

FE Colleges in a New Culture of Adult and Lifelong Learning

IFLL Sector Paper 7



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NIACE has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training, particularly for those who do not have easy access because of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient financial resources.

You can find NIACE online at www.niace.org.uk

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Foreword

This is the seventh of the Sector Papers to be published from the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (IFLL). The Sector Papers will discuss the implications of lifelong learning for each of the sectors involved in providing learning opportunities: early childhood, schools, family learning, further education, higher education, private training providers, voluntary and community organisations, local authorities, learning cities, cultural organisations, and local learning ecologies. The goal here is to encourage innovative thinking on how these parts do or do not fit together, as part of a systemic approach to lifelong learning.

The Inquiry was established in September 2007 and will produce its main report in September 2009. It is sponsored by the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE), with an independent Board of Commissioners under the chairmanship of Sir David Watson. Full details of the Inquiry can be found at www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry.

The overall goal of the Inquiry is to offer **an authoritative and coherent strategic framework for lifelong learning in the UK**. This will involve:

- articulating a broad rationale for public and private investment in lifelong learning;
- a re-appraisal of the social and cultural value attached to it by policy-makers and the public;
- developing new perspectives on policy and practice.

IFLL: supplementary papers

The Sector Papers are complemented by several other strands of IFLL work:

- *Thematic Papers*. These relate nine broad themes, such as demography, technology or migration, to lifelong learning. Each one reviews evidence submitted to the Inquiry, and then draws together strands from the debate into a synthesis of the issues, with key messages.
- *Context Papers*. These will provide a broad overall picture of expenditure on all forms of lifelong learning: by government, across all departments; by employers, public and private; by the third sector; and by individuals and households. The goal is to provide a benchmark for mapping future trends.
- *Public Value Papers*. These will look, from different angles and using a variety of techniques, at the 'social productivity' of lifelong learning, i.e. what effects it has on areas such as health, civic activity or crime. The goal is both to provide evidence on these effects, and to stimulate a broader debate on how such effects can be measured and analysed.

- *Learning Infrastructures*. Unlike the others, this strand consists not of a series of papers but a set of scenarios, designed to promote debate and imagination on what the infrastructure for learning might look like in the future. This challenges us to integrate the physical environments of learning, the virtual environments or learning technologies, and people's competences and behaviour.

Published papers are available from the IFLL website:

www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk



Professor Tom Schuller
Director, IFLL



Sir David Watson
Chair, IFLL Commissioners

Executive summary

This paper explores how further education (FE) colleges could make the best contribution to a renewed system and culture of adult and lifelong learning in the future. The imagined time is 15–20 years from 2009.

The paper draws on FE colleges, past and present, to propose their future contribution. It argues that FE colleges have learned since their incorporation in 1993 to work with more, and more diverse, adult learners than ever before, although their adult work is currently hindered by narrowly cast policies and inequitable funding regimes for adult learning. For the future, a broader approach to colleges' functions needs to be developed – one which equally values the knowledge and skills involved in learning for work, self-development, family and life as a citizen. Colleges, which have been encouraged to be adult organisations by enabling policies in recent decades, have proved their ability to improve, diversify and be vibrant, self-confident centres, fit for twenty-first-century adult and lifelong learning. In a positive vision for the future, they will have a social and economic function and gain greater independence as educators, social partners and social entrepreneurs. They will be valued for their expert professionalism, curriculum innovation, business skills and breadth of capability. Demographic and economic trends suggest that in any case they will increasingly become adult organisations.

By 2025, colleges should be the backbone of an inclusive lifelong learning system and culture, working in close co-operation with a range of local and national partners. Their role will be as much about enabling people to be active and knowledgeable citizens in an uncertain world as it will be about developing adults' vocational skills, capabilities and employability. In adult learning, colleges are the giants who have learned to dance, but they have not yet written the music or the choreography. The success of a new adult and lifelong learning culture in the future will depend on the extent of their powers to create, produce and direct new and better learning, as much as it will depend on performing and delivering it.

Key propositions

Proposed way forward

This paper makes a number of propositions which have arisen during this exploratory project, the outlines of which are described below. Ideas expressed here could help to transform the contribution of further education (FE) sector colleges in a newly invigorated system and culture of adult and lifelong learning, which the IFLL considers to be essential for the UK's social and economic well-being. The reader is asked to imagine how FE colleges would best work, 15–20 years hence, within a different policy context, in a rapidly changing world with an adult population that is increasing and growing old.

Colleges should form the 'institutional backbone' of the lifelong learning system, with a renewed remit for adult learning

The number of potential adult learners will rise dramatically, and the relative number of young people will decrease over the coming years.¹ The concept of 'an affordable college education for all', universally understood in the USA, should become a key concept for policy in the UK, supporting adults' social and economic aspirations. Colleges can offer the necessary blend of vocational, academic and general education, and have the size and capability to perform a dual role of leadership and support. Learning should be available at all levels at colleges in every locality for everyone from 16 until the 'fourth age', with continuing opportunities for 14- to 16-year-olds to gain vocational knowledge and skills at college, supported by literacy, numeracy, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and ICT, together with a broad general education. As well as their state-funded role, colleges will lead the development of new forms of learning – funded independently by external sources, learners and colleges – putting their vocational expertise to work in their role as social entrepreneurs and providers of learning to business.

Colleges' values and missions should be inclusive and pluralistic, offering a comprehensive and diverse curriculum for a diverse adult population

Complex and diverse missions are the only realistic approach to colleges' roles, given the needs and demands of individuals, families, communities and the range of employers and their staff which they serve. Colleges' employment-facing work goes hand in hand with working for social inclusion and catering for those with the greatest learning needs at pre-entry and entry level, those with 'spiky profiles', and those who already have achieved educationally but need or want to change direction. Colleges

¹ McNair (2008).

have long experience in providing post-16 education for working class people and disadvantaged groups, and this should be enabled to grow in the interests of social justice, active citizenship and equality, as well as economic well-being. Colleges should be the vehicle for adult and lifelong learning in a major new drive to break systemic inequalities and intergenerational cycles of deprivation.² Education policy should embrace adults of all ages. Current assumptions about 'working age', exemplified by 65 being the age at which policy-makers and statisticians lose interest in adults, should no longer inform policy on vocational education, foundation or work-related skills: every adult matters.

Colleges should be first and foremost local organisations, playing a leading role in a coherent networked system with a single point of entry for learners

Colleges should work in partnership and co-operation with others – including local authorities, employers, training providers, universities and the voluntary sector – to create and sustain a thriving local ecology of lifelong learning. They should play a lead role in determining local learning strategies; this could include the co-creation of focused IT-enabled networks with a shared portal to create a single local point of access in a locality, ensuring a connected and coherent response to learners' and employers' enquiries, demands and needs, and enabling tracking and support for learners' trajectories.³ Demographic changes will mean more adults who need local learning at all levels, including higher education, so the relationship and formal arrangements between local colleges and universities must be much clearer to enable smooth transitions for learners.

Colleges should take the lead in rethinking, developing and modelling adult pedagogies and models of learning provision which are enhanced by new technologies and suit the future patterns of adults' lives, work and social commitments in the twenty-first century

Colleges and their partners should lead the creation of innovative new approaches to adult and lifelong learning fit for fast-changing twenty-first-century patterns of life and work. Research shows that for learners to persist in learning, a range of supports are needed to make sure they can dip in and out of learning rather than be forced to drop out.⁴ These supports include help for learners who cannot attend but can continue to learn, and funding mechanisms that allow flexibility beyond attendance-based counting systems. Colleges and other providers of learning still largely use long-standing but (on their own) outmoded classroom-based learning almost exclusively. Meanwhile, adults who can afford it are increasingly turning to IT-enhanced, flexible, informal ways of learning that suit their purposes, often in the private sector. Others learn informally,

² Parsons and Bynner (2007); de Coulon et al. (2008).

³ CBI (2009).

⁴ Carpentieri (2008).

on the job, at work but get little recognition for their learning. Those who can't afford to pay are missing out on new learner-centred patterns of adult learning which are developing in the private sector.

Colleges, especially at the front line, are already innovating and developing products and processes that anticipate and act on the ways in which adults are engaging in learning outside state-supported education systems.⁵ Flexible models of teaching, learning, mentoring and support that fit with learners' lives at work, at home and in families and communities, enabled and enhanced by technology, could be developed in consultation with learners, higher education (HE) institutions, voluntary organisations and employers. The new flexible learning models would complement or be a routine alternative to the current assumption, circumvented by some innovators, that only classroom- or workshop- and attendance-based models can trigger funding for college programmes. The vision of a flexible model of learning, with colleges at its core, would see adults learning and progressing across levels to suit their learning backgrounds and purposes, wherever it suits them: in colleges, online, in the workplace or in HE institutions, or a combination of these.⁶

Colleges should offer a core citizens' curriculum

Colleges should offer a core citizens' curriculum, available to all adult learners, which would be developed as an enabling national framework, reworked and redefined at local level to suit circumstances and needs. Its core purpose would be to create a more inclusive society, strengthening people's sense of agency and belonging in a democratic society, developing the contribution that adults make as citizens. Drawing on Fryer's work on citizenship and belonging for the IFLL and a number of his key principles,⁷ the citizens' curriculum would develop knowledge and understanding of the challenges facing society, including: education about climate change and sustainability; sustaining good mental and physical health in an ageing society; democratic systems and participation; equality and diversity; learning to cope with uncertainty; basic citizenship-related law, rights and social justice, and the responsibilities of citizenship; faith and religion; changing patterns of family, including support for parenting, eldercare, childcare and grand-parenting; financial literacy and economic well-being; and personal and career development, using the universal adult careers advice. The core citizens' curriculum would: encourage adults to develop and practise their literacy and numeracy and see it as a right rather than a personal deficit; develop the voice of relatively voiceless groups in the community; and develop critical thinking and problem solving, as well as the attitudes and skills of working and living with others, developing confidence, managing feelings and communication.

⁵ Hinman and Fletcher (2008).

⁶ King (2008).

⁷ Fryer (2008).

Vocational education, including work-based training and professional development from Level 1 to postgraduate, should remain central to colleges' mission

Colleges should remain the mainstay and leading sector for vocational education in a renewed drive to create a valued and coherent vocational education system, returning to a knowledge-based approach to vocational capability. Vocational education should be aligned with education for the professions, so that it is not seen as the poor relation in the persistent academic–vocational divide. As Lorna Unwin has argued, all occupations have a body of knowledge which is social and historical as well as occupational. Many adults choose to train and retrain for specific work and career reasons. Colleges should be able to offer a fully rounded vocational education as well as academic learning, with options open to adult learners, rather than a narrow knowledge-poor approach to skills and training. Over the last 20 years, vocational education has narrowed, squeezing out knowledge and a broader education as being integral to vocational qualifications and modes of assessment. In the future, with an ageing workforce and economic uncertainty, depth, flexibility and breadth in accommodating adult learners' choices will be critical. Within vocational education, a citizens' curriculum would offer an integrated (not bolt-on) twenty-first-century rendering of general and liberal studies, which was introduced into further education colleges in the 1950s to encourage exactly the capabilities that we will need in the future – that is 'habits of reflection, independent study and free inquiry' because 'we cannot afford either to fall behind in technical accomplishments or to neglect spiritual and human values'.⁸

Proposed steps

The following steps should be taken to ensure that colleges can develop in the six key ways described above:

- **Colleges should have a significantly greater degree of autonomy** over all key areas of strategy and operations, with new models of governance and lines of accountability that ensure 'adequacy and sufficiency' for their constituencies and range of users. Greater autonomy for colleges should include autonomy regarding funding (see below).
- **Funding: the lion's share of college funding (up to 80 per cent) should be flexible** to enable colleges to take decisions at local level to respond to the needs and demands of adult learners – young people, employers, employees, unemployed people and other stakeholders – with a much smaller element of funding than is now the case earmarked to meet national targets. There should be an end to the inflexible, divisive and, as currently planned, dual regimes for funding which separate adults from young adults (i.e. those aged 16–19) and prevent colleges from responding appropriately to need and demand, whether for 14–19 or post-

⁸ Unwin (2009).

19 learning. Funding should meet demand from learners regardless of their age. Greater flexibility will be aided by colleges' roles as social and work-related learning entrepreneurs, as colleges use their knowledge and capability to increase learning opportunities and resources for communities and employers.

- **Compliance requirements should be reduced, with far fewer brokerage systems and intermediary agencies.** This would include abolishing public funding for brokerage systems such as the Train to Gain system, and a reduction in the number and authorising powers of intermediary bodies such as Sector Skills Councils and quality improvement bodies, encouraging better, faster responsiveness to local demand, and more resources rerouted to teachers and all those directly serving adult learners' needs. Funding for learning from the public purse should go directly to those providing learning, subject to appropriate but not heavily bureaucratic checks and balances and new forms of accountability and relationships with local partners, including local authorities.
- **Colleges should have more powers to design and award qualifications and to implement a unit-based and credit-based curriculum** within a nationally recognised system to ensure transferability and portability of learning outcomes. The technical work has long been accomplished. Policy is supportive. The issue is implementation. What is lacking is urgency in the policy impetus and strategic decision-taking by universities, colleges and schools together to make a unitised system to support learning and transitions a reality for learners.
- **The professionalism and capability of FE staff must be recognised, rewarded and trusted.** FE teaching and learning support professionals have endured low status and low pay compared with that in schools and universities. In the future, if properly skilled and qualified craftspeople, technicians and professionals are to be the norm in a competitive economy, FE teachers must be held in high regard, respected and adequately rewarded as a distinct branch of the teaching profession. FE teachers' blend of craft, technician, business, academic and teaching skills means they have a multi-dimensional professional profile. Until recently, teaching qualifications based on pedagogy, particularly subject-specific pedagogy, were lacking. This has been addressed by government. Higher standing for FE teachers should be a natural consequence of the Government's standards agenda. Since 1997, this agenda has helped to raise the quality of teaching, learning and students' achievement. It has developed the professionalisation of teachers in FE, making teaching qualifications mandatory over time and enabling the growth of a culture of continuous professional development. Governance changes have also strengthened institutional and professional authority, through measures such as the providers' licence to practice, moves towards self-regulation, and the establishment of the Institute for Learning. In association with universities, colleges should have an extended remit for teacher education and qualifications and professional development. Alongside the enhanced professionalism and standing of FE should go the responsibility for, and the wider powers to assess, students' course work,

examinations and other aspects of assessment regimes contributing to the award of qualifications.

- **Going to college: colleges and universities should become progression partners in learning federations in localities and regions.** FE colleges, as much as universities, should be the focus of a drive to make going to college the natural expectation of everybody over school age – at whatever point in their lives suits them. Current organisational divisions between levels of provision, especially between HE and FE, should give way to local, regional and subject-based alliances for access, transition and progression.⁹ As community colleges adapt to the UK environment, FE colleges should become the locally flowering branches of universities, able to hybridise both HE and FE in the interests of adult learners. In addition, colleges should have increased powers to award Foundation Degrees and other sub-degree qualifications. Colleges could offer student support services and local access to HE students, and, increasingly, degrees in subjects for which a college has the relevant capability or scholarship. Two-plus-two arrangements could become one route for students in their college education: a simplified, unitised and credit-based system in which adult learners work towards qualifications at all levels would support a successful new model of partnership between FE and HE for learning. Such a settlement between FE and HE should include all universities unless they are purely postgraduate institutions, which is a possibility in the future for a small number.
- **Adult learners in FE and other adult learning organisations, whether they are part-time or full time, must have access to the same fee regimes and financial support as learners in universities.** Support should include access to entitlements – as vouchers, learning accounts or ‘learning budgets’¹⁰ – to support the learning that adults want or need to undertake and which is discussed with adult learning advisers and consistent with public funding.

⁹ Parry (2008); Bathmaker et al. (2008).

¹⁰ O’Leary and Oakley (2008).

Colleges in a new era of adult and lifelong learning

Introduction to the IFLL FE project

Colleges make up a large section of the tapestry of adult learning organisations across all four countries of the UK. This IFLL project focuses on the future contribution of FE colleges and their roles in a new era of adult and lifelong learning. The purpose of this project is to take account of, but move beyond, the current FE system and policy. Its main focus is general FE colleges in England, but it also includes the significant number of sixth form colleges that work with adults, the designated adult colleges, residential adult colleges, and agricultural and horticultural colleges. The project recognises that 14- to 16-year-olds are, as defined by the National Youth Agency and NIACE, 'young adults' at a critical stage in their lives as potential learners or disaffected learners; they must therefore form part of an adult and lifelong learning strategy. Nevertheless, as policy arrangements for 14- to 19-year-olds and adults are currently so distinct, the project has focused more on learners over 19, mindful of the fluidity and messiness of ages and stages in real life, the overlaps in policy, and practices in colleges.

