

# RECONSTRUCTING FURTHER AND ADULT EDUCATION IN A POST CORONAVIRUS WORLD





# Reconstructing further and adult education in a post-coronavirus world.

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## Introduction

We are living through tumultuous times. There are four intertwining crises the world faces; a public health, political, economic and environmental crisis. Further and adult education must be able to play its role in meeting the challenges these crises have raised.

The public health crisis has reshaped the way we think about our lives, our work and how we relate to one another. The political crisis has been precipitated not only by the Coronavirus but also by the mass resistance to institutional racism ignited by the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police. The outpouring of solidarity protests that have spread across the globe are of historic importance. Many of our students have joined these protests. We all have been forced to see the world through the eyes of those who suffer racism and inequality.

There are dire warnings of economic collapse and unemployment reaching levels not seen since the 1930s. The sector can play a central role in educating and training those who find themselves without work. The fourth crisis, the environmental one, cannot be separated from the other three. Viruses are incubated and spread because of the mass production of food through agribusiness. The people who live in the global south, who have contributed least to the climate and ecological crisis, suffer most from its consequences. The economic crisis will in part be solved through the just transition of fossil fuel-based production to solar and wind-based production. Further and adult education will be central to this transition.

It is generally accepted that the post-coronavirus and post-George Floyd world cannot be the same as the one that preceded it. However, where there is less agreement is what that world will look like and what kind of changes will be necessary for it to function to meet the needs of everyone.

Those working in further and adult education have launched themselves into supporting their students and their communities. From creating imaginative online teaching resources and providing one-to-one support to setting up foodbanks and making PPE for their local hospitals – FE staff have been on the frontline in every sense.

What has emerged throughout the crisis is a sector that has revealed its collectivist and public role, one rooted in working class communities serving young and old. A sector that has confidence in and builds the confidence of those who may have been labelled as unsuccessful at school. Many of whom come from some of the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Competition and the market have been the main drivers of the educational and training needs of our students. This model did not ‘magic’ its way into the sector – it was a conscious decision to introduce it and it has failed to match the needs of our communities. Pitting college against college to compete for the lion’s share of the available student in-take has prevented the sector from unleashing its full potential and dampened innovation.

Previous constructive and progressive work has been developed in this area. For example, the [Independent Lifelong Learning Commission](#) makes a positive contribution by laying out the basis for constructing a ‘cradle to grave’ national education service. The sector is awaiting the findings of the independent commission on the [College of the Future](#) as well as the government’s own plans for a [post-16 White Paper](#). Both appear to be sympathetic to more collaboration and less competition. However, it remains to be seen if a real planned sector emerges from the commission or the government’s white paper.

## Four phases of FE

Modern FE has gone through essentially four phases. The first from the period of the 1950s through to the 1970s, where colleges were designed to train technical skills to working-class youth to work for local employers.

The 1980s' rise in mass youth unemployment ushered in the second phase – the “comprehensivisation” of FE. This enabled a far more diverse and broader educational offer that chimed with the greater ambition and creativity of working-class people, who had often lost employment opportunities from local employers.

The incorporation of the sector in 1993 marked the third phase. The Conservative government of the day severed the links with the democratically accountable local authorities and introduced the market into the sector. Those who supported this move promised that the change would “raise standards” and “cut the shackles” binding colleges. Thus, allowing them to be more “dynamic” and more responsive to the needs of the community.

Of course, nothing of the sort occurred. Instead, we saw colleges doing their utmost to outdo their competitors. Any attempt to foster cooperation between institutions was constantly undermined by pressures to survive and prosper as a business.

Instead of greater opportunities, this resulted in a narrowing of the educational provision and a new narrative developed, which extolled the virtues of vocational education – which wasn't vocational education, but narrow skills training – over academic education.

We are now into the fourth phase: the supergroups. This phase is the logical conclusion of incorporation. Some who consider themselves to be on the liberal and progressive wing of the leaderships in the sector have attempted to argue that the creation of

supergroups will undermine the competitive nature of the sector. Mergers to create groups would allow a new era of cooperation and planning to take place across colleges.

## Aggressive competition

Of course, predictably, the opposite has happened. The creation of supergroups, recommended by the disastrous Area Reviews, rather than undermining competition, has created a more aggressive competition within the sector.

