

# Mind the gap: the neoliberal assault on further, adult and vocational education

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This instalment of the Soundings Futures series looks at the past, present and future of further education.

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**T**his article focuses on the neoliberal assault on further, adult and vocational education - an area often overlooked in educational debates, and a part of the education system that has always been politically and culturally marginalised by the state.<sup>1</sup> Vocational and technical education has historically been regarded as 'second best', a place for 'other people's children'. And a significant consequence of this marginalisation was that it was possible in the 1990s to carry out neoliberal policies in further education that would have been politically implausible in schools or universities at the time. The sector was thus subjected to the introduction of a quasi-market in advance of wider neoliberal reforms to public education.

The marketisation of further education in the late 1980s and 1990s developed a powerful neoliberal logic of its own, which blocked or marginalised the discussion of other logics, discourses or alternatives.<sup>2</sup> This logic led to a focus on the finances of further education, and particularly of colleges: attention shifted towards their effectiveness as competitive 'corporations', and away from issues such as initial

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learner priorities, or the needs of local communities. Areas of market interest were overdeveloped, while other crucial areas, such as teaching and learning, professionalism and the curriculum, were neglected. This underlying logic of market principle has continued to dominate the sector till the present day, and it is my view that the marketisation of colleges - started in 1993, and known as 'Incorporation' - was a test-bed for policies that were later applied (in somewhat different ways) to schools, universities and other parts of the public sector.

Any discussion of alternative scenarios for the future beyond neoliberalism will necessarily involve a return to some basic questions, including the meaning of lifelong learning and the nature of our overall aims in education and training. One central focus will be an examination of the division between academic and vocational education. The present education set-up does not serve learners or society well, but nor did that of the past. The problems of further education are not just the product of neoliberalism. Rather than arguing for a return to an imperfect past, therefore, my intention is to make the case for a different future - for a more regional and local democratically accountable education system, based on deeper forms of democracy, and for fundamental curriculum reform that includes vocational and technical, as well as adult and higher, education.

### **The impoverished legacy of technical, vocational and adult education**

Technical, vocational and adult education has a long, though relatively hidden, history. Very often these terms are used interchangeably, yet they are not quite the same. Records from the nineteenth century concerning further or vocational education are very scant and unclear, and there are difficulties in distinguishing between the terms 'adult', 'technical' and 'vocational' education. The use of the word 'school' can mean what we would describe today as a college, and the use of the word 'adult' needs to be set within the context of the school leaving age being raised to 12 only in 1899, and not rising to 14 until 1922. By and large, however, further education was not considered, or given any priority, by central government until the 1944 Education Act.<sup>3</sup>

Adult or community education in its broadest sense can be traced back before the nineteenth century. For example the Sheffield Societies formed by mechanics in 1792 were a form of self-education that was completely separate and independent

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from state regulation; while in the eighteenth century there was some adult literacy education provided by the church to enable the 'poorer classes' to read the Bible. There were also Schools of Industry after 1795, which emphasised learning trades, manual skills and the 'habits of industry'.

The other main tradition of adult education in the early nineteenth century was that of working-class 'self-help education', often organised through small associations and clubs, and, on a larger scale, through the institutions of the labour and co-operative movements. In this tradition, adult education took a myriad of different forms and was a mix of education and radical politics, from the common reading circles of working men and women to the Owenite Halls of Science, and the 'schools' organised by the Chartists, Christian Socialists, night schools and others. Although 'practical knowledge' was highly valued in this tradition, the emphasis tended to be on developing working-class literacy, general culture, and, above all, political awareness.<sup>4</sup> For reasons of space, however, it is not possible here to go into a more detailed history of adult education outside of further and technical education.

Nineteenth-century technical education and training in England had a number of strands, including the various schools and self-improvement associations. But the dominant form of technical training in England during the first half of the nineteenth century was the apprenticeship, which was organised by independent employers and craftsmen with no public funds and little public regulation, and was distinct from mainstream educational provision.

What was common to all strands of adult education and training during this period was their predominantly voluntary and part-time character. The state played a relatively minor role in apprentice training and formal technical schooling, at least until later in the century, and it was generally opposed to the tradition of radical working-class self-education.