This paper sets out possible ways forward and scenarios for colleges in a new framework for lifelong learning. The starting point is that a vibrant adult and lifelong learning culture will be essential to the future success of the country, socially and economically. The paper examines the strengths and weaknesses that colleges bring and their potential as major contributors to lifelong learning in the future. Colleges have been held back by policy constraints from fulfilling their whole potential in lifelong learning. There has also been unevenness in colleges' speed and creativity in creating adult-friendly environments, including for HE learners. This paper will explore the conditions under which colleges can help to rebuild and renew an adult learning culture fit for the future.

The project's questions

The project addressed the following questions about the best ways that colleges can optimise their contribution in the medium- to long-term future – that is, the next 15–20 years:

- What are the strengths that colleges bring to the future of lifelong learning?
- What would an FE college system with a renewed focus on lifelong learning look like?
- Scanning the horizon, what distinctive contribution could FE colleges make to adult and lifelong learning in the future?

The project progressed through desk research to seminars and discussions with sector leaders, researchers and policy-makers. Pen portraits of four colleges that offered help to the project and whose ideas were influential are included in *Appendix B*. In the course of shared explorations of the issues, bigger questions about the future became important, which also inform this paper:

- What are the purposes, roles and the best organisational forms of institutions for lifelong learning, like colleges, in an age of radically changing modes of communication, access to and provision of information, and the production of knowledge?
- Who are colleges' learners likely to be and what will they need and want to learn in an age of high skills demands, mobility of labour, longer lives, flexible working patterns and the need for flexibility, individual choice and personalised approaches to learning – all of this in the context of a democratic deficit, the effects of decades of individualism, persistent social inequality and underachievement?
- Can colleges radically change without also changing universities and schools and other providers to form new ecologies of local adult and lifelong learning?

What are FE colleges? Their history and identity

The history of FE colleges

One key to colleges' potential in the future is to contextualise them – to chart and analyse their development as part of local communities – in their economic role as vocational educators working with employers, and, from the twentieth century as part of the statutory education system. Looking at their past, particularly as adult learning organisations, can help to illuminate the future for colleges. This paper draws on the history of FE colleges and their predecessors – an outline of their development over a long period is included in Appendix A.

Some facts and figures

Every year, further education colleges educate over three million people and contribute to social inclusion:

- Eighteen per cent of learners are from ethnic minorities compared with 11 per cent of the general population.
- Over 80 per cent of ESOL learners are in colleges.
- Ninety per cent of Skills for Life qualifications were achieved through FE institutions.
- Sixty-seven per cent of those in receipt of Education Maintenance Allowances in 2006–2007 are studying at colleges.
- The number of college learners aged over 60 is 131,000.
- Official figures show that the national average of participation from 'widening participation' postcodes is 25 per cent. In comparison:
 - in general FE colleges, the average is 29 per cent;
 - in sixth form colleges, 25 per cent;
 - in schools, 19 per cent;
 - in universities, 20 per cent.
- In terms of 16–19 participation in colleges, Stanton points to evidence that shows that those with weaker GCSE scores, who are also more likely to be from disadvantaged groups, are 'less likely to participate anywhere post-16 if they are attending an 11–18 school', suggesting that switching to college is the most likely option for continuing to participate in learning as a young person and thus later as an adult.¹¹

¹¹ Stanton (2008b).

However, it should also be noted that although black and minority ethnic participation levels in FE are positive and achievement rates are rising, black and minority ethnic achievement rates still lag behind those of white students.¹² Stanton¹³ shows that FE colleges have a more comprehensive attainment profile, as non-selective organisations, but that sixth form colleges nevertheless make a strong contribution to black and minority ethnic success rates, particularly with young black learners, who are over-represented in sixth form colleges but under-represented in schools.

Colleges also have strong links with HE:

- Colleges provide 48 per cent of entrants to HE.
- More than half of foundation degree students are taught in FE, which offers 59 per cent of HNDs and 86 per cent of HNCs.
- Forty-two per cent of HE learners are part-time; a large number of these learners study in FE because they need a local institution.
- Of the part-time HE population, 77 per cent study in just 60 institutions, including the Open University, suggesting that either universities must change their widening participation strategies or that more HE will be delivered in FE colleges.
- Among part-time HE students, 83 per cent are in employment. Among full-time HE students, 66 per cent also work inside and outside term time.

Colleges contribute to the local economy:

- Colleges delivered nearly half of all vocational qualifications in 2006–2007, compared with 6 per cent awarded through employers.
- Research commissioned by the Association of Colleges (AoC) claims that every £1 spent by a college generates another £1.90 for its local area.

Colleges are viewed positively by the local community and Ofsted:

- Sixty-seven per cent of stakeholders believe that colleges have a positive impact on local communities.
- Sixty-four per cent believe FE has a major positive impact on the national economy and productivity.
- Success rates for college programmes have risen to 77 per cent.

Research from the Teaching and Learning Research Programme shows that in 2006–2007, adult learner numbers dropped significantly in FE colleges:

- Those aged 19–59 and 60-plus made up 80 per cent of FE learners in 1996–1997 and 81 per cent in 2003–2004. In 2006–2007, the figure had dropped to 62 per cent.
- In this period, numbers of under-19s grew from 20 per cent to 38 per cent of FE learners.

¹² Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning (QIA) (2008). See also Carpentieri et al. (2007).

¹³ Stanton (2008b).

Research also suggests that for some groups of adult learners, workplace learning is preferable to college-based learning. This is true of learners studied in a large-scale longitudinal Skills for Life study in which the proportion of learners in the 35–44, 45–54, and 54-plus age groups in FE colleges (circa 36 per cent) was far smaller than the proportion of learners in the workplace (over 70 per cent).¹⁴

What do FE colleges do?

Below is one attempt to define what colleges do, which may inform their potential future role in adult and lifelong learning.

Colleges are primarily local institutions for vocational and academic learning, as well as for community and personal development. Anyone over aged 16 and many over age 14 can go to college to learn.

FE colleges provide the majority of state-supported adult and lifelong learning provision and, together with sixth form colleges, are the majority provider of young people's learning from ages 16 to 18. A slight majority of learners are currently under 19, but until recently eight in ten were aged over 19.¹⁵ Nevertheless, most adult learners still learn in or through colleges.

There are colleges in every city and practically every town, as well as across all the rural areas of the UK. They vary in size: some are small specialist-designated colleges for adults, or subject-specialist colleges, but the majority by far are large, multi-site general FE colleges, some of which are bigger than universities in terms of student numbers. There are a significant number of sixth form colleges – which are about to have a distinct status – many of which run adult learning programmes.

Colleges offer a diverse range of learning programmes and qualifications, in contrast to universities and schools. Thousands of vocational qualifications sit alongside academic qualifications and a range of accredited and non-accredited adult programmes, including employer and employee training.

Colleges are best known for their long-standing lead role in vocational education, from preparatory courses, to Level 1 through to diploma, sub-degree and foundation degree level courses. The range includes certificate and diploma courses, NVQs, support for apprenticeships, and occupational staff development and training for employers. Colleges are the majority providers for the development of what are now commonly termed 'skills' in the UK, as well as training for small, medium and large employers.

General FE colleges offer a non-selective system with minimum or no entry requirements for the majority of programmes and lower thresholds for academic programmes than most sixth form colleges, many of which have a highly selective intake.

¹⁴ See www.tlrp.org

¹⁵ NIACE (2005).

Participation: who are FE colleges' learners?

Geoff Stanton's evidence to the FE Parliamentary Select Committee in 1998 called the college sector the 'representative' sector, suggesting that colleges offer learning to large numbers of people from all social classes and groups, including significant numbers of diverse minority ethnic groups, whose success levels in FE colleges are rising.¹⁶ The majority of adult learners study in FE colleges, although in 2008–2009, adults are no longer quite the majority of learners in colleges.¹⁷ There is much evidence that FE colleges draw their learners from lower socio-economic groups than do school sixth forms, sixth form colleges or universities. The majority of the more than three million learners in FE are from relatively low-achieving groups,¹⁸ working-class learners and disadvantaged groups.

The participation profile of colleges has been diversifying continuously since 1993, when they were removed from local authority control as incorporated bodies. In the same buildings, learners with a wide range of learning difficulties and disabilities, literacy and numeracy learners, vocational learners, those up-skilling or changing direction and those studying for sub-degrees or degrees study alongside one another. Numbers of literacy, numeracy and ESOL learners have grown across the UK since all four parts of the UK responded to the OECD's International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), which had revealed the scale of the problem. Migration to the UK in the 2000s added many – particularly EU nationals – to the number of ESOL learners. Numbers of asylum seekers, on the other hand, have declined as a result of policy interventions and restrictions to entitlements. Since the 1990s, there have also been an increasing number of international students and links between individual FE colleges and institutions across the world.

At local level, colleges work in partnership with voluntary sector and other local organisations to cater for potential adult learners who are disengaged and not in education, employment or training (NEETs). Other learners and potential learners may lead chaotic lives, experiencing a combination of problems associated with poverty. These learners include teenage parents, homeless people, former and repeating offenders, people rehabilitating from drug and other substance misuse, people held back by low levels of literacy and numeracy, people recovering from various forms of abuse, and people dealing with mental health problems or finding personal relations at any level challenging. Adult learners in FE also include prisoners and offenders in the community. Colleges are often the organisations of aspiration for many groups of adult learners, to which smaller organisations help them progress.

The 2008 NIACE participation survey, however, shows a steep fall in adult participation, and this decline has had an impact on colleges. FE colleges' learners include a significant proportion of learners from social groups C–E, and the fall in adult

¹⁶ Frumkin et al. (2008).

¹⁷ Aldridge and Tuckett (2008a and 2008b).

¹⁸ Fletcher and Perry (2008).

numbers in colleges is described in the NIACE survey as affecting these groups disproportionately. There has been a significant drop in the number of skilled manual workers, full-time and part-time workers, and the 25–34 year old age group in FE colleges. Despite *Skills for Life* and other initiatives to support employers and for the disadvantaged, there has been no increase in participation for semi- and unskilled workers, unemployed adults and retired people. Older adults appear to have been the most strongly affected by the loss of learning opportunities in colleges and elsewhere in the post-16 system.

How are FE colleges perceived?

People who neither use colleges, nor know much about those who do, often seem puzzled about their work and how they fit into the overall education system. This includes policy-makers and educators from other sectors who systemically exclude colleges from discussions about education, which centre on schools and universities.¹⁹ Perhaps their complexity and ‘comprehensiveness’ make colleges difficult to define or value – they are the institutions that do ‘everything else’.

When policy-makers have turned their attention to FE in recent years, it has often been by offering faint praise, the preface to a sceptical appraisal of the value that general FE adds (compared with sixth form colleges for example), followed by initiatives to try to simplify their purpose. Since colleges uniformly argue that their value lies precisely in their complexity and reach, their relationship with policy has been awkward, twisting and turning as policy-makers take powers from FE and, some years later, usually partially, return them again. The relationship remains unresolved.

Although the image of colleges among their users is positive, as shown regularly by feedback from the Association of Colleges, Learning and Skills Councils and quality improvement bodies, as well as college student surveys and research projects, colleges enjoy neither the prestige which attaches to universities in the public mind nor respect of the kind that the policy community shows towards universities as independent organisations. This situation must be addressed if colleges are to achieve the ‘new narrative and a clear voice’ called for by Caroline Mager in *A New Era of Ambition for the FE Sector*.²⁰

To date, colleges have not fully succeeded in efforts to change the perceptions of policy-makers and those in other education sectors of their role and performance. Colleges remain undervalued, and their contribution is often overlooked in education and broader public debate. Where they have been high profile in policy, as in 1992 and 1997, it has been as much as the subject of criticism as of favourable recognition, with notable exceptions such as the balanced report from the FE Select Committee in 1998. This lack of understanding impacts on policies affecting colleges. For example, direct and unfavourable comparisons with sixth form colleges on 16–18 provision are frequently made that downplay or ignore the demographic and complex social class profile of FE’s learners. Despite recent research findings which show convincingly that colleges perform consistently better than small sixth forms with a more diverse and underprivileged learner population,²¹ the long-standing funding discrepancy with schools and the ‘sixth form presumption’ which favours the opening of new school

¹⁹ Perry (2005).

²⁰ Centre for Excellence in Leadership/QIA (2008).

²¹ Stanton (2008a and 2008b).

sixth forms in college catchment areas have been retained, even though there is no cost–benefit rationale.

Employers and their representative organisations have historically also been lukewarm about colleges' ability to respond quickly to need and offer solutions on the basis of accurate training needs analysis; this perception has often been based at best on anecdotal evidence, but has been changing steadily, and many colleges are the key partners for large employers in both the public and private sectors. New research from the CBI, commissioned by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) shows that 47 per cent of employers in a survey of 600 have strong relationships and contracts with colleges. Colleges also form a significant number of private training providers for work-based training, through the creation of subsidiary organisations with a dedicated commercial mission; business units dedicated to commissioned employer training, which started after 1992, are also still growing.²²

Though the evidence is anecdotal, colleges' reputation among policy-makers appears to be in part the result of FE colleges not being the providers of choice for the political class from any party. Colleges are personally unknown to the powerful, and illustrious alumni are hard to find. Not only do middle-class children go elsewhere, but most people in the establishment do not count among their acquaintances people who have been to FE colleges in contrast to schools or universities. And one bad experience, such as the story of an education minister's grandchild not being able to get the A level subject combination of her choice at a big city college, diminishes the reputation of the whole sector. Colleges are caught in the middle of a socially and educationally divided society. Michael Duane's comment on secondary moderns – that they were 'schools good enough for other people's children to go to' – still seems relevant to colleges.²³

Colleges' breadth and depth and their status as 'comprehensive' education organisations are seen both as strengths and weaknesses, as evidenced by policy developments, reviews and inquiries and the recurring theme of 'could do better' which accompanies recognition of colleges' achievements. There are, it seems, few prizes for picking up the pieces and improving the life chances of large numbers of less successful children and adults living in challenging economic, personal and social circumstances. This is in contrast to the glittering prizes offered to the gifted and talented and those who are already educationally, culturally and materially well resourced. Colleges are caught up in a residual 'more means less' mindset which dogs post-16 educational expansion and widening participation.

²² CBI (2009).

²³ Fletcher and Perry (2008).

The strengths, issues and challenges that colleges bring to the future of adult and lifelong learning

Strengths

Evidence from research, policy and advocacy supports the consultations for this paper which show that FE colleges bring a range of strengths, assets and capabilities to lifelong learning:

- Colleges have a **long history as a presence in their localities**, providing an unbroken line of vocational, academic and community-focused, community-owned education for young people and adult learners which stretches back to the 1820s. Close to local labour markets and well positioned to respond to the learning needs of employers, individuals and communities, colleges have always had a social function as well as an economic function.
- Since their incorporation in 1993, colleges have enthusiastically embraced their renewed **remit for adult learning**. After decades of concentrating more on vocational and academic learning for those aged 16–18 than on adults, colleges have developed a culture which is responsive to adults and employers, and offer wide-ranging and imaginative provision. Colleges are having to work hard even to keep adult numbers stable in a harsh and deteriorating funding climate, some through classic Robin Hood methods, others by working to attract new external sources of funding.
- Colleges are large organisations; they have the **capacity, adaptability and flexibility** to accommodate the millions of new learners that a renewed lifelong learning sector would attract, from very young children learning with their parents and grandparents, to challenging young adults from age 14 in outreach programmes, through to adults in the fourth age who are in need of regular or residential care but still benefit from learning – for example learning that alleviates the symptoms of dementia or physical frailty and offers support to carers. Without colleges, the tapestry of adult and lifelong learning would consist of barely connected fragments.
- Colleges offer a **comprehensive education which is ‘more than skills’**, from pre-entry to postgraduate level. They offer academic, vocational and occupational education, as well as learning for personal development, for families and communities of interest. General FE colleges and adult colleges are neither selective in their intake, nor are they places where learners are weeded out to make room for those more likely to succeed to improve performance in league tables. A college education improves the life chances of all groups of adults. Adult learners who persist with learning move on to many different destinations by diverse routes:

to jobs and careers, to further study, to pursue new interests in higher education, to help their children's learning, to lead more fulfilled lives. This diversity of outcome is a strength: it is not a deficit that FE learning is more than a preface to, or less than HE learning.²⁴

- Colleges have the proven ability to **adapt and respond to new policy**, changing systems and top-down demands from policy. FE has described itself as the 'adaptive' layer since the late 1980s, and most recently as 'stoic' in face of the loss of adult learners and the planning blight caused by the Government's determination to put all its eggs in the decidedly rickety Train to Gain basket.²⁵ Special pleading aside, employers, en masse, are not proving as eager as the Government's rhetoric suggests it would love them to be. Colleges have repeatedly put into practice a dizzying array of new government initiatives, often unexpected, often less than strategic, often reversing previous directives as frequently as building on them and characterised by hurried implementation schedules involving several stakeholders and policy intermediaries.
- Evidence suggests that colleges **bring good returns to investment**, that they are cost effective and make a positive contribution to the economic health of the UK. Recent studies for the Association of Colleges in England and colleges' representative bodies in Wales and Scotland show that there are high returns to public funding of colleges, measured in financial returns to the economy and productivity (although productivity is notoriously difficult to quantify), as well as the economic and social benefits of learning experienced by individuals.
- Colleges' commitment to **widening participation** – given impetus in the 1990s by the Widening Participation inquiry of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), chaired by Helena Kennedy²⁶ – has strengthened colleges' adult learning ethos. Colleges have been successful in engaging **disadvantaged and hard-to-reach learners**, Skills for Life learners (on literacy, numeracy and ESOL programmes below Level 2) and adults with learning difficulties and disabilities. This is associated with a rebalancing of learners and levels towards Entry Level and Level 1 from Level 3, once the traditional FE heartland. Above Level 3, colleges are responsible for much of the widening participation in higher education to other social classes; universities, by contrast, have grown, but their social class composition has hardly changed at all, remaining solidly middle class.
- Since 2001, colleges have **provided well over 80 per cent of adult literacy, language and numeracy (LLN)** provision (including ESOL) across the country, through discrete courses, through provision embedded in vocational programmes at Levels 1 and 2, and through non-qualification-bearing courses ('other' provision) from pre-entry level. Millions of people have achieved a first or higher level LLN qualification. The Public Service Agreement target for LLN was achieved early.

