Nuffield Foundation
80 YEARS
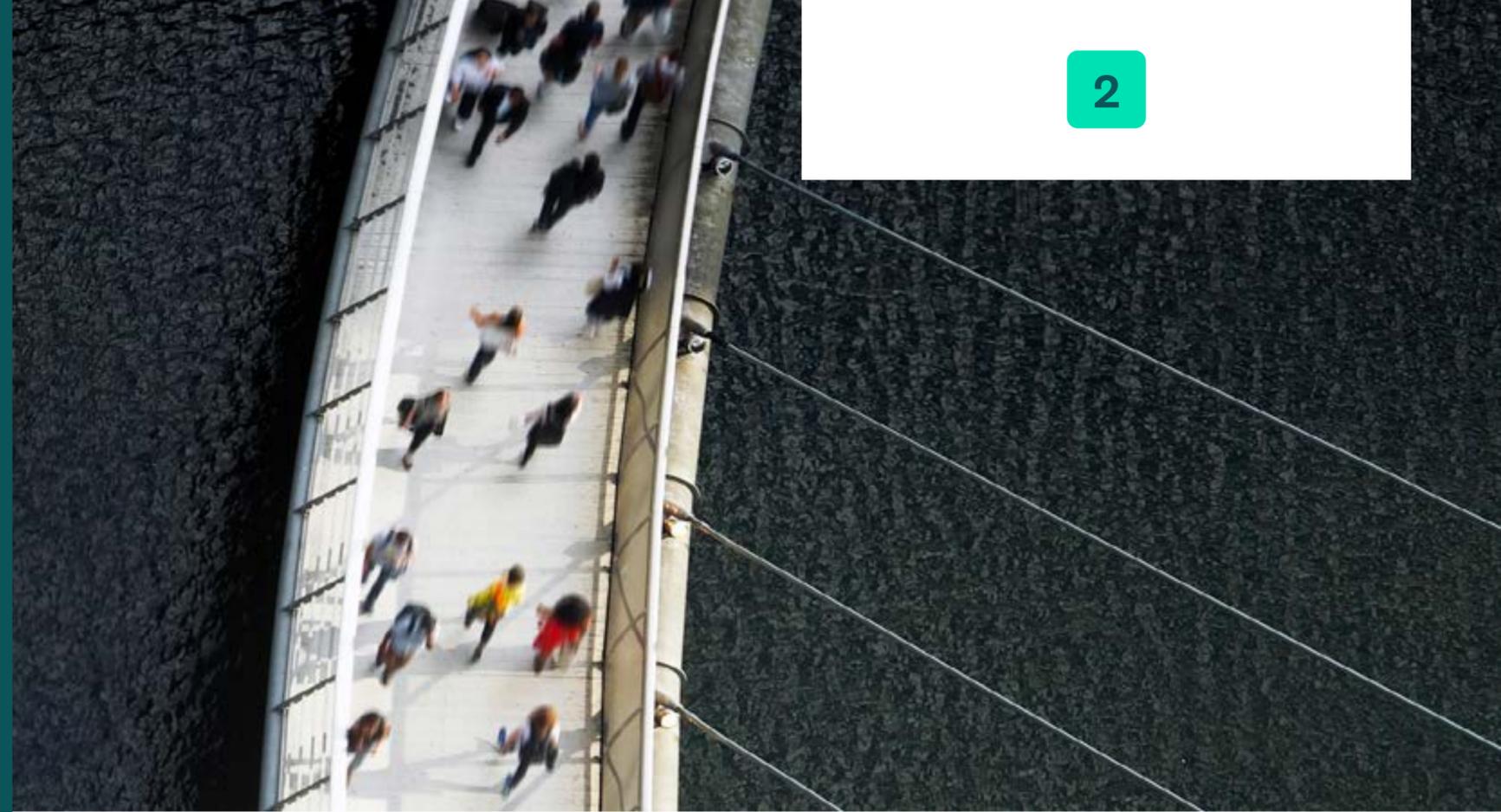
Changing lives for the better

The world is **on the move** in alarming ways.

