
FE: its past, present and possible future

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Since the 1991 White Paper which proposed that FE colleges be incorporated (ie taken out of local authority control), around 40 government reports, White Papers, Green Papers and the like about FE, HE, Adult Education and training have been produced. Most of these have done little or nothing to move FE off the dysfunctional path that it has gone down since incorporation.

The January 2021 White Paper, titled Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth, contains one substantive commitment, the 'Lifelong Learning Entitlement' to 'the equivalent of four years post-18 education' to be introduced for everyone from 2025. Other than this, however, it looks like part of a drive by Conservative strategists to win support in

constituencies where the offshoring of industrial production has undermined the Labour Party's base. But there is little reason to think it will do anything for working people in those constituencies.

The White Paper proposes a re-technicisation of FE which would require - and then itself reinforce - an overall re-industrialisation of the UK economy. Unless such a reindustrialisation is part of a from-below green re-organisation of the global socio-economic order, it can only happen if big sections of the UK workforce are immiserated to a point where they will accept pay and conditions competitive with those of workers in countries to which production has been offshored. With such immiseration, the free ports which the Government is introducing could conceivably become

manufacturing sites, in turn generating a demand for workers able to install and maintain machines there, and for retechnicalised FE to train them.

However, if something like this happens at all, it's likely to be much more limited than the White Paper implies. Capital has its own reasons to hold the wages and living standards of UK-domiciled workers above those of, say, garment workers in Dakkar. Moreover, at present virtually every Russell Group university has some combination of engineering faculties, departments or schools. In this situation, any extension of technical education to less well-off young people is likely to be at level 4 and above.

A valid FE system is socially necessary for the life chances of working-class people. So whatever results from the White Paper, we need urgently to put forward - and organise in support of - a model of what FE should become. Such a model would differ sharply both from what the White Paper proposes and from the current situation. How has this situation arisen?

The incorporation of FE colleges was part of the Major government's response to the defeat of the poll tax - that is, a device for shifting the cost of FE out of local government expenditure. Nevertheless, a section of aspiring college managers, especially those from non-technical backgrounds, had been pushing for such a change. They saw that the offshoring of industrial jobs combined with technological change meant that most colleges would soon cease to be centred on part time technical and commercial courses for employed young people. They saw also that this would lead to the retirement of old-style, technical background principals and heads of department, and thereby offer themselves a chance to step into these positions.

Quite a few of those who now became principals saw incorporation, implemented from April 1993, as an opportunity to enrich themselves. Meanwhile at least 18,000 ordinary FE lecturers were made redundant. The College Employers Forum (CEF) set out to impose new contracts for the lecturers that remained, involving a much longer college year, week and class contact time, and an overall destruction of pay and conditions. Incorporation also led to a massive bureaucratisation of colleges, and a lot of high profile corruption cases, mostly involving principals' franchising scams. Although such scandals still occur, incorporation has opened colleges up to creeping privatisation, especially via property strategies, but also via outsourcing - to IT contractors, private training providers, staffing agencies, legal advisers, coffee shop and canteen caterers, cleaning contractors, security companies, advertising agents and the like, to a point where what would formerly have been viewed as corruption has become standard senior management practice.

Although many of those leading our then union,

NATFHE, acquiesced in incorporation, it was followed by more than two years of grassroots resistance to its effects by branch activists and ordinary members. Before he too resigned in a corruption scandal, CEF chief officer, Roger Ward set up an agency - Education Lecturing Services (ELS) - to recruit casual staff as strikebreakers. Incorporation also started a long process by which lecturers have been steadily deprofessionalised. Nevertheless incorporation itself was not the root cause of the decay that has beset FE to this day.

Between the mid 1960s and the 1980s, what happened in FE colleges was shaped primarily by the levy/grant system and the associated industrial training boards that were introduced following the 1964 Industrial Training Act. This in turn originated largely from a desire of large engineering employers to shift training costs to public funds. In other words, the technical education arrangements that the Tories destroyed in the 1980s had themselves been set up on a half-hearted basis.

Despite this, between the mid 1960s and the late 1970s large numbers of young people participated in day- or block-release FE. Lecturers' pay and conditions were relatively good, because colleges needed to attract technically qualified and experienced people out of unionised industry into lecturing jobs. But the relations between apprenticeships, training and technical education were never put on a fully coherent basis. On top of this, the relation between general education and the technical or vocational content of courses was never properly thought through at a policy level. For example, the General (formerly Liberal) Studies element that vocational awarding bodies required colleges to provide to students on their courses was itself also a half-hearted measure.

These arrangements fell victim to the post-1979 Thatcherite de-industrialisation of the UK and the associated assault on unions, one consequence of which was that young people were driven out of unionised employment, and most of the time-served apprenticeships that underpinned technical education in colleges were abolished.

However, the Tories' default approach to FE, along with the Labour Right's compliance with this approach, has shaped the deep structure of publicly provided education from much further back.

