, into their local communities or into their ongoing commitment to supporting others as a result of their experiences.

We have gathered rich data from more than 180 participants from across twenty years. This has enabled us to build up a vital evidence base to draw on and inform detailed analysis of the impact of HKF and to explore this expanding ripple effect: its impact in challenging cycles of intergenerational inequality and contributing to the achievement of social justice with its powerful individual, social, economic and health benefits.

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## Positioning

Ensuring a more diverse population progresses to higher education is a key driver of the HKF. Indeed, the Foundation's work proceeds from an understanding of the social and economic benefits of higher education, including the higher level of lifetime earnings that follows. The Institute for Fiscal studies 2016 report: *Family background and university success: differences in Higher Education access and outcomes in England* highlights how graduates are much more likely to be in work, and earn considerably more on average than non-graduates. In comparison, non-graduates are twice as likely as graduates to be experiencing unemployment 10 years after leaving compulsory education. The benefits of attaining a degree are also gendered: while there is a male graduate to non-graduate pay gap of £8,000 per year, the female graduate to non-graduate pay gap is £9,000 per year.

In its development of 'human capital', higher education brings with it wider social and economic benefits : better educated citizens contribute higher levels of productivity but they also enhance social cohesion within their communities. The research narratives of the HKF award winners illustrate how higher education provides a valuable means for improving economic and social mobility – not in the narrow individualistic but an inclusive sense in which the benefits of educational attainment are distributed to participants' families and communities.

*My son was 5 months old when I went back to finish college. I am a single parent and had nursery fees, travel costs and rent to pay. Using the bursary I was able to focus more on my studies as I didn't have to take on as much part time work in order to make ends meet. I graduated from King's College London in 2016 with a 2:1 in International Politics. (Female award winner)*

**HKF Award winner in 2011**



**Alan Tien**

**HKF award winner 2009**

"The HKF bursary has certainly made a positive difference to my experiences in Higher Education. It has given me the confidence to succeed at university whilst not having to worry about financial difficulties or accessing resources which my wealthier counterparts have no troubles with."

**Alan Tien** became homeless while studying for his A levels. With guidance from a college advisor, he applied for a bursary from HKF. He went on to achieve a degree in Education at the University of Birmingham and is now working in the Civil Service. Alan's narrative illustrates how determination and a willingness to seek out available support can be crucial if people are going to achieve their potential. Alan's experience has sparked in him the desire to help others and commit himself to public service.

<sup>2</sup> [www.ifs.org.uk/publications/8791](http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/8791)

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2017), *Benchmarking higher education system performance: Conceptual framework and data, Enhancing Higher Education System Performance*, OECD Paris.

# THE RESEARCH APPROACH

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The research project that underpins this report explores how consciousness-raising and dissemination of HKF narratives in the local, national and international domain can engage learners and communities in learning and participatory knowledge production. As such, the research itself coheres with the values of HKF in seeking to provide the conditions for nurturing hope and working towards social justice.

## Research approaches

- The project makes use of the HKF digital platform in order to enhance its democratic and dialogical approach to knowledge production. A key aspect of this is the use of video recorded interviews which are edited and posted on a dedicated project Youtube<sup>4</sup> channel. These are then linked to the HKF website.
- The website features perspectives from learners, teachers, trustees and the former and current chair of HKF.
- Participants were consulted throughout, before their narratives were placed in the public domain. Their views about final videos were sought and the videos re-edited in response to their viewing and recommendations. Our aim with these videos is to present individuals' stories in a powerful way.
- Alongside providing insights into the history of the Foundation, the key focus was on researching learners' stories of transformation through access to and participation in Higher Education, their prior educational and social experience (including their socio-economic background) and the intergenerational and wider impact of receiving the award.
- There is also a strand that connects to modes of capital; this is an aspect that impacts on notions of choice and transitions.
- A further strand explores HKF's peer mentoring, work-shadowing and personal skills training that on a personalised basis is successful in providing learners with the confidence, knowledge and skills to progress into, through and beyond university.

## Research Objectives

The study examined what makes HKF unique and what it provides that other charities do not. In capturing this information, the research team sought to provide answers to the following questions:

- How does HKF help provide routes to higher education for learners who would not otherwise access HE?
- How does HKF offer learners the chance to engage in education at multiple stages of life, recognising that their relationships to employment /education are not neat and linear?
- In what ways are the peer mentoring, work shadowing, and personal skills training provided by HKF successful in enhancing learners' confidence, knowledge and skills they need to progress?
- What is special and particular about HKF in encouraging social mobility - particularly for students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds - by increasing the range and types of student support available?
- What are the short term and longer term impacts on individuals' lives – including on their confidence, resilience, and careers?
- What is the wider impact on their families and communities?

<sup>4</sup> [www.youtube.com/channel/UChDeirtGCmeBs361BgibXnA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChDeirtGCmeBs361BgibXnA)



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## Project methodology and approach

The research utilised primarily a qualitative approach to capture the rich narratives of the learners. The diversity of the HKF award winners necessitates an exploration of their views framed by a broad analysis of the educational landscape. The study thus far has consisted of:

- HKF award recipients being identified and invited to participate in exploring the key research questions.
- A descriptive analysis of the HKF recipients focusing on their views of the impact of the HKF and transformational and often intergenerational impact.
- A survey which was sent to all historical and current HKF award recipients. The aim of the survey was to explore the experiences of the recipients in relation to studying and being successful in HE and their progression routes from a range of starting points into HE, training and employment, with a particular focus on identifying the enabling and challenging factors for learners.
- The research team has carried out a series of in-depth research conversations and gathered reflective written responses from HKF recipients, teachers, steering group members.