By the mid-nineteenth century there was increasing criticism of this voluntary tradition. The pattern of technical education which had developed was not only institutionally marginalised from mainstream education; it was also intellectually adrift. Science was separated from the classical curriculum. In other words, technical education was separated from general education, and skills were separated from knowledge.<sup>5</sup> The standard product of the employer-controlled apprenticeship was the useful 'practical man', and the main standard of quality was time

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served. However, what this practical man (there were few women apprentices in manufacturing) did not acquire, at least not through his apprenticeship, was any broader culture, or any level of theoretical knowledge. This divide in the nineteenth century between the vocational and academic became a strong feature of British education, and it is still alive and kicking.

In the 1902 Education Act (Balfour Act), the basis was laid for the expansion of post-primary and secondary education; and this, combined with the economic growth of the late nineteenth century, should have provided the basis for growth in technical and further education. However, the school sector, and in particular state grammar schools, continued to receive higher priority than technical colleges, while all areas of education were squeezed through the expenditure cuts of the inter-war era. The 1902 Act did however provide for some expansion of evening continuation schools (later called Evening Institutes); and, more importantly, it led to the establishment of senior and junior technical schools. The latter were designed to make provision for students who had reached the school leaving age but not the age when it was possible to begin an apprenticeship.

With the end of the First World War, and the rhetoric of creating a 'land fit for heroes', the 1918 Fisher Act was passed. This required all LEAs to provide free and obligatory Day Continuation Schooling for those leaving school at 14. However, the economic depression and public expenditure cuts after 1926 ensured that only one authority (Rugby) actually met the requirements of the Fisher Act. A few continuation schools were established, but they did not develop into a comprehensive national system, or achieve parity of status with academic secondary schools. And in the 1920s and 1930s - operating outside the requirements of the Fisher Act - Henry Morris pioneered community education in Cambridgeshire. But by the time of the late 1930s, most further and technical education provision had reverted to its pre-war pattern and remained predominately a 'voluntary' system of part-time evening classes, mainly vocational in character. (The early twentieth century had also seen some new developments in voluntary education: the Women's Institute was founded in 1924, some years after the inauguration of the Workers Education Association in 1903.)

The origin of further education as we know it was a clause introduced in the Education Bill of 1944, to describe education that would follow on after secondary education - itself a newly introduced notion. The new Act would be the first to make

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it a legal duty for LEAs to provide technical education. With the election of a Labour government in 1945 the growth of technical colleges rose dramatically, and by 1947 there were 680 establishments, double the number in 1938. Full-time students increased by some 130 per cent, and the number of part-time students trebled during the same period. Employers were asked by government to associate and co-operate with the new colleges, and this approach led to the growing occupational training role of 'technical colleges', which gradually became institutions for 'day-release' vocational education for those in employment or serving apprenticeships. Colleges became responsive to government initiatives, and reached the high point of establishing links with local industry and employment in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During this time of expansion and change, further education failed to achieve the status of schools or the prestigious autonomy of universities; nor did it have a formalised relationship with employers. The English approach to vocational education, even at the height of its close relationship with the economy after WW2, always reflected its inferior status and lack of national coherence. By the early 1970s only a small proportion of 16-19 year olds were involved in full or part-time education and training, and the majority of young people in work did not receive any form of further education and training.

Throughout this period, apprenticeship remained the main vehicle of vocational training. But, for all its strengths as a means of imparting job-specific vocational skills, the apprenticeship system was being questioned as an adequate vehicle for meeting the skills needs of the economy. Not only did the apprentice system provide an inadequate supply of skilled workers; it was also deficient in many other ways. It involved unduly lengthy periods of time-serving, failed to train to any specified standards, was overly narrow in the skills it imparted, and was impoverished in terms of general education and theory. Most damagingly, it ignored the training needs of semi-skilled workers. It also severely limited access, most notably for women and people of ethnic-minority origin, often because apprenticeships tended to rest on a longstanding agreement between employers and employees, and were passed on to the sons (rarely daughters) of established and 'trusted' workers.

Despite the advances of the post-war years, the provision that emerged was highly uneven, and varied substantially from one locality to another. Legislation had been permissive, not mandatory, and had allowed LEAs wide scope for interpretation. Vocational education and training remained separate from the

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academic, and low in status. Apprenticeships were dominated by the engineering, construction and other traditional industries, but by the 1970s these were in steep decline. As a consequence the economic and work-based role of technical colleges also declined, and in response they started to transform themselves, beginning to provide a wider range of academic, vocational and pre-vocational courses - demand for which was expanding because of the shifts in the economy that went alongside the decline of manufacturing. In the process they began acquiring a multi-purpose educational function, offering full-time day courses as well as evening classes, and eventually they became known as further education colleges. During the 1980s colleges increasingly saw themselves as responsive institutions catering for diverse students following a variety of general education, vocational, general vocational and higher education courses. They reflected the priorities of their respective local education authorities and the different communities and labour markets they served.

Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, full-time participation in further education rose steadily, and colleges were required to respond to the needs of new types of learners, including, notably, adults and school leavers who previously would have directly entered the labour market. Two trends had particular influence. Firstly, there was the growth of academic courses for both adults and young people who wished to have a second chance of passing O- and A-level exams. There was also a growth in access courses stimulated by the expansion of higher education, which was now becoming more accessible to some of those who would previously have been excluded. There were also changes brought about by the difficulties many schools were experiencing in maintaining viable sixth forms, in the face of demographic trends that meant falling numbers of 16-19 year olds. Some LEAs attempted to encourage links between schools and sixth-forms by establishing consortia or sixth-form centres in order to offer a reasonable range of academic courses and maintain reasonable class sizes. Others removed sixth forms from schools and merged them into sixth-form colleges, or combined sixth forms with colleges to form 16-19 year old tertiary colleges that provided both academic and vocational courses. Some tertiary colleges included adult education, while other LEAs maintained separate adult provision.

The second trend that affected the development of FE colleges was the rise in youth unemployment from the mid-1970s. In response, successive governments initiated a number of programmes and schemes for the growing numbers of

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unemployed school leavers, including the Youth Opportunities Scheme (YOPs), and, later, the Youth Training Schemes (YTS). For unemployed adults there was the Training Opportunities Scheme (TOPs) and, later, Employment Training (ET). These schemes were based in FE colleges, and this meant that by the end of the 1980s further education colleges were receiving approximately 20 per cent of their budget from central government departments. These government initiatives reduced the levels of young people registered as unemployed, and some young people did find employment through the schemes, depending upon the local employment opportunities.

During the mid-1980s there was a growing realisation that the disappearance of the youth labour market was not a temporary phenomenon, and this was linked to reports that stressed the importance of increasing the knowledge and skills of the workforce because of changes in economic production. Unfavourable comparisons with participation rates and education levels in other countries were made, and some reforms of the post-16 curriculum took place, expressed in proposals for a national qualifications framework so that equivalence could be found for academic, general and vocational qualifications. During the 1970s and 1980s, 'new vocationalism' or 'pre-vocational' programmes were developed, offering a range of courses which emphasised preparation for work in general, not for specific jobs. Developments in general vocational education were directly funded from central government bodies and created the mechanism for more national regulation over assessment and quality assurance. With the later development of General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), there was also a greater national regulation over awarding bodies such as the Business and Technical Education Council (BTEC) and City and Guilds.

However, despite all these new initiatives and growing regulation from central government, the institutional structures of post-16 education and training were not fundamentally changed, and England and Wales continued to have a mixed system of academic and vocational courses offered by a variety of different institutions. Although further education colleges were increasingly becoming a major provider of full-time 16-19 education, they failed to match the status of secondary schools. This was because of the prestige attached to sixth forms, which on the whole focused on A-level results and getting pupils into university. This remained the preferred option of many, mainly middle-class, parents. In comparison with school

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sixth forms and sixth-form colleges, further education colleges tended to accrue a disproportionate share of more disadvantaged students and those seeking a 'second chance' after unsatisfactory previous experiences of learning. Where tertiary colleges were established, and in the rare cases where they became the sole 16-19 provider in an area, a new institutional model could be seen to exist in embryonic form. However, the overwhelming majority of further education colleges continued to offer an awkward mixture of academic, general vocational and vocational programmes, providing for both the 16-19 age group and for adults. These mixed purpose institutions continued to form part of a complex institutional patchwork of post-16 provision, which included sixth forms, sixth-form colleges, adult education institutes and training providers, all of which came under different statutory regulations and state bodies.

Further education provided for a wide range of students - graduates and non-graduates, the industrially experienced and the non-experienced, skilled craft workers, white-collar workers, managers, scientists and social scientists. This made it hard to identify colleges of further education as a distinct type of organisation, and it was also hard to identify college teachers as a distinct part of the teaching profession. They tended to be teachers associated with particular, often competing, subject or vocational departments. There was no obligation on teachers to gain an initial teaching qualification and there was no minimum entry qualification for those seeking to teach.

