Learning from the past: General / Liberal Studies in English FE, c. 1957-1980

Josh Patel

One of the foremost barriers to change in the Further Education space has been a lack of policy memory, arising from the retirement of experts and the frequent churning of personnel within government and the civil service. In 2021, the Edge Foundation launched our 'Learning from the Past' series to address policy amnesia and support good policy development (1).

Today's FE system in England prioritises adaptability and flexibility to engage with a labour market driven by rapid technological change and heading in uncertain and unknowable directions. This takes the form of the accreditation of 'general skills' valued by employers. General skills accountability has however been criticised as failing to deliver desired results. For example, Functional Skills provision has been thought to decontextualise learning by deprioritising the practicality of these skills and disincentivising learners (2).

The history of FE contains an illuminative example of a nearly contrary approach to general skill. From the 1950s to the 1980s, millions of students aged 16-19 in FE colleges participated in a rich, discourse-based and social-minded 'curricular and pedagogical phenomenon' called General/Liberal Studies (GLS) (3). The content and delivery of GLS was never codified, evolved over time, and differed even between individual tutors, who exercised a high degree of autonomy. However, it wielded a strong educational mission: to cultivate critical thinking and communication skills, and prepare students to hold citizens' rights and responsibilities. Commonly, GLS provision included one hour per week covering topics including but not limited to art, literature, modern foreign languages, history, sociology, politics and media studies. These studies were integrated to varying degrees into the wider curriculum. Initially, GLS was rarely assessed. However, tensions between that autonomy and the need for accountability led to the demise of GLS and blanching much of its distinctive educational characteristics. Indeed, this laid the groundwork for the general skills accountability frameworks in place in English FE today.

GLS arose from impulses in the nineteenth and twentieth centures which, with the increased demand for educated and skilled labour in industrial societies, feared working-class activism and later the spread of communism and fascism. A narrow education in specific academic or technical knowledge and skills could lead to a 'moral vacuity' and an inability to responsibly (according to one's social status) wield the increasingly powerful knowledge enabled by modern technologies (4). This became particularly acute following the Second World War with growing demands for 'manpower' drawing in demographics of students hitherto excluded from post-compulsory education. As one tutor in 1955 contended:

> The young miner at the training centre can [be] and is taught to be an efficient miner. But he is likely to remain stupidly underdeveloped as a citizen, he will have no standards of value, as far as beauty is concerned, and will develop and sustain his appetite for crime comics, worthless films, commercial dance music, sordid back alley pleasures, because he is unaware of anything better (5).

Their proposed solution was to experiment with encouraging mining apprentices to write poetry. Inoculating students with high artistic culture in contrast to their vocational learning was intended to exert a civilising influence. This paternalism however could be animated by a concern to enfranchise students in discussions around the social ends they served. In 1957, the Ministry of Education stipulated

the inclusion of some element of general and liberal studies in English FE, though the mode of delivery was left to colleges and teachers to determine.

During the 1960s GLS tutors moved away (though never escaped entirely) from unquestioningly transmitting the virtues of the established social elite. They instead were concerned with the democratisation of critical faculties needed to evaluate and participate in civil society through exposure to ideas from across the cultural spectrum. This might include the local context of their industry, industrial relations and strikes, rights of young workers, current affairs, money matters, personal issues to sex, drugs and rock and roll. Activities might include research or creative project tasks independently or in groups, and role-plays, while non-classroom time might be spent visiting theatres or factories. This openness invited students to negotiate with tutors features of the curriculum based on what was of relevance to them. This, as Robin Simmons has argued, facilitated the transmission of powerful useful knowledge by which students might challenge dominant social norms and act as dynamic and confident agents to improve the world around them (6). Tutors (who students may have addressed more casually, using tutors' first names) facilitated rather than led learning.