²⁴ Perry (2005).

²⁵ The Guardian (2009).

²⁶ Kennedy (1997).

Colleges are still devising ways to include the large numbers of learners excluded by the loss of funding for ESOL and 'other' provision – particularly the low-paid – demonstrating a continuing commitment to the most disadvantaged learners.

- The breadth and scale of the curriculum offered by colleges enables them, more easily than training providers with a narrower curriculum offer, to work successfully with **learners who have 'spiky profiles'**. Their range of expertise enables colleges to ensure that adults who have gaps and weaknesses in their prior learning can undertake at college the foundation learning that is essential to gaining vocational and other qualifications. This practice has long been the case, but since the 1990s, funding for additional learning support, study skills and for literacy and numeracy has meant colleges can address more systematically the diverse needs of learners.²⁷ Research shows that providing these supports for the large group of learners with spiky profiles helps them stay the course and makes LLN much more relevant to adults and less 'remedial', and offers learners a more positive learning identity. As long as the UK has an adult basic skills problem – it is an intergenerational problem which will still be present in 2025 – literacy, numeracy, ESOL and other learning support will need to be incorporated into adult learning programmes to address inequality and ensure the knowledge and skills for work and life are fully developed.
- The scope and scale of colleges have enabled them, with funding support, to offer an effective wrap around of **support services**, learning services and enrichment curricula, which together contribute to a stronger learning culture. Provision includes: social places and spaces; libraries and IT-based resource centres; sports activities; information, advice and guidance, including careers advice; counselling; pastoral care; publicly available restaurants; studios and theatres; students' unions and clubs. This combination of activities and facilities could be more interconnected to create a strong sense of belonging and a more routinely used resource for families, community and employers. The quality of support in FE has also contributed to colleges' success in growing an international student body and supporting 'non-traditional' HE learners to stay the course and gain degrees.
- Colleges are **improving the quality of teaching and learning** year on year according to Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and Ofsted inspection reports. When the FEFC inspection regime started in the early 1990s, bringing a renewed focus on curriculum, teaching, learning and achievement, the quality was at best variable. Now, the number of colleges seen to be poor overall is small and shrinking. Quality has been supported by policies on the professional development and qualifications of the FE workforce, which have also encouraged college leaders to prioritise teaching and learning and the learning environment. Research shows that most college teachers enter FE with idealism about their subjects and the wish to empower their learners. College teachers tend to stay in FE despite uncompetitive

²⁷ McGivney (1996).

pay and conditions and the relatively small number of substantive posts supporting part-time hourly paid staff. A recent longitudinal study of teachers showed that Skills for Life teachers had, on average, eight years' service at the start of the research.²⁸

- Since the early 1990s, colleges have developed as **strategic partners in economic development**, central to networks of providers, economic development and community regeneration agencies, HE institutions and other stakeholders.²⁹ They are well positioned to contribute strongly to local partnerships for the development of adult learning.
- Colleges attract a culturally and ethnically **diverse student body**, with a higher representation of minority ethnic learners than in the profile of the communities they serve.³⁰ They have a long-standing record of commitment to **servicing working class communities** through their vocational education tradition and also, increasingly, work with NEETs, young and adult offenders, and other educationally disadvantaged groups of young people and adults, often in partnership with the voluntary sector. The Skills for Life strategy has increased colleges' experience of educating disengaged and disadvantaged adults in literacy, numeracy and ESOL. No other sector makes this distinctive contribution on a large scale.
- Colleges have the professionalism, the **capability and the will independently to design curricula and award qualifications** that are fit for learners' purposes and responsive to employers' and other local needs. Colleges' focus on formative assessment, or assessment for learning, has also increased, supported by research and development, and teachers are vocal in seeking a better balance between formative assessment and summative assessment of learning.
- Since moving out of local authority control, colleges have **improved and matured as a sector valued by the public**. The sector has forged a broad identity and though the picture is far from perfect, colleges have gained a far higher public profile than before 1993. College leaders and aligned academics bemoan the invisibility of the sector in educational discourse.³¹ However, there are many indicators of FE colleges' increased presence in the public mind, in (some) HE institutions, in the national media and in policy at all levels. The machinery of college representation, self-advocacy and accountability are in place. After several officially sponsored 'anti-bureaucracy' drives, colleges are now developing a self-regulation system and culture together with other post-16 providers. It is essential that this should replace, at least partially, the burdens and distractions of the complex 'compliance' culture which has accompanied over 20 years of system and policy reform.

²⁸ Cara et al. (2008).

²⁹ James (ed) (1998).

³⁰ Frumkin et al. (2008).

³¹ Perry (2005).

- Over the last 15 years, colleges have enthusiastically and radically **modernised** their estates. Colleges were shabby and run-down places by the early 1990s, often housed in nineteenth-century schools, or in buildings shoddily constructed in the 1960s' expansion of FE. Supported by funding bodies, colleges have bought new sites, sold old ones, built new complexes, restored old listed buildings and redesigned interiors. They have created well-equipped, attractive, modern environments for learners, employers and other users. A key aim has been to create a businesslike but friendly atmosphere with a strong IT and communications infrastructure, together with the development of a strong marketing function. New sites have helped colleges put themselves on the local map in ways they had never previously achieved. Criticisms have been levelled at college leaders for putting their passion for estates development above curriculum, and in the future, college leaders need to be fired as much by the urgency of curriculum development, particularly if they are to gain greater autonomy. However, they would argue that a modern environment fit for learning is part of developing adult pedagogy.

What are the issues and challenges for colleges in the 2025 lifelong learning landscape?

- In the pendulum swings of policy since 1992, colleges have gained and lost ground in providing for adult learners. The most recent **funding cutbacks and the machinery of government changes** have caused what one principal called 'collateral damage' to colleges' capacity, capability and morale in adult learning. The current losses have reduced, in many places drastically, non-qualification-bearing 'other' provision, as well as ESOL, pre-entry and Entry Level Skills for Life learning. Clearly, loss of provision has an impact on the profile and reputation of colleges in their localities as providers of adult learning, and the damage will take time to restore.
- Institutional leaders struggle with the **contradictions in policy and planning approaches to FE development**. Ambitious, costly long-term funding for buildings and infrastructure is carefully planned and approved, but the planning of learning provision is short term, competitive and volatile, although it is intended to meet those long-term learning needs and demands at the heart of the 2020 'world class skills' agenda. Colleges understandably ask what is the purpose of costly new infrastructure, if not to plan ahead strategically and build individuals', employers' and communities' use of them? Research suggests that colleges are right to propose returning to the three-year strategic planning cycles which marked the FEFC's approach.³²
- Colleges have been subject to **external interference and control** in a government-led, **top-down performance culture, driven by targets** over which they had little or no say. Colleges have not been trusted to judge which learning opportunities

³² Delorenzi (2007).

to develop to meet local needs – something that they argue they have the best professional expertise and experience to judge. The top-down control and compliance culture may have made colleges adaptive, but it has also made them risk averse.³³ Yet the best practice in colleges now and in the past has been in curriculum innovation and the broad educational offer that develops human capital in industry and business, individuals' capabilities and life chances, and social capital in communities.

- The **lack of autonomy and the mountain of bureaucracy** associated with 20 years of continuous government reform have displaced energies and dissipated teachers' and college leaders' time for thinking about teaching and learning.
- At least since the introduction of what Lorna Unwin³⁴ called the 'knowledge-lite' competence-based assessment and qualifications system, there is evidence of a **serious imbalance between the attention paid to the assessment of learning compared with the learning itself** and the development of post-16 pedagogy and curricula. College staff should be engaged in research and development to design and deliver flexible, IT-enhanced models and pedagogies for teaching and learning which help adult learners.
- The **'skills agenda' has diluted and distorted education**, as has the related prioritisation of qualifications and measures of competence and skill assessed through narrow summative methods, increasingly multiple-choice. Knowledge-lite NVQs³⁵ have dominated vocational education and training since the mid 1980s, squeezing out rounded initial and recurrent education and training of people for their roles as workers and citizens. Colleges' ability as vocational educators to offer breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding is under-recognised in the ideology represented by the skills agenda. This leaves colleges as just one of many competing training organisations, or 'providers', 'delivering' skills. In the future, extended working lives and the changing contexts, processes and tools for work will demand repeated episodes of learning and retraining. Unwin³⁶ argues for a fundamental rethink of vocational education which will enable a person's learning to be grounded in the kinds of knowledge that can be transferred to new working contexts.
- **Social division persists throughout the education system.** Social class, ethnicity and the nature of a learner's aptitudes, learning orientation and potential remain key determinants of social and economic success.
- **Vocational education is not valued as highly as academic education.** The depth of knowledge and understanding, and the learning processes required for vocational competence and skills are under-recognised in curricula and qualifications. The institutions that provide vocational learning and qualifications

³³ Coffield et al. (2008).

³⁴ Unwin (2009).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

have been systemically and historically undervalued in comparison with universities or schools by policy-makers, the media and the wider establishment. The people who attend colleges are, unsurprisingly, also undervalued, something that is evident, for example, in the constant references to ‘unskilled’ and ‘low-skilled’ work or the underestimation of the knowledge and skill in much low-paid and unpaid work.³⁷ This is reflected in curriculum and assessment policies and qualifications that measure competences and skills with little interest in the knowledge that underpins them and needs to develop alongside specific occupational skills. There is little understanding either of the need for sufficient knowledge and broad skills to help people transfer from one kind of job to another over a lengthening working life, often punctuated by career and family breaks or periods of unemployment or ill health.³⁸

- **The clear preference at policy level, in terms of the rise of ‘demand-led’ funding systems, is for employer-led training rather than individually led or employee-led learning** as the solution, despite the evidence of the success of union-led learning and skills since 1997. This approach has shut down opportunities for colleges and others to serve local needs and demands directly and meet learning needs that may well support economic activity indirectly as well as directly.
- **At local level, the voluntary sector and other organisations often experience difficulties in forming productive partnerships with colleges**, and experience them as inward-looking and apt to pull rank and use their sheer size to assume leadership over others. Colleges sometimes bring overly competitive and inflexible approaches and manoeuvres which do not help to address the more fragile and subtle issues arising in communities. Top-down pressure can heighten competitive pressure. The drive to self-regulation through the Single Voice approach (the Single Voice is the company set up to transform further education into a more self-regulating sector), working across different types of educational ‘providers’ large and small, and a co-operative approach to local learning ecologies could offer ways to help big organisations learn from small ones.³⁹ Colleges have been entrepreneurial in recent times, but can still learn much from the fleet-footed, responsive ways of the voluntary sector.
- **For some disengaged groups, colleges are invisible and thus inaccessible.** These ‘hard to reach’ groups travel in an orbit in which FE colleges do not feature. Indeed, colleges are experienced by many socially excluded groups as intimidating, at least in prospect, compared with community-based adult learning or voluntary sector organisations.
- There were disadvantages to the way in which colleges developed over the 1990s and 2000s. The competitiveness and compliance cultures that came with incorporation created **new priorities, passions and time-consuming**

³⁷ Unwin (2009).

³⁸ McNair (2008).

³⁹ See www.feselfregulation.org.uk/infoabout_singlevoice.html

preoccupations among leaders, who for a long time focused on issues at least one remove from teaching and learning: institutional and business development; estates; financial health and, sometimes, sheer survival; estates development; competitive relationships; protective alliances with other colleges and potential merger; dealing with external, top-down requirements, hyperactive policy environments and the pursuit of initiative-based funding. Their improved plant and estates are insufficiently used for the local community, and this is an area where colleges could work locally with others to improve.

- **College governance still has too few lines of accountability to learners, communities and other key users.** The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act made corporations self-governing, accountable only to public funding bodies and government. This gave colleges some freedoms, but did not encourage partnership and co-operation locally. New forms of accountability will need to replace compliance as the main form of accountability.
- **The teaching and learning models that will be needed for the twenty-first century are still critically underdeveloped,** including flexible delivery of learning programmes that exploit new technologies for learning and communication and meet twenty-first-century-learners' lifestyles, habits and needs. Greater flexibility is needed to raise participation levels and enable adults to engage and persist in learning. Blended, distance and open learning remain marginal activities rather than built routinely into the planning of an adult-friendly curriculum offer, although there is evidence of good practice.⁴⁰ A major contribution of colleges, given their resources, would be to make programmes that offer a learner-led mode of learning mainstream rather than marginal. Research and development and innovation are needed, as suggested by O'Leary and Oakley, and Unwin.⁴¹
- There is a **mismatch between the acceptance of colleges as a trusted 'brand' at local level by learners, customers and stakeholders, and the sense of mistrust of colleges at national policy level.** Ministers, senior civil servants and other important stakeholders visit colleges and admire their work, but this does not change the obscure position of colleges in the education firmament.
- **Unclear and unhelpful boundaries and divisions between colleges and universities and colleges and schools persist.** There are also continually changing roles for too many external agencies and bodies which do not closely relate to each other and have a short lifespan. There are different funding agencies for HE; local authorities take responsibility for some college learners (those aged 14–19) and there is to be a new agency for adults; there is duplication of inspection arrangements for HE and FE.⁴²

⁴⁰ Hinman and Fletcher (2008).

⁴¹ O'Leary and Oakley (2008); Unwin (2009).

⁴² Fletcher and Perry (2008); Parry (2008).

- Periodically, **policy-makers have wanted to make colleges more single-minded in their offer** – most recently in the Foster review of FE in 2005⁴³ and curriculum reviews which seek to bring together the academic and vocational into overarching diplomas; one such effort is currently underway. But colleges stubbornly adhere to a complex mission; and those colleges, like rural colleges, ‘monotechs’ and sixth form colleges, which have had a more simple mission, have also used every permissive piece of legislation or directive to diversify what they do to meet local needs and stimulate demand for learning. The attempts to narrow and simplify what colleges offer⁴⁴ are, college leaders argue, unrealistic. Colleges may be untidy and sprawling, but so are the learning trajectories of adults, the fast-moving changes in the labour market, the patterns of family and community life, the persistence of inequality and poverty, and the demographic realities of the ageing society. If other aspects of adult and community learning, provided by LEAs and the voluntary sector, were well-resourced and available in every locality, and if they and colleges stuck to a narrower remit, the system could be tidier. But such a system could create even more divisions in an already divided system, and there would be few incentives to build the bridges that adults seek between the different parts of the system. Learners seeking vocational and academic learning, knowledge and skills, formal and informal learning, would not find them under one roof as they now do.

Colleges are the hub of learning for people over 16 in almost every locality. However, despite their size and scale and unique roles, colleges are currently labelled as just one of a list of ‘providers’ of post-16 education and training. The term ‘provider’, emphasising the competitive market model of FE with learning as ‘supply’, dates back only to 2001 and has been seen by many as emblematic of the status of colleges in the policy community. It is hard to imagine such a term being applied to universities or schools.

⁴³ Foster (2005).

⁴⁴ Ibid.; Leitch (2006).

