

The Solidarity section of Post-16 Educator is for activists to draw readers' attention to disputes, struggles etc. Please send articles and/or factsheets to the editors (see p2). Deadline for September issue: 31/8/08.

Harlow College one year on: the silent conflict

A year ago, teaching staff at Harlow College staged a five-day strike: an unprecedented action for them but one which reflected the desperation of the situation as a politically motivated principalship, led by Colin Hindmarch, played an ideologically driven game with the interests of learners in order to smash the union. The conditions imposed upon teachers included a massive reduction in wages for many with the introduction of a new unqualified 'tutor' role, the imposition of an effective 56-hour working week and reduction of holidays from 45 to 30 days a year. This was imposed despite the fact that Hindmarch created more management positions and raised their pay by 11 per cent. However, on top of all this, around 40 experienced teachers were denied opportunities to continue working there because they were deemed to be opposed to the new Teaching and Learning Strategy. A further similar number of teachers opted for voluntary redundancy, unable to accept such a draconian and spiteful regime.

Since the headline-grabbing events of last June, there has been little said and even less printed on the state of affairs at Harlow College. This is not because it has settled down. On the contrary, the situation has become ever more desperate, in particular for the students.

But why the silence? The College principalship was suffering most due to adverse publicity and news reports which exposed its cruel, politically motivated initiatives; it cleverly contrived a situation which would stifle criticism, in particular from the one source which should have been the most vocal; the UCU. After the redundancies and the failure to abide by the law to meaningfully negotiate the new contracts, huge pressure from the Union and Bill Rammell MP was placed on the College to accept ACAS negotiations. The College accepted this with the proviso that UCU would never publicly criticise the College. This the Union foolishly accepted.

In the wake of this agreement, a Working Party was established to find a way forward, due to conclude at Christmas 2007. However, enjoying the continued silence of UCU, the College pushed back this deadline month after month. It is now set to conclude in September. Coupled with a new learner agreement which students were obliged to sign upon enrolment which also prohibited them from making public criticisms, this has meant that the College is now able to bask in relative silence. Only a Guardian article of 18th March 2008 exposed a hint of the appalling conditions at the College, thanks to the bravery of the president of the local NUS in refusing to sign the learner agreement. However, UCU, like the principal, was tragically 'unavailable for comment'. The College continues to hold its remaining teaching staff and students hostage to a never-ending working party which the Union foolishly allowed itself to be outmanoeuvred into accepting.

Now we must turn to the details of what has been happening at the College, tucked away from public scrutiny. The staff turnover rate continues to be alarmingly high; one principal tutor in English resigning after little more than a fortnight in post, a sociology teacher sacked after a month, and a psychology teacher given two hours to clear his desk after having joined UCU less than 24 hours previously.

The LSC and Ofsted published damning reports on the College last autumn. Ofsted was most scathing, pointing out their shock at an IT class of 100 students being taught via a personal address system.

At a public meeting effectively forced upon the principal and Bill Rammell, Colin Hindmarch claimed that the costs of redundancies were not high, at only around £150,000. When pressed to reveal the actual figures, some months later, he acknowledged that the cost was just under £1 million. Now seeking further clarification, corpo-

ration board minutes reveal it to be more like £1.3 million.

Some may argue that this could be justified if the College improves its service to students and achieves better results. But this is perhaps the most tragic story of all. In March 2008, the College delayed releasing its winter A-level exam results to students for almost a week. When finally revealed, no details of grades were published but only a paltry 58 per cent of AS-level exams were passed - a huge decline on the previous year. Following this, the chairperson of the corporation board, Martin Coleman, said in the local paper: 'We are happy with the way things are going'. The significance of these results is that these students have only experienced learning under the Hindmarch regime, including his peculiar 'subject days', where students learn the same subject once a week but for the whole day.

The College also rigged the elections to the posts of students representatives on the corporation board. Realising that the NUS leader would have won any open contest, they contrived a complicated delegatory system to avoid any public debate and to insulate the corporation board from hearing any real concerns and criticisms.

The College is also engaging in the practice of withdrawing students from their exams weeks before they are due to be held. The students are then transferred onto short ICT classes which they cannot fail to pass. This then serves to distort the 'success rate' data because the student will receive certification and the failure to complete the course which has occupied them for the rest of the year would not be revealed in any figures. Accounts of students begging to be allowed to sit the exams that they have been studying for months, under wholly inadequate conditions, have been rife. Many parents have had to pay for private tuition and are bitter that this may be exploited by the College as they may still take credit for the results achieved.

The local MP and FHE minister, Bill Rammell has been most reluctantly dragged into the dispute and now finds himself accused of complacency and expediency. He once criticised UCU publicly for their methods last year but refused to give details so they could be given an opportunity to justify themselves. He also dissociated himself from the article published in the Guardian but refuses to elaborate on those elements which he considered were untrue. He also claimed that academic opinion on 'subject days' for FE

colleges was mixed, with some claiming they are a good idea. Can any reader enlighten us as to where 'subject days' are deployed successfully?

Last month, Rammell and Hindmarch attempted to pacify critics by inviting a few select individuals around the College to see the wonderful new facilities. This may have made Rammell look good for the taxpayers' money being invested, but most concluded that the College could not blame poor resources for the College's failures. Because of this, Hindmarch was subjected to wholesale criticism where he even conceded that 'subject days' were failing, citing the fact that May - a crucial month for exam preparations - has two bank holidays, depriving students of essential learning time for any course they study on Mondays. This was pointed out to him when he first tried to impose 'subject days' in March 2007, but he simply sacked those who raised such professional concerns.

Scandalously, Bill Rammell still opposes any calls for Colin Hindmarch to resign. He claims that to remove him would be the 'populist' thing to do but is not in the interest of the students. Even though Hindmarch has the LSC, Ofsted and the QIA almost constantly in residence, providing stabilisers for this child in blue braces who cannot ride his bike, Rammell insists on protecting him. His majority is only a tiny 97 votes and yet he has spoken up to protect Hindmarch's position with far greater voracity than he ever did to protect the jobs of around a hundred teachers this time last year. No one believes that Rammell would ever send a child of his to an institution run by Hindmarch and most people are truly shocked at his attitude and downright complacency. The real reason why he will not call for Hindmarch to resign is because Hindmarch will ignore him. This will expose the reality of Rammell's impotence and failure to act properly upon the incorporated status of colleges which allowed this wholly unaccountable situation to arise.

There is no end in sight for the conflict, and it is foolish of Mr Rammell to continually search for the shortest route for a mystical Harlow College paper towel so that he can wipe his hands of the whole affair. The College faces a huge litigation bill when UCU goes to court for protective awards for the College's failure to meaningfully consult over the redundancies, and there are cases for unfair dismissal and victimisation as well. Harlow College is a tragic saga and its full story will be known one day. This article provides just a glimpse of a curriculum's worth of lessons that we could all learn from.

News update: April - June 2008

Week beginning 28/4/08

Points in a UCU staff satisfaction survey include: 1 in 12 FE lecturers has been physically abused by a student; 40 per cent say they have felt physically threatened by people they were teaching; among those interviewed there was a consensus that raising the leaving age to 18 will make verbal and physical aggression by students towards lecturers worse.

Point to emerge from a *Times Higher Education (THE)* interview with Andrew Colin, chairperson and owner of Into University Partnerships, to which East Anglia, Newcastle and Exeter Universities have outsourced English for academic purposes provision, include: Glasgow Caledonian University is planning to use Into to 'recruit and teach' international students; Colin claims Into's failure to file its 2006 accounts on time was 'a simple mistake'; he says its 2007 accounts will show a £1.7m loss; this is because, out of the £8.5m he has personally invested in Into, £3.7 has gone on marketing; Colin is also chairperson of a property investment and development business; for each joint venture, Into has set up a subsid-

iary to develop a site and lease the building back to the host university; he admits that 'rates of pay [ie for lecturers employed by Into.Ed.] are probably worse' than for in-house provision; Into started in 2005 through a deal between Colin and current HE Funding Council for England (HEFCE) CEO David Eastwood in his then capacity as vice-chancellor of the University of East Anglia (UEA) by which provision there was outsourced to Colin; Colin wants to have about 11 Into 'centres' in the UK by 2012; Into is 'about to sign a deal' with Manchester University.

In a talk to the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors' annual conference, held in London, Anthony Daly, senior research officer for the AQA exam board, identifies difficulties in setting grade boundaries for the 14-19 diplomas. (Grade boundary issues were an important factor in undermining the Curriculum 2000 A-level reform.)

Points in a *Guardian* article by Doron Shultziner, previously co-author with another former Oxford postgraduate student of an article in the *Harvard Crimson* publication of an article criticising Oxford, include: between 1990 and 2007, the

number of undergraduate students at Oxford increased by 1,033 (10 per cent) whereas the number of postgraduates increased by 2,984 (75 per cent); 63 per cent of postgraduates there are overseas students; on top of University tuition fees, postgraduates have to pay the college where they are based an additional £2,000 annual fee, as well as between £3,000 and £4,000 per year for accommodation (not including food).

Steve Wain, principal of St Vincent 6th Form College in Gosport has stated on the college website that: 'It is impossible for the LSC to move forward with their proposal [ie for merging St Vincent with Fareham College of FE on a new £60m campus. Ed.] as it stands now. They simply have no moral authority to do so'. The ten Hampshire SFCs continue to support Wain, while the eight CFEs support the LSC. The LSC is due to decide on 2/6/08 but this is subject to government approval.

The UCU branch at Leeds University is contesting an arrangement introduced by management there, according to

which people whose research is published in prestigious journals are rewarded with sabbatical leave on top of funds for buying time out of teaching and admin, thereby shifting this work onto those published in lower grade journals, excluded from the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) etc.

