

Adults in Further Education: A Policy Overview

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Summary

Policy on FE is aimed at tackling social exclusion and contributing to economic efficiency. Several measures have contributed to increasing both participation and achievements of adults yet the needs of many of the most disadvantaged adults remain unmet.

Since further education colleges are key institutions in the delivery of initiatives such as Skills for Life and Train to Gain, the impact of these initiatives has a major impact on the services they provide for adults. FE colleges are concerned about the impact of the contestability agenda on this provision. Many FE colleges are also concerned about the effects of reductions in funding for provision that is not clearly employment related, and also the restrictions on funding for ESOL.

The main challenge faced by FE colleges is getting the balance between individual, State and employer funding for courses. This is a difficult message to get over to those who can afford to pay but who have benefited from free or heavily subsidised provision. The state has a responsibility to ensure that those who can least afford to pay have their education funded. It also has a responsibility to ensure that institutions with wider social remits can compete fairly with those with commercial agenda who can 'cherry pick' low-cost, high return activities.

Introduction

Several years ago I observed a new teacher in a further education college working with a group of women on an access to higher education course. The women appeared to range in age from late twenties to mid-forties and were from a socially and economically deprived area in Glasgow. They were studying psychology. The debate in the class was lively and constructive. The women easily related the psychological concepts to their own life experiences. During the break I chatted with the women and they told me of the places they had been offered at universities provided they completed the access course.

On another occasion one of my students did his BA thesis on the experiences of a group of asylum seekers undertaking a course in motor vehicle repair and maintenance at another Glasgow FE college. The accounts were fascinating as the FE students compared and contrasted their experiences of education and work in countries as diverse as Somalia and Bosnia.

The third example I provide is of interviewing a group of women in a small business in the North East of England. They had recently finished undertaking basic skills courses in literacy and numeracy in their own workplace but tutored by staff from a local FE college.

The above examples illustrate just a small part of the wide range of activities undertaken in and by the sector described by Sir Andrew Foster in his review of FE in

England as ‘the middle child [of the education system] with huge potential that everyone has overlooked’ (Foster, 2005: 58).

What is FE?

This question does not have an easy, direct answer. Further education is defined by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) as comprising qualifications up to A-Level or NVQ Level 3 and higher education comprising degrees, postgraduate qualifications and Higher National Diplomas (LSC 2007). However, while FE colleges in England receive most of their funds from the LSC that, in 2006/07 spent £5.4Bn of its £10.7Bn budget on FE (LSC 2007), 143 English FE colleges also received direct funding for their higher education provision from the Higher Education Funding Council for England and 144 colleges received funds for HE provision from higher education institutions (HEFCE 2007). In 2005/06 the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council (SFC) provided grants to Scottish FE colleges of £526M. This was to cover both their FE and HE provision (SFC 2006). In other words FE colleges provide higher education as well as further education.

In addition to the provision delivered in their own premises, FE colleges service education and training activities in the community, in workplaces and in prisons. This can include adult basic skills, specific vocational skills, and personal and community learning. Further education colleges are thus part of the wider learning and skills sector (LSS) that includes all post-school education and training that is not delivered in institutions of higher education. The waters become further muddied here because official policy documents recently have begun to describe this wider sector as the further education sector. Although further education colleges are a major player in this sector, it also includes independent training providers, local authority adult and community learning provision, and education and training delivered by voluntary organisations. For the purposes of this paper, I will try to use FE as the activities of FE colleges but recognise that policy and practice will often mean that wider issues are discussed.

There are around 400 FE colleges in England, around 40 in Scotland, around 25 in Wales, and 6 area-based colleges in Northern Ireland (down from 16 as of 1st August 2007). Approximate figures are given in the previous sentence because mergers between institutions are very much part of the current scene. Colleges cater for around 3.8M adult learners in England, around 351,000 total learners in Scotland, 225,000 total learners in Northern Ireland and 285,000 total learners in Wales (directly comparable figures are not easy to find).

Aims and Purposes of FE

Hillier (2006) identifies the two major aims of FE policy in England as ‘creating an inclusive society which is also economically successful.’ Other commentators would probably dispute the order in which Hillier lists these aims. Hodgson *et al* (2007) identify two drivers from their survey policy documents. These were skills and social justice, but they argue that a close study of the documents indicates that social justice is to be achieved through, and is subordinate to, skills development. These two aims were clearly identified in a statement made by David Blunkett when he was Secretary of State for Education:

...skills and learning must become the key determinant of the economic prosperity and social cohesion of our country. Knowledge and skills are now the key drivers of innovation and change. Economic performance depends increasingly on talent and creativity. And in this new economy, it is education and skills which shape the opportunities and rewards available to individuals. (DfEE 2000: 3)