As FE colleges entered the 1990s, approximately 20 per cent of their budgets consisting of targeted funding from central government departments and national government bodies. Alongside this targeted funding, more regulation had also been introduced, usually associated with the shift towards marketisation, leading to the adoption of performance indicators and new forms of accountability; and meanwhile central government was increasingly giving power to governing bodies, thereby weakening LEA control.

### **The neoliberal onslaught**

The neoliberal onslaught on further education described below, and its subsequent development, was part of the wider neoliberal logic of the time.<sup>6</sup> Margaret Thatcher was the initiator of neoliberalism in Britain - thought of as the time as



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Thatcherism - and she launched a wholesale challenge to the values of collectivism and egalitarianism that were part of the post-war settlement. Her government was bent on undermining local authorities, challenging the power of trade unions and privatising the public sector wherever possible. These policies were part of the 'market utopianism' of the Thatcher project - a belief that market systems can sort out all problems, bring about innovation and efficiency and meet human needs.<sup>7</sup> Had the Thatcherites had their way, privatising the public sector would have included health care and education. However, in these politically sensitive areas a compromise was found between public and private, which involved the setting up of a quasi-market in these sectors (described in more detail below), including outsourcing to private companies whenever possible.<sup>8</sup>

Just prior to and during the early Thatcher period, education and the public sector, including local authorities, were by no means problem-free. Trade unions sometimes fought defensive or sectoral battles which could very easily be portrayed as unions obstructing necessary reforms and modernisation. Teaching unions, in what they saw as protecting the interests of their members, often found themselves defending the status quo, thereby putting themselves, at this particular historical juncture, on the opposite side of progress and reform. This was not just a myth created by the right-wing press. Anecdotally, during my own time as a councillor on the Greater London Council (GLC) and Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) in the 1980s, I sometimes found myself on a collision course with the trade unions when pursuing progressive and egalitarian educational change. Furthermore, some, though not all, local authorities were bureaucratic and cumbersome organisations, often failing to make changes that were fundamental and necessary. These are still areas of important debate for the left.

Suffice to say, all of these weaknesses, often exaggerated by the press, were the terrain that the Thatcher project tapped into, connecting with popular perceptions and genuine grievances and frustrations. The victory of Thatcher in 1979 and her subsequent victories represented not just an electoral defeat, but a hegemonic victory by the right. The right's vision - of marketised efficiency, competition and individual liberty - was translated into an education policy that remains dominant, and has now come to be seen as common sense. The left, unlike the right, failed to present a vision of future change and better public services.

During this period reform was also being called for in the FE sector, following

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numerous reports showing poor financial management in further education institutions and a great variance in cost per student following the same kind of course. One report highlighted poor student retention and success rates, concluding that between 30 and 40 per cent of 16-19 year olds who started a course had not succeeded, yet finding no link between cost per student and pass rates.<sup>9</sup> This was seen as indicating a massive waste of public money as well as leading to the incalculable damage done to the students themselves. It was this combination of recognition of the need for change and the dominant belief by government at that time in a competitive market that formed the basis of the neoliberal assault on further education. Following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, the logic was that further education had to work within a business and financial model, to evaluate the viability of provision and have a new alertness to regulation and control from central government. As I have already argued, such an experiment in further education was possible at this time because it was politically marginalised.

The logic created by neoliberalism in the early 1990s shaped subsequent provision, and continued to have profound and detrimental influences on the further education described below. This can also be seen as an ‘institutional logic’, when it comes to considering the way it works itself through in particular contexts. When the wider ideological market logic is applied to different institutions, it is mediated by a variety of factors, including the management culture of the institution in question, its financial health, local negotiations, and the many other forces operating in any given context. In other words, the manner in which the neoliberal logic worked its way through in individual institutions varied. Interestingly, the market logic, while producing upheaval and change, tends to leave some important issues very much the same, with many issues remaining unstable and unresolved.<sup>10</sup> The logic stamps its mark on some areas, yet actually prevents finding a solution on many important issues, such as defining a strategic role for further education. Importantly, institutions of further education - like schools later on - found themselves in the paradoxical position of being ‘set free’ from LEA control yet having to contend with draconian regulations from central government, top-down funding, and centralised inspection regimes. Below I will show how such an ideological position produced a logic of its own and became entrenched as the dominant discourse, in due course precluding or blocking the discussion of other logics, discourses and alternatives.

