Hello again, Mr Macfarlane

Tertiary colleges for the twenty-first century

Robin Simmons

Abstract

This paper revisits the Macfarlane Report of 1980, the first draft of which recommended the dissolution of school sixth forms, sixth form colleges and other providers of post-compulsory education and training, and the establishment of a national system of tertiary colleges across England – a programme of reform which would effectively have extended the principles of comprehensive education to the post-compulsory level. Whilst the rejection of the Macfarlane committee's plan may represent an opportunity which has been lost forever, the paper presents a case for the revival of tertiary colleges across England. This, it is argued, would provide a much more coherent, 'democratised' system of provision than the current model of further education based on the neo-liberal principles of markets, competition, diversity and choice. A national system of tertiary colleges would, I contend, be able to deal far more effectively – and equitably – with some of the significant social and educational challenges now facing contemporary British society, although a concomitant programme of labour market reform is, I argue, also necessary to create sustainable and meaningful employment, and stimulate demand for learning.

Keywords: further education; tertiary colleges; Macfarlane Report; comprehensive education

Introduction

Debates about comprehensive education focus mainly on schools. Much less attention is paid to post-compulsory education, even though most young people remain in some form of learning after leaving school and many adults return to education – sometimes serially – many years after finishing their initial schooling. This paper begins to address this by focusing on the further education (FE) sector in England, a traditionally low-profile endeavour but which is now – with the exception of pre-school learning – perhaps the most diverse, muddled and commercialised sector of education in the UK. The central argument of the paper, however, is that the failure to implement the initial recommendations of the 1980 Macfarlane Report and create a national system of tertiary colleges represented a significant lost opportunity for FE and the comprehensive movement more broadly. Had Macfarlane's plan been adopted, further education would have been reorganised according to the principles of comprehensive education, and

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FE would have been able to cast off its long-standing image as the 'Cinderella sector' of English education. It would also have allowed post-compulsory education to be delivered in a far more consistent, efficient and flexible fashion. Whilst tertiary colleges have been out of favour for some time now, their revival would, it is argued, help ameliorate some of the significant challenges now facing policymakers and young people in particular, especially in terms of making a broad variety of education and training more accessible to a wider constituency of potential learners – a principle long advocated by proponents of comprehensive education (see Rubinstein and Stoneman, 1972).

The paper begins with a brief history of further education in England. This provides the reader with an insight into the evolution of FE and its current 'condition'. The second section deals with the tertiary college movement, the Macfarlane Report and its aftermath. The third section presents the case for a revival of tertiary colleges which, it is proposed, would provide a far more effective – and more just – system of post-compulsory education than is offered by the current complex mish-mash of providers. The paper concludes by locating the call for tertiary reorganisation in a broader programme of labour market reform which, I argue, is necessary to provide meaningful opportunities for education and work in twenty-first century Britain.

Further education in England: a brief history

The English FE sector consists of a diverse range of organisations providing a broad variety of learning opportunities for adults and young people over the minimum school-leaving age of sixteen. Further education colleges – or technical colleges as they were formerly known – have, however, always been the most significant providers of FE in England, although school sixth forms, sixth form colleges and specialist colleges play an important role too. These organisations compete for 'business' against each other and hundreds of private and voluntary providers, which are now part of the landscape of post-compulsory education and training. Effectively, the English further education sector is a complex mixed economy of public, private and voluntary providers operating in a quasi-market engineered and managed by the state. This means that further education is not only a highly competitive affair but also difficult to understand, not only for those with little experience of FE but also for many working or studying in the sector (Orr and Simmons, 2010).

FE colleges offer a wide variety of learning opportunities, from 'basic skills' and GCSE 'resits' through to apprenticeships, professional qualifications and degree-level programmes. Their 'core business' has, however, always been teaching vocational skills and knowledge for everyday employment – whether for the construction site, the engineering workshop, the care home, office or hotel (Ainley and Bailey, 1997, p2). Consequently, further education has always been a largely working-class endeavour

even if, traditionally, FE colleges mainly served relatively privileged sections of the working class. Either way, the upper and middle classes rarely frequent further education colleges and few policymakers have detailed knowledge or experience of FE (Richardson, 2007).

