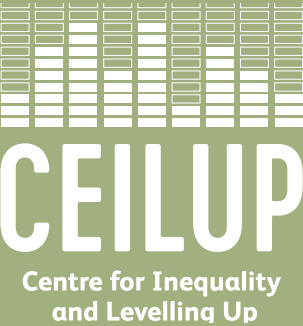


Can levelling up make a difference to inequality?

A Ruskin College Seminar





About the Centre for Inequality & Levelling Up

The Centre for Inequality & Levelling Up (CEILUP) is a new research centre based at the University of West London. It aims to produce policy-relevant research that can shape approaches to addressing inequality and to level up the UK. CEILUP works across the whole spectrum of research and inequality producing original research for a range of audiences.

To follow us on twitter go to @_CELUP or contact graeme.atherton@uwl.ac.uk



About the University of West London

The University of West London is the career university. It was voted number 1 in the UK for student satisfaction, student voice and academic support in the National Student Survey (NSS) 2022; best modern London university (non-specialist) in the 2023 Complete University Guide; number 23 out of 121 universities nationwide in the Guardian University Guide 2023; and University of the Year for Student Experience and University of the Year for Teaching Quality in the Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide 2023.

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Introduction

In its attempts to define what levelling up means, the government has, rightly, emphasised that the scale of the challenge makes it a multi sectoral agenda. But it has not thus far embraced all parts of the economy and society in this agenda, with some sectors given less of a role - higher education is one. However, the Levelling Up white paper still covered a large amount of ground - including reference to over 120 different policies from transport, to health and to sport for young people. Such an approach though requires public discourse that brings different sectors together.

Ruskin College, with its history of transcending boundaries in terms of who or what an Oxford college is, sits in an ideal position to foster such discussion. The 'Can levelling up make a difference to inequality?' seminar at Ruskin College in April 2022 convened by the Centre for Inequality and Levelling Up (CEILUP) was such an example of cross sector discussion including a local Oxford leader; a political commentator, the head of one of the most prominent national charities engaged in the levelling up debate, a member of the government's levelling up advisory group and the Heads of two Oxford Colleges. This pamphlet brings together the views of five of the contributors to the event.

Phillip Collins has a distinguished background in politics and journalism, having served as a speechwriter in Tony Blair's office when he was Prime Minister, and a writer for the New Statesman and the Evening Standard. In his essay Phil draws on his experience in government to highlight the history of levelling up and the need for long term and preferably bi-partisan thinking to make significant progress.

Matt Leach is the CEO of Local Trust. The Trust was set up in 2012 as a Lottery-endowed charitable foundation pursuing a radical, decade-long experiment, committing £1.1m of funding to each of 150 "left behind" neighbourhoods across England. Matt draws upon the work of the Trust to argue for the importance of social capital and social institutions in building levelling up.

As well as being the Head of Kellogg College, Jonathan Michie is also Chair of the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL). In his article he reflects on the potential future role of Ruskin which builds on its past, as a leader in providing opportunities in higher education for adult learners. He also emphasises that levelling up is a challenge located in the long standing political, economic and social inequalities that have bedevilled the UK for decades.

Professor Graeme Atherton is the Head of the Centre for Inequality and Levelling Up at the University of West London. His contribution points to the importance of the missions in levelling up and how the £20bn of investment connected to this agenda needs to be related to these missions. There are significant funds being devoted to levelling up and now more than ever, with public spending facing new constraints, it is crucial that these funds are used effectively.

The final contribution again places levelling up in its historical context and points to the role of education as intrinsic to addressing the long-standing regional gaps in income, health, employment at the centre of levelling up. Peter John who is both Principal of Ruskin College and Vice Chancellor of the University of West London ends his contribution though by asking for an ethical levelling up that harnesses the potential of meritocracy while protecting those who cannot prosper in open competition.

While the contributors to the event come from very different backgrounds they centre on some common themes regarding levelling up and what the government will need to take into account as they take this agenda forward. Long term commitment, a willingness to confront systemic aspects of the economy and society that by their nature engender inequality and a radical re-balancing of power that emphasises subsidiarity in decision making are all going to be required.