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## The early years of marketisation: upheaval and change

In the years between 1994 and 2001 the neoliberal logic began to work its way through the system by means of a new funding currency called the 'unit of activity' (the unit). This was used to allow the funding to follow the student, as part of the creation of an education and training market for colleges; and a new inspectorate and strict auditing regime were introduced, which provided data to the market. As further education colleges were released from LEA control (a move supported by the majority of college principals), they inherited responsibilities, such as property maintenance, staffing and finance. Yet, ironically, the effect of the new Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) model was one of centralised control through funding, inspection and national regulations, with the real line of accountability being not to the governors but to the funding council. Further education institutions saw themselves as competitors with their neighbouring institutions, not as partners of a national sector. Thus, colleges were obliged by the power of funding levers, and the particular form they took, to focus on growth and 'increased efficiency' and to compete in an education market.

Economists describe such a state of affairs as a quasi-market, a market underpinned of necessity by government regulation and finance.<sup>11</sup> In the context of colleges of further education, for example, there was no market in education, as the relationship was not fundamentally determined by price and funding was controlled by the state. To make a market work, performance indicators were needed so that consumers (students) could make informed choices about where they could receive the best services. In such circumstances colleges had to act as competitive businesses in order to attract students and thus funds, and had to spend resources and time focusing on the demands of competition, all the while operating within a tight regulatory framework. This meant, in many cases, that courses were no longer demand-led; instead, choices were guided by the funding price tag. Such a system saw some further education institutions focus upon 'gaming' the system, sometimes referred to as 'unit farming', in order to secure extra funding or manipulate their performance indicators.

As the neoliberal logic developed momentum, further education became more and more driven by finance: it came to overshadow every aspect of college activity. And alongside the shift from educational to financial considerations, a new

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vocabulary was introduced into college life. 'Chief Executive' replaced 'Principal'; 'leadership' was emphasised in contrast to 'management'. Some colleges used non-teaching staff in quasi-teaching roles, describing them as 'instructors' and 'demonstrators', thereby blurring the boundaries between teaching and support. Governing bodies became 'business led'; students became 'customers', and were sometimes referred to as 'funding units'. 'Funding streams' replaced what had been previously referred to as classes and courses. 'Provider' became a generic term to refer to schools or trainers. 'Viability' was introduced as a criterion - a financial judgment of what classes would run and what curriculum would be offered. This financially driven curriculum became the new common sense of the market model.

What courses or curriculum would be offered had always been an issue in further education. However, the new logic represented a shift away from discussions influenced by LEAs, local employers and local community and educational needs, with lecturers participating in the negotiations about what the college offered; in the new framework decisions were primarily driven by economic and financial considerations, as dictated by the funding tariff. This in turn was driven by a preference for courses considered directly useful to the economy, thus marginalising traditional liberal adult education. The emphasis for adults, backed by funding, was on numeracy, literacy and English as Second Language Courses (ESOL), known collectively as 'Adult Basic Skills' or 'Skills for Life'; and there was a focus upon social inclusion and employability.

One of the contradictions within this shift away from local and towards national and market-driven considerations was that national agreements concerning conditions of service for the FE workforce shifted the other way: conditions were locally negotiated with - or imposed by - incorporated local college management. The workforce were thus caught somewhere between private-sector and public-sector management logics and culture, as was befitting in a quasi-market. This ambiguous position continues to be reflected in the fact that further education teachers still access public sector pensions, much like schoolteachers. However, unlike schoolteachers, they negotiate with independent employers and employer bodies, not government.

The transfer of employment responsibilities from LEAs to 'incorporated' further education institutions was followed by unprecedented industrial conflict, which was particularly acute between 1994 and 1997. This conflict took place in the

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context of new laws on trade unions, and college employers were not slow to use this legislation. The management view was that contracts had to be ‘modernised’ to give greater flexibility and ease adaptation to a new business model. Suffice to say, increases in teaching hours and the working year were wanted, and achieved, by employers, albeit with local variation. Across the board, the new regime involved increasing redundancies for full-time staff and a greater use of part-time and agency staff in order to save money.

As well as the neoliberal logic outlined above, what is particularly noteworthy from this period is the extent to which central control, taking the form of funding levers, alongside inspection and performance management, could so rapidly alter the behaviour of institutions and the people in them

### **The second phase of marketisation: planning, targets and centralised control**

By 1997, when New Labour came into office, the unfettered logic of the early phase of ‘efficiency savings’ had caused financial problems in many further education institutions. There was also a growing criticism of bureaucratic rigidities and data collection, as well as growing evidence of institutions manipulating or maximising performance indicators. The new government promised change, not of the market model itself, but in the funding regime, funding quantum, and methods of inspection, and in the strategic direction of further education. Slowly New Labour brought about a number of changes, moving away from competition and unplanned growth, towards a new emphasis on strategic planning, albeit employer-led. The claim was that putting employers in the ‘driving seat’ would make the sector more consumer driven, which in turn would lead to finding new solutions for the learning needs of businesses.