According to the science writer Gaia Vince, by mid-century, around one-third of the world's population will be forced to migrate because of the climate crisis. This is not a trivial trend.

It is unfolding before our eyes and raising huge questions about the future of nationhood, the tenets of welfare security, and the terms of inclusion and belonging.

The questions it raises are significant for us all: can the international order of nation-states survive, and should it, to deal effectively with the onslaughts of global disfiguration?

What will be the precepts of border control when the humanitarian case for sanctuary is overwhelming, or more pointedly, what will remain of the legacy of sanctuary?

With governments constantly confronting systemic disruptions and disgruntled populations, what will remain of the already frail politics of obligation towards historically vulnerable communities: migrants, the left-behind and racialised minorities?

Resistance to migration

An easy reaction to migration in liberal (and illiberal) democracies has been to draw the bridge up. Intellectually, this has involved misrecognising the global destabilisations of climate, market profligacy and oligarchy by blaming its victims and fictive enemies.

The result of this has been to roll out a nativist politics of the sequestered state hostile to foreigners, cosmopolitans, minorities, system robustness and thought itself.

A place not too far from here typifies this response. Culture wars against the weak, the 'woke' and the different have become the battleground of national identity and well-being.
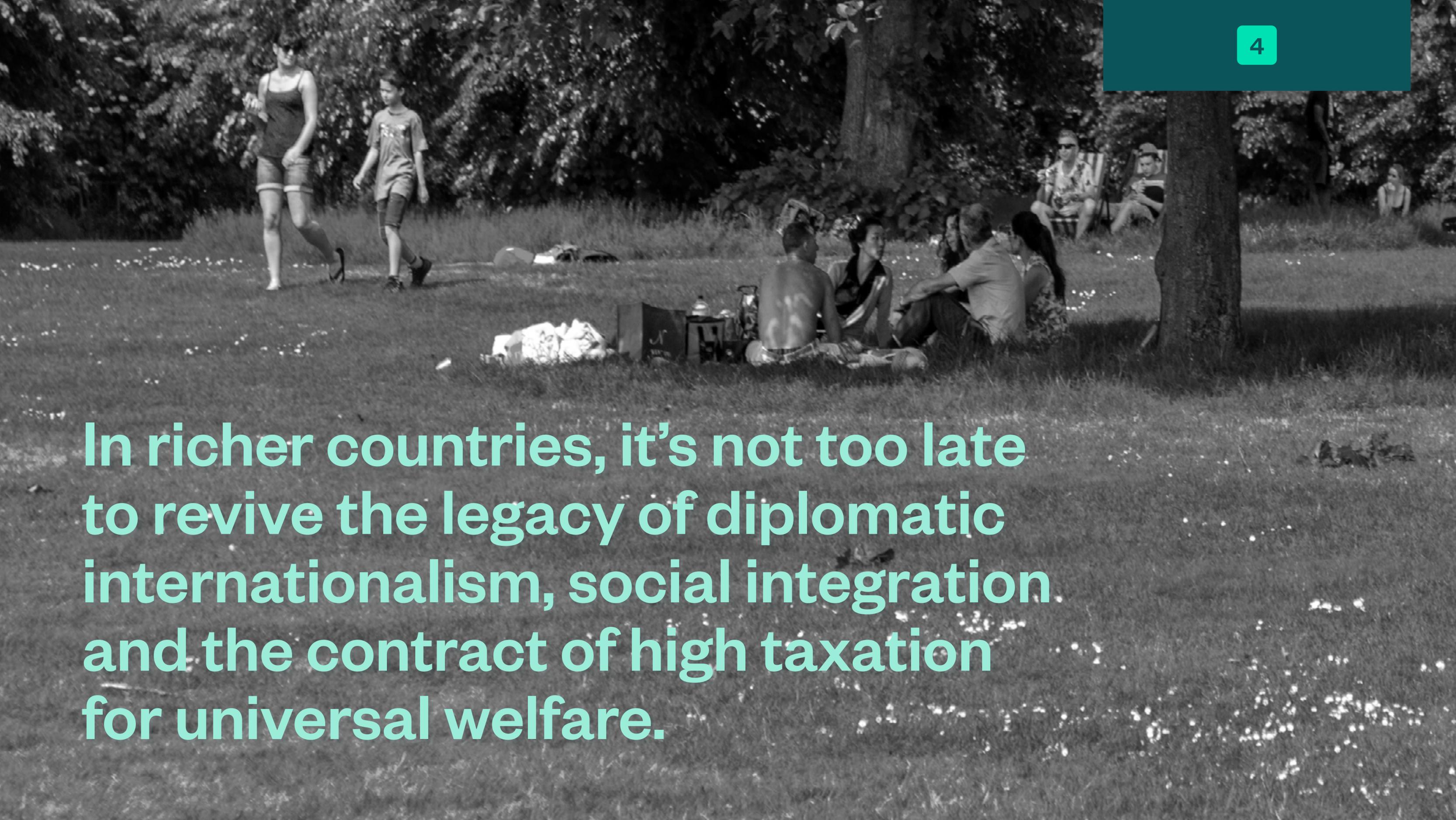
In that place, the focus is on sealing off borders, ramping up surveillance, lauding past glories and historic peoples, taking down cosmopolitan and multicultural legacies, and ignoring the urgency of preparedness and protection in an age of continuous disruption.

