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Witnesses: David Hughes and Professor Martin Weller

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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Members present

Baroness Morgan of Huyton (Chairman)
 Lord Aberdare
 Earl of Courtown
 Baroness Garden of Frognal
 Lord Haskel
 Lord Holmes of Richmond
 Lord Janvrin
 Lord Kirkwood of Kirkhope
 Lord Lucas
 Lord Macdonald of Tradeston
 Baroness O’Cathain

Examination of Witnesses

David Hughes, Chief Executive, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, and
Professor Martin Weller, Professor of Educational Technology, The Open University

The Chairman: Thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning and helping us with our deliberations. You have in front of you, I hope, a list of interests that have been declared by members. These were declared by the Committee on 8 and 22 July. They can be found in the transcripts as well. This is a formal evidence-taking session of the Committee and a full note will be taken. It will be put on the public record in printed form and on the parliamentary website. You will be sent a copy of the transcript, and you are very welcome to revise any minor errors. The session is on the record. It is being webcast live and will be subsequently accessible on the parliamentary website. You are also welcome to submit any additional written evidence after this session. In fact, we welcome that if we feel there is anything we need more information on. The acoustics are not bad in here, but it is always worth speaking up so that we can all hear each other properly. That is the housekeeping.

Would you like to introduce yourselves before we get going to the questions? If you want to make any brief opening remarks, please do so. If you do not want to, that is fine and we will go straight into the questions.

Professor Martin Weller: I am Martin Weller from the Open University. I am a professor in educational technology. My areas of interest are open access, open education MOOCs, open education resources, those sorts of things. That would be the line I guess I am pushing in this Committee.

David Hughes: I am David Hughes. I am the chief executive of NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education with a national voice for lifelong learning, so there are lots of things to talk about. I am fascinated to hear the questions.

Q87 The Chairman: Thank you. I will kick off, if I may. Obviously we are talking about lifelong learning in particular with you today. We know that it needs to form an important

part of the UK's education system. It is necessary for the UK to adapt and compete in a knowledge-based economy. That is all quite glib, and we hear that all the time, but what we want to hear from you properly today is what you see the future of lifelong learning to be and what it means for lifelong learning to help us provide the skills that keep changing in a future digital economy.

David Hughes: That is a big topic. Lifelong learning is what we exist for, so I will try to keep it brief. There are a few problems with the current system. It is too focused on young people at the expense of the rest of the population. It is not that young people do not deserve a fantastic education, it is not that the transition from school into the workplace is not incredibly important—there are lots of things that need to be done in that arena—but the focus on that is at the expense of supporting people in the workforce and supporting people in later life. One statistic we use a lot is that about 13.5 million jobs need filling in next 10 years and yet there are only 7 million young people entering the labour market in that period. There is a 6.5 million gap. Those jobs need to be filled by people working longer, people working more hours and people who are not active getting back into the labour market. Most of those people will need some kind of lifelong learning support to be able to be effective in the workplace. Digital skills are an incredibly important part of that. There are estimates that about 90% of new jobs need at least basic digital skills, and we think that of those probably half need quite high-level skills as digital users and digital workers, yet the workforce does not have those skills, so we are too focused on young people and there is not enough support for people who are post-23 or 24. There is not enough investment in the workplace and in people, particularly those in low-paid work and low-paid jobs. There is too much focus on formal education at the expense of informal. We think that a lot of the digital skills that people will need to pick up can come from an informal leaning approach rather than a formal one. What I mean is that they do not need to get a qualification to be able to learn digital skills. Digital skills atrophy quite quickly. If you don't use it, you lose it. You need constant refreshing and updating. Technology is changing, so you cannot say that anybody who is digitally literate now will be for the next five years, let alone 50. Therefore people will need constant support to be able to carry on learning. That needs people to be lifelong learners, to learn the learning skills and the digital skills to be able to learn on their own and with others. There are lots of issues about it.

The other thing that is a problem for us is that there is too much focus on the state-funded part of the education system. Going forward, we have to have a system that looks at three different funders of learning: three investors. There are individuals themselves—we all need to be able to invest our time and resource in leaning—and employers, who we think have reduced their funding. A lot of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills' evidence suggests that employers are funding less learning in the workplace than they were before the recession and not very much of that is in the digital skills that we are talking about today. So employers need to invest more and government needs to start thinking of ways of enabling and encouraging individuals and employers to invest in learning. I will leave it there.

The Chairman: That is very helpful and instructive, thank you.

Professor Martin Weller: I agree with everything that David said. I see it as a rich ecosystem of different elements of learning mixing lots of things: formal and informal, as David said, people coming to take different sizes and types of learning, moving away from the kind of one-size big chunk of doing a degree to different types of accreditation. Some learning will

be for accreditation and some will not. Some things may be accredited through the community through badges.

That is a much more complex, nuanced way of learning. People will come in and out of different types of learning. They may come to do one part, which is vocational training, and then do some stuff for interest—that may be a MOOC, an open course—and then they may take some smaller bits of learning and build some of it into an evidence portfolio. That is a much richer picture of how people engage in learning throughout their lives.

The Chairman: Is there any sort of portal where there is a catalogue of all the different qualifications? One possible problem for employers is that there is chaos in qualifications and people do not really know what anything means, other than the qualifications that we all know about.

Professor Martin Weller: It depends what you are looking at. You have to know what you are looking for. If you are looking for MOOCs, there are catalogues you can go to for MOOCs; if you want to look at degrees, there are places you can go to for that; but if you want to look across different types of learning in a particular vocation or subject area, that is not there.

