

# 20



**Helena Kennedy  
Foundation**

social action | social mobility | social justice

## Learning Worked

Helena Kennedy Foundation Impact Report

## Executive Summary

# OUR 20TH ANNIVERSARY HEADLINE SPONSOR, NCFE

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

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

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

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



**David Grailey**  
Chief Executive  
NCFE

## FOREWORD

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

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

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



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



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

## ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

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It has been over twenty years since Baroness Helena Kennedy QC published her seminal report, *Learning Works*. The report positioned further education not just as a provider of skills for the national economy, but as a force for social cohesion, and inspired Dr Ann Limb to establish the Helena Kennedy Foundation (HKF) in 1998. A key idea was that the charity should be a charity *for* the further education sector, championed and supported financially *by* the sector.

To mark our 20th anniversary, Trustees commissioned research from Edge Hill University and Birmingham City University, funded by the national awarding organisation, NCFE. In *Learning Worked*, Professor Vicky Duckworth and Dr Rob Smith examine the impact HKF has had on individuals, communities and the economy. The research explores the Foundation's unique role in shaping the futures of bursary recipients who find routes into higher education at different stages in life.

Since the Foundation provided its first bursary in 1998, it has provided awards for more than 1500 people from 18 to 67 years of age, providing bursaries, mentoring and support for talented young people and adults who have experienced disadvantage. Data collected through the application process in the last five years of the Foundation's work shows that:

- more than a fifth of award winners have caring responsibilities
- 13% of are asylum seekers or already have refugee status
- a high proportion come from Black African, African Caribbean, Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi and other ethnic backgrounds
- 23.9% identified as having a disability, including mental health issues, autism and recovery from addiction

The research project gives bursary recipients, their teachers, trustees and funding partners an opportunity to tell their stories while strengthening the charity's sense of what works and why. *Learning Worked* is a 'live document', housed on the charity's website and updated throughout our 20th anniversary year and beyond. It provides, and will continue to share, timely evidence of how HKF has played, and continues to play, a vital role in contributing to transforming lives, families and communities, by providing financial bursaries and mentoring and supporting disadvantaged students' trajectories from the further and adult education sectors. The report provides a rich source of evidence to draw upon in campaigning work to influence policy makers, the development of a socially just educational framework, and to help inform and facilitate HKF's empowering, inclusive and transformative vision.

This Executive Summary provides an overview of the key themes identified in *Learning Worked*. For the full report and a range of videos, please visit our website: [www.hkf.org.uk](http://www.hkf.org.uk). Publishing *Learning Worked* on the HKF website allows us to engage with a wider audience of teachers, learners, policy makers and the public — locally, nationally and internationally. It is also a forum in which people can contribute narratives about their own transformative learning experiences.

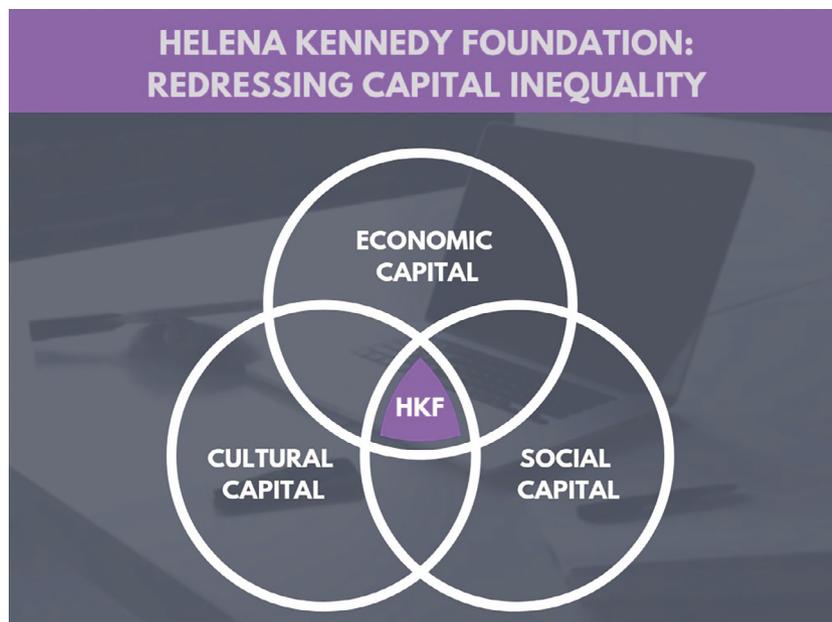
## LEARNING WORKED: WHAT WE'VE DISCOVERED

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The *Learning Worked* study used a mixed methods approach which included gathering the narratives of bursary recipients, teachers, significant figures in the Foundation's history, and others, to explore the impact of the charity on individuals and society more broadly. Historical and current HKF award recipients, teachers and steering group members were surveyed, in-depth research conversations were conducted and reflective written responses were gathered from them to capture data about experiences of higher education and the impact of the award.