In the meantime, the injuries of aversion, discrimination and inequality deepen, adding new subjects of suspicion to existing ones.

Internationalism and integration

It's become hard to defend an open and just society in this environment of fervent nationalism and recurring global crises straining public resources.

In richer countries, it's not too late to revive the legacy of diplomatic internationalism, social integration and the contract of high taxation for universal welfare.

Prof. Ash Amin speaking at the *Changing lives for the better* launch event

Yet its urgency can't be over-stressed. In the richer countries, it's not too late to revive the legacy of diplomatic internationalism, social integration and the contract of high taxation for universal welfare.

It's the legacy of the social state regulating the economy, redistributing income, engaging internationally, developing active industrial, infrastructural and regional policies, and investing in social protections and cultural freedoms. Cognate, environmental and technological extensions can be imagined.

But this revival can't be dewy-eyed. It can't forget the social model's modest record on class, gender and racial equality, nor avoid asking whether it suits our times, let alone, whether it is politically viable or not.

These are overstretched and volatile times, forcing awkward political choices. For example, conceding to points-based migration while retaining an unflinching commitment to sanctuary based on safe passage. Or narrating nation and belonging as the common, shared infrastructures and joint endeavours necessary to survive the disruptive future, while not giving up on moral outrage against sexism, racism and class inequality.

The question we as a society have to ask ourselves is if the revival of this legacy should displace identity as the prime marker of citizenship? Or should it accept that the fiscal affordances of the emergency economy can only stretch to protecting vital systems, and the most vulnerable populations and habitats, rather than to the principle of welfare universalism?

Considerations for the Foundation

The Nuffield Foundation has committed to the principles of a just society, one that seeks to ensure universal welfare in the broadest sense. Can the same be said at the level of the nation-state? Have we fully understood the limits of the secure society in a cataclysmic and unreadable world order?

Looking ahead, we need to ask, what kind of society has Britain become? Do the models of nation, inclusion and security in conditions of extreme risk and insecurity need to be reconsidered?

Reflections on changing families and intersectionality

Professor Ann Phoenix

We are all familiar with current concerns about what the media has called the 'cost of living crisis', not least because parents who have previously considered themselves able to adequately provide for their children are shocked to have to seek out food banks or warm spaces.

But inequalities and inequities are, of course, broader than food poverty alone.

Housing inequalities

Housing inequalities are also at the heart of many troubles children face – those who have no space to do homework and no bed of their own to get a good night's sleep.

Some families don't have working cookers and there are others where children have to sofa surf around different addresses. Compared with their peers who live in better or more secure housing, these children do not have the same opportunities to do as well in school. Nor can they avoid the stresses that housing inequalities give rise to, and which may serve to worsen their mental health. Migrant children whose parents have no recourse to public funds (NRPF) – a result of not having been granted official leave to remain in the UK – face particularly difficult times.

