

Who runs our colleges?

Stephen Lambert *emphasises the need to make F. E. accountable again.*

The Government's plan to reduce the number of FE colleges across the country is short-sighted and misguided. In the North East there are roughly 14 colleges, most of which are 15 miles away from each other. In County Durham, Bishop Auckland College is 32 miles away from Gateshead College. If this plan ever sees the light of day, some of the smaller institutions, mostly in rural and

socially disadvantaged areas, will close. Hundreds of students will simply not be able to access courses or learning programmes due to the lack of public transport – no trains and irregular buses. To date, North Tyneside and South Tyneside colleges have agreed a merger, and Carlisle College has become part of Newcastle College Group (NCG). But above all, the Government's proposed change

raises the key question: just who does run our colleges in the second decade of the twenty-first century, both in the North East and elsewhere in the country?

Since 1992 FE has been hit hard by successive government changes - mostly quite damaging to students, college staff and local communities. The Further and Higher Education Act implemented in 1993 destroyed

many traditional community-based colleges whose remit was to meet the needs of local neighbourhoods, 16-19 year-olds, mature students returning to learning, and local businesses. Incorporation meant that FE colleges were cut loose from local education authorities and ran as large businesses motivated primarily by making money.

Arguably these changes had a detrimental impact on staff. New contracts requiring that lecturers teach up to 25 hours a week were introduced in many colleges. Nationally negotiated salary scales were scrapped, and in many cases replaced by American-style systems of 'performance-related pay'. Many experienced teachers have been victims of 'reorganisation' with the result of 40 per cent pay cuts. Staff in their fifties have been weeded out via unlawful ageist employment practices, and too often replaced with semi-qualified 22 year-olds paid about £18,000 a year. Subjected to a sterile sea of neo-liberal management speak such as 'strategies', 'operational plans', 'action plans', 'hubs' and so on, most lecturers have been reduced to the status of 'mechanistic technicians' facilitating groups of students glued to a computer screen for half the week. The management culture in some of these institutions is based on the Stalinist model – namely fear and control. Stress, mental ill health and staff bullying is rife in the FE sector. In short, FE practitioners have become increasingly 'proletarianised' in the last two decades lacking any real control over their work in the classroom or workshop.

Meanwhile, marketisation of further education has led to principals being rebranded as chief executive officers with whopping big salaries. The former maverick boss of NCG, Dame Jackie Fisher, was earning in

excess of £200,000 per annum (funded by the taxpayer) – more than the prime minister of Britain! Further evidence of monetisation can be seen in the appointment of principals in addition to CEOs. Other invented job titles borrowed from the US include 'Director of Curriculum' - in other words, someone in charge of lessons (and thinking up gimmicks to justify their existence). Organisations such as NCG till recently had grandiose dreams of building massive education business empires, some of them global in range with a notable presence in China, with discrete local colleges. To its credit, however, NCG has forged a constructive partnership with Newcastle City Council and is focusing its efforts on meeting the needs of local communities, especially NEETs and other marginalised groups.

Likewise, many of these 'corporations', as they like to describe themselves, lack any democratic accountability. Even Dame Jackie argued that the only person she was accountable to was the Secretary of State for Education. Most governing bodies are packed out with business people with no direct or indirect experience of educational management. Few, if any, locally elected councillors sit on these boards, and there remains an absence of representation from the Third Sector, a key player in any regional economy. Take the NCG board of governors, which has an over-representation of members from the private sector – ten governors are well-established business people!

Although bringing about a wealth of industrial and commercial expertise, there's a clear need to strengthen governing bodies with people who have had direct experience of educational management and teaching at the 'chalk face'. As Les Walton, chair of the Northern

Education Trust, notes, the student must remain central in any college's business plan. So why not have more teachers, learning assistants and students serving on these boards. And even the dinner lady may have something to offer – given that she's at the front line in dealing with young students every lunch time.

With devolution in Wales, the Welsh Assembly in 2010 decided to 'de-incorporate' and focus on what colleges (known as the 'old-techs') had always been about: centres for vocational education and training, adult and community education, GCSE and A-level provision, for the old-style quality three-year apprenticeships, and day-release for mechanics and white collar / white blouse workers. In other words, the main priority was to serve the needs and aspirations of their local communities, public bodies, charities and businesses, and not the Far East or Dubai, our economic competitors.

The Government must abandon its plan to amalgamate colleges, which would simply end up creating unaccountable 'titan-colleges' headed up by over-remunerated 'titan-CEOs', as well as being geographically inaccessible to many potential learners. Colleges need to be rebranded as community colleges on the American model. Furthermore, we need to see greater democratic accountability built into governing bodies, namely representation from local government, the community itself and the voluntary sector. Although it remains impracticable and costly for LEAs, in the light of further academisation, to resume strategic responsibility for FE colleges, the setting up of regional combined authorities in some parts of the country from 2017 provides a good opportunity for scrutiny and overview of what these colleges do.