The history of England's FE colleges can be traced back to the mechanics' institutes of Victorian Britain, but local education authorities (LEAs) were central to their development for much of the twentieth century (see Summerfield and Evans, 1990). Local authority involvement was, however, initially voluntary and some parts of the country were left without any meaningful provision until the 1944 Education Act required LEAs to secure 'adequate facilities' for further education (Bailey, 1987). Adequacy is, however, open to interpretation and the time, energy and resources different LEAs committed to FE varied considerably. Some LEAs also allowed colleges significant autonomy in their affairs whereas others were more restrictive and controlling. But the 'footprint' of each college was also shaped, to some extent, by the demands of local business and industry, as well as the presence (or otherwise) of neighbouring schools, colleges and other providers (Waitt, 1980). Some colleges were more 'open' and inclusive than others, but there was generally a reluctance to engage with the needs of women, ethnic minorities and others outside their traditional clientele of apprentices, technicians and other aspirant workers (FEU, 1979). All in all though, it is fair to say that FE under local authority control was varied and uneven, and that this variability existed at numerous levels: between LEAs; within individual LEAs; and even between different departments within individual colleges (Simmons, 2008). Either way, further education was essentially a low-profile affair on the margins of the education system (Lucas, 2004).

The climate began to change during the 1970s. There was, on one hand, rising inflation and increasing unemployment, alongside significant cuts in public expenditure. But the collapse of British industry, which began following the OPEC oil crisis of 1973, had particular consequences for FE, not least in curtailing the supply of day-release students which traditionally provided most of its client base (Ainley, 2007). Many colleges were forced to embrace new constituencies of students, and participation in further education, especially on a full-time basis, began to grow. An important development was the introduction of various training and retraining schemes for the unemployed, which brought new communities of adults and young people into colleges (Ainley and Corney, 1990).More generally though, there was increasing disquiet about the education system; James Callaghan's (1976) 'great debate' speech, for example, (in)famously blaming the UK's relative economic decline on the supposed inability of the education system to provide employers with appropriately skilled and motivated workers – although, in the case of FE, such accusations can be traced back much further (Summerfield and Evans, 1990).

Thereafter, there was, during the 1980s, a series of attempts to reshape education

in order to serve the perceived needs of the economy. The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act was, however, pivotal for further education. Following this act, all FE colleges were removed from LEA control; each institution became fully responsible for its own affairs; principals became 'chief executives'; and colleges were forced to compete against each other in marketised conditions engineered and maintained by the state (Simmons, 2008). All this was accompanied by deep funding cuts. Twenty thousand staff left FE in the first five years after colleges were removed from municipal control (Burchill, 1998). FE colleges became much more performative institutions; teachers' pay and conditions deteriorated; macho-management and industrial unrest became commonplace. FE colleges became far more taxing places in which to work, particularly for teaching staff (Randle and Brady, 1997). Whilst New Labour increased spending on FE, it also intensified performative measures, tightened central control, and serially encouraged private and voluntary providers into the sector (Avis, 2009). More recently, successive Conservative-led governments have inflicted round after round of cuts on colleges and many are now in financial peril. Quality and patterns of delivery remain varied and uneven, despite a programme of area reviews in 2015-17 which aimed to rationalise provision, and create more resilient, efficient providers (Burke, 2017).

Going tertiary

The term tertiary college is sometimes used simply to describe an institution which provides both academic and vocational FE. But tertiary colleges are, in their truest form, sole providers of publicly funded post-sixteen education in any given area, other than universities and other institutions of higher education (RCU, 2003). There are no school sixth forms, sixth form colleges or other FE providers in the vicinity. Young people of all backgrounds, aptitudes and abilities leave school at sixteen and go to a single organisation providing a broad, inclusive curriculum – although tertiary colleges also serve the needs of adult learners, business and the community. Full-time and part-time education, vocational, pre-vocational and academic learning all take place within one institution. Effectively, tertiary colleges are comprehensive institutions of post-school education and training.

