
Special issue: *Colleges as anchor institutions in their local community: promoting inclusive economic, social and educational growth*

Research article

Developing English VET through social partnership in further education

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Abstract

Recent debate has highlighted the important significance of social partnership in further education for developing new approaches to English vocational education and training (VET). There is international evidence of the contribution that well-established social partnerships between employers, unions and government can make to deliver VET effectively. It is argued that in England VET can benefit from adopting and embedding social partnership models, especially ones in which further education (FE) colleges have a local and regional anchoring role. However, to date, England has persistently failed to implement any kind of significant social partnership for various reasons – a crucial

one being government reliance on an employer-led approach to VET. A prerequisite for developing social partnership in further education is to identify and garner support for promising governance and cooperation structures. Such identification foregrounds a conception of a rich civil society and economy, with local and regional partnerships being essential enablers. An examination of FE colleges as part of a VET system reviews the benefits of establishing a coordinated skills system providing coherent local, regional and national pathways for vocational, technical and skilled work. Such a national VET system would integrate universities, employer training, the school curriculum and careers.

Keywords civil society; England; further education; local; social partnership; vocational education and training

Introduction

English vocational education and training (VET) provision has been in decline for many years. Government-led austerity from 2010 to 2019 led to a total loss of income of around £1 billion, representing a cumulative cut in income of around 12 per cent for further education (FE) colleges, according to the Institute of Fiscal Studies (Farquharson et al., 2021). The current government aims to turn this situation around, with the *White Paper Skills for Jobs: Lifelong learning for opportunity and growth* (DfE, 2021) proposals being an attempt to re-establish FE colleges as major agents of economic regeneration, but there are problems associated with inadequate funding in the sector (see Orr, 2020). FE colleges are 16+ institutions that cover a wide variety of needs, including VET, general secondary and higher education. FE college teaching ranges from the most basic preparation for work courses to remedial literacy and numeracy, through technical courses at various levels up to and including Level 7 (master's level), to supporting apprenticeships and taking on the main responsibility for the new flagship vocational qualification, the T level, as well as teaching A levels. They are thus critical to the provision of all levels of work related know-how in England, and have a vital role to play in dealing with youth unemployment in the medium and the longer term. Historically, FE colleges have embodied a local mission serving their communities and local economies, thus often specialising in certain areas. Due to their expertise and organisational reach, FE colleges will remain central to government VET expansion plans, including apprenticeship growth. English VET has been described as a hybrid of an apprenticeship and college-based system (Green et al., 1998), but a more useful description is as a predominantly further education-based college system which includes sixth form colleges often providing some VET. Since the 2010s, the place of FE colleges has been much debated (for example, NIACE [2011] on the role of FE colleges; the Lingfield Report [DfE, 2012] on teacher professionalism; the CAVTL Report [ETF, 2013] on the role of further education in VET; the Sainsbury Review [DfE, 2017]; and, most recently, the Augar Review [DfE, 2019] has considerably accelerated the present political favouring of the VET sector as a whole by emphasising the potential role of further education in economic regeneration). These reports, particularly CAVTL, Sainsbury and Augar, form the basis of much of the White Paper on Skills for Life (DfE, 2021).

Critical assessment of the White Paper proposals with respect to the history of policy in this area is valuable as it offers insights into the likely effectiveness of current recommendations. A historical and comparative perspective reveals that in Europe, various forms of social partnership are central to the governance of VET (see Conchon, 2013). Social partnership involves long-term cooperative arrangements between, typically, the state, employer organisations and trade unions, sometimes with regional authorities and civil society organisations. These arrangements can range from the national (for example, bodies such as the BIBB in Germany and the now-defunct UKCES in England), through sectoral governance, to enterprise and even locality levels (Clarke and Winch, 2015). Depending on the levels at which they operate, social partnership can govern national, sectoral, enterprise and local policies, as well as administering and awarding vocational qualifications as in Germany. Germany is best known as a country with extensive social partnership governance ranging from national to local level, and taking in enterprise governance at different levels of the company (Streeck, 1992).

