

How can FE lead the green revolution?

In this episode, we're talking about the green curriculum and asking how we develop an education and training system that creates a skilled workforce for new and emerging industries. We're asking what role FE can play and what the next government can do to support colleges seeking to skill and reskill the workers needed to tackle the major global challenges from climate change to food security.

We're joined by Charlotte Bonner, CEO of the <u>Environmental Association for Universities</u> and <u>Colleges</u>, which seeks to lead and empower the post-16 education sector to make sustainability 'just good business', and Jeremy Kerswell, CEO and Principal of <u>Plumpton</u> <u>College</u>, in East Sussex, which uses its large estate to create real-life experiences for students, modelling best current and future practices in all aspects of sustainability and land management.

About Charlotte Bonner

As CEO of Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges, Charlotte is responsible for the strategic leadership of the organisation. She has over fifteen years' leadership experience across membership and tertiary education organisations where she's focused on business development, transformational engagement and policy and advocacy.

Before joining EAUC, she was the Education and Training Foundation's education for sustainable development (ESD) lead, and before that was a keystone of NUS' sustainability work, most notably project managing the UNESCO ESD prize winning Green Impact programme from its inception. She is one of the co-founders of Students Organizing for Sustainability International. She's previously held senior teaching associate positions at the University of Bristol and was a sustainability consultant working with private and public sector clients prior to her tenure at NUS.

Charlotte has an MSc in energy and environmental technologies, is a Fellow of the RSA and a board member at Change Agents UK. She lives in Scarborough and is happiest when on her bike, travelling overland or cooking for friends.

About Jeremy Kerswell

Having worked across England's FE and HE sectors for 18 years, Jeremy became Principal of Plumpton College in October 2015. Originally from West Sussex, Jeremy grew up on a



small holding, where his love of the countryside and interest in wildlife and animals began. He went on to study animal science at Reading University, and it was after a short period of employment in both the animal and agricultural industries, he decided to forge a career that would combine his passion for the natural environment with education. Plumpton attracts students from across the South East to study a range of land-based courses from entry to masters level.

Transcript

Shane Chowen 00:00

Hello and welcome to a special pre-election series of Let's Go Further. the podcast from the Skills and Education Group, that challenges the way we think about skills and education. In this series, our collaboration with FE Week, we're shining a spotlight on the FE and skills policy issues that should take centre stage at the upcoming General Election. We'll be asking what we need from the next government and looking at how well our sector is positioned to fight for those needs. I'm Shane Chowen, Editor of FW Week, and I'm delighted to be your host for this series. In this episode, we're looking at how the global green agenda is affecting FE. Demands for a greener curriculum are coming from all sides. Employers need a skilled workforce for new and emerging industries. Students want to study at Net Zero institutions. And whoever forms the next government has a mountain to climb politically and economically to secure the UK's target of becoming net zero by 2050. So how do we create an education and training system that meets all of those demands? Joining me to discuss this are Charlotte Bonner, CEO of EAUC, the Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges, and Jeremy Kerswell, Principal and CEO of Plumpton College. Welcome to you both. Charlotte, for listeners that may not be familiar with EAUC, can you give us a flavour of what your mission is and how you go about your work?

Charlotte Bonner 01:18

Of course, so EAUC, the Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges, we're celebrating our two-decade, 20th anniversary this year. And during that time, we've existed to lead and empower the post 16 education sector to embed sustainability in everything that it does, so that we're equipping learners for their lives and we're shaping society for the better. And we do this in three ways. We're a membership organisation, and we support our members to create meaningful sustainable change through holistic



whole organisation approaches. We convene our network to generate solutions to share challenges. And increasingly, we're working to create systems change to establish a more enabling environment for sustainability action across the sector.

Shane Chowen 01:58

Brilliant thank you. And Jeremy, tell us a little bit about Plumpton College and how you're engaged with the sustainability agenda.