Q88 Lord Haskel: You have told us that there is too much concentration on young people, not enough expenditure on the rest, more jobs than people coming through and too much focus on the state and less on the individual and employers. Obviously that is what you think needs to be done to make it all more effective. I ask then, who is going to deliver this? At the moment, we have sector skills councils, professional organisations, trade unions, the BBC and the MOOCs. Can this be rationalised? Who will deliver all this?

David Hughes: That is a really good question. If I knew the answer I would be worth a lot of money, because people have been trying to tinker with the system for so long and it has changed so many times. Localism is really important. In England, that involves local enterprise partnerships; in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, it involves different structures.

It seems to me that people want to understand what skills they may need and that will be useful for them in life and in work. Often, they need to see that locally. If they see employers getting engaged with public bodies locally, with community organisations, learning providers—universities, colleges, independent training providers, local authorities—and so on, that is a really important part of the answer. It is not the only answer—the OU is a really important part that is global, so there are other parts—but lots of people who we talk to do not understand the system or what learning they need.

It seems to me that it would not be adequate just to make a big list of qualifications. That would bewilder people. What works, we think, is when people can say, “There are employers who will be creating these jobs over the next five or 10 years. They are looking for these sorts of skills and people with these sorts of qualifications and putting them together”. Then the providers of learning, the colleges and universities, have to follow and help to inform that pattern of delivery and give the flexibility needed. At the moment, as I said, it is so focused on the transition to work. Then people get into their first job and are left. That is bizarre, given that people will be working for 50 years or more. The local focus is critical. People can understand it, connect with local employers and understand the local labour market better. It is really important to get employers engaged in that process, in that social

partnership with the other organisations that you mentioned—the unions, the BBC, the OU, the colleges and universities, and so on.

Q89 Baroness O'Cathain: I could not agree more with you that the local way is the way to go. In another Committee that we have in this House, we did a study into youth unemployment and it was suggested to us by Lord Heseltine that we should try to get down into the local area. Certainly, I do not think that people credit local enterprise partnerships, which I think are somewhat unstructured at the moment, with the information they have or with their ability to call in all the people you are mentioning—the local chamber of commerce, the unions and the employers. Could you tell us whether you think it is a good idea to invest in or encourage these local enterprise partnerships throughout the country to take on that responsibility and to channel some funding to them?

David Hughes: I do. They are very patchy. Their capacity is very different in different parts of the country. You cannot generalise. There are some fantastic examples of LEPs—local enterprise partnerships—with superb approaches to skills, and there are others that have less experience and less capacity. The capacity issue needs to be addressed. You address that partly by giving them more responsibility. My approach would be for the centre, which holds the purse strings, to do deals with local enterprise partnerships, so that locally social partnerships of organisations sign up to deliver outcomes that are related to skills, jobs and inclusion. The inclusion bit is critical. It is not just about getting young people into good jobs. That is really important, but we need inclusion, digital inclusion in particular, and literacy and numeracy for people to be able get into entry-level jobs and start moving in work. We need a compact with the Government saying “If you deliver this, we will give you this funding to be able to deliver through the partnership of organisations that is needed”. If you did that, locally people would start to build the capacity. They would have to.

Q90 Lord Lucas: If you are looking at changing to a digital skills-based job later in life and you do not have those skills, how do you find out which bit of the digital economy you might be suited for? Is there anything you can do to say, “Where would I fit into this world? Where ought I to train?”. If you can identify a bit, how do you identify which sorts of training you can fit into your existing life that an employer will still value?

David Hughes: I think you know the answer. I do not think you can find that information very easily. The systems and the organisations that we have are not set up to provide it. The careers service does not provide that kind of information. It is not aimed at people in mid-career and mid-life. We carried out a pilot funded through the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills called the mid-life career review. We are really excited about it. We had 3,000 people aged around 45 to 55 who had a one-to-one or group work session aimed at giving them that sense of where you find out information, how you get some confidence about your own future and how you plan for the next 15 or 20 years of your working life as well as for your retirement, which might, of course, be semi-working. We are really excited about the opportunities around that. However, the reality is that the careers service is not funded to deliver to that group of people. It is not one of its priority groups, yet people who are 45 might have 25 years to work. There is a lot of technology change in that period. I do not think there is anywhere where you can find out that information in a systematic way. If you find out what skills you need and even which qualification might help, it is really difficult to find the funding and the access to be able to deliver it. Part-time, flexible HE, probably with the exception of the OU, has collapsed in the past three or four years. FE colleges are

very focused on full-time learners rather than part-timers. There is not very much use of technology in learning to give that flexibility in a blended approach to learning. I am afraid I am quite pessimistic about that. I do not think you can.

Lord Macdonald of Tradeston: You do not have any suggestions at all about how that might be addressed. You obviously think it is a problem.

David Hughes: I think it is a major problem. The pilot we did on this with 3,000 in mid-life showed that a very simple and quite cheap intervention with individuals works. The evaluation we will be publishing within the next month shows that people can be empowered to start thinking about themselves as people who can change, people who can learn, people who can get new jobs.

The Chairman: Again, that would point to it being delivered locally.

Q91 Lord Macdonald of Tradeston: The problem with localism is that if you have apathy, incompetence or underfunding locally, you suffer as a citizen. Should there not be a benchmark offer from central government that we will make available the kind of counselling that you were implying mid-life people should be getting? Is that not an offer that political parties or government should be making?

