

Chapter 8 – The Impact of Widening Participation on Further Education Settings in England

Peter Wolstencroft – Liverpool John Moores University
Judith Darnell – The Bedford College Group

Throughout history, scholars have found great difficulty in defining the Further Education (FE) sector due to both its byzantine structures and also its myriad of opportunities and pathways for learners. Today's Sixth Form colleges and colleges of Further Education are a world away from George Birkbeck's first foray into adult education in 1821 which saw him set up the pioneering Mechanics' Institutes, an initiative designed to bring education to workers who had been through only perfunctory formal education previously (Walker, 2016). Instead, present day colleges are run as quasi-businesses with the educational and the economic imperatives engaged in a battle for supremacy. This chapter seeks to describe the current FE landscape and explores the dichotomy that exists between the pressures of metrics on an organisation and the requirement to respond to government priorities; but also the need to provide transformative opportunities for diverse communities. We enquire how these challenges can be approached in practice and investigate how widening participation can be managed, alongside the performative measures used to explore success in the sector such as producing cohorts of students with high success and retention rates. We offer two case studies (one from within 'The Bedford College Group' (TBCG) and the other from King Edward VI 6th form college in Nuneaton) with the view to investigate and share some examples of best practice in what might appear to be a sector under pressure.

Definitions and purposes of FE

Duckworth (2014) suggests that difficulties in defining the sector are due, in part, to its fast-changing landscape which is both rich and diverse. Anderson, Barton and Wahlberg (2003) characterise this by describing the sector as having IADHD - Institutional Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder – and a quick review of its history confirms that its role has been both ever changing and also, often neglected.

One of the consequences of the Education Act (1944), which raised the school leaving age to 15, was a renewed focus on the Further Education sector as remaining in education became far more acceptable within society. This was followed in 1972 by the raising of the leaving age to 16; something that, at that time, was perceived by many as problematic (Bamford, 1975). The age was raised again to its current level of 18 in 2015 which suggests that the worries identified by Bamford were not borne out by the reality. Much of this drive to raise the age was linked to the necessity of generating more skilled labour, which has been seen as a core

purpose of FE colleges since the start of the Mechanics' Institutes. Returning to Birkbeck's original ideals, colleges were created for the purpose of bridging the gap between either school and work, or school and university, as well as serving to boost industrial and academic opportunities in a post-war society (Peart, 2013). This diverse sense of purpose might well be one of the reasons why the sector has proved so difficult to be defined; indeed, it has often been described as what it is not, rather than what it is. One example is 'Further Education ...includes any study after secondary education that's not part of Higher Education' (DfE, n.d.) which not only fails to give the sector a clear identity but also neglects to recognise the growing amount of Higher Education that takes place in the FE sector. One common thread does exist however; traditionally, the FE sector has had strong associations with disadvantaged communities and was most likely to educate the poor and working class (Thompson, 2009). This can be dated back to its roots amongst the Mechanics Institutes where it was used, not only to teach new skills, but also to educate those who had not been educated before (Walker, 2016). As well as this role in educating what might be termed 'non-mainstream' students, it is often seen as a 'second chance' for those who have not been viewed as 'successful' at school.

A commonality in the description of the sector is the desire to support sections of the community that have not always been fully catered for by education and hence the educational imperative of 'education as a good in itself' is a strong feature of many colleges. However, to simply define it as existing to support disadvantaged students is both misleading and an oversimplification. The then Prime Minister, James Callaghan, articulated the importance of the link between education and economic benefits in his Ruskin College speech (Callaghan, 1976) and the Further Education sector has been at the forefront of the desire to link employability to qualifications. This has resulted in a tension between an instrumental view of education which focuses on the economic imperative and the more traditional, educational imperative that stresses support for all students. This tension is explored below.

Economic versus Educational Imperative

The movement towards an economic based model for colleges in England that was signposted by Callaghan has been further facilitated by the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) which sought to use the perceived best practice from the private sector to improve efficiency (DfE, 1992). Furthermore it also encouraged the use of a series of metrics that were claimed to judge the performance of organisations within the sector. Whilst the latter has created a degree of convergence of ideas about what makes an outstanding college, it has tended to narrow the focus of the organisation to those things which can be measured (Ball,

2003). A key point to make at this juncture and at the heart of the dichotomy between educational and economic imperatives, is the primacy of the data, hence, if a policy, such as supporting less advantaged students, was explored, then it is looked at with reference to the impact on the metrics for the organisation.

