

‘Not a revolution at all’

We reprint here an article by John Holford in the Nottingham Post on 28 August written in response to one by John van de Laarschoff, CEO of the recently merged Nottingham College, where a variety of struggles are in progress

John van de Laarschoff, chief executive of the newly-merged Nottingham College - so now boss of further education across the city - says he's leading an 'educational revolution'.

It's leading to redundancies. Reports differ on exactly how many: dozens, perhaps over a hundred. Few revolutions are bloodless: 'collateral damage' comes along the way. Sometimes, maybe, the end justifies the means.

But there's a problem. His 'educational revolution' isn't a revolution at all. It's the same stodgy mixture politicians have been telling FE leaders to dish up for decades.

When Mr van de Laarschoff says his college must 'provide employment-led education . . . powered by employers', he's just reheating yesterday's stale policy pudding. Being 'employer-led' has been the mantra in FE since the 1980s.

And it's not worked. Not for the economy. Not for employers. Not for communities. Not for students.

Why? Well, there are two main reasons. First, many employers are not, in fact, very good at predicting what the economy needs. True, some are quite good at knowing what skills their own firm needs. But their own needs come first - not the economy's. Indeed, some are even against training their staff, because highly-skilled workers find it easier to get another job.

We have public further education colleges to do what employers can't, or won't, do - or can't see the point of. To develop skills the economy needs, not only now but for the future.

It's frankly silly to treat employers as the fount of all knowledge about skills. The sad fact is that British employers have been rather poor at training - and at keeping their companies in business. German employers, in contrast, know that colleges have real expertise in planning for skills needs, what should be taught, and how. German companies have also been much better at staying in business. Germany's economy is often called the powerhouse of Europe. Coincidence?

The second reason why Mr van de Laarschoff's 'educational revolution' won't work is that his vision of what further education is really for is rather limited. Perhaps it's understandable: as he says, this is his 'first foray into the world of further education'.

We're living, he says, in a time of 'great change' with 'low levels of aspiration among our young people'. So what's his recipe for low aspiration? 'Tough love' to replace 'students' false hopes': the college must 'help employers' by supplying staff with the right skills and attitudes.

Hardly an inspiring message to students. Don't dream. Don't widen your horizons. Don't try to make the world better. Just get a job and know your place.

In fact, a good further education college means far more to its community than serving employers. Of course, Nottingham needs a strong economy and secure employment, and further education plays a key role in that. But we also need a civilised community, and a democratic one. One where young people learn to participate as citizens and to take responsibility.

We need young people - and older people too - who know how to volunteer in the community, how to participate in organisations, how to contribute to decision-making, how to speak up, how to recognise injustice and challenge authority, how to be good citizens. We need them to become entrepreneurs, and creative and independent thinkers. And like the rest of us, employers need people like this too. Because employers are citizens, and because their businesses need intelligent, considerate, thoughtful, workers - not obedient robots.

A civilised and democratic society needs people with all these skills. A further education college can't play an active part in developing them if it dreams only of being the cat's paw of employers.

It's neither right nor fair to expect employers to tell further education colleges what to teach. Colleges must, in the words of Baroness Sharp's independent commission of inquiry, be 'active shapers within their communities, supporting social cohesion, creating aspiration and providing individuals with the wherewithal to advance their social, economic and personal ambitions'.

So Nottingham College should listen not just to employers, but to charities, voluntary and community organisations, researchers, local politicians, college students, staff, teachers . . . Nottingham College should be a college that serves all the people of Nottingham, and across all aspects of their lives.