A report on overseas activity by FE colleges prepared for the Association of Colleges (AOC) by the University of Warwick reveals, amongst other things, that Wigan and Leigh College has for 11 years franchised campuses in India which are run by a private company which pays to use the College's name.

Following reports of a directive issued in November 2007 by the team managing the RAE, according to which members of RAE panels must destroy their notes within 20 days of a decision being reached on the allocation of research funding, UCU's HE Committee (HEC) agrees to make Freedom of Information Act (FOI) requests for 'all RAE panel evidence including personal notes, workbooks, draft minutes and minutes' at the end of each month this year, starting in April. (Destruction of this material would make it difficult for people to appeal against RAE panel decisions.)

UCU members at Keele University vote to escalate to an assessment boycott their dispute over threatened sackings in the School of Economic and Management Studies. Keele secretary and registrar Simon Morris, says that he 'greatly regret(s) the offence that has been caused' by remarks he made on a train journey which were overheard and recorded by one of the lecturers at the centre of the dispute. Morris said that the restructuring would clear the 'dead wood' from the School, and that 'We are not going to let the union tell us what to do; we will do what we want'.

HEFCE Research Excellence Framework pilot manager Graeme Rosenberg tells a conference titled 'Beyond the RAE 2008: Bibliometrics, League Tables and the REF' that HEFCE has in effect gone back to the drawing board on the proposed replacement for the Research Assessment Exercise. 53 HE institutions have expressed interest in taking part in a pilot of the new system. Linda Butler, head of the Research Evaluation and Policy Project at the Australian National University (which uses a system similar to that proposed for here) says that vice-chancellors lobbying for systems they think would benefit their institutions often have 'no understanding' of the cost involved.

All six unions involved in FE pay negotiations reject the AOC's 2.5 per cent offer.

At a meeting with about 100 heads of HE subject associations, Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) CEO Philip Esler attempts to justify the £12m cut in post-graduate awards on the grounds that it is necessary in order to 'preserve the council's budget for strategic research programmes'.

Week beginning 5/5/08

A *THE* report of a dispute between Cambridge University and one of its professors, Derek Fray, about matters relating to the licensing of two spin-off companies, CE and BTi, quotes a letter from the US Naval Research Laboratory to the University which refers to: 'the very considerable investment in BTi and the University of Cambridge by the US Government', and quotes Fray as saying that the US government's dissatisfaction with Cambridge had led it 'subsequently . . . to support similar research at Imperial College London'. (The research relates to a new way of producing titanium and other armaments-related metals.)

On the FE pay dispute, Unison national officer Chris Fabby says: 'We reject this offer outright', while regarding the protest actions scheduled for 4/6/08, UCU FE official Barry Lovejoy says: '. . . I am sure most of the colleges will take part - most of them having taken part in the [24/4/06 Ed.] strike' (emphasis added).

Saudi royal family member Prince Alwaleed bin Talal bin Abdulaziz al-Saud is donating £8m each to Edinburgh and Cambridge Universities so that they can set up research centres aimed at improving understanding between the Muslim world and the West.

A strike by UCU members at Liverpool Hope University is in prospect over management's plans to make 7 out of 16 academic staff in the computing department and 1 of 2 technicians there compulsorily redundant. UCU claims falling student numbers in the department are due, in the case of undergraduates, to the University raising the UCAS points required from 160 in 2003 to 260 in 2008, and in the case of postgraduates (most of whom are from overseas) to its raising fees from £3,000 to £8,100.

University College London (UCL) has set up a committee to consider whether it should sell its shares in armaments manufacturers. (One of its main investments is in Cobham, a company which makes components for Hellfire missiles used in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2006, UCL owned £1.5m of arms shares, the largest holding of any university revealed in a Campaign Against Arm Trade survey.)

HEFCE's Equality Challenge Unit produces evidence to show that women in general, along with over-40s of both sexes, are particularly in line to be affected by the Government's decision to cut funding for ELQs (equivalent or lower qualifications - ie HE qualifications undertaken - usually for employment reasons - by

people who already have degrees).

There is evidence that some university managers are misusing the 'Transparent Approach to Costing' (Trac) - the system used to report back teaching and research expenditure to HEFCE - in an attempt to divert funding from teaching towards research. In a letter to vice-chancellors, HEFCE Trac Strategy Group head and Exeter vice-chancellor Steve Smith says: 'If we undermine Trac without a better alternative, we may simply lose funding' [ie from the government Ed.].

Week beginning 12/5/08

A study headed by Sunderland University professor Gill Crozier, based on 160 interviews with 27 working class degree level students and some tutors at an FE college, a post-1992 northern university, a pre-1992 Midlands university and an elite university in the South finds that: such students are not more likely to drop out than HE students in general; the highest levels of individual support were at the southern university and the FE college; on-line learning unintentionally (and undesirably) tends to prevent students becoming 'bound in' to a university's culture.

The National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) annual survey of adult participation in learning cites LSC figures showing that in the two years since the Government withdrew funding from non-certificated adult education, the number of adults studying has fallen by 1.4 million. A small proportion of these have moved to other providers, for example the University of the 3rd Age. The dropout rate is highest amongst the less well-off.

Points in a *THE* article about Bolton University based on an

interview with vice-chancellor George Holmes include: UCAS applications to Bolton in 2008 fell by 23.5 per cent over 2007; the 2008 *Good University Guide* ranked Bolton 112th out of 113 institutions; in March 2008 the Commons Public Accounts Committee cited Bolton's dropout rate (18.4 of students not completing courses) as the UK's worst; Holmes started at Bolton in 2005; Bolton is launching a 'Bolton wellbeing centre' on one of its campuses; in conjunction with the Kartha Education Group, it is to launch a campus at Ras Al Khaimah in the Arab Emirates to be staffed by a 'flying faculty'; a similar campus is planned for Singapore. (The article does not mention that corruption allegations relating to Holmes' period as principal of Doncaster College continue to circulate there.)

Points in an LSC evaluation of Train to Gain, based on a survey of employers, include: £524m of public money will this year go to fund Train to Gain; more than two thirds of the businesses participating in Train to Gain had arranged training for themselves in the preceding 12 months; less than 50 per cent of companies contacted by Train to Gain 'brokers' went on to carry out any new training; just over 17 per cent of training provided under Train to Gain (corresponding to £91m expenditure) has been simply a substitute for training which employers had previously funded for themselves; Train to Gain funding is to rise to £1bn this year.

Invited by the *THE* to comment on a motion to UCU annual conference which implies that Newcastle University's capability measures are a disguised form of disciplinary procedure, Newcastle assistant human resources director Garry Coupland says that the capability policy: 'protects the interests of staff by identifying a number of support measures, such as additional training and develop-

ment, mentors or buddies, occupational health support, technological aids and varying the responsibilities of the job'.

Harvard University professor and Jesus College Oxford senior research fellow Niall Ferguson, who thinks that the only progress tests for school pupils should take place at 11, tells a conference (held at Rugby School) about the extended projects which are to be optional for A-level students and compulsory in 14-19 diplomas, that the latter are 'not designed for teenagers intending to go to university'. Commenting, a DCSF spokesperson says: 'Our qualification strategy offers young people three very clear routes through A-levels, diplomas and the International Baccalaureate'.

A HEFCE report on foundation degrees says: 'The evidence suggests that students, even part time students, do not get their tuition fees paid by their employers or [receive] any other financial support'.

Commenting on the HEFCE report on foundation degrees, HE minister Bill Rammell says of the foundation degree launched by Tesco in April: 'That's absolutely the kind of initiative you want . . .'

An Ofsted report on Stockport College rates it 'outstanding' in nine areas, including leadership and management and quality of provision. (In 2001 an adverse report led the then principal Richard Evans to resign.)

Following the announcement by vice-chancellor (and Universities and Colleges Employers Association - UCEA - chairperson) Bill Wakeham of a review of income and expenditure, including a freeze on the recruitment of academic staff other than basic grade lecturers, unions at Southampton University issue a joint statement predicting that 'large numbers of compulsory

redundancies' of support staff will be announced in July.

A study of preparations for the society, health and development 14-19 diploma in two London boroughs, written for Central London LSC by Aimhigher manager Graeme Atherton and consultant Dafydd Thorne, cites lack of strategic leadership from senior management as one reason why, although partnerships for this were picked, among other things, on the basis of their links with HE, universities' direct involvement in diplomas is 'patchy and piecemeal'.

Week beginning 19/5/08

A *Guardian* article about former City and Guilds (CGLI) CEO Chris Humphreys's new role - as CEO of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKces - the body recommended by the 2006 Leitch report) quotes him as saying (regarding employers' views of sector skills councils, which UKces vets): 'I hear: . . . some are stronger than others, but what we want you to do is to help the network to improve, not rip it up by the roots' and (regarding so called 'employability skills'): 'Over the past 10 years we've had core skills, key skills, soft skills, general skills . . . and yet employers are unanimous in saying . . . it's getting worse'. (Humphreys sees the solution to this in more emphasis on teaching as opposed to listing skills.)

Commenting on the findings of a study of 'distributed leadership' in HE based on interviews with 152 managers at 12 universities, including 12 vice chancellors, 12 human resources directors, 28 deans and 41 heads of school, its author, Exeter University's Georgy Petrov, says: 'Distributed leadership may be used by those in positions of real power to disguise power differentials, offering the illusion of consultation and

participation while obscuring the mechanisms by which decisions are reached and resources distributed', and that this 'is particularly concerning . . . in the current environment where most UK universities are rationalising, if not eliminating, their main formalised mechanism for bottom-up influence and decision-making - that is, the committee structure'.

