

FE White Paper another wasted opportunity

Paul Wilkinson

'Should we embrace a proposal that puts FE colleges at the centre of an underfunded, narrow, skills-based and business-led plan, which simultaneously does nothing to address mass unemployment but does saddle more students with debt for the rest of their lives?' asks Sean Vernell, vice chair of UCU's FE Committee. The simple answer of course is 'no' but that is exactly what Gavin Williamson's White Paper on FE, published in January, asks us to do.

There are currently 28 colleges subject to Financial Improvement Notices (FINs) which are harbingers of cuts and 'efficiencies'. Many more are undergoing redundancy programmes in order to stave off the inevitable. The pandemic has decimated the apprenticeship programme. The impact of Brexit and the challenges of the climate crisis will undoubtedly require a re-shaping of the workforce. Just a few reasons then to hope for a well-funded and transformative plan for the sector.

UCU members, though, will be deeply disappointed by a White Paper that once again demonstrates a paucity of fresh thinking. Once again an Education Secretary fails to provide any oxygen for a patient gasping for breath. Despite his flowery promise of a 'revolution' in FE what has emerged is a continuation of an ideological thrust that lies at the heart of its asphyxiation. It leaves intact the incorporated status of colleges run by shadowy Boards and provides very little in the way of the desperately needed financial uplift that the sector needs after year-on-year underfunding. And it is a step backwards in addressing the massive contraction of lifelong learning opportunities.

This 'revolution' would be better seen as a revolving door of failed policy ideas which will lead to contraction in breadth of provision and in access to learning. The White Paper proposes little more than a narrowed, employer-led curriculum with 'Training' and 'Skills' being preferred to 'Education' in its language. Having trailed the White Paper last July, Williamson gave us a flavour of his well-rounded view: 'We must never forget', he insisted in a speech last November, 'that the purpose of education is to give people the skills they need to get a good and

meaningful job' (1). The real and wide-ranging needs and potential of local communities will be secondary to the formulations of Accredited Chambers of Commerce, not known for either a history of engagement with educational issues or largesse when it comes to offering investment in training and skills. Neither are they renowned for creating 'meaningful and rewarding jobs' in any instance where drudgery, repetition and low wages are deemed more likely to create private profit. Yet it is these who will be invited to lead the development of 'Local Skills Improvement Plans', a power which Williamson aims to cement into statute.

Nottingham's UCU members in particular will be chilled by the language and philosophy, which was central to John van der Laarschott's bungled attempt to completely overhaul Nottingham College. This led to the bitter dispute 18 months ago, overwhelmingly won by UCU. They will have further reason to be especially dismayed as they recall the disastrous 'entrepreneurial' regime of Amarjit Basi at New College which led to financial collapse, large-scale redundancies and a merger born out of crisis.

The post-18 offer is centred around the idea of a flexible lifelong learning guarantee but, true to type, this will come in the form of loans. Williamson's 'revolution' will simply extend the process of passing on what should be social investment in learning to the learners themselves. Adult learning thus becomes a risky business for potential participants in which the accumulation of debt needs to be weighed against the unknown potential for future earnings.

According to the Institute of Fiscal Studies:

Since the early 2000s there have been large falls in spending on adult education. Spending is nearly two-thirds lower in real terms than in 2003-04 and about 50% lower than in 2009-10. This fall was mainly driven by the removal of public funding from some courses and a resultant drop in learner numbers, which fell from 4.4 million in 2004-05 to 1.5 million by 2018-19 . . . Total spending on adult education and apprenticeships combined is still about 35% down on 2009-10 in real terms (2).

However, despite the obviously urgent need to tackle this problem the plan will not be implemented until after the next general election.

It gets worse. The skill sectors in which these loans will be eligible are to be limited to a narrow range of subject areas:

Sectors deemed a low priority with low wages include hospitality, leisure, travel, retail, media and arts, while sectors such as IT, construction and engineering will get the green light. As a result, the full level 3 Lifetime Skills Guarantee qualifications are expected to number less than 400 - around a quarter of those 1,200 available from the adult education budget or funded from advanced learner loans. (3)

This decision seems most bizarre when you consider how many of these sectors have suffered badly in the pandemic but it also exposes the poverty of Williamson's ideas. This is not a vision for the future but, as Vernell suggests, is more a throwback to the limited offer of technical colleges of the 50s and 60s. An opportunity to address the huge losses in adult provision has thus been comprehensively squandered.

It is also worth noting that in a further act of vindictive vandalism the Government has already decided to axe the Union Learning Fund which has enabled the training of thousands of union learning representatives tasked with promoting education and training at the workplace by working with employers. Needless to say, trade unions are nowhere to be seen in any considerations of developing the sector in the White Paper.

There is a promise of 'significant new investment to improve the FE workforce' in 2021/22, though the promise extends only as far as an 'extensive recruitment campaign'. Quite how this is going to attract newcomers to the profession is not formulated, despite evidence that pay is one of the reasons for the current exodus of teaching staff. A January 2021 survey of the profession by DES has revealed that an alarming 53 per cent of new entrants to FE leave within five years. With the median pay gap between schools and FE rising to £9,000 it seems obvious that this will be a major factor. Even the AoC has recognised the problem: Mary Vine-Morris, AoC's national lead for employment, said that the report: 'provides irrefutable evidence' that college funding does not enable staff to be paid a fair rate for their work:

The gap in starting salaries makes it all the more important that the Government's commitment to a starting salary of £30K for teachers includes college staff . . . It is no surprise that low pay is leading to a worrying fall in retention rates as

younger staff particularly are forced to leave in order to get a salary which will allow them to buy a home and raise a family.

Vine-Morris may be right, though it should be noted that colleges represented by the AoC failed to cough up any of last year's £400m uplift in funding for staff pay and have recommended a paltry offer of 1 per cent this year.

The White Paper lacks any details on funding and Rishi Sunak's Treasury still has to be overcome. Although it recognises the need for more simplicity and stability, with the possibility of multi-year funding settlements, there are no specific promises for any ear-marked funding to tackle the pay problem. What has been trailed though is the idea of outcome-based funding, a move that will probably inflame college managers' passions for performance-related pay. Last year Williamson did announce a £1.5bn package for capital spending on buildings and infrastructure. This is very welcome of course, but this is pretty small sustenance given the billions removed from the sector over the last ten years. And should a college find itself struggling under this new regime Williamson proposes that the Education Secretary will make early and direct interventions - a centralisation of power that will be of concern to many given its potential for diktat and sledgehammer politics.

So, no revolution, and despite Williamson's promises to raise the status of FE there is little evidence that he has grasped the fundamentals. As the UCU General Secretary puts it:

The focus throughout the White Paper is on employers rather than staff and students, but the value of education is not just whether it fills skills gaps and improves productivity. Indeed, as the Government seeks to deal with the long-term fallout from the current public health crisis it is disappointing to see such little focus on the wider benefits of lifelong learning for mental health, wellbeing and community cohesion. The Government must take a much wider view of the purposes of teaching and learning. That expansive understanding - not simply the demands of employers - should be what informs teacher education for the sector. (4)

References

1. <https://feweek.co.uk/2020/07/09/gavin-williamsons-speech-on-fe-reform-the-full-text/>
2. <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/15150>
3. Fraser Whielden, <http://feweek.co.uk/2020/11/20/revealed-the-sectors-excluded-from-pms-new-lifetime-skills-guarantee/>
4. <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/11252/UCU-response-to-further-education-white-paper>.