The assumption of a direct and simple link between skills and economic performance is challenged by Finlay *et al* (2007a) who argue that although for individuals, increasing their qualifications will generally place them in a more advantageous position in the labour market, it does not follow that a general increase in skills levels will improve a nation's economic position. The improved economic positions of China and India are not led by them having higher percentages of their workforces with the equivalent of Level 2 or 3 qualifications but by their much lower labour costs. Increased workforce skills will not lead to higher levels of economic productivity if there is insufficient investment in capital equipment to take full advantage of these skills. Economic performance can also be hampered by exchange rates, interest rates, and savings rates, none of which are causally dependant on skills (Wolf 2002). None of these arguments justifies not developing skills but they do suggest caution in expecting immediate national economic benefits and possibly in privileging skills and economic development over social justice in education policy.

Even if one accepts economic prosperity as the main route to social inclusion worthy of government support, it does not necessarily follow that the best way of achieving economic prosperity is by supporting educational activities that directly develop skills that appear to be most closely related to workplaces. Individuals have weird and wonderful routes through education and employment and only *ex post* do they often make sense. Attempting to steer work outcomes through *ex ante* manipulation of course choices seems fraught with difficulties. One can accept the government rationale that social inclusion can be achieved through following an educational trajectory that leads to employment and increased income, without buying into the notion that educational trajectories that are more obviously 'vocational' such as basic skills or motor vehicle mechanics are superior in leading to employment than classical philosophy or creative writing. It is stating the obvious to point out that studying classical philosophy, creative writing or flower arranging can be motivational vehicles for the development of a range of skills that have employability utility.

When government ministers write or speak of social justice what do they mean? In 2006, Tony Blair, as Labour Prime Minister, wrote the following:

Tackling social exclusion is at the heart of this government's mission. It is our fundamental belief that everyone should have the opportunity to achieve their potential in life. (Cabinet Office 2006: Prime Minister's Preface)

The prominent political philosopher, John Rawls, linked terms such as justice and inclusion with others such as fairness and equality (Rawls 2001 and 2005). He considered justice to be an issue of fair distribution of benefits among the population. He argued that a just distribution is an equal distribution. Fairness is taken up by the British Equalities Review as a central concept in their definition of equality (2007:19):

An equal society protects and promotes equal, real freedom and substantive opportunity to live in the ways people value and would choose, so that everyone can flourish...An equal society recognises people's different needs, situations and goals and removes the barriers that limit what people can do and can be.

Several commentators (e.g. Hill 1999; Hodgson & Spours 1999; and Prideaux, 2005) have argued that New Labour abandoned measures such as progressive taxation and social benefits systems that promote the equality of resource distribution. In their place they have introduced policies designed to improve individuals' opportunities. Thus equality of opportunities has replaced equalities of resources as a key policy objective. There is a key flaw in this position. In the kind of market- or demand-led system that is being promoted by the government, opportunities are accessed through resources. Therefore without some greater equalization of resource distribution, greater equality of opportunity is unlikely to be realized.

In his first remit letter to the LSC, Blunkett (DfEE 2000) identified a third aim or purpose for learning. He wrote that:

[Learning] strengthens families, builds stronger neighbourhoods, helps older people stay health and active, and encourages independence for all by opening up new opportunities – including the chance to explore art, music and literature. And what was available to the few can, in the new millennium, be enjoyed and taken advantage of by the many. (para. 5)

Learning, or education, then can open up possibilities for both personal and community fulfillment. Supporting people to explore music, art and literature is not supporting either an economic or a social objective. It can be intensely personal. This purpose is glossed over both in policy documents and by the commentators cited above.

The analysis so far has drawn on statements and documents that relate to the system in England. The commentary in this section equally applies in Scotland. For example, 'the vision' presented in *A Smart, Successful Scotland* (Scottish Executive 2001: 7) under the heading 'Learning and skills' is 'Every Scot ready for tomorrow's jobs'. A later document (Scottish Executive 2003: 7) provides two reasons for investing in lifelong learning:

- Investment in knowledge and skills brings direct economic returns to individuals and collective economic returns to society.
- Lifelong learning contributes to the development of society through the achievement of other social goals such as civic participation, sustainable development, improved health and wellbeing, reduced crime and greater social cohesion.

These are entirely consistent with policy objectives in England. Jane Davidson, Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning in the Welsh Assembly wrote:

We share key strategic goals with our colleagues in England – but we often need to take a different route to achieve them. (Welsh Assembly Government 2001:2)

Davidson identifies here the crux of the differences between the jurisdictions in the UK – the aims are similar but the means are different. The key goal for further education in Wales is cited as:

To give everyone over 16 access to flexible learning opportunities which will enable them to participate fully in the economy and their communities. (ELWa 2007)

In the next section the various policy means used to achieve educational purpose in FE will be explored.