The act of narrowing the focus within the sector to a series of measurable performance indicators represents a challenge to some of the objectives of colleges. Included amongst these challenges has been ensuring that the original purpose of FE, (to improve access to education for those who may have struggled to engage with formal schooling), remains central to their remit. Keenan and Kadi-Hanifi (2020) describe this challenge, as well as the perceived government prejudice in viewing FE as a place where “the perceived economic and societal ills might be solved” (p.3) as one that is not always adequately addressed. The focus on performance which is measured with metrics also threatens the cultivation of other, softer, skills in students which are more difficult to measure (examples of these might include higher levels of confidence and self-esteem and improved verbal communication skills). The importance of this wider role was illustrated by a research project commissioned by the University and College Union (UCU) which provided robust evidence of the vital role that FE colleges play in transforming lives in modern Britain. Duckworth and Smith (2019) described an expanding ripple effect where diverse communities experienced powerful individual, health, economic and social benefits from continuing their education.

The incorporation of colleges that followed the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) imposed marketisation on the sector; something which created a new challenge for colleges. Prior to the Act, it was normal for colleges to work cooperatively in a geographical area with the focus being on supporting the student and ensuring that complementary courses were offered to ensure a wide range of choice in the area, rather than competing ones which presented repetition. The 1992 Act stressed the benefits of competition between providers as a means to improve overall standards and hence, colleges were encouraged to compete for students, the cooperative environment had become a marketised one. The tension between the educational imperative that encouraged colleges to support disadvantaged students and the economic imperative, which stressed metrics and the importance of ensuring colleges performed well in league tables whilst maintaining financial stability, is clear and it means that the sector has to strive to balance the two opposing approaches. Reconciling the need to support students, with the need to work in a marketised environment, has become even more of a challenge in the last decade when cuts to funding have affected the sector. The result (as described by Duckworth and Smith, 2019) has been stretched service, hurt communities, and penalised college staff.

In addition to a general decrease in funding, pressure has been added to colleges via a multitude of government initiatives. In the last few years these have included the necessity for all students to gain English and maths qualifications (backed up by a decrease in funding if students were not enrolled in these subjects), the proliferation of apprenticeships in the sector, the growing presence of Higher Education courses in FE and the introduction of T levels. Coupled with this, FE has also been subjected to what Stevenson (2017) refers to as 'datafication', a process whereby data is collected '.....on all levels of educational systems (individual, classroom, school, region, state, international), potentially about all processes of teaching, learning and school management' (Jarke and Breitner, 2019, p.1). This collection of data means that college leaders are often led by this, sometimes at the expense of the educational imperative.

Widening Participation

The stated vision of the DfE is to produce a widely educated society which encompasses equality of opportunity for young people from all backgrounds (Munday, 2020). The importance of 'social vitality' (p.54) is stressed and the suggestion is that a higher number of learners within a community will undoubtedly benefit society. Keenan and Kadi-Hanifi (2020) concluded that FE is fundamental to this process, due to both its accessible and inclusive nature. These threads were taken from The Kennedy Report (Kennedy, 1997) which explored the nature of widening participation in education and made many recommendations to support those who had been less successful in 'earlier learning' (Kennedy, 1997, p. 13). This creates a further link back to what Keenan and Kadi-Hanifi, (2020, p.8) describe as a 'second-chance' sector. Part of the drive in widening participation has also been supported through the setting of national and local targets for participation as well as 'a lifetime entitlement to education...which is free for young people and those who are socially and economically deprived' (Kennedy, 1997, p.13-14).

Widening participation in the sector was developed with the intention of re-calibrating the recruitment practices back to encouraging the traditional FE audience (most noticeably the working classes) back into education. These groups were the most likely to be on the margins of society in terms of socio-economic and cultural status. Kennedy believed that by offering the chance of furthering their education, expectations and aspirations could be raised. The marketisation and the ensuing competitive practices between colleges produced a landscape where FE institutions were more interested in improving numbers and success rates, rather than reaching out to those who were less inclined to pursue additional qualifications when leaving school. Kennedy suggested that pushing the focus back to underprivileged students

was incredibly important in shaping local communities and creating opportunity in the job market (Kennedy, 1997).