In London rather than 40 colleges fighting for funding and students we now have five main groups all with huge resources carving up the capital and fiercely fighting to defend and deepen their booty.

Newcastle College Group – the largest group in the sector and the pioneer of the fourth phase – has acquired, much to the despair of staff, Lewisham and Southwark College in London.

Many of the leaderships of the supergroups support and accept the educational direction of the government. They are angered, rightly, about the government's refusal to fund FE but are keen to promote the values of skills training in the guise of apprenticeships.

## Colleges have become more remote

The comprehensive educational ideals that guide and inform many remain at the heart of those who teach in the sector are regarded as out of date and not credible in the brave new world of skills shortages, a low wage economy and mass youth unemployment. But as the Coronavirus crisis has shown it was



these very ideals that allowed the sector to rise to the challenges the pandemic brought with it.

This inaccurate but convenient account of events, espoused by successive governments and shared by college leaderships, allows government to blame educators for the failure of young people to find meaningful employment rather than the continued failure of their own policies. It is the responsibility of government to provide jobs. Colleges cannot conjure work out of thin air.

It is a narrative the sector must challenge if it is to move forward and be genuinely responsive to the needs of the community we are supposed to serve.

Incorporation and the new supergroups have made colleges more remote from their communities. The shrinking of the adult education provision within the sector is an example of this. It is one of the great educational scandals of our age.

The question is can we turn the disaster of coronavirus into an opportunity to reset further and adult education to allow it to do the job those who work in the sector know it can do? If yes then this must start by breaking the shackles that incorporation and merger mania have brought about.

What follows is the beginning of a discussion of what kind of changes are needed to take place within further and adult education to educate and reskill our communities in a post -coronavirus world. It is one of many that will be coming out of UCU's [Fund the Future campaign](#).

## The market and competition

The unfettered market and competition model that has been consciously brought in to the sector over the last 40 years laid the basis for the inability for society to deal with the coronavirus. It has prevented cures to be found, allowed the virus to spread and led to tens of thousands lives to be lost. This model cannot neither protect its citizens nor educate them.

The marketised model has restricted the sector from being able to meet the needs of all its students and staff. We have witnessed the absurdities of competition that drives college managements to create policies designed to sink their competitor colleges and groups.

We need to create an education system that is genuinely responsive to the needs of our communities. We need to replace the market within education with a system that is planned based upon the aspirations of our students and communities.

## Planning and cooperation

The sector needs to be planned around an educational rationale as opposed to blind competition. Colleges need to work alongside all education sectors – nursery, school and universities- within a strategic plan, which meets the needs of the whole community.

If all the sectors worked democratically together on such a plan, not in competition, then lives of millions could be transformed, and FE could help to drive forward economic regeneration.

### We propose:

- *The further and adult education sector to be run through local democratic accountability / control by LEAs /regional bodies.*
- *To bring further and adult education back together into the same government department.*
- *Borough wide cross-sector education forums with representatives from: local unions, parents' groups, student unions, community voices and employers. Their role would be to map out the educational needs of the community and to develop a joint education sector plan.*
- *A skills audit to gauge what skills will be required to develop the economy now and, in the future, which must have at its heart a green skills agenda.*

## Funding

Funding for further and adult education has been at a historic low. Since 2008 the sector has seen over 25,000 jobs go, over one million adult student places cut and wages slashed by 27% in real terms. If we are going to be able to meet the challenges of the post-coronavirus world then government must reverse the funding crisis the sector has suffered.

### We propose that:

- *Funding per student should be levelled upwards to that in schools, not schools levelled down to FE.*
- *Full funding for fees be restored to all adult/FE courses.*
- *Educational Maintenance Allowance and Adult Learning Grant fully restored to all regions and nations of the UK.*
- *No tuition fees*
- *Student loans to be abolished and replaced with a living grant.*
- *There should be clear funding commitments to further education provision over a 5-year period, not the stop-start approach currently adopted.*
- *Funding for students needing to repeat levels should be made available.*
- *Reverse the cuts in adult learning.*
- *Adult learning to be given equal funding status with other provision.*
- *Migrant workers to be given the right to free education.*

## Practitioner and management

### Rebuilding the trust by closing the democratic deficit.

There has been a serious breakdown of trust between staff and management. Since incorporation, there has been a conscious attempt to clear out those deemed awkward and not responsive to management demands. An increasingly authoritarian micro-management has been adopted by most college senior managements – one which starts with the premise that staff can't be trusted. Our sector is marked by a democratic deficit, with teachers and communities largely excluded from policy-making locally and nationally. As practitioners, we experience this deficit acutely in our everyday professional lives.

