

***The Coming of Age for FE? Reflections on the past and future role of further education colleges in England*, edited by Ann Hodgson**

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The Coming of Age for FE is a critical celebration of further education that opens by introducing the reader to the sector: an introduction to a sector that has existed as part of the post-compulsory educational landscape for at least 21 years – hence the title *Coming of Age* – and prior to its current incorporated form had existed – as regional centres for vocational education – since the 1900s. What further education is, in all its dynamism and complexity, ought – after 21 years – to be obvious. But the introduction is a necessary one, not only for those who although familiar with schools and universities have managed to miss out the sector in-between, but also for those who, having spent an entire working career in FE, welcome a detailed account of why things in FE are the way they are. This question – how and why has FE assumed the shape it has – is answered in meticulous detail over the book's ten chapters. Everything is covered, every perspective from student to politician, from workforce to governance. Power, leadership, and the future are also discussed. The book raises key questions and offers creative suggestions for the future role of FE.

FE has survived through its remarkable capacity to adapt. In recounting the sector's contemporary history, Hodgson, Bailey, and Lucas (Chapter 1) identify six distinct phases between 1993 and 2015. Five years is a long time in FE. This is the length of the longest phase the writers identify during its turbulent history. This would suggest that the post-2010 phase of 'austerity and deregulation' is already due for change. And, as Area Reviews take hold, the phase dated from 2016 onwards might be better understood as the phase of 'the lean, efficient, mega-colleges'. In this phase, FE colleges are mega-conglomerates, branded as local but operational on an international and national scale within a cross-phase group structure. They extend beyond the scale of local educational authorities, unencumbered by democratic accountability. Given the nugatory funding they receive from government, they barely qualify as public institutions. Like the police, the Health Service, schools, and universities, they are private, profit-making, tax-payer-subsidized institutions. It is quite possible that this is a final phase, before – in the absence of Vince Cable's ministerial defence – the sector changes beyond all recognition.

There is no such thing as FE in any abiding sense. What governments want, who students are, and the way colleges are resourced mean that these institutions are constantly changing. As a sector, we have simply not developed a strong sense of identity in our own and the public's imagination – unlike schools and universities. Complex, amorphous, adaptable – FE is the middle child who, unlike her younger and older siblings, is yet to achieve a sense of responsibility.

In bringing together leading FE researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, *The Coming of Age for FE* provides an expert's guide to the sector. The book places FE in its UK context, focusing on the shifts, twists, and turns since incorporation. The role of markets in addressing skill shortages is explained in the overall context of policy imperatives – identified as the central tensions that colleges need to resolve. How the sector responds to these challenges – indeed, the capacity of the sector to respond as a sector – has continued implications for its overall cohesive identity. Given that different colleges respond in distinct ways, the sector fragments even further. When asked 'What is FE?' one institution might well answer, 'An FE college works primarily with adults to develop their vocational skills'. When asked the same question, another might say, 'The FE sector focuses on preparing 14–19 year olds for the workplace'. This may sound like a lament, but the desire for consistency of purpose holds only if one is prepared to view colleges as if they were machines. Perhaps an unintended and unanticipated consequence of austerity, with its shift in how colleges are funded from government to local employers, is the de-McDonaldization of the sector.

This inconsistency across the sector might well be manageable for teachers and managers – but it is good that inspectors wanting to gain some understanding of FE are part of the text's invited readership. One size does not fit all. The text points to another, perhaps even more enduring, phase of local responsiveness (Perry and Davies, Chapter 3). FE has a heartfelt but overused ethical mantra. The cliché is uttered with remarkable ease across the sector: whatever happens, we 'Do the Right Thing for our students.' Perry and Davis's critical interrogation of what *actually* happened to students after incorporation is telling. In 1996 (four years after incorporation), there were more than 3,214,000 students in FE colleges and external institutions (55). In 2011, after years of widening participation, lottery-funded community projects, the learning society, national campaigns, and skills for life gremlins, it is deeply surprising to note that there were only 2,400,000. It is unlikely that the decline in student numbers halted in 2012.

If the ethical stance most closely associated with FE is taken at face value – what matters are students – this chapter ought to be read as an indictment – not of colleges, but of incorporation. It is hard to judge whether incorporation has been successful or not. What is apparent is that incorporation accentuated FE's position within a quasi-market but impoverished its other drivers: pedagogy and professional purpose. The introduction of concepts such as quality and success allowed governments to determine students, qualifications, and delivery, while bypassing democratic accountability.

Given that 1992 was some 25 years ago, it is probable that there are few staff working in the sector who actually remember the upheaval caused by incorporation. Fletcher, Lucas, Crowther, and Taubman (Chapter 5) note changes in the employment status of FE staff as one of the most significant impacts of 1992. In this respect there are only two phases for FE – before and after. Before 1992, the FE workforce had collective bargaining on pay and conditions of service. What the sector has now, after 1992, are zero-hour contracts, increasingly intensified workloads, and Stepford-style lecturers. Changes in the size and shape of the FE workforce followed, but were not directly caused by, incorporation. If FE is marked by its association with training hairdressers, who do not, after all, need a 'proper education' (xv), a policy that allows anyone with or without qualifications to teach is surely the marker of an occupational group that has lost any grip on what might have been, or might have become, a profession.

The text looks back only to define a logic that has come to an end and to suggest that the sector has reached a crossroads. Hodgson and Spours (Chapter 10) suggest that it is time for FE to move towards a post-incorporation model, characterized by technical and vocational leadership. The post-incorporation college is defined as having ten dimensions – dimensions that include an end to policy micromanagement, the re-introduction of democratic accountability, new forms of professional collaboration, and increased investment. The imagined future suggested in this chapter builds well on years of critical analysis and draws that critique to a logical conclusion. The potential of FE, and the inability of the sector to fulfil that potential, feeds well into the public social partnership approach the authors envisage. The future viability of FE is secured when it is able to assume a distinct place within a regional and sub-regional high-skills ecosystem.

A book that looks backwards to a bleak past ends by suggesting a future role for FE that is optimistic but not far-fetched. The elements required to craft the post-incorporation college already exist. Who, after all, would resist a call for cooperation, cohesion, and efficiency in pursuance of a vibrant education system in which social inclusion is a shared responsibility?

Dr Carol Azumah Dennis
Co-Director for Postgraduate Taught Programmes
Faculty of Education, University of Hull
Carol.Dennis@hull.ac.uk