

Introduction

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Commissioned by the University and College Union (UCU), the *Further Education in England: Transforming lives & Communities* research project aims to understand and provide robust evidence of how further education is vital in transforming lives and communities in 21st century Britain. It also provides evidence of how and why further education is an important lever for supporting social justice, sustainability and social cohesion. It presents a picture of colleges challenging intergenerational poverty, and offering people from diverse communities hope, agency and a positive orientation towards the future.

Further education is often marginalised by policy makers who have little experience of its benefits. Indeed, as everyone who works in colleges knows, since 2009, further education in England and the UK has been subjected to deep cuts – and these cuts have gone far beyond anything endured by other sectors of education. In effect, these cuts have hurt the communities that colleges serve and have penalised college staff who work hard day in and day out to provide transformative teaching and learning experiences.

The aim of this research is to turn a spotlight onto the powerful and important work that further education colleges do. We wanted to focus on the social benefits that typically are not measured in a sector that in response to government and funding policies has built up cultures and practices that focus instead on ‘measurable’ outcomes. These metrics alone give an inaccurate and slanted view of the enormous importance of further education.

The project was founded on a simple premise: that for some people further education colleges provide a lifeline and a reintroduction to learning that has the power to transform their lives. We knew this from our personal and professional experience of working in further education directly as teachers, but also alongside it as teacher educators and researchers.

The research utilised a range of methods to capture the rich narratives not just of the students but of their teachers, family members, friends, community voices and employers. Phase one was centred on building qualitative data through a number of research conversations with people across the further education sector. Phase two of the research utilised two national online surveys – one for staff and one for students – to gather further insights into the lives of those whose lives had been touched by further education.

Key findings

■ Further education teachers and managers spend a significant amount of time supporting students outside the classroom, and have heavier teaching loads than school teachers

46% of further education teachers reported spending more than 4 hours per week supporting students outside the classroom. This ranged in nature from providing additional support for students to complete classroom work, to helping individuals manage bigger issues related to budgets, housing and personal relationships – issues which, unless resolved, can make learning difficult or impossible to achieve. This was also true for managers, a third of whom reported spending more than 8 hours a week providing this type of support to students. While secondary school teachers are reported as teaching between 20 and 21 hours per week, two-fifths (41%) of respondents to the further education staff survey are in classrooms teaching for more than 24 hours a week, while 19% said they teach for more than 27 hours a week.

■ Further education is a route to empowerment and agency for people from a range of backgrounds

Unlike school, entry points to further education are not governed by age or catchment area, so it can provide opportunities for people with a range of different purposes. As a critical space to support and empower learners, it offers opportunities for economic and social transformation which increase individuals' level of choice and agency. Respondents made a strong link between empowerment and increased personal agency. Research participants also described how telling their own stories in relation to abusive relationships, alcohol dependency and mental health issues was empowering in the classroom, and how returning to education had improved their confidence and skills. This has important implications for curriculum and funding, both of which need to support learning opportunities which connect effectively with learners' lives and experiences, and be flexible enough to support small step progression.

■ However, colleges are typically seen as providers of vocational qualifications for 'unacademic' young people

Colleges are typically seen solely as providers of vocational qualifications for young people who have not experienced 'academic' success in their schooling, whereas historically and still today, they continue to provide a wide range of both academic and vocational courses. The relationship between school and colleges is also poorly conceptualised and enacted, and this has contributed to the growing pay gap between schools and colleges. Forcing colleges into a vocational silo perpetuates the ideological division between academic and vocational qualifications and, in so doing, consolidates structural inequality.

■ The market structure has embedded an instrumentalist view of further education

The current market model uses funding and 'incentivisation' to allow for on-going policy and curriculum intervention. This market structure has supported an instrumentalist view of further education with an emphasis on 'skills' rather than broader conceptualisations of education. This impacts negatively on students' interests – for example where providers are forced to compete with each other for the same funding stream when setting up courses rather than coordinating provision locally to suit the community's needs.

■ Incorporation has not achieved its intended aims

Rather than freeing colleges up to be independent and entrepreneurial, incorporation has shackled them to centralised policy whims. It has linked colleges to a national skills discourse that has since proved to undermine and overrule local ecologies and important relationships between colleges and their communities. Although it is not possible to turn back the clock, recent moves towards regional and municipal devolution may offer the opportunity to re-establish a locally coordinated further education system which prioritises the needs of communities.

■ **Structural inequality shapes life courses and life chances decisively**

The research uncovered many cases in which participants felt that they were negatively labelled or simply ignored by teachers, which had a very negative impact on their experience of schooling. Participants described how uplifting it was for someone to value them for who they were and recognise the obstacles they had overcome. Class identities have been diminished in significance over recent decades, but structural inequality – often strongly influenced by class – continues to shape life-courses and life-chances in decisive ways. For young people often marginalised by poverty, further education provides hope, opportunity and agency and can enhance their life chances, both in its own right and by providing a route to future education or training and future employment. Funding should reflect this rather than consolidating inequity.