Jeremy Kerswell 02:05

Yeah, so Plumpton has been here since 1926. It was established as the land base college for Sussex, and therefore has a very rich heritage, if you pardon the pun, in the field of all things environment, food production, and those other great diverse subjects that reflect the land base industries. But right now, we truly feel that we have a more important role to play than ever before, given what a global issue is actually, you know, whether that's climate change, sustainability, food security, and therefore at the heart of our current strategic plan is sustainability. And that kind of crosses our curriculum. And we've been doing a lot of work there in terms of developing new curriculum for 16- to 18-year-olds, for adults and for employers. It also spans our work in attracting more students, you know, we have this skills gap. So we have to attract more students. And I'm pleased to say, you know, we're growing those student numbers. And then, of course, we have a very large estate here at Plumpton, I think, the largest college estate in the country. And so we have the perfect opportunity as custodians of that estate, to ensure that we are doing the right thing as landowners ourselves in terms of our own sustainability practice.

Shane Chowen 03:29

So a question for both of you - a shortage of green industry skills in the workforce has been flagged as one of the biggest risks to the UK's ability to meet its all important net zero targets. So do you think Charlotte start with you? Do you think that training and apprenticeships is really at the front and centre of policy thinking in this space at the moment?

Charlotte Bonner 03:49

I think there's a lot of debate and discussion about green jobs and green skills and what that actually means for our education system and what that means for industry across the country and globally. There's two large schools of thought, I think. One is around kind of have we got what we need to develop the volume of technical skills that we need to invest



in the infrastructural changes and the technological changes we need across society, particularly with things like energy systems, agriculture systems, travel and transport systems. And at the moment, I think in terms of volume, the answer is no. You know, there's lots of things that could be done to enhance the number of people either developing those skills through their early careers or actually retraining and adapting existing skills they have for those newer industries. But the other is that fundamentally, all jobs can have some green element to them. Whether you're a heat pump installer, whether you're an engineer, whether you're a hairdresser, a plumber, a business administrator, and how are we ensuring that there's almost a universal curriculum entitlement around sustainability skills that are relevant to each of those professions. And in terms of what's been going on, over the last four years, I think we've seen some really significant momentum. There was the green jobs Task Force and the recommendations that came out of that. The country's Net Zero strategy, IfATE's green apprenticeship work, the Department for Education Sustainability and Climate strategy and the various implementation projects that have come off the back of that. So momentum is building. But I think there's still an awful lot of disconnect and disjoint, between different policy areas, and how central the sustainability agenda and you know, our own sustainability goals are to different policy areas. And I think that's what is really needed next is that connectivity between different areas that are all kind of thinking skills is important, but make sure there's a consistent message for educators, for education organisations, for employers, but also for people going through education as well.

Shane Chowen 05:57

Thank you. Jeremy, you're on the front line of all this. What do you think?

Jeremy Kerswell 05:59

I do agree with Charlotte, actually, in that it feels like there's a recognition of the importance, and there is that momentum building. So whether that's task forces, climate strategies, green skills, working parties, etc. But actually, I'm not sure that that's translating into, you know, actual practice and policy, which is enabling us to respond and react more rapidly, as you say, on the ground. I think, you know, there are some positive signs, obviously, when it comes to apprenticeships, I think, you know, some of the changes that have taken place that have been announced, certainly in the last few weeks should enable us to have a greater reach and mobilise a little more quickly. But there's more work there. I think, in terms of the incumbent workforce, if I just reflect on that for a second, I think there's huge risks there in terms of people already employed in the



sectors who desperately need upskilling at a time of significant change for these industries. And I'm not sure we've still yet got the freedom and the flexibilities to truly be able to meet adults and employers and the needs of the incumbent workforce. So I think, positive signs, but we need to see that translating into changes around policy and funding on the ground.

Charlotte Bonner 06:00

So I couldn't agree with Jeremy more, but I think that there's one particular segment of the incumbent workforce we need to prioritise and that is our educators. Because if we've got the hundreds of 1000s of people already in work that need upskilling and reskilling, and we anticipate significant changes in the future curriculum to bring a sustainability lens into the breadth of subject specialisms that our sector delivers, then unless we're prioritising kind of CPD for educators, we're going to create a huge bottleneck, where we've got a fit for purpose curriculum, we've got a demand for the skills, but we haven't got anybody able to deliver that training. So I think the CPD piece for educators is absolutely critical.