David Hughes: Absolutely. We launched our manifesto in June and we said that we thought that mid-life career reviews should be an entitlement. Every citizen should be able to access some advice and support at some point in their mid-life and perhaps at other transition points, such as women returning to the labour market from looking after their children and people who have been made redundant and have an entitlement to some support to think about what jobs they might be able to get, what learning they might be able to do, what skills are available and what the labour market is doing. Some information and advice on where to go to find out that information is a very simple entitlement. The localism bit is a trade-off. You have to have a tension between what is important nationally and a loose framework negotiated locally to make it appropriate, because labour markets are very different. The jobs that will be created in London will be completely different from those in Gateshead and Plymouth. You need a bit of both. That is why I am calling it a negotiation between the two and an agreement that that group of organisations locally will deliver outcomes, not just qualifications that are kind of important but actually the jobs, the skills and the chances they offer to people are much more important.

Professor Martin Weller: I am probably less pessimistic than David. The answers to many of these questions lie in approaching them from the side rather than head-on in terms of gaining employment skills. It is more about focusing on what people are interested in. There is then a bleed across, if you like, from digital skills. Let us take the example of local history. Digital Historians is really fascinating, and there are so many good things about it. That is how to approach it and it is how people want to engage with it. You can get the local photography club to create online profiles and so on. We have our open educational resource platform, OpenLearn, that helps local champions to run these clubs and get people to engage with the resources. Once people gain confidence in their digital skills, to the point that they do not even think of them as skills, they are much more confident about going on to do other things that might lead on to jobs and so on. You must attack this using the things that people are actually engaged with and interested in.

The Chairman: That sounds great, but who funds it and how is it scaled up to reach more people?

Professor Martin Weller: There are different elements that need funding. There is the release of open educational resources which at the Open University we have made into a more or less sustainable model. We release between 5% or 10% of the course material we produce openly, and we think that that works well enough as a marketing tool for student recruitment to pay for itself. That is how it works. Local support is often simply encouraging people to become their own champions. They might be people who have been active in our own forums. We encourage them and we have put guidelines in place on how to become a champion. Some of this is self-sustaining, but funding can be put in place for it. It requires bits of support, such as server space.

Q92 Lord Haskel: Do you not think that there is an economic imperative on employers to do a lot more? Surely there should be way of encouraging this. There was a time when employers would organise courses at the local FE college to train people for future work. Has that sort of co-operation disappeared entirely? You said that FE colleges concentrate too much on full-time courses, but that is because of the way they are funded. But, equally, there are ways that FE colleges can run courses for employers, and that goes on a lot. You seem to be writing off the need for employers to retrain people, although doing so is in their own interests.

David Hughes: I am not sure I am writing them off, but I am not sure that enough of it is happening, although it is critical. I used to work in Derby where Rolls-Royce used to have a learning centre in Derby that was open to the local community—Derby College. That does not happen any more, and in part it is because of the funding cuts that have been made. In particular the funding has become tighter and tighter over the past five or six years. There is also a need to focus resources on young people because there are a lot of them and they need a great deal of support. As I say, it is crucial and I do not think it is happening enough.

A lot of the informal learning is also critical. We have funded dozens of local community peer support projects in the digital space and they work really well. People like me then help and give me advice on photography, Skype for getting in contact with my kids overseas, and family tree projects. It is clear that these projects work and we have lots of evidence of how important it is to bring people in and to give them the confidence to go on and learn. The two problems are that the funding is short term in nature; it is not mainstream. Also, there are no progression routes for people that are clear and consistent across the geography of this country. In some ways this is an easy issue to tackle, which is why I suggest that the localism approach is the right one. I cannot see this happening nationally. It has to happen through people coming together and offering informal learning routes and informal ways to access these resources, and then ensuring that the progression routes are there, with information about the labour market and digital skills. Employers should offer support and schools should offer family learning. There is enormous potential for schools to offer access to technology, because this is a big issue of lots of people on low incomes. They and their children need the digital skills to make a start on their digital journey. The digital divide by class is horrible, and the digital divide by parental achievement and learning is dire. We have to start in schools and to make the learning informal. Family learning is a very good approach.

Professor Martin Weller: You have asked us about journeys into formal learning. It can be a very dramatic step: you are not learning and then you are doing a three-year degree course. It is a matter of trying to smooth out that curve, if you like. Perhaps it starts with someone seeing a TV programme and wanting to learn a bit more about it. They try out some educational resources and gain a bit of confidence. They may then go on to try an Open course which lasts for seven weeks and they may get some accreditation for it. It helps to smooth the transition. To go back to the role of employers, for professional societies I can see Open courses being a productive way of bringing people into their profession, but the funding works against them. They get their money from people paying to come on to their courses. It might be good for wider society to have such courses open so that they generate interest in, say, accountancy, but that is not the model. In some ways the system works against them in terms of the longer-term benefits.

Lord Aberdare: What you seem to be describing is what I would think of as a careers service. Is the careers service a completely lost cause as a result of the funding having gone to schools, or is there something one could do in a relatively straightforward way that would make a real improvement?