Fifteen years on: key roles for FE colleges in a new system and culture of lifelong learning?

During this project's consultations with college leaders and stakeholders and exploration of research evidence and new thinking, a number of propositions and options emerged. There was consensus about many issues. There were also differences, particularly about the models for college structure and missions. This section sets out some of the propositions, and evidence to support them.

Colleges should form the 'institutional backbone' of the lifelong learning system, with a renewed remit for adult learning

As the number of potential adult learners rises and the number of young people decreases over the coming years, the concept of an affordable college education for all, universally understood in the USA, should become a key concept for policy in the UK, supporting young people's and adults' aspirations for work and life. It should become part of public understanding and a shared aspiration across society. Learning should be available at colleges at all levels in every locality for everyone from 16 until the 'fourth age', with continuing opportunities for 14-year-olds to gain vocational knowledge and skills at college, supported by general education and literacy and numeracy development.

Colleges should remain and develop as inclusive, pluralistic and diverse organisations

Colleges should continue to develop their capacity, capability and ongoing roles as comprehensive organisations, providing education and training and life-changing learning for people of all ages in multiple settings. It has proved unrealistic to propose a narrow mission for colleges in the learning and skills sector. The attempts of the Foster Review⁴⁵ and Leitch Review⁴⁶ to simplify and narrow colleges' roles would not enable them to serve the diversity of communities', employers' and individual needs, and continual economic and societal changes which play out at local level. Simplistic models are sometimes equated with 'excellence' through focus; however, adult learning, life and economic forces are complex and unpredictable. Within the FE system and within localities, colleges need to offer the capacity for breadth and the capability to adapt and change direction. In 2009, colleges are at the forefront of responding to the needs of unemployed adults. As an example, City and Islington College is offering retraining and job preparation courses for Woolworths and other employees made suddenly redundant as companies fail. Competition has resulted in

⁴⁵ Foster (2005).

⁴⁶ Leitch (2006).

an unproductive complexity, marked by fragmentation and overlap. Partnership and co-operation in a local learning ecology should be developed to give this necessary complexity coherence.

In *The Skills Paradox*,⁴⁷ O'Leary and Oakley argue that colleges have always had, and should retain, a social function outside the market. Writing about the need for reform in vocational education, Unwin⁴⁸ argues strongly for the development of 'citizens' capabilities' which make explicit and develop the historical and social knowledge that are part of any job, build these into vocational curricula, and thus bring the social and economic together in work-related learning throughout life.

Colleges as local lifelong learning organisations

Colleges should remain, despite a number of sub-regional and cross-regional mergers and takeovers, local organisations. This approach chimes with other research and thinking, including the outcome of a national seminar series hosted by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership and Quality Improvement Agency (QIA). In *A New Era of Ambition for the FE System*,⁴⁹ a key recommendation is that colleges should prioritise their local role, leading co-ordinated activity in their localities. Even in the case of cross-regional mergers, the colleges in the Newcastle College group will still primarily serve their local communities. Although for them as elsewhere, ICT and flexible learning will change the relationship of learners to a particular locality, there is plentiful evidence to show that learners will still want local provision with human interaction and to work with a peer group as part of a programme of adult learning. As already argued, it is in their localities that colleges are best understood and valued. They are fundamentally a service for local people and organisations.

In an adult and lifelong learning culture driven by individuals' wants and needs, organisations, like colleges, can play a key role responding to that need as major players in a local ecology of lifelong learning. The local mission of colleges was strengthened in the 2009 Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill, which stated that further education corporations 'must have regard, amongst other things, to the objective of promoting the economic and social well-being of the local area' in which they are established. It is made clear that the 'well-being of an area' includes the 'well-being of the people who live or work in that area'. Localness is clearly related to the social mission of colleges beyond their market function, and the desirability of colleges remaining diverse and pluralistic – key features for an inclusive adult and lifelong learning culture.

⁴⁷ O'Leary and Oakley (2008).

⁴⁸ Unwin (2009).

⁴⁹ Centre for Excellence in Leadership/QIA (2008).

Partnership and connectivity in a networked system: colleges to have a lead role in a local ecology of adult and lifelong learning

As local organisations operating in a local ecology of adult and lifelong learning, engaging in social and economic activity, colleges would be the largest though not the only significant providers of adult learning. While colleges would be the backbone of provision, local authorities might have the overview of lifelong learning provision in a networked system. With colleges' capacity, resources and connectivity to wider agendas, they could offer a leadership role, if sensitively handled, working organically in a spirit of community service and give and take with the voluntary sector, businesses, unions, training providers, community organisations, local authorities and others. Smaller organisations, which can be critical of or feel threatened by colleges, should be able then to recognise better the roles and expertise that colleges have to offer.

Key to the success of a new system would be the development of a single portal for adult and lifelong learning in a locality, which colleges could develop with partners and the local authority.

Examples of existing successful practice would be where public sector organisations, including schools and colleges, have exploited policy funding streams by working with each other and with the private sector to win lottery and other funding for community-focused initiatives – health and leisure centres, new kitchens, drama spaces, and so on. Key success factors for a healthy local ecology of organisations are mutual respect, good communications and openness, but also formal agreements on shared initiatives, and joint planning and strategy, so that use of resources in local areas can be shared and optimised. Shared self-generated local audits and planning between organisations should be at strategic level, and replace top-down requirements. But a networked system would also aim better to support and smooth the journeys of individual learners in the system: for example, a learner might be based in a voluntary organisation but have access as part of that learning to the college's resources, gain a college certificate and move or progress upwards into different learning environments within the local partnership arrangements.

College leadership of joint strategic planning for adult and lifelong learning

The era of collaboration and partnership would provide colleges, as the 'institutional backbone' of lifelong learning in a local area, with a leadership role in flexible, strategic planning. In recent times, top-down directive approaches have left providers with little room for autonomous planning. In 1993, the FEFC began a regime of three-year strategic planning cycles. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) era from 2001 took planning away from providers to the LSC itself, at national, regional and sub-regional

level, leaving colleges and other providers with shorter time-frames and frustrations about the ability to plan longer term, invest, take risks, collaborate and rationalise. To be effective organisations in the new era of lifelong learning, colleges should be able to make their own predictions and plans for adult learners' and employers' needs in their localities, and ensure they have the capacity and capability to build a quality service to meet those needs and the flexibility to change direction.

Learners and teachers at the heart of a college

A new framework for adult and lifelong learning will put learners and teachers at the centre. A shared vocabulary, values and mindset between leaders and teachers needs to gather pace in FE colleges to enable this new framework to be realised at local level. For example, the cultures of 'retention' and 'achievement', which are narrowly defined, need to be replaced by thinking through how to support learners to engage with, enjoy and persist in learning. Less hierarchical and more collegiate approaches to organisational development would put teachers and learners at the heart of the organisation as respected qualified professionals (as they are becoming), subject to continuous professional development. The need to empower practitioners and make space for their voices to be heard has recently been addressed in research and sector consultations. It has been argued again that practitioners' knowledge of learners and employers qualifies them for a stronger role in the design of courses and qualifications. Practitioners are well placed to help create a truly demand-led system and to help develop workable policies.⁵⁰

Adult and lifelong learning pedagogy, teaching and learning

Colleges should lead the development of adult pedagogy, including by means of an enhanced role in teacher education and continuous professional development. Many colleges are already going down that road, supported by continuing professional development requirements and entitlements by the Institute for Learning. A key to the successful development of an adult pedagogy, including social pedagogy, is to concentrate on the education of teachers, from which qualifications follow. Qualifications are not the be all and end all, and there is a view in the sector that college staff are becoming better qualified than ever but with a shallower knowledge of pedagogy and theory than in previous eras. In particular, colleges should lead:

- pedagogy for personalisation, with initial and diagnostic assessment based on what learners know and want to know, building on their existing knowledge, expertise and skills and responding to their emerging interests, desires and ambitions;
- the development of pedagogies for flexible, ICT-enhanced learning;

⁵⁰ City and Guilds (2008).

- enabling advanced FE learners in their second and third years at college to take on roles as assistant teachers, mentors, coaches and learning support providers;
- developing good practice in learning outside the classroom, including developing learning support, pastoral support, extra-curricula activities, social activities and online communities of interest;
- the development of pedagogies for workplace learning;
- the development of new pedagogies for learning from, recognising and building on people's existing knowledge and experience.

Radical change to delivery models: flexible models of delivery for all learning programmes, and workforce capacity to deliver

It is sometimes said that learning, not only in colleges, happens in ways that a time-traveller from 100 years ago would recognise. The nineteenth century is present with its patterns of attendance, requirements for physical presence, registers, timetables, classrooms, predictable furniture layouts, and so on. Before state education, when most adults learned informally and led less regimented lives than during the age of the factory system – of which state education is a reflection – there were very different patterns of learning; these were typically informal, independent, in small groups, using many different local spaces and resources, with peer mentoring. Could it be that tomorrow's FE needs to be more like its past?

Much is known from research about adult learners' episodic patterns of learning, of dipping in and dipping out of learning, of the rise of 'private' informal learning online and in less timetabled ways. NIACE's survey on how adults like to learn⁵¹ shows the extent to which adults learn informally using a range of approaches including ICT, and prefer to blend individual study with interacting with other people. Colleges in the future should experiment and take risks, as some are already doing,⁵² using online and blended learning, tutor-supported self-study, peer mentoring, coaching and other ways of supporting learners for whom a timetabled, attendance-based mode of learning is not suitable.

Flexible models of delivery should no longer be a bolt-on strategy of last resort because people are 'prevented' from attending college. A flexible service should be offered as a mainstream option, built into a learner's plans from the start, and be part of developing technology-enhanced, 24-hour, 360-days-a-year organisations: learner time would replace timetables. Funding systems will need to support flexible learning rather than measure attendance as they now do.

A key aspect of such developments would be workforce development to support greater use of IT for learning and formative and summative assessment. Teacher education, professional development, with learning professionals from HE, FE and

⁵¹ Aldridge and Tuckett (2008b).

⁵² Hinman and Fletcher (2008).

other lifelong learning sectors work together to develop and conduct IT-enhanced assessment.

At one level, colleges would be 'open' all hours and all year as community learning resource centres and workshop facilities, offering sites to practise craft and other skills. Practice, as much research shows, is critical to maintaining skills that otherwise deteriorate: use it or lose it. At another level, learning would be dispersed, free of rigid timetabling constraints and characterised by new approaches to teaching, mentoring, coaching, counselling and supporting learning. New ICT-enhanced learning programmes, along with broadcast media initiatives, newly designed learning materials and a flexible, simplified credit and qualifications system would all help learners meet their goals and enjoy learning in ways that suit them. For employees, small business owners, co-operatives, the self-employed and others, schemes should be devised for on-the-job learning that is recognised and accredited.

Leading an holistic vocational education for adults

Vocational education has long been in a crisis of neglect, impoverishment and uncertainty about its standing in the education system. As Lorna Unwin has argued, vocational education has narrowed, squeezing out knowledge and a broader education as part of vocational learning. Within vocational education, the citizens' curriculum can offer a twenty-first-century rendering of general and liberal studies, introduced into FE colleges in the 1950s to encourage 'habits of reflection, independent study and free inquiry'. The rationale will still be relevant in 2025: 'we cannot afford either to fall behind in technical accomplishments or to neglect spiritual and human values'.⁵³

This paper argues that a new settlement for vocational education should be at the heart of the new culture of lifelong learning. Colleges have a unique history and function as providers of a broad vocational education. This position has been undermined by vocational education policy over the last 20 years which has sought to replace vocational education with training for skills, and in the process has neglected depth of knowledge and a broader education as part of vocational education. A new vocational education should be colleges' most significant contribution to lifelong learning. Thus colleges would have a strong economic, employer-facing and work-related mission. Given an ageing workforce, colleges would serve adults from age 14 to those of whatever age who need to learn a craft, trade or profession, or to retrain or update knowledge and skills for paid work. Colleges would both educate and train young people and retrain or update adults at all levels, including HE, in collaboration with local or regional universities, or, exceptionally, in alliances outside regions based on subject specialisms. Mixed-age groups would be the norm.

As part of their vocational remit, expertise and culture, colleges would deliver employer-led and commissioned training and provide programmes as part of Train

⁵³ Unwin (2009).

to Gain and its successors. Colleges should work directly with employers. The role of brokers is argued by colleges and others to undermine the capacity of colleges to work successfully in relationships with employers.⁵⁴ New models that overcome the limitations of Train to Gain should be developed, including a broader educational foundation to skills development.

However, if colleges are to succeed in their work-related mission, they must have direct contact with employers and routinely develop organisational and training needs analysis skills among groups of staff. The development of these professional skills among dedicated groups of college staff is essential in order to assess need accurately and design bespoke programmes accordingly. On apprenticeship, colleges would also be the majority providers of off-the-job learning, coaching and support for apprentices. There is a strong case, given the ageing workforce, to extend support for apprenticeships and other workplace learning to a wider age range, with public funding for 25–50-year-olds. This model would be focused on effective delivery, which would break down any lingering image of colleges as not delivering effectively, flexibly or fast enough to meet employers' needs.

Colleges should have the powers to award publicly and privately funded qualifications for bespoke employer training and professional development. Their adaptable range of awards would be subject to appropriate external validation and conform to standards set within a national qualifications and credit framework. These powers would enable colleges to design and deliver curricula and qualifications that fit closely with a particular employer's purpose. Adult learning for the workplace, with appropriate qualifications or certification, would replace a qualifications- and level-driven, top-down skills model.

Colleges could still compete with other colleges and other providers for state and employer resources, as a market function. But their market role should not eclipse their role as contributing to social, community and individual well-being. Alternatively, colleges could be a public service model in which they are recognised providers of education encompassing knowledge, understanding and transferable capabilities, which are all needed for increasingly higher level jobs. All jobs – low paid and highly paid – will be subject to permanently changing technologies and processes across all industry sectors. The notion of unskilled work as opposed to poorly paid work should be exposed as the myth it is.

Towards a citizens' curriculum

FE colleges' mission and practices include engaging in education to support people in communities, offer learning for social and personal purposes and support active citizenship and civic engagement. These roles would be formally recognised and encouraged in a citizens' curriculum, driven by the concept that every adult matters.

⁵⁴ O'Leary and Oakley (2008); CBI (2009).

This curriculum would be an integral part of a college adult learning programme – whether vocational or academic or for personal development or general or liberal education – and adult learners would choose those elements of it that best suit their life circumstances.

Colleges should offer a core citizens’ curriculum, available to all adult learners, which would be developed as an enabling national framework, reworked and redefined at local level to suit circumstances and needs. Its core purpose would be to create a more inclusive society, strengthening people’s sense of agency and belonging in a democratic society. Drawing on Fryer’s work on citizenship and belonging and a number of his key principles,⁵⁵ the citizens’ curriculum would develop knowledge and understanding of the challenges facing society, including: education about climate change and sustainability; sustaining good mental and physical health in an ageing society; democratic systems and participation; equality and diversity; learning to cope with uncertainty; basic citizenship-related law, rights, social justice and the responsibilities of citizenship; faith and religion; changing patterns of family, including support for parenting, eldercare, childcare and grand-parenting; financial literacy and economic well-being; and personal and career development, using universal adult careers advice. The core citizens’ curriculum would: encourage adults to develop their literacy and numeracy as a right, develop the voice of relatively voiceless groups in the community, and develop critical thinking and problem solving, as well as the attitudes and skills of working and living with others, developing confidence, managing feelings and communication.

The citizens’ curriculum would also answer the need expressed by colleges for a return to a broader ‘college education’, including vocational and academic, and the call by Lorna Unwin, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) and others for general education again to be part of vocational education and adult skills development. The citizens’ curriculum could also encompass calls by the CBI and other employer bodies and unions for the prioritisation of the so-called ‘soft skills’ of confidence building, team working and problem solving (the latter also urged by the mathematics community to develop thinking skills and critical thinking). The reintroduction of a broader curriculum that is social, historical, political and personal is not to be seen as separate from the learning of technical and craft skills, but part of it – of gaining a deeper understanding of the past development and therefore of the future development of the workplace.

In consultation with learners and users, citizenship curriculum areas and topics could be initiated or further developed as discrete areas for study, credits and qualifications. They could also be embedded in existing curriculum areas such as construction, agriculture and horticulture, hospitality and catering, community sports, hairdressing and beauty, engineering, and science subjects.

⁵⁵ Fryer (2008).

The involvement of learners in college governance (see below) could also become part of the citizens' curriculum, empowering learners to take part fully in the running of a college in learners' and users' interests.