Shane Chowen 08:10

Absolutely. We've got a question on that coming up. So that's a nice, a nice teaser for a few minutes. A few minutes ahead of us there, Charlotte. Just before we go into some of those more specific elements, I wanted to just get Jeremy's thoughts on Local Schools Improvement Plans, because I get the sense certainly from previous episodes in this podcast series, that local schools improvement plans are doing quite a lot of the heavy lifting at the moment when it comes to informing colleges and on the training sector, what the skills needs of their local areas are, introduced by this government. And by the sounds of things labour aren't going to fiddle about with them and change them around too much. So I'm just interested from your perspective, Jeremy running a, you know, a specialist, land based institution, do you get the sense that Local Schools Improvement Plans are a useful vehicle for the green economy to express its training and education needs?

Jeremy Kerswell 09:01

Yeah, I mean, absolutely. And I've got a lovely example of that impact, actually, on the grounds that we've seen here just in the last few weeks. I think, before I get into that, just to take a step back, Sussex, were one of the trailblazers of the original SDF pilots. And I think that almost felt like it gave us an opportunity to get out there and really understand what employers needed.



Shane Chowen 09:23

SDF is Strategic Development Fund - is that right?

Jeremy Kerswell 09:26

Yes apologies. We do love an acronym don't we? But it was the precursor really of the Local Skills Improvement Plans. And so it enabled us to make a bit of a head start in terms of truly understanding what employers need. Right now, we've got really successful Local Skills Improvement funded projects happening. We've used the intelligence coming from that research with the sector across Sussex to develop some new curriculum, and the take up of that curriculum has taken us all by surprise, because the numbers have been significant. We've had to put on additional courses and I'm talking about in topics, initially one day courses in regenerative agriculture, sustainable woodland management, sustainable horticulture and really important relevant topics for the industry, and evidence if ever that we've got that right, because demand is so high.

Shane Chowen 10:24

Charlotte, is there anything you wanted to add on Local Schools Improvement Plans, has this crossed your radar?

Charlotte Bonner 10:28

I think it's really great to hear the examples that Jeremy has given of how those kind of policy contexts have led to different ways of working within Sussex. And I think there's numerous examples of that from across the country. And what I'm particularly interested in is because the Local Skills Improvement plans and the funding that goes with them are, as the name suggests, local and regional, what are we doing at a national level, to harvest examples of what's working really well, that we can scale up and extrapolate across the country? But also, what lessons have we learned? Because there is a risk of doing a lot of this work regionally? Yes, it's fit for purpose. And yes, you build on, you know, that existing community. But in terms of how we use that structure to help us all go further and faster, I think there's something still to be done there.

Shane Chowen 11:15

So it looks like Local Skills Improvement Plans are here to stay, and we're all generally quite happy with that - wonderful! When we're talking about green industry sectors, like construction, agriculture, energy tend to crop up quite a lot - industry leaders in those



industries do talk and have done for a while about, you know, ageing workforce, retirement booms, and then not being necessarily happy with the number of young people that are coming up to fill the gaps left by older, more experienced workers. Jeremy, coming to you first. And it sounded quite positive that you were getting lots of demand for your, for your courses. Do you sense then a shift perhaps in the narrative in there being more interest from young people entering these really important industries?

Jeremy Kerswell 11:58

Yeah, absolutely. I think we've seen that, again, play out here, over the last four or five years. So despite our 16 to 18 demographic being in decline, we've seen a growth in student numbers of over 30%. And actually, it's in the last couple of years, and our projections have been that in the next few years, that we're seeing the greatest growth in our kind of Level 3 subject areas relating to environment, sustainability, land management, and I think that's capitalising on a real interest and desire from young people who feel obviously very passionately about sustainability and climate change, to want to do something about it, to be you know, the agents of change. And it's not just in terms of environmental sustainability, and land and environmental management, that we're seeing an increase in young people wanting to study these subjects, particularly at Level 3, we're also seeing a real uptake in terms of higher uptake in terms of agriculture and food security. So as of, you know, this coming academic year, we'll have the highest number of students studying agriculture here than ever before. We are a member of Landex, which represents land-based colleges up and down the country. I'm a board member of Landex, and therefore, you know, my general sense is that up and down the country, this picture is being mirrored elsewhere. So I think the technological advances, the higher profile things in the media, do mean that more people are certainly being attracted to study these subjects, which is needed, given the national skills gap that we have.