David Hughes: I do not think it is a lost cause; I would not want to suggest that. However, I think that the targets are too tight and that the service focuses too closely on people aged between 18 and 24. I think there are big issues in schools and that the issues for adults are different. I know much more about the adult side than I do about the young people side, although I am the father of three teenagers. On the adult side, there is not enough support for people to get the skills so that they themselves learn what they need to do. I personally do not believe in the concept of a careers adviser advising an individual about their future, but I do believe in giving people some skills so that they can find out for themselves. That is sustainable. Careers education is what people need and it is what schools should be delivering as well. The careers service could be manoeuvred. The evaluation of our mid-life career review pilot proved that there is a massive demand for it and that it works. It is also incredibly good value for money. People need to be given confidence. We do a survey every year of people in learning. It involves around 6,000 people, so it is statistically significant. The starkest finding for me is that if you were not successful in your education up to the age of 16, 17 or 18, it is incredibly unlikely that you are going to get back into learning. It is very skewed, whereas if you are successful and if you carry on learning to degree level, the number of people still in learning and talking about themselves as learners throughout their lives is incredibly high. The family and intergenerational aspects of this are also quite scary.

We have to break into that and give people confidence that they can be successful learners, that it is worth doing and can pay for itself because it will lead to a better job and a better life. That needs some nudge.

Q93 Baroness Garden of Frognal: You have both been referring to things that require motivation. There is a move towards self-teaching as a means of upskilling both in schools and for the workforce, but learning online without a teacher or a set pattern of study requires a certain degree of discipline as well as motivation. Both of your organisations have expertise in that. Can you delve a bit further into how you can increase the motivation for people who are not natural learners?

Professor Martin Weller: You are absolutely right to label that as an issue. The completion rates on these MOOCs, the big open courses, are very low at around 10%. The people who

complete are usually those who have studied before, often at post-grad level. You are not getting to the people that you want to get at with this idea of democratising learning. It is not so much about motivation as more about having a set of learning skills. Those people who have been through a degree or post-grad know how to learn: discipline and structure in learning and knowing how to set aside time. Being an independent learner is difficult, so it needs lots of support. It is manageable; you can do the online element, but it is difficult without human support.

We ran a project in the United States funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, in which there were people who had consistently failed maths, could not get employment and were trying to get on to an employment programme. We gave them an open course on an introduction to maths with really targeted support and got something like 80% pass rates on that. If you intervene at the right point, you can get success.

The Chairman: What was the intervention there? In a sense, that is the key, is it not? You are saying that you need certain skills, and it is not motivation but confidence.

Professor Martin Weller: It was very local but also they could study at their own pace. They could come back to drop-in centres when they needed it and the material was structured very differently from conventional high school maths in the States—it was new material that had been adapted. What we often find at the Open University, to go back to David's point about people who have failed in education once, that they get into the mindset that "Education and learning are not for me". It takes a bit of work to get around that. If you get some early success, then you can find, "Maybe it is for me". It is important to get that across. It is a worry that MOOCs, while they are fantastic in a way, may reinforce that sense of failure. If you are thinking, "I will try it this week", and have dropped out after week two, perhaps it compounds the message that it is not for you.

Baroness Garden of Frognal: Perhaps a solution is reinforcing the relevance to something within their own lives. Very often school learning can seem remote. Maths might seem remote, but if you can see that it will help you to run your household accounts, that might help.

Q94 Lord Janvrin: Following up on this and digging deeper, if we are going to get change, are there champions or local centres of excellence that should be publicised more? Is there a national campaign? How does one try to intervene, as you say, in some of these areas? Are there things that we ought to be recommending, suggesting or pushing? We can all see the problem.

David Hughes: There are lots of things. One of the problems with this type of debate is to know at what level we are talking about the issue because there are so many different dimensions to it. For me, there are four issues around MOOCs. Motivation and relevance to people's lives is one. Access to technology is one. If you do not have access to technology, you do not access a MOOC; it is as simple as that. That is true of a lot of people. Study skills, which Martin mentioned, but also digital skills are relevant. Some of the support you can access is through virtual networks, and you have to be quite highly digitally skilled to be able to access and use those and be confident about them. That is in itself multidimensional.

The other issue is about people's desire or motivation for social interaction. Learning is not something that you do in isolation. There is a great study of people coming into this country doing the citizenship test, with two simple groups: you can do it in groups or on your own

online. The learners who achieved the citizenship test and became citizens were followed up. The people who learnt together were more likely to be employed and engaged with their children's learning, and were more likely to volunteer. They were more likely to say that they felt British and felt proud to be British. That is because of the social interaction and the other benefits of being together with people. You can replicate some of that through a MOOC, but you are relying on people's pre-existing social networks for that. It is pretty complex.

The Chairman: To come back to Professor Weller, I do not want to put words into your mouth, but are you saying that that the traditional OU route of distance learning but with a level of interaction is more important for people who have not necessarily had a tradition of study skills, and that MOOCs work fine if you already have a higher level of study skills?

Professor Martin Weller: Yes, that seems to be the picture. We may just be seeing early adopters, and as people become more familiar with the stuff maybe we will see a greater completion rate. It comes down to investment as well. If you have not paid anything to sign up for a course and can do so on a whim, it is easy to drop out. To go back to David's point, we also see a much higher retention rate among students who make a social connection with a cohort because they have a commitment, an investment, with their friends. That can be online, it does not have to be face to face, but having a social connection does help. Certainly for the sorts of learners we try to target at the OU, we still feel that that human support, something we invest a lot of money in, is significant.

