

Policy Rifts in UK Further and Higher Education

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Abstract

The future of further education is under challenge in the United Kingdom. The government appears to see further education solely in terms of supporting the economy through the provision of an improved skills base. An alternative approach would be to bring coherence into the governance and management of further and higher education to create a tertiary education system. Implicit in adopting such an approach would be some decentralization of policy to regions, away from central government.

Further education colleges (FECs) grew up under local education authorities (LEAs), and were the seedbed for the establishment of polytechnics in 1967, but in 1993 they were incorporated, removed from LEA control, and given independent status. Further education (FE) is now funded in England through a Further Education and Skills Agency located under the Department for Education (DfE). Universities have been historically autonomous, but are now controlled by the Office for Students, also answerable to the DfE. In 1992, the governance and management of higher education (HE) was decentralized and later devolved to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and, residually, to England; FE followed HE.

Since 1993, FECs' progress has substantially depended on their recruitment market: They offer courses for 16 year olds for GCSE A-Level, for technological and professional courses, and for a range of bachelor of technology (BTec) intermediate courses; increasingly, they have become involved in access programs to HE and teaching for two-year foundation degrees in collaboration with universities. In effect, therefore, there have been two markets in operation, one in further education and the other in higher education, the latter formidably sharpened by the introduction, in 2012, of full cost tuition fees in place of direct government funding.

In 1993, when the sector was in effect created, there were around 450 FECs in the United Kingdom, but this figure has been greatly reduced through mergers in the intervening years to 294 in 2019, distributed as follows: England 248, Scotland 26, Wales 14, and Northern Ireland six. Meantime, the number of universities, mostly through the upgrading of former colleges of higher education, has grown so that the number of public universities now stands at 163. Over this period, FE in all four nations has been seen as the poor relation of postsecondary education, underfunded and attracting little political interest. Universities, on the other hand, sustained by increases in funding for research and the introduction of high levels of tuition fees (except in Scotland), have been comparatively well funded and have enjoyed (though that might not be the best description) maximum political attention. In 2020, Wales declared its intention to move to a tertiary education system, merging FE and HE policy considerations, as being more suited to its economic and geophysical circumstances. In 2021, Scotland, where 20 percent of HE has traditionally been carried out in FE, embarked on a consultation exercise with a view to following a similar path.

Current Developments in England

In 2019, the government published *The Post-18 Education Review* (the Augar Review), which in addition to recommending reductions in HE tuition fees, thus potentially destabilizing universities' finances, also recommended a much more positive role for FE, together with a much needed injection of capital funding for infrastructure. The government has yet to respond to the HE parts of the *Review* but has published two documents, a White Paper *Skills for jobs: Lifelong learning for opportunity and growth* (DfE, 2021) and a Policy Paper *Build back better: Our plan for growth* (HM Treasury, 2021), which aim to define its industrial strategy; both bear heavily on its view of the future of FE. The former states that the core mission of further education is to "increase productivity, support growth industries and give individuals opportunities to progress their careers" and that it aims to provide "a seamless and strong relationship between further education and industry"—not, it may be noted, with universities. Employers are "to have a central role in designing qualifications and training." The second document identifies the skills base as one of "the three pillars" of the investment required to realize the

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plan, in which cities “will be the engines of growth” and innovation. The second pillar will “support and incentivise the development of creative ideas and technologies that will shape the United Kingdom’s future high growth, sustainable and secure economy,” thus reinforcing the gap between FE, responsible for the skills base, and HE, responsible for innovation and, presumably, creative ideas.

Subsequently, the DfE has revealed its wishes to introduce a new FE qualification, the T-level (T stands for Technical Qualifications-Level), to parallel GCSE A-level, and to streamline vocational courses, with the aim of eliminating “second rate qualifications.” This is being strongly opposed by college heads and has been described as “vandalism” by a former secretary of state. It is strongly implied that restraints will be imposed on HE numbers, probably in nonvocational disciplines, to enable financial support to be given to an expansion of FE.

Essentially, these reforms suggest first, that the future role of FE will simply be as a technological feeder for high tech industry and second, that as a sector it will continue to be operated separately from HE with only minimal policy coordination with HE. This implies a narrowing of FE functions, which, it has been estimated, would exclude up to 20 percent of students who would not be able to meet the T-level entry requirements in English and maths and would severely reduce the range of professional qualifications that colleges currently offer. It would also significantly deemphasize the important role that is undertaken by colleges in supporting widening participation in HE by reaching out into areas of social and economic decline.

An Alternative Policy—The Development of Tertiary Approaches

The most significant losses from these new policies are the lack of policy coherence between the two sides of postsecondary education and the failure to recognize the undoubted effectiveness with which colleges work closely with their communities. These point to the need to unify the governance and management of the two sectors and move toward a tertiary education system. Recent research by Shattock and Hunt estimates that on the basis of a 45 percent response rate from FECs, 89 percent had joint arrangements or direct partnerships with universities in the areas of student upward progression, franchising arrangements, validation agreements, and apprenticeship degree programs. Moreover, many universities like Lincoln or Plymouth have partnerships with networks of colleges located in areas of economic and social deprivation, which provide critical routes into further and higher education.

In a situation where it is claimed that the United Kingdom suffers from greater economic inequality between regions than anywhere else in Europe and while, according to government statistics, 260 of 317 local authority districts in England contain one of the 20 percent most deprived areas in the country, the role of FE in collaboration with HE makes an essential contribution to a national “levelling up” agenda. But to achieve this, it will not be enough to eliminate policy silos in central government. Moving decision-making much closer to the regions where local knowledge can play a larger part will be much more effective. ▲

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