Shane Chowen 11:59

I think that's really fascinating. What would you offer as advice to other college leaders that aren't running land-based colleges, but who, you know, they do want to get their share of the and capitalise on the on the growing interest of young people wanting to enter these industries. But as Charlotte says, every industry has a, you know, a green and sustainable element to it. So what advice would you offer to those colleges?



Jeremy Kerswell 14:02

I think it's about taking the product to the marketplace, really, you know, our biggest challenge often has been the stigma that's associated with these subjects and the general public, let alone school teachers and head teachers just don't truly understand the fact that these are increasingly skilled sectors that need a higher level of technical skills given you know, the technology, the science, the environmental sustainability aspects. And therefore, you know, as leaders, we have a responsibility to take that new narrative and that new story out into our marketplace and that is schools that's sixth forms and bring it to life and showcase, you know, what the future of these industries that like industries that are, you know, traditional, and therefore, still have, I think, a perception that isn't an accurate reflection of what they'll look like moving forwards,

Shane Chowen 15:00

Charlotte, clearly something is going right here, especially in Sussex, it seems, but what do you think the next government should be doing? So you know, from a strategic perspective in bridging that link between industry colleges, training providers, and the next generation coming up from schools, when it comes to careers information, for example,

Charlotte Bonner 15:22

I think it's warming to see the momentum that's been built over the last four years. But there's still so much that's needed to create a comprehensive system that's kind of that's a well-oiled slick machine in terms of how the supply and demand of skills are well matched, and that education organisations have what they need to really be promoting and driving and embedding sustainability in what they do. And likewise for employers. I think in terms of what governments can do, there's two things here. One is you mentioned specifically the careers point in I think it was 2020, the green jobs task force was set up. And they produced what I believe to be a really stonking report in terms of the recommendations that came out of that to government, to industry and to the skills sector. And I find that I've worked in this sector for nearly 20 years now a huge amount of frustration when, you know, a significant amount of work and expertise goes in of taskforce and reports that come out of it. I don't think there's a shortage of in terms of, do we know what to do to help progress? But do we have the political will to actually crack on and get on with the delivery elements, so I would signpost people straight to the task force's recommendations. But the other is thinking about what are the systems and frameworks that shape what business as usual look like? And is sustainability



comprehensively and consistently, given attention within those. And you know, from an education perspective that looks like the regulatory framework, it looks at the curriculum specifications, it looks like the funding mechanisms, it looks like initial teacher education standards, and what CPD is available to organisations. And there's really, there's so many examples, pockets of really excellent practice. But I think what we need to do now is start looking at how do we build this into those systems and frameworks, so that this isn't something that that colleges and other organisations do, as well as their day jobs, but this this becomes part and parcel of those day jobs?

Shane Chowen 17:16

Who should own that Charlotte? Should this be a Department for Education thing? Or should this be a DEFRA thing, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who should take ownership of all of this?

Charlotte Bonner 17:27

I mean, that's the really challenging thing, particularly with the devolved education system. We did some mapping last year of the of the different influences on the post 16 landscape across the UK and Republican of Ireland. And, of course, in each of the devolved nations, there's a further complexity regulated and pushed by DfE. Some of it is regulated, pushed by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. Some of it is pushed by DEFRA, some of it is pushed by local authorities and devolved governments. And that's one of the reasons that I think we have this kind of pockets of practice rather than a consistent approach. And I don't think, you know, we're not going to centralise the education system anytime soon, in terms of ownership and responsibility for those different elements of it, you know, whether that's quality assurance, or, or content or regulation. So it has to, I think, just be a consistent part of governmental mandate to different devolved bodies, that sustainability is something that through their work, they should be embedding and promoting and driving, so that you get that ripple.

Jeremy Kerswell 18:26

Yeah, I think it's a really good question, Shane. And I think actually, you know, in a post Brexit era, if we just look at food production, you know, this country is crying out and has an amazing opportunity for a national food strategy, which knits together, you know, how can we produce and be more self-sustaining as a country? How can we produce more food, ourselves, therefore, with lower food miles done in a more sustainable way, and then and knit into that health, because as well as sustainability, climate change, and food



security, health is the third massive global challenge that us and future generations are going to face, and so we need that national food strategy. So what an opportunity for DEFRA to get hold of that and then work I think, with the DfE on what should be a National Skills Strategy for the land based sector and picking up an earlier point from Charlotte, you know, it's great that on a local level, some of these things are playing out, but where we've got areas of strategic national important significance or shortage, we do need a National Strategy for Skills, pulling it all together.