Q95 Lord Lucas: You talk about lack of learning skills, study skills and digital skills as being a problem. Is there any evidence or research on that? My life suggests that those are not problems. Whenever I have been dealing with prisoners or the unemployed in south London, the problem has always been motivation. You supply them with motivation and the study skills appear. Certainly, that is the experience of most computer games companies: they can pose extremely difficult questions to their users and their users will learn, whatever their background.

David Hughes: Ability and skills represent an interesting debate in themselves. Lots of people have the ability to learn. There is lots of evidence of poor literacy and digital skills getting in the way of people's ability to learn. The literacy statistics are quite shocking. There are quite a lot of statistics from the national skills survey that people in socioeconomic groups C, D and E have much lower digital skills than people in higher economic groups. A survey by the Prince's Trust looked at young people who are not in education, employment or training and the evidence from that was that their confidence in their digital skills was much lower than that of their peer group who were in education.

Lord Lucas: Is there any evidence that teaching digital skills improves things, as opposed to supplying the motivation for them to learn it themselves?

David Hughes: That is a more difficult one to prove, is it not? I am not sure that there is any direct evidence.

Professor Martin Weller: Our approach at the Open University is to embed those skills rather than make them explicit. You come in because you want to learn history, not digital skills. If you ask people whether they need digital skills, they say, "Oh no, I don't need that", but actually they do.

Lord Lucas: So in practice you go for the motivation.

Professor Martin Weller: You are absolutely right. We can talk about digital skills, but there has been a big upsurge in the elderly population on Facebook because the motivation is for them to keep in touch with their family and all sorts of things. When motivation is there, one can often overcome these things.

The Chairman: This carries on to Lord Janvrin's next question. Have we covered that? Fine.

David Hughes: Quickly, the CBI did a survey recently that suggested that employers believe that a lot of their workforce has poor digital skills and that that is holding back their businesses. Again, I appreciate that this is not quite answering your question, but there is a lot of concern that people are not able to function in the way that employers want in order to be effective in the workplace.

Q96 Baroness O'Cathain: I have a simple question. Do you have any information at all about how many people are in that block of the ages of 16 to 24 who have very poor, if any, digital skills? Mainly, I want to know what proportion of that block has access to getting digital skills. It seems that the younger you get them, the more interested they are. These youngsters are all going around now with smartphones and things, but not in deprived areas. The work that you mentioned that the Prince's Trust is doing on that is quite significant. You seem to be saying, "We will get them digital skills", but they do not even know how to open a computer.

David Hughes: Again, the Prince's Trust study is worth looking at. There is a lot of evidence from that about what young people who are not in education, employment or training are doing or not doing. There are some worrying statistics: 25% of males are not looking for jobs online. It is very difficult to find most jobs now without going online. It is very difficult to get a job without applying online. It is very difficult to get a job online without having a digital presence.

Baroness O'Cathain: But how do they get online? The number one step is not readily available to them.

David Hughes: As I said, access to the technology itself is really important. Libraries are becoming less and less accessible. A lot of them are closing down, opening hours are getting shorter, and it is difficult to book time on computers in a library, so there are massive barriers to individuals who do not have access at home.

Q97 Lord Holmes of Richmond: I think we have covered much of what I wanted to ask around the localism agenda and local delivery models so I shall ask you to be quite specific on stuff that is happening now at a local level which you think is impactful and effective and about specific things that are not happening at a local level which you think would make a difference, not least local delivery leading to reductions in local inequality.

David Hughes: There are probably four groups of people who we need to think about in this. It is quite important to think about them separately as well as collectively. There are some big issues about people with disabilities and their access to technology, learning and work. There is evidence that unemployed people claiming jobseeker's allowance have lower digital skills than their counterparts. Low-wage, low-skilled workers in mid-life are probably at higher risk of redundancy and are not getting support. Older people need to be digital citizens because digital by default means that they are going to have to access more and more services digitally and they are missing out on retail opportunities and so on and so

forth. We need to think about the issue in different ways. For me, they are the four big priorities.

I am really keen to look at family learning as one of the solutions. There is lots of evidence that parents are more interested in digital skills than non-parents because their kids are using it and are expected to use it at school. There is lots of evidence that peer-to-peer support is really important. We talked a bit about that and about getting people who live next to you to start talking about digital skills and helping to supply them. There is a need for employers to take the upskilling of people in the workforce more seriously and to help to support them informally.

Older people are a particular target we need to think about carefully. There is an irony in that lots of isolation can be overcome by people having digital access, yet older people tend to have much lower access and skills, so we need to think about ways of doing that. Helen, who I have just seen walk in, will talk about the Tinder Foundation's work locally, which is fantastic.

The final bit of the jigsaw for me would be to get that planning of progression routes. It is all very well enticing people into understanding why they need better digital skills, and it is fantastic to use different ways to motivate them. A lot of people want to move on. That flexible offer, informal as well as formal, does not exist. It has to be a ladder or a climbing frame up to the very high-level digital skills that the economy needs around digital makers, but there are not the rungs on those ladders or climbing frames to get there.

Lord Janvrin: On the employers' side, how does one get much greater understanding of their role in this? It is obviously in their long-term interest. Are there suggestions you could make in that area?

David Hughes: There are exemplars. East Midlands Housing Group has an approach to every member of its staff and a digital charter that says that it wants every member of its staff to improve their skills, that every member of staff needs a basic set of digital skills to work in that organisation, in a positive way, not as a barrier, and that different people in specialisms need higher-level skills. It is taking that approach. We can look at those exemplars and get some evaluation of their impact in the workplace and of their productivity and effectiveness. We need to start shouting about that more. Organisations such as the CBI and the Federation of Small Businesses need to be able to promote that more.