Accounts from learners within the sector clearly indicate the power of FE courses in conquering marginalisation (whether it is economic, social, political or cultural) (Munday, 2020). Schuller *et al* (2002) as well as Duckworth and Smith (2019) have recognised the transformative nature of education for both communities and individuals. Whilst the Kennedy Report was widely welcomed, the sector has faced several challenges to meeting its remit in this area. Given the pressures on colleges to meet data targets, it is no surprise that there appears to be a dichotomy of issues at play here in regard to ensuring a diverse college cohort who are also able to perform to meet the college's attainment targets. Shaw *et al* (2007) identified that attitudes to widening participation at a departmental level often acted as a barrier and it was often not a priority amongst staff due to a fear of 'lowering standards' (Shaw *et al*, 2007, p.112) for marginalised groups. However, at senior management level, widening participation was described much more positively and as necessary in order to benefit communities and individuals, one of Shaw *et al's* participants noted it as a 'social responsibility' (2007, p.114). This particular research project also revealed that the phrase 'widening participation' was a problematic term and was being used in different ways. The researchers preferred to use the term 'student diversity' in order to 'harmonise understanding across the sector' (Shaw *et al*, 2007, p.133).

The 2021 White Paper also introduced further change to the sector in the form of encouragement for students to develop lifelong skills by granting capital funding to "transform the college estate and enable high quality provision" (DfE, 2021, p. 59). From 2025 the government plans to introduce a lifelong loan entitlement to boost educational participation for all, as part of the 'lifetime skills guarantee' as they note that currently there are significant skills gaps. Whilst this initiative is aimed at all learners, the inevitable focus will be on widening participation in groups which historically have low engagement rates, a laudable aim but one that is complicated by the overarching objectives stated. As a summary, these are:

- give employers a greater say in the development of skills
- provide higher level technical skills
- provide a flexible, lifetime skills guarantee
- simplify and reform funding and accountability for providers
- support outstanding teaching

Whilst these aims are laudable in nature, it is key to return to the tension between the educational and economic imperative. The points above stress the need to connect education

to employability and hence the metrics that determine success are likely to reflect this link. This approach in education (and one that links back to Callaghan's speech), is linked to the economic imperative and hence, trying to balance this with an approach that focuses on the educational imperative, is likely to be a challenge for colleges.

T levels

As has already been referenced, the FE sector is continually evolving, but the constant is the requirement to balance employer and labour market needs alongside available government funding. An example of this balancing act is the introduction, in 2020, of T Level qualifications. These qualifications, which are two-year courses equivalent to three A-levels, aim to incorporate academic classroom learning alongside an extended placement in industry. The purpose of the qualification is to increase students' employability and raise the profile of vocational learners. The courses have been designed in collaboration with employers and businesses to identify needs within each market and direct training and skills appropriately (DfE, 2020 and TBCG, 2021). Amongst a plethora of other courses and routes, the T levels are another offer for students to access education and employment. T levels are described in the recent 2021 White paper as "a prestigious technical alternative to A levels" (DfE, 2021, p.33). The T levels have been created as a collaboration between the awarding bodies and the employers and industry-relevant professionals. However, colleges need local employers to 'buy into' the idea of T-levels, despite the limited financial incentives for the employers initially. Once qualified, the hope is that T level students will be seen as highly trained and valuable resources with more industry experience through the work placement element of T levels as opposed to the traditional vocational learners. A merge of both the technical skills and the theoretical knowledge together in one highly regarded qualification is certainly likely to be attractive to employers and is likely to enhance and widen participation to students who may not traditionally attend a college institute, however, it is another initiative for colleges to react to.

Widening participation must also be considered in light of progression into HE courses from T levels as this appears not to have been a driving force in their introduction. A report commissioned by the National Foundation for Educational Research (Straw *et al*, 2019) found that institutions who were trialling T levels in 2019 had considered progression routes to include employment, HNC and HND courses, apprenticeships (including higher apprenticeships), and foundation and technical degree programmes. FE colleges who took part in the study were already reporting 'solid progression routes' (Straw *et al*, 2019, p.28) indicating close links with local HE institutions. Whilst this appears a positive move on the

surface, concerns were raised about the preparedness of these students for higher level study in terms of their practical skills and occupational competency. In addition, whilst T levels are likely to shift routes for students into employment and HE, it is unclear what their role has been in widening participation to degree-level Higher Education due to the lack of focus on this aspect during their introduction.

Whilst the lack of focus on widening participation within T levels is a concern, it is the consolidation of vocational education into a small number of routes which has raised greater concerns about the direction of travel within FE. Their introduction has forced the consolidation of the current 13,000 (approx.) technical qualifications into 15 T-Level routes introduced between 2020 and 2022. Interestingly, the Sainsbury review (Sainsbury, 2016) suggested that only four routes are expected to be taught via the apprenticeship route. These are: protected services, transport and logistics, sales and marketing and social care. The review claims that there were 2.8 million non-graduates working in the four occupational groups that were solely apprenticeship-only options. Some learners, therefore, had no classroom-based option to enter these areas and so were likely to be pushed into the apprenticeship route with little other option. This 'secretive cull of FE provision' has left many frustrated (Ryan, 2018, p.2). This reduction of routes has the potential to lead to problems with widening participation as students are channelled into areas where they are unsuited, or unhappy and may simply not make the grade.