The first and indeed only significant attempt at a social partnership approach to English VET governance was brought in by the Industrial Training Act (1964), which aimed to expand apprenticeships into sectors which had little or no VET. The Act allowed the voluntary set-up of joint employer- and union-run sectoral boards which could introduce an apprenticeship levy.

Levies are devices for overcoming problems of collective action, and here employers were obliged to pay a levy that could only be recouped for training purposes. Only 27 sectoral boards were set up, which was fewer than originally envisaged. A continued lack of enthusiasm for the Act from both employers and unions limited its effectiveness, with the consequence that by the early 1970s, support for its provisions was ebbing (Pemberton, 2001). The incoming Conservative government in 1979 strongly favoured market-driven, rather corporatist governance arrangements, with the Act falling completely out of favour. Subsequently, there has been no policy attempt to revisit this social partnership approach to English VET governance in any significant form. Later, incorporation strongly steered the sector away from developing social partnership approaches, although more cooperative arrangements, sometimes involving trade unions and employer associations, can be found in Wales and Scotland. Scotland notably has a national body, Skills Scotland, that aims to integrate all aspects of VET provision and includes trade union representation. However, the idea of a levy as a solution to collective action problems in VET, in particular to employer reluctance to provide apprenticeships, resulted in legislation that in 2017 compelled larger firms to take part in a levy scheme. Unlike the 1964 legislation, the levy was not dependent on social partnership-based opting in, but on national legislation making it mandatory. It is an irony that a government based on market principles should have thought it necessary to introduce such a 'dirigiste' measure, but indicates its perception of the gravity of the problem of lack of employer demand for VET as an obstacle to the expansion of apprenticeship provision.

Incorporation and its consequences

The aim of incorporation in 1992 was to create a new national education sector of FE colleges by changing colleges from being local authority-run with extensive local community and business links to being autonomous independent charities run by governing bodies whose membership is overwhelmingly drawn from business. As a result, colleges are run like businesses and are responsible for their own finances. They are expected to be commercially viable, with sufficient income generation to produce a small surplus, and so have to seize any opportunities to offer courses in order to maximise their revenue. The practical consequence of this is that FE colleges are often obliged to compete with each other, with competition being particularly acute between colleges in the same local area, and often taking the form of offering the same courses. Courses that might be useful economically and socially in a locality but cannot generate sufficient revenue if they are run by an individual college tend not to be offered, which diminishes the range of available provision. Here 'locality' is understood as a travel time of no more than an hour to an FE college, which greatly depends on the quality of transport links. It follows that some colleges (for example, in rural areas) will be regional rather than local, involving up to half-a-day travel time. FE colleges struggle with income management, as the vast majority of their revenue derives from government funding in some form or another, with an annual award being typical.

At the time of incorporation, there were around 450 FE colleges, but due to funding arrangements and government policies arising from a commitment to market-based approaches the sector has changed significantly. From 2010 onwards, extreme financial pressures resulted in numerous mergers, which have loosened the local affiliations of many colleges. These financially driven mergers have not been the only way in which the local affiliations of colleges have been slackened, as many have sought a more corporate model of governance and strategy, consonant with the market-based emphasis of post-incorporation policy. As part of the latter, colleges have sought a national profile through mergers with colleges across the country (Ryan, 2019), enticed international interests, grown their higher education visibility (with 11 per cent of further education provision being higher education based), developing a multi-institutional shape via academisation or college grouping, and even via broader college lobbying groups (such as the Mixed Economy Group and Collab Group). The combined consequence of these trends is that the post-war conception that colleges are locally placed and that their priority is to support the local economy through their student body and/or staff is therefore problematic. As a minimum, an FE college will normally have other interests in addition to its locality, for example, a regional or even a national specialism.