Lord Holmes of Richmond: I want to explore the family learning point further. There is something in that. I am interested in your hypothesis. Going back to traditional learning and reading for families where it has been problematic in the past, is there any evidence that the fact of children going to school and having to learn to read necessarily fed back to encourage the parents of those children to improve their literacy skills? If that was not the case then, do you think it would be different and that technology and digital skills are fundamentally different from traditional literacy and numeracy skills?

David Hughes: On the latter point, basic digital skills need to be part of that package. If there was one recommendation I would like you to propose, it is that we start to see digital skills as the third plank of the basic skills that every citizen needs: literacy and language, numeracy, and digital skills. They are essential, and they are not funded and supported in the same way at the moment. There is evidence from family learning that if schools work with families, the children do better at key stages 1, 2 and 3. At 4, it is more difficult to

evidence. The parents will go on and carry on learning. Anecdotally, there are lots of examples of schools. We gave an award to a school in Nottingham this year for its family learning. It targeted the most disadvantaged children and their families, children who were truanting and who were not at school the most. It invited the parents in very gently. The improvement in attendance and motivation was startling. That was around learning generally. My point is that most of those families will also have very poor or low access to technology and the school is an important and useful place they can go to access the technology and support the learning of their children. This is an easy recommendation because the pupil premium is targeted at those families. I suggest that some emphasis on family learning and digital skills would be a fantastic proposition.

Q98 Lord Macdonald of Tradeston: It is clear that in recent years there has been growing enthusiasm for vocational training across politics and across government, including, in particular, apprenticeships. Baroness O’Cathain mentioned the 16 to 24 age group. Do you think that the Government could give more effective leadership and support in digital skills in things such as industry partnerships and post-16 specialisms and, perhaps most importantly, their funding priorities?

Professor Martin Weller: To push my line again, there is a role for open education. We have seen that a lot of our open projects allow us a light form of collaboration. People can take things and do things and adapt them very quickly without having to go through complex memorandums of understanding and so on. For instance, when we produced our open education resources people took them and said they were going to translate everything into Chinese for the community over here. They did not have to ask our permission to do that. They could just go and do that. We are seeing teachers taking stuff, combining it with other elements and putting things together. The type of specialisms you might want to see would be quite cross-disciplinary, combining things in unexpected ways that you could probably not predict. It is only when you allow stuff to be openly licensed and adaptable that you get those unpredictable outcomes. That is what employers want to see. There is a new skill coming over here that we had not thought of before. A few years ago, we did not talk of data journalists, for instance. That brings together two disciplines into one role. Those people need different skills and resources from different areas. It is difficult to put a programme in place for the jobs of the future because we do not know what those jobs of the future are yet. If you have an open ecosystem, you can create those things as they come along.

David Hughes: There are lots of things that need to happen in this arena. I do not think that digital skills are embedded enough in the curriculum generally post-16. In some sectors they are, and are very specific, but most self-employed people will need quite high levels of digital skills. They will need a website, online banking and an online payment system. They will need to be able to present themselves to the world digitally. I think that they are part of the curriculum for lots of trades and lots of potential self-employed people. We need employers to start engaging with providers of education post-16 to learn both ways about the digital skills we will need in the future. We talked about the need for people in the workplace to keep learning informally. That happens when colleges and universities work closely with employers and start to offer that suite of skills and learning that needs to be available. That then taps into people’s motivation. People will very often be turned on by learning that is endorsed by a local employer in a way that they will not be if it is just a qualification they have never heard of. I use the Rolls-Royce example because I worked in

Derby for many years. If you had Rolls-Royce involved in any of the learning offer, people took it seriously. If you put some bizarre NVQ level 2 or level 1 title on something, they were strangely not interested.

The Chairman: How can we reinvigorate that with employers? All the evidence is that, post the recession, they are not doing that at the same level. They say, “If we train people, they may move”. How can we reinvigorate a commitment to the development of the workforce?

David Hughes: At the risk of repeating myself, there has to be a local focus on outcomes and the Government need to fund colleges, universities and other providers to focus on those outcomes. If they do that, they free up the innovation and creativity to start to engage with employers to ask: “What outcomes do we want in this area? How do we engage people who will be vital to the workforce in future? What skills do they need before they enter the workforce? What skills do they need when they are in the workforce? What part does the employer play in paying for that? What subsidy do the Government provide?”.

The Chairman: That is pretty crucial, because otherwise it is the Government doing it for business, is it not?

David Hughes: Not for one minute am I suggesting that the Government can fund all this; employers need to pay for lots of the provision required, but the flexibility is not there because the focus is too much on full qualifications all the time. Qualifications are really important, do not get me wrong, but they are not the only part of the system that is needed.

Q99 Lord Macdonald of Tradeston: Is there a direction from the Government—because our report is to advise the Government—that you would like that would help to stimulate industry partnerships and that kind of localism?

David Hughes: Definitely. An emphasis on local partnerships—in England, that is LEPs and in other parts of the UK it is different mechanisms—local deals based on outcomes, the funding system focused not on qualifications but on the skills that people need to get on and the progression that they want to achieve, would be fantastic.

Professor Martin Weller: We could help employers by having a convenient package for them so that when they are doing a review of an employee they can say, “Here are some learning options”. Some of those can be informal, some of them may be formal. Employers are busy people and they are not aware of the range of stuff out there. Part of the onus is on those of us in education to come up with a neat package to provide to different employers in different circumstances.