The **website** and **videos** have become a tool to communicate a message about the power of the HKF award to teachers, learners, policy makers and the public. These include nested narratives: about individuals, steering group members, organisations – but also refer to families and communities.

We have re-termed our interviews ‘research conversations’ as this tag better reflects the egalitarian and reciprocal atmosphere we try to achieve while conducting the research. For us, it is vital to achieve a relationship of trust with participants so that they are active in the co-construction of knowledge and meaning that sits at the heart of the research process.

The project harnesses the potential of digital media to communicate information, narratives and values to an increasingly digitally-adept public. In that sense, the HKF website acts as more than a repository and is indeed crucial in allowing us not only to disseminate the research findings but also to invite engagement with a wider audience. The stories of HKF award winners are inspirational in the messages of hope they communicate. As such they can provide a resource and a roadmap for others who face similar challenging circumstances. The website offers a forum on which people can contribute narratives about their own transformative learning experiences and Twitter has become a way of connecting the HKF impact project to the Further and Higher Education communities and beyond.



**Dr Mohamed Abdi**  
HKF award winner 2003

“I knew the only way was to try and do well at school... In college I had teachers who motivated me.”

**Mohamed** arrived in this country aged 14 and with very little English. He lived with his mother and two younger brothers in a small, damp bedsit. As the eldest child, he felt it was his responsibility to assume the role and responsibilities of a father figure. He always aspired to be a doctor but was told by his tutor at school that he was aiming too high. As his mother’s work as a cleaner was badly paid, he often went hungry. When he began studying at college he was encouraged and supported to apply to University and to HKF for a bursary. He studied Biomedical Science for two years at St George’s Medical School before transferring in the third year to Medicine. During his HE studies, his family became homeless and he was forced to sleep on friends’ sofas for several months. He won a series of prizes and awards while at University and is now a General Practitioner in Croydon. He spends a great deal of his spare time giving talks to young people and to the local community, offering advice and support. Mohamed’s narrative illustrates how belief and support inspires individuals, not just to achieve for themselves, but to want to help and support others.

# THE THEORETICAL LENS

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The research utilises sociological theories of capital to explore the structural context and to further understand notions of choice/ no choice among diverse groups of people (Duckworth and Smith, 2018a). Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes three fundamental forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital may be manifested in family income and wealth. Reay, Crozier, & James (2011) argue that access to these capitals is socially structured and patterned, typically to the advantage of white middle-class students. Cultural capital may be defined as symbolic resources or goods that may be transmitted from generation to generation among the middle and upper classes in order to maintain class status. Ball *et al* (2002) draw on the notion of 'embedded choosers' to argue that these were young people with access to rich and diverse forms of social, cultural and economic capital. University for this group was seen as part of a natural progression. In contrast, the decision-making of young and older people who received HKF bursaries from less advantaged backgrounds were often the first in their family to consider going to university, and were faced with a variety of significant barriers and difficulties.

Accessing higher education provides opportunities for people to enhance their social, cultural and economic capital. The award winners' stories reveal how the encouragement, support and recognition conferred by the award often came at a critical moment in their lives. The impact was frequently transformative.

## Research findings

### Key themes

- HKF's beneficiaries are primarily disadvantaged students who have overcome significant barriers in order to continue with their education to university level.
- HKF is a lifeline for recipients who face severe financial hardship as well as social and cultural disadvantage, combined with difficult personal circumstances.
- HKF offer learners the chance to engage in education at multiple stages of life, recognising that their relationships to employment/education are not neat and linear.
- HKF provides peer mentoring, work shadowing, and personal skills training on an individual basis that is successful in providing learners with the confidence, knowledge and skills to progress.
- HKF has impact with a reach wider than the recipient as it also benefits the recipients' families and often their communities as well.
- HKF supports learners who are often in a state or period of transition emotionally.
- HKF is a catalyst for developing confidence and resilience.
- HKF facilitates learners' ability to plan career trajectories.

Vincent & Ball (2007) highlight that while traditional middle-class students are often advantaged through their family support system, it is important from a socially just standpoint that so called 'non-traditional' working-class students are provided with the opportunity to develop and prepare themselves with educational dispositions and capital that can support academic development and success. The HKF approach addresses this standpoint and the themes identified broadly reflect how HKF impacts on a number of areas of the recipients' lives simultaneously. Indeed, the project has amassed a considerable amount of data to provide evidence in support of the above themes.

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## Social Capital

(Resources that are accessible to individuals through networks)

HKF enables learners to access social capital - which includes the impact of being able to gain access to mentoring and work-shadowing opportunities. This allows them to build their confidence and reposition themselves through routes into education and employment that may have previously fallen outside their world picture.

The findings revealed that the mentorship provided through the HKF was seen as being extremely valuable, the survey highlighting it as the one of the key benefits offered by the Foundation after financial support. Indeed, according to survey respondents it was particularly valuable because it contributed to demystifying routes into professions that were felt to be outside the learners' world picture. Alongside advice, support and encouragement, mentorship offered learners assistance in navigating through HE and into employment. Role models also supported the award winners to feel that university could be an option for them. Significantly, a great number of the survey respondents expressed their intention to take on a mentoring role in the future or stated that they had already taken on such a role. Unsurprisingly then, many also recommended the expansion of this aspect of the Foundation's work. Drawing on the evidence, we would suggest that role models and mentors are an important resource throughout the learners' journeys into HE and beyond into their careers.