As climate change deepens, housing inequalities will affect the health of families in different ways, whether from being too cold in harsh winters or in offering less protection from the rising heat of summers.

Over the next 30 years, the quest for social justice and improved well-being will require governments and local authorities to adopt and implement 'Housing First' policies. Housing First is an approach that offers permanent, affordable housing, as quickly as possible, for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. It's a policy that Helsinki in Finland has followed since 2008, with a resulting decrease in its homelessness: from 18,000 people in 1987 to 6,600 in 2017.

Digital inequalities

Linked, in part, to housing inequalities are digital inequalities. These came to the forefront of the political agenda as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, when it became clear that some children had to share mobile phones to do their lessons, and that poor or intermittent internet connections were an issue for many.

With rapid changes in AI, and deeper connections growing between the online and offline worlds, the digital divide is only likely to increase. If digital exclusion is to be effectively tackled and more fully understood, it is necessary to address poverty and inequalities more generally by taking an intersectional approach to understanding the problem as a whole.

The basic principle of intersectionality is that we are all simultaneously positioned in multiple social categories, so that there are always differences between people in the same social category and similarities between people in different categories.

For example, if we consider educational outcomes, it is not enough to think about racialisation without recognising its intersections with gender and social class. We know that, on the whole, white children tend to do better in school than black children. But in tackling educational inequalities, we have to also recognise that African Caribbean and Somali-origin children do particularly badly.

Gender makes a difference too, with boys doing less well than girls, and those from working class backgrounds falling behind those from the middle classes.

The same is true for white children whose educational outcomes are worse than those from Chinese backgrounds and some of those from South Asian backgrounds. This is why there is an increasing recognition of the academic gap between white working-class boys and other white children.

The point is that inequities are complex, inequalities are increasing, and policy solutions to address precarity over the next 30 years will increasingly have to recognise that one size does not fit all.

Prof. Ann Phoenix speaking at the *Changing lives for the better* launch event

The importance of trustworthy institutions

John Pullinger

In 2015 world leaders gathered in New York against the backdrop of the continuing ripples from the financial crash, growing concerns about inequality and exclusion, and failure to grasp the nettle on climate change.

They were there to agree a set of goals with the aim that by 2030 no one should be left behind.

The sustainable development goals covered each of the dimensions by which we have typically measured progress: economic, social and environmental.

But crucially they also included a fourth dimension: peace, justice and strong institutions.

This fourth dimension was added to the mix when the voices of people from across the world were heard as part of the process. People facing injustice. People feeling powerless. People displaced by war or natural disaster. They said, "we need institutions that work for us", "...that hear our voice" "...that do something about the situation we find ourselves in".

The addition of this fourth dimension makes an important statement, that is: you can't achieve anything without strong, trustworthy, inclusive and effective institutions.

This is not something we think about enough.

Effective institutions in a time of fragmentation

Our institutions need to be strong, trustworthy, inclusive and effective. Strong, so that they have the authority to carry the day when tough choices need to be made.

Trustworthy so that those choices are accepted, especially by those whose actions are challenged or those who are required to pay some price.

Inclusive so that everyone in our society has a voice in how choices are made and can see themselves and their interests represented in the decision-making process.

And effective: nimble in the face of events; competent, highly skilled; able to effect the changes necessary.

John Pullinger
speaking at the
Changing lives for the better launch event

Over the years the Nuffield Foundation has made an important contribution to this issue through, for example, its role in the creation of the Constitution Unit at University College London, Full Fact, the fact checking organisation, the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, the Ada Lovelace Institute, and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.

Yet so often we see weakening, not strengthening: pressures on finance; loss of skills, hollowing out of capabilities. We see mistrust and concerns about whether we can believe what we are being told, whether those who speak from a position of power deserve respect or the derision they so often get from influential observers.

We see fragmentation rather than inclusion at a time when inequalities reinforce feelings of injustice and alienation.