The 1870 Education Act required directly elected school boards to be setup to provide elementary schooling for working-class children. In the years that followed several of the larger school boards, especially in London and in industrial cities in the Midlands and North allowed schools to provide more advanced teaching, including in science subjects, to older children and young people who wanted to progress to this, thus bringing into being a sort of precursor to what would now be called FE. In the 1890s, partly

because the Anglican and Catholic churches saw this as a threat to their schools, and partly because socialists were exercising a significant influence within school boards, Tory politicians set about using this development as an excuse to attack school boards more generally. This initiative was supported both by the Fabian 'socialist' Sidney Webb, whose worship of national efficiency remain central to Labour Party education thinking to this day, and the top civil servant at the Board of Education, Robert Morant, whose approach to publicly provided schooling was heavily influenced by Christian Socialist ideas, according to which the medieval Christian church had made it possible for people from humble backgrounds to rise to positions of authority within it. These two arranged for a legal decision, the Cockerton judgement (1899) which pronounced it illegal for school boards to provide education beyond the elementary. They then combined further to shape the Bill that, when the Tories returned to power in 1900, became the 1902 Education Act. This replaced directly elected school boards by local education authorities which in turn restricted working-class children's access to education beyond the elementary to a very small number picked out and whose parents could pay the fees then charged for attendance at grammar schools. This system was imposed despite widespread, militant opposition on the part of the trade union and socialist movements.

At that point there was a powerful collective commitment amongst union activists, union leaders and socialists to a democratic model of publicly-provided education, including in the post-compulsory sphere. The final factor behind the situation we face now in FE is that this collective commitment is, at least for the moment, not available.

Colleges today are characterised by high levels of management bullying, a massive administrative workload on lecturers, and a fear on the part of all employees that they will lose their jobs in the frequent re-organisations and mergers. About half the colleges have been merged or closed altogether. In terms of curricula, de-industrialisation and incorporation have brought about a situation where most vocational courses for 16-19 year-olds are nominally full-time, and conducted mainly at levels 2 and 3, in areas like IT, business studies, health and social care, travel and tourism, performing arts, sports studies, hotel and catering, uniformed services and art and design, along with some more traditional areas like building crafts and mechanical services. Some colleges also provide a limited amount of higher level work in a few of these areas, usually linked to - or franchised from - nearby post-1993 universities. Some also provide ESOL teaching, geared mainly to adult students, and a few access-type courses. The education policies of successive governments have come close to abolishing the second chance 'academic' subject route

that grew up in colleges in the 1970s alongside technical education.

The White Paper proposals will do little or nothing to improve this situation in the vast majority of the remaining colleges.

In the longer term, the way forward would be for a Labour government to replace the present set-up by a unified national further education service. This would provide for 16-19 year olds and adults as now and it would guarantee to do this in every major population centre. It would be composed of sub-regional consortia of colleges. Each consortium would have a board of governors elected directly by the public in that sub-region, with the franchise extended to 16 year-olds. They would be responsible to that electorate for the running of the service in the area covered by the consortium. The senior management of each institution composing such a consortium would be appointed, and could be dismissed, by these governors. In place of Ofsted as now, there would be a publicly-funded national further education inspectorate, accountable through parliament to the national electorate for the overall running of the FE service.

Alongside full and part time vocational courses and A-levels, such a national service would ensure that every constituent college provides teaching and learning in socially necessary fields such as ESOL, adult basic education, and through-routes to more advanced work for students who start at Level 1 or below.

Where valid FE provision exists today, it does so because practitioners, working constantly against the grain of a dysfunctional system, sustain it. We must defend and extend all such provision, but should at the same time press for two main curricular changes.

First, without trying to compete with school sixth forms or sixth form colleges to the disadvantage of those institutions' grassroots staff, every FE college needs to move towards providing an alternative route to A-levels for both 16-19 year olds and adults. A consortium structure of the kind described above would allow the numbers wanting to do A-levels in FE in each sub-region to be high enough to permit a wider range of subjects than a single college could provide.

A-levels geared to FE students rather than sixth formers would be characterised by modularisation, credit accumulation, verified coursework assessment, criterion-referenced assessment, and the active participation - via mode 3-style consortia or similar - of teachers in developing assessment criteria, and thence subject content. Such a structure would open up an enlarged possibility for people on vocational courses to combine this with some A-level study. In the longer term it would give a wider range of people access to scientific, technological, engineering and mathematical knowledge. We must demand that awarding bodies make it available.

Secondly, colleges need to move towards an enhanced model of vocational courses - that is, a model in which technical knowledge and valid general education are integrated with one another.

This would require sustained cooperation in each college between a re-formed group of general education practitioners and vocational staff in each employment field. The experience of General Studies with part-time technical students from the 60s to the 80s and of Core and Key Skills with full-time vocational students since, shows that integration between these two spheres is necessary to the validity of both, and that without such cooperation integration cannot take place. Every full-time vocational programme should contain a mandatory project-centred unit through which students can develop enlarged and enhanced capacities in areas like reasoning, research, action-planning, problem-posing, problem-solving, presentation, reading, writing, discussion, analysis, and working democratically with others. This in turn would require general education staff who understand how to organise such project work, vocational course tutors who are given enough time to work with them, and the cooperation of awarding bodies.

The above curricular proposals depend on basic grade lecturers taking back control over the point of

production - that is, the day-to-day conduct of teaching and learning, assessment and curricular guidance to students. They can do this only by collective self-organisation within colleges and nationally. (This self-organisation must obviously be conducted in such a way as so far as possible to protect those involved from victimisation.) In the process they will begin to take away managers' power to use the threat of Ofsted - and via this of internal lesson observations, mock inspections and the like - as a means to enforce pedagogic compliance. Such self-organisation must involve staff with responsibility for in-service training and continuing professional development, as well as frontline practitioners. In the end, only practitioners can validly theorise, and until they start to do so, bogus ideas posing as theory will continue to be imposed on them from above.

Practitioners who get involved in such a movement would also strengthen UCU branch activity, because members would become better able both to assert themselves against management bullying, and to form links with grassroots activists in other unions, in constituency Labour Parties and in community, equality and climate campaigns.