These pressures and mergers prompted a policy recognition that market-based models had not worked in the FE college sector, with the Area-Based Reviews (BIS, 2015) being presented as the end of the incorporation experiment. Area-Based Reviews represented a partial return to the centralised planning of VET through a review of inefficiencies due to duplication of courses and lack of economies of scale. From 1992, duplication and small-scale provision had been tolerated by successive governments as a necessary consequence of healthy competition between colleges.

However, these reviews had the effect of exacerbating existing financial pressures by offering the solution of forced mergers for FE colleges in financial difficulty (estimated to be around 25 per cent of colleges) and inserting a criterion of a maximum of 63 per cent of spend-on-staff costs in college budgets. In itself, the latter imposed serious financial pressure on colleges to model low pay and higher workload terms and conditions. The effect of this can be judged by comparing staff costs spent in 1992: in FE colleges it was 70 per cent, and in sixth form colleges, where there is pay parity with school teachers, current spend averaged 71 per cent (AoC, 2018). Such reductions in spend-on-staff costs highlight the fact that declining funding for public sector services and pay have been and are highly visible in the further education sector. Financial pressures have markedly reshaped the sector, with major trends towards the mergers of colleges into larger colleges and college groups resulting in 168 FE colleges and the absorption of sixth form colleges into general further education, resulting in 51 free-standing sixth form colleges. In addition to this, there are 2 specialist art and design colleges, 13 land-based colleges and 10 institutes of adult learning, plus various hybrid institutions created by government policy since 1992, namely, National Colleges, Institutes of Technology (mainly working with FE colleges), 14–19 University Technical Colleges, 2 university-based FE colleges and 16–19 Academies (AoC, 2020). Although the mergers may have gone some way towards the rationalisation of provision, this has been at the cost of local accessibility, thereby bringing into focus the important relationship between quality of access and that of local and regional transport links.

Despite this extensive rationalisation, FE colleges remain chronically underfunded, both in absolute terms and in relation to higher education. Currently, English FE colleges have 2.2 million students with over 1 million of these aged between 16 and 24 years old, while 1.5 million of the same age group attend universities. In England in 2017–19, the total FE college income was around £7 billion a year, with around £500 million of this being for course provision at Level 4 and above, but the total higher education income was around £34 billion. This equates to higher education receiving approximately five times as much income per student as further education. The Institute of Fiscal Studies estimates that FE colleges lost a total income of around £1 billion up to 2019, equating to a cumulative income cut of around 12 per cent (Farquharson et al., 2021), and other estimates put this figure even higher, at over 20 per cent. These comparisons reflect the relative political importance, social prestige and lobbying power of universities in relation to the FE colleges.

Current White Paper proposals

The current White Paper proposals seem designed to address some of the perceived governance mistakes of the past (DfE, 2021). First, the government seems to recognise that vocational education needs to be integrated with economic development, rather than treated as a stand-alone business sector. Second, there is some recognition that there needs to be more cooperation between providers than currently exists, with room for both local initiative and national direction. FE colleges are placed at the centre of provision, and an intention has been expressed to subject private training companies to more rigorous scrutiny in order to gradually remove those providing an inadequate service. There is an intention on the part of the government to stand by their commitment to apprenticeships and the apprenticeship levy, and to increase their reach into the small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) sector.

Despite these positive developments, there is some cause for concern about certain aspects of governance. For example, consider this statement: ‘We will use the national system of employer-led standards that have been created for apprenticeships as a model and will ensure employers have a central role in designing and developing qualifications and training’ (DfE, 2021: 4). With proposals of this kind, the details are everything. Here there are questions around who the employers are, including whether they are individual businesses, influential businesses, large businesses or even employer associations. It is unclear what assurance can be given that they will provide adequate qualifications

or how representative they are of employers in a particular sector. The experience of the attempted VET reform of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), which was a qualification designed to give employer-led VET training, is not encouraging in this respect (Matlay and Addis, 2002; Winch, 2021). The Manpower Services Commission and the Department of Education and Science thought that the use of functional analysis would ensure that broadly based qualifications which could easily be updated would be produced. However, the influence of some employers who were most concerned about certification of routine or semi-routine tasks predominated, with the consequence that the original aspiration of NVQs was abandoned and the qualification became a hallmark of semi-skilled labour (Raggatt and Williams, 1999). The current proposals offer limited reassurance for concerns about the nature and quality of employer engagement with qualification design, which is an element of the highest importance in qualification development, and for businesses and sectors whose interests may be inadequately represented in the design of qualifications.