■ **Students face a 'triple-lock' of objectification in the current further education system**

The research exposes how the existing funding mechanism and market model does not put students' interests first, but instead objectifies them in a number of ways. First, the 'skills' discourse positions further education as primarily important for the purpose of human capital (i.e. labour) production. Second, the current qualification framework enforces a binary and deficit-based perception of young people as being either 'academic' or 'vocational', which causes structural disadvantage to some students. Third, cuts of more than 25% to budgets for adult learning mean that the recruitment of students has become a 'bums on seats' exercise. This 'triple-lock' of objectification side-lines the interests of students and has become a mechanism for reinforcing the 'classing' of further education¹.

¹ Duckworth, V. and Smith, R. 2018. "Breaking the triple lock: further education and transformative teaching and learning". *Education & Training*. 60(6): 529-543. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-05-2018-0111>

■ **Adult education is necessary for personal enrichment and growth throughout the life course, and colleges are ideally placed to deliver it**

Compulsory education alone is not enough to meet the needs of the rapid changes in the world of work, now and in the coming years. Adult education is needed so that individuals can take agency as they develop, and collectively adapt to the world. Without the hope that further and adult education offers there can be little optimism for social justice and a future based on choice for all. Colleges are ideally placed as vehicles for tackling social inequality and realising social justice: they are situated at the heart of their communities; they have a long-standing and deep-rooted understanding of their local industries and they understand their students' needs.

Recommendations

- **We need a funding model that takes proper account of the socio-economic factors of the students that colleges are providing for.** If students are coming from low income backgrounds and have additional needs associated with poverty, poor mental health and difficult home circumstances, then colleges need to be funded to address these.
- **The wraparound role of colleges in addressing students' needs must be acknowledged** as an important aspect of further education pedagogy – by government, by funders, by Ofsted.
- **Colleges should be re-positioned centrally as the non-linear model of education that is required for the twenty first century.** Policy and funding need to acknowledge the important role colleges are playing by providing flexible and part time routes not just as an additional part of a linear system. Colleges have to re-build damaged learner identities as a precursor to providing courses and qualifications. This often operates at the level of re-engagement but is an essential first step. Nowhere is this recognised in the current funding model.
- **Therefore, colleges need to be freed up from the prescriptive time-limits on the courses they offer** – that are imposed irrespective of the (educational and socio- economic) backgrounds of the students they provide for. The vital restorative pedagogical work that further education teachers have to undertake means that additional time is necessary if students are to be given equal opportunities to achieve the qualifications they take. The annual cycle of funding is a part of the way colleges are straight-jacketed in what they are able to achieve. These cruel and unjust restraints fail to take account of student needs and reduce further education's potential to bring about social mobility.
- **College governance needs to be locally and democratically reconfigured.** There is a danger that the current move towards delegating some further education provision (e.g. through combined local authorities) will result in a locally managed replication of national government's traditional supply-side policy model. Twenty five years of weighting governing bodies with the voices of employers has produced scant benefits – particularly in terms of curriculum. Colleges have a key role that makes them much more than a component in the supply of 'skills' for employers. The wider social and health benefits of further education require the involvement and coordination of local authorities. The ability of colleges to address social inequality needs to be enhanced.
- **A dynamic national website which is populated by schools, employers, learners and families is needed.** Many people and communities are cut off from role models, aspirations and hope. It is hard to imagine a future without being able see others who have taken pathways outside your world picture and on seeing them realising 'if they can do it, so can I'. Role models are absolutely essential in demystifying routes into education, training and employment. Social capital is not homogeneous - it is not distributed equally. This platform would reach into institutions, communities and homes. In doing so its presence would rupture the divide between the public (which includes schools, further and higher education) and private domains, which includes work and home. This site would include case studies, career stories and pen portraits of role models as a form of cultural and social capital. These inspiring stories of diverse learner journeys would illustrate how real people have overcome adversity to reach their goal.
- **We propose a localised further education system in which colleges are viewed as important epicentres of social inclusion and cohesion** that connect to schools pre-entry and employers and HE on exit and that are accessible to people of any age to access to achieve the personal and / or professional development they need to thrive. Funding needs to reflect this.
- **We propose a holistic approach to engaging with questions of Sustainable Development that involves all stakeholders in educational systems:** students, staff across colleges and the local communities they serve. Local pedagogy and praxis is well-positioned to respond to the lived experiences of these communities² (see Duckworth and Smith 2019).

² Duckworth, V. and Smith R. 2019. Promoting education for sustainable development for adults. In Plant, H. and Ravenhall, M. (Eds), 2019. *Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise: implications for the adult learning workforce*, Learning and Work Institute, Leicester.



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Transformative Teaching and Learning in Further Education

**Executive Report for the University and College Union
Transforming Lives and Communities project**

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