The present approach to levelling up has yet to come to terms with these requirements. It is the role of discussions such as that in April to help those engaged in levelling up to do so. Over the course of 2023 CEILUP and Ruskin will be taking the lead in making these discussions happen with a series of events which build on this inaugural seminar. We will be working with partners from across the higher education and policy spectrum to convene thought leadership events that drive forward attempts to address inequality. We welcome all those committed to making levelling up a reality to work with us.





Ruskin College Opportunity at its heart

Ruskin College was founded in 1899 with the mission to provide educational opportunities to adults who are excluded and disadvantaged. The Ruskin campus is in the Headington area of Oxford providing a unique environment for study and research.

Ruskin College was founded by two Americans who studied at Oxford University and decided that the same level of education should be available to everyone, not just the elite. Named after John Ruskin, a radical pioneer of socialist thought, Ruskin has been a driver of opportunity for those who have been previously denied it and a leader progressive thought for over 100 years. In 1976 the then Prime Minister James Callaghan gave a lecture on education at Ruskin College Oxford which is widely regarded as changing the terms of the debate around the nature and purpose of public education. Twenty years later in 1996 Tony Blair spoke again at Ruskin setting out the ideas that would frame the policies of the next 15 years of Labour government.

Over the past century Ruskin has continued to offer opportunities for thousands of older learners from working class backgrounds to participate in higher education and benefit from membership of one of the world's leading universities.

In early 2021 the University of West London (UWL) brought Ruskin College Oxford into the UWL group. UWL has a history and ethos in keeping with Ruskin, as one of the country's most diverse and inclusive universities. The goal is to build on Ruskin's history and principles and provide opportunities for learners from all backgrounds to access higher education in Oxford. Already, new courses in Law, Public Health and Politics/International Relations are available at Ruskin and new students are benefitting from the Ruskin experience.

Ruskin will also continue to be a pioneer in progressive thought. This pamphlet brings together the ideas presented at the first seminar convened in the UWL era at Ruskin and shows the diversity of perspectives on inequality that need to be debated if economic and social outcomes for those in the most challenging situations are to improve.

Over the course of the next year there will be a programme of seminars at Ruskin that look to shape the public discourse as we approach the next election building on this inaugural event.

The politics of levelling up

In his first speech as Prime Minister in July 2019, Boris Johnson spoke of a need to “level up across Britain”. His choice of terminology revealed a cunning political accusation. We, it suggests, will level up whereas you, the political left, will level down. The left, so the accusation goes, is content with the equality of the grave in which all get poorer. The objective of this policy programme is to reduce inequalities between regions but without cost to any place in particular. Though it is a fine ambition, it might be a fond hope.

The reason why was also contained in that first speech. Mr Johnson said that his new suite of policies would “answer the plea of the forgotten people and the left-behind towns” and would increase “the productive power” of every corner of the country. This was a characteristic rhetorical device by the Prime Minister. By suggesting that the problem is merely that many towns had been “forgotten” and their people “left behind”, he implied that all they needed was some policy attention and the problem would soon be fixed. Alas, levelling up is a lot more difficult than that.

Social and economic inequality is a deeply entrenched and chronic problem. The Levelling Up White Paper does, indeed, contain some good things. The prospect of greater local devolution is attractive and it is good to have a series of metrics by which levelling up will be measured. The limitations of the White Paper, though, are rather glaring. The missions themselves are not all well defined and it is not always obvious even how they would contribute to the goal of reducing regional inequality.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed out that, by 2025, many departmental budgets will still be lower than they were in 2010. This calls into question the possibility of whether the White Paper’s 12 missions can really be expected to be fulfilled. It is also not clear that the Treasury, which has only committed funding for three years, is really behind the policy. Given that the places targeted in the White Paper are precisely those which have suffered the most severe cuts during the years of austerity, this is a significant worry.