Along with the CBI and British Chambers of Commerce, TUC general secretary Brendan Barber welcomes a clause in the draft of the next Queen's Speech, in which the Government proposes to consult relevant parties about whether all employees should have a right to request training (ie analogous to the 'right' to request flexible working). However he admits that this is the quid pro quo for the postponement till 2014 of a broader review of training rights, while UCU general secretary Sally Hunt points out that it presupposes a 'demand-led' training model which would be subject to 'affordability'.

Commenting on a decision by management at Southampton University to drop the term 'manager' in favour of 'process owner', an unnamed academic says: 'This appears to be an attempt by the senior deputy vice-chancellor to make everybody's job title as silly as his. It highlights the barking mad managerialism that is rife in this university'.

Derby University, which in 1998 took over High Peak (FE) College in Buxton, is in the process of taking over South East Derbyshire College. (The former High Peak now accounts for £8m of the University's £100m annual turnover, while SE Derbyshire's turnover is £12m.)

A survey conducted for DIUS to which 135 UK HE institutions responded reveals that 65 per cent of these provide 'transnational education' - ie they have either

their own campus or a link with another provider abroad. There are 1,536 such programmes, involving 276,000 students in nearly 80 countries. 63 per cent of provision is by post-1992 universities. The report warns that the focus on private colleges as partners may become 'problematic' if those providers gain their own degree-awarding powers.

Leeds Metropolitan University, which took over Harrogate College in 1998, is in the process of transferring it to Hull College.)

Ministers announce that about 20,000 'pupils' are now expected to take 14-19 diplomas from September 2008.

Figures from the HE Statistics Agency (HESA) reveals that in 2006-07, the number of academic staff employed by UK institutions was 169,995 (up 3.1 per cent over the previous year), and the number of 'managers, professional and technical staff' was 79,250 (up 3.7 per cent).

Northampton University is in the process of cutting three full time posts out of the eleven in the history division of its School of Social Sciences.

Week beginning 26/5/08

Launching a campaign by Oxford University to raise £1.25bn from 'old members and friends of the university', vice-chancellor John Hood cites figures showing that between 1/8/04 and 31/3/08, Oxford received over 100,000 gifts from 60,000 donors, most of which were 'of £25,000 or less' (THE), while a campaign launched by Cambridge University in 2005 had by 1/8/07 raised £663m in gifts.

Under the guise of reducing bureaucracy, the LSC has given colleges permission to omit from their 'members' reports' (ie the version of their annual accounts

made available to governing body members, as distinct from the version filed electronically with the LSC itself) certain details that were previously available to the public through this route, including pay increases made to senior management and information about overseas travel. UCU general secretary Sally Hunt describes this change as 'very disturbing'.

It emerges that the HE Academy (HEA) has lifted the 6/3/08 suspension of its former director of research and evaluation Lee Harvey (for writing in personal capacity a letter to the *THE* in which he criticised the National Student Survey) but that Harvey has now left the job, and has probably signed an agreement barring him from revealing details of what happened.

Points in a *Guardian* article on the attitude of DIUS minister John Denham to FE college mergers include: there are signs that Denham is trying to hang on to the power of authorising mergers which, under the 2007 FE Act, is supposed to have been transferred to the LSC, possibly in the hopes that the LSC will go out of existence (due in 2010) before he has to relinquish it; some college managers think that funding for FE next year will be the worst for ten years, and that allocations to be notified finally this July will not cover all the 16-18 year olds to whom places have already been offered; the proposed merger of the three remaining colleges in or near Nottingham - Castle, New and South Notts - is part of a trend by managers to establish bigger institutions to have more 'success' under the regime of 'contestability' and Train to Gain.

Responding to reports that '20 or 30' HE institutions may not honour the third stage of the 2006 pay deal, Sally Hunt says: 'Any institution that seeks to unilaterally defer the 2008-09 award negotiated by the UCU in good faith will

face the full force of the national union'.

Responding to evidence that only 20,000 students will start 14-19 diplomas in September, AOC quality director Maggie Scott says: 'It's a case of quality over quantity' while DCSF secretary Ed Balls says that he never intended 'a big bang at the beginning'.

Following the decision by Nottingham University managers to call in the police after an electronic copy of an edited version of an al-Qaeda training manual was found on admin worker Hicham Yezza's computer, which in turn led to the arrest and detention for six days of Yezza and postgraduate researcher Rizwaan Sabir, 26 academics there sign a petition calling on the University to uphold academic freedom. (A similar manual, which is freely available on the Internet, can be

bought via Amazon for £7.55. Sabir was released without charge on 20/5/08 but Yezza, a libertarian political activist and former Nottingham student, has been moved around a series of detention centres, including Dover, in an effort to deport him to Algeria, which he left for the UK as a teenager 13 years ago.)

Statements submitted by universities to UCAS indicate that about 70 now intend to 'welcome' applications from candidates with 14-19 diplomas.

In a speech at the Association for College Management (ACM) annual conference, held in Birmingham, CEO Peter Pendle asks, with reference to the transfer of funding from the LSC to LEAs: 'What about the potential for power struggles between . . . colleges, between colleges and local authorities, between local

CAFAS Council for Academic Freedom and Academic Standards

- ◆ campaigns against the decline in standards
- ◆ defends individuals against victimisation
- ◆ gives moral support and legal advice
- ◆ investigates malpractice and publishes findings
- ◆ seeks to develop a support network with unions and other organisations.

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authorities at sub-regional level, between the YPLA [Young People's Learning Agency. Ed.] and the SFA [Skills Funding Agency. Ed.], between the YPLA and Regional Development Agencies and so on'.

It emerges that HE minister Bill Rammell has written to the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) to say that, because of the recent decision by UCU to reject single table pay bargaining in HE, the Government will not now contribute to the costs of this autumn's independent review of HE pay.

The LSC has 'invested' £6.5m in e-learning with private training organisations in the last two years, with an additional £4m planned for the current year.

Plymouth University management announces that, in order to tackle a deficit predicted to reach £3m this year, it will make a £10m cut in its 2008-09 spending, to include reducing the institution's pay bill by 10 per cent and closing its Exmouth campus.

At a media briefing about on-line exam marking held at Edexcel's London HQ, managing director Jerry Jarvis says that script annotations by examiners are 'yesterday's stuff' and that: 'The thing that disappoints me is that a teacher would rely on what are random anecdotal comments, rather than use some of the available technology'.

UCU annual congress, held in Manchester, votes for a review by the Union of the 2004 HE pay framework agreement, endorses the decision to oppose single table bargaining and remits a motion calling on the National Executive to have talks with the NUT about a merger. A motion proposing moves towards an academic boycott of Israel is also passed.

Week beginning 2/6/08

Commenting on last week's news that the Government will not help pay for the review of HE pay scheduled for September 2008, UCU head of HE Malcolm Keight says that now the review 'won't be a significant source of information to inform next year's pay round'.

On the basis of HESA figures for the intake of young full time undergraduates to HE in 2006-07, HE minister Bill Rammell claims that widening participation measures are beginning to have 'real impact'. The proportion from state schools rose to 88.3 from 87.9 the year before, and the proportion from 'lower socio-economic groups' rose to 30.3 per cent from 29.8 per cent. The university admitting the lowest proportion of such entrants was Oxford (down to 9.8 per cent of its entrants from 11.4 the year before) followed by Cambridge on 11.5 per cent, Bristol on 14.3 and Durham on 15. A spokesperson for Oxford comments that the system used to calculate benchmarks (in Oxford's case 17.9) was 'unhelpful and . . . unrealistic' while a spokesperson for Bristol says: 'We're not going to beat ourselves up about these figures . . .'

TES gossip about the restructuring of UCU staffing says that 40 staff members have expressed an interest in voluntary redundancy, and 35 of these are former NATFHE employees.

To support his contention that DIUS minister John Denham is unfairly directing cash for apprenticeships towards 'traditional' sectors such as engineering, IT science, construction etc and away from his area, Tom Bewick, CEO of Creative and Cultural Skills (CCS) - the sector skills council covering advertising, visual arts etc - cites a report commissioned by them from consultants TBR, according to which such

enterprises employ 411,737 people and are set to recruit 36,000 more in the next seven years,

John Denham announces a deal between DIUS and SEMTA (the science, engineering and manufacturing sector skills council) by which £65m of the Train to Gain budget will be ring-fenced to SEMTA, which will carry out audits of companies' training needs and thereby within the next two years cause 20,000 extra people to achieve level 2 qualifications, 10,000 to achieve level 3 and 3,000 to take up apprenticeships.

In a case supported by UCU, an industrial tribunal in Aberdeen rules that Aberdeen University cannot use the argument that funding for his post is short term to refuse zoology research fellow Andrew Ball a permanent contract.

In a report titled *The Diploma: a Disaster Waiting to Happen?*, Allan Smithers and his Buckingham 'University' colleague Pamela Robinson claim that: 'The annual cries about A-level standards will be as nothing compared with the uproar the [14-19. Ed.] diplomas will provoke'.

Welsh first minister Rhodri Morgan opens at the University of Wales in Newport the Wales International Study Centre (WISC). This is a public-private partnership between, on the one hand, every Welsh HE institution except Swansea University, and, on the other, a company called Study Group International. (The British Council is also involved.) The aim is to attract people from Asian countries, especially China, who will pay to attend this centre in the hopes of progressing to HE in Wales. (Swansea already has a deal with the Australian company IBT Education.)

