

Forgotten or the future?

Mike Pevitt

This is the 30th year since the creation of that supposedly excellent support for and advancement to education, OFSTED, which in fact is widely recognised to be not fit for purpose, and could be said to have been politicised by the government as a tool to complete the academisation programme, or in reality the privatisation of the education system, in England.

2022 is also the 30th anniversary of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 (FHEA 1992), which took the sector out of local authority control and made FE colleges non-departmental public bodies, with management responsibility lying with the governing body of each individual college. There have been other changes since, such as the merger programme introduced in 2016, which aimed to cut costs further by encouraging colleges to merge with similar institutions nearby. The eventual outcome of this was not as many mergers as the Government wanted, but still a reduction in the number of colleges from 209 in 2016 to 163 in 2022, a decline of 44 colleges or 21 per cent of the provision.

So is the FE sector the forgotten education sector, or is it rather the future education sector, which could provide an insight into the direction of travel that the academisation programme will take over the next few years?

The Government seems to forget that the FE sector is tasked with delivering the next generation of workers in the many different trades and occupations which are vital for the economy. They want this delivery system to be cut-price, and it is now beginning to fall apart at the seams. Colleges are finding it hard to recruit staff away from working on the tools to teach these skills, and to retain them when they do. After all, why give up a good wage for a poor one, and have

somebody inspecting your work every two weeks through walkthroughs and observations, and then an OFSTED inspector arrives, who was a past headteacher and has never laid a brick or wired a lighting circuit, to tell you that 'perhaps if you taught it this way . . .?'

As I write, the vacancy situation in the sector is getting worse, with over 6,000 unfilled posts, which means either that already overworked tutors cover the post on a week-to-week basis, or that unqualified tutors are employed via agencies at great cost to the institution, and a disjointed education for the student.

The FE sector is 'forgotten' in that in it we are paid on average £9,000 per annum less than teachers in the 'state' primary and secondary sectors. This is due to the FE sector managing itself; there is no Burgundy Book in this sector. The absence of such a weighty tome means that for each of the 163 FE colleges in the country there is a little Burgundy book - a total of 163, or more if we allow for TUPE in the mergers of the last few years.

An example of the diverse terms and conditions in the sector can be found in Greater Manchester. There are nine FE colleges within the conurbation. Each has many different sets of terms and conditions. Tutor salaries range from a maximum of £27,500 in one college to £39,400 in others, with some having starting pay greater than the maximum in others. The same applies to annual leave, with some giving 13 weeks whilst others can only offer ten, which includes the eight bank holidays as well. Further to this are the working weeks, where again we see a variation amongst these colleges between 35 and 37 hours, with some of the poorer payers having the longest working weeks. The next variant is

the number of contact hours expected, varying by over 100 hours per year, and, most importantly, the different descriptions of what constitutes a contact hour between different institutions. This makes moving between colleges to take up employment a big decision, because there is continuation of service only for your pension but not if it came to a redundancy situation, another area with differing conditions.

The academisation of schools can be mirrored in the above, as more move away from local authority control and protected terms and conditions until the first shake-up, or in some cases terms changing overnight despite the TUPE regulations.

Union membership in FE continues to be sketchy, with the National Education Union (NEU) representing about 4,000 members of staff and the UCU about 16,000 of the 50,000 currently employed in FE teaching, which manifests itself as only about 40 per cent of FE teaching staff are in a union, which is reflected in the conditions currently suffered by many in the sector.

Unfortunately this equates to less than 1 per cent of all NEU members and 13 per cent of all UCU members respectively, which can lead to members in FE being forgotten by the main body of each union. Gaining a greater membership should be the aim of both unions, but this is difficult in the sector if staff are employed only on short term or hourly contracts, and poor rates of pay mean in some cases that union membership is just a cost too far for new appointees in the sector. However, I would ask 'Can you afford not to be in a union?'

In the last five years, the Association of Colleges (AOC), which represents 90 per cent of the colleges as an umbrella organisation, has recommended a 1 per cent or £250 pay rise each year, which colleges can refuse to implement, or offer higher (sic). Many colleges used the 35 per cent cuts in funding to the sector to justify pay freezes for the many, but not the few. In one college the principal's wage rose by 11 per cent in one year to £150,000 or five times the median salary of staff at that college. There are no national pay scales for colleges to adhere to; they have their own scales, which are not transparent in many cases, so lengths of pay spines can be difficult to compare between colleges in the sector. There is no collective bargaining on a national scale, with the AOC offering a take-it-or-leave-it offer to the union's representatives. It is then the responsibility of union members in each

college to act as individual units not as a national group.

In June 2022 the UCU branches in a couple of colleges in Greater Manchester won a 6 per cent and 7.5 per cent rise after staff voted for strike action during the GCSE period - a drastic measure, but it worked, whereas another college were only offered 2 per cent, a massive variance in colleges only a few miles apart.

Facility time differs in each and every college for union representatives, with no standard measure of how it is compiled, a kind of a finger-in-the-air approach, along with recognition of the unions. Colleges do not pay the facility time levy to local councils, unlike many schools, resulting in a large burden of colleague support work and representation being carried out by unpaid college reps, usually in their own time.

(Currently a number of academies are starting to withdraw from paying the local authority levy and thus cutting the amount of finance available to pay full-time branch secretaries to do casework in schools. As the privatisation of the education system rolls out, and more academies decide to stop paying the levy, this will result in the lessening of worker representation within the workplace, and will have a massive effect on organising and collectivisation for the unions at local and national level.)

To sum it up, the future education system in England will make a number of people very rich, with disproportionate salaries to the rest of the staff, and will have a low union membership due to lack of organising and representation in the sector, as it will rely on volunteer union reps. There will also be no continuation of service, as teachers move between different multi-academy trusts, different wage structures and term dates within the same local authority, multitudes of different employment terms and conditions, poor retention and recruitment rates with high staff turnover on an annual basis.

The future doesn't look very bright unless the unions learn the lessons of the FE sector, don't forget about us but talk to us and listen to us. I hope my vision is wrong, because the only people to suffer are the students who should really profit from education, not the fat cats who run the mats.