But the biggest concern of all would be the complacency. Closing the gap between regions, or equalising life chances, is an incredibly difficult task. And it is not at all helpful to pretend, as government ministers too often do, that some places have been forgotten. The truth is much more troubling than that. The Labour government between 1997 and 2010 tried very hard to do what is now called “levelling up”. The 1998 New Deal for Communities and the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal channelled £4bn of public money into neglected places. The evidence of the Brexit campaign in which these places voted emphatically to leave the European Union on the grounds that nobody ever paid attention to them, suggests that it did not work.

It would be wrong to say nothing was achieved. Public buildings were rebuilt and public spaces spruced up. But regional productivity hardly changed and the growth rates between regions didn’t shift much. Britain remains a nation heavily dependent on the tax revenues from the enterprising capital. The one great success story of the Labour years was in the cities – Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle – and that was due, in no small measure, to smart local government. The political objective of levelling up is to revive the towns and it is not at all clear how this can be done as a separate strategy.

The Conservative years have been paradoxical for local power and the pivotal figure has been George Osborne. As chancellor during the coalition he was responsible for an austerity programme that took its toll on local government. Yet at the same time it was Osborne, with his Northern Powerhouse initiative, who led the way in trying to push power downwards. As yet it has had no discernible effect on regional inequality.

It is hard to see that it will do any time soon. The other problem with levelling up is that the results take so long to come in. Expect plenty of cosmetic changes, to make people feel that change is coming. In the midst of a crisis about the cost of living it is unlikely to work. The future of whatever changes begin under the auspices of the Levelling Up White Paper might therefore rest with the next government. Maybe the most welcome aspect of the government’s discovery of regional inequality is that this will become one of those issues on which there is something of a bipartisan consensus. If the two main parties were able to agree that the problems were serious and needed addressing no matter who was in government, that would be a prize worth having.

Philip Collins is an Associate Editor of the *New Statesman*, a columnist on the *Evening Standard* and the founder and writer-in-chief at *The Draft*.



Levelling up left-behind neighbourhoods

Local Trust is a Lottery-Funded charitable foundation, established in 2012 to deliver the Big Local¹ programme, a fifteen year programme aimed at rebuilding the social fabric of 150 ‘left behind’ communities around England.

A key part of our learning from a decade of direct engagement with communities is the extent to which neighbourhoods that are both deprived and have also lost significant parts of their social infrastructure face a range of negative social outcomes that are significantly worse than other areas that otherwise score similarly on the Index of Multiple Deprivation.²

These communities – most often located in peripheral estates on the edge of post-industrial towns in the North and West Midlands (but not just there – you can also find neighbourhoods facing similar challenges in Essex and Kent) – didn’t just lose the jobs when traditional employers moved on, they also lost places to meet, and the disappearance of local, community-led civic institutions.

The Levelling Up White Paper highlights the extent to which rebuilding the social capital of these communities is vital if we want to enable self-reliance, sustain social stability and create a sense of shared civic identity. And is an absolute necessity if we want to start to reconstruct local economies - a point Andy Haldane has also made in the past.³

But addressing this is not a short term challenge. Local Trust’s experience is that rebuilding the social infrastructure of communities where it has been allowed to degrade requires both a long-term, patient commitment of funds, but also support over that period to help communities build skills and confidence and re-establish the organisations, groups and institutions necessary to underpin local civic life.

Unfortunately, much of the “community” focused funding that has been delivered over the last decade - whether from the state, lottery or philanthropic foundations – has failed to sufficiently acknowledge or address this need. Instead, overwhelmingly, we see that left behind areas struggle to access any sort of funding at all.⁴ Grant funds goes to places already set up to draw down and use resources when they are made available, whilst areas without pre-existing local civic capacity continue to miss out.

We need to turn this around and focus effort and funding on rebuilding social capital and social institutions where they are absent. The case for doing so is both moral and economic. The quality of the social fabric at a very local level – the places where people can meet, and the organisations and institutions that bring people together – is hugely important to people’s quality of life. And where community infrastructure and social fabric is weak, demand for services is likely to be much higher, picking up the failure costs associated with loneliness, disparities in wellbeing and loss of social cohesion.