HKF award recipients were asked to participate in exploring the key research questions. As part of the project, the researchers accessed the HKF archive and surveyed almost 200 current and historical bursary recipients from the past 20 years. Respondents identified a hugely varied range of subjects (from architecture to podiatry), institutions (from modern post '92 institutions to Oxbridge) and current occupations (from software engineers to filmmakers), indicating that HKF supports both vocational and academically elite pathways.

The *Learning Worked* report identifies clear evidence of HKF's transformative impact. By applying sociological theories of capital, it reveals evidence of creating economic and social mobility through education. HKF has provided social and financial resources – in the form of bursaries, advice and support – that have created economic, social and cultural capital for the students it has supported. The overall impact is to address the capital inequality which exists for these students.

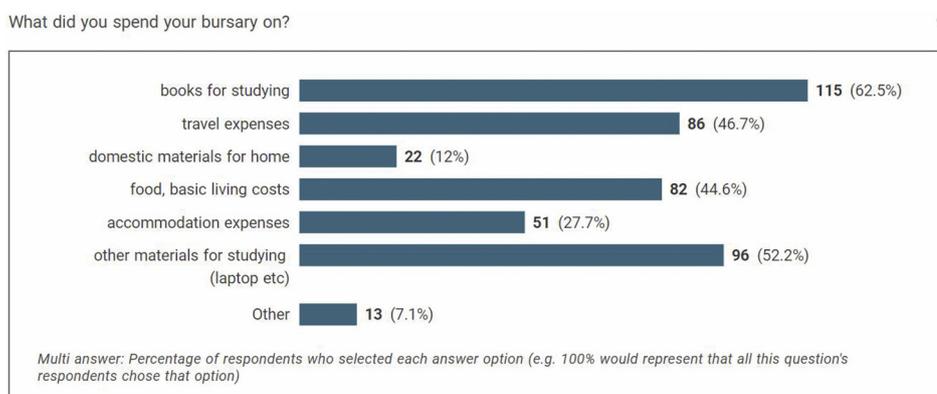


## ECONOMIC CAPITAL

Economic capital takes the form of money, property and other assets owned by a family. Reay, Crozier, & James (2011) argue that access to these capitals is socially structured and patterned, typically to the advantage of white middle-class students.

We know that money continues to be a big issue for students considering progressing to Higher Education. Tuition fees and student loans are a barrier to entering university for those who are debt-averse, and while some FE colleges have established bursaries, others have not. For that reason, learners from less advantaged backgrounds may consider university to be totally out of reach.

HKF does not dictate what bursary recipients use their award for. The results of the *Learning Worked* survey reveal the competing demands in the budgets of HE students:



A surprisingly high percentage used at least some of their bursary to pay for food and meet basic living costs, which shows how fundamental the award was to these individuals. Many mature students, particularly women, have to balance studying with childcare (Bowl 2001, Duckworth 2013) and it was important that they were able to use part of the bursary for this.

A recent report by the Learning and Work Institute, *Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise* (2017) highlights that once people have left school with low qualifications, there is often no clear path to skilled or well-paid jobs. Many adults in employment with qualifications below Level 2 do not receive workplace learning and face barriers in accessing additional learning opportunities. This means people remain in low-paid, low-productivity jobs, on in-work benefits. They are more likely to be unhealthy and less likely to participate in their communities. Education empowers women, in particular, by increasing their chances of getting jobs, staying healthy and participating fully in society. The catalysing power of education flows into an improvement of their children's life chances.

## SOCIAL CAPITAL

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University is seen as part of a natural progression for some middle-class students. However, recipients of HKF bursaries are often the first in their family to consider going to university, and face a variety of significant barriers and difficulties. By connecting students' aspirations and colleges' identified need with encouragement and financial support, HKF breaks the cycle of disadvantaged backgrounds.

HKF gives 'non-traditional' students access to alternative social capital that unlocks the power of networks to support their academic development and success, including mentoring and work-shadowing opportunities. In this way, they can build their confidence and find routes into education and employment that may have seemed closed to them. As one award winner put it: "It was not just gaining financial support but gaining an additional family who are always there to support and encourage me to achieve my best potential. I have attended events where I met with other inspirational winners and trustees who share the same passion of advocating education. Being part of this community gives me the confidence to continue making progress in my personal and professional life."

Opportunities to gain work experience are likely to differ according to family background and socioeconomic status (Milburn, 2012) which is significant when some employers see it as important as qualifications.

