

For the few not the many?

Stephen Lambert and Mark McNally *argue that a responsible government would take back control of FE colleges as part of a National Education Service*

The Government's 'Area Review' is now complete: a development plan which has rationalised the number of further education colleges across England. Dressed up as an 'efficiency' move, the real motive, of course, was to reduce costs. To date, Tyne Met. College has merged with South Tyneside. And the global player in town, Newcastle College Group (NCG), has merged with Carlisle College - 64 miles away - and with Lewisham College in London (known locally as Le Tesco).

Educationists Patrick Ainley and Robin Simmons believe that the approach was short-sighted, ill-thought-out and misguided. Some of the smaller colleges in rural areas, like Harrogate, have been subsumed by larger organisations like the Hull College Group (HCG). This development comes hard on the heels of growing quasi-privatisation of further education. Who runs our colleges today? Are there commercial opportunities too good to be missed?

Since 1992, further education, seen as the 'cinderella' of the system, has been hit hard by successive government policies. The Further and Higher Education Act, brought in in 1993, destroyed many traditional community-based colleges, remembered fondly as 'the techs', whose remit was to meet the needs of local communities.

'Incorporation' - a strand of privatisation - in the nineties meant that colleges were cut loose from councils and run as large-sized corporate businesses. The rationale behind this change was to open up colleges to the free market and remove the 'dead hand of local government'. Arguably this had a detrimental impact. Tough new contracts were imposed on teachers, requiring them to teach classes of 30 for 24 hours a week, on top of preparation, marking, meetings and endless red tape.

Negotiated salary scales were scrapped in some big colleges and replaced with American-style performance-related pay systems. In a climate of shortages, thousands of experienced 'good' teachers have been the victims of 're-organisation strategies' with the result of 30 per cent pay cuts. Staff in their mid fifties have been weeded out via ageist employment practices, and replaced with a mix of the unqualified or young NQTs with a fixed salary of £23k and little opportunity of career progression. The academic consequences of this are not hard to envisage: profit before performance.

Subject to a sterile sea of New Right management speak, such as 'corporate touch down space strategies' and 'learning hubs', some tutors have been downgraded to the status of 'instructors' or mechanistic 'technicians', facilitating groups of students glued to a computer screen for half the week under the guise of 'e-learning'. Some of the curriculum provision is 'outstanding' in colleges like New College Durham and Gateshead. And 'good' at colleges like Darlington, QE and Bishop Auckland. However, some is either 'in need of improvement' or 'inadequate', like that of the international 'virtual college', Learndirect.

To some critics, the leadership culture in some of the larger institutions is based on the old Soviet model, with an unhealthy emphasis on 'fear and control' and a pre-occupation with 'empire-building', while at the same time stifling grassroots initiative and enterprise. Some of these places have lost focus. Learners and apprentices deserve better, say Ofsted.

In the last decade an army of quality controllers have carved out lucrative careers to support colleges as 'business units' striving to meet 'targets' or 'outcomes', not to mention a battalion of private sector 'consultants'. As Ainley notes in his book

Betraying a Generation, this money 'could be more effectively used directly supporting young people', or at least put into student hardship funds.

According to the teachers' body NEU, stress, anxiety and workplace bullying are a key feature of the sector. The job has become increasingly 'proletarianised' in the last decade, with teachers lacking any real control over their work in the classroom. It's small wonder that hundreds of decent teachers are leaving the profession in their droves to work in the private sector or abroad.

Meanwhile, the 'marketisation' of further education has led to principals being rebranded as CEOs, with eye-watering salaries. A dozen top college bosses in 2017 commanded 'double bubble' prime ministerial salaries of between £200 and £400k with perks like private healthcare and company cars, regardless of performance or Ofsted inspection results.

According to the Taxpayers' Alliance, hardly a leftwing body, the former maverick boss of Newcastle College Group, Dame Jackie Fisher, prior to her retirement at the age of 57 in 2013, was coining it in on a yearly salary of £293,764, coupled with bonus payments of £54,090 and private healthcare (despite Newcastle having the best public hospitals outside London!). The then Conservative prime minister David Cameron slammed the board of governors' decision to award this sum as 'highly irresponsible'.

In 2016 NCG paid its chief executive £287k, its director of finance £201k and its principal £160k - including bonuses and pensions - while the former chair of governors trousered an annual stipend of £30k as non-executive director of Intrain, the company's independent training provider.

As Ainley points out, the huge incomes of college 'super managers' are not a measure of their individual contribution to increased productivity, rather a reflection of their ability to set their own salary and bonus levels - in conjunction with college chairpersons!

Organisations such as NCG and its neighbours the HCG and Doncaster Education City, till three years ago, had grandiose dreams of building massive education empires, some global in range, with a notable presence in China, with discrete local colleges. Likewise, many of these 'corporations' operate in secret, lacking any democratic accountability. Governing body meetings, where and when they exist, are not open to the public or media. Most boards are packed out with handpicked business people with no educational management or teaching experience. Few, if any, local councillors sit on these bodies, and there is an absence of representation from the wider community and third sector too.

Although bringing in a wealth of commercial expertise, there's a clear need to 'democratise' these bodies with a diverse range of people such as teachers, learning assistants, parents and students. Even canteen workers may have something to offer, given that they're at the frontline in serving meals to students everyday!

For the writer Melissa Benn, in her book *Life Chances*, a responsible government must take back control of the FE sector as part of a National Education Service. According to the polemicist Barnaby Lenon in his new book *Other People's Children*, six out of ten youngsters aged 16 to 19 (and mostly coming from working-class backgrounds) attend their local college, following courses ranging from hairdressing to plumbing.

Simmons and Smyth rightly argue, in their book *Education and Working-Class Youth* (2018), that the promise of a better-funded, publicly accountable further education service based on cooperation rather than competition, improved pay for teachers and support staff, a cap on executive pay, a much-needed remodelling of apprenticeships, and vocational education supported with student grants, would go some way towards improving matters.

Likewise there's a case to set up regional standards boards or scrutiny and overview committees, made up of independent people, to weed out recently alleged wrongdoing, cronyism, nepotism and corruption which has affected the larger English college groups such as Doncaster Education City (previously headed-up by George Holmes, now vice-chancellor of Bolton University). College board chairpersons need to justify principals' annual salaries in excess of £150k to the House of Commons Select Committee. Academy leaders are now obliged to do this.

There's a pressing need to bring greater democratic accountability into governance arrangements so that they better reflect the communities in which they serve. This works well in Scotland and Wales, where colleges have been de-incorporated. Scrutiny arrangements there remain robust and educational standards are high. We mustn't lose sight of the fact that the English learner should come first, and not the Far East, the nation's key economic competitor. Blyth not Beijing, Dunston not Dubai, Sunderland not Singapore, and Middlesbrough not Malaysia! Our colleges must serve the many and not the few.