Similar considerations apply to the aspiration to enhance provision through better coordination, as the problem is not the desirability of the goal, but governance and incentive structures which make coordination and cooperation difficult to effect. In the absence of a thorough revision of FE college governance arrangements, there remains too much scope for competing interests to determine local policies. Colleges require incentives to cooperate with each other, to offer programmes which avoid duplication and provide a comprehensive and relevant offer for their localities. As long as FE colleges are completely independent of local authority governance and are practically under the influence of employers sitting on their governing bodies, as well as being in competition for students with other local colleges, those incentives will simply not exist. Additionally, there is currently no structure to bring together local authorities, government, unions, colleges and businesses to plan and coordinate local provision. For example, this could be achieved by giving local enterprise partnerships, which are bodies mandated by legislation to encourage economic and skill development in their regions, giving greater powers and increasing the range of representatives on them, as this would allow the role of employers to remain substantial while not being able to dominate the decision-making of the partnership. The White Paper does propose three-year financial settlements that would allow for more long-term planning, but in the absence of structural governance changes, it is not clear that this in itself will be sufficient to make real improvements.

Significance of localism

The term 'localism' is understood here as the prioritisation of policy based on the needs of communities within an hour's travelling distance of an FE college. There is also a closely connected dimension of 'regionalism', taking in longer travelling times. However, where transport links are good, a locality can be thought of as quite an extended area. As in the history of policy, the current broader political context is important for future directions in further education, skills development policy and FE college governance. Despite some of its shortcomings *Skills for Jobs: Lifelong learning for opportunity and growth* (DfE, 2021) attempts to engage with some crucial wider issues, either directly or indirectly, with localism being one of these. Government industrial strategy in *Build Back Better: Our plan for growth* (H.M. Treasury, 2021) foregrounds infrastructure, local economies and skills, with local economic regeneration being closely identified with democratic accountability (as evidenced, for example, in discussion about the 'red wall'). The College of the Future (2020) commission elaborates similar themes, articulating the significant role FE colleges play in local economic and civil life, and exploring the potential of these colleges to address national and sectoral priorities, such as that of National Health Service (NHS) workforce upskilling, as considered in *Creating the Workforce of the Future: A new collaborative approach for the NHS and colleges in England* (NHS Confederation and The College of the Future, 2020). Such concerns accord with those of the very recently disbanded Industrial Strategy Council, which claimed that many industrial strategy aims were not being met, especially that of the priority accorded to skills development, and that new social partnership relationships with unions plus sector deals would be a preferable route to economic and civic growth (Industrial Strategy Council, 2021). This approach, adopted to some extent in the NHS, stands in contrast to the lack of social partnership in the further education sector. These issues of localism and skills development highlight the democratic deficit in government policy, which argues for levelling up and regeneration, but without sufficient emphasis on the institutional change and coordination, and equality between partners, needed to deliver this successfully. A greater emphasis

on business ensures a lesser emphasis on labour and the institutions which support its role, namely, vocational colleges, unions and, more widely, local authorities and the NHS. An instance of this is the White Paper (DfE, 2021) inclusion of the British Chambers of Commerce as a new regional partner for skills development, and a heightening of the role of employers in local skills plans, which reinforces the interests of business over those of labour. A crucial measure of the relationship between business and labour is found in the roles allocated to vocational colleges and the frameworks for skills development, and here we can see the continuing marginalisation of the labour interest, through the exclusion of trade unions in governance and planning of VET, further indicating how social partnership has become a marginal influence in policymaking after its apparent salience in the 1960s and 1970s.