This was something of a change from the logic of the first phase of marketisation, but it had its own problems: the notion of strategic planning and that of the quasi-market represented something of a dichotomy. This underlying dichotomy was, however, to a large extent smothered by the generous funding to the sector from approximately 2001 to 2010. This extra spending was not only focused on the general funding of educational institutions, or on areas such as teachers pay. It also included measures such as the introduction (in 2001) of Education Maintenance

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Allowances (EMAs), which gave money to 16-year-olds staying on in some form of continuing education or training, and Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs), introduced in 2000, which gave tax incentives to employers, and more choice to individual learners. (ILAs were shut down eighteen months later, following reports of fraud, abuse and poor provision, mainly among private sector providers.)

The emphasis on planning lasted less than four years - from 2001 to 2005. Local strategic planning was dropped because of central government reluctance to give the local Learning and Skills Councils the funding and power that was needed to plan provision locally. However, while control was pulled back to the centre, generous funding continued, although tied to centrally set targets, one of which was a rise in the numbers of young people in further education (the consequence of which was a massive decline in adult education and training).

Most importantly, the Labour government did not strategically intervene in the sector or change institutional arrangements. The emphasis was on skills and employability, with funding being routed through employer-led schemes, responding to the needs of employers and individuals seeking work. One example was 'Train2Gain', a government-funded employer-led scheme launched in 2006, which provided free or subsidised work-based training to adults. By 2010, much as had happened with the ILAs, the scheme was discredited by reports of fraud and poor quality provision.

While the neoliberal logic of marketisation was rampant between 1994 and 1998, the period under New Labour represented what has been called a more 'enlightened neoliberalism'.<sup>12</sup> There were considerable increases in public expenditure, and in efforts to support learners as outlined above. This extra expenditure countered some of the more drastic consequences of the logic of 'Incorporation'. However, the centralisation of power continued, as did the proliferation of unaccountable government agencies and the undermining of local government. This kind of development has been described as extending the 'business state' - despite increases in public expenditure, the underlying theme remains that 'the market knows best'.<sup>13</sup> In such a context changes always have a market principle: putting employers in charge of government funding bodies, replacing the public servant with people from business, increasing the numbers of managers and consultants drawn from the business community; privatising parts of the public sector; or setting up private finance initiatives (PFI). Behind every

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development was a marketised view of education. Schools, colleges and profit-making organisations were all competing against each other to send their students into the 'best' universities.<sup>14</sup> In the further education sector, colleges competed in a quasi-market, but operated within a culture of bureaucracy, inspection, targets and regulation - with the voice of the professional being increasingly marginalised.

It is important to note here that the state itself was unable to amend this neoliberal logic even when it sought to do so. Between 2001 and 2005, when the Learning and Skills Council was emphasising local planning, but having to deal with the contradiction between the market and planning, as outlined above, the state found itself unable to alter the impact of the quasi-market logic. It found itself in the paradoxical situation of trying to develop strategic local planning, but in a context where decisions were still being dictated by market assumptions. Strategic planning was abandoned.

### **From 2010: neoliberalism and austerity**

The Coalition and subsequent Tory governments, which came to power after 2010, pledged to cut public expenditure drastically as part of their austerity programme. Almost immediately Train2Gain was closed, and funding was also withdrawn for 14-19 Diplomas (a general vocational qualification as an alternative to the academic qualifications). Furthermore, the Education Maintenance Allowance was abolished in England. For education and training outside the school sector the reforms seemed to be somewhat contradictory, in the sense that they were both regulatory and deregulatory. The government funded students in further education based upon enrolment and qualifications passed from the previous year, thereby removing central planning in favour of outcome-led funding. And the Education Act 2011 allowed further education institutions to borrow money without permission from central government and to change the nature of their governance. Deregulation also proceeded in other areas, for example with the removal of the requirement of teachers in further education to be teacher trained, a requirement that had been introduced by New Labour.