## Economic Capital

(Money, property and other assets)

The HKF bursary recipients who gave their views in the survey described the importance of the bursary and indicated what the money was used for:

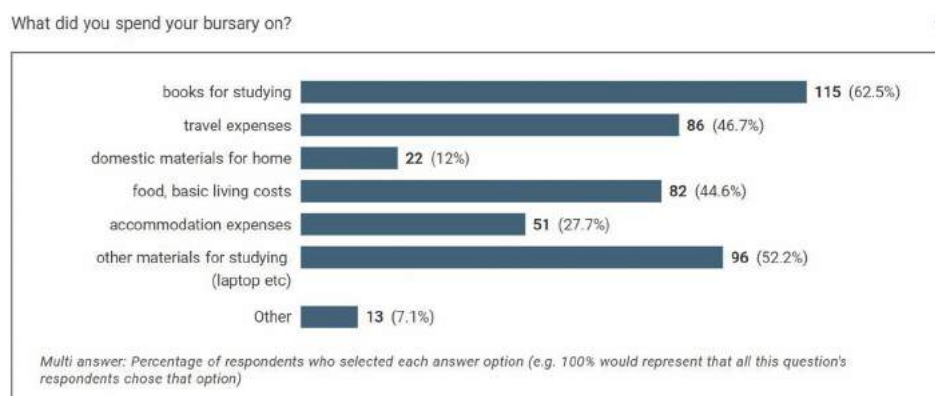


Figure 4. What the bursary was spent on according to survey respondents

Respondents were able to select more than one answer to this question and the responses provide an overview of the competing demands in the budgets of HE students. While the high proportion who indicated they used the bursary for books or other materials connected to study may not surprise us, the relatively high percentage who used the money to pay for food and meet basic living costs provides strong evidence of how important the award was.

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The research revealed that learners who received the award often had multiple barriers which included financial constraints; the award was a means of addressing these. In a context in which tuition fees have increased to more than £9000 per year, with large numbers of students working to support themselves while studying, the bursary continues to have a significant impact. For example, many mature students (particularly women) have to develop strategies to continue studying while balancing childcare (Bowl 2001, Duckworth 2013) and our findings reveal the financial importance of the bursary in ensuring that they were able to utilise part of it on childcare.

## Cultural Capital

(Practices, knowledge and skills)

Some learners' accounts revealed the range of barriers that they overcame on their FE and HE pathways. Many of these involved navigating deeply personal and painful issues, for example, abusive relationships, alcohol dependency and mental health issues. The empowerment they gained was linked to the HKF bursary and the renewed dignity and self-belief it afforded them.

Learners described how uplifting it was for someone to value them for who they were and recognise the obstacles they had overcome. Along with this recognition came validation. The learners described how this empowered them and gave them a feeling of self-worth, inspiring them with confidence on the next stage of their journey to university. According to one survey respondent:

*"Being recognised by HKF gave me a sense of achievement. Someone believed in me. This gave me further determination and motivation to get where I wanted to be: enjoying a job I am passionate about instead of low paid unfulfilling work or the constant fear of being on the edge of unemployment with basic needs unmet as they were once."*

Research suggests that if students are going to be successful in HE, they need to develop a sense of entitlement, rather than viewing it as a privilege (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). Our research reveals how the HKF award, through its affirmation and recognition of the learners' stories contributes positively to the mental and emotional self-image of award winners, enhancing their sense of 'belonging' in what might otherwise feel like an unwelcoming learning environment. Learners' sense of well-being, self-worth and confidence was cemented by the recognition of their resilience conferred by the award. Many felt they had a right to progress to HE and had earned it.



**Anabel Acheampong**  
HKF award winner 2013

Living in foster care during her adolescent years, Anabel hasn't always enjoyed the gentle encouragement and support that enable young people who are growing up, leaving school and pursuing a profession to flourish. But what is so admirable about Anabel is that, in spite of that, she has developed and maintained an impressively positive attitude and incredible commitment to succeed in life. Anabel undertook a degree in Sociology at the University of Leicester. A bursary helped Anabel to pay for the supplies necessary for the completion of her degree and the mentoring and general guidance offered by the Foundation were a great help in Anabel's determination to succeed. Anabel now works for Santander as a business analyst.

# RUPTURING THE CYCLE OF DISADVANTAGE

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Research from across the world has identified how family background influences young people's educational trajectories (see for example Buchmann, 2006). Working-class parents just like middle-class parents desire to help their children, but may lack the social and cultural resources to become involved in a way that will influence their children's educational pathways. They may have a different perspective on education and lack the resources (financial, cultural and social) to support their children into HE. By connecting students' aspirations and colleges' identification of need with encouragement and financial support, HKF positions itself as a champion against this determinism.

The survey data provides a wealth of evidence to support the position that a family's financial circumstance can be the difference between going and not going to university. The extracts below represent a small sample of bursary recipients' views on this:

- With the HKF award, I am able to study with all my needs covered and use all my potential without the monetary worry... The bursary has made it possible to achieve my full potential and compete with my cohort regardless of my financial background.
- My family and I are not that well off, I was very hesitant to go to university because of the increased fees - the stress of debts and managing the money was overwhelming, but having £2000 every year towards my fees helped me and my family significantly. Although I was capable of studying a psychology degree I was almost not going to go because we couldn't afford to manage financially, so the help I received from HKF made a difference and pushed me to pursue my studies.
- Winning the award meant adversity would not continue to define my education in a negative way as it removed the financial and societal barriers I faced to pursue higher education. For me, it meant I could study in London which, without the HKF bursary, wouldn't have been possible as the living expenses would have been too much. I come from a single parent family and am the first to go to university which means so much to my Dad. Going to university and fulfilling the place offered to me wouldn't have been possible without HKF so it means a great deal to both me and my family.

