

FE and Skills across the UK: the case of England

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Abstract

This briefing paper argues that the role of FE in England needs to be viewed through a historical and system lens rather than through the rhetoric of official policy. A broader analytical approach suggests that further education in England has since the early 1990s been shaped by the processes of marketization and national policy levers to create a relatively inclusive and reactive FE national sector. However, FE colleges have now entered a particularly unstable period of retrenchment due to funding, competition and the effects of Area Based Reviews (ABRs). At the same time, there are some positive signs because ABRs have raised the local profile of colleges with a more prominent role for locally co-ordinated action and reform of technical qualifications points to a greater role for FE at the higher levels. Nevertheless, deep system problems remain and without wider reform the future of FE will continue to be largely shaped by the negative behaviours of other educational and economic forces. The paper concludes by arguing that FE needs to make a transition from its reactive role to a more strategic local and sub-regional leadership role, but that this will depend not only on FE colleges and their local missions, but also on building a wider local learning and skills 'ecosystem' environment in which this connective and leadership role can be realised.

The unique role of England within the UK

England has a unique role within the United Kingdom being by far the largest country in terms of population and size. It also dominates the political complexion of the UK as a whole, due to the fact that Westminster is seen to represent not only England but also the British State. It is a situation in which England and the UK and Englishness and Britishness have become blurred. This demographic, economic and political dominance remains, despite democratic devolution and the emergence of national parliaments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is a dominance that is driving policy divergence in education and other fields.

The processes of divergence in education have also been fuelled over the past three decades by a greater willingness in England to experiment with neoliberal forms of organisation – notably institutional autonomy, marketisation and a reduced role for local

government. It is also the case that size matters. In terms of education, England houses a large number of the UK selective and research-intensive universities and also continues to provide the majority of upper secondary education (USE) qualifications for Wales and Northern Ireland (NI) and for the small number of schools in Scotland that wish to offer them.

The current English education and training landscape – FE in retreat?

This wider political and educational landscape provides an important backdrop for analysing the role of further education (FE) colleges in England. Unsurprisingly, most colleges in the UK are to be found in England. There are 334 college in the UK and, the vast majority (288) are English. Of these, most are general further education (GFE) colleges (189), with the remainder comprising sixth form colleges (73); land-based colleges (14) and 12 specialist designated colleges (AoC, 2017). It is anticipated that as a result of merger processes arising from ABRs, the number of English GFE colleges may be significantly reduced.

However, national and numerical dominance does not necessarily signal the UK dominance of English FE in a wider political or educational sense. As we have seen from the first seminar, the role of FE in Scotland, Wales and NI is very much influenced by their respective national contexts. Moreover in England, and despite some signs that government now recognises the important skills role of FE, the FE sector appears to be in a period of retrenchment. This is due principally to falling levels of participation. The proportion of 16-18 year olds attending GFE has fallen slightly in recent years compared with participation trends in schools, sixth form colleges and higher education (HE) (DfE, 2017), whereas the decline in adult participation has been dramatic. And this is despite the fact that FE makes a major contribution to achieving qualifications outcomes at Levels 2 and 3 by 19 (Hodgson and Spours, 2013).

This FE 'stasis' in England is largely the result of the impact of government policy since 2010; notably academisation and the growing of school sixth forms (many of them ineffective and inefficient); the more recent emphasis on apprenticeships and the work-based route; the continued expansion of HE; the impact of student loans on FE and, of course, the effects of

austerity and expenditure cuts. Amidst these problems for FE in England, it continues to play a central role in the education and training of particular social groups; supports local communities and seeks relationships with employers/employment at sub-regional and regional levels. The roots of this paradox between the historical and continued importance of FE and the fluctuations of its fortunes can be found in a brief historical and systemic analysis.

A historical and system perspective – marketised and socially inclusive

Education expansion and the growing social inclusion role of FE

FE colleges in the post-war period were known as the ‘local tech’ – a place associated with vocational skills development; practical qualifications (e.g. City and Guilds) and apprenticeships. The vocational skills system was not a mass one as in Germany (too many young people went into unskilled work); but FE while relatively small had a clear vocational identity. It also existed at the lower end of a vocational ladder that included local polytechnics – both under the control of local authorities.

All of this was to change in the 1980s and early 1990s as the youth labour market collapsed and post-16 educational participation expanded. This educational tectonic change provided the context within which FE colleges increasingly took on a ‘social inclusion role’; as they increasingly catered, through prevocational and low level vocational provision, for young people unable to access the academic track; selective vocational courses or work.