A number of ideas have been put forward of possible constituent elements or units of a citizens' curriculum from which learners would choose combinations. These add to the rich agenda set out by Fryer's⁵⁶ 12 points and some of the possibilities mentioned above. A number of priorities emerged from the IFLL FE project as contenders for colleges in addressing the major issues to be tackled in the future in adult and lifelong learning. Priorities include: political and citizenship education; education for change and uncertainty; climate change, sustainable economic development and environmental justice; learning about other countries, cultures and languages; health in an ageing society; equality and diversity; financial literacy and economic well-being; and organisational and project management skills. A number of these areas were discussed in project seminars, and more detail is provided in *Appendix C*.

Autonomy: colleges as self-regulating organisations with greater independence and self-determination, comparable to universities, and with more local accountability

It has been suggested that self-regulation is a major step towards a new settlement for FE, 'shifting the paradigm' towards far greater autonomy for FE colleges in a collaborative local ecology of lifelong learning.⁵⁷ The portrait of Highlands College, Jersey – one of the individual college profiles in *Appendix B* – shows how this might work in one setting. A new approach to governance and accountability in a future adult and lifelong learning system could enable colleges to respond more fully and accurately to adult and lifelong learning needs if all or some of the following were in place:

- accreditation and awarding powers in a significant number of qualifications, including employer programmes;
- teachers with powers to assess learners' assignments, summative assessments and examinations with appropriate moderation and external verification that aimed to minimise bureaucratic burdens.
- a funding model that offers up to 80 per cent for response to local need, whether employer, individual or community and down to 20 per cent for specific government targets;
- autonomy and choice over the FE curriculum, which could make colleges more strategic and enable human resource strategies that create stability, a stronger core staffing and a focus on the college's strengths and specialisms.

⁵⁶ Fryer (2008).

⁵⁷ Hodgson and Spours (2009).

More democratic forms of governance and accountability

There should be a shift in accountability and reporting systems to reflect new levels of autonomy and powers of decision-making for adult learning. Accountabilities should be more lateral and less vertical. This would be reflected in the development of new models that place communities, learners, employers and other users centre stage.

Colleges could become multi-stakeholder organisations, or mutuals, in which local organisations, employers and learners are empowered to take part in decision-making. This approach would empower adult learners and organisations which have learning as part of their organisational culture and goals, including employers and employee organisations. New accountability models should be developed to prioritise accountability to learners, employers, communities and funders, and this accountability would validate a college's performance to government and its statutory agencies.

Governing bodies would be accountable to users and stakeholders and involve employers, community leaders and others, including local authorities. Appropriate lines of accountability to local authorities, among other stakeholders, would link colleges' local democratic processes and enhance the legitimacy of governance arrangements. A renewed relationship between FE colleges and local authorities would be designed to ensure co-operation in 14–19 education and support FE colleges' role in working with schools and families/family learning; it would also ensure that colleges' role in working with an inclusive adult population links effectively with local authorities' responsibility for social services and other local care and support services.

Colleges could aim to become membership organisations in a full sense. Members would be informed in written communications, public meetings and online about proposed strategies and changes, interrogate the board and managers of colleges, and have opportunities to debate and, where appropriate, vote on decisions.

Governing might further work through extensions to existing practices:

- elections by members to the governing body;
- greater transparency in publishing of financial information, including salaries of all senior staff and any governor remuneration;
- more transparent data gathering, analysis and publishing of results;
- learners, users and client satisfaction information made public locally;
- independent community and employer 'audits' of colleges' performance in delivering quality education and training and gathering new evidence of need; these would be economic, social and environmental audits.

There are relevant recent developments in creating trust schools, which are also charitable foundations – in particular, trusts created as co-operatives. These are currently favoured by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) as a model for governance, and could also offer a promising model for college governance. Drawing on international experience in governance of schools, co-operative trust

schools involve teachers and other staff, learners and external stakeholders as part of governance. Co-operative values are part of the curriculum. The argument is that strong ethical values, the skills of 'working together', and a sense of membership and belonging have a positive impact on learners' achievement. Results from such schools are promising. The co-operative model is aided by a culture of partnership outside the school. Governance in such a model for colleges would be an element-in-action of the citizens' curriculum in the college itself.⁵⁸

New models of leadership

New governance structures in a renewed mission for adults will involve developing a new leadership ethos. Colleges could further develop approaches to leadership that are already underway, led by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL). These approaches focus on a model of 'service', on mutual leadership between partners in localities, and on teaching and learning. These and comparable models are externally focused, geared to serving the expressed needs in communities and among employers, and to continuously improving teaching and learning, with learners at the heart of college leaders' concerns. Efforts could be made to ensure that leaders throughout colleges at all levels reflect their local communities' populations better. Existing women's and ethnic minority leader networks would be actively developed in all colleges, and leadership development would become part of colleges' learning offer to local communities.

Reform of qualifications, credit and unitisation – a leadership role for colleges

Much work has been done on the conceptualisation and technical development of unitised and credit-based qualifications systems which are transportable across organisations. The technology is there, but the will to press for implementation is not, either at policy level or in universities. FE has not had the autonomy to implement the systems it has developed and championed. FE-based organisations – the Further Education Unit (FEU) in particular – led the development of credit systems in the UK, with key publications such as *A Basis for Credit* in 1992.⁵⁹ The FEU and its successor organisations, NIACE and the National Open College Network, have been the main advocates of an adult-friendly system of learning towards qualifications. The implementation of a credit framework, and the portability and transferability of smaller units of learning to build towards a qualification, is still championed by FE college leaders as the way forward for adult learners (young and older) and disaffected learners who need to dip in and out of learning.

⁵⁸ Wilson and Mills (2008).

⁵⁹ Stanton (1992).

The qualifications and credit framework should be operationalised as widely as possible, with colleges designing curricula and qualifications based on credit. Colleges should be able to award credits within an agreed system and with appropriate light-touch validation arrangements.

Colleges as recognised providers of HE for adults, with clarification of the FE–HE relationship

Much of the HE provided by FE colleges attracts adults, not least because it is local, there are many part-time courses, and research shows that the culture of pastoral and learning support enables learners with ‘spiky profiles’ to stay the course and achieve degree or sub-degree qualifications. The localness of FE provision is also a key factor in enabling learners in rural areas to undertake HE.

At present, approximately 10 per cent of HE is offered in FE colleges. The majority of this provision is at sub-degree level, including HNDs, HNCs and an increasing number of Foundation Degrees. Some Foundation Degrees can now be awarded by FE colleges. Since the 1980s, with the wave of expansion of universities and polytechnics, colleges have also offered Access to Higher Education courses, which are aimed at and particularly attract adult learners, and for which the accreditation was initiated by the practitioner-led National Open College Network.

Degrees and a significant number of postgraduate courses – mainly professional courses, including teacher education – are also offered in FE colleges through their partnerships with universities.

In terms of policy and funding, the role of FE in HE remains unclear, under-recognised and low status. Funding and planning arrangements are complex, multiply bureaucracies, and duplicate inspection regimes.

The relationship between FE colleges and HE is not an equal one. There are a number of ways in which the relationship may be improved in the interests of adult learners. At present, colleges still have the option of choosing a range of university partners to sponsor and award the courses and qualifications they want to provide. These multiple partnerships enable colleges to choose university partners with a strong track record in a particular subject and an interest in working with FE. One alternative, which is cognate with the US community college model, is for colleges to merge with universities as post-18 organisations, at least for their HE and professional work. Another alternative is for a number of colleges in a locality to be associated with a single university partner – the ‘Staffordshire’ model. Christine King of Staffordshire University and Geoff Hall of New College Nottingham recently proposed the possibility of flexible, part-time study for a degree over a lifetime.⁶⁰ The notion of entitlement to

⁶⁰ King (2008).

a part-time, adult equivalent of the five full-time funded years of FE and/or HE for 16-year-olds, proposed by Geoff Hall, is supported by the 157 Group of large colleges.

If colleges are to be developed as primarily local organisations, and the policy aim of achieving 50 per cent participation is to be successful, colleges' role in adult HE needs to be further recognised and supported. If colleges are also to be allowed greater autonomy, then there are implications for universities' monopoly on the degree, including, but not only, the Foundation Degree and professional postgraduate qualifications. Inconsistency and lack of transparency in the funding of HE in FE colleges, and the costs and fees to learners will need to be addressed and systems remodelled for fairness and equity across sectors. Learners should not be punished for where they learn any more than when they learn.

Colleges should be able to award some degrees and diplomas, and there should be a role for the leading college providers of HE and the Mixed Economy Group,⁶¹ which could develop its role in higher education. One option is the creation of an organisation modelled on the widely respected Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) that could validate and quality assure degrees in FE as its core function. In another model, colleges should continue to be enabled to work with multiple HE institution sponsors to ensure responsiveness to the adult market and/or choose the model most suited to their post-19 populations.

Colleges as key players in developing the sustainability agenda

As large organisations, colleges can make a difference to sustainable development through raising awareness, involving learners in projects and 'greening' their operations. As already emphasised, colleges are constantly refurbishing buildings and extending plant. They also have experience since the early 1990s in delivering a curriculum for sustainability, both embedded in other qualifications and as self-standing courses. Interest in sustainability initiatives will grow, and colleges could adopt a broader role as role models and sites of expertise in green and wider sustainability issues, for example partnering with other organisations in Transition Towns or conservation initiatives, which would provide a good example of informal learning supporting a social movement or community initiatives.

Colleges as independent social entrepreneurs

Since 1993, colleges have understood themselves to be entrepreneurial, business-like organisations, able to flourish in the market whatever the challenge. In reality, after the first period of incorporation, which brought a rush of entrepreneurial activity, some of which was discredited, colleges have not had a lot of room to realise their entrepreneurial potential, given the weight of delivery of selective government targets.

⁶¹ The Mixed Economy Group of Colleges (known as MEG) is made up of 29 FE colleges who offer HE qualifications as well as FE provision to their local communities.

The vast majority of colleges see themselves also as serving both community/social and economic needs. In an era when it is expected that much adult learning will be informal and not publicly funded, there is an opportunity for colleges to develop as 'social entrepreneurs', for example in the fields of sustainability, healthy food and nutrition, and the cultural industries, and provide services while raising income for educational activities and financial support for learners. In the new era of adult and lifelong learning, in 2025 for example, colleges should be significantly less dependent on state funding and more independent, with multiple sources of income to enable their role as partners in local social enterprise.

Innovation, research and development

In the past, a key role for colleges was innovation; research and development; and product development in the industry sectors, crafts, trades and professions in which they offered vocational education and training.⁶² Colleges developed and offered new technical solutions, process improvements and inventions as part of their core function. They worked with trade bodies and their research associations. In the twenty-first century, colleges are already developing innovative new 'green' buildings and offer award schemes for staff and student innovations and inventions. College staff have developed a culture of practitioner research and development, working with HE institutions. This research is primarily into pedagogy, teaching and learning and is best reflected in the Further Education Research Network (now the Learning and Skills Research Network) and the enhanced role of FE practitioners in major Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded research schemes such as the Teaching and Learning Research Programme. A handful of colleges such as City College Norwich have specialist units that focus on research. There is a continual evolution of FE staff into full- or part-time research, as the CVs of academics in education departments of universities demonstrate.

In the future, it would serve both industry and the richness of the FE college education culture well if FE colleges were able to re-adopt their research and development for industry and business roles, as well as for social science research and the development of approaches to citizenship and belonging.⁶³ Colleges' technical and practical subject focus would position them well to take a role in sustainable development, trialling new approaches across curriculum areas.

⁶² Venables (1955).

⁶³ Unwin (2009).

Models, missions and purposes: a diversity of colleges?

The consultations that took place on the project identified a number of different models for FE colleges in the future of lifelong learning. This was not a rigid typology, but a preferred weighting of missions, values and purposes for an individual college or group of colleges. The suggestion is that a number of models are possible and can coexist rather than offering a single blueprint for colleges of the future.

All college leaders consulted in the course of the project agreed that specialist colleges are part of the overall shape of the FE college sector. The coexistence of general FE colleges and sixth form colleges, soon to be distinct legal entities, as well as specialist adult colleges and 'monotechs' in a given locality was not seen as problematic, and most thought the diversity was healthy, offering genuine choices to learners with a variety of needs. General FE colleges are the majority providers, but the range of other types of colleges varies widely. Not all sixth form colleges, perhaps the minority, have developed substantial adult programmes since 1993. Adult residential colleges and designated adult colleges are situated in the areas where historically they were established. Provision, broadly, is complementary, and in a healthy lifelong learning culture there will be more than enough learners to provide for.

The following ideas about the mission of FE colleges were offered in response to the challenge to think about a spectrum of colleges in the future. Ideas were expressed in terms of colleges' mission and purpose, their core constituencies, their plant, what is unique or specialised in their curricula, the balance of provision, and the essential character and profile of a particular college. An overwhelming finding of the report is that we need a pluralist and diverse system, incorporating large and small, general and specialist organisations.

The following 'categories' of colleges were put forward:

- colleges of vocational education;
- post-14 community colleges;
- mainly post-19 FE and HE organisations, variants of the US community college model;
- adult 'designated' colleges and adult residential colleges;
- post-25 organisations.

Colleges of vocational education

Colleges have a unique history and function as providers of vocational education. Vocational education policy over the last 20 years has been to develop systems

based on the measurement of competence in the workplace, in which employers, or proxy bodies for employers, have the lead role. It is essential for employers to take a lead role, but a better educated and skilled workforce would result from strategic partnerships between employers and colleges to provide full vocational education.

Colleges of vocational education would have the powers to award publicly and privately funded qualifications for bespoke employer training and professional development. Their adaptable range of awards would be subject to appropriate external validation and conform to standards set within a national qualifications and credit framework. These powers would enable colleges to design and deliver curricula and qualifications that fit closely with a particular employer's purpose. Adult learning for the workplace, with appropriate qualifications or certification, would replace a qualifications- and level-driven top-down skills model.

Vocational colleges could be established on a market model, competing with other colleges and other providers for state and employer resources. Alternatively, colleges could be a public service model in which colleges are recognised providers of education that encompasses knowledge, understanding and transferable capabilities, which are all needed for increasingly higher level jobs which are subject to permanently changing technologies and processes across all industry sectors.

Post-14 community colleges

Funding and curricula would be geared to learners over 14, at all levels including HE, and for all life stages. Colleges' curricula would be work related, for personal and professional development. Colleges would be encouraged to be inclusive and diverse, and they would be rewarded for reaching those most excluded and disengaged as much as for providing higher levels of learning including HE. In Geoff Stanton's phrase to the FE Select Committee, colleges would be 'the representative sector', with mixed participation by all social classes and those with the highest and lowest levels of achievement. Colleges would develop their curricula and skills to deal with increasingly 'spiky profiles', economic down times and the uncertainties of changing skills needs. Information, advice and guidance would be at the core of colleges' offer for learners. Colleges would work in close partnership with voluntary sector providers of advice to facilitate support for other aspects of life, such as health, housing, finance, and so on.

As far as priority groups are concerned, colleges would have a key role in substantive programmes of learning for NEETs, including the now growing adult NEETs groups, unemployed people and those people being encouraged to prepare for a return to the workplace over time, such as single parents and the older people the economy will increasingly need. Community colleges would work closely with schools on family literacy, ESOL and numeracy, as well as wider family learning. They would also have a strong remit to offer Entry Level learning as a priority, enabling people who experience multiple disadvantages to tackle their learning. This range of provision would give

colleges a key role in breaking the intergenerational cycles of disadvantage and advantage which research has now clearly shown to occur.⁶⁴

Community colleges, working with a range of partners in adult and community learning, local authorities, health trusts, the voluntary sector and faith communities, would help to develop a range of new programmes of learning and, where appropriate, accreditation for older learners, right through to the fourth age, and their carers. Programmes would support those still in work, help people over 60 maintain active and healthy lives and deal with increasing frailty, and engage with those with dementia and other mental health problems. In this model of FE, colleges' closeness to learners and communities would be reflected in the colleges' support for community and social action for an 'educated democracy' and education about social justice.

As with other college models, the ability to design awards to suit learners' needs would be essential, as would the use of credit for small steps in learning.

Post-19 community colleges

In this model, colleges are at the heart of a new post-19 lifelong learning settlement which draws on both the US Community College model and European vocational education systems. The vision of this model would be dedicated post-19 college (including university) campuses in every major town and sub-region, offering FE, HE, vocational and academic learning with the support for literacy, language and numeracy required for learners to achieve and progress. The majority of programmes would be at or above Level 3 and lead to qualifications, together with some Level 2 geared to re-sits and progression to Level 3, together with employer-led and personal development programmes for adults. Learning at or below Level 2, including literacy, numeracy and ESOL, advice and guidance would mainly be offered through partners. Education for those aged 14–19 would be offered by sixth form colleges and schools. Much literacy, numeracy, ESOL and ICT would be offered through community-based adult learning – LEA, voluntary sector and training providers – with which the college would operate in close partnership or on a federated basis, so that their learners would progress to the Community College.