Increasing financial pressures during the 1970s drove many local authorities to reorganise post-compulsory education. Some LEAs decided to concentrate sixth-form provision in particular schools and leave others to concentrate on eleven-to sixteen-year-olds. Elsewhere, neighbouring schools were encouraged to form sixth-form consortia, although such arrangements were often fraught with logistical difficulties (Terry, 1987, pp10-11). Other LEAs chose to create sixth form colleges for students continuing with academic studies after the age of sixteen. This offered some advantages, not least the ability of sixth form colleges to offer a broader range of A levels than schools. Some

local authorities chose a more radical option: going tertiary. England's first tertiary college opened in 1970 after Devon LEA decided to abolish school sixth forms in Exeter and replace them with a single post-sixteen institution. By the end of the decade, fifteen tertiary colleges existed in different parts of England. Somewhat paradoxically given their antipathy to comprehensive education, most of them were founded in Tory-controlled LEAs, especially in rural authorities with falling school rolls, small, unviable sixth forms and underused FE colleges (Cotterell and Heley, 1981).

There was, in the run-up to the 1979 general election, something of a political consensus around the need for a national review of post-compulsory education, and a post-sixteen working party, chaired by the under-secretary of state for education, Neil Macfarlane, was established soon after Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government took power. The Macfarlane committee's remit included: assessing future demand for different forms of education and training; the relationship between schools and colleges; and the cost-effectiveness of existing provision. Its initial proposals were nothing short of sensational. The first draft of the Macfarlane Report recommended the dissolution of all school sixth forms and sixth form colleges, and replacing extant arrangements with a national system of tertiary colleges through 'building up' FE colleges into broader, comprehensive post-sixteen institutions (Macfarlane, 1980). This, the committee argued, would enable a wider range of full-time and part-time courses across the country, and offer significant cost savings vis-à-vis other alternatives (Macfarlane, 1980, p31). It was a truly radical proposal which, if implemented, would have extended the principles of comprehensive education to the post-compulsory level and brought the 'Cinderella service' of FE into the educational mainstream (Simmons, 2009). Macfarlane's proposals, however, ran contrary to the core principles of Tory education policy and senior figures in the Conservative Party were, perhaps unsurprisingly, infuriated by Macfarlane's proposals (David 1981, p764). The committee was forced to reconsider its conclusions, and the final draft of the Macfarlane Report merely recommended that LEAs *consider* tertiary reorganisation. National reorganisation was, it stated, unrealistic due to patterns of 'existing investment', 'local preferences' and the 'success of many "all through" schools' (Macfarlane 1980, p36). The end result was therefore something of a fudge.

Some LEAs nevertheless pressed on with reorganisation and there were, by the early 1990s, some seventy tertiary colleges across England, although school sixth forms and sixth form colleges were sometimes allowed to exist alongside them. The lack of a national policy also meant that competition with institutions in neighbouring authorities undermined the comprehensive principle, even if a fully tertiary model was introduced in a particular LEA. Over time though, the shifting policy context made tertiary reorganisation much more difficult. The 1988 Education Reform Act encouraged schools to opt out of municipal oversight, thus enabling them to set up sixth forms off

their own bat. Often the prospect of schools leaving the fold also served to deter LEAs from reorganisation. The possibility of creating more tertiary colleges was then more or less extinguished when the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act removed all FE and sixth form colleges from local authorities. LEAs were reduced to bit-part players on the margins of post-compulsory education, and notions of local planning and co-ordination went by the board thereafter (Simmons, 2009).

Discussion

Education, as Bernstein (1970) reminds us, cannot compensate for all society's ills. But the way it is organised and delivered can nevertheless exacerbate or ameliorate inequality to some degree – and tertiary colleges offer significant social and educational benefits for students from across a broad range of backgrounds and abilities. Their broad and inclusive ethos and intake means that tertiary colleges can play an important role in what Rubinstein and Stoneman (1972) described as the 'democratization' of education. But research by the Responsive Colleges Unit (RCU, 2003) also found that tertiary colleges usually had better achievement rates than general FE colleges and sixth form colleges, and that they were more successful than both in terms of encouraging progression to higher education. It also found that their retention rates were almost as high as sixth form colleges, despite the fact that tertiary colleges have a more diverse curriculum and more inclusive ethos. Perhaps most notably, the RCU found that tertiary colleges help increase participation, especially among the socially and economically disadvantaged, and provide them with greater options, including access to 'minority subjects' normally reserved for the privileged. With full-time and part-time courses, humanities, arts and sciences, and general and vocational education all offered within one institution, the potential to reduce entrenched barriers between academic and vocational learning also becomes more feasible (Cotterell and Heley 1981, pp10-11). In other words, tertiary colleges are best placed to provide a more flexible curriculum best able to develop the talents and abilities of a greater range of students than is possible through other means.