Points in a report prepared for UCU by Manchester University professor Jeremy Waddington on

the basis of a 2007 survey of 4,000 UCU members (of whom 1,887 were in HE) include: in 2005 the combined membership of the AUT and NATFHE was 117,000; this number has been sustained since the merger; UCU itself estimates that there are in FHE 220,000 lecturers who are not members of UCU; 35 per cent of eligible lecturers are members of UCU as against 60 per cent union density for the public sector as a whole; more than 10 per cent of FHE lecturers are under 30 but such staff constitute less than 4 per cent of UCU membership; 54 per cent of FE members of UCU are content with the workplace representation it provides, as against under 40 per cent of HE lecturers; members are more likely to be happy with the union where there is a strong local branch; more than one third of those polled 'do not know if they have a rep at their workplace' (*TES*); alternatively (*THE*), 'only 55 per cent of HE members said they had a UCU rep at their workplace'.

The LSC's £5bn project for rebuilding colleges will result, over the next eight years, in a 700,000 square metre cut in space. LSC infrastructure director Phil Head maintains that: 'The capital programme is transforming the FE estate by providing space that creates a better learning environment, with bright, flexible accommodation . . .' while Bradford College UCU president Steve Wilkinson points out that in a new building there 76 staff are being forced into a space designed for 44.

In exchange for one filing cabinet drawer plus a headset and webcam40 each, Coventry University staff, mainly from the Business, Environment and Society Department, have agreed to give up their office spaces for a three-month trial of a Joint Information Systems Committee accommodation scheme.

As the Government announces an extra £50m for training teachers for the 14-19 diplomas, there are rumours, based partly on Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) guidance, that students will be allowed to do their work experience outside the relevant industry. (3,054 are down to do Construction.)

An academic at the University of Central Lancashire describes as 'a slap in the face for overworked and underpaid staff' a scheme introduced by vice-chancellor Malcolm McVicar, according to which staff will receive a £150 annual bonus if targets related to such factors as 'customer care' as measured by the National Students Survey are met.

FE college training restaurants may be at risk because of an LSC decision to fund catering students for one qualification only. (At present, most do both food preparation and food service, but if forced to choose one, most will opt for preparation.)

The private contractor INTO University Partnerships launches INTO Manchester, its partnership with Manchester University, which is intended to allow up to 1,000 international students at a time to do a pre-university course.

Along with UCU, the other unions with FE negotiating rights - ATL, ACM, Unison, Unite and GMB - all reject as inadequate the AOC's improved 3 per cent pay offer.

Week beginning 9/6/08

UCU members in London FE colleges take a days' strike action over pay.

Croydon College, which claims to have 800 full-time-equivalent HE students, is in talks with London Metropolitan University to open an HE centre in Croydon offering degree courses, supposedly to up

to 5,000 students. Other FE colleges amongst the 29 now in the Mixed Economy Group (of FE colleges with over 500 HE students) include Blackburn, Bradford, Burnley, Durham, Hastings, North East Surrey, South Tyneside and Yeovil.

Macdonald Daly and Sean Matthews, respectively president and an executive committee member of the UCU branch at Nottingham University, resign from these posts after criticisms of an open letter which they wrote, in which they accused unnamed colleagues of 'irresponsible, opportunistic and unethical conduct' for supporting the campaign to defend Rizwaan Sabir and Hicham Yezza.

A *Guardian* article on FE quotes UCU equality and employment rights head and former candidate for general secretary Roger Kline as saying: 'It seems to me that the sector is in complete turmoil, We have agreed all sorts of things with employers but getting them implemented is proving difficult. Money is getting tighter and the curriculum is getting narrower, becoming very skills-focused. Adult education is being smashed to pieces.' In contrast the same article quotes Hull College principal and 157 Group chairperson Elaine McMahon's opinion that: 'Lecturers have never had so much freedom and choice'.

Points in a *Guardian* article on the OU include: of the OU's 7,552 associate lecturers, 599 are aged 66 or over and a further 1,215 are over 60; following the Government's Employment Equality (Age) Regulations introduced in October 2006 it initially allowed people over 65 to apply for 2-year extensions and 256 out of 317 due to retire then were allowed to go on working; this year, management has decided to enforce the law to the letter, with the result that no one can continue beyond 65 unless

there is a business case for this, leading to a lot of sackings; University secretary Fraser Woodburn, challenged about the loss of teaching capacity says: 'The criteria are about the needs of the organisation rather than the particular abilities of individuals'; Woodburn then says the OU intends to abolish its retiring age in 2011 anyway.

AOC president and South Cheshire College principal David Collins, who in the past resisted having 14 year olds in his institution, now says it would be better to take them because: 'That way we could take care of their motivational issues at an earlier age'.

In the report *Behind Closed Doors: Military Influence, Commercial Pressures and the Compromised University*, produced for the Scientists for Global Responsibility Organisation, Chris Langley and co-authors use Freedom of Information material about a sample of 13 universities to argue that the actual extent of military funding per each of the 100 or so relevant universities is about £2.1m per year, as against the £400,000 suggested by official figures.

Since September 2005, Ofsted inspectors have rated 27 colleges inadequate for leadership and management, as compared with 92 where these aspects were rated as satisfactory.

Following discussion at a Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills committee evidence session, Office for Fair Access (OFFA) director Sir Martin Harris says that, despite government moves to make universities' admissions procedures more transparent (ie supposedly in the interests of widening participation), 'individual decisions on admissions will remain a matter for institutions themselves'.

Information about 14-19 diplomas posted on the DCSF website

implies that the intermediate diploma will for the next two years be treated as equivalent to 8 GCSEs (ie when the compulsory functional skills tests are added, an arrangement which will lapse in 2010) and the higher diploma will be worth 3.5 A-levels.

Eight hourly-paid teaching assistants bring a grievance against Aberdeen University over rearrangements which have led to them being forced to do large amounts of unpaid work.

A study carried out for the Centre for British Teachers Trust by consultants Adrian Perry (formerly principal of Lambeth College) and Mick Fletcher, in which they plotted the size of 229 colleges in England against their Ofsted ratings, suggests that larger colleges which can dominate their local 'markets' tend on the whole to do better than smaller ones, except that small tertiary and sixth form colleges also tend to do well, and that 'colleges which faced little or no competition were among the best in the country' (*TES*).

University of Lincoln management cancels an election for a staff rep on its governing body in an attempt to stop UCU-backed activist Mohamed El-Sheemy being elected.

The body resulting from merger of the FE Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) with the Centre for Excellence in Learning (CEL) is to be called the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and Roger McLure, formerly head of Scottish (FE) Funding Council and before that finance director at the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council, is to become its CEO, on £150,000 per year. 8 out of 12 LSIS board members are principals or former principals.

A Council of Professors and Heads of Computing (CPHC) report on the take-up of undergraduate places on computing

courses reveals that this has dropped by 50 per cent, at a time when the IT job market is predicted to grow by 15 per cent over the next eight years.

Former civil servant and FE Funding Council inspector Toni Fazaeli, whose husband is NIACE director Alan Tuckett, starts work as CEO of the Institute for Learning.

By proposing the creation of a new sixth form college in Hampshire, the LSC has reportedly defused the quarrel over its threat to force St Vincent (sixth form) College to merge with Fareham College (of FE).

Week beginning 16/6/08

An Economic and Social Research (ESRC) project, co-directed at Sheffield University by Gareth Parry, finds that the distinction between FE and HE is being eroded, and Parry says: 'If the concept of further education is thereby exposed as redundant, it should be abandoned'.

Another ESRC investigation, this time based on tracking the HE attainments, if any, of every state school student who turned 18 in 2004-05 (ie about 600,000 people), finds that although, in the words of principal investigator Anna Vignoles, 'state school pupils remain far less likely to go to university' and although the data shows that poorer students are more likely than better-off ones to drop out of HE, the decisive factor in determining who goes to what, if any, university and what they achieve there is how well they have done in education between 16 and 19 (ie rather than their class, ethnic background, gender etc as such).

At the Edexcel marking centre in Hellaby near Rotherham, staff work in two shifts between 6am and 10pm, and between mid-May

and June handle 1.3m sheets of paper a day, using forklift trucks, conveyor belts and 26 scanning machines, thereby allowing 90 per cent of Edexcel GCSE and A-level scripts to be marked online.

In the week before its annual conference, the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) releases a survey of 109 universities carried out for UCEA by Income Data Services which 'shows' that universities provide, in the words of UCEA CEO Jocelyn Prudence: 'among the better employment conditions when compared to the whole economy'.

In the policy paper *Work Skills*, the Government sets out plans by which from autumn 2008 the 680,000 jobseeker's allowance claimants will be forced to undergo skills checks, followed 'where appropriate' by compulsory training, while from 2010 the 470,000 single parents on income support will be forced to undergo job training once their children reach school leaving age, with a strong hint that they will be under pressure to start this training earlier on. For UCU, communication and public affairs head Paula Lanning comments: 'We are not in favour of people being forced into education'.

After only two and a half years of a six year contract, HEFCE CEO David Eastwood will in April 2009 leave this post in order to become vice-chancellor of Birmingham University.

Following interviews with 40 FE principals, former CEL CEO Lynne Sedgmore, who was asked to collate principals' views on how to prevent violent extremism in colleges, reports that the focus should be on gang culture, guns and knives etc, and that picking on Muslims, as encouraged by the Government, media etc would be a distraction from this real problem.

HEFCE releases figures for 2005-06 which show that women formed

38 per cent of all academics with a permanent contract, 19 per cent of professors, 32 per cent of senior lecturers and 47 per cent of lecturers.

DIUS secretary John Denham initiates consultation (till September) on a government plan by which an employer who wishes to deny a worker time off for training would have to explain in writing that there is a sound business reason so to do. (This would apply to workers in England who have more than 26 weeks service with the relevant employer.)

In the dispute over Keele University's attempt to sack staff in the School of Economics and Management Studies, the UCU branch there suspends its industrial action (including an assessment boycott) and calls off a 'greylisting' boycott due to start this week, after the employer agrees to extend to January 2009 the period for voluntary redundancies, engage academics in the restructuring process and not deduct pay for industrial action already taken.