Investing in addressing this can pay for itself – Frontier Economics analysis submitted to last year’s spending review suggested that £1m invested in rebuilding local social infrastructure pays back at least £3.2m, divided roughly equally between returns to the Treasury and improvements in local wellbeing.⁵

But we also need to think more widely about the extent to which policies that support and foster the growth and sustainment of local civic institutions are embedded in how we plan, how we support and how we manage place at a hyperlocal level. We need to hardwire in policies focused on providing all communities with accessible and affordable places to meet; we need to look at how to stimulate, support and sustain the emergence and growth of community-based organisations and we need to place growth of social capital alongside physical and financial capital when it comes to developing business plans and assessing policy options.

Matt Leach is CEO of Local Trust, the agency that delivers Big Local - the largest ever Big Lottery endowment.

Why and how Ruskin College’s legacy must live on

I was delighted to be invited to contribute to this initiative, both because of the importance and urgency of the topic, and because it signals the intention of Ruskin College to regain its place as a thought leader on such matters. I knew Ruskin College in the 1980s from supervising Ruskin students when I was a College Lecturer in Economics at Balliol and Magdalen Colleges, and then from teaching on Ruskin’s trade union courses when I was at the Economic Department of the TUC, and again when I worked in Brussels as an Expert to the European Commission, and commissioned research from Ruskin on the employment and training implications of completing the single market.

I would therefore like to congratulate the University of West London’s Vice Chancellor, Professor Peter John for having stepped in when Ruskin College was in danger of collapse, and for having taken on the role of Principal, committed to continuing Ruskin College’s historic mission to provide university-level education to working class students to improve society. I’d also like to thank Professor Graeme Atherton, Director of the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON), for this invitation to participate.

Inequality – of income, wealth, geography, and power – is a major problem globally, and particularly for the UK. Regional inequality has long been worse in the UK than in other countries, and that disparity has got worse over recent years – the inequalities have got worse in the UK, as has our situation in comparison with other countries.

To tackle and overcome these inequalities requires action across a range of economic, social and political agendas. It requires hugely increased investment in productive and social infrastructure – housing, transport, communications, health, and education; urgent action to tackle climate change – requiring a serious national strategy to insulate homes and other buildings, promote public transport and reduce car and plane travel, and boost renewable energy production; and radical measures to create a high-productivity, high-wage economy.

Ruskin College could play an important role in promoting this agenda. Britain’s stagnation as a low-wage, low-productivity economy is due in part to the undermining of the trade union movement, which is the best protection against employers moving onto this low-wage, low-productivity terrain. Of course, if their competitor firms are doing so, any employer will feel pressured to follow suit. What is needed are trade unions operating across all firms that can cut off this dead-end, of relying on low wages and low productivity, forcing all employers to instead choose the high road of high-wages and high productivity. Ruskin College traditionally played an important role in trade union education, supporting this alternative agenda. It is time for Ruskin College to once again play that historic mission – for all our sakes.

In terms of education more generally, Ruskin could again play an important role. Because in the UK, post-school education has too often been seen by Government as a choice at aged 18 of whether to go to university – a choice if missed, to be missed forever. For too long our education system has been based on the principle, “If at first you don’t succeed, you don’t succeed”. This must change. As a country and society, we need education to be accessible to all individuals and communities, lifelong and ‘life-wide’ - not just for the world of work, but also for individual wellbeing and personal enrichment, and for thriving communities, a healthy democracy, and indeed to support civilisation itself. That was the message of the 1919 Report on Adult Education, produced by the Ministry of Reconstruction, charged with the mission of pointing the way forward after the devastation of World War One. It was also the message of the Centenary Commission on Adult Education in 2019.⁶

I’m pleased to be Chair of the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL), which promotes precisely this agenda – of supporting adult education and lifelong learning, to strengthen our communities, democracy and society; to equip us for the changing world of work; and to enable us to deal with new technologies as they emerge and impact across our lives.

I look forward to further collaboration between UALL, the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON), and Ruskin College to help Britain rise to the challenge posed by increased inequalities – of income, wealth, geography, and power – and to help create the conditions for a socially and environmentally sustainable future.