A reactive and marketised national sector

FE’s role in education system expansion was given a ‘market twist’ in the early 1990s, as polytechnics became ‘autonomous’ universities and FE colleges became Incorporated institutions – neither fully public nor fully private organisations. Instead, FE was seen to comprise a distinct national sector. In this marketised scenario, however, colleges never became fully autonomous institutions but, instead, were heavily steered by national policy levers, notably funding mechanisms and by a centralized funding council that replaced the role of local authorities (Coffield *et al.*, 2008).

Despite becoming part of a growing national sector, FE colleges found it difficult to establish their own professional identity. This was due not only to the turbulence around lecturer conditions of service in the 1990s, but also the ways in which FE colleges were shaped by the wider dynamics of the neoliberal economic and educational era – the rising role of competitive schooling and of universities together with the relative absence of local employers as the economy became less industrial and more financialized and service sector driven. The relationship between colleges, the economy and skills ebbed and flowed according to the nature of governments and their policy orientation to FE. But throughout this era and to the present day, their main contribution became seen as the ‘suppliers of skills’ to employers rather than as true partners.

The paradoxes of FE in England

A historical perspective begins to provide some explanation regarding paradoxes of FE that persist to this day – perceived as marginal to the education system (compared with schools and universities) yet continually important; unstable yet resilient due to FE’s ability to react and respond; conflicted by its competing roles and relationships but still seeking to build its vocational mission. Furthermore, despite having a highly-committed workforce that chooses to work in relatively disadvantageous conditions, the forces surrounding FE and the multiple roles it has had to develop in reaction to these have contributed to a weak sense of professional identity. The paradoxes of FE today could also be seen in broader political terms – education institutions that have mild social democratic aims, but are trying to achieve these through largely neoliberal means.

A policy perspective – an extreme Anglo Saxon model?

Following the General Elections of 2010 and 2015, the government approach to upper secondary education has been characterised as an ‘extreme Anglo Saxon model’ (Hodgson and Spours, 2014). The concept of the ‘Anglo Saxon model’ (Sahlberg, 2007) is based on a set of education system features compared to different systems globally (i.e. in the Anglo-Saxon case, the dominance of a standardised curriculum and testing regimes; top-down accountability measures; and institutional competition and choice) that have been promulgated worldwide by transnational organisations such as the OECD. The assertion

that England employs an extreme version is based on a series of policy developments since 2010. In terms of curriculum and qualifications, reforms have included changes to the national curriculum towards a more 'traditional' content and pedagogy; a focus on 'the English Baccalaureate' for 14-16 year olds focused on the acquisition of so called 'facilitating' academic subjects and a decisive shift towards linear and summative approaches to assessment in GCSEs and A Levels. Vocational qualifications have also been subject to reform, having been divided into Applied General and Technical, both of which contain much greater external examination. The Anglo-Saxon approach is also reflected in highly marketised institutional and governance arrangements with increased support for autonomous schools and a range of new education providers (e.g. Free Schools, University Technical Colleges [UTCs], Studio Schools) competing with the more traditional providers – school sixth forms and colleges - for the delivery of USE. FE colleges continue to operate as incorporated bodies. At the same time, however, policy and governance has become even more centralised with the formation of a single ministry and funding body, with a powerful role for the inspectorate (Ofsted) and the new Institute for Apprenticeships but no independent curriculum body.

One of the significances of the Anglo-Saxon model for FE is that it has served to isolate colleges and to deflect attention away from collaborative strategies, both with employers and a wider range of social partners. However, this latter issue is not the fault of FE alone. Employers in the UK are notoriously difficult to engage in education and training (Keep, 2005) due to a range of factors, including a historical deregulation culture; repeated government supply-side skills strategies and a predominance of SMEs that struggle to undertake skills related innovation.

A current perspective - collaborative and vocational policy turns?

However, the factors supporting the Anglo-Saxon model are weakening as market-led competition fuels inefficiency and ineffectiveness. Austerity has forced the Government to implement post-16 ABRs in England (HM Government, 2015). While focusing primarily on the financial viability of colleges, ABRs also appear to suggest the possibility of greater co-ordination at the local and regional levels (Spours *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, the role of local

authorities is growing, albeit from a relatively weak position with future devolution of the adult skills budget to certain city regions/groups of local authorities. And there has been a shift away from the 'academicism' of the Gove reforms (but not the curriculum division), towards vocational and technical education with the *Post-16 Skills Plan* (DfE, 2016), which proposes the development of 15 new Technical Routes (T Levels) and the new standards-based apprenticeships that are to be funded via a UK-wide apprenticeship levy. Added to this there is the wider Brexit environment and the effects of Theresa May's 'soft economic nationalism' (Pearce, 2016). Whatever version of Brexit is pursued, one outcome could be to focus more firmly on the skills development of young people in order that they are able to replace some sections of migrant labour. Furthermore, the absence of any dramatic change in the role of employers as providers of work-based education in what will remain a relatively de-regulated labour market, could also result in a greater role for FE colleges as they continue to fill the gaps left by other social partners.