In 2014 the overall reduction of expenditure for the Department for Business Innovation and Skills was predicted to be some 43 per cent between 2010 and 2018. The actual reductions are difficult to find as the department was merged with

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others in 2016, but there is no doubt that they have been extremely severe.<sup>15</sup> Adult provision has been cut across the board. Even the adult basic skills programme mentioned above, that had initially been protected from cuts, is now to lose all government subsidies by 2020/21. Individuals over the age of 24 are now expected to take out loans to pay for education and training, copying the model for higher education funding, in the hope that introducing yet more market forces will empower individuals to make better choices according to costs and the benefits to their employment. This change pushes funding for training away from colleges and towards employers, reinforcing the Labour government's strategy.

Policies aimed at reducing the public spending deficit continue at the time of writing, but the depth of the present funding cuts is already considerable. In 1993, at the beginning of the neoliberal onslaught, there were 450 further education colleges in England, but by 2016 only 243 remained in operation. Further mergers are expected to make institutions 'financially viable'. Given this level of reduction, further education may soon be unable to rely on any central state funding, which may lead to an increasingly deregulated sector. At the time of writing the Tory government, far from reversing cuts, is pursuing a policy of deregulation, reduction in expenditure and general austerity.

### Considerations for the future?

Instead of a return to the past, and a system of central government and LEA control, it is perhaps time to let local communities have a greater say over education and training provision. As part of a local and regional strategy for skills arrangement, education and training could be placed within a public social partnership, and a new balance could be found between the need for strategic planning and local input. Provision organised in the interests of finding a more democratic and locally based system would represent something better than neoliberalism or its predecessors.

One possibility would be to establish comprehensive tertiary colleges focusing upon a wide range of general and academic courses, within environments specifically catering for the learning needs of the 16-19, or perhaps the 14-19, age group. While a comprehensive tertiary system would be politically difficult to achieve in the face of current school sixth-form provision, such a rationalisation may become possible in the longer term. This would rescue schools from trying to



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maintain non-viable sixth form provision, and allow them to concentrate on the pre-16 curriculum. The further education sector could adopt a more flexible range of provision, including a greater focus on vocational courses and the support required by adult learners, leaving to other institutions the particular structures and provision that the younger age group requires. There may be a need for some regional variation here, but there would be a general presumption that sub-degree work was the province of further education rather than the university. This would be good for maintaining the distinctive mission of universities, as well as defining the boundaries between schools, further and higher education.

There are similarities and differences between schools and colleges of further education. For example, there is no 'national curriculum' or SATS in further education. The FE curriculum is more indirectly influenced, by the dictates of funding and a focus on employers' needs and 'employability'. The national curriculum is more directly ideological, influenced by the 'top universities' and the consequential importance of academic selection. On the other hand, both schools and further education institutions have had to follow neoliberal logics, with schools, further education and other providers all having to compete against each other. Universities, too, are following market values, with league tables, students as 'customers', and excellence measured against 'outputs' - as a result of what has been called the financialisation of universities.<sup>16</sup> All education and training have followed the neoliberal logic of the market.

Throughout this discussion, however, there has been an underlying argument that further education is also politically and educationally marginalised, and strategically adrift. This is partly a reflection of the sharp division between academic and vocational education, a division that is longstanding and very deeply rooted. This is something that also needs to be addressed by any future strategy for FE.

Vocational qualifications are still seen as the route for those who cannot succeed in the academic arena. And this divide between vocational and academic knowledge, qualifications and pathways is an explicit expression of the divide of cultural capital and social class. The system serves the elite well, while those who do not succeed either drop out of education altogether, or are marshalled into forms of vocational education that offer no real chance of employment, or into apprenticeships that lack meaningful substance. Does this serve the needs of modern society, when there is a need for more people to engage in knowledge-based employment and higher levels

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of education and employment? This returns us to the questions considered at the beginning of this article. What is education and training for, and in whose interests should it work? What is the relationship between theory and practice? Should those engaged in practical activities require no theory (and vice versa)? Such questions are not aimed at belittling academic knowledge, but simply make the case that other forms of knowledge are also important.

There have been many ideas concerning the divide between the academic and vocational. For example, in 1990, proposals were put forward by the IPPR to establish a baccalaureate approach whereby learners could mix technical, vocational and academic modules in a 14-19 pathway.<sup>17</sup> Attempts have been made to raise the status of vocational qualifications by successive governments, including the present one. These have focused upon curriculum initiatives to develop general vocational courses as an equivalent to the academic - for qualifications such as General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), Diplomas, Foundation Degrees and Business Education and Technical Certificates (BETCs). The idea is, for example, that a GNVQ at level three would be equivalent to an A-level qualification. However, curriculum reform aimed at bringing about a broader, more inclusive curriculum has always eventually been politically blocked. This is because of the reluctance to reform A-levels. These remain the 'gold standard' representing entry to the 'top universities', which are firmly rooted in the academic tradition and are explicitly not vocational. In fact the 'Russell Group' universities have never recognised general vocational qualifications.

