

Restructures and mergers in further and adult education

Resisting cuts and rationalisation

UCU briefing

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Reviewing post 16-education and training institutions is the title of the government's latest policy document for further and adult education. Needless to say it is a review that, if implemented, will drastically reduce the size of the sector and with it the future of millions of students. The document states:

'The work of FE and Sixth Form College Commissioners has identified there is significant scope for greater efficiency in the sector, in a way that frees up resources to deliver high quality education and training which supports economic growth.'

The proposed restructure of the sector is based upon the premise that the sector is not fit for purpose, in other words to deliver the necessary training and education that young people and adults need to close the skills gap that exists in Britain today. The government argues that the sector needs to change to ensure that young people and adults have the necessary skills and education to enter/re-enter the workforce. However it doesn't take much examination of these proposals to see what really lies behind them.

WHAT ARE THE GOVERNMENT'S PROPOSALS?

The government are proposing that there is a 'national programme of area-based reviews'. Many are already underway. Those who are to carry out the reviews at the local level will be a range of stakeholders who include '***chairs of governing bodies, further education and sixth form commissioners, local authorities, local enterprise partnerships and regional schools commissioners.***' Note who is not invited to be a part of the steering group: students, staff or unions. The review is not an open review to genuinely look at ways to improve the service. It has a clearly stated aim: '***We will need to move towards fewer, often larger, more resilient and efficient providers.***'

It is the 'fewer and larger' part of the government's aim that is most worrying. In London, for example, there are 40 colleges spread out across the greater London area. The proposal is that the government would like 10 hubs which would farm out different areas of education and training to, presumably, private providers.

This will not only lead to the loss of thousands of teaching posts but also a significant loss in local course provision. Groups of 'super' colleges, so large they will lose any

connection with the needs of the communities, will dominate each region, inevitably leading to a narrowing of the curriculum. The 10 hubs and their 'pop up' providers will increasingly provide short-term skills training courses for a particular employer who happens to be on the way up and recruiting at that time.

This will be at the expense of genuine theory-based vocational education and academic courses for those who wish to continue to university. It will also be necessary for students, often from poor backgrounds, to travel further to their nearest college. In many cases, the cost of this will be prohibitive and will discourage people from taking up the education they need.

All of this will leave the student with, at best, a short-term skill which may or may not help her to find employment, but without wider transferable in-depth knowledge that will enable her to navigate her way around a very difficult economic climate.

SKILLS, EDUCATION AND THE ECONOMY

Over the past 35 years there has been an unchallengeable orthodoxy that there is a direct link between an educated and skilled workforce and a successful economy. The problem of mass youth unemployment, they argued, was not the fault of government policy. Instead 'the anti-industrial bias in the classroom', as James Callaghan put it, lack of parental discipline and 'trendy' teaching methods that foster the idea that education should be for education's sake rather than have a direct economic purpose, are the main causes of youth unemployment. In short, being out of work has been seen as an individual failing rather than a consequence of a lack of labour market opportunities brought about by government policies.

Despite this widely held 'common sense' view, there is no evidence that narrowing down a country's education system to skills training actually produces a more dynamic and sustainable economy. But there is evidence that shows that an education system that encourages critical thinking of all its citizens and not just the children of the wealthy, and sees education as something human beings do from the cradle to the grave, can develop all in society to have more productive and fulfilling lives. However this 'common sense' is now being contested. A new consensus has emerged within the educational community and the wider labour and trade union movement which recognises that social and economic inequalities need to be overcome if we are to deal with youth unemployment and the anti-social issues that arise from it.

APPRENTICESHIPS

The main driver behind the government's approach to their restructure plans is to make education more responsive to the needs of employers. The expansion of apprenticeships lies at the heart of their plans and provides the apparent rationale for why other areas within the sector needed to be cut. All the main political parties agree on the need to expand apprenticeship programmes.