Other comments saw the financial award as part of the wider support package offered by HKF:

- I would like to thank the HKF for offering a bursary to students from low income backgrounds and arguably more valuable than the bursary is the support and emails sent by the team. I was also able to secure an internship due to the help by the HKF and it really helped me gain experience in a tough industry to secure an internship in and made a large difference to my CV.

Some view the HKF as a community which they are proud to belong to:

- It was not just gaining financial support but gaining an additional family who are always there to support and encourage me to achieve my best potential. I have attended events where I met with other inspirational winners and trustees who share the same passion of advocating education. Being part of this community gives me the confidence to continue making progress in my personal and professional life.



# MARIE McNAMARA

## HKF award winner 2006

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Marie arrived at college after splitting with her violent partner. She struggled to read and write and struggled with her confidence.

Determined to improve her reading and writing, she grasped at adult education as a life line that provided a pathway for her towards a career in nursing. Through education, she wanted to challenge the intergenerational poverty of her background. She described how:

*"Through learning to read and write, I now see life differently. Now when my children bring homework home I'm right onto it. I sit down with them and we go through their work together. For example, my son Andrew is only eight and he has 20 spellings a week to learn. This week he had words such as exhibition, examination and electrocution. Before returning to education I would never have been able to help him with words like this, so the chances are he would not have learnt them. He would have gone to school, had his spelling test. Maybe he got 4 or 5 out of 20, if he was lucky, felt a bit daft in front of the children who had got most of them right and slowly but surely before you know it, it's a knock on effect, history is repeating itself. But because I can now sit down with Andrew and help him with his homework he gets marks like 17 out of 20, which to me is pretty amazing. I really feel that in my case because I'm all my children have, if I'd not returned to education the chances are that my children would have ended up experiencing difficulties in their education. I'm not saying that they won't but if they do, like I did, I can now help them."*

Marie described how receiving the bursary allowed her to buy her children a new school uniform. She highlighted how:

*"If I had had to send my kids to school in an old shabby uniform I would not have gone to university. I couldn't have faced the thought of them being looked down on, judged you know. I spent part of the bursary, as I see it, on all our education and that's what made it so important. Without it I wouldn't have gone to uni you see! Seeing your kids right matters first."*

The research clearly highlights how educational journeys empower women, in particular, by increasing their chances of getting jobs, staying healthy and participating fully in society. The catalysing power of education flows beyond them and into an improvement of their children's life chances.



## KELLY SPENCE

### HKF award winner 2014

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From an early age Kelly always had an interest in nursing. She had a passion for helping others and caring for them both physically and mentally. Life though had other ideas for her and she was forced to face and overcome challenges that would have tested the strongest and most determined of people. In the long term, these challenges helped her grow into the person she is today.

As a child she always knew she was different. She described how 'I walked on my toes, fell over a lot, used to feel such pain after I'd walked a short distance'. Doctors always said it was a habit, a phase, but the older she got, the more they realised that maybe there was more to it than they first thought. Kelly was a strong swimmer, training as a lifeguard to learn first aid and help others, but the training got harder, and she experienced more and more injuries so that soon she was forced to stop all exercise and admit she needed help. At the age of 15, when self-image is such a big issue for young people and at a key stage of her education, Kelly was informed that she would have to undergo surgery to lengthen her Achilles tendons to allow her to walk properly for the first time. It was then that doctors discovered she had in fact been born with cerebral palsy.

The surgery went well, but the recovery was slow and painful. With both her legs in casts she spent months being unable to cope with basic daily tasks, and the months of gruelling physiotherapy she endured in order to learn to walk again were a signal that life was never going to be the same. When she was 17, doctors advised her that her legs were too fragile, that she would struggle to stand for long periods and that nursing would be hard. She described how 'Being the stubborn person I am, I never let no be an answer, nothing is impossible'.

But as strong as the mind is, life and the body have other ideas. At the age of 18 she contracted a life changing illness that left her with epilepsy. Unable to control it and waking each day with overwhelming feelings of pain and tiredness, she struggled with life and felt she might never be able to achieve any of her dreams and ambitions. Despite these challenges, she described how 'I loved helping others so spent my time researching nursing techniques and methods of care. I advised others on how best to care for others in emergency situations, teaching in schools and voluntary events'. Throughout everything, her passion to be a nurse never faded. At the age of 30 her dreams came true - she enrolled on an access to education program and started training as a nurse, to help others and make a difference in their lives. University changed her life. It was a challenge but she embraced to do as much as possible for herself.

Kelly was a Helena Kennedy Foundation award winner in 2014. Her award acknowledged her strength in overcoming barriers in her pursuit of further education. The Foundation awarded her additional support in recognition of her passion for nursing and caring for others. She described how, 'recipients like myself have all overcome difficult health and life challenges to work in healthcare. It has been inspirational for me to show others that it does not matter about your background, anyone can achieve their dreams'.

For two years, she has been employed as a representative of the School of Health at the University of Teesside. Here she provides moral support for students in all aspects of life both inside university and out. She has acted as a role model and student advocate and runs additional educational classes to boost students' confidence and charity events within the local community to raise awareness and funds for vulnerable people. In addition, Kelly was the winner of the **Most Inspirational Student of the Year** at the Student *Nursing Times* Awards 2017.