This prioritising of business over labour interests, although a matter of current policy, should not be uncritically accepted. As will be seen shortly, there is a significant line of political thought, both British and European, about social partnership, which suggests that at least some rebalancing of these interests would be beneficial. Such a potential rebalancing raises three major areas of development for a more cohesive and effective approach to localism. First, the debate around localism and devolution, which focuses on the institutional arrangements for local and regional economies, raises questions around democratic accountability and the role of the state. For example, Keep (2016) aims to address this with his concept of 'metis', which is defined as localised, practice-based knowledge and expertise employed in analysing the role of devolution and localism in further education. Key to a metis is a degree of mutual trust among the stakeholders, also critical to the successful operation of social partnership, which, as we saw, can operate successfully at the local and regional level. The involvement of local authorities, employer associations and trade unions in collaborative arrangements has the potential to create favourable conditions for the creation of a metis.

The second area is consideration of how the type of economy and state deemed desirable integrates with localism agendas of various kinds. Progressing this in practice is complicated by the ongoing impact of populism stemming from economic and social disparities across regions. These cut across previously well-established party political divisions (such as the breach of the so-called red wall of traditionally Labour-voting constituencies), and have led to attention to the variety of solutions to the enablement of flourishing local economic and civil life. The third area is the specific place and role of FE colleges acting as bridging institutions between the needs of localism, the economy and civil society, with a number of reports (such as NIACE, 2011) arguing for the place of these colleges as anchor institutions within their communities. These questions of place and role raise more questions, but in what follows the focus is on whether the current and proposed institutional governance arrangements are sufficient for colleges to have a realistic chance of meeting their required role. Such an analysis needs to be grounded on ideas of social partnership, and the political thought on civil society which underpins much of this, postulating a collaboration between the state and nationally, regionally and locally based civil society institutions.

Social partnership and conceptions of civil society

Social partnership in further education is significant for developing new approaches to English VET with recent debate recognising this (Belgutay, 2020; Crowther, 2021). Well-established social partnerships between employers, unions and government can make a contribution to the effective delivery of VET as international evidence notably but not exclusively from Germany shows. Adopting and embedding social partnership models, especially the ones in which FE colleges have a local and regional anchoring role, can benefit English VET. However, in England, since the 1960s there has been persistent failure to implement any kind of significant social partnership. There are a number of reasons for this, but a key one has been government reliance on an employer-led approach to VET. An essential precondition for developing social partnership in further education is the identification and gathering of support for promising governance and cooperation structures that provide institutional grounding for the involvement of a wider range of social partners. A conception of a rich civil society and economy is foregrounded by this identification (Lockey and Wallace-Stephens, 2020) in which local and regional partnerships are essential enablers.

Some recent political thought on civil society and its relationship to social partnership broadly argues for a mediated relationship between the state, market and civil society, offering policy critiques on this basis aiming to rebalance the interests of labour and capital (Blond, 2010; Glasman, 2009;

Sumner and Blond, 2018; Cruddas, 2021) and informing policy development (such as in the Common Good Foundation). For example, Cruddas (2021) argues that rising inequality, especially the wealth and political influence gain of the top 1 per cent, corresponds to the decline in the importance of unions as stakeholders and checks on state policy. Beyond this very broad political thought, consensus on many issues concerning how social partnership could be implemented in FE colleges remains to be established in order to ensure the development of a social partnership model which has real checks and balances on state- and market-driven agendas. For instance, even in a coordinated economy, there are questions about what measures need to be taken to ensure there are no gaps between regional and state curricula. Such considerations indicate that mediating interests between relevant social partners are a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective coordination of interests (Busemeyer, 2014). The institutional shape and inter-institutional relationships of colleges and other partners also need to be considered. Important aspects of this include a possible rethinking of long-held assumptions about the dependence of the further education sector on the state, exploration of potential ambiguities around the autonomy of FE colleges and an articulation of what the frequently expressed wish for freedom for these colleges from state- and market-based policies might actually entail. In the latter case, this freedom might take the form of permitting FE colleges to further the interests of the college, its students and local community independently of both state regulation and market forces. For this autonomy to be possible, FE colleges would need to be part of a reconstructed coordinated economy and civil society that would rethink the processes of college formation, modes of governance and expected duties. Thus, course provision, local and regional coverage, a reconsidered, more inclusive governance model and a clearer specification of the remit of FE colleges would need to be the subject of legislation. Such autonomy for colleges would require balancing with the autonomy of other interests in civil society, especially unions and local authorities, in a conception of related civil society roles. It would enable FE colleges to reorient themselves around promoting a national agenda based on the collaborative and civic role of colleges, rather than focusing on individual and group college interests, expansions and mergers.