Policies relating to FE

The administration of the four countries of the UK use a variety of policy instruments to provide a framework for the delivery of further education and to effect changes in the sector. These policies will be addressed under three main headings although it will be readily observed in the discussion that there is a great deal of overlap between these categories. The headings are:

- Organisational and structural framework;
- Funding, initiatives and targets;
- Qualifications.

Organisational and Structural Framework

Steer *et al* (2007) identify three phases of development of the learning and skills sector in England from the 1990s to the present. The **first phase** was the period of the FEFC and the TECs and ran through the 1990s to 2001. This phase was characterised by the ‘New Public Management’ model of governance that aimed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public services through ‘semi-private delivery arrangements and the promotion of an education and training market’ (Steer *et al* 2007: 179). Markets, formula-led funding and competition between providers were key elements of policy during this period. The **second phase** started with the establishment of the LSC in 2001 and lasted until the change of Chief Executive in 2003. Steer *et al* call this the ‘Early LSC’ phase. It involved greater involvement of planning. This was the period of the strategic area reviews led by the LSC. Targets, inspection, and the development of a range of initiatives (e.g. Skills for Life and the Employer Training Pilots) were central features of this phase. The **third phase** is titled by Steer *et al* the ‘LSC Business Model’ and it started in 2004 and, with modifications identified below, is still the dominant model. It is characterised by increased use of market mechanisms (choice, competition and contestability) and the centrality of targets and funding.

This third phase has been further developed by the public sector reform model developed by the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit in 2006. This model sees the development of better public services arising from four forces – top down performance management; market incentives to increase efficiency and quality of service; users shaping the service from below; and the development of capability and capacity of the workforce (Strategy Unit, 2006). Steer *et al* identify the strength of the model lying ‘in the way in which it assembles a coherent discourse around funding priorities, inspection, institutional flexibility and self-improvement’ (Steer *et al* 186-7). However they point out that it is a centrally driven market model. It is not just demand-led but led by demands that fit with the government’s priorities. Current

policy has left 'large swathes of adult provision in a precarious funding position' (ibid 187) because this provision did not fit with government priorities.

A key issue with respect to England is that over a ten year period there have been three major macro-organisational frameworks within which FE colleges have been operating. The move has been from competition to planning and then on to another competitive model. This lack of stability has not been as prominent a feature in either Scotland or Wales.

Further education Scotland was subject to 'significant inter-college competition and rivalry' (Thomson 2003:50) from 1993 to 1997 at the tail end of the long period of Conservative government in Britain. However the election of the Labour government in the UK in 1997 and then the establishment of the Scottish Parliament with two Labour/Liberal Democrat coalitions from 1999 – 2007 led to a period of stability that did not mirror the constant change experienced in England. There were changes in the central funding bodies for FE so that from 1993 to 1999, colleges received their grant in aid from a funding unit within the Scottish Office Education Department. On 1 January 1999 a Scottish Further Education Funding Council was established that on 3 October 2005 merged with the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council to form the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council (SFC).

Although designated a 'funding' council, SFC's remit includes 'developing and implementing policies...in respect of further education'; 'developing strategies for improving knowledge and skills' and 'holding colleges responsible for the quantity, quality and relevance of their provision' (SFC 2007). It has proven much easier for the SFC to combine funding, strategic and quality assurance roles than it was for the LSC. The scale of the Scottish system probably helps it to do this.

Coordination of further education in Wales is also facilitated by size. For a time, the organizational context in Wales mirrored that in England. In 2000 a funding and strategy body called ELWa was established with similar responsibilities to LSC in England. The mirror of the LSDA in England was Dysg. Both of Dysg and ELWa have been subsumed into the Department for Children, Education and Lifelong Learning of the Welsh Assembly Government.

Funding, Initiatives and Targets

A number of commentators (e.g. Simkins 2004: Ramsden *et al* 2004) identified a tension in New Labour policy relating to further education between devolution of responsibility and funding and the maintenance of central control and steering. The suggestion made is that greater national coherence has been achieved only with the loss of local discretion. As pointed out above, even the new moves towards a demand-led system envisage demand within parameters set nationally rather than a system which allows services users (individuals and employers) to demand what they see as priorities. Funding has generally been linked to targets and delivered through initiatives. These initiatives have included *Skills for Life*, *Educational Maintenance Allowances* (for younger learners), the development of *Union Learning Representatives* through the *Union Learning Fund*, and the *Employer Training Pilots* now rolled out nationally as *Train to Gain*. Each of these initiatives can be seen as contributing both to the social inclusion and economic efficiency aims of educational policy.

Overall funding delivered through the LSC doubled between 2001/02 and 2007/08 from £5.5Bn to £11.4Bn although part of the increase was accounted for by the LSC becoming responsible for funding additional activities such as sixth form provision in schools. Between 1997 and 2006 investment in FE increased by 48 per cent. However over the same period, funding for schools increased by 65 per cent (Coffield 2007), highlighting an inequity in the system.