The *Learning Worked* survey highlighted mentorship as a key benefit offered by the Foundation after financial support. Respondents said that as well as advice, support and encouragement, it helped demystify routes into professions. Role models also showed the award winners that university could be an option for them. A large number of respondents have since become mentors or expressed their intention to become mentors in the future. Many also recommended the expansion of this aspect of the Foundation's work.



**Anabel Acheampong**  
HKF award winner 2013

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

## CULTURAL CAPITAL

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Cultural capital may be defined as symbolic resources – practice, knowledge and skills – that may be transmitted from generation to generation among the middle and upper classes in order to maintain class status.

According to the Equality Act 2010, Universities have a responsibility to ensure no student is discriminated against based on race, gender or sexual orientation<sup>1</sup>, but it is not illegal to discriminate against someone based on their (perceived) social class. Our evidence illuminates inequality stemming from this characteristic that many learners face throughout their lives and across generations of the same family (Duckworth and Smith, 2018a). Higher education is important for social mobility and universities need to take action and ensure they are providing access for and supporting applicants from the diverse and vast pool of talent that this country has to offer.

Research suggests that if students are going to be successful in HE, they need to develop a sense of entitlement to higher education, rather than viewing it as a privilege (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). The HKF award recognises the range of barriers that learners overcome and in doing so, boosts their mental and emotional self-image and helps them to feel that they had a right to progress to HE. Our research shows that acknowledging learners' resilience gives them a sense of well-being, self-worth and confidence.

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



**Dr Mohamed Abdi**  
HKF award winner 2003

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

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

## CONCLUSIONS

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Graduates are much more likely to be in work, and earn considerably more on average, than non-graduates. In comparison, non-graduates are twice as likely as graduates to be experiencing unemployment 10 years after leaving compulsory education<sup>2</sup>. Higher education brings with it wider social and economic benefits too<sup>3</sup>: better educated citizens contribute higher levels of productivity and enhance social cohesion within their communities.

Behind these statistics are powerful narratives about individuals overcoming challenging circumstances. Many have navigated deeply personal and painful issues, for example, abusive relationships, alcohol dependency and mental health issues. Learners described how uplifting it was to receive the bursary in recognition of the obstacles they had overcome. The learners described how this gave them renewed dignity and self-belief, inspiring them on the next stage of their journey to university with the confidence and self-esteem that are essential to progress. Our research revealed that for adults who have felt marginalised and discarded, this self-belief and the belief of others is vital to their success as learners (Duckworth and Smith 2018b).

Education catalyses every stage of the journey to a better life, especially for the marginalised, the poor and the most vulnerable. HKF's financial, personal and emotional support, enables award recipients to take advantage of the hope and choice offered by higher education, changing their lives and shaping their futures.

Through the stories gathered in *Learning Worked*, we learn about the ways that discrimination advantages certain groups of people over others and the role that social action and education can play in rectifying this. Education enables individuals to escape poverty by helping them develop the skills they need to improve their livelihoods, their families and communities. HKF has supported more than 1500 disadvantaged people in accessing this opportunity.

Many HKF learners regarded their entry into higher education as transformative and recognise the role of HKF in this. The opportunity and the award itself helped them challenge negative labelling and marginalisation, moving their lives forward. A ripple effect has seen the creation of role models who give hope of integration and social mobility in the communities they are from.

HKF is a dynamic resource network that facilitates social equality and social justice wherever it has a presence, addressing local need to strengthen the flow of students that pass through the FE / HE corridor. In two decades, many gains have been made, but there is still an urgent need to break down barriers and promote social justice by widening participation in education. Although the proportion of students from poor backgrounds attending university has increased significantly over time, the chasm in the HE participation rate between richer and poorer students remains glaring (Crawford *et al.*, 2016). We have the power to challenge rather than reproduce this social inequality.

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

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

# CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

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Please visit the HKF digital platform – [www.hkf.org.uk](http://www.hkf.org.uk) to listen to and share the marginalised, often silenced voices that need to be heard. *Learning Worked* will be added to and updated throughout the 20th anniversary and beyond.

HKF is also engaging with social media as a way of connecting the HKF impact project to the further and higher education communities and beyond, so please follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

We are always looking for new ways to work with further education colleges to expand the number of students participating in the scheme. As well as being perfectly positioned to identify individual need, colleges have valuable connect with local employers, facilitating students' transitions into appropriate employment.

To donate to Helena Kennedy Foundation or learn more about our work, please visit: [www.hkf.org.uk](http://www.hkf.org.uk) or contact us at: [admin@hkf.org.uk](mailto:admin@hkf.org.uk).

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Copies of this publication can be obtained from:

**Helena Kennedy Foundation**  
Room 243A, University House,  
University of East London,  
Stratford Campus,  
Water Lane,  
Stratford,  
E15 4LZ

Tel: +44 (0) 208 223 2027

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