Developing a new framework for further education governance

Despite the importance of the relationship between social partnership and conceptions of civil society, the recent history of FE colleges with respect to both its practical operation and government policy has shown no engagement with the crucial matter of the role of these colleges in the regeneration of economic and civil life. Current VET policy lacks a sense of fuller engagement around political thinking on civil society and its implications for social partnerships, and what this would mean for the role of the state in skills development and the further education sector. As has been seen, actual and proposed solutions have moved between state- and market-based ones. However, what is really required is an ongoing revival of a mediated relationship between the state, market and civil society that articulates a conception of civil society that provides checks and balances on the extremes of each, thereby beginning to recover some of the British post-war cross-party consensus. Accepting that civil life should be both part of economic regeneration and democratic accountability necessitates serious consideration of whether current institutional governance arrangements for FE colleges are sufficient for developing a robust and sustainable vocational system and facilitating a coordinated approach to economic development which embeds consensus around the importance of social partnership. Arguably such considerations would result in profound reconfiguration of current civil institutions involved in the delivery of, and governance of, VET if consensus could be reached on how this should be done. While the extent of this reconfiguration can be debated, it is clear there is a need to rethink:

- FE colleges as institutions in terms of their relationship to the state and market, their relationship to local and regional community and actors, and their relationship to other educational sectors and actors, including new actors if required.
- FE college governance arrangements in terms of adopting a social partnership model which brings both unions and business into the core of college governance and policy, and developing a social partnership model drawing on local and regional union and business interests plus other civil and local institutions, including new potential institutions.
- the FE college system as part of a vocational system in terms of the establishment of a coordinated skills system that provides local, regional and national pathways for technical and skilled work

integrating universities (either as vocational partners or vocational universities), employer training, and the school curriculum and careers as part of a national vocational system.

Towards a coherent national system

Continuing to highlight the importance of the well-established further education principle of a clear line of sight to work is an essential foundation for any successful social partnership arrangements, and such partners should help to better ground this rhetoric in coherent further education governance arrangements. Aligning VET programmes with current and future labour market priorities involves such cooperation at local, regional and national level (Hodgson and Spours, 2019). Establishing such a line of sight in practice remains complex, as current FE college provision is not coherent with respect to entry into the labour market, which at least in part reflects the well-documented fact that England has a poorly functioning occupational labour market. Further education reform should form part of a coordinated policy leading to a well-functioning occupational labour market (which would be much more like what might be seen in Germany), as such a market is essential for establishing effective social partnership. These difficulties are made worse by the lack of adequate national data on young people and on VET opportunities. Better social partnership requires a much clearer sense of who FE college students are, and what they are seeking educationally and occupationally. If such partnership could be achieved, it would open up the opportunity to collaboratively develop some new key principles around competences and their relationships to qualifications involving FE colleges, employers and unions.