There are further inequities. Skills for Life and Train to Gain offer free education or training up to Level 2 for those who lack qualifications at this level. The Leitch report (Leitch 2006) predicted that if the UK were to keep abreast of its competitors, then Level 3 should be the baseline qualification. Young people at school or college have free, funded education up to Level 3 (A Levels). In June 2007 it was decided that people up to age 25 would have free education for their first Level 3 qualification. This still leaves adults aged 26 and over at a disadvantage.

A major concern of FE colleges concerns the contestability agenda through which they envisage a significant part of the adult education budget being administered. They see this as potentially being highly destabilizing. They also consider that many of the most disadvantaged adults will not receive education or training through this route since they are not in employment and are often well below the target qualification thresholds of Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3. They see the cuts in funding as having a potential impact on the achievement of Skills for Life and other employability targets since many colleges used non-vocational courses as vehicles for delivering basic skills and as gateway courses to vocationally orientated provision. Directly vocational courses are not the only means of achieving employability outcomes.

Qualifications

Much of the attention given to qualifications in England in recent years has focused on qualifications aimed at 14-19 year-olds and the attempts to create a unified framework such as that existing in Scotland with the Higher Still system. The Scottish experience illustrated that creating such a system does not necessarily impact on qualifications for adults in FE (Raffe *et al* 2007). What has had a much greater impact on the opportunities for adults in Scotland is the development of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), a major aim of which was to facilitate progression into FE from school and community education and out of FE into higher education institutions.

A significant portion of Scottish higher education is provided in further education colleges. In 1999, 34% of Scottish undergraduates were undertaking courses in FE colleges compared with 12% in England (Paterson 2003: 24). Lowe and Gayle report that 52,000 full and part time students are engaged in higher education courses and they describe these students in the following terms:

Compared with university based higher education students, higher education students in further education colleges are more likely to be older, have non-traditional entry qualifications, study part-time, be enrolled in HNC or HND courses...and come from less advantaged backgrounds. (Lowe & Gayle 2007: 226)

Field (2004) also discusses the high numbers of higher education students in Scotland that are located in FE colleges. He agrees with other commentators who give this as a

major reason for the higher participation rates in HE in Scotland than other parts of the UK and than in many countries in Europe. However, Field argues that this ‘makes only a limited contribution to social mobility for students from less advantaged backgrounds’ because:

- ‘those who enter higher education in further education colleges are disproportionately likely to leave without a qualification’;
- ‘few who achieve an HE qualification in further education...progress to degree level study’;
- ‘those who do progress to a degree course mainly enter low-status institutions’ (Field 2004: 85).

Wales and Northern Ireland both have qualifications frameworks developed but progress in England towards the development of such a framework has been slow. Despite the failure of the Scottish framework to make a major impact on social mobility, there is no doubt that it has led to greater participation of adults in both FE and HE.

A positive feature of policy in England has been the promotion of the national qualifications in both literacy and numeracy. These qualifications have been criticized by educational professionals, for example by not including writing in the literacy tests (Edward *et al* 2007). However, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) reported that:

..since the launch of the strategy in 2001, 4.7 million adults have taken up 10.5 million *Skills for Life* learning opportunities with 1,619,000 learners achieving their first *Skills for Life* qualification in literacy, language or numeracy. This figure includes achievements by over 138,000 offenders.’ (DfES 2007).

The research project reported by Edward *et al* found examples of tutors who reported learners delight at receiving their first ever certificating recognising educational achievement. They also reported concerns about those who were below Levels 1 and 2 recognised for the national tests, i.e. those at Entry Levels. Concerns were expressed that with the focus on Levels 1 and 2 (and now Level 3), these most disadvantaged learners may be left not catered for. The development of the Foundation Learning tier is being designed to address the needs of this group.

Impact of Policy and Issues

FE colleges have seen significant increases in their number of adult students over the past ten years (NIACE 2005). However, there is no evidence that learners from the poorest socio-economic groups or those with the lowest levels of skills or qualifications have been part of this increase. Both quantitative and qualitative studies indicate that a significant part of the increase is from women who were successful at school but prevented from continuing in education for social and family reasons (NIACE 2005: Thompson 2002). Paradoxically, it is that part of FE provision that has had the greatest impact on engaging learners in the disadvantaged communities through supported leisure learning that is under the greatest threat from the changes in funding. One of the main continuing sources of funding for this provision is through short-term initiative funding which was likened by Finlay *et al*

(2007b) as *Flowers in the desert*, that is, provision that grows and flourishes with the irrigation of funding but withers and dies when the funding dries up.

The great challenge for FE colleges and those who fund them is to find ways of engaging the learners who have been most resistant to previous attempts to get their attention.

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