Jonathan Michie is Professor of Innovation and Knowledge Exchange and President of Kellogg College at the University of Oxford.

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4. OCSI. 2020. *‘Left behind’ Neighbourhoods: Community data dive*. See [here](#).

5. Frontier economics, 2021. *The impacts of social infrastructure investment*. See [here](#).

6. The Centenary Commission on adult Education. See [here](#).

How to keep levelling up on mission

Levelling up was the new idea meant to embody this government's concern for regional inequality. Thus far despite the identification of £20bn to invest in projects related to levelling up and the publication of a 300-page white paper outlining the government's vision for it, levelling up has yet to build the momentum many would like. It is now facing twin challenges in a new Prime Minister who has yet to embrace it and the cost-of-living crisis. To capture the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on levelling up the Centre for Inequality and Levelling Up have examined the missions which form the basis of the levelling up strategy. These 12 missions are medium term targets for 2030 designed to galvanise action across policy areas ranging from enhancing productivity and closing gaps in pupil achievement at age 11 to improving well-being and reducing crime rates.

Drawing on over 100 pieces of evidence that examined the relationship between the missions and higher inflation; poverty and recession we found that two thirds were at high risk of failure; 2 more were at medium risk and the remaining two at low risk.⁷

The cost-of-living crisis has highlighted the gamble in pursuing a strategy to address the long term underlying causes of inequality without making provision for the short term. A lack of an anti-poverty strategy undermines most of the missions as they depend on poverty not increasing which it will certainly do. The much-maligned Truss administration was right to prioritise growth as the economy tipping into recession will also make most of the missions hard to achieve - those relating to improving productivity and increasing investment in research and development will be particularly badly hit. The evidence also shows that even a relatively short recessionary period could have a lasting effect on crime rates, extending broadband coverage and health inequalities thus impacting on several more missions.

The return of Michael Gove as levelling up minister brings renewed hope for levelling up. But it is vital that he retains the commitment to the missions outlined in the white paper. They represent the most innovative part of this agenda and the only way of marshalling the cross departmental support required to make levelling up a success.

We identified around £20bn of Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) funding from various pots that have been associated with levelling up as part of our submission to the recent enquiry into levelling up funding from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill committee.⁸ Our analysis suggests though that these funds have been used thus far mainly to support infrastructure projects with little clear connection to the 12 missions. Whatever of this £20bn that remains to be allocated must be aligned far more with these missions and used to try and address the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on them. The missions are also the best way of leveraging in support from other departments for levelling up as they face their own budget cuts. The £20bn from DLUHC will not be anywhere near enough to protect levelling up from the effect of the cost-of-living crisis.

Levelling up has stimulated a renewed discussion on inequality in the UK and regional differences. But it has yet to move much beyond a presentational exercise for a government to the right of its predecessors but with a number of seats that traditionally belonged to the left. The unique mission-based approach to addressing inequality represents the best hope that levelling up has of having a real impact, but it must become the centre of what levelling up means from now on in.

Professor Graeme Atherton is head of both the Centre for Inequality & Levelling Up (CEILUP) and the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON).

This article first appeared in the publication 'The Levelling Up Agenda: A special report by The Leaders Council'.

7. Atherton, G. Le Chevallier, M. 2022. *Mission Improbable: how the cost of living crisis will affect levelling up*. CEILUP. See [here](#).

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Levelling up the UK: sound bite or realisable objective?

The potent sound bite - Levelling up - brought new focus to a rather old problem: how to reverse long-standing regional gaps in income, health, employment, and life chances by re-aligning economic and social policy.⁹ This is not a new idea: in the 1950s Harold MacMillan sent Lord Hailsham to the North-East to resolve their lingering social and economic disadvantage. Harold Wilson tried the new Department of Economic Affairs, Ted Heath joined the Common Market, while Thatcher tried free market ‘trickle down’. Blair and Brown used social inclusion and investment in the regions, David Cameron had the ‘Big Society’ while Theresa May tried the meritocracy - again. All seemed unable to address the systemic problems inherent in British capitalism, control its excesses, and balance regional and local disparities.