On the basis of modelling work done by the AQA exam board, its general secretary Mike Cresswell warns that from 2012, when functional skills tests are due to be integrated with GCSEs: 'Looking at the information we have now will lead you to believe that there will be quite a lot of students who would otherwise get grade C who will not do so when this has to include functional skills'.

In its response to a report produced in March by the Commons innovation, universities, science and skills committee on the cut in funding for ELQs, the Government says: 'We have foreseen the consequences of our policy and, in our view, they are wholly acceptable'.

90,000 14-16 year olds are currently attending FE colleges via the Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP).

ESRC research funded by HEFCE and conducted by a team at Oxford University co-directed by education lecturer Geoff Hayward finds that between 1995 and 2004 the proportion of students entering HE with purely vocational qualifications fell from 14 to 10 per cent, while the proportion entering with a mixture of academic and vocational qualifications rose from 4 to 14 per cent.

Commenting on changes proposed by Nottingham Trent University management to the recognition agreement there, UCU branch secretary Colin Bryson claims that: 'The university is on the brink of derecognising the UCU . . .'

Week beginning 23/6/08

Hourly paid associate tutors in some schools at Sussex University have experienced pay cuts after management regraded them at level 5 on the standard pay spine, on the assumption that they do not develop their own teaching materials.

A TUC report, *Apprenticeships: Skilling the Regions?*, points out that there is not a single English region where apprenticeships make up even 1 per cent of jobs.

Regarding his plans for reversing the recent decision by NUS conference to reject his anti-democracy 'reforms', NUS president Wes Streeting tells *Guardian* readers that: 'It's really important that we communicate far more clearly going forward to make sure people have a sense of ownership about the reform process'. On his scheme to ditch NUS opposition to HE fees under the guise of calling for a broader review etc, he says: 'Going forward, I simply cannot see . . . how it [ie the parliamentary Labour Party. Ed.] could get past [sic - ie 'passed'. Ed.] any increase in fees'.

CBI director general Richard Lambert reveals the results of a survey of their members indicating rejection of the Government's scheme for academic 14-19 diplomas alongside vocational ones.

HE Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) spokesperson Peter Williams attacks the continued use by universities of the 'rotten' system of degree classes.

Points in a *TES* article about FE funding include: the annual budget for Train to Gain is to increase from £350m now to £1bn in 2010-11, taking the numbers on these programmes from 420,000 to 950,000 a year; colleges are to be given a 3 per cent increase in funding per Train to Gain trainee for the next three years; over the same period, an extra £133m is also to go into training for the construction industry, to include cash for 6,500 new apprenticeship places; 73 per cent of 17 year olds are now said to be in education or training.

The HE Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) has commissioned external consultants to look into managerial capability at the University of Wales, Lampeter, the subject of an adverse QAA report in 2007. (At the UCU annual conference in May, it emerged that Lampeter may not implement national pay and grading agreements and is looking to save £300,000 via voluntary redundancies.) UCU regional organiser Mark Oley says: 'UCU is pressing HEFCW that the university should remain in the town in some form'.

A survey by the Mathematics in Education and Industry organisation of 171 schools and colleges which entered candidates for AS-level maths in January 2008 indicates a significant rise in the numbers taking this subject.

Science minister Ian Pearson launches the Government's

'Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers', in which bodies including UUK agree to implement the law on fixed term contracts for HE researchers unless there is 'a recorded and justifiable reason' not to do so. For UCU, assistant general secretary Jane Thompson points out that nearly 80 per cent of researchers remain on such contracts and 'routinely under the threat of dismissal'.

A report summarising the findings of an internal consultation conducted by the LSC among 3,200 of its staff about the likely effects of the changes to FE funding reveals widespread scepticism about the proposed roles and probable inter-relations of the Young People's Learning Agency and Skills Funding Agency. For the PCS union, LSC group president Ruth Serwotka says: 'There's a bit of confusion about why this change is considered necessary. All these new quangos are going to be created, with chief executives on top-level pay . . .'

Oxford University will from autumn 2008 extend to those wishing to study economics and management its use of the Cambridge Assessment Thinking Skills Assessment, hitherto used to vet applicants for the PPE (philosophy, politics and economics) degree.

The ACM is to recommend to its members that they accept an 'improved' 3.2 per cent AOC pay offer, while Unison says it will ballot its 25,000 members in FE after deciding whether or not to recommend this deal.

DIUS announces that the Skills for Life programme has achieved two years before the target date its aim of getting 2.25 million adult students to achieve at least a level 1 qualification in literacy or numeracy, 2.28 million having reportedly done so.

Where we stand:

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.

Second Life - first experience

Cheryl Reynolds

Imagine that you have been granted the land and resources to create your own classroom. It can be at the top of a mountain or the bottom of a lake, on the beach or floating in the sky, flat, spherical, cuboid or cylindrical. Your students could be sitting in rows or swinging from the chandeliers. You have the power to build whatever you like and to make it into whatever kind of learning environment you think will inspire and engage your learners.

This is the promise of Second Life, a 3D virtual world in which each inhabitant is represented by an avatar. An avatar is a 3D figure controlled by its owner via the computer keyboard. Using key strokes, avatars can be made to walk, run, jump, fly, gesture to one another, teleport to new locations in the virtual world and, crucially, communicate with one another through text and voice. You and I could meet there and have a conversation about the weather, though this might prove rather boring, because the sun always shines in Second Life. The real joy and beauty of the environment is that it throws up chances to talk to anyone, from anywhere, about anything. Is this what Habermas would call an 'ideal speech situation' and how might we use it to communicate with our students?

Educationalists across the globe have begun to explore the potential of Second Life in learning and teaching. Examples include a virtual law court built by Harvard University; a Design Degree Show laid on by graduates of Goldsmiths, University of London; a series of visualisation tools for use in cell and molecular biology lectures at Liverpool University and many more.

So how does one go about creating one's own educational utopia? The first step is to obtain an avatar. The Second Life website provides a 'Join up now' link which takes you through the stages of entering your details, choosing your appearance, naming your avatar, downloading the relevant software and logging into the virtual world.

The first time you log in, you land on Orientation Island. By exploring the island, you learn how to move around, change your appearance, communicate with others and manage your belongings. And from there, the virtual world is your oyster. So where does one go in Second Life? Well, that rather depends on what you're looking for.

An important caveat is that, in very many regards, Second Life replicates the real world, so there are university campuses and there are discos, there are shopping malls and libraries, there are people interested in entering into academic discourse and there is adult content. In general, one finds what one is searching for but it is possible to stumble upon places you would rather not have gone and people you would rather not have met. The idea for an educational user is to find the respectable, educational sites that will be populated by others who share the same goals and standards. Examples include Educase Island, which hosts virtual conferences and discussion groups, the ICT Library which showcases educational tools, and the Ivory Tower Library of Primitives, where you can learn how to build.

Building is a key step in creating your own virtual classroom. At the Ivory Tower, one can learn how to use the 'Build' menu, accessible through a clickable tab at the bottom of the screen. This menu allows you to click and drag objects onto the ground and to resize, add texture to, carve up and join together these objects in order to create new things. The strap line of Second Life is 'Your World; Your Imagination' because everything you see there has been built by the inhabitants. All the clothes, furniture, paths, trees, roads, buildings and vehicles came out of somebody's 'Build' menu at some point in the creation of the world. Even the terrain is determined by avatars, as it's possible to raise, lower, flatten and hollow out the land according to your preferences. It takes application and practice to begin to feel competent as a builder but if you don't have the time or inclination, there are specialist companies of virtual architects springing up who, for a fee, will do the building work for you, according to your specifications.

It is entirely possible to become an active inhabitant of Second Life and never to spend a single penny on the enterprise. Building is free so that you can make your own objects with no investment other than your own time and ingenuity. You can build on any land where the owner has decided to permit it. Examples include the many 'sandboxes' that are dotted around in Second Life. However, sandboxes will automatically return your objects to you after a specified time has elapsed so if you want to create

something permanent, at a site where you can control permissions and access, you need to become a landowner.

This is the approach that the University of Huddersfield has taken through a recently funded Learning and Teaching Project. An island was purchased and used to host staff meetings, encourage collaborative activities across campus and hold classes with groups of students. Key benefits have been the spontaneous collaborations that arose between different Schools and Departments in the University, generated by a common interest in the technology and supported by the chance to work together in new ways on creative projects. The island is now home to a Senate building for large group meetings and classes, a campfire for smaller seminars, a four storey building used by the Drama group, a maze created by the Psychology department and its students, and a fledgling retail outlet for use by Fashion and Retail. Many Second Lifers make objects specifically to sell to other avatars and branding, pricing, hosting opening events and marketing can all be replicated 'in world' without the large outlay that would be needed in real life.

The project has, however, not been without its challenges. Enabling the correct ports to allow access to Second Life from the University's real world campus and getting software installed in computer labs for students to practice in face to face sessions has been difficult. Regular forced upgrades to the software meant that re-installs had to be requested quite frequently. However, recent policy changes at Linden Labs, the company that runs Second Life, mean that this occurs far less often so that the problem has diminished.

Pilot

In this context, a pilot was conducted over the course of the 2007-08 academic year with students of the University's MSc Multimedia in Education course from the School of Education and Professional Development. Students were invited to come to the Senate building on the University's 'Queensgate' Island at 7pm every Sunday evening. This cohort of students attends the University for six Saturday day-schools spaced throughout the academic year, with online collaboration and support making up the rest of the course. Many of them are in full time jobs and this flexible mode of delivery supports them in accessing a Masters programme without taking time away from work. Second Life, therefore, provided an additional forum in which to meet and discuss the course, with the added benefit that it allowed the students to evaluate the potential of this new platform for use in their own teaching in the future.