In addition to this reduction of choice, the introduction of the T level route is likely to cause a shift in the progression paths and options for students. It might well be the case that the A level route into academic HE will only happen in school 6th forms and 6th Form Colleges, neither of which have traditionally had a remit to widen participation to the disadvantaged. This movement does have the potential to create increased opportunities within general FE colleges for some students. The investment in T levels and higher-level technical education mirrors a European style vocational universities/polytechnics (see the Netherlands and Germany for examples) and the academic/vocational divide would begin at 16 when young people choose between A and T levels. On the surface, this eventuality sounds positive for raising the status of vocational education, but there are dangers in that it is likely to close off the traditional FE role as a second chance route for mature students and other disadvantaged groups and would obviate the social mission that Kennedy founded. The focus on younger students means that many of FE's traditional groups (notably mature students and those looking for a 'second chance') are marginalised. Indeed, the rise of T levels has the propensity to cause huge policy implications for widening participation. The government had planned to overhaul some vocational and technical qualifications (typically BTEC courses) in

favour of T levels but after an outcry from the sector, it was decided that these qualifications will now not be defunded until at least 2024. However, the threat of T-levels on the traditional routes is looming and is causing much controversy (Weale, 2021).

Higher Education in Further Education

One of the main mechanisms for widening participation in FE institutions in recent years has been an increase in the offer of HE within an FE environment. Since the post-92 expansion of the university sector and the desire by the then Labour government under Tony Blair to ensure that 50% of school leavers progress to Higher Education (Blair, 1999), a political imperative has been to ensure that all sectors of the community have access to HE courses. Traditionally those groups identified by Kennedy (1997) have been less likely to participate (Reay *et al*, 2001) and so alternatives have been sought to rectify this imbalance. The proliferation of Foundation Degrees, HNCs and HNDs, all of which are likely to be taught at a college, has provided an opportunity to target these groups, many of whom would not want to study in a more traditional university environment.

Many students studying HE in an FE environment have progressed from a previous course at the same institution (Wolstencroft and de Main, 2020) and stress the fact that they stay as they are already familiar with the staff, facilities, local area, and assessment platforms (*ibid*). Whilst this can be seen in a positive light, at this stage it is important to return to the central premise of this chapter that FE institutions face the difficulties of balancing the educational imperative which stresses the benefits of this approach to HE, with the economic imperative which demands minimum numbers are recruited and resources are measured against financial constraints. Whilst the concept of introducing HE in the FE environment does appear to be a positive move, the realities are likely to be more problematic. The numbers of learners taking this route is much lower than the numbers going to a traditional university and hence the economics of the situation mean that what is taught is likely to be a narrower curriculum that is tailored to the resources available, rather than what is best for students. In addition, programmes will only be financially viable if a given number of students are recruited, which could mean the closure of classes if that number is not met. So, whilst this movement to expand students' opportunities to progress to HE can be seen as beneficial, the economic imperative does mean that it is not always as student centred as it might be.

Generation of Creative, Successful Solutions

The next part of this chapter will examine this dichotomy through the lens of two successful institutions within the FE sector and will demonstrate that although tensions exist, there are

ways that institutions can try to alleviate these pressures. We intend to recognise the challenges faced but also focus on the solutions used. All FE colleges have similar challenges imposed on them, but we hope to highlight good practice in the management of these potential pressures. Therefore, it must be stressed that the examples used in this chapter must be viewed through the lens of successful approaches to the challenges faced. Elsewhere, as we have highlighted, much of the sector is still struggling to reconcile the need to perform well on the various metrics, with the need to maintain a student focus. Our intention at this point is not to dismiss colleges that may be struggling with the aforementioned issues; more to offer hope that under these challenges, there are possible ways forward and good practice that should be shared with colleges who are feeling crushed under the opposing pressures.

Looking at the objectives set out in the 2021 White Paper, it is clear that the landscape of widening participation is as complex as ever. Merely increasing participation is only a small part; instead, it fits into a landscape that encompasses the needs of industry, government, the economy, the regulatory framework, as well as the needs of students. Alongside this, the concurrent pull between institutional metrics and the need to widen participation to include those members of society for which FE was founded, is often contradictory and this, as well as the need to meet government targets, can create an environment in which it is hard for the sector to thrive. However, as our first case study shows, it is possible to meet these challenges and the capital funding and investment of 1.3 billion due to FE over the next five years offers hope for the future of FE.