When communities huddle together for comfort, with "us" inside and "them" outside, and a desire to build the barriers rather than ease the paths across them. A sense that those in charge are not acting in our name and we need to take back control.

Unanswered questions

World leaders gathered again in New York in September 2023. Eight years earlier, the UK representative was David Cameron. The USA representative was Barack Obama. The Russia representative was Vladimir Putin. Much has changed in eight years, but much has not. The imperative for action on sustainable development is ever stronger.

The pandemic, the war in Ukraine and rapid changes in technology have shown the impact of disruption on the way we live our lives and the way we think about the world. At the United Nations I expect that they will be asking if our current

global institutions are fit to face the challenges ahead.

What questions should we be asking in the UK given what we have learned from global events and those much closer to home?

Are our current institutions up to the job?

How might they change?

Do we need new ones?

How might Nuffield play its part?

Challenges for the UK's education systems

Professor Lorraine Dearden

Post-pandemic financial pressures have put a strain on education systems across Britain and Northern Ireland. Choosing a key policy focus to reduce inequalities in education and help those who are most vulnerable is difficult.

So many issues exist – among them, the provision of adequate childcare, the worsening teacher supply crisis, COVID-19 learning loss, rising school absences and inadequate SEND provision.

Another major challenge is the massive under-investment in vocational routes through education, and the impact of changes that have been made over the years. The latest of these being the introduction of T levels – technical-based qualifications, launched in England in 2020 – which exist as an alternative to apprenticeships and A levels.

Rethinking the rigidity of education

I grew up in the Australian Capital Territory, where the education system has remained largely stable since the abolition in 1976 of exams at age 18. The system there is completely college-based: school finishes at 16 years, and all public school students go to state-funded college. Students can take up to a maximum of seven academic or vocational subjects, and must pass at least four to get their school completion certificate.

Prof. Lorraine Dearden speaking at the *Changing lives for the better* launch event

Why can't we broaden out the curriculum and allow people to combine elements of all options?

Australian students who want to continue English and Maths at university level can take either highly academic and tertiary-accredited courses, or they can opt for a course aimed at improving literacy and numeracy for everyday use. In England, students have three choices at 16: a narrow academic route (A levels), a vocational route (T levels), or traineeships/apprenticeships. Why can't we broaden out the curriculum and allow people to combine elements of all these options?

We specialise too early (particularly in England and Wales) and we need to change this if we want to be serious about expanding vocational routes.

Unless children are exposed to all available options, how do they know what to choose?

The Australian example proves that the choice between A levels and T levels doesn't need to be binary.

Transforming higher education

We also need to level the playing field by changing the existing funding model. The current system grants much more substantial sums of money to institutions that offer degree courses, compared to those offering vocational ones. It is for this reason that several high-quality vocational providers in the tertiary-sector – the old polytechnics – have abandoned their vocational roots.

To do this would require a complete rewiring of the Higher Education funding system. In the current financial climate, the political will to implement such a change is unlikely to find favour. But if we as a society are intent on improving outcomes for young people, then rebalancing our focus and investment in vocational education is something we would do well to consider.

About the authors

Professor Ash Amin, CBE, is Emeritus 1931 Chair of Geography at the University of Cambridge. He is known for his work in urban, cultural and economic geography and is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences and the British Academy, for which he was Foreign Secretary and Vice President from 2015-2019.

Professor Ann Phoenix is Professor of Psychosocial Studies at UCL Institute of Education. She is a Fellow of both the British Academy and the Academy of Social Sciences and holds visiting professorships in several European countries. She was previously Co-Director of the Thomas Coram Research Unit.

John Pullinger is Chair of the Electoral Commission. He was previously UK National Statistician, President of the Royal Statistical Society, Chair of the United Nations Statistical Commission and President of the International Association for Official Statistics.

Professor Lorraine Dearden is Professor of Economics and Social Statistics at the Institute of Education, University College London. She is a renowned specialist in the economics of education and has served as a Nuffield Foundation trustee since 2021.