"Helena Kennedy Foundation has been integral to helping me achieve my dreams."

Kelly Spence

 **Teesside  
University**  
Student Nurse

## BRANDON AKEM

### HKF award winner 2011

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Brandon arrived in the UK as an unaccompanied minor fleeing persecution in his home country. After his arrival, he was keen to continue his education despite facing multiple hardships with regards to accommodation and home life. Having no paper evidence of his qualifications, he found it difficult to access learning opportunities at the appropriate level. Further education gave him an opportunity and one of his teachers helped him with an application to the HKF. The support Brandon received gave him the confidence to apply to the University of Leicester where he went to study a degree in Law. The HKF award enabled him to buy a laptop and other essentials but more important than that, in his opinion, was the realisation that someone believed in him. The visit to the House of Lords at Westminster to receive his award is remembered as an affirming and empowering occasion. He invited the two most important people in his life at that time: his fiancée and Veronica, his tutor from college. After successfully completing his degree, he moved to London. Once more, he had to overcome significant obstacles in finding accommodation and employment but he persevered. His first job was in insurance in Essex. He now works as a multinational insurance network manager in the City on Fenchurch Street. He has a young family and further ambitions to help other young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

*Veronica: It was difficult for Brandon in so many ways. Going home on his own every night. Looking after himself in a bedsit in a very deprived area. Having been orphaned. But he hit those grades and got a place at the University of his choice.... After he received the award from Helena at the House of Lords, he said to me: "Do you know something? I do not feel disadvantaged anymore."*

Brandon's story reveals the interrelation and interdependence of social and economic capitals. As a resourceful and determined young man, and like many of the other HKF award winners whose narratives the research has collated, he was willing to seek out support where and when he could. The relationships he formed through doing that, connected him with opportunities to further himself: first in education, then later, in employment. The HKF scheme activates both social and economic capital to enhance students' agency and enable them to reach towards their goals and fulfil their potential.

"It's about  
believing in  
young people."

Brandon Akem



## JO WYARD

### HKF award winner 2014

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Jo Wyard, HKF winner, commenced the 3rd and final year her Social Work degree in September 2018.

*I will be eternally grateful to The Helena Kennedy Foundation for the support I received over the course of my Social Work degree, as it changed not just my life, but moreover it changed my children's lives, in more ways than one! They saw me both struggle and achieve my goal, and they now say hard work grows your brain, doesn't it Mummy!*

*I have strived to inspire my 4 children, but really they are the ones that have inspired me.*

*Thank you HKF, I am more grateful than you could ever imagine. Jo Wyard*

Below Jo shares part of her speech when she returned to share her journey with HKF award winners in 2018.

Baroness Kennedy, Foundation staff, award winners and distinguished guests, thank you for inviting me to speak with you this afternoon.

I stand here today reflecting upon my life, particularly my academic life that has influenced who I was and what I have become. As a woman I fit into many of the political and economic stereotypes. I did not do well at school and the expectations of those in a position to encourage academic excellence, my teachers, was to assume that my destiny would be to become pregnant and fade into the distance never to be heard of again.

This to a degree became a self-fulfilling prophecy. I left school with only two GCSE's, however, these opened up the opportunity for me to complete a hairdressing apprenticeship. During that time I left home, became pregnant at 19 and by the time I was 21 had become a single-mother with the first of my four children. So I suppose the assumption made by my high school teachers was right, but what they did not take into account was my determination.

'Single-mother' throughout history has always been a demonising term. It has portrayed us as fallen women, morally irresponsible, lazy, shameless and desperate, the list is endless. But, when the word 'single' is omitted and the label becomes simply 'mother', the descriptions are quite different aren't they: nurturing, kind, patient, forgiving, gentle, the list again is endless. Why is that? When the word single is added why are we suddenly perceived so differently by society? Made to feel such shame? Whether single or not we are all mothers, all doing the best we can at any one moment. On my first day at college the demons of self-doubt invaded my thoughts, but I was determined not to accept those labels that had been placed upon me. Moreover, I wanted to be in a position where I could one day challenge them. This is where the Helena Kennedy Foundation Award helped me achieve my goals.

The Helena Kennedy Foundation

*"exists to overcome social injustice by providing financial bursaries, mentoring and support to disadvantaged students from the further and adult education sectors, enabling them to complete their studies in higher education and move on successfully into employment or further studies".*





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This is just what it delivered. In 2014 I embarked upon my social work degree at the University of Suffolk where the Helena Kennedy Foundation award provided me with not just a financial bursary to help me through each of my three years at university, but also provided the opportunities for personal and practical support. I am so grateful to the college for putting me forward for the Award and cannot thank the Foundation enough. The support you have given has been life changing and showed me that again I had people who had faith in me and there is no greater power and support than having people believe in you.

My journey however does not end there. I did not sail through my University degree. However, with each year that passed I slowly grew as a person and developed confidence in my academic ability despite being finally diagnosed with Dyslexia in my 3rd year, at the age of 44. This diagnosis explained so much, however, I can't help but wonder had my dyslexia been recognised at high school, my life could have been quite different.

But again, life has a strange way of intervening. Rosemary, my dissertation tutor, asked me if I'd ever thought of Educational Psychology as a career. She went on to explain that this would mean completing a Masters in Psychology first and eventually a doctorate. I was stunned that she thought I was capable – as she had been my harshest critic at university.

I asked her, "Do you honestly think I could do that?" "Of course you can!" she said.