Case Study ONE

The Bedford College Group (TBCG) has twenty sites (including five main campuses) serving learners in the South-East Midlands area of the UK. TBCG's stated objectives are to offer a multitude of courses, levels, and routes to enhance education for all and encourage progression to fulfil each learner's potential. In 2020-2021 TBCG offered 3,700 courses, 742 qualifications and had almost 15,000 students enrolled. In order to understand the college's strategies in relation to managing the act of widening participation but also adhering to the government's pressures regarding metrics, Quality Manager Nicola Shortland was interviewed. The following sections indicate the summarised responses to the interview questions and offer an insight into the workings and the values of a large FE college.

What does the term 'widening participation' mean to the college?

The college sees widening participation as a long-term process which embeds but is also reactive to cultural and social change. The associated stigma that the college faces in relation to less able, working-class learners is an unfair one. TBCG has so many pathways on offer

alongside high expectations that it draws a diverse range of students from a range of backgrounds. Each level of learning is viewed as a stepping-stone to the level above and the college prides itself in its wide provision which allows access to a broad range of educational opportunities for learners. It seeks to prepare learners to progress comfortably and confidently on to the next step. The college has a strong level 2 provision across many subjects and widens participation within this by offering a two-year level two programme which encompasses a level one course and offers a seamless movement between level one and level two. This offers an opportunity to develop a valuable skills-set in order to progress learners to achieve beyond the level one qualification. Opportunities for FE learners to access HE (Higher Education) has been important and developing skills sets in education for levels 1 and 2 has been key in building a firm foundation in order to progress learners through the levels successfully. It is not uncommon for students to start at level 1 and progress right through to HE within TBCG.

Who benefits from widening participation?

Everybody benefits from widening participation. Students themselves gain qualifications ready for the labour market but also get additional skills like communication and wider benefits such as heightened self-esteem and confidence. Employers and the local community are advanced through better developed skilled workers. The college as a whole also benefits from widening participation, in terms of diversity and opportunity for conversation but also in terms of heightening access to HE provision and therefore increased numbers studying the higher levels. Staff members within the college are also challenged and benefited professionally due to developing a skill set of teaching at all levels. Many staff are part of the provision across a range of programmes right from level 1 to level 6.

What strategies and opportunities are in place to widen participation?

As much as the college is committed to enhancing and transforming students as individuals, in reality provision is guided by funding. The job of the college is to make a broad offer available to students, to ensure that it is marketed towards those who would benefit from it, but also to be constantly adjusting to the needs of the labour market. These actions naturally widen participation. For example, TBCG always used to have a strong hospitality provision. However, in recent years TBCG has seen a dramatic fall in students studying hospitality courses and so has replaced those courses with apprenticeship provision where an entire floor has been disbanded and re-established in order to meet current labour need, whilst ensuring that hospitality courses are still offered at other sites where needed. The college is therefore successful in widening participation because it is responsive to and driven by the needs of the local community and offers what is appropriate at the right time and at the right level. Another example of changing provision to suit learners is a relatively new offer available at

TBCG 6th form which is a foundation year GCSE programme which has been attractive for students who seek a 6th form experience but need to re-take their GCSEs. Access courses offer a similar support for students who need a stepping-stone into the next stage of study. Another growing provision at TBCG is part-time courses aimed at adult learners who want to return to education but need the flexibility to retrain whilst working around childcare and work commitments. This provision is set to grow in coming years with the lifetime skills guarantee initiative and the loans which will be available to support this. The college also recognises the difficulties for adult learners to re-engage after a break from education and so have introduced study skills schemes (both integrated and stand-alone) which act as a bridge between levels to allow academic ability and confidence in learners to grow and to be successful in their further study. This strategy again helps to widen participation by allowing access to suitable provision for learners. In terms of opportunities within the wider context, the college seeks to be proactive instead of reactive in that it continually seeks to gather momentum for changes on the horizon in preparation for future students, therefore widening participation for students of the future and not just those currently enrolled. TBCG achieves this by working closely with communities they serve, external organisations and industry leaders. For example, the college is committed to investing highly in technology because technology in education is fundamental to the future workforce and effective learning. We are ahead of the curve and this is significant in widening participation.

How does the college manage to widen participation whilst ensuring cohorts of students have high retention and success rates?