There have been grand claims by the government on how successful their apprenticeship programme has been. They point to the growing numbers of those on apprenticeships. The number of people on these schemes rose to 868,700 funded apprentices in 2012/13. However only a small proportion of this number were under 19. In fact only 181,000 were on them. 392,000 were over 25 and 294,500 were aged 19-24. So despite the political discourse around apprenticeships being for young people, a significant majority are over the age of 25.

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three-year period where the apprentice is funded to attend college to study the more theoretical side of the work. Education is certainly not at the heart of these apprenticeships. Many are short training programmes that don't even pay the national minimum wage. Even fewer get long-term employment on completion of these courses.

Despite the government rhetoric their 'apprenticeship' programme falls well short of what is necessary to deal with youth and adult unemployment.

UCU'S RESPONSE: AN ALTERNATIVE THAT PUTS STUDENTS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES AT ITS HEART

The government and some college principals will try to argue that these proposals provide an opportunity to progress further and adult education in challenging times. Some colleges have moved straightaway to look for partners to merge before the 2017 deadline for the end of the review period. This is a mistaken approach and reveals that college leaderships have given in before the fight has even begun.

These proposals are the bitter fruits of incorporation when colleges were forced to sever their ties from local government, and marketisation ripped through the sector. Many within the leadership of the sector opportunistically and cynically fell in behind incorporation to drive down the conditions of service of their staff and create their own fiefdoms. Consistently failing to oppose the government has meant the chickens are now coming home to roost. Passively implementing the government strategy this time round will mean there will be very little left of the sector in five years' time.

UCU believes in an alternative approach. 3.5 million people attend the further and adult education sector. Many are looking for a second chance to better their lives by taking classes from a choice of a myriad of courses after failing to achieve what they were capable of at school.

Rather than unleashing the creativity and unlocking the potential of those who attend colleges, these new Tory proposals will only reinforce their alienation and frustration by preventing them from experiencing the liberating experience of education.

These proposals will not address the concerns of the one million 16-24 year olds who have no work, education or training, or the 15% of 16-65 year olds who have no qualifications whatsoever. But they were never designed to do so.

A BETTER WAY: UCU'S VOCATIONAL EDUCATION PROPOSALS

14-19

- ▶ Implement an integrated 14-19 phase with a multi-level diploma based on credit accumulation and transferability to be taken by all students.
- ▶ Overhaul careers education, information, advice and guidance for young people to ensure it is independent, high quality and accessible to all.
- ▶ Employers, teachers and learners all have a valid role in designing vocational qualifications.
- ▶ Restore proper financial support for learners to replace EMA.
- ▶ A new kite-marked 'Youth resolution' scheme for employers who provide fair pay and structured training and development for their young staff

Adults

- ▶ Over-25s to have a bespoke career change/fresh start programme to replace

apprenticeships in recognition of their different educational needs.

- ▶ Reverse the decline in workplace training with statutory time off for learning.
- ▶ Scrap equivalent or lower qualification policy.
- ▶ Skills support for unemployed adults matching local labour market needs using expertise of colleges and LEPs.
- ▶ Implementation of Youth Resolution for young adults up to 25.
- ▶ Reconstituted sector skills councils in a social/industrial partnership model to include employers of all sizes, unions, learners, and FE and HE providers.

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Apprenticeships

- ▶ Revert to a programme for under-25s only.
- ▶ Move towards a statutory three-year minimum duration.
- ▶ Have education at their heart, with mandatory off-site learning provision including wider learning aims.
- ▶ Abolish the gap between national minimum wage and apprenticeship minimum wage.
- ▶ A certified professional title should be awarded upon completion.
- ▶ Financial support through fiscal measures that will work for small and medium enterprises – tax credits, wage subsidies, grants from levy system.
- ▶ Employers should contribute financially to training through levies proportionate to size.

Funding

- ▶ Voluntary approach has failed; statutory underpinning of vocational education and training (VET) needed with fiscal measures such as tax credits and levies to properly support and fund learning.
- ▶ Scrap failing 24+ advanced learning loans.
- ▶ Social/industrial partnership model to properly engage all types of employers, provide union role and representation, raise levies and provide grants.
- ▶ Government to fund VET seamlessly without an arbitrary divide at age 19.