As Rosemary walked off I stood there trying to let what she had said sink in. I finally saw why she had pushed and challenged me so much in the last three years; she believed in me.

I managed to complete my degree and was awarded a degree classification of a 2:1. I had made it and I can't begin to tell you how that felt and in recognition of my achieving I was nominated to give 'The Vote of Thanks' speech on behalf of my fellow graduates during the graduation ceremony.

The day of graduation ceremony is a day I will never forget. Words cannot describe how I felt when I thought of how far I'd come since I first took on those labels of doom and failure associated with my childhood experiences of education.

I am now studying for my Masters in Psychology at the University of Essex. It is even harder than I thought it would be but I am fascinated with everything I am learning, and more than ever determined to succeed.

My academic and personal journey has still not ended but what my social work education has confirmed, is that there are always the possibilities for change if the resources are made available to all and equality prevails. An Education system that encourages social, cultural and personal engagement as well as recognising individual differences and creativity is the key to changing society and lifting communities out of deprivation.

*'No child should leave school feeling unworthy'.*

Education, for me, has been the catalyst for change and I am so excited for what the future holds. I'm finally starting to believe in myself.

*'It's amazing how far you can go when you have people that believe in you'.*

## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

*More important than its financial value was how the bursary recognised my achievement. Returning to education while working full time was very difficult and the award acknowledged this. It helped me to see that my previous failure in education was not my fault, but the result of a set of difficult circumstances that I was able to overcome.*

**HHK Award winner 2006-10**

Duckworth and Smith (2018a) have identified how adult education can provide an empowering environment for learners to challenge symbolic and physical violence which can often trigger mental health episodes. As highlighted by WHO (2000) :

*Women are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, psychosomatic conditions, eating problems and sexual dysfunction. Violence may also affect their reproductive health. (ibid: 3)*

Further education is shown to be beneficial in the positive effect it can have on mental health and well-being. Indeed, as Duckworth (2013) documents, deprivation and poverty are strongly linked to the prevalence of mental ill-health in communities. Clearly, adult education courses for young and older adults offer further opportunities of re-engaging with education; they can contribute to personal development, including the development of so-called 'soft skills' such as confidence (a valued outcome in Barton *et al.*'s 2007 study) economic, social and health related benefits. The Learning and Work Institute's recent report (2018: 20) highlights how 'insecure and poor-quality employment is associated with an increased risk of our physical and/or mental health worsening, from conditions caused by work that in turn lead to absence due to illness, and worklessness'. Adult education courses offer a better chance of acquiring the tools needed to run their own lives, to reclaim agency and self-respect. The HKF award makes the renewal of their journey from learning and into (often more fulfilling) work possible.



**Jason Braber**

**HKF award winner 2013**

Jason attended Hadlow College as a mature student where he studied a BTEC level 3 extended diploma which he successfully achieved. He is now continuing at Hadlow studying for a degree. Jason's ambition is to pursue his interest in fishing into a career, working for the environment agency. Jason had to support himself, his disabled wife and two step-daughters on state benefits throughout his studies but he is determined to better himself and make a good life for his family.

He used the bursary to benefit his studies particularly travel expenses for work experience. The bursary has been invaluable in his learning journey and in helping him to progress.



## MICAH GRIMSHAW

### HKF Award winner 2009

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Micah attended Preston College to study BTEC Sport. Whilst studying at college she describes how she had a 'complete breakdown' in the relationship she had with her mother – with whom she was living at the time. During the first year of her studies she stayed with friends, sometimes with strangers and for some periods of time at a youth hostel. The hostel housed many people including drug users and ex-offenders. Her welfare adviser at college supported her through 1:1 support sessions, food vouchers and finding her a secure place to live in Preston so that she could continue with her studies in a safe place. In private conversation she told her welfare office that she had always felt inspired by an amazing supply teacher who had taught her in Primary School, but believed that she would never make it to University considering her social circumstances.

Once Micah finished college she left to try living in Nottingham with her Dad and signed up to Job Seeker's Allowance whilst trying to find a job in administration. She spent the summer of 2009 feeling incredibly low: she was struggling to find a job with limited work experience and a poor address history. Often she was asked why she had gaps in her address history; during these times her belongings were kept in a bin bag and she 'sofa-surfed' at friends' houses, even completing her college coursework using a spare computer at a 'Help the Homeless' charity. Two days before clearing, she telephoned Preston College to enquire whether there was any way she could get to University through clearing; in doing so she discovered that she had actually been awarded the HKF scholarship for a place on a teacher training course. This meant that she only needed to choose a subject specialism and somewhere to live - all within a couple of days!

The bursary awarded by HKF allowed her to buy resources she needed to support her studies at University. She described passionately how it 'helped me to feel like I had an equal opportunity to succeed and do well'. HKF supported Micah to complete her application for student finance along with the local MP, where she came up against the same barriers to education and well-being when she could not answer questions about her address history or provide financial statements from her estranged mother who refused to support her application.

Micah describes how she often wonders what life would be like now if she hadn't been awarded her scholarship. She believes she is now in 'a huge position to give back to others and make a real difference to hundreds of lives - if not more.' She also reflects on the number of young people who will not be as lucky as she was to receive a life changing opportunity. Indeed, that motivates Micah to do more to make a difference. Sometimes she feels like she has Imposter Syndrome, declaring 'how can a girl who used to share a room with a drug addict, with strict visiting rules of no more than 2 people between the hours of 8am-8pm only and with only £30 EMA to survive on per week be Head of a Department earning more than the average salary in the UK?'