The act of widening participation does not pose a barrier to success rates and is viewed very positively. TBCG institution has many strategies for supporting students to develop their full potential and each learner is seen and valued as an individual. Student services provision is strong which helps students emotionally and financially where necessary to make sure that students are signposted and supported so that they have the best opportunity for successful completion and progression. The careers advisors are always on hand to remind students of the paths ahead and motivate students to look to the future. In terms of academic provision TBCG offers one-to-one support, a hard-working LSA team, library staff on hand to support at all times and group study sessions are also available. TBCG works closely with the LEA, the police, charities, and social workers to ensure that students have the support needed to pass their courses and stay on track. A high level of teaching and learning is maintained through ensuring that staff are trained regularly. As an example, the 'professional development team' have identified that managing diverse needs inside the classroom is currently a priority and, consequently, the focus of the next staff training day is entitled 'inclusion without conformity'. Widening participation and having diverse groups can lead to some social challenges in terms of inclusion but TBCG has a strong team of personal tutors who ensure that students have a

chance to have open discussions about diversity and educate learners in understanding and acceptance in line with the Equality Act (2010). Alongside this, the personal tutors collaborate with guest speakers who offer an open dialogue on a variety of issues which broadens student perspectives. The personal tutors also offer pastoral support to learners where necessary as well as preparing students for next steps and giving them motivation to complete. TBCG has a strong Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Leader who ensures that these values are embedded throughout the college and where students voice is valued. The only difficulty that TBCG has with widening participation relates to retention of particular ethnic groups in certain subjects, which is quite difficult to manage. However, they feel that one of the ways that this can be combatted is through having a strong EDI focus and through ensuring that all students are aware of the support systems available to them.

Overview

On the face of it, this case study reinforces the many benefits associated with widening participation in FE and several key themes emerged from the interview. The stigma associated with FE in relation to its provision solely for the working class and marginalised (Kennedy, 1997; Thompson, 2009; Walker, 2016 and Keenan and Kadi-Hanifi, 2020) is perceived to be an archaic assumption and the myriad of pathways that are offered allows greater opportunity to enhance educational attainment for all. In many ways this mirrors the thoughts of Daley *et al* (2015) when they liken the sector to the Twelve Dancing Princesses in that it finds a way to do what it wants, despite external obstacles.

Enrolling students on a level two course that has foundations in a level one course allows the college to focus on progression. Whilst this has clear benefits for students, in that they have a more graduated approach to learning allowing them to learn from a lower base, it also benefits the college and meets the economic imperative as it increases the chances of student success and hence, improved performance in the metrics. In enrolling students on a 2-year level two programme, with the initial teaching at level one (during the initial terms of the academic year), TBCG is actually protecting funding per enrolment, as well as encouraging the students to commit to their learning journey by achieving the full level two, rather than the traditional level one. However, if this is too much for the student, they are still able to gain a level one and so is still recorded as 'achievement', which positively impacts the metrics. Additionally, maintaining student engagement for two years means that students are more likely to be able to pass the maths and English functional skills which again helps the metrics and it is hoped that students will then move towards GCSE. The college's viewpoint regarding progression is that gaining students' familiarity in environment, expectations and building connections improves the retention of students remaining in college and achieving. Raising aspirations in this way is fundamental in demonstrating the

college's philosophy that every student can succeed if placed on the right course for them and with the optimum support systems at their disposal. It also shows the tensions, but also the resolutions between the two imperatives – the commitment to education is underpinned by an approach that ensures that targets are met.

The offers presented by TBCG (including the new T levels and a strong HE provision) need to be designed to meet the needs of a diverse range of students, many of whom may not be on the margins of society but may merely seek a change in career direction or want to focus on education after having a family. Indeed, this echoes the ideas of Shaw *et al* (2007), who, after investigating widening participation, preferred to use the term 'student diversity' to encapsulate the idea that a variety of learners could be catered for within the FE environment. Given the marketisation approach espoused by the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), adjusting to the needs of the labour market is a priority for colleges and directing students on a pathway which is suitable for them is key to the role of the careers advisors to ensure educational but also economic success. Careers advisors in FE are also mentioned in the White Paper (DfE, 2021) as an important resource and their key role is recognised in directing students into the labour market roles that are suitable. Indeed, (and already alluded to above) the White Paper also recognises and encourages the idea that employers should have a greater say in the skills development of learners, which will create even stronger links between colleges and local communities.

The case study shows that TBCG stresses its ability to develop some learners from study at level 1 right through to HE and this is indeed admirable. However, in order to ensure the optimum outcomes are attainable for learners, a number of strategies/support systems are at work behind the scenes. Student services provision (economic and mental health support), one-to-one support sessions, library staff support, group study opportunities, personal tutors, and careers advisors all work together to support students to complete their courses. This level of support offers the best response in the face of the measurement of performance data. Performance indicators, as mentioned in section one, represents a challenge to some of the objectives of colleges. Another strategy employed by the college (which also, incidentally, echoes the White Paper (DfE, 2021)) is that outstanding teaching is supported through a strong professional development team who support and engage teachers who may feel they would like extra training or CPD opportunities. Again, the offers of training opportunities for teachers are likely to result in optimum learning for students which feeds into college metrics and representatives from the college sees these endeavours as crucial in relation to both student experience and consequently the impact on data. So the question remains – are we

training staff for educational purposes, to meet economic objectives or can the diverse objectives be reconciled.