The Chairman: Pushing you further, because that goes back to my earlier point about information, who provides that? Where is that provided? Is it local or national?

Professor Martin Weller: It could be by sector, it could be local. A local college could provide that to local employers, but there might also be online offerings, so that, if you are studying engineering, you are told, “Here is a bunch of things that might be interesting for you to study”, so that when the employer is doing a mid-career review, it is more about your learning opportunities. Some of those will be formal, some will be informal, and they will be of different sizes, but at least it is a convenient package for them to take to sit down with in the meeting.

The Chairman: I understand that, but who has the responsibility for putting that information together, for making the links?

Professor Martin Weller: If you tell the universities, they should provide that structure.

David Hughes: That is a crucial point. I do not think that universities and colleges think it is their job to deliver that type of learning to employers and employees. That is wrong. We must reinject some sense of localism into colleges and universities beyond the publicly funded full qualifications. That is hard because it is risky and difficult. They do not necessarily have the right skills or employees to deliver it, but if they do not, there is no one else to step in, so it has to be through those institutions.

Lord Lucas: Can you point out any examples of good practice, of people doing it because they believe it is right in advance of funding?

David Hughes: There a conference going on at the moment in Warwick, which Martin is going back to, which is full of people who are doing fantastic work on the use of technology in learning and embedding technology in learning in different areas of the curriculum. There are lots of what I would say are small pockets of fantastic practice. We need to promote that much more widely. Enormous investment is needed in the workforce. Lots of people who are expected to teach digital skills and use digital learning do not have the skills themselves to have the confidence to do that, so we need a big investment in the workforce—teachers, lecturers, trainers and so on.

Baroness O'Cathain: That is a very valid point. Most people directing large organisations have not done any of that themselves, and they do not like being shown up by the youngsters who can do all those things. There is a psychological problem there, but there are some terrific examples. You have twice mentioned Rolls-Royce. Rolls-Royce created a huge factory on the South Downs. Nobody had ever built a car down there or knew anything about them—well, obviously, some of the local mechanics did. They trained every person. That is one of the most important new developments of the past 10 or 20 years in Sussex. It is an incredible example, but not many people know about it.

When the Blair Government first came in, I was very impressed by their campaign saying, “The most important person in my life was my teacher. I remember Mr or Miss so and so”. I thought, “Gosh, what a good thing to do”, and that must have had a lot of positive effects on teaching people. Similarly, there seems to be huge need for an information campaign. If people could see what Rolls-Royce did down in Sussex, the result could be amazing.

David Hughes: We can provide some written examples, if that would be helpful, of family learning, community work and peer-to-peer support network working. I am sure that later Helen will give you some examples as well.

Lord Lucas: If employers are not doing enough, they need to understand how it can be done.

The Chairman: There needs to be some push on them as well.

Q100 Lord Kirkwood of Kirkhope: Can I take you back? You scoped out some of the client groups that we are concerned about, but I am nervous of complacency. We are talking about peer-to-peer and family learning, but there is dislocation. Think of the work of Louise Casey. We have families facing nine socioeconomic barriers to getting anywhere in life that keeps them out of jail, but we are talking gently among our middle-class selves. I emphasise that to make a point, but what do we do? All the evidence that I am hearing in this inquiry, which is fascinating and absorbing—it is an important policy area for the country—suggests that inequality is going to get worse. No one is suggesting that we stop technological

development because it will make equality more severe, but I get no sense that people are thinking about the number of people who are going to be dislocated from the labour market who are already in work. We are talking about getting them interested in mid-term career reviews by joining photography sessions.

What do the Government really need to do to grab hold of this before we start getting public unrest in the streets of our major cities? Things can change dramatically and quickly in this area, as you know better than we do. What should we be recommending to the Government in the next Parliament that needs to get done and funded to make sure that we do not lose not just 15% but perhaps 25% of our population who feel completely left behind, because that has political as well as economic implications?

David Hughes: I am pessimistic, and I am sorry about that because we have been talking about literacy and numeracy for 100 years but we still have not cracked it. This is a new challenge that comes on top of that. Of course, it is a compound issue. People with literacy and numeracy problems often have poor health understanding and poor financial skills, and they nearly always have poor digital skills as well. I completely understand the challenge: it is getting bigger and it is getting worse. We have to invest more money at the local level in tackling the challenges which people are facing as adults. Again, family learning is important.

Lord Kirkwood of Kirkhope: That is a very important point. Can you point us towards any sort of cost-benefit analysis that has been made of doing exactly the kind of thing you are talking about? I am sorry, I interrupted you when you were trying to explain the position. I apologise for that.

David Hughes: Interestingly, we are just seeking some money to do some research on family learning because we believe that it can tackle problems for the most disadvantaged people.

The Chairman: There is certainly some evidence on literacy levels.

David Hughes: There is indeed, and we are doing some family numeracy work at the moment that again will produce evidence. Family learning is not just a nice, fluffy thing. I have kids and I do family learning all the time. I am not talking about the state supporting me, I am talking about the kids who grow up in households without books, PCs, laptops and iPads. We need to target them. The Robin Hood Primary School in Nottingham is doing that now and is achieving some fantastic results. This work is being done with families whose kids may possibly end up going off the rails. It is being targeted at that group, which is important. However, there is not enough funding going into it. The PISA and PIAAC studies done recently by the OECD suggest that we have long-standing literacy, numeracy and technology problems, and that is partly about funding.