Micah continues to love learning and she is passionate about all people realising their aspiration and achieving a sense of belonging within a community. 'I cannot thank HKF enough for opening a seemingly bolted door to so many life-changing opportunities' Micah declares with a hope for the future that empowers others she meets.

Micah is now Head of Autism Research and Development at a school in Liverpool.





# THE EXPERIENCES OF LEARNERS PROGRESSING TO HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES:

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## Challenges and perceived barriers to entry:

- Academic concerns;
- Experiences of labelling;
- Low self-esteem;
- Undiagnosed educational needs;
- Financial concerns;
- Practical barriers.

## Making the decision:

- Catalyst points e.g. depression, break up of relationships;
- Family and friends;
- Planning ahead;
- Staying local or feeling secure;
- Choosing a course;
- Wanting a new job;
- Wanting to be a role model for children;
- Wanting promotion;
- Supporting children with their studies.

## Interviewees' views of what constitutes a great learning experience:

- A trusting relationship with the teacher and with peers;
- A course that taps into their desire, commitment and passion;
- Teachers who sow seeds of hope and help students to look to the future positively;
- Teachers who provide opportunities to explore routes into HE; education and training;
- Experiencing diverse educational environments;
- Experiencing responsibility and high expectations;
- Overcoming doubt and taking on challenges.

## CONCLUSION

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The abundance of policy interventions in education in the UK over the last twenty years suggests the importance of the perceived link between education, the economy and a just and equal society. Further education seems to be even more vulnerable to policy intervention than other sectors (see Belfield *et al.* 2018, p37 which lists 25 important policy interventions since 2000). This may be because policy makers continue to view colleges in mainly instrumentalist terms. Such a narrow ‘human capital’ view of the purpose and function of further education fails to take account of the kind of the broader social benefits that are so powerfully articulated in the narratives of HKF award winners. The message appears to be: learning works – but the way it works is not easy to account for. To think of it in terms of a binary system of input and output is to misunderstand fundamentally the human and social processes involved. Indeed, to view it in such terms, as further education funding sometimes appears to incentivise, risks objectivising the very people further education is there to benefit: namely the students.

A recent report by the Learning and Work Institute, *Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise* (2017) highlights that once people have left school with low qualifications, for many there is not a clear line of sight to high-skilled or highly remunerated jobs. This is, in part, due to the lack of impartial careers advice in schools which is often designed to favour the institution that gives the advice.

For many adults once they achieve employment, particularly if they have qualifications below level 2, they do not receive workplace learning and face barriers (attitudinal, temporal and financial) in accessing additional learning opportunities. This means people remain in low-paid, low-productivity jobs, on in-work benefits; they are more likely to be unhealthy, and less likely to participate in the lives of their communities.

Education not only helps individuals escape poverty by helping them develop the skills they need to improve their livelihoods, their families and communities but it also generates productivity gains that boost economic growth substantially. For growth to reduce poverty, however, it needs to focus on overcoming inequality by improving the lives of the poorest and marginalized the most. Access and progression in education throughout the life-course is vital to achieve this socially just goal and it can help ensure that the benefits of growth are fairly shared.

With this in mind there needs to be a recognition of the structural constraints that prevent learners accessing dominant capital in order to progress to HE. Action rooted in a deeper understanding of the impact of people’s unequal access to resources may help ameliorate the persistent educational stratification in access to HE. As identified by Coffield (1997) a successful learning society is one in which everyone obtains high-quality education and post-school education and training which everyone has access to suitable opportunities for lifelong learning, including university.

Research indicates that social class and income differentials related to whether students attend university remain stubbornly unchanging. Indeed social class remains a barrier to participation in and navigating a successful trajectory through higher education. According to the Equality Act 2010, universities have a responsibility to ensure no student is discriminated against based on race, gender or sexual orientation<sup>5</sup>. However, we note that class is not included as a protected characteristic in this act, meaning it is not illegal to discriminate against someone based on their (perceived) social class. And yet our evidence illuminates the inequality that many of the learners have faced throughout their lives clearly stems from this characteristic. Higher education is important for social mobility and universities need to take action and ensure they are providing access for and supporting applicants from the diverse and vast pool of talent that this country has to offer.

<sup>5</sup> [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/part/2/chapter/1](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/part/2/chapter/1)

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Removing the apparent barriers to participation is not easy but it is important; it is crucial to address the intergenerational aspect and the transmission of inequality across generations of the same family (Duckworth and Smith, 2018a).

The research uncovered the stories of learners who were able to change the way they interpreted their experience (Duckworth and Smith 2018a) as a stage in the revitalisation of their agency as learners; this then led to transformation. The learners' narratives revealed how making sense of their structural positioning as adult learners in a society based on inequality of opportunity and choice enabled them to challenge symbolic violence, which is often hidden and includes negative labelling and marginalisation, in order to move their lives forward. The Alumni offer invaluable support in a range of ways, for example as career and educational role models, mentors/e-mentors, work experience providers. This is a vital aspect of HKF's holistic approach. There is a recognition that opportunities to gain, for example, work experience are also likely to differ according to family background and socioeconomic status (Milburn, 2012). This is significant when we acknowledge that work experience can be as important as having the qualification for some employers. This is also why HKF provide work-shadowing, mentoring and access to work experience in order to ensure the supported transition of HKF award winners into employment.

### **Localism & connection to communities & employers**

According to the evidence from this project, further and higher education turns this deficit, negative self-worth and low self-esteem of these learners into a positive: enhancing social integration, social mobility and the agency of these learners with consequent knock-on effects in their families and communities.