As effective as the student support strategies, staff training, and breadth of pathways appear to be the concern is that these seemingly robust strategies are built on less than solid foundations. The biggest limitation to all FE provision is government funding and this is where the economic imperative comes into the equation. Throughout this chapter we have stressed the tensions that exist between economic and educational factors. Listening to the response of the college to the challenges faced is heartening and it is clear that the organisation remains committed to the concept of reaching out to underrepresented groups and mirroring ideas in the White Paper: however, all the positive initiatives are underpinned with a key caveat. As with the entire sector, the college is guided by funding in almost every decision it makes. So, in some ways the key response in the interview is “as much as the college is committed to enhancing and transforming students as individuals, in reality provision is guided by funding”. This indicates a flaw in the plans of any college looking to increase representation from groups who historically do not access FE in great numbers. The implication of the answer is that any changes in funding would have an impact on all the excellent work carried out and hence, widening participation might be replaced by the next initiative. Given the comments from Anderson, Barton and Wahlberg (2003) about the rapidly changing priorities in the sector, this is a major concern.

The White Paper (DfE, 2021) offers a glimmer of hope for the future. It promises a lifetime skills guarantee with a lifelong learning loan which is available from 2025 and capital funding of 1.3 billion to be invested in the FE sector throughout the next five years. However, the funding driven model used in the sector does mean that any initiative remains precarious.

Case Study TWO

The dichotomy of balancing the two imperatives is also illustrated in our second case study. King Edward VI College in Nuneaton is a thriving Sixth Form College based in a relatively deprived area of the country. It offers a range of courses, including A Levels and BTECs, to over 1000 learners and has a growing Higher Education provision, much of which caters for students who are the first in their family to attend the higher level of study. This HE provision means that students can stay in the known confines of the college they have studied in previously before finally transferring to a local university to complete their degree. This approach has proved very successful indeed as many students, who would not otherwise have progressed on to university, have done so in what is perceived as a ‘safe environment’.

Linsey Plant, Programme Manager for the HE part of the college explains what widening participation means to the college:

I feel widening participation is providing the opportunities and environment for students who haven't ordinarily considered HE and/or are seen to be educationally disadvantaged, to experience it in some form to encourage them to consider that route. The college makes a point of not just enrolling high flying students; it spends a lot of time and resources on those who haven't perhaps had the support and encouragement in the past as well. We have students on the externally collaborative 'Aim Higher' programmes to also support their journeys...

Whilst any response is likely to be location specific, what is fascinating with Linsey's first answer is how closely this ties into the original purpose of the sector and also the ideals of the Kennedy Report. In this case, Further Education is being used to support students who otherwise might well have been denied the opportunity. What is also interesting is that it is an explicit policy of the college to do this, it is not being pushed by funding mechanisms or targets, instead it is the college working with the local community to support students in a highly personalised manner. In many ways this is the economic imperative subsumed into the educational imperative as the thinking is that if time and effort is spent cultivating links with groups who traditionally have not been participants then both objectives can be achieved. The increase in numbers (and hence funding) can be a cause for celebration in terms of greater revenue as well as the possibility of greater social mobility. Now, it will only be those who make the final decision who will know the lead driver but whatever it is, the result is a balancing of two, apparently opposing forces.

Everyone benefits from widening participation – the students and their families, the college, and its reputation, even HE itself from having a diverse range of backgrounds and therefore views and experiences...

These words hint at the motivations that lie behind the decision-making process. The drive for widening participation is seen through a variety of lenses, each gaining something from the policy. The gains possible for students and their families are relatively obvious but for the college and also the surrounding area, the gains are less tangible and tend to be linked to the raising of expectations and the improvement in the skills of the local populace. What is not mentioned but is implicit in the answer, is the metrification of the centre and how increased numbers and the increased success rates that identifying groups and supporting them, can bring.

This raising of expectations can be seen when looking at the strategies used to ensure students are supported:

We use a whole variety of approaches. These include the Aim Higher programme, personal pastoral, and progress tutors, HE courses for post Level 3 students, HE guest speakers and fayres and tracking of Pupil Premium students. We also offer vocational and A 'Level courses for differing needs and study preferences plus a Level 3 1-year Foundation programme for those not quite meeting GCSE entry requirements to build their GCSE portfolio (this includes Maths and English). We want them to get used to the College) before embarking on the full two-year Level 3 programme. Previously, such students would find it difficult to secure anywhere with their results...