It has been argued that the current FE college governance arrangements, and those proposed in the White Paper (DfE, 2021), are insufficient in themselves to create coordinated economic arrangements that embed consensus around the nature and kind of desirable social partnerships, and for developing a robust and sustainable VET system. As such, continued rethinking and reflection of the kind discussed above is essential so that it can inform policy. In many areas of policy, especially health scenario planning, it is established practice, with the aim of more reliably predicting the future and avoiding potential policy disaster. However, such scenario planning for VET in general, and FE colleges in particular, has sadly been lacking, and the development of effective social partnerships should include this kind of planning as an integral element. A good illustration of the importance of scenario planning is the current White Paper plan (DfE, 2021) to prioritise T levels and remove funding from most Level 3 BTEC qualifications (which are occupationally based vocational qualifications that prepare candidates for entry into the labour market and at the same time have a recognised educational currency), which risks potential policy disaster through a number of unintended consequences. For example, the removal of funding from Level 3 BTEC qualifications raises several complex questions, including what happens to Level 1 and 2 BTEC qualifications, especially with respect to their conceptual fit with T levels and their integration with apprenticeships and university-level courses.

Conclusion

The past 60 years of VET policy in England have seen various twists and turns. In the corporatism and embryo social partnership arrangements of 1964, through to the market-based reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, to the statist measures embodied in the 2017 legislation mandating apprenticeship levies, and currently the turn towards a more cooperative engagement between central and local government in VET provision, one can discern a constant search for an approach that satisfied both the requirements of national economic strategy and local and regional needs. This holy grail of policy has always proved elusive, and the current emphasis on levelling up poorer regions of England has prompted another attempt at a partnership between central, regional and local authorities, this time without any attempt at social partnership arrangements.

Many difficulties with VET provision in FE colleges result from the fragmentation of the sector, the lack of employer buy-in and industrial strategy, which continue to lead to a failure to deliver its desired outcomes. It may seem odd to talk of a lack of employer buy-in in a VET landscape that valorises employers as constructors of qualifications. However, the reality is often that many employers have little or no interest in promoting training either in or beyond their own companies. Not only does upskilling not fit well with their business strategies (Keep, 2020; Sissons, 2021), but the general lack of qualified staff within a labour market segment leads to individual training initiatives being vulnerable to poaching

by other firms. An examination of FE colleges as part of a VET system should review the benefits of establishing a coordinated skills system providing coherent local, regional and national pathways for vocational, technical and skilled work. Such a national VET system would integrate universities (as either vocational partners or vocational institutions), employer training, the school curriculum and careers. What is crucial is that the role of government is well judged so that a coherent national system is implemented, which avoids rigid policy prescriptions and allows appropriate local variation. Such proposed national system development should be assessed in the context of whether culturally, politically and practically the development of social partnerships in England would most appropriately be done within a formal legislative framework as in Wales, or as a set of cultural norms as in Scotland. The failure of the Industrial Training Act (1964) suggests that, in England, establishing cultural norms before implementing a formal legislative framework would be the most prudent course of action. This suggests, in turn, widespread prior consultation and consensus building before substantial reform is undertaken.

An essential requirement is that a national VET system would have broad links to dual professionalism in further education through working collaboratively with employers to co-produce and co-create skills development, and supporting teacher professional development through community and employer partnerships. It would broaden and deepen employer engagement, thereby supporting better workplace training cultures and promoting development of vocational expertise (Winch and Addis, 2022). To properly support such dual professionalism we need local and regional economic systems (such as the West Midlands Regional Development Agency), which seek to embed further and higher education provision within planned development and local civic engagement. Much of this is directly related to the frequently stated government policy ambition of levelling up, which is often based on the idea of individuals undertaking VET as a personal choice but, as has been discussed above, the lack of coherence in the current VET system is likely to strongly militate against the effectiveness of this approach without a set of local, regional and national pathways that are physically and financially accessible to young people and older workers changing occupations. In contrast, a properly grounded social partnership system which supports both business and labour interests (such as local jobs and training, and recognition of rights to practise an occupation) would serve as a much better foundation for this ambition. Funding in such a system should be sustainable and support development, rather than being based solely on simple performance measures. Taking this approach would enable the further education sector to provide a public service to local communities, especially in terms of entry into the labour market and towards facilitating civic engagement, and become a key component of state practice in levelling up.

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Research ethics statement

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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