Adult residential and specially designated colleges

The UK's tradition of specially designated adult colleges, non-residential and residential, with their roots in nineteenth century social and labour movements, were considered an essential continuing element of the diversity of learning in the future. With their experience and expertise, they should play a strong role in the development of a citizens' curriculum.

⁶⁴ Parsons and Bynner (2008); De Coulon, Meschi and Vignoles (2008).

Post-25 adult colleges

The idea of post-25 adult colleges draws on recent brain research, as well as on beliefs and practices in Scandinavian countries, which suggest that thresholds to adulthood are changing. Many adults returning to learn in their mid 20s are likely to be still in the process of becoming financially and emotionally independent. Many will be seeking to restart their lives after difficult experiences. There is a case for suggesting a place for adults to study without a large 14–19 cohort with different needs and lifestyles.

Policy: enabling FE colleges to succeed in adult and lifelong learning

A number of recent initiatives, research and development, and policy analysis have made recommendations for changes to policy which would enable FE colleges better to realise their potential to meet adult and lifelong learning needs in the future.

The CBI has recognised that demographic trends mean that FE colleges will become adult organisations whatever governments do, so they should continue to develop their role, particularly in working directly with employers, developing broad capabilities, rather than 'mere skills', with flexibility in their delivery of learning.⁶⁵

Delorenzi⁶⁶ argues for a renewed focus on individuals within a demand-led system and on prioritising those with low or no skills and unemployed people. As have the participants in this project, Delorenzi⁶⁷ and O'Leary and Oakley⁶⁸ argue for a radical simplification of national structures and systems, and the use of intermediary organisations and brokers, including state support for Sector Skills Councils and their statutory roles in qualifications. Nash and Jones⁶⁹ for example, set out a wide-ranging set of recommendations, not least regarding the need for a stable, well-qualified, better paid and professionally supported workforce, the end of 'benefit traps' and inequalities in funding, and the financial support of learners. Fletcher and Perry⁷⁰ write of the undervalued and underpaid 'community of professionals' in FE and the inequitable funding of learners across sectors.

All recent commentators argue that the development of a lifelong learning culture will depend on greater devolution of powers to providers and local government, and stress the importance of FE colleges playing a strategic role. There is consensus about the need to address inequalities in funding regimes and financial support for learners across colleges, school sixth forms and higher education, based on student need and income rather than on the level of the course or the institution offering it. Tuckett⁷¹ sets out a menu of improvements to FE which together, he argues, would help make current and future systems work better.

The points below reflect areas in which thinking and research supports a different approach to policy for FE colleges, which would also benefit other providers and the adult and lifelong learning system as a whole:

⁶⁵ CBI (2009).

⁶⁶ Delorenzi (2007).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ O'Leary and Oakley (2008).

⁶⁹ Nash and Jones (2008).

⁷⁰ Fletcher and Perry (2008).

⁷¹ Tuckett (2008).

- The UK should develop the US approach, part of Barack Obama's election pledge, to offer an '**affordable college education for all**'. This would have to be reflected in policies whereby FE college learners, full and part time, received the same financial deal as HE learners.
- There should be a settled view and acceptance of the **diversity and complexity** of the populations that colleges serve and the programmes and qualifications which follow, and the **social as well as economic role of colleges**.
- A **learner-led system** should be as strong a part of demand-led approaches to adult learning as employer-led systems, so that colleges and other providers can be rewarded for providing what learners and their communities and employees need as individuals.
- There should be the promotion of a coherent system of **unitisation and credit**, working towards a simpler set of qualifications which could include a broad qualification comparable to the US General Educational Development (GED), which has wide public recognition and value.
- **A lifelong learning entitlement**, to amount to five years' education – similar to the 16–21 two-plus-three system of supported learning, with two years at Level 3 and three years' degree-level education – could take the form of discrete elements that learners accumulate towards a larger qualification, whether at Level 2 or a Foundation Degree or degree. Learning accounts or learning budgets could be used as the currency.

Reforms to college funding could include:

- **The majority of funding to colleges (up to 80 per cent) to be flexible**, deployed by colleges to meet local need, with an agreed percentage to meet national targets. Flexible funding is justified on the grounds that colleges are in the best position to know and respond appropriately to their communities' and local employers' needs. Funding should be incentivised to relate closely to users at local level, with colleges designing programmes and awards by contracting with clients directly. Discretionary funding would be the foundation of a system of trust in FE professionalism, subject to appropriate lines of accountability.
- **More funding to learners** to support a learner-led system, with financial support and savings incentives introduced to facilitate the learning that adults want to undertake, not only for a limited number of courses that fit national priorities. Funding would include a range of instruments – vouchers, grants, loans and tax incentives – in a package comparable to full-time 16–18 and HE support.
- **Funding models to enable flexible modes of study**: where-you-are and when-you-can modes of study, including home study, with programme and support materials, flexible and open learning, coaching, mentoring, intensive and extensive provision, and the ability to dip in and out as an expected and planned norm rather than learners being characterised as either attenders or drop-outs.

- College funding for an enhanced role in **applied research, technological and product development and innovation** for business and industry and the curriculum.
- **Learner-proofing of all government policy** proposals related to adult and lifelong learning and FE colleges.
- **Abolition and/or reduction of state support for intermediaries and brokers** such as Sector Skills Councils and Train to Gain, but the retention of support for shared portals and networks for employers and learners to access provision, and the continuation of personal advisers in adult guidance and careers services.
- **A mid-life learning MOT** – which, it is suggested could be at 50, with entitlements including a learning account system to support identified learning needs – to form part of the lifelong learning entitlement.
- **Putting back the bottom rungs of the ladder: entry level should be an enduring policy priority** to tackle intergenerational transfer of low skills and systemic social and economic inequality.
- **Adequately funded embedding of basic skills**, linked to a citizens' curriculum in vocational education, from Level 1 to HE levels.

Appendix A: A brief history of colleges

Colleges' potential contribution to adult learning in the future needs to be set in the context of their long history and development over nearly 200 years as part of local and national learning ecologies and systems. This historical sketch aims to help illuminate what colleges could bring from their past to their future.

FE colleges have their roots in two main traditions and types of local organisation.

Firstly, colleges' roots lie in nineteenth-century education and training organised by and for working class people in communities. These organisations were exemplified by mutual improvement societies, co-operatives, temperance organisations and other associational movements, and the Quaker-led adult schools, which taught literacy, helped families cope with money, and provided other practical help, and education that was explicitly part of radical social and political movements. Many of these offered an open-ended, often informal education. A wide range of subjects were studied, with literacy, grammar and number work at the heart of learning. This group could broadly be defined as being social movement and self-improvement based.

Secondly, colleges' roots lie in education sponsored by middle class employers and philanthropists and social reformers to develop craft skills, applied science and practical work-related subjects, as well as liberal education for working class people, particularly artisans and craftspeople and the 'aristocracy of labour'. The latter organisations were essentially locally run and managed, and were exemplified by mechanics' institutes and literary institutes dating back to the 1820s. Later forms included working men's colleges. Both kinds of organisations offered a fertile mix of formal and informal learning, starting with literacy and arithmetic, clerical skills, vocational education and craft training. They also offered learning to satisfy communities of interest, individuals' curiosities and personal development. And they offered subjects such as social sciences, philosophy and humanities, and scientific subjects such as mathematics, astronomy, economics and engineering.

Many of today's FE colleges descend in an unbroken line from mechanics' institutes and working men's colleges (e.g. People's College Nottingham, and Mary Ward). With their remit for adult basic education, these colleges still engage, too, with the concerns of the organic learning in communities, which flourished in the nineteenth century. Technical colleges emerged as part of the new state education system following legislation in the 1880s, and this next generation of vocationally oriented organisations for post-school learning was formally recognised and publicly funded. Colleges became dedicated to vocational education and support for those in apprenticeships or young people in half-time work as well as at school. Although technical colleges continued to work with adults, they were distinct from the growing number of organisations offering a liberal arts education or more academically oriented recreational learning.

From the early twentieth century, colleges became part of local authority provision. Colleges' core provision included sandwich courses, apprenticeship education and 'night school' for people in work, leading to vocational qualifications. New organisations for working class adult learning, notably the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and Ruskin College, were founded and flourished at the beginning of the twentieth century. These organisations introduced higher education, and their 'tutorial class' curriculum introduced compulsory writing and essays, which successfully attracted very different men and women than the university extension lectures: educationally ambitious manual and craft workers and trade unionists, rather than a predominantly middle class audience attending out of personal interest.

The 1944 Education Act and subsequent acts gave colleges a broader remit and the name they have borne since. Further education colleges became an alternative to schools for school-leaving-certificate resits and A-level programmes, alongside their employment-related tradition.

Before and after 1944, FE and technical colleges that developed significant amounts of higher education and significant numbers of qualifications and undertook industry- and business-related applied research functions were re-categorised as higher education institutions, including through legislation. This left FE colleges as the providers of lower level learning, with vocational education still at their core. As the system of HNCs and Diplomas was widely developed in the 1960s, colleges offered major vocational programmes to sub-degree level; over the last three decades, colleges have developed more and more HE provision.

At present, colleges have a more or less 'mixed economy' of FE and HE, and none plan to become HE institutions, except through merger with existing universities, as was the case, for example, in the Thames Valley. As far as adult learning is concerned, legislation and local authority regulations have continued to change, at times promoting a strong role for colleges, then lessening their role. At different times and in different places, adult and further have been distinctive services with clear boundaries; at other times, FE colleges have offered a wide range of non-vocational learning. And in times of education cutbacks, the non-statutory nature of adult learning has resulted in adult education being substantially subsumed in FE, a statutory service.

An important development, relevant to the future of lifelong learning, came with the introduction of general and liberal studies. In the period after the Second World War, concern grew about the narrowness of much specialised and vocational education, in HE as well as FE. In the 1950s, the National Institute of Adult Education (NIAE; now NIACE), the Association of Technical Institutions and college principals set up a national committee of enquiry into the vocational and non-vocational elements of FE.⁷² The debate which led to the enquiry centred on the need for adults to be able to write lucidly and accurately, but also, in the view of many, to have 'a thorough acquaintance with literature, poetry and drama' and to learn history and social studies. Their report

⁷² Venables (1955).

led to the 1956 government circulars which established liberal studies and general education in FE colleges. The strong liberal studies tradition in FE that followed came to an end partly because it became a 'bolt on', Friday afternoon routine rather than being integrated into vocational or academic curricula. Nothing similar has replaced it, except, to a small extent, the 16–19 citizenship curriculum introduced by the Labour Government, led by the work of Bernard Crick.

Since the 1970s, colleges have expanded their role in adult learning. In the 1970s' economic downturn, colleges provided programmes funded by the Manpower Services Commission for unemployed young people and adults and were encouraged to target specific social groups as the labour market changed, such as women returners to a job market where part-time service industries were replacing manufacturing jobs. The emphasis was on training, up-skilling and retraining for work. FE was central to several national initiatives that linked education and the workplace, such as the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), PICKUP, the Manpower Services Commission programmes such as the Youth Opportunities Scheme (YOPS), the adult schemes TOPS and pre-TOPS and their successors. Preparatory courses for vocational programmes were devised which included basic education and life skills, such as pre-TOPS and the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE). ESOL and literacy and/or numeracy to support unemployed people's re-entry into work grew over the 70s and 80s. The number of qualifications and awarding bodies proliferated in all curriculum areas.

From the mid 1980s, the system of NVQs was developed – competency-based qualifications defined by new occupational standards and led by bodies representing employers. In a proliferation of reforms, the position of colleges was in a constant state of change. The needs of employers and the workplace were re-confirmed as central. Education became part of the wider marketised approach to public services. Private training providers increasingly became the competitors of FE in the provision of assessment-led training, seen as distinct from education, offering the work-based route to NVQs for young people from 16, usually those with low or no qualifications. Colleges, however, became the majority provider of NVQs, offering simulated workplaces. Employers' adoption of NVQs independently assessed in the workplace was half-hearted at most and remains a challenge despite successive government incentives.

As HE expanded, so did HE in FE. The expansion of adult learners in HE from the 1980s encouraged the development of access and foundation courses, run in colleges and with an accreditation system (initiated by the National Open College Network) based on units and credits. This trend strengthened colleges' role in academic as well as vocational programmes and their credentials as a comprehensive education service. Through the 1980s, colleges developed an increasingly eclectic curriculum, responding to continuous policy reform. By 1988, colleges, following schools, managed their own budgets.

In 1991, it was announced that colleges would be 'incorporated' as organisations from April 1993, independent of the local education authorities which they had been part of for almost a century. Media reports at the time said that colleges were to be 'set free'; college leaders almost universally welcomed their new independence. FE colleges became independent 'corporations', with college governors as the members of the corporation. Lines of democratic accountability locally were weakened, and local autonomy within a national compliance framework became the model. This was arguably the biggest ever single change for colleges, before or since.

The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 set out a clear remit for FE colleges and the curriculum offer they were funded to provide. A dedicated Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) was established, based on the Polytechnics Funding Council established some years earlier when polytechnics were similarly incorporated. The FEFC was a small, centralised organisation with a skeletal but expert professional staff at regional and national level, with representation by college leaders at all levels.

For the eight years after 1992, FE colleges gained a clear and distinctive identity, although not a homogenous one. Alongside general FE colleges, membership of the FE sector also included sixth form colleges and specialist and designated organisations, including the long-standing adult residential colleges such as Ruskin, Hillcroft and Northern colleges, and four London colleges for adults. All of these had their roots in social movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Also included in the 1992 settlement were agricultural and horticultural colleges, the 'monotechs' such as colleges of building, printing and more, and residential colleges for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. The FEFC offered clearly focused leadership and management of the new system, including an inspectorate. The achievement of qualifications, teaching and learning quality, management and governance were the cornerstones of the FEFC's approach. The FEFC's style was reflected in regular circulars about subjects ranging from funding, to governance, to data collection, to marketing and quality issues. A new funding methodology was established, including core funding, growth funding and an open-ended element of demand-led funding. There was freedom for colleges to franchise to other organisations at rates set by colleges. The funding methodology aimed to change behaviours - to increase efficiency by driving down unit costs and increase the achievement of qualifications with rewards for competition and achievement.

The FEFC was centralist and highly directive. The FEFC created a new funding regime, rewarded people for achieving qualifications rather than just participating, drove down unit costs and created the most comprehensive collection of learner data ever undertaken - the Individualised Student Record (ISR), now known as the Individualised Learner Record (ILR). The FEFC also commissioned and scrutinised colleges' strategic plans and, to assess and promote quality improvement, created the first ever FE inspectorate. Colleges' sense of independence was short lived. Colleges took on a lot of new responsibilities, yet their powers were limited. As far as the role of colleges as employers was concerned, the focus was on national advice from the college

employers' forum (later Association of Colleges), but decisions were taken locally. This weakened national collective bargaining, as FE corporations were free to establish their own conditions of service within legal frameworks. National systems for contracts, salaries and terms and conditions were replaced by local ones. Colleges acted like the businesses they were asked to become, addressed lecturers' and other staff groups' long-standing conditions of service and underwent painful years of conflict. The FEFC years were a paradoxical mixture of autonomy and constraint.

Competitiveness between colleges was a core concept in the move to incorporate colleges, and funding mechanisms were used to reduce the widely varying levels of funding for each learner. Colleges were given powers as the conduit for the funding of adult learning organisations, known as 'external institutions', which were offering provision set out in the Further and Higher Education Act; basic education was prominent in this. In addition, a separate public-private system was set up to oversee the work-based training route and much of adult skills development in the workplace, including Employee Development and Assistance Programme (EDAP) schemes in some areas. The Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) were funded to contract with training providers, including colleges. At first, TECs were actively led by local employers who formed TEC boards. A separate inspectorate for TEC-funded provision was established. Through the 1990s, two major parallel and competing systems were established, further complicated by separate arrangements for the funding of programmes for the adult unemployed and another system for non-accredited adult learning, over which LEAs had control.

