
A monocular perception

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The White Paper comes at a critical time and its publication offered a huge opportunity to review and refresh how education and training should look for the next 5-10 years.

Critical in this is the role of colleges of FE. The White Paper has a monocular perception of what colleges are and what they do. FE is conceived of entirely in terms of skills and employment. The emphasis throughout is on empowering employers to steer what colleges do.

In other words, the White Paper really is simply laying the ground for more of the same. This discourse has been the dominant discourse in the last two decades. Government after government have pushed this agenda and brought in policies and qualifications to support it.

All of this has been at the expense of a broader vision of what FE is and could be. Bluntly speaking, if the White Paper is about intensifying the current system then that suggests that telling people what courses they have to follow and what jobs they should be getting and spoon-feeding them through assessments will lead to their fulfilment and their sense that their life is 'productive'.

There is an interesting question to be had about the relationship between education and training for work. Two key questions are: i) Does education require the active involvement and engagement of the student? ii) Is training something that is done to employees rather than with them?

The questions are relevant because the White Paper habitually objectifies FE. Indeed in the first line of the Executive Summary, it states how the reforms it maps out will support people: 'to get the skills our economy needs throughout their lives wherever they live in the country' (Paragraph 1).

What does objectification mean here? Simply that the White Paper prioritises 'the skills our economy needs' over the needs, desires and hopes of individuals. The message is that the Government has a plan for what you should be learning.

The White Paper only works if the students and the college staff buy into an idea that further education is all about and is only about 'skills for the nation'.

At this point, it's important that the reader stops thinking about other people's children and imagines instead that this White Paper might be talking about their children and even them. Then the reader needs to ask themselves: am I motivated and am I passionate about getting skills to benefit the economy? Or do I want to pursue my own route and pursue my own aspirations, hopes and dreams?

This is the big failure of the White Paper; the Minister is so steeped in an ideology of human capital that he has stopped seeing FE students as real human beings with families, lives and desires of their own.

Putting employers at the heart of the system seems to have the flip of students being pushed to one side. It's their skills that are important, not them. This is a line on employers that came out of the CAVTL report of 2014 when talking about vocational education. So it's had six years to be proven. The key areas are in Apprenticeships and T-levels. Both are problematic as they appear to seek a blurring between a broader educational experience (in Apprenticeships this part is left to heavily accountable colleges) and work (which it is left to employers to provide training for which they are totally unaccountable).

Putting employers 'in the driving seat'? What does it even mean?

The White Paper is a tired farrago of empty instrumentalist rhetoric and exaggerated claims about the 'achievements' of the last decade. The greatest failures of the White Paper lie in its failure of leadership, its failure of imagination and its lack of courage.

We needed leadership at this critical moment in our country's political and economic history. Instead, we've been served up with the same old tired rhetoric and a series of policies that haven't worked for a decade, so why on earth would we expect them to start working now? It's the same old tired human capital discourse that has disfigured FE for more than a quarter of a century. It neither recognises what FE is, or, more importantly at this critical moment in this country's history, what it could be.