The chance to create a national system of tertiary colleges was perhaps lost forever when Mr Macfarlane was forced to climb down from his initial recommendations over forty years ago now. There has, since that time, been wave after wave of quasi-market 'reforms' which have promoted notions of diversity and choice across all sectors of education – and private providers are now significant players in FE, especially in terms of apprenticeships and other forms of work-related learning. Whilst such arrangements are presented as driving up standards and empowering students as customers, market forces in education systematically benefit those most able to manipulate them to their own advantage – and it is those individuals and groups who possess greater levels of

social, economic and cultural capital who are further privileged, especially in terms of gaining access to more prestigious forms of learning (Ball, 2003).

The way that education has been restructured and reordered since the 1980s means that radical change would be needed in order to revive the tertiary college movement. But, whilst a government committed to comprehensive education is unlikely in the immediate future, expedience may yet put tertiary colleges back on the agenda. The coronavirus pandemic has had far-reaching effects on patterns of work, consumption and numerous aspects of social and economic activity. This, in turn, is causing significant rises in unemployment, especially among young people, with youth unemployment predicted to reach levels not seen since the 1980s (Resolution Foundation, 2020). Consequently, there is a renewed focus on work-related training which, according to official discourse, will help the unemployed develop new skills and adapt to different ways of working. On example is the Kickstart Scheme, which aims to instil unemployed sixteen to twenty-four-year-olds with the skills and confidence necessary to secure sustainable employment (HM Treasury, 2020). Another is the 'lifetime skills guarantee' which will, we are told, provide access to fully funded level 3 courses for adults without an A level or equivalent qualification, from April 2021 (BBC, 2020).

The challenges associated with delivering all this should not be underestimated – especially via a system (if indeed system is the correct term) which is both highly complex and substantially underfunded. The huge expenditure associated with ameliorating the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic also means that strict public spending constraints are likely in the long term. But it is hard to imagine how existing arrangements will be able to provide the flexible, inclusive curriculum necessary to deal with adults and young people who would not otherwise participate in post-compulsory education and training. The current mosaic of providers is, moreover, also highly inefficient, in terms of producing both significant duplication and gaps in provision, and the considerable waste of time, energy and resources associated with markets, competition, diversity and choice.

Conclusion

Tertiary colleges, as we have seen, offer considerable advantages over other forms of post-compulsory education, not least their ability to cater successfully for a larger, more diverse range of learners than is otherwise possible. They are best placed to offer the broad, flexible curriculum needed to deal with the challenges facing adults and young people going forward – especially in terms of offering provision able to bridge the academic-vocational divide which has always bedevilled education, especially in class-conscious England (Hyland and Winch, 2007). Financially, tertiary colleges make sense too. The current complex montage of FE providers is characterised by multiple

duplication of personnel, finance, marketing and numerous management functions, most of which is not required under a comprehensive tertiary system. A national system of tertiary colleges then is the obvious answer for post-school education and training. The challenges involved in realising this should not, however, be underestimated – not least in terms of the ideological opposition associated with neo-liberal discourses about the efficacy of competition, markets and the notional benefits of 'specialist providers' so dominant in policy circles. The practicalities of unpicking the existing institutional maze of post-compulsory education would be no small task either.

Having said all this, no educational reform can single-handedly resolve mass unemployment. We have long known that supply-side initiatives can never be effective in the long-term without concomitant intervention to stimulate the demand for labour. This, of course, has been repeatedly demonstrated by a string of initiatives going back to the Youth Training Scheme of the 1980s (see, for example, Ainley and Corney, 1990; Benn and Fairley, 1986). A radically different approach is necessary in order to stimulate employment and promote robust programmes of education and training in areas of strategic social and economic importance. Exactly which areas should be prioritised is debatable but they might include: green and renewable energy; national infrastructure projects; caring services, including work with the elderly and the vulnerable; and a programme of public services renewal, including policing, probation, social work, and youth and community work. All this would, of course, need to be properly managed and co-ordinated – and a national system of tertiary colleges could provide at least part of the answer to this pressing need.

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Robin Simmons is Professor of Education at the University of Huddersfield. His research interests lie in the history and sociology of education, especially in relation to post-compulsory education and training.

r.a.simmons@hud.ac.uk