Responses to the environment were quite diverse. Some participants were excited and inspired whilst others were disconcerted and doubtful. Factors which

influenced this included: degree of existing familiarity with virtual worlds; technical barriers and challenges such as bandwidth and graphics card quality; fears about encounters with mature content; access to a computer with install rights; learning style and ability to touch type. When communicating via text, students type their contributions into a field at the bottom of the screen. Clicking 'Enter' then causes their comments to appear on the screens of all those avatars within 30 virtual metres. For non touch-typists, it was a challenge to keep up, as three or four new comments may have appeared whilst they were looking down at their keyboard, typing in their answers. Voice became enabled in Second Life during the course of this initiative but could not be accessed by all students and so was not used during the sessions.

Nonetheless, the effect of the use of Second Life on the MSc group as a whole was remarkable in that it generated a lot of subsidiary discussion, both in face to face sessions at the University and in concurrent Blackboard discussions. People tended to have strong opinions as to the value of the activities and this in itself was a positive outcome as it formed the focus of debate about wider educational issues and relevant theories of interactive media.

Potential future developments include exploration of the value of the 3D affordances of the environment. Experiments in building 'life size' objects that represent cellular structures, such as the way that chromosomes are arranged during cell division, are ongoing. The aim is to measure whether providing avatars with the opportunity to walk inside the cell and look at it from all angles aids understanding of the cell division process. Similarly, 3D representations of ideas and concepts might be used to aid understanding. A structure that represents Marx's model of society, with its base and superstructure, has been created on the University's island and will be used to measure how much students can learn through interaction with this object and discussions about it.

In addition, Second Life provides considerable scope to engage in digital ethnography. The ethnographic approach of entering into an environment as an active participant and documenting, analysing and evaluating the findings is richly afforded by this environment as there are few gatekeepers and one is generally free to go anywhere and talk to anyone to accumulate one's data.

The litmus test for any use of Second Life as an educational tool has to be how effective it is in facilitating learning. Collaborative, situated, creative, technological, social, interactive and innovative - how can it fail? It captures something of the zeitgeist and its six and a half million inhabitants illustrate the power and pull of this burgeoning area of online communication. How this will unfold and what shape the virtual world will become depends on what we do with it. Have you started planning your Second Classroom yet?

How tolerant are you?

Philippe Harari

This exercise is not about the actual issues mentioned in the table below, but about the extent to which we should tolerate ideas we disagree with and behaviours we disapprove of. You could ask students to fill in the sheet below, either individually or in pairs or small groups, and then have a class discussion about their responses. Try to focus the discussion on the issue of toleration, rather than on the specific questions. For example, the issue is not whether the BNP is right or wrong, but whether their views are such that we should not tolerate them,

and if not, why not. The following questions may well come up as part of this discussion:

- Is there a distinction between what J.S. Mill referred to as 'self-regarding' and 'other-regarding' actions?
- Does every individual action have some kind of impact on society?
- If actions do have an impact on other people, does society have a right to control them?
- How should society distinguish between what is acceptable and what is not?

	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain
Islamic headscarves should be banned in schools			
All drugs should be legalised			
Smoking should be banned in public places			
The BNP should be treated like any other political party			
Parents should not be allowed to smack their children			
Prostitution should not be restricted by law			
The age of consent for sex should be abolished			
Homophobic remarks should be made illegal			
There should be no censorship of the internet			
People who do not like this country should leave			

Now try to define a general principle that sets out what should and should not be tolerated in society:

The problem with the three rs: results, retention and the redefined learner

Richard Lawton *looks at some of the pitfalls involved in the drive to measure teachers' work*

A significant feature of the changes in education from incorporation has been the redefinition of the student as customer and the increasing power of this group over the 'new managerialism'. Much of the business of education, like any other business, needs to be customer driven - taking account of and acting upon student needs and opinions. The perceived effectiveness of individual lecturers - and in some cases whole institutions - is based on its outcome. The intention here is not to disregard this shift as pernicious in its entirety. Learners are on the receiving end of education and are therefore in some ways best placed to comment on its effectiveness. Moreover, we should not forget that our primary goal as teachers is to promote learning and ensure learning has taken place - being aware of and meeting the needs of learners should indeed be of primary importance. Its importance however does not mean its reliability is unquestionable and a further problem is that it is matched by equally ineffective systems, namely result and retention figures which are essentially quantitative and unreliable. A student-centred and figures-driven approach to assessing a teacher's effectiveness destroys morale and leads to those aspects of work which are not visible or not measurable becoming undervalued. The fact that a teacher's effectiveness and capabilities can be ascertained by looking at a set of numbers is in itself an affront to professionalism.

Limited

Part of the problem with investing too much in student opinion and needs is that the education system has provided many learners with a very limited vocabulary with which to judge their experiences. For example, much time is invested in employing a range of learning methods and resources, and learners are often encouraged to discover what kind of learner they are. One negative outcome of this process is

that we provide learning styles as labels and turn learners off from alternative methods. Even the most conscientious of lecturers cannot promote the individual learning styles of all learners at any one time. Learners must have some responsibility for their own learning and should make the most of their opportunity even if this means getting involved in a discussion even though they are visual learners or making notes when they are kinaesthetic learners. Their turn will come.

The main problem, however, is the process by which student opinion and assessment is gained - namely the survey. Student comment on and assessment of a course is often based on perception rather than reality and also is more often based on the immediacy of the questionnaire. For example - if I had been standing in a queue for three hours waiting to return an item in a department store and was then given a questionnaire on customer service then I would be inclined to tick the 'no' box in respect of whether customer service was good. It would be quite easy to forget that the previous dozen or so times I had visited the store customer service had been exemplary. The same problem exists with student opinion on any aspect of a course, whether that is variety of teaching and learning resources or the utility of the library or ICT provision.

The use of a survey can in itself turn learners off from engaging fully in the process, leading often to unreliable and uninterested responses. This is evidenced, for example, in rating surveys (ie on a scale of 1 to 5). The survey which has all the 3s circled and no supporting comments may suggest paying lip service to the process. Not only might results be overwhelmingly middle of the road but such a survey can also present results that are entirely contradictory - in which a group of learners commenting on the same thing can offer conflicting opinions on an aspect of a course. This can be unhelpful, and in some ways makes the asking of the question a waste of time.

The reliability of a survey can also vary depending on how and when it is administered. Informally, learners may be coached by the teacher or influenced by friends' comments. Learners may be hesitant to comment if the anonymity of the questionnaire is in any way doubted. Any of the above makes a mockery of the process. Human factors also come into play and wider issues of gender and age, for example, can play a part. The young lecturer, sharing common interests with learners, may be popular and gain positive feedback regardless of wider issues. It seems feasible to suggest that the most popular teacher may or indeed may not be the most effective.

A further problem is that other processes used to judge performance are similarly unreliable, albeit in a different way. Results and retention data are viewed outside of the context in which the figures have been achieved, and mark a demise into quantitative measurement, which tells us very little, and a step away from qualitative information which would help the figures to be understood. To use the department store analogy again - if in the month of July the store only sold 100 ice creams, missing its quota of 200 by 50 per cent, then the store has quite clearly failed. However, if it is taken into consideration that the July in question had been one of the coldest and wettest for 50 years then the supporting evidence actually suggests that the store has done quite well against very difficult circumstances - the key difference in interpretation: a recognition that the store manager lives in the real world in which he or she does the best that he or she can against impossible odds.

Teachers cannot be held solely responsible for a set of results if the context in which they are achieved is ignored - it has to be recognised that they are just one variable alongside many others. Levels of achievement and individual cases must be recognised in the context in which they occur. The flaws in the system begin immediately when potential progress and level of achievement is based crudely on previous achievement. On some occasions results do not match what a mathematical formula works out that a student should achieve. Does this mean the teacher is incompetent, or is it that this system is flawed or unrealistic and dislocated from the process of achievement? It takes no account, for example, of subject variations or the context in which previous achievement has been gained.

It could also mean that the learner has not made the most of his/her opportunity and that he or she is in some way responsible. It could be either or indeed both, but it must be recognised that the latter has its part to play. Throughout my education I can recall at every level fellow learners who did not achieve the grades they could and should have achieved. These people could be neither made nor encouraged by the teacher and were stubbornly unwilling to get homework done on time, to attend lessons regularly or to participate actively in lessons, and had no real

interest in the subject (despite having chosen it). Dare I suggest here that it was the learners' fault they achieved a grade E instead of the Grade A they needed for university, or is it quite clearly the teachers' fault? Commonsense suggests the former, yet it would not always be interpreted in this way. Incidentally, it is often these learners that are present to complete the student survey. If they are not, this could suggest they have done the sensible thing and left the course. This, however, is where the teacher is in an impossible situation. If the learner stays then results - or at least value-added data - will be affected, but if he or she leaves then retention figures will similarly present a negative picture.

Retention figures present the same problem as results data of simply being a set of isolated figures. There is a plethora of reasons why a learner would leave a particular course of study - personal problems, an offer of employment, because none of his/her friends are doing it, change of career plan - none of which the teacher has any control over. To be judged by something over which you have no control is ridiculous in the extreme. To try and retain learners on an unsuitable course or programme of study to maintain good retention figures is also something that should not be encouraged.

Feedback

The emphasis on isolated figures also highlights another problem related to student feedback in that it seems to be taken less seriously in the presence of results and retention figures. If the questionnaire I filled out for the department store suggested 'yes' to good customer service and its entirety was positive affirmation, and this was matched by the other 100 or so people surveyed, then would this be enough to offset the fact that ice cream sales were down 50 per cent? Probably not, the key difference being the difference between making money and hitting targets (what matters to a business) and customer satisfaction or a positive learning experience (a secondary factor used when it serves a purpose).

