

Introduction

Rob Peutrell

This issue focuses on the White Paper, *Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth*. Some have welcomed it - sycophantically relieved that FE colleges (and their senior managers) will have a role in the post-Brexit, post-Covid economy. Mostly, sector opinion has been wearily muted; this was not the FE revolution Gavin Williamson promised. But, as one contribution to this issue notes, none of the many vocational and post-16 policy initiatives since the early 1990s have prevented the downward trajectory of the sector. Why then bother with this White Paper? Partly, the White Paper signals intention, if we can decode its language: more private sector control, less educational opportunity for working-class students, more power to the DfE, fewer chances for university places. It's also a symptom of the decayed structure of vocational education since Thatcher began to de-industrialise the economy in the 1980s. Flawed it may have been, but vocational education before de-industrialisation had centred on meaningful apprenticeships with the expectation of a job. Since then, governments have been playing a game of mollify and mystify - creating a thinner system of

non-work-based vocational training for the precarious and low-waged in a pear-shaped job market; repeatedly failing to raise the status of vocational to that of university-based academic education. This journal has no set view of the White Paper. Contributions reflect the contributor's particular concerns and involvements. There is agreement, however, that the White Paper is not a serious attempt to create a vocational education system linked into the transformative, socially-just green industrial strategy needed to sustain it. Practitioners will seek to exploit the opportunities between the cracks for valid educational purposes. But, as these contributions show, we need to see the White Paper, not merely as bad policy from an indifferent education secretary, but as rooted in a history and ideology, and in the systemic exclusion of practitioners from policy formation. The response to the White Paper has been dominated by current and former college CEOs and policy consultants. In contrast, we're inviting post-16 practitioners to discuss not only the White Paper, but the wider post-16 system and how we organise to change it. We look forward to your response to this issue.