In the 1990s, colleges demonstrated how successfully entrepreneurial, flexible and responsive to both employers and community-focused provision the best of them could be. Colleges rapidly grew and modernised. Some colleges exploited the new private finance initiative to start ambitious new builds. Adult learning, much of which was built into the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, grew, in particular, adult basic skills. Other adult learning was initiated by franchising provision to community-based organisations. Enrolments and learner numbers increased year on year, although the new recording and measurement system was unreliable, and precise growth numbers were hard to assess for several years. In the permissive environment of franchising until the late 1990s, some colleges sailed close to the wind in terms of financial probity and ethical practices. Bad practices were exposed, and the independence of the whole sector suffered, with a significant tightening of accountability and FEFC funding systems. It is often forgotten, though, that some excellent adult learning outreach and community-based work was done through experimenting and risk-taking and community partnerships. Innovation and risk-taking gained a bad name through a small minority of colleges where extreme risk-taking, poor financial management and even misuse of public funds were later unearthed as bad practices. Many colleges innovated radically and successfully in the way the curriculum was delivered, developing open and flexible learning across the college. The tension in incorporated colleges between flexibility, autonomy, innovation and

risk-taking on the one hand, and the weight of top-down requirements, rigidity and regulation on the other, remains in play. The latter has had the upper hand since the late 1990s.

There was growth in the 1990s in other areas of the college curriculum. Higher education in FE grew in the 1990s for local, part-time adult learners and young people, through partnership and franchising arrangements with universities. These developments offer the beginnings of the idea of regional universities, combining FE and HE. By 1997, when the Dearing Inquiry into HE reported, approximately 10 per cent of HE learners were in FE – more than the overall HE undergraduate population at the time of the Russell Report in the 1970s. As far as non-accredited adult learning was concerned, many LEAs also contracted their non-accredited personal development and recreational provision not included in the Further and Higher Education Act to colleges to provide.

The 1990s was the period when colleges aspired to develop on the US model of community colleges. Colleges worked on the concept of a college diploma at Level 3, using credit-accumulation models developed by the Further Education Unit/LSDA, by the Open College movement, and in the USA and New Zealand. On the vocational side, colleges saw the German dual system as a model with its blend of vocational and liberal education and apprenticeship education. The German system was seen as avoiding the education–training divide by recognising that every occupation should have a valued qualification that represents both a broad education and focused occupational training.

Policy-makers, particularly senior civil servants, were sceptical, cautious and usually dismissive of proposals for change instigated from 'below'. The new Labour Government instead focused on the underachievement of colleges, particularly A level results and Level 3 in general, and the poor quality of literacy and numeracy provision which had been exposed by the OECD's IALS report. The first major Labour initiative on colleges, the Standards Fund in 1997, set the approach for the coming years. Despite a good reception for the Helena Kennedy committee's report to the FEFC on widening participation,⁷³ and the idealism of the lifelong learning strategy the Learning Age, the Government's emphasis was on a tough contract with FE: it offered significantly more money in return for better results with hypothecated funding based on a series of initiatives and reforms. However, a core demand of Kennedy, the entitlement to a first Level 3, has since become policy, even if couched in the rigid framework of whole qualifications.

In 1999, the Government proposed to abolish the TECs and the FEFC and create a new funding and planning body, the Learning and Skills Council, with 47 local councils and an overarching national body. This reflected the Government's merger of education and employment into a new department. Colleges initially welcomed this, seeing it as the successful result of lobbying for the abolition of the TECs. In reality, it

⁷³ Kennedy (1997).

was the FEFC and its systems that disappeared, while the culture and staff of TECs, not least because of their size and TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment)) regulations, survived to run the new system. Knowledge of FE at local level by decision makers and planners was minimal. In addition, colleges lost their distinctive identity, becoming 'providers' alongside an array of education and training organisations ranging from micro-business to large employers. Colleges lost profile, influence and clarity of mission alongside their competitors, although there were some welcome incentives to work in local partnerships.

Colleges remain the majority provider of adult learning, despite falling numbers of students over recent years. They offer a wider range of provision. Just under half their learners are now adults, whereas less than five years ago it was eight in every ten.⁷⁴ However, policy developments, including the FE White Paper that followed the Foster Review of FE, the 14–19 reforms and, most recently, *World Class Skills*,⁷⁵ which followed the Leitch Review of the UK's skills needs to 2020, have all attempted to simplify colleges' mission. The aim of policy has been to firm up colleges' economic mission, strengthen 14–19 provision, and give colleges a primary if not exclusive focus on vocational and employer-led provision for young people. Colleges are to deliver the whole qualifications at Levels 2 and 3 that are seen as the key to skills for competitiveness. They are to compete for demand-led provision, i.e. publicly funded but employer-led programmes, dominated by the Train to Gain initiative. The sequence of policy initiatives has challenged colleges to be 'contestable' in an increasingly competitive marketplace for employer-led and work-based learning.

To be an integral part of the national skills agenda, colleges must now work ever more closely with employers and with their industry-sector lead bodies, the Sector Skills Councils. Colleges must compete with other providers for what has been their core funding and core work. A major challenge for colleges is to get closer to employers while working within a system in which intermediaries broker deals between employers and providers. Some large colleges have now won the right to work directly with employers on Train to Gain, but the key issues remain: funding has moved from colleges to employers and brokers, making smaller colleges potentially unviable and further mergers inevitable.

The unpopularity of intermediary organisations – quangos and agencies which are regularly abolished and replaced, and profit-making private contractors – can in part be explained by the Gershon Review. Gershon advocated the shrinking of the civil service to create more resources for the front line to achieve government targets. In providers' perceptions, this has not happened. Instead, restructurings have brought costly new intermediary bodies into being, which function as outsourced policy agencies, with further funding going to private intermediary companies to ensure that government initiatives are implemented by colleges (colleges are not trusted to deliver government

⁷⁴ NIACE (2005).

⁷⁵ DIUS (2007).

initiatives without central 'support'). Meanwhile, colleges have not been given funding direct to implement policy, and funding for adult learners has shrunk. Open-ended, non-accredited 'other' provision has been publicly pronounced by policy-makers as less important than work-related skills – 'plumbing not pilates'.

Appendix B: Pen portraits and college viewpoints: four different colleges

Below are sketches of four different FE colleges: two general FE colleges in England, one in Jersey and one specialist adult college. These 'pen portraits' are based on interviews with college principals, their views and reflections, together with material from college and other local sources and Ofsted reports. The pen portraits include college leaders' views of current policy and practice and ways forward for the future of colleges' work in adult and lifelong learning. Ideas throughout this paper have drawn on these and other colleges' perspectives.

New College Nottingham

New College Nottingham (*ncn*) is one of the largest general FE colleges in England, based in the city of Nottingham, where 279,000 people live. The college was established in 1998. The college and its predecessor organisations have had a long history of service to Nottingham's industry and business and to its diverse communities. At the heart of the college's operations in the old city centre are the refurbished Lace Market buildings. To walk into the airy modern interior of the old Lace Market is like walking into a future imagined by the past, with modern technology replacing old machinery: a 21st century college, housed in factory buildings where 19th century workers would also pray and learn before and after work in a basement chapel. An attractive subsidised college restaurant, whose main clients are local residents, is close by, reflecting the high standard of hospitality and catering programmes at the college. The college's largest predecessor organisation was one of the first colleges to undertake a Private Finance Initiative which, in a long-drawn-out and complex process, starting in the 1990s, enabled the refurbishment of the old Lace Market, and *ncn* has continued to develop its presence in the city centre. As well as lace, the city's industrial and commercial bases included textiles, bicycles and pharmaceutical retailing. It was the headquarters of 'Boots the chemist'. The college's curriculum now reflects both its traditional strengths and the city's current commercial profile: fashion, textiles and art and design, for example, are prominent, as are the cultural industries and education. All FE subject areas are taught at the college. Education has a high profile in the city, and is a major employment sector.

Nottingham and its periphery has two universities; New College Nottingham; two other FE large colleges and a VI Form college, all of which are based in or close to the city. *ncn* serves a demographically and ethnically mixed city. Thirty one per cent of the city population live in the 10 per cent most deprived areas nationally.

New College Nottingham has over 19,000 learners. They study on programmes ranging from literacy, numeracy and ESOL through to HE courses, with a balance

of vocational and academic programmes at all levels. There is an extensive offer for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. The majority of learners are adults, i.e. over the age of 18. Over 60 per cent of learners are part-time, and nearly 60 per cent are women. The college has over 22 per cent black and minority ethnic (BME) learners, whereas the BME communities of Nottingham make up 15 per cent of the population. There are, significantly, programmes for employers, and around 1,500 learners in Train to Gain provision run by the college. The college has multiple HE partners and a wide-ranging HE programme of diploma, foundation degree and degree programmes. The college runs the adult and community learning programme commissioned by the local authority. New College Nottingham is one of the '157' group of colleges: a group of the biggest colleges set up following the Foster Review of FE in 2005 which suggested these should have a stronger voice in promoting the work of FE. The mergers of smaller FE colleges and institutions between 1998 and 1999 have made New College the large, diverse college it now is. Further mergers of Nottingham's city-based colleges in Nottingham are being considered.

The college's main predecessor organisations had a high profile among the proponents of modernisation and change in FE in the 1990s and early 2000s; one was a leading college in the franchising boom of the 1990s, championing the adoption of the US Community College model of FE, and working with other leading colleges for a nationally recognised FE college diploma at Level 3, and a 2+2 F/HE system, with colleges awarding Associate Degrees. The current college leaders also see the post-19 US Community College model as a positive way forward for FE in adult and lifelong learning. The college principal's vision for lifelong learning in the future is for FE colleges to be at the centre of 'an affordable college education for all'. Barack Obama's aim for the USA should become the natural aspiration for people of all ages in the UK. A college education would come to mean that FE and HE would be equally valued. Colleges would major on Level 3 onwards, but all levels of learning and progression would be provided through the college in co-operation with the adult and community-based learning organisations which would help people progress to a college education. The US Community College is a favoured model, with credit accumulation leading to a simplified system of universally recognised awards.

Adult learning, including basic skills, has been a major curriculum area. Thirty one per cent of *ncn*'s current HE and Level 4 learners are from widening participation areas, as are 47 per cent of its overall learner numbers. The college wishes to promote its adult ethos and environment, believing that a mixed age approach benefits young people and that there is no tension between serving both populations together in one institution, provided support for learners, including additional learning support, are central to a college's ethos.

In adult learning in the last few years, *ncn* has been hit by a double blow: reductions to adult funding at the same time as a rise in 16–18 learners. Within one year, there was a significant shift towards young people. The younger demographic profile of students

coming to the college in the past two to three years has helped to maintain numbers, as this trend went with the grain of policy developments which favoured young people. This, though, is a short-term phenomenon. Looking 15–20 years ahead, the population is ageing and this will affect recruitment to FE in Nottingham as elsewhere. At *ncn*, fee rises for adults were the unavoidable result of policy and funding changes. The college has had no funding cushion available to support non-accredited learning. Adult education has rapidly declined. In the last two to three years adult numbers have dropped, although they are now stabilising. While some colleges have been able to divert funds from other areas to bolster numbers, this has not been an option at *ncn*. There has been a loss of 12,000 adult FE learners between 2003/04 to 2006/07. Adult numbers have now stabilised. The college is still hitting its targets. The number of low-income students on fee remission has risen. Adult learning grants have been an important support, and adults have been able to take up the first free Level 2 in large numbers. There has been a big reduction in ESOL and the low Entry Levels in Skills for Life because of concentration on Level 2. Unlike some colleges, which had two to three years' support funding to adjust to new priorities, *ncn* had to make its changes within a year.

The current decline in 'other provision' resulting from policy decisions, followed by what the college's principal termed 'ad hoc palliatives', have brought adult learning closer to an acceptable level, but unnecessary 'collateral damage' has been caused. A short-sighted approach to adults in FE has undermined FE's great strengths in adult learning, for example the college's ability to pick up and deal with people with 'spiky profiles', and to use its closeness to the labour market to help people into jobs and better career and life chances. The longer-term vision of the college principal is to see an entitlement to part-time learning for adults over time, which is equivalent to the five-year entitlement for 16 year olds: two plus three years supported study to graduate level.

A key element of *ncn*'s vision for the future of lifelong learning is of modern, purpose-built city centre FE/HE campuses at the heart of every major town and city, serving communities, employers and individuals, complemented by dispersed provision delivered in local communities and IT enhanced learning to enable flexibility and progression. Environmental awareness is a growing focus of college activity. The principal's vision is also of FE as a more internationally networked sector. The college sees itself as a 'cosmopolitan college' in the heart of a 'great student city' and international students have been coming for 30 years for courses from GCSE to university foundation and HND. Students from different countries and continents study there, and formal links are in place with institutions in other countries including India and African countries. The principal sees a successful future FE and lifelong learning system continually learning from other countries' systems and economies.

Oxford and Cherwell Valley College

The mission of Oxford and Cherwell Valley College (OCVC) is to foster 'a love for learning' and the clear priority of its leadership is to create learning environments which will support learners to stay in learning. OCVC is a large general FE college, the result of mergers between colleges. It operates from four main sites as well as in community venues and workplaces. All FE subject areas are offered with the exception of land-based industries. The college has a strong reputation for its specialist provision for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. It offers provision from basic skills to higher education through academic and vocational programmes. There are high success rates for adult learners in literacy, numeracy and ESOL and at Level 1.

The college serves Oxford city, including its poorest and socially most problematic rim estates such as Blackbird Leys and Rose Hill. OCVC also serves the north of Oxfordshire including some of the county's market towns and rural areas with pockets of deprivation and poverty. Much of Oxford and Oxfordshire are prosperous with high levels of employment, but there are nevertheless deprived urban and rural areas and many indices of poverty in Oxford city. Once a leading car manufacturing town, Oxford's largest employment sector is now education, with two universities as well as schools and community education. Culturally, it could be argued that the FE college sits 'between towns', as in Raymond Williams's depiction of the division between the university and the population of a traditionally industrial city. The car industry, now owned by BMW and producing only the Mini, has shrunk (in mid-February 2009 850 workers have been laid off). The new growth industries in the college's catchment area are high-tech, including bio-tech enterprises, many spawned by university research, and highly specialised engineering.

The college has 2,501 full time courses and 1,000 part-time vocational programmes. There are several HE partners, including Oxford Brookes, the University of Derby, the University of Bedfordshire and De Montfort University, covering several curriculum areas. There are over 6,000 full-time equivalent learners. Over 7,000 adult part-time learners study at OCVC, as well as 800 full-time adult learners. There is also a substantial offer to employers in the area, with approximately 2,346 learners on 'Train to Gain' programmes.

The current financial situation is challenging, with 83 per cent of funds coming from the LSC. The college's leadership recognises the need to diversify funding sources. However, a new building is being proposed in Oxford city centre, which, funding permitting, will open up a hidden stretch of waterfront to the public. The other two sites also have proposed new developments. The college management team is planning the new build carefully to optimise the college's plans to transform teaching and learning, and they give credit to the Labour Government for enabling extensive and innovative new building in FE.

In terms of the adult learning climate and funding, the college reports that approximately 40 per cent of adult places have disappeared over the past two years;

that is, 11,164 full-time learners are down to 800, and some 11,000 part-time learners are down to under 7,000. The college reports that this results directly from the cuts to part-time courses and other provision, including the changes to ESOL, and the end of previously funded short and taster courses.

A recent Ofsted report was positive across all subjects and on the college's overall effectiveness. The college's own top priority is to transform for the better the teaching and learning experience, optimising the quality and extent of spaces dedicated to social and cultural activities by learners and other groups of users. Its philosophy is that learning is social life, and vice versa, and that narrowly defined performance indicators (qualifications) should not be the only aims for educators. The college wishes to build a strong learning infrastructure around such social spaces, extended sports facilities and activities outside the classroom. It observes that when students first come to the college, their key concerns are the vocational or academic curriculum which is their primary learning goal, but that they soon wish to branch out. This is particularly the case for the many learners who come into the college's centres from outlying areas, and spend only part of their day in classrooms. Better use of ICT is also part of the college's planning for a more versatile, learner-centred curriculum,.

Learners are to take a greater part in the development and running of the college as its users. There is already student involvement in decisions about the design of new buildings and the choice of architects. The college is recognised for the quality of support for learners and the 'tolerant and respectful ethos' as Ofsted has described it. There are plans to involve learners in teaching. For example, they are investigating extending the 'Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector' (PTLLS) programme so that second and third year students can become assistant teachers, mentors and coaches. The college argues that these learners are already informal teachers, helping others to learn something they themselves have learned. This is championed as a valuable approach for adult learners. The fully qualified teacher becomes the overseer, validator and assessor of provision, supported by assistants, technicians, experts and learner-teachers. The aim is to start with selected vocational areas, e.g. Hair and Beauty. Involvement in teaching could be linked with fee waivers as a reward for responsibility.