Despite the ubiquitous nature of the inequalities mentioned above, many are caused by ‘accidents of history’¹⁰ where investment or facilities have been located because of the region’s success. As a result, the over concentration of economic prosperity became quickly associated with the drift to London and the South-East. Subsequently, in 1997 the total economic value of the UK was 4.3 times larger than London by 2015 this had decreased to only 3.3 times larger than that of the capital¹¹. This economic intensity was accompanied by a clustering of specialists with ‘commercially valuable skills’¹² working in close proximity to one another, leading to what Richard Florida describes as the ‘Creative Class’¹³. Whatever the reason, this easy connectivity¹⁴ resulted in opportunity, access, and fair outcomes being denied to large sections of the population occasioning the belief that too many have been ‘left behind’. These were the prime target for the levelling up political rhetoric that the Conservative 2019 general election victory generated.

Despite some scepticism, levelling-up, caught the public imagination with its simplicity and mass appeal.¹⁵ Whether it is more than a mere political slogan only time will tell but currently its language speaks for and about communities, services, opportunity, pridefulness, and place while simultaneously appearing to address investment, productivity, and wealth distribution.¹⁶ But can it keep these contradictory messages in together and succeed where many before it have failed?

One area that is fundamental to any attempt to reduce inequality is education: access to it, opportunity gained from it, and success attendant upon it. It is here that the disparities come to the fore. According to the Royal Society’s recent report on ‘Regional Absorptive Capacity’,¹⁷ the most productive, highest-income places tend to be those with the highest skills levels and the most graduates – that is largely, though not exclusively, London and parts of the South East and Eastern regions. London’s workforce already has close on 60 % qualified to degree level and above while Inner London has over 65 %. Using the same measure, the North-West and West Midlands have only 38 %, the East Midlands 35 % and the North-East 34 %. Lots of places are well below even these regional averages such as Grimsby and North-East Lincolnshire (24 %), Mansfield (17 %) and Barrow (21 %). Many of these figures can be replicated in parts of Wales and Scotland.



Numerous independent organisations have further highlighted the connection between poor educational outcomes and a lack of social mobility and economic growth¹⁸. The OECD further suggest that it can take up to five generations for those in the poorer social brackets to reach the average income or more. This inter-generational problem has been added to during the pandemic with the increasing divide between the cognitive elite and the rest.¹⁹ In many of the areas mentioned above, the gap between those who have gained, and the rest has widened with more than ever being trapped at the bottom of the social hierarchy.²⁰

The ‘levelling up’ agenda is, in part, an attempt to address these education ‘cold spots’ by emphasising the importance of the ladder of opportunity.²¹ Much has been written and claimed by numerous governments, the current one included, about the need for balance in our education system. The renewed focus on vocationalism is much welcomed as is the emphasis on re-training, skills development, and the advantages of artificial intelligence (AI). Another important way to improve life chances to invest in early years education as numerous studies show how pre and early intervention pays massive dividends down the line. New technology and innovative pedagogy has already helped to craft new solutions to a ‘levelling up’ problem. DreamBox is an adaptive learning process

that integrates teaching and assessment with regular usage to enable ‘in-the-moment’ differentiation and personalisation. Another initiative from Rhode Island called Word Gap shows how word formation and word gathering can be enhanced by the use of mobile recorders where toddlers from less advantaged backgrounds make linguistic advances that match their more advantaged peers.

Above all though, it is in the sphere of ethics that ‘levelling up’ needs to be placed. Too often many are trapped on low incomes with poor prospects unable to shape a better life for themselves and their dependents. An ethical ‘levelling up’ would seek to achieve what Sandel²² calls a ‘fair meritocracy’ whereby social and cultural unfairness are mitigated by improved equal opportunities and redistributive policies. I will leave the last word to the outgoing former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, who said in 2021: ‘it is the mission of this government to unite and level up across the whole UK not just because that is morally right but because if we fail then we are not only simply squandering vast reserves of human capital we are failing to allow people to fulfil their potential’.²³ That mission currently remains yet again unfulfilled.

Professor Peter John CBE is Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive of the University of West London and Principal of Ruskin College.

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