

Whose College of the Future?

*Waiting on Gavin Williamson's delayed White Paper, Rob Peutrell considers the recently published report titled *The College of the Future**, posing the question: incorporation has failed, but what next?*

It's now OK to say that senior managements in FE colleges came to concentrate 'more on their own interests than on the interests of their community and local economy' (1). In fairness, the EDSK report that quote comes from refers to colleges not senior managers. But as incorporation handed institutional (if not sector) power over to CEOs and college boards, it amounts to much the same thing. If colleges are 'anchor institutions' for localities, as the *Independent Commission on the College of the Future* wants them to be, stories of college senior managements slipping their moorings have circulated the sector networks for years. Here are four examples from my city, Nottingham. A marketing van from one college sits outside another as students arrive for enrolment. Institutional banter, but indicative: one college is fair game for another.

Three of what were then four Nottingham college principals brief union reps on their plans to open a campus in China. It would offer world-class skills, a lucrative supply of international students - and a chance not to be outshone by the Russell Group university down the road.

A hair and beauty lecturer is surprised to find a training salon opened by a college in Leicestershire near Nottingham city centre. 'Don't we already do hairdressing?' she asks.

New College Nottingham purchase six real learning businesses, including a cafe with little passing trade, and invest in a training centre in Delhi. The CEO and other 'entrepreneurial' Gazelle Group college bosses schmooze with Sir Richard Branson, whilst a floor is cleared at NCN for the Peter Jones Enterprise Academy before the college goes into financial crisis.

Cynical? In FE, it's difficult not to be. 20-odd years ago, Nottingham NATFHE Area Committee drafted 'Out of Chaos', a briefing for local MPs on the impact of incorporation. Its concerns about competition, unrepresentative boards, loss of provision, and the

erosion of staff conditions were widely shared amongst sector staff. Sector decision-makers appear finally to have caught on. If ever it was justified, incorporation is a busted flush. The question is what next?

Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education, has promised an FE 'revolution'. There is anticipation of college renationalisation. Williamson, however, has been criticised for not consulting widely enough and for rushing his (now delayed) White Paper (2). In contrast, the report of the *Independent Commission* seems to represent a substantial body of sector and sector-related opinion, although I'd question the label 'independent'. Far from involving 'leading figures from business and the trade unions' as its website claims, there is only one trade union representative among the commissioners, none on its expert panel, and no trade unions listed among the supporting organisations. In short, there is a predictable corporate bias: college CEOs, sector management bodies, HR and marketing professionals, Pearson, the global edu-business - some strong research links, but no teacher representatives, nor representatives of community interests. Even in the college of the future, decisions about the sector will be made for and about those who work in FE - not with us, and certainly not by us.

Despite this, the report represents a big shift on current arrangements. Its argument can be summarised as follows: to be effective 'anchor institutions' in localities and regions, college need the right funding, resources, knowledgeable and committed staff, and local and national recognition and understanding. If FE is to help us meet the challenges of the climate crisis, regional and social inequality, new technologies, revitalising communities (to name just a few), the sector needs an overhaul. Rather than the 'unproductive

competition' that incorporation encouraged, FE needs properly collaborative networks comprising colleges, employers, other stakeholders, with long-term planning; agreed national, regional and local priorities; and statutory duties on colleges to broker agreements on provision consistent with those priorities. Covid has made the need for change more pressing. The report argues further for a statutory right to lifelong learning to Level 3 and that colleges should not just be centres for skills training to meet employer needs, but also places that help students and communities develop their capacities for democratic citizenship with opportunities for debate, political education and civic engagement.

In many ways this is welcome stuff, although reports of this kind have to assert not debate the claims they make, including political claims. Incorporation fed on the fantasies of neo-liberalism which rubbished the idea of public sector provision. The report reflects a developing consensus from Labour Left to the red-wall Tory Right that demands more interventionist and corporatist economic and other policy approaches. Similarly, the report's stress on colleges being 'place-based' institutions reflects the post-Brexit re-emergence of a communitarian stress on locality.

Colleges and localities

The relationship between colleges and their localities is a point to dwell on. Colleges now are not community assets but highly regulated spaces. Lanyards, security guards, identity checks and dress codes are justified on the grounds of public security, but they're also a means of policing access to what are essentially privatised spaces and reveal 'an obsession with appearance' and a marketised uniformity in which educational relationships are more 'shopping mall than . . . classroom' (3). In contrast, democratic citizenship is messy and argumentative; it scuffs the paintwork and marks the walls. Of course, colleges *should* be democratically-engaged civic institutions and centres for social agency. As the report recommends, they ought to open their doors to movements for human rights and social justice. The report acknowledges the cultural shift needed in this regard. Nonetheless, there are reasons to be sceptical. Does citizenship education in FE currently wander far from the banalities of 'British Values' or fundraising for charitable causes? Would the DFE want it to? Would most college managements welcome the dissidence genuine democracy entails?