The college sees the changing characteristics of learners as a significant challenge for the short and longer term future. Traditionally, FE has served working-class learners and, in particular, educated 'proficient technicians' across business and industry. With the loss of manufacturing, including in a city such as Oxford, the profile of learners has been changing profoundly since the 1970s and more rapidly since the 1980s. There is a need nationally to think through the changing nature of working-class communities, consider the nature of work becoming available and the work people want to do, and design adult learning to meet the emerging picture. Current attitudes, argues the college's principal, are based on 1960s notions of the work ethic, work expectations and patterns of family, parenting and community, all of which are now very different. Colleges can play a key role in re-thinking how best to serve working-class

communities in the future, rather than 'improve' and admonish communities. They can also help to ensure that the needs of employers match the work needs and desires in communities. In respect of this adult learning, the cost of failure to individuals, society and the economy will be high if far-reaching changes are not addressed in education, and politicians should consider this when making cuts in adult learning.

In the most deprived areas of Oxford, unemployment, poverty and low self-esteem are widespread. In Blackbird Leys, over 45 per cent of people have no qualifications at all. Seventeen areas of Oxford are among the 30 per cent most deprived areas in England. Unemployment is at six per cent but rising, and there is a high level of child poverty: 22 per cent of under-16s live in low income households. Poor parenting patterns and drug misuse are common. But colleges can play a valuable role in helping people back into education, e.g. previously disengaged young women whose interest in education is often rekindled by their interest in their children. FE needs to work closely with schools, Primary Care Trusts and the voluntary sector to develop people's independence and motivation to sustain learning. The college sees the need for financial incentives for the voluntary sector to help get people into learning and on into FE colleges, with clearer progression routes from adult and community learning (ACL) to college.

Soft skills are seen as an integral part of the curriculum and should be recognised and assessed. The qualifications system will have to be much more flexible, offering 'quick successes' for adult learners, to demonstrate progress at points throughout the learning process, e.g. formative assessment, online assessment and adult counselling on how to learn best – e.g. for someone with a history of mental health difficulties, or someone who has lost their job with little prospect of finding another job quickly. Retraining for new and different kinds of work and supporting organised leisure and social activity which involves learning could be priorities for adult learning for working-class people, including 'going back to the future', as traditional and new pursuits such as dog-racing and allotment keeping flourish; and new kinds of work such as care for the elderly proliferate. Workplaces are increasingly lonely places and organised activity outside work will play an essential role in holding communities together.

As well as the college's involvement in Train to Gain there is a wide range of employer training, including, for example, training Oxford's school cooks, Cowley motor workers and health and social care workers, including online tutor support provision. One aspect of Train to Gain is seen by college leaders to be right. Workplaces are the best place to engage many adults – but there is a need to enable the real depth of knowledge and skills to be learned, and replace narrow assessment-led approaches. A new training model was suggested by college staff: the State should fund individuals to train at FE colleges, and employers pay a premium for the trained employee. The State (through FE) is in effect the nationalised employee training agency, clawing the money back from employers who buy the finished product, enabling the State to fund the next trainees.

The college is a provider of teacher education and professional development, but believes that government reforms, in pursuing qualifications for teachers, have neglected to develop the pedagogical and theoretical content of teacher training and professional development, so that the education of FE teachers has not necessarily been improved. 'Better qualified' does not necessarily mean 'better educated'. OCVL sees an enhanced role for FE colleges nationally in developing and offering teacher education qualifications and CPD with a deeper pedagogical content and fit for future lifelong learning challenges.

Skills can be upgraded without educating the whole person in ways which enable them to move on in work and learning. FE colleges add value to adult learning through their ability to motivate learners by enabling both cognitive and emotional development. Adults are often blocked. FE colleges offer a rich education for adults which improves their confidence as well as their occupational skills.

Mary Ward Centre

The mission of the Mary Ward Centre (MWC), founded as a settlement in 1896 in Bloomsbury, London, is 'to promote public education and social service for the benefit of the community'. Its founder, Mary Ward (better known as the novelist Mrs Humphry Ward) described it as 'a place for ideals, a place for enthusiasm', and its staff still adhere to that ethos, seeing the relevance to the current and future world of the culture and values of the 1890s and 1900s, when social reformers like Octavia Hill were involved, and George Bernard Shaw, Gustav Holst and Sidney Webb gave lectures at the Centre.

MWC is one of a small group of colleges in and outside London known as Specially Designated Institutions. Its mission is adult learning and with the other colleges it currently has a limited period of protected funding to offer learning which is not accredited and which is designed to attract adults whatever their learning goals. MWC is deeply rooted in its local community. It is still based in Bloomsbury: the organisation moved from Mary Ward House in Tavistock Place to Queen Square in 1980. The Centre works closely with other organisations, particularly with the voluntary sector. MWC is a lifelong learning centre, primarily for adult learning, but also works in co-operation with others on community-based activities. There was a Mary Ward Centre Youth Club, recently handed over to Coram's Fields to run and a Mary Ward Legal Advice Centre.

MWC is a focused, confident organisation which sees itself as in a healthy position, unassailable and still highly ambitious. It is popular with students and earning enough to cross-subsidise provision so that they can benefit all who need their provision, including ESOL learners. The badge 'unassailable' relates to the quality of teaching and learning. A key priority, despite tight funding and the demands on an FE organisation is a happy staff working in a reasonable work/life balance. Their aim is to maintain a minimum of 80 per cent of non-accredited liberal arts provision. The college has close

relationships with the Working Men's College and the other two specially designated adult colleges in London, the City Lit and Morley College.

The college's ambition is to be 'fabulous' in teaching and learning quality: 'the friendly place to learn'; with an inspiring physical learning environment, excellent social and pastoral care and all the services which create the best 'wraparound' to classroom teaching. MWC self-assesses its teaching and learning as 'good' and student achievement as 'outstanding', in the Ofsted terminology, though the Centre still deals with challenges about how best to record learning progress on non-accredited courses. However, MWC has wholeheartedly embraced formative assessment which is now well developed.

'Equalisation', Mary Ward's original term one hundred years ago, is still a key aim, now and for the future. MWC offers what could be seen as a traditional liberal arts education, but wants to make it accessible for all. In the Centre's social mix, 49 per cent of learners are on means-tested benefits and a large proportion of those paying fees are on low incomes. There are cross-subsidies between curriculum areas in support of equalisation, for example, to buck the recent ESOL restrictions. Cross-subsidy is difficult to achieve, and the college believes this is the case across FE. Current policy is perceived, in Mick Fletcher's phrase, as 'carrots for the rich, sticks for the poor'. MWC's biggest concern is the trend identified in NIACE's 2008 participation survey⁷⁶ that MWC will lose students who are in low-paid work. A major part of their learner cohort, they are squeezed in the middle between those on benefits and those who can afford to pay. MWC's ESOL provision, for example, specialises in low-paid workers. The college provides for employers and employees, with a particular focus on workforce development for the voluntary and community sectors.

MWC sees itself also as having a niche market in the over-60s, which it wishes to increase in the future. MWC offers a lifeline, a re-creation of aspects of community for many adults, not least by addressing loneliness as a constant issue that older people and many others experience in modern city life. The college also wishes to develop further into provision for the over-80s – helping people to retain physical and mental fitness.

MWC has a campaigning mindset and a strong vision of its future role. It is a member of the Campaigning Alliance for Lifelong Learning (CALL). It is currently working for long-term stable funding for arts and humanities learning for ESOL, for adult-friendly short courses, for innovation, for the inclusion of cost-of-living increases in the LSC and future funding packages (funding is protected in the short term, but without any increases). A main aim for MWC is to forge closer partnerships, with a view to federation or even merger, if desirable, with other organisations to protect their contribution to adult and lifelong learning.

⁷⁶ Aldridge and Tuckett (2008a).

MWC is grappling with governance, which it self-assesses as outstanding. Its tradition is a large council of management which is being reduced in size to be more effective. It prizes its identity as a membership organisation and the membership fee has recently been reintroduced. The governance ambition is to make the organisation 'everyone's MWC', which it sees as critical to its institutional independence.

MWC wishes to remain part of an FE system in which all sizes and specialisms are recognised as needed for both quality and reach. An argument for its future is that MWC 'can go the extra mile in a way big colleges may find difficult'. The principal argues for diversity at MWC from her experience of having worked many years in large inner city London colleges in east London.

Criticisms of current policy also include the 'obsession with large-sized qualifications and prescriptive qualifications, particularly the full Level 2', which does not help adults. All this is known from the past, i.e. that a range of sizes and types of learning programmes and recognition for small steps of learning and qualifications are essential. MWC would like to see a regeneration of the work of the Curriculum Development Unit in Battersea and support for proper credit accumulation and Access to HE accreditation systems. The rejection of Tomlinson⁷⁷ is seen as a missed opportunity which also impacted on the development of accreditation for adults. They are sceptical about the quality and amount of attention that is being paid to the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and the Foundation Learning Tier (FLT). MWC had a last key question: as local authority leadership and involvement is back for young people aged 14–19, where is the comparable planning focus for broad-based adult learning as compared with adult 'skills'?

Highlands College, Jersey

Mission is an interesting concept when a college is the only provider in a community. People who live on islands cannot get in a car or take a bus to the college down the road. The college cannot be picky, and an inclusive mission is the only realistic option. Despite the community only being 90,000, the offer has to be broad, varied and cater for all: the portfolio of a big city college for a place the size of a small market town, from Entry Level to MBA.

Highlands is the college for the Island of Jersey. While in many respects similar to a typical English FE college, its accountability structure is different. The college is part of the States of Jersey Education Service. Jersey is a crown dependency and is self-governing with its own parliament responsible for domestic policy and foreign relations. This gives the college a unique position and provides it with a different policy context from English colleges. It enables it to be a source of experimentation and a place to test 'what-ifs?' In many respects it looks just like any other college, but 'what if there was no Ofsted?', 'what if there wasn't Train to Gain?', or 'what if we could

⁷⁷ See the Tomlinson Report on 14–19 education; DfES (2004).

decide to prioritise adult learning?’ are questions Highlands can decide for itself. As an English college outside of England, the Highlands story is about how the College and its Governing Body square the circle of being *outside*, but demonstrating that they are also *inside* for critical purposes.

Jersey has its own policy-making structure, but it has been much more trusting of its college than is the case in England. The Education Service has not imposed any curriculum-related regulation. The College is subject to the States of Jersey’s financial, procurement and human resource regulation, but it is trusted to understand its market, work directly with employers and respond to needs and wants rather than having its curriculum priorities dictated by government. In this small community there are no Sector Skills Councils or funding agencies, and the scale of operation means that it is much easier to get key decision makers together. The Apprenticeship Council meets around the Principal’s table. It is no surprise that Highlands is seen by many as self-regulating in a rather pure form.⁷⁸ The College has used its relative autonomy to do many things of which quality improvement has been one, but another has been to continue to give priority to the development of adult learning.

With self-regulation comes a particular sense of responsibility which the monopolistic position of Highlands creates. There is an imperative to ensure that provision is of the highest standard as many students have little alternative but to look to the College for a course. Islanders rub shoulders with college staff in their day-to-day lives. No college lecturer or manager wants to have to explain in the supermarket on a Saturday why their neighbour’s son or daughter is unhappy or underperforms at the College.

One striking feature of the College is the approach to funding that the States of Jersey have devised. The funding methodology is easy to understand, coherent and is linked to the self-regulation agenda. While there are priority areas, the College is allowed to *vire* funds, so it can respond to the demands for adult learning in positive and innovative ways. That has encouraged the development of a broad range of adult learning. There is no Train to Gain in Jersey, no separate funding stream for adults and no centrally driven targets.

Highlands’ adult programme is wide ranging. There are five times as many adult learners as there are 16–19 enrolments. Annually, 6,000 students, of which 850 are full time, enrol at the College. The adult programme covers higher education, specialist courses for the finance industry (which is the Island’s main source of wealth and employment), vocational studies, basic skills, ESOL (the Island has high levels of migration from Poland and Madeira), return to learn, as well as a wide range of learning for leisure and pleasure courses, including courses in Jersey’s own language, Jerriais, which derives from Norman French, the language of William the Conqueror.

⁷⁸ Sallis and Hubert (2009).

The adult programme is offered on the main campus near St Helier, but also in 23 centres across the Island, especially in rural areas. Nine miles by five seems small until the pattern of Island roads is encountered. Courses are delivered in schools and the premises of Age Concern, the Catholic Church and local family centres.

The College devises the largest portion of its provision, but also works with many UK organisations. Plymouth University is the main partner, but also the universities of Southampton and London South Bank and the Open University. The College also relies on private trainers and community groups such as the University of the Third Age, Autism Jersey, the Probation Service and the Jersey Lawn Bowls Association (a formidable force in Commonwealth Games bowls!). They call this model *brokerage*. This is a different model from that in England where a broker is an intermediary put between a college and employers. Highlands does the brokerage, finds the expertise, on or outside of the Island, and brings it to the College for community benefit. It could be a trainer delivering yachting qualifications or the Birmingham based Central Law Training who is a major force in legal CPD. This brokerage model works well for a small College with a full-time staff of only 75 academics who clearly cannot deliver the entire complex programme. The College also relies heavily on industry specialists to teach. There are over 350 visiting lecturers – employed, the college says, because of their expertise, not for financial reasons. There is a very extensive teacher training programme.

Unusually for FE, the College is host to the civil service management training, integrated into the College's University Centre. The Centre is developing more on-Island HE and aims to establish a degree, at foundation, honours or postgraduate level, for each of the Island's main industries. This ambition has been fulfilled for public service, financial services, IT, construction management, architectural technology, creative arts and human resource management, and a childcare degree is in preparation. The University of Southampton delivers its Executive MBA in the Centre.

While Jersey is a wealthy Island, its main industry is taking a battering in the current economic climate and like most Western societies Jersey has considerable inequalities in the distribution of its wealth. There are pockets of poverty and underperformance in learning. While the social security scheme is generous by UK standards the cost of living is high. For the College to fulfil its inclusive mission it has in recent years expanded its basic skills and ESOL provision and developed an approach of working in the community which was highly commended in the 2008 Association of Colleges' Beacon Awards.

What of the future? Where could the college be in 15 or 20 years' time and what will learning look like? Firstly, it aims to see much greater institutional co-operation across the education system in the Island. The College is already in the same system as schools. This gives advantages such as parity of pay with school teachers and movement between school and College staff. Whole system co-operation on learning is a goal. Education is still looked at as distinct, separate phases. However, Jersey's Education Department has pioneered whole-system staff development, promoting programmes on critical skills and assessment for learning in which all teachers and lecturers take part, and the College recently introduced coaching skills to all of the Island's primary, secondary

and FE staff, helped by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership and the Learning and Skills Network. They believe that through greater integration of all phases they could stop many more students falling through the educational net. Their progress could be tracked throughout their educational career and their learning styles and preferences could be known and built on. While post-16 staying on rates are high in Jersey, at 90 per cent, those that drop out after post-compulsory education are those who have become disillusioned with education and an approach which personalises education and tracks progress could have lasting benefits.

A 'Learning Island' could be the mission of the future. Standards will be driven up through a professionalisation of the whole workforce and not just amongst those in professional and white collar jobs. While participation in adult learning is high in the Island, lifelong learning is still not a reality for many and two thirds of adult learners are women. A key aim is to attract more men, especially from lower socioeconomic groups. Working in partnership with employers on what matters to people is the one way forward with more learning in the workplace, a greater use of IT and more personalised learning.

There is also an ambition to see the Island a multilingual place again. It was once, and French is still an official language, although few people speak it. The majority of people who are multilingual are recent migrants from Madeira and Poland. Indigenous young people are as bad at languages as anywhere in the UK, despite being 14 miles from France. Considerable work is going on with our neighbours in Normandy and Brittany, including exchanges with the Business School in Rennes. Highlands believes that to be 'World Class' means that learners, whatever their age, speak at least a couple of other languages, to improve productivity as well as the enjoyment of other cultures.

What sort of college could Highlands be in twenty years' time? They aim still to be trusted and self-regulating, with high standards and high achievements. Adult learning will continue to be dictated by the needs of adults themselves and the College will continue to work closely with others in the communities and in the UK to broaden the offer. There is no intention of distinguishing between learning for work and learning for pleasure and the College will see all learning as important, valuing curiosity as highly as skills. The vision is that everyone will become more literate and see other peoples' languages as an important part of that literacy. Everyone will be an active citizen, exploring the culture of others. The College plans to continue to innovate, work co-operatively and be a place that leads learning, providing opportunities for all.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Appendix C: Every Adult Matters – the citizens’ curriculum in FE

At project seminars and consultations, college leaders and stakeholders put forward many ideas in relation to the notion of an FE curriculum. The suggestions arose out of discussions about what skills, knowledge and understanding young people and adults would need to gain in the future. There was consensus that we should not return to a ‘bolt on’ general studies approach, or the reinvention of core or key skills, and that a citizens’ curriculum would involve freedom to choose elements and units. There was also consensus that we needed a