Doubts

The onset of economic troubles of the 1970s, however, exposed doubts as to the relevance of GLS to the broader technical education programme of FE. GLS had always been subject to suspicions that without assessment it lacked accountability and was of variable quality. Its mission was easy to ridicule as politically suspect or inadequately practical, as in Tom Sharpe's satirical novel *Wilt* (1976). The newly established Manpower Services Commission (MSC), a non-departmental body of the Department of Employment, pursued strategies to address national youth unemployment through the certification of generic skills to prepare young people to enter and move across a variety of occupations. In response, agitations within GLS aimed to integrate their values more closely within the FE curriculum. Deploying MSC rhetoric, they argued that GLS developed 'employability skills' and 'life and social skills', The Business Education Council (BEC), for example, identified and integrated throughout the curriculum core themes that had previously been stand-alone in GLS: people, communication, money, and numeracy. The growing significance of certification and assessment in GLS blanched much of its distinctive educational character. GLS was incrementally further decontextualised and splintered into various employability training programmes, such as BTEC Common Skills, MSC's Core Skills Project, BTEC National to GNVQ Advanced courses from 1992, and Key Skills to Functional Skills from 2007. These further tied generic skills to perceived needs of business and industry through examination, inspection, and managerialism, decreasing tutor autonomy. Assessment practices became product and outcome focused, rather than process focused. These developments marked the end of a distinctive programme of GLS.

GLS was a remarkable experiment. The capacity to contextualise knowledge meaningfully was enabled by the autonomy afforded to tutors by GLS. Its inability, however, to generate persuasive evidence for external accountability, and ongoing social and economic anxieties around national decline, led to its dissolution. It is especially easy to attribute the demise of GLS and its subordination to an economising central authority as a consequence of restrictions on the progessive redistribution of resources. This is, however, to under-appreciate the efforts by which GLS tutors sought to preserve and indeed extend the values of GLS by promoting a broad curriculum integrated throughout vocational education and training by establishing new forms of accountability. Doing so secured their own livelihoods, professional status and legitimacy by tapping into new modes of funding in order to respond to a national crisis afflicting young people. Because of this, the transition from GLS to communication studies occurred with little struggle. Without systems of accountability, it is difficult to make meaningful statements about why such generic skills should be a priority for public funding.

Recognition

Fostering the generic faculties needed to participate in society as a worker and citizen remains an important goal of FE and education more broadly. Current plans of the Conservative government in 2023 to expand maths and English provision to age 18 signals a recognition of the importance of such study. T-levels include mandatory employability, enrichment and pastoral elements while Prevent and British Values programmes attempt to embed citizenship values throughout education. However, reform of the current centralised system is required to realise this ambition. Learning from the example of GLS, any future initiatives would have to carefully

consider how to demonstrate the longer term economic and social value of progressive citizen education. Developments in project-based learning and reflective practice along with active participation of teachers in curriculum and assessment criteria are a number of avenues that Colin Waugh has previously suggested (7). Such an exercise would be of enormous value in helping learners understand decolonising the curriculum, climate change, consent, AI and social media, exercise empathy, and understand the importance of individuals and the possibility of collective action. Given the local and global challenges facing 16-19 year-olds today and in their futures, the aims of GLS have not lost any of their significance.

1. For more information and the report this article is based on, please see: https://www.edge.co.uk/research/learning-from-the-past/

2. Kobayashi, C., Warner, P., & Dickinson, P. (2024). *Spelling it out, making it out: Functional Skills qualifications and their place in vocational training*. AELP.

3. Bailey, B. & Unwin, L. (2008). 'Fostering "habits of reflection, independent study and free inquiry": an analysis of the short-lived phenomenon of General/Liberal Studies in English vocational education and training'. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 60(1), 61.

4. Vernon, K. (2000) 'A Healthy Society for Future Intellectuals: Developing Life at Civic Universities'. In C. Lawrence & A. -K Mayer (eds.) *Regenerating England: Science, Medicine and culture in Inter-War Britain*. 180.

5. Halliwell (1955) cited in Stafford, R. (2017), 'The context of Liberal and General Studies, 1950s - 1990s'. *Post-16 Educator, The Real Radical Education? Bulletin 1.* 15.

6. Simmons, R. (2015). 'Civilising the Natives? Liberal Studies in Further Education Revisited'. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 63(1), 85-101.

7. Waugh, Colin (2021). 'FE: its past, present and possible future'. *Post-16 Educator*, 103, 3-6.