The sheer number and the variety of approaches in this example mirrors that of the previous case study and the message that comes across is that the sector appears to be adept at finding ways to meet its objectives. What is noticeable here is how many of the initiatives mentioned are targeted at students who might otherwise have left education as discussed by Kennedy (1997). As posited before, how much of this is driven by the desire to promote equality and social justice and how much is driven by the necessity to meet targets is a question that is almost impossible to answer but it does appear that colleges have found a way of intertwining the two approaches. By providing a second chance for many students, the college is both benefiting from the increased numbers, but also fulfilling its wider function of serving the local community. This something that Linsey followed up when asked about the strategies used to target students from widening participation groups.

Events are organised by a dedicated Careers Manager which take time. However, the feedback and results are good. With HE courses, we only have 3 at the moment but plans are afoot to grow this provision over the next 2-3 years.... subject to funding...

Whilst the effort that the college has put into this area is admirable, it is the last three words that catch the eye as they echo the response from TBCG. The economic imperative appears to remain dominant in the sector and it is quite clear that funding is a key factor when pushing these initiatives. That is not to say that it is finance that drives the desire to widen participation, more that it facilitates it. Linsey's last answer shows that despite the pragmatism that comes with the need to secure funding, there remains a real desire within the college to ensure that education is transformative for participants:

(This approach) is engrained in the college through the pastoral/progress system and through the HE offers made. With the HNC Business for example, some students may have struggled with exams but as we know they are good students who have worked well, they are often given the HNC opportunity and consequently thrive in it. They can then regain their confidence and progress to university. It's about knowing the student rather than a set of rules, and how to build their ability and confidence rather than letting them go post Level 3 with an uncertain future...

Conclusions

There have been significant changes in the Further Education sector since the formation of the first Mechanics Institutes by George Birkbeck but arguably, it has been in the last thirty years that the biggest challenges have been faced. The passing of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) completely changed the landscape of the sector and paved the way for the conflict that is at the heart of many of the issues discussed in this chapter. Whilst the economic imperative has always been present within colleges, most notably in the link made by Callaghan (1976) and others with the needs of industry, the passing of the 1992 Act introduced both marketisation and datafication into the sector. This had the impact of ensuring that colleges were constantly aware of the need to meet specific metrics in order to show 'success'. This shift towards a performative (Ball, 2003) approach means that it is very easy for the educational imperative to become of lesser importance.

This tension between the two approaches is exacerbated by the constant policy churn and the reduction in funding that has occurred in the last decade for the sector. Whilst the next few years appear to offer new challenges (albeit with a promise of more funding), the case studies outlined in this chapter do give some hope for the future and are a demonstration that although every college faces similar challenges, there are ways that these pressures can be managed. The tension between the need to ensure that courses are financially viable and the need to keep the educational imperative at the forefront of decision making is not going to stop in the next few years. The publishing of the 2021 White Paper neatly outlines the divide that exists between the two approaches. On one hand the introduction of initiatives in it might well help support students from disadvantaged groups, but it is all predicated on an approach that means that in order to support, colleges must first ensure that books are balanced, and economic choices are made. This means that college decisions must involve identifying the needs of students and local communities whilst being aware of the constraints of the other pressures as explored in part one.

Despite the multitude of initiatives and the changing political landscape, the colleges highlighted in these case studies appear determined to 'find a way' to fulfil the original goals of the sector of educating and providing opportunities for all students, regardless of their backgrounds or educational level. They manage to successfully widen participation by adapting to new skills set requirements, working flexibly with employers in a modern world and introducing an even larger offer of courses such as foundation programmes, T. Levels and HE courses whilst retaining their core purpose: to provide transformative education which benefits local communities and offers all learners a sense of hope and purpose for their future lives and careers. At the beginning of the chapter we discussed that for the most

part, FE appears to be a sector without a clear identity. However, as highlighted by the case studies in part two, successful outcomes are due, in part, to a successful balancing act between educational and economic imperatives. This means that colleges need to ensure that the mission to support all learners is implemented with creativity and a clear student-centred and community-centred focus whilst also being aware of the metrics. If college provision is adapted and changed based on need, then its identity should not be negatively perceived as 'unclear' but as fluid and responsive to the needs of society but also the demands of the government. Whilst there is inevitably a degree of compromise, as we have seen in this chapter, this fluidity of approach can be utilised in order to adjust to the needs of all students within the sector.

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