More substantial are the report's expectations of the colleges' role in local economies. A perceived misalignment between education and the economy has been an issue for policy-makers for half a century at least. This report is one more iteration. Whatever its communitarian / corporatist sentiments, however, capital is not sedentary. Local economies are contingent on capital flows and market decisions (a car plant closed here; a call centre opened there) that have little respect for people or place. More, UK business has a poor record of long-term investment, including in training, whilst skills training doesn't by itself create jobs nor guarantee skilled, secure, satisfying employment. The report advocates 'social partnership' and a green-tinted Keynesianism in which there are no essential conflicts between the interests of 'Productivity, People, Place', to use the report's central mantra. Creating an environmentally-sensitive economy that narrows regional inequalities and responds to the educational and other needs of communities and localities would require serious ideological and structural reworking. Is this feasible in what is still a fast-finance dominated, globalised economy? Strong industrial policies with strategic planning and controls of finance and investment are radically at odds with the neo-liberal desire for capital to escape material entanglements with people and place. Without big political forces mobilising for change, piecemeal interventions are more likely, with FE colleges - perhaps better funded - still subject to haphazard policy, and still offering the same mix of vocational alternatives to higher-status academic routes, (job centre-mandated) repositories for the un/underemployed, residual Access, ESOL and so on.

What about the teachers?

The report asks that colleges harness teachers' professionalism, commitment, and pedagogic and subject expertise, and rightly draws attention to the problems of pay and recruitment. Paternalist at best, the report notes the pay gap between FE and other educational sectors, but not that between staff and senior managers - an issue of sometimes toxic resentment. Similarly, the report recognises the importance of professional development, but not that the inadequate state of CPD reflects a poverty of *educational* leadership in colleges. Teachers routinely complain about the diet of online mandatory training and sessions of generic 'best practice' ('top tips' and 'easy wins' for perfect Ofsted lessons) 'delivered' by consultants or management-mandated Teaching and Learning experts.

Its stance on CPD is disappointing but unsurprising. Yet, professional learning is surely one area crying out for teachers' professional autonomy to be recognised. By autonomy, I don't mean an unaccountable free-for-all, but a process of collective professional self-institution, in contrast to a de-professionalising heteronomy that demands compliance with external authority - the Secretary of State, the CEO, the Quality Director (4). Of course, the notion of collective autonomy leaves much for us to wrestle with: How should ethical and professional standards and accountabilities be maintained in practice? What are the organisational, resource and other practical implications? But without autonomy, CPD is hardly professional. More controversially, we should be pitching for professional control of educational work more widely. What counts as valid education deserving public support is an issue for educators and the wider community, but curriculum design, accreditation schemes, decisions over guided learning hours and resource allocation, and, critically, how we evaluate practice should be matters primarily for professional deliberation.

Saving face?

Senior managers and college boards welcomed incorporation for the freedoms it promised, and accepted the harsher disciplines independence from local authorities entailed. Salary increases and (publicly-funded) corporate status were probably attractive too. But as principals segued into CEOs, they didn't bargain on the haphazard national policy and chronic underfunding that incorporation meant in practice. Mostly, they were content to live with the consequences whilst these were felt by staff, students and the communities students came from. Sector staff were routinely reminded that FE was not a cosy job-guarantee scheme; flexibility and strict staff utilisation were the order of the day. For staff and local communities, incorporation meant pay cuts, administrative overload, casualised contracts, job insecurity, intrusive scrutiny, undermined professionalism, lost learning places, a narrowed curriculum, and, importantly, a disconnection between local communities and college boards: business knowledge was hard core; community knowledge, merely folksy.

It was only as FE began to implode that the consequences of incorporation were felt at a senior level. Area Reviews, the FE Commissioner's powers of financial scrutiny, and a number of high-profile casualties among CEOs showed that vulnerability was no longer something that only the lower grades should worry about. At the same time, policy-

makers have tended to regard the sector with a certain contempt. As is well known, Vince Cable, when coalition minister at Business, Industry and Skills, was advised to cut FE entirely. In the post-Brexit, Covid-accelerated rethink of post-16 provision, are senior managers and boards an expendable asset?

The EDSK report edges that way. In its proposals, colleges would remain separate from government but lose their institutional independence by being grouped together under the direction of local FE Directors. *The College of the Future* pushes a softer line. Institutions would be required to operate within collaborative networks but without the equivalent of a local FE Director.

What the report doesn't argue for is that colleges should be integrated into public lifelong-learning systems, with *democratic* local, regional and national strategic direction; a strongly empowered teaching profession; and a strong community voice. This failure of democratic ambition illustrates the continuing power of managerialism and the desire to save the collective face of college CEOs by pre-empting a more radical course of action.

* Independent Commission on the College of the Future (2020) *The College of the Future: The UK-wide final report from the Independent Commission on the College of the Future*. Available online: <https://www.collegecommission.co.uk/final-report-uk>

** Incorporation refers to the process by which in April 1993 the Major government took colleges out of local education authority control.

Notes:

1. Richmond, T. and Bailey, A. EDSK (2020) *Further consideration: Creating a new role, purpose and direction for the FE sector*. EDSK. Available online: <https://www.edsk.org/publications/further-consideration/>
2. Evans, S. (2020) This is why we should delay the White Paper even longer TES Online. Available at: <https://feweeek.co.uk/2020/12/05/this-is-why-we-should-delay-the-white-paper-even-longer/>
3. Smith, R. (2015: 91) Building Colleges for the Future: What the ugly sisters have to tell us about FE in Daley, M., Orr, K. and Petrie, J. (eds) (2015) *Further Education and the Twelve Dancing Princesses*, pp 91-104
4. I'm borrowing from the Greek-French theorist Cornelius Castoriadis here.