Further education colleges are deeply rooted in the towns and cities in which they are situated and are well-positioned to connect with local employers in order to facilitate students' transitions into appropriate employment. Recognition of further education's role in reinforcing social integration, social mobility and social equality includes but extends beyond the provision of apprenticeships to the large groups of young people and adults who access further education in order to change their place in our society, to benefit themselves, their families and their communities.

These learners act as role models to others inspiring growth, change and giving hope in the communities they are from.

Further and higher education are a vital resource for these transformative journeys. Indeed as social and economic inequities increase between and within countries there is a need to take action. Policies designed to improve literacy and to enhance opportunities for transformative learning need to be tightly bound to challenging poverty.

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## Future action and the future of HKF

These findings are particularly interesting to commissioners of a range of services in cities and devolved administrations. With devolved budgets and outcomes-based local commissioning arrangements over the coming years, we are likely to see changes to the way adult learning and education works. This, we would argue, requires joined up thinking across discipline areas and different service 'silos'; we need cohesive approaches which focus on challenging inequality, and work toward models of social justice which empower communities.

The vision for the future of the Foundation is one in which HKF becomes more widely known and celebrated within and by the sector. HKF is keen to engage more colleges and to expand the existing base of sponsors and donors so that it can broaden and deepen the work it undertakes. The map in Figure 3 shows a concentration of bursaries in and around London. This pattern of distribution is one that can change as colleges in other regions and other countries in the UK engage and participate. The ripple effect of the support HKF offers means that the impact of the Foundation's work is not restricted to personal well-being and health, but spills over to enhance social and economic activity. From that perspective, HKF can be seen as a dynamic resource network that facilitates social equality and social justice wherever it has a presence.

By focusing on addressing need locally and, through that, strengthening the flow of students that pass through the FE / HE corridor, the work of HKF illustrates how:

- The FE / HE corridor is a powerful vehicle to drive forward social justice.
- The scheme is a vital resource for the transitions of marginalised and often silenced communities.
- National policy needs to engage more fully with the causes of inter-generational cycles of poverty.
- Higher education can offer a stream of social capital which enriches learners' personal lives, enabling the formation of supportive bonds with other learners.
- Higher education can bring about transformation in the selfhood and social identities of learners with few or no qualifications, reintegrating them as active survivors with renewed hope and agency in our country's rapidly changing economy.

## Shining a light

For twenty years, HKF has been shining a light on educational disadvantage and intervening to bring about positive change. We know that money continues to be a big issue for students considering progressing to Higher Education. Tuition fees and student loans are a barrier to entering university for those who are debt-averse. For that reason, learners from less advantaged backgrounds may consider university to be totally out of reach.

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*What we do know – we see it time and time again – (bursary recipients) are giving back to society what they have learnt; through the personal transformation that they have undergone they are helping to change society.*

**Dr Ann Limb CBE DL – HKF Founder**

### **Continuing the conversation**

HKF ensures that bursary recipients are not alone in their pursuit of educational and career aspirations. They are part of a long legacy of award winners - a legacy of social action that the charity is rightly proud of. Their stories are important. Their experiences, their perspectives and their voices need to be listened to and heard. Through them we can all learn about ourselves and, equally importantly, learn from those voices around us that are often hidden and marginalised. Their stories can also help us to reimagine society and to pinpoint what needs to change. Through their stories we learn about the ways that oppressive structural forces such as classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism advantage certain groups of people over others in the public and private domains of their lives.

We want the stories to continue to be shared locally, nationally and internationally, to speak back to negative representations and importantly to inspire others. A series of learner blogs will therefore be released in the 20th Anniversary year and beyond. We encourage you to visit the HKF digital platform and listen to the voices and share them with the communities around you.

To support and donate to the charity go to: [www.hkf.org.uk](http://www.hkf.org.uk)

For all other enquiries contact: [admin@hkf.org.uk](mailto:admin@hkf.org.uk).

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### End note:

It has been over twenty years since Baroness Helena Kennedy QC produced the *Learning Works* Report (Kennedy 1997). In doing so, she argued a case for a “redistribution of resources in favour of further education” (Kennedy 1997: 10) and recommended that widening participation in post-16 education be prioritized. The report formed the bedrock on which the widening participation policy agenda was founded. The Report led to the implementation of a national strategy which aimed to ensure that all UK citizens over the age of 16 would have equal access to further and higher education. The main tenets of the Report were that learning was pivotal to national and individual economic prosperity and social cohesion, and that equity meant that all should have the opportunity to succeed. A shift in policy was suggested in which continuing learning was considered a natural aspect of adult life. Twenty years on, many gains have been made and the importance of widening participation is still a live issue.

Notwithstanding the improvements that have been made though, there is still an urgent need to break down barriers and to reconnect education to social justice. This is what makes the continuing work of HKF so vital. *Learning Worked* recognises that education is political and challenges neoliberal notions of education trajectories that mask structural inequality in a rhetoric of educational choice. It recognises the need for an enlightened and innovative politics of education that challenges unjust educational structures and that looks to new policies and procedures aimed at redefining what is at stake in the struggle for a better and more humane educational system. It positions further education not just as a provider of skills for the national economy but as a force for local social cohesion and the renewal of educational opportunities as a key strategy in the achievement of social justice.



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“We do small things that have a very great impact - and you only have to listen to the voices of the students to know that.”

Founder and vice president  
Dr Ann Limb CBE DL





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