Charlotte Bonner 19:40

One of the difficulties is that some of the language that we use, and I'm as guilty of this as the next person, is vague and even alienating in terms of Net Zero, in terms of sustainability in terms of green jobs, whereas food security, energy security, health, they're much more accessible entry points for people to really engage with what we're talking about and what's needed across the country. And we talked a little bit about you know careers and young people going into different sectors earlier on. But if that's really tangible, I work in health, and I'm creating a better society, I work in food, and I'm creating a better society, I work in food, and I'm more tangible for people to see, I can do a job that's good for me and for the planet.

Shane Chowen 20:30

Let's talk about teachers and teaching and the curriculum, because no education system can be better than the quality of its teachers. Jeremy, do your teachers have access to the resources, the industries, the industry placements, and you know, all the things that we talk about when we want teachers in particularly technical and vocational areas to be, you know, at the forefront of the industries that they are actually teaching? How does that work at Plumpton,

Jeremy Kerswell 20:56

You know, FE has you know, faced and is facing a really significant challenge when it comes to recruiting teachers. And I think, if I use again, Sussex as an example, and you know, it's an expensive place to live, and therefore, very rarely do we ever recruit a trained teacher. I think kind of in FE, we probably take that for granted these days, you know, that, that actually, we're capable of training teachers, and therefore, what we're actually looking to recruit is technical experts in their fields. That's a real challenge, when I think, you know, we're not able to pay people enough is the long the short of it shine. And I think, again, that's well documented compared to what they can earn in their



sectors, you know, in technical roles in their sectors, you know, it's a challenge to recruit the best technical staff. I think, once we have those people, and have trained them in the craft of teaching, then, as you say, it's all about ensuring they remain current. And that, again, is a challenge in the fast-paced environment that we're working in. We offer an industry insights programme at Plumpton where we require all of our teaching staff to get out and spend time in industry. And every year where it works, that works really well. But again, you know, ideally, there'd be a level of funding in place, I think, which enables us to pay teachers and keep teachers and the ability to be able to free up a bit more of their time, actually, to spend time in industry and going back to Charlotte's earlier point, you know, ensure they truly are equipped with the most current technical skills and knowledge to be able to train the current and future workforce.

Shane Chowen 22:53

Charlotte, we saw recently, we reported in FE week about a pilot in the West Midlands led by the automotive industry where essentially they're creating what they're calling a Further Education lecturers reservist scheme, where essentially, they could call up as it were lecturers from industry, and then drop them into teaching roles, you know, as and when colleges needed them. I'm quite interested, I thought one that's quite an interesting model. Two, we know that this is a problem that affects lots and lots of the curriculum areas that we deliver in the FE and skills sector. And I'm wondering from, you know, where you sit in all this, talking to colleges, universities, as well as industries, to what extent is getting the next wave of teachers through the door part of those big strategic discussions?

Charlotte Bonner 23:41

Yes, you're right, Shane, there is. This is a widespread challenge. It's not one that's just faced by Plumpton College. There's a retention and recruitment challenge across the country. And that puts a lot of pressure on organisations' ability to develop new practices as well as to deliver the day to day. We will move to a position where there's more diversity in how we teach. But fundamentally, we're always going to need that dual professionalism, right, people that can teach and people that can teach the most up to date, relevant fit for purpose curriculum. And I think that will be done in partnership, partnership between educators, employers, and the example that you've just given is a great one, but also partnership between educators and community, NGOs, civic organisations. I was talking to a lecturer yesterday who'd just come back from a field trip, where they've been out with farmers, they've been out with nature conservation