Lord Kirkwood of Kirkhope: We know that universal credit, which is coming in eventually, has a local support service framework so that advisers can help people through the Digital by Default service. Is there not something there that will allow us to grab hold of these families and say to them, "Come this way. Here is an avenue you can take to introduce you to the idea of technological training."?

David Hughes: Both of us have said that there are things that work, but most of the funding is very short term. We have had projects funded through BIS and the Skills Funding Agency for 12 months. The results were fantastic, but the funding finishes and the project finishes. I hate to keep going back to funding, but there has to be a stronger focus on it as being a part of what works.

The Chairman: As you say, it is what works.

David Hughes: Absolutely. I go back to the role of universities, colleges and other public institutions. They should be given the responsibility to do something about this as part of all the other things they do. In too many instances institutions have lost sight of responsibility to the local community. They are much more focused on universities being global in nature. Colleges are going to India. Let us focus on the local community because that is really critical.

Professor Martin Weller: Context is important in this as well. I did some work with a group of people in Jamaica. They put lovely laptops into the libraries but no one wanted to go in and use them because it was not “their place”. This guy bought some metal containers that you see dumped everywhere and fitted them out with Macs. He then put them into the middle of villages.

Lord Kirkwood of Kirkhope: A metal container.

Professor Martin Weller: I am not suggesting that we supply metal containers, but the context is important. Even if we did open up all our libraries again, the people we want to get at might not feel that the library is “their place”. It needs to be done somewhere where they might go, such as the pub or the shop. Again, context is important.

Q101 Earl of Courtown: I think we have already covered part of my question, which concerns the sort of chicken-and-egg situation with regard to online learning and digital skills: if you do not have digital skills you cannot engage in online learning. We have also been talking about motivation, and of course we come back to the literacy problem. Once you get the literacy problem sorted out, you can get the motivation going, along with more social interaction. I am thinking particularly of older groups and the level of confidence people need to get back into retraining. You were saying that we should concentrate more on the older groups, people in their 40s, 50s and 60s, and you said that they have much to contribute. One would imagine that those individuals will seek out additional learning if they can be shown that they will actually gain from it. However, there are those who do not actually seek out additional learning. We have been through this subject, but is there one more point you could make about motivating those who are not actively seeking out additional learning?

David Hughes: One of the particular issues about digital skills is that people need ongoing support, not just initial learning. That is critical, particularly for older people. My mum, who is very digitally literate, still sometimes needs me or my son to help her sort out her problems. It is not enough to provide one burst of input. The confidence thing comes from knowing who to ask and where to go when you are stuck. This is an important part of it.

Baroness O'Cathain: Before I go into my final question, I have two brief queries. What about teacher training colleges? Do they feature significantly or are they still in the groove of the classical subjects?

David Hughes: There is not enough going on.

Baroness O'Cathain: So there could be a recommendation in that area.

Professor Martin Weller: It can become a kind of check-box exercise: can you add up a formula in Excel? We need to work towards higher-level skills and on fostering digital curiosity so that people are creative online. The tick-box skills are not enough.

The Chairman: Such as teaching children how to do a spreadsheet but not teaching them how to think.

Baroness O'Cathain: My second point is whether there is any way we can stop the computer industry from putting a towel over its head every month and trying to change everything that we have all got used to. It is absolutely ludicrous.

The Chairman: We have just started migrating from Microsoft Office 365.

Baroness O'Cathain: I have been told that Windows 7 has just about reached its sell-by date. Why is that? People are not going to be given any support by Microsoft, Dell or anyone else because they have made their money on that particular product. They then make it more and more inconvenient for the normal user, who has to relearn everything. I actually think it is criminal; I will go as far as saying that. These people are making more money than any other sector and they are taking us all for a ride. Is there any way that Governments throughout the world or the EU could do something? You may laugh, but it is true. However, I am exaggerating to make the point.

The Chairman: Maybe we need to get them back so that we can have a go at them.

Q102 Baroness O'Cathain: I think we should because it is very bad. Anyway. I turn now to my final question. I know the answer from Mr Hughes, but I do not know what Professor Weller has to say. What is your one key suggestion for a change that this Committee could recommend to improve UK competitiveness in respect of digital skills? How would you make that fundamental change happen and how much would it cost?

Professor Martin Weller: My answer would be that we need to create a context within which innovation and experimentation can flourish. We are talking about digital skills almost separately, as if we could simply enhance them, but actually lots of things work against them. So off the top of my head I will refer to, for example, student fees. At the moment they work against someone coming in and trying out a bit of learning, and perhaps then going away and coming back. They also make both students and universities quite risk averse. I would refer to the Research Excellence Framework as well, which tends to make academics think that they must publish in the traditional journals and should not do any of the other things. You need to look at the whole context within which digital skills develop. You want to allow for experimentation and innovation, but lots of things serve to constrain them.

Baroness O'Cathain: Mr Hughes, I take it that your answer is that all the emphasis should be put on digital skills, literacy and numeracy. Is that so?

The Chairman: And the local hub.

David Hughes: The third one would be to use the European Social Fund locally and engage employers to be funders for delivering skills to the workforce as well as to the community. I think that a specific focus for the ESF could be on that aspect.

Baroness O'Cathain: There is to be a specific focus on youth unemployment and we could actually piggyback on that.

The Chairman: Thank you very much indeed. You have both been very helpful.