The weaknesses of a system are easy to point out. Offering solutions and alternatives is the difficult part. The main weakness of this brief article is that it offers no radical solutions, but this is also due to recognition that quality assurance has to exist - education has to be scrutinised and individual lecturers' performance and their role has to be accountable. To suggest otherwise would be ridiculous. Finding alternatives, however, remains problematic. What is clear is that there needs to be some integration of data and context. Results and retention alone are not only an inadequate reference point for effectiveness but also play a direct part in most colleges' appraisal schemes, and therefore have the potential to retard financial and professional progression.

Where does Functional Skills come from, and how can we overcome it?

Colin Waugh

1. Introduction

During a training session on functional skills at my college earlier this year, I had a conversation with the consultant who ran it, from which the following points emerged. Some time ago she had been a lecturer - in French - at Barnet College. While there she had at one stage been required to teach French to vocational - possibly hotel and catering - students. Their level of literacy was, in her opinion, so low that she had 'had' to teach them English before they could start to learn French. At present she is a lecturer at Royal Holloway College. However, functional skills has in her opinion no connection with English for academic purposes or other study support in HE. She also owns her own riding stables, where her experience as an employer of young people has led her to see how right 'the employers' are to demand that schools and colleges provide functional skills teaching. She had heard of curriculum developers such as Tim Oates and possibly also Gilbert Jessup (see later), but was either unable or unwilling to say who - other than 'the QCA' - had written the functional skills specifications for English. She did not know that NATFHE and the AUT had merged, but in any case does not belong to a union, and was clearly unhappy with the suggestion that unions might have a view on functional skills.

This conversation reveals a lot about the pedigree of functional skills and about the impulses and assumptions behind it. In particular, it suggests that what is at stake is whether the basic skills lobby, which is not to be confused with working teachers of basic skills, will use functional skills to gain control of general education within 14-19 diplomas, or whether practitioners can, by taking the right sort of action, secure a better outcome. This article describes steps which such action is likely to entail.

2. Roots of functional skills in FE

First, we must strip functional skills of its appearance of being natural - and hence inevitable - and instead reveal its history in the decisions, actions and omissions of specific persons and groups. One way of reading that history is as follows.

Functional skills can be seen as the latest phase in the development of the basic skills movement, which in turn is the most recent in a series of struggles about education which goes back to the emergence

of large scale industry around 1800. From then till now, other classes have regularly intervened in the attempts of working class adults - including young adults - to obtain education. These interventions include: from the 1820s to the 1840s, the activity of the Benthamite 'philosophic radicals'; in the second half of the 1800s, the university extension movement; and in the first half of the 1900s, the so-called Workers' Educational Association and its offshoots. Basic skills - including functional skills - is the main form taken by such interference from about 1970 till now.

As far as 16-19 year olds in FE are concerned, the basic skills movement was triggered by a situation which came to a head in the Inner London Education Authority's FE service in the early 1970s. In 1970 this service contained two broad types of college: technical colleges of roughly the same type as existed elsewhere in the UK (some of which, and some parts of which, were on the way to HE status), and 'FE' colleges, some of them traditional 'day' colleges (as opposed to 'night schools') and some of them purpose built during the 1960s. The core function of these 'FE' colleges was to provide a form of general education for people between 15 and 18. Traditionally they had some students who were full-time, including people preparing to sit or resit GCEs, and others placed at lower levels. Again traditionally, they also offered day release provision for people whose jobs, like those of post office messengers, did not require the acquisition of technical skill. In these colleges, then, 'general education' meant the teaching of subjects like English or Geography either at GCE, CSE or lower levels, and it was a central aspect of what such institutions did. However, from the mid 1960s, a new factor entered this situation.

In the technical colleges, where the overall ethos could be close to that of an industrial workplace, general education took the form of Liberal or General Studies - the contrasting, non-assessed hour or so of broadening or uplifting material that apprentices were usually required to do along with their trade-related studies and which also played a role in higher level courses. This was taught by people from various backgrounds - but not mainly by people who had been school teachers.

However, from the mid 1960s 'FE' colleges began to include some low level technical courses. This

happened because the 1964 Industrial Training Act extended apprenticeships - and with them college release - to a larger number of young people than hitherto. Thus the number of part-time day students in FE rose from 613,000 in 1963 to 981,000 in 1969-70. Outside ILEA this just meant that technical colleges expanded. But in ILEA 'FE' colleges it meant that staff who had mostly been trained as school teachers and whose main job was to teach a version of school subjects could now be required to spend some of their time teaching Liberal/General Studies to students who had been released from employment to follow the early stages of a technical programme, for example trainee telecommunication technicians. Teachers required to do this thereby became aware of the kind of work done by Liberal/General Studies specialists in technical colleges. Some of them felt uncomfortable with this work because of its open-ended nature, which stemmed from the fact that it was not formally assessed. They also - rightly - saw how their involvement in such work could limit - or even damage - their career prospects.

Moreover, as well as drawing into colleges a greater number of technical students than before, the 1964 Act also meant that classes of apprentices included people with lower school attainments and/or a less deferential attitude than had hitherto been the case. As well as open-endedness, then, taking a Liberal/General Studies class in an 'FE' college now involved having to cope with, on the part of some students, a heightened resistance to any approach reminiscent of school.

During 1969, a group of ILEA teachers came forward with a teaching and learning method aimed at overcoming this problem. This method centred on communication 'workshops' - classrooms permanently organised in such a way that each student could work individually on the development of his/her ability to read, write, listen and speak, using worksheets from a resource bank. Whereas the teacher had previously been obliged to deal with students as a group, he/she could now circulate from one individual to another. And whereas a teacher had previously been obliged to choose between a didactic approach and one centred on whole group discussion, he or she now had another option.

If this method had been used in conjunction with discussion by teachers committed to treating students as adults, its introduction would have been a step forward. But, because a section of managers linked it almost at once with 'Communication Skills', the reverse became the case. Although the phrase 'communication skills' has a longer history, in the present context it was shorthand for a policy of acting as if students were 'difficult' because they could not read and write properly.

This view was false. First, it located the problem in the student regarded purely as an individual. Secondly, it sought to divide and rule the students, rather than winning their consent by fostering solidarity,

levelling up capacity within and between individuals, or entering into dialogue with them as members of a group. Thirdly, although many such students did have difficulties with reading and writing, that was not the reason why they were sceptical about vocational course elements. Fourthly, in any case, an approach focused exclusively on 'correct' communication - in contrast, for example, to one based on broader conceptual enrichment - could not engage effectively with these difficulties.

From 1973, mergers took place across the ILEA FE service, most of which involved bringing together a technical college and an FE college in each locality. It is likely that one force at play in these mergers was an impulse on the part of managers and more senior lecturers in some areas of the technical colleges to shed their lower level work as part of the process of achieving HE status, and that another was a drive by managers in 'FE' colleges to improve their own position by picking up this work.

The document which proposed these mergers, the Briault report, included an appendix (no. 2) on 'general (non vocational) education'. This appendix was primarily about general education in the 'FE' college sense, not Liberal/General Studies with industrial release students. However, it allowed a link to be made between the two areas, because some of the general education lecturers in the FE colleges saw that it could be read as authorising them to colonise the Liberal/General studies area in the technical colleges with the communication workshop approach, thereby giving themselves on the one hand a weapon against what they saw as difficult craft students, of whom there were likely to be many more in those colleges, and on the other a career path which would not otherwise have been open to them. (We shall see that Liberal/General Studies was a soft target.)

Putting himself at the head of this expanding 'Appendix 2' area, an ILEA staff inspector, Eric Bourne, took advantage of this impulse. In a period of two or three years in the mid 1970s he built up a group of people with an almost religious loyalty to himself, to Communication Skills and to the concept of 'communicative competence'. He did this by making selected individuals into advisory teachers, and giving a wider group blocks of time away from the classroom for staff and curriculum development (and therefore also for bringing themselves to the attention of managers in other colleges who could promote them) at a teachers' centre which he controlled. To be accepted into Bourne's group you had to denounce Liberal/General Studies.

Bourne's ambitions coincided with those of the City and Guilds of London Institute examining body's general education department, which grew as unemployment began to squeeze the market for trade-related qualifications. He negotiated CGLI-certificated Communication Skills qualifications (initially numbered 772, later 361) at two levels, and his adherents began to replace Liberal/General studies with these in the

colleges for which Bourne was an inspector. At the same time, CGLI started to promote these 'products' across the rest of London. Towards the end of the 1970s, the regional FE awarding bodies such as NWRAC, EMFEC, the Welsh Joint etc agreed that CGLI could market its courses in their jurisdictions, accelerating the national take-up of 772. Of course, few of the Liberal/General Studies teachers thus forced to fit in with 'communication skills' received the benefits on offer to Bourne's followers in the ILEA.

These developments took place against a background of broader social change. One such change was the upsurge of self assertion by working class young people that began in the second half of the 1950s. Bourne's version of basic skills capitalised on the fact that some adults, including some teachers and lecturers, felt threatened by this. Another such change was the process which began with the public sector cuts in 1976 and which, by the end of the NUM strike in 1985, had become effectively irreversible - that is, the expulsion of human labour from industry, the destruction of some industries altogether, the restructuring of others by technological change, the export of industrial capital to low wage economies overseas, the expulsion of young workers from the mainstream, unionised labour market, the cutback in apprenticeships which went far beyond merely reversing the 1960s expansion, and the restructuring of those which remained so as both to shorten them and to disengage them from a time-served basis and union control; above all, the use of unemployment to break workers' self-organisation. Against this background it suited a wide range of 'stakeholders' that working class young people should be classed as lacking basic skills. Through such 'training' schemes as TOPs and YOPs under Callaghan and YTS under Thatcher, the influence of the basic skills lobby spread from FE to permeate the benefits system.