I see no future in proposing a return to a time pre-dating neoliberalism - i.e. a return to the traditional curriculum (although equivalent expenditure levels would be most welcome). Apart from anything else, the division between the academic and vocational education and training predates neoliberalism. The future of further, technical and adult education should be discussed as part of a wider debate for education involving local people, employers, schools and universities. The future shape of education is itself part of wider vision of the sort of society we want, and here a new balance needs to be found between the market, the economy, and the needs of individuals and society. We need a vision that is different and better, and a more generous, inclusive education that takes everyone's learning seriously, as a public good, and not just something for those who are academically able. The left should be developing new ideas around lifelong learning, based on a vision

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of educational and training opportunities for all in society, throughout their lives, including learning opportunities in the workplace. Such a vision, alongside a deeper democratic system that is far more responsive to local and regional needs, would improve economic, social and individual wellbeing. It would represent a real alternative to the values of neoliberalism.

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## Notes

1. For the sake of brevity these somewhat different categories of education and training will be referred to below as 'further education'. The *Soundings Futures* series develops the programme of alternatives to neoliberalism indicated in Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Mike Rustin (eds), *After Neoliberalism: The Kilburn Manifesto*, Lawrence and Wishart 2015. Previous articles have looked at schools and higher education. All articles can be found at <https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/futures>.
2. N. Lucas and N. Crowther, 'The Logic of the Incorporation of further education colleges 1993-2015: Towards an understanding of marketisation, change and instability', *Journal of Education Policy*, Issue 5, 2016.
3. A. Green and N. Lucas, 'From Obscurity to Crisis: The FE sector in Context', in A. Green and N. Lucas (eds), *FE and Lifelong Learning: Realigning the Sector for the 21st Century*, Bedford Way Papers, 1999.
4. N. Lucas, *Teaching in Further Education: New Perspectives for a Changing Context*, Bedford Way Publications, 2004.
5. A. Green, *Education, Globalisation, and the Nation State*, Macmillan 1997.
6. For more on neoliberalism see Stuart Hall, 'The neoliberal revolution': [www.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/48/neoliberal-revolution](http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/48/neoliberal-revolution). See also S. Hall and A. O'Shea, 'Common-sense neoliberalism', *Soundings* 55 - an instalment of *After Neoliberalism: the Kilburn Manifesto*: [www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/03\\_commonsenseneoliberalism.pdf](http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/03_commonsenseneoliberalism.pdf).
7. P. Devine, A. Pearman, M. Prior and D. Purdy, 'Feelbad Britain', in P. Devine, A. Pearman, M. Prior and D. Purdy (eds), *Feelbad Britain. How to make it Better*, Lawrence and Wishart 2009.
8. D. Purdy, 'Crisis and Regime Change in Britain', *Soundings* 57, summer 2014.
9. Audit Commission/OFSTED, *Unfinished Business: Full-time Educational Courses for*

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*16-19 Year Olds*, HMSO 1993.

10. I do not have space here to discuss a theory of change developed in analysing the US civil rights movement by Fligstein and McAdam, called 'A Theory of Fields'. It may be of some interest to readers. It is a sort of Gramscian theory based upon what the authors call 'strategic action fields' and 'unorganised social space'. See N. Fligstein and D. McAdam, *A Theory of Fields*, OUP 2012.

11. J. Legrand and W. Bartlett, *Quasi-Markets and Social Policy*, Macmillan 1993.

12. N. Lawson and K. Spours, 'Education for the Good Society: an expansive vision', in *Education for a Good Society. The values and principles of a new comprehensive vision*, Neal Lawson and Ken Spours (eds), Compass 2011.

13. See *Feelbad Britain*.

14. 'Education for the Good Society'.

15. E. Keep, *What does skills policy look like when the money has run out?* SKOPE, Association of Colleges 2014.

16. B. Schwarz, 'Editorial: the scandal of contemporary universities', *Soundings* 69, summer 2018.

17. D. Finegold, E. Keep, D. Miliband, D. Raffe, K. Spours and M. Young, *A British Baccalaureate: Overcoming the Divisions Between Education and Training*, Institute for Public Policy Research 1990.