Across the sector, teachers are estranged from the corporate values, practices and language of the institutions we work in. This feeling drains the motivation and resilience of individuals, and undermines the shared purpose a college would require in order to thrive.

Colleges need to break with managerial cultures that impose policy and sanction staff who resist corporate diktats, directly through disciplinary



controls or indirectly by stigmatising them as out-of-date malcontents and unmotivated moaners. In this undemocratic dispensation, senior managements and college boards mandate what's best for the organisation, regardless of the views and experience of practitioners.

Resisting these mandates is seen as both futile and counter-productive; managerialism thus demands compliance. When this top-down culture causes anxiety and stress, managements will offer therapeutic palliatives, such as mindfulness workshops, along with mentoring for motivation and similar programmes of support. Ironically, anxiety and stress are often viewed as indicators of a dynamic institution and evidence of teachers being driven out of the 'comfort zones' in which they would otherwise complacently remain. Those who can will leave the organisation, although staff turnover is interpreted as another measure of organisational progress.

This managerialist approach is about power and control, not about creating productive learning environments for students and staff. College management structures and practices need to change from attempting to control everything to allowing staff and students to have a genuine voice within their institutions.

### This means:

- **Embracing the democratic principle:** those affected by sector policy have a right to shape that policy, nationally, locally, and within our institutions.
- **Enabling participation:** so that our sector benefits fully from the professional knowledge and experience of teachers, and from the unrealised capacity for identifying issues and solving problems of everyone involved in our colleges, including students and communities.
- **Accountability:** without democratic openness there can be no accountability, nor can we avoid the policy churn, false starts, vanity projects, and instances of outright corruption which scar our sector.
- **Acknowledging our sector's responsibility for nurturing democratic citizenship:** colleges should embody democratic values, and through their culture and practices, nurture the skills and capacities our students need in order to address challenges such as climate change, inequality, and democratic decline.
- **Trade unions to have representation** on all bodies throughout the college including, governing bodies, curriculum and health and safety committees.

### On-line working

The experience on working remotely has not brought about the liberating experience that some college managers extol. Many practitioners look forward to when we can go back to face-to-face teaching. Whilst online methods of delivery have their place, for many the experience of having to work remotely has reinforced the central role of social interaction in the teaching and learning experience.

Tens of thousands of college practitioners have learnt to deliver their courses online. They have demonstrated how flexible and responsive they have been to ensure their students don't miss out on education.

Some college principals have welcomed these changes and see in online delivery the future of further and adult education. Clearly remote learning has its place in 21st century delivery systems but should not be seen as an alternative to the face-to-face delivery model.

### Where these systems are in place due to the Coronavirus the following must also be in place:

- *Students must be provided with the ability to participate in remote learning. This means college/government to ensure that every student has the equipment that is necessary to allow them to access learning.*
- *Staff guidance on the health risks of working long hours online without our breaks.*
- *Colleges ensure that staff are given rigorous training about health and safety guidelines when working from home.*
- *Risk assessments of staff home working conditions must be undertaken by the college.*

### A diverse curriculum

The narrowing of the curriculum and the obsession of exam-based assessment has dominated our education system. For our young people to be able to survive the post-coronavirus world they need a curriculum that reflects their diverse needs.

There is often a false dichotomy within education between the vocational and the academic. We in the FE sector have a proud history of teaching and preparing young adults for employment as well as providing a wide range of opportunities for academic study. Our young people have many sides to their ambitions. We need a curriculum that mirrors these ambitions rather than attempts to constrict and shape them into one dimensional beings.

