

What is Further Education for?

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Ministers in the previous New Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments concurred that further education should seek primarily to enhance the UK's economic productivity by improving workforce skills, which would also improve social mobility by providing access to better jobs. Policymakers from all governing parties even shared the same 'engine room' metaphors to promote their belief in FE's capacity to effect economic and social transformation. Likewise, members of Keir Starmer's government have expressed their equally firm belief in economic expansion through developing workforce skills. Many years ago, however, the writer Philip K. Dick explained how, 'Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away'. In that spirit, this article examines the reality of FE's capacity for economic and social transformation to question this belief in the sector among policymakers, along with others.

Such questioning is important because attempts to make that belief manifest are behind the at least twenty-seven policy interventions between 1991 and 2001 that, according to Keep, Richmond and Silver (2021), involved changes to English FE's systems or structures. In this regard Ryan's (2005, p427) description of 'busy work' may be apt: when 'we try to look as though we are achieving something but all we are doing is shuffling the paper on our desks'. Intervening in FE has been a means to demonstrate that politicians are doing something, even though that something alone is very unlikely to achieve their economic or social objectives.

The belief that FE can bring about social mobility and economic development aligns with Human Capital Theory (HCT). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines human capital as 'The knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being'. HCT conceptually provides a causal connection that leads from better education to a better economy, and to better life chances for

individuals, all of which is catnip for policymakers. Consequently, educational institutions have been 'transformed into drivers of capital accumulation in a new form of exchange where learning equals earning' (Brown, Lauder & Cheung 2020, p1).

Despite the allure of its conceptual simplicity, HCT has weak foundations. There is little evidence that employers in Britain are motivated to invest in deploying the talents of more highly skilled workers. Alison Wolf, who advised each of the three previous governments, found as long ago as 2004 'no clear-cut evidence of economic benefits accruing to countries which are high spending in education terms'. All too apparent is that, as Brown, Lauder and Cheung (2020, p3) found, 'There are not enough of the jobs that people want, especially at a wage their education and training were supposed to offer'. Likewise, the Chartered Institute for Professional Development found in 2023 that,

At a national level, too many UK businesses are built around low-skilled, low value jobs. Employers often design and structure work in a way that limits their staff's use of skills resulting in skills-to-jobs mismatches and stagnant productivity.

How can FE alone transform that situation? Evidence of a causal connection between education, even vocational education and training, and economic development is insubstantial. The associated belief does not, therefore, stand up to reality.

What about social mobility? The government's Social Mobility Commission (SMC) provides a helpful definition:

Social mobility is the link between a person's occupation or income and the occupation or income of their parents. Where there is a strong link, there is a lower level of social mobility. Where there is a weak link, there is a higher level of social mobility'

When politicians speak of social mobility, they

mean upward mobility, yet Payne (2017, p4) concluded that in similar terms to those of the SMC above, 'for every four or five people who are upwardly mobile, three are downwardly mobile, and two or three are immobile'. British society is socially mobile up and down, although many of those movements are incremental and, in any case, Britain remains highly unequal. The SMC in 2019 established that 'Britain's most influential people are over 5 times more likely to have been to a fee-paying school than the general population. Just 7% of British people are privately educated, compared to two-fifths (39%) of those in top positions'. Who one's parents are still matters, as does where one is educated. According to the Equality Trust, the UK has one of the highest levels of income inequality in Europe. Can FE improve this situation?

Undoubtedly FE has offered individuals a second chance at education, but the number of adults in FE is now less than half what it was in 2005, according to Department for Education (DfE) figures published in 2022. That reduction of second chance opportunities is a direct consequence of government policy for the funding of education. Nevertheless, graduates from higher education courses in FE colleges are more likely to be in 'sustained employment' one year after graduation than graduates from universities. Yet, according to analysis of the DfE's Longitudinal Educational Outcomes dataset in 2020, HE in FE graduates are also consistently likely to be earning much less than university graduates. Ten years after graduation the difference between the median salary of an HE in FE and a university graduate is almost £10,000. That discrepancy does not reflect a failing in FE; it reflects the persistent structural inequality of British society and the kinds of jobs for which HE in FE courses prepare. As a report for the Conservative government's Department for Business, Innovation and Skills entitled *The Contribution of Further Education and Skills to Social Mobility* concluded in 2015,

Improvements in the income, employment and social position of adults can increase social mobility, but these factors operate within and are influenced by the wider structure of the labour market and the income distribution.

Social mobility is constrained by society's structures, over which FE has little influence. A different report with a similar focus on *Further Education, Disadvantage and Social Mobility* produced for the Sutton Trust in 2021 reached similar conclusions:

. . . young people from a more disadvantaged background have lower educational aims and

outcomes, and . . . this effect is observed independent of any influence from prior attainment and type of institution.

Those lower educational outcomes persist despite the institutions attended, including FE colleges. For an article published in 2017 Erzsebet Bukodi from the University of Oxford analysed data from the 1970 cohort of around 17,000 randomly selected people, all born in that year. Her aim was 'to establish empirical regularities at the level of associations' and through her analysis she found that:

Overall . . . we can conclude that qualifications attained through life-long learning primarily serve to maintain, rather than to narrow, inequalities attached to social origins in Britain.

Yet despite that reality, not only politicians have expressed belief in FE's capacity to effect social change. Many whose commitment to and affection for FE, including this writer, have emphasised instances of individual transformation through FE whilst overlooking its reproduction of inequality within Britain's wider educational system. Emphasising the transformation of individuals' lives suggests that structural inequality can systematically be overcome through engagement with education and hard work. That suggests structural inequality is not really a problem, and we find ourselves back in the territory of David Cameron's division of skivers and strivers, with which he justified so-called austerity. Diane Reay's warning is relevant: 'social mobility [is] a politically driven distraction that diverts our attention from the real problems that need to be addressed: problems of increasing social and economic inequalities that require redistribution not social mobility' (Reay 2016, p27).

Certainly FE can contribute to the development of a more equal society, but only as a component within a comprehensive policy for the redistribution of wealth. Similarly, FE can contribute to the development of skills necessary for economic expansion, but that expansion can only be achieved within a comprehensive industrial policy. Economic and social transformation is not, though, primarily what FE is for. Reay who went through her own transformation from working-class girl to Cambridge professor, wrote that ' . . . no child should be left in poverty, written off educationally and viewed as having a lower value than other children whose main difference is that they have had the good fortune to be born into more privileged backgrounds' (Reay 2017, p.198). Everyone deserves a decent education, which identifies FE's social purpose.

FE should offer students, whoever they are, the best education possible, involving well-considered

pedagogy as well as engaging and relevant curriculum. That education is most likely and rightly to have a strong occupational or practical emphasis, but it should not be limited to that emphasis. That's it. That's what FE is for. That matters because, in the words of Seamus Heaney, 'education can offer ampler prospects and a change of perspective or a reason for aspiration'. That is not social mobility and it is not economic expansion, but for FE students it still means that FE is always worth trying to do well.

References

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