While the vocational and collaborative 'policy turns' could produce an upturn in participation in FE and more focused relations with employers, wider systemic problems remain. Policy on FE in England remains predominantly based on a marketised institutional autonomy model; the qualifications system has become more selective and exclusive; the sector continues to be pushed around by policy and starved of funding and, critically, negative behaviours of other potential social partners (e.g. school-based selection, employer absence and HE indifference) remain relatively unchallenged.

A new vision for FE in England – leading local learning systems?

The Government assumes that a smaller number of more economically viable FE colleges with the addition of a few Institutes of Technology represents a new future for FE.

Compared with the present state of flux this is possibly true. Looked at historically and systemically, however, it also looks like just staggering on. In organisational terms, larger FE college formations will be surrounded by a plethora of smaller competing and isolated organisations - school sixth forms, Sixth Form Colleges, Independent Training Providers and SMEs – constituting an inefficient and ineffective landscape.

It is possible, on the other hand, to see an alternative future for FE in England. In this FE colleges see themselves less as a reactive national sector competing with other forces and more as a ‘connective hub’ in local collaborative learning ‘systems’ or what have been referred to as local ‘High Progression and Skills Ecosystems’ (Hodgson and Spours, 2016a). Figure 1 below summarises the type of shifts from ‘sector’ to ‘system’ along a number of related dimensions:

Figure 1. FE as distinctive national sector or as part of a local learning system

Dimension	National sector	Local learning system
College role and function	Distinctive institutions in a marketised national sector	Connective progression and vocational hubs in local/regional skills systems
Concept of skill formation	Skills supply for employers	Skills co-production through new stronger partnerships between colleges and employers
Role of national and local government	Strong top-down policy levers (e.g. funding, inspection and performance indicators) and weak local government	More devolved ‘policy frameworks’ with greater local discretion regarding the allocation of funding and review of quality
Role of schools and other educational social partners	Market-oriented, autonomous and competing entities	Strong local collaborative partnership working and network building for progression and more effective outcomes for employers and learners
Role of employers	Voluntaristic - little incentive or obligation to engage locally	New incentives and regulatory frameworks to bring employers into local collaborative systems
Professionalism	Distinctive dual professionalism	Connective triple professionalism

Colleges may assert that they already demonstrate some of the features required to build local learning systems, such as ‘progression hubs’ and the concept of a more outward-looking professionalism. However, the main conclusion drawn from this diagram is that a new role for FE will be dependent not only on how colleges see their local leadership role, but on the creation of a ‘system’ or innovation ‘ecosystem’ (Mason and Ross, 2014) in which these leadership and connective functions can flourish. As to the relationship between ‘sector’ and ‘system’; the diagram is not in fact suggesting a radical break between one and

the other, but the growth of 'system features' that gradually redefine the essential character of a new FE sector that is less focused on its distinctive reactive role and more focused on its leadership and connective role in what might be described as a 'post-incorporation model' (Hodgson and Spours, 2015).

In late 2017, a key question is how far the outcomes of ABRs provide the opportunity for some of these local strategic dimensions to be strengthened through the sub-regional working groups that will be formed to take forward the ABR recommendations designed to build relations between colleges, employers, local authorities and wider stakeholders? A further question is how far the other social partners within localities will be prepared to change the way they operate. Colleges cannot enact this agenda on their own.

Policy learning in divergent and convergent scenarios

As Keep (forthcoming) argues, policy learning is difficult to realise in divergent situations when national systems appear to be organized according to increasingly different principles and assumptions. In this situation, respective national policy makers may be forgiven for thinking that they have too little in common to hold a constructive conversation.

Conversely, it is fair to assume that policy learning is more likely to occur through processes of convergence in which social partners from the four countries are able to identify relatively common problems and challenges being addressed in different national contexts. In other words, policy learning is encouraged when characteristics of the 'UK laboratory' are present (Hodgson and Spours, 2016b).

Given that it is highly unlikely that in 2017 Scotland, Wales and NI are going to be attracted by English marketization, the question is whether England can transition away from the Anglo-Saxon model that has had its starkest representations in the focus on general education and competitive schooling promoted by the Cameron, Osborne and Gove version of Conservatism. Perhaps the political environment is now sufficiently unpredictable that it will encourage political actors to look beyond previous boundaries and assumptions in order to seek out new solutions. In terms of FE, it may mean recognizing that the English

marketised model has run its course and another trajectory is required that perhaps has more in common with the FE experience in other parts of the UK.

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