specialists to look at different land across the country and how it's being used to protect and regenerate nature. So that's a partnership between educators and NGOs and charities as well as employers. But to do that, you need the time and space to engage in it. And it's not necessarily time and space to learn new stuff, but it's time and space to engage with developing those partnerships, and figuring out who's best place to ensure that learners have a really well rounded experience as part of their education, so that time that you need to explore these things, develop those partnerships and, progress that diversity in terms of how you teach, that's what's missing at the moment in terms of the capacity of the sector. So it is definitely a challenge. But what we found running CPD for educators, both at EAUC, and also in partnership with the Education and Training Foundation, it's not technical learning to get educators into the headspace so we can bring sustainability into our teaching and learning practice, it is that space for reflection, that space for a review of the curriculum. Where can I best bring this in? Because learners tell us time and time again, they don't want to come to college to learn about farming and sustainability, or business and sustainability or sport, science and sustainability. They want to know, how does my subject specialism create the problems that we're facing? But how does my subject specialism solve them too? And that requires, again, a different skill set for an educator in terms of helping learners and knowing that, rather than simply saying, right, this is this is the solution. And this is how we're a part of it.

Shane Chowen 26:11

Now looking at the national polls, and the recent local election results, Labour are in a very strong position, it's fair to say, coming up to the General Election. But, they were criticised recently for watering down their 28 billion pounds climate spending pledge. I imagine both of you have in different ways been engaging with opposition MPs in your areas or in the policy world. So I'm just interested in what confidence you're getting, from those discussions on, you know, the likelihood of, you know, good, meaningful change, the sorts of things that we've been talking about in this episode, from the next government, should it be a Labour one? Jeremy, let's come to you first. And then Charlotte, I'll ask you the same question.

Jeremy Kerswell 26:52

Yeah, I think, for me, a massive risk at the moment is in our qualification landscape. And the students studying the right knowledge, developing the right knowledge, skills, and behaviour, is absolutely critical to everything we've talked about, and just for this sector, let alone all others. And so, I think, you know, the notion that if Labour were successful,



they would slow down, pause, and take a bit more time, I think and understanding what that future qualification landscape needs to look like, is really important. I'm, you know, I'm an advocate of T Levels, I do think they've got a role to play. But, at the moment, you know, the very, very, very high proportion of students that leave Plumpton with their existing qualifications are walking into work, and therefore those current qualifications are meeting employers' needs. And I think there's yeah, I'd like to see that change, I think, if there were a change in government and a slightly different, more conservative approach taken to looking at qualifications for starters.

Charlotte Bonner 27:55

Yeah, I think I'll go back to what I said at the beginning. And the ask is that this needs to be consistent. We can't have a sustainability, climate change strategy that sits over there with a different careers advice strategy and a different food security strategy over there. It absolutely needs to be a consistent message that this is important. And so when I look at the things that our policy asks that would be around, building this into, Jeremy mentioned qualifications, let's put a sentence in the Ofqual handbook that says qualifications need to be fit for purpose to achieve our sustainability and climate goals. It's not saying the curriculum needs to change, it's not saying this is what the content should be. It's still allowing awarding organisations to interpret that, but it would create radical change really quickly. So I think that's where our policy asks for the next government, what whatever colour they may be, is about really thinking about how to hardwire this into the education and skills landscape.

Jeremy Kerswell 27:57

Yeah, I think, you know, the reality here is, you know, there is an amazing opportunity for the FE sector to lead the green skills revolution. My ask of government is that they recognise the environmental aspects of green skills as part of the green skills agenda. I'm not sure that recognition always exists. And, therefore, you know, there are the funding mechanisms in place to enable us to meet these needs. And in areas of, you know, global and national significance, there is a nationally strategic approach. Shane, if I may, the final thing for me in terms of asks of government would be to recognise all the great work that happens in FE already. And in doing so, simplify the regulation, simplify the red tape, you know, trust providers. And you know, I mean that in terms of funding and policy and framework and enable us to do what we do well in meeting the needs of our sectors.



Shane Chowen 30:16

Well, unfortunately, that takes us to the end of this episode. We are out of time. I want to say a big thank you to my guests, Charlotte Bonner and Jeremy Kerswell and to thank you for listening. We hope you've enjoyed the conversation and that it's got you thinking about what we need in the FE sector, and what we should be asking of our next government. If you have a question or a comment on what you've heard, please join in the conversation on social media. And remember to subscribe wherever you receive your podcasts to access earlier and forthcoming episodes of Let's Go Further.