### Close the exam factory

The pandemic brought home how unfair and stultifying the education system based on exams has become. The attempts made by college/school senior management teams to devise a fair system to assess exams when no exams were taking place must be one of the greatest travesties of the crisis. Hundreds of thousands of young people, due to Ofqual's marking and assessment guidance, were deemed as failures. Never again can we allow this to happen.



The obsession with exams and grades has forced students to follow narrowly based criteria to pass exams at the expense of developing the ability to think critically and be creative. The shift in many vocational courses from an overwhelming focus on outcomes at the expense of valuing the process of learning has led to a 'tick box' approach that offers no depth of study and limited opportunities for developing transferrable skills.

## We need a new approach:

- *Abolish GCSE and A levels and replace it with a diploma system.*
- *This would establish parity between academic and vocational education. It would include an 'extended project' and it would be dominated by teacher assessment.*
- *Enhanced professional status as teacher assessors must be recognised as an integral part of the teaching process, and teachers' professional judgements to be valued and given more time to do what they do best – inspire students by delivering a varied and interesting curriculum in ways that motivate and are relevant and exciting to students.*
- *Courses must offer wider learning experiences that are an integral part of a vocational curriculum; our students need to learn about their rights, the role of trade unions, citizenship, discrimination, participating in democracy and environmental issues.*
- *That a multicultural education is essential to the social cohesion of our communities*

## We are for:

- *Bringing back democratic control of awarding bodies.*
- *Providing personalised career advice, face-to-face with students rather than the electronic and telephone contact.*
- *A real engagement with the needs of young people and oppose forced education to 18, community volunteering projects, a return to 1980s style job creation schemes, national service or other forms of coercion of young people alienated by the education system.*
- *The promotion of an anti-racist, decolonised curriculum in all areas of the syllabus, that teaches all people the realities of British imperialism, colonialism and the structural inequalities that exists in society.*

## Real Jobs and apprenticeships

The post-coronavirus world will need to reskill the workforce. It will mean rethinking what society's priorities are. The need to respond to the climate crisis is as urgent, and as integrated, as the need to protect society from future pandemics.

## Climate jobs

- *Finding a solution to the climate crisis will help solve the economic one. We need jobs that deal with the impact of climate change as well as those that will prevent a further descent into global warming.*
- *A target of 500,000 climate jobs is one we believe would provide the basis of creating tens of thousands of well skilled and secure employment opportunities for young workers. Colleges must be at the centre of training and educating this future pioneering workforce.*
- *The green skills gap is now a major stumbling block to delivering a Just Transition to a zero-carbon economy. We believe an integrated skills strategy should cover:*
- *The effective embedding of Education for Sustainable Development across the curriculum*
- *The rapid introduction of a short-course sustainability skills programme to train the existing workforce*
- *An expansion of quality apprenticeships based on a coherent system of delivery addressing the inequalities in apprenticeships to ensure access by under-represented groups*
- *Promoting effective community engagement by the further and adult education sector to support the supply and demand issues of skills and jobs.*

## Education should be at the heart of apprenticeships.

Apprenticeships are not just about training for tasks or for specific job roles; they should include a broad education which prepares people for the changing world of work and empowers them to be engaged, adaptable and resilient. There is an important role for wider learning objectives such as rights and responsibilities at work, as well as developing a range of skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork.

The government's approach to general education within apprenticeships is clearly out of step with our international neighbours and its T-level model has been an expensive failure. In England, general education (including maths and English) adds up to between 50 and 100 hours over the duration of an apprenticeship, whereas German and Swiss apprenticeships require 400 hours of general education across a range of subjects.

With education forming the core of apprenticeship programmes, we would also expect to see educators having a key role in their development. However, the focus in England has been on employer-led reform rather than meaningful partnership working



## Prison education

The education of prisoners must be one of the central priorities for education funding. The rehabilitation of offenders shows that society is trying to reach and help those at its extremes to help them make positive contributions to their own lives and to societies.

The failure of the market in education can be seen at its worse in prison education. Like FE, prison education has gone through its own marketisation since 1993 going through four OLASS (Offender Learning and Skills Service) iterations and has now entered the Prison Education Framework (PEF) in its fifth form.

In the initial stages this process was seen as a cash cow for the public and private education providers with the budget reaching a peak of £146.68 million in 2014 -2015. This process however has led to a culture of trying to please the commissioner by doing more for less and a steady reduction of the terms and conditions of those working in the profession. These tighter margins led to a private provider withdrawing from several London prisons as the contract was no longer economically viable.

The retendering in OLASS 1 to 4 was an expensive and inefficient methodology. The frequent change and instability in the process meant that the issues of workforce planning and refreshing infrastructure were never properly addressed as there was no long-term accountability.

The latest funding model PEF has seen the budget of £130 million taken from the Department of Innovation and Skills and placed directly under the control of the Ministry of Justice. This led to a commissioning model with two main strands, the Prison Education Framework and the Dynamic Purchasing System. The former being concerned with the core subjects and running for the length of the contract and the latter for bespoke provision with contracts up to a maximum of one year.

All of these contracts were to be in direct control of individual prison governors who were expected to manage their providers performance and apply contractual sanctions and retender where necessary.

In reality this has led to those working in prison education being in a constantly precarious position with their jobs under threat in an annual basis in both strands. The DPS because of its initial annual renewal and those working on the PEF contract because of the ability of the prison governor to review their annual delivery plan and make changes to the subsequent years provision.

It will become increasingly more difficult to recruit the staff into prison education if they are under annual threats of losing their jobs or losing their access to the Teachers' Pension Scheme.

The casualisation of the workforce in Prison Education is problematic because the instability of the current funding model could lead to a further proliferation which in turn will have a detrimental effect on providing the quality and stability that the students deserve. This has already led to the Justice Committee calling for more stable prison education contracts.

### **To allow prison education to meet the needs of offenders and society:**

- *Will need to be properly funded.*
- *Will need to move to a position of widening the curriculum to take account of all its students' educational aspirations rather than the narrow target-based curriculum that the current funding model supports.*
- *Will need to be taken as an equal educational partner, funded and prioritised the same as all other educational establishments be they schools, FE colleges or Adult Education providers.*
- *To bring back prison education under the control of the Department for Education.*

### **Respecting the role of the professional the teacher in FE**

We have witnessed the role of the teacher change in recent years. We believe that the role of the teacher should be valued and respected. An erosion of pay and conditions has resulted in a workforce that is overburdened and stressed.

### **We call for:**

- *An increase in the democratisation of colleges to value the professional judgements of teachers.*
- *FE teachers to be seen as a transformative profession, not merely skills preparation for jobs.*
- *An end to casualisation*
- *a reduction in levels of administration and red tape*
- *Closing the gender and ethnic pay gaps.*



## Equality

Equality must be at the heart of the reconstruction a post-coronavirus world. We have seen how economic disadvantage impacted on who died from the virus.

People from poorer working-class areas were more likely to contract and die from the virus than those from wealthier areas. Those from BAME backgrounds suffer significantly higher rates of contagion and death due to the virus and those with 'underlying health conditions', many of whom have disabilities, were also more likely to contract and die from the virus.

An equal society is a fairer society and a more productive one. Further and adult education sector must become a standard bearer for equality throughout society. Not only through ensuring that the celebration of diversity is thoroughly integrated throughout the curriculum but also through inclusive employment practices and ensuring secure contracts are given to all who work in the sector.

FE has for a long time been the access point for education for marginalised students. FE students contend with significant barriers to get into education, from the juggling of childcare and the demands of stressful work environments, to the often disabling features of college life including physical access, packed classrooms, and anxiety inducing assessment-focused learning, to battling the continued painting of working class and BAME students as deviant, unwilling to learn, and lacking ability.

No longer must it be acceptable that staff from BAME backgrounds, women, staff with disabilities and LGBTQ+ backgrounds disproportionately over populate casualised posts or for it to be acceptable that there are still gender, race and disability pay gaps.

### A new democratic FE system should:

- *Fully fund nursery places.*
- *Scrap the Prevent program and actively engage with BAME students to challenge misrepresentations and support anti-racist work.*
- *End Pregnancy and maternity discrimination for both students and staff.*
- *Not disadvantage students and staff with caring responsibilities.*
- *Ensure that roles that are largely traditionally women's roles such as learning support must be respected, not casualised and paid properly.*
- *Fully fund mental health services in every college to provide support for staff and students and to raise awareness of mental health issues.*