In the aftermath of these changes, the Review of Vocational Qualifications (1987) adopted a curricular model based on 'learning outcomes', put forward by the Manpower Services Commission functionary Gilbert Jessup, himself a former student of the fraudulent ILEA-based psychologist and eugenicist Cyril Burt. This included a core of 'generic competence' that would be common across 'occupational training families'. Although this idea had its progressive side (1), by the time General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) emerged in the early 1990s the 'core' had been narrowed down, first to the six 'skills' that we know today as Key Skills (then called Core Skills), and soon afterwards to the three judged worthy to be 'mandatory' (Communication, Application of Number and IT). In short, 'generic competence' had been reduced to basic skills. Then in the second half of the 1990s, the government advisor Ron (now Lord) Dearing decreed that these 'skills' should be renamed Key Skills and made freestanding from students' main programmes, thereby recapitulating Bourne's drive to replace Liberal/General Studies with the freestanding

772 qualification, and foreshadowing the recent decision to disintegrate functional skills from GCSEs.

3. Why practitioners need to find a voice

Practitioners who want to create something better than functional skills will sooner or later have to organise themselves into a body through which they can speak for themselves with a loud enough voice. This too requires that we learn from the history of Communication Skills. The leaders of the body that should have resisted this from the outset, namely the Association for Liberal Education - which claimed to speak on behalf of Liberal/General Studies teachers - in fact colluded with the destruction of the very areas which they were called upon to defend. How could this happen? The answer lies in the history of the WEA.

Despite its name, the WEA was in reality built on behalf of the capitalist class by the traditional universities and the state, starting in the early 1900s, with the aim of countering the growth of working class collective self education, first within Marxist groups, and then via the Labour Colleges. Liberal education, in the sense which concerns us here, was in essence constructed by the ruling class during and immediately after World War 2, using as its agents a group of people connected with the WEA. Prominent members of this group included the Penguin Books director W.E. Williams and the teacher education academic Boris Ford, who between them were largely responsible for shaping the Army Education Service from early in the war, and for ensuring that the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC) was excluded from influence over it. After the war, Williams and Ford were central to the policy making which led in 1957 to the Education Department Circular 323 on liberal education in technical colleges. The ALE, founded in 1961 by a group around the Cambridge extra-mural tutor Vivian Ramsbottom, based itself on this circular and the assumption behind it. This assumption was, in essence, that the exploitation of labour by capitalist industry could go on at higher and higher levels of intensity so long as a section of the workers were given access to bourgeois culture, which in turn meant that those who led the ALE during the crucial period - in effect, the 1970s - stopped supporting the movement against Communication Skills which grew amongst Liberal/General Studies practitioners once this gravitated towards a more critical perspective.

The WEA's influence also undermined resistance to Communication Skills from another direction, via the WEA's collaboration with the TUC leadership in the Workers Educational TUC (WETUC), set up in the 1920s to counter the influence of the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC). WETUC made it easier for union bureaucrats to clamp down on educational initiatives amongst rank and file members by creating a division of labour which allowed them to say that education must be dealt with through WETUC. This in

turn helped camouflage their real motive for opposing such initiatives, namely that the development of a layer of educated activists would jeopardise their own power. Secondly, in 1964 - in the very year when the extension of apprenticeships became government policy - the TUC took over and suppressed the NCLC - that is, the genuinely working class organisation that had been resisting the WEA for 50 years. It is true both that NCLC provision had long before this lost the revolutionary character it possessed up to the 1920s, and that its provision had never been aimed at young people. Nevertheless the TUC's move helped to bring about a situation in which there was, when the Communication Skills lobby arose around 1970, no currently functioning model of post-compulsory general education under working class control, and therefore less scope than there might otherwise have been to create beyond the ranks of Liberal/General Studies lecturers themselves a movement against that lobby.

This history suggests, then, that those who want to overcome functional skills must reconnect themselves (of course critically) with the lost tradition of independent working class self-education, and make this connection a central strand in our own self-organisation.

4. Within mainstream provision

In doing so, however, we will have to organise ourselves within - rather than alongside - mainstream provision, including within functional skills itself. There are two aspects to this. First, it is only at the point of educational production that basic skills can be superseded, and hence only those who produce it who can bring this about. Secondly, events over the last 40 years have shown that level 2 and 3 courses in FE offer a base from which practitioners can extend valid forms of general education across the lower levels of the sector.

The basic skills movement has failed repeatedly to seize hold of general education in level 2 and 3 courses. For example, in mid 1970s Inner London Bourne and his followers tried to impose their own version of General and Communication Studies on Technician Education Council (TEC) provision, and were prevented from doing so by a spontaneous movement of G&CS lecturers headed by Paul Connett and Drew Burns, after which Outer London colleges too rejected Bourne's submission. Another example is the failure of the discussion elements of core skills (communication) in relation to GNVQs. Thirdly, the attempt, following Dearing's intervention, to impose Key Skills as a freestanding additional requirement on AS- and A2 level students in Curriculum 2000 collapsed within a few weeks.

These failures show that basic skills can thrive only where it attaches itself to provision that has been marked off by official diktat as 'low level'. As soon as the possibility of students progressing eventually to HE comes into the equation, the claim that 'communi-

cative competence' is the key to 'survival' loses its power. In the end this is because when the basic skills model comes up against students who are confident enough to resist its attempts to treat them as less than fully human, as people with no culture, it has to back off.

This implies that teachers and lecturers who want to overcome the dominance of basic skills should organise themselves within 14-19 diplomas, seeking to develop there forms of practice which embrace functional skills within a model centred on holistic generic competence.

5. Ideology

We cannot develop such a model if we do not tackle the ideology that underpins basic - including functional - skills. The proponents of Communication Skills claimed that they were fostering students' 'communicative competence', a concept borrowed by the UK sociologist Basil Bernstein from the US anthropologist Dell Hymes. Bernstein founded his conceptions on the same experience that was later to be part of the impulse behind Communication Skills - that is, he taught English to post office messengers at the then City Day College between 1954 and 1960. Communication Skills obtained respectability at the level of teacher education courses and the like on the basis of a distorted version of Bernstein's ideas which remains to this day part of the 'commonsense' of many who control FE curricula. So until those who are critical of basic skills engage with what he really said - including those aspects of what he said which render it vulnerable to such distortion - there is no chance of establishing valid practice. This is likely to entail subsuming Bernstein's conceptions within a more powerful and valid model of our own, probably by building on his debts to the Russian linguistic psychologists Lev Vygotsky and A.L. Luria.

6. Union dimension

To work for something better than functional skills is necessarily to try also to reverse the deprofessionalisation of lecturers' working lives. The advance of the basic skills movement has always depended on a denial of the expertise - and a devaluing even just of the ordinary experience - of lecturers. At first sight this claim may be surprising. What practitioner in Key Skills, for example, has not been present at some staff development function where a manager has called on everyone to pool their teaching resources, put their best lessons on the VLE etc? But in reality this is the antithesis of the collective development by practitioners of teaching and learning strategies and hence of the capacity to produce and use materials, which literally cannot be conducted in isolation from discussion about what general education is for. The basic skills movement, as explained earlier, was founded on the rubbishing by its proponents of what Liberal/General Studies lecturers did,

and it has continued like that ever since, trying constantly to force general education into the same narrow-minded and mechanistic model, and striving to marginalise the best ideas of everyone involved. Of course, lecturers have had to live with the hegemony of basic skills - to make it work, to persuade students to go along with its nitpicking demands and to smuggle past its absurd restrictions what valid material they can. Equally, at any time during this period, managers could in principle have taken another direction altogether. At the outset, for example, they could -as a small minority did - have encouraged Liberal/General Studies lecturers to level up the weaker aspects of their practice to the strongest and thereby to develop for themselves a viable way forward. Later on it was always possible for them to have started taking note of what lecturers really thought, and of what would really be worth doing with students. But few have been willing to take the risks involved.

As indicated earlier, the hegemony of basic skills rests at a more fundamental level on the destruction of working class self organisation, which in turn was made possible to a large extent by the dissolution of a layer of organised craftspersons in mechanical engineering. The decision taken by dominant sections of the capitalist class in the 1970s to break up this section of workers was of course accompanied by a decision not to reproduce it, which in turn cut out the core of what most colleges did - ie use former craftspersons to teach engineering apprentices. This then had the further result that the pay and conditions of all lecturers could be driven down, because it was no longer necessary to hold them at a level which would draw these craftspersons out of industry. Key Skills lecturers and the like have become used to avoiding risky teaching strategies, to being less and less prepared to discuss what they do in an open-ended way. The direct cause of this self-censorship is the hegemony of basic skills over curricular policy, but that hegemony persists only because the breaking of the link between FE and organised labour has made people with mortgages or children at university reluctant to step out of line in case they should be targeted for redundancy.

Finally, therefore, practitioners who oppose functional skills will not succeed unless they connect this with a drive to build on the union side a rank and file movement capable of organising effectively against bullying and bureaucratisation, against excessive class contact and class sizes, against officially imposed continuing professional development and for time in which basic grade lecturers can, in dialogue with students and vocational staff, develop teaching and learning strategies cooperatively for themselves.

(1) For progressive aspects of Jessup's thought, please see: Colin Waugh, 'Review: the waning of curricular Thatcherism?', *General Educator* 12, September/October 1991, pp19-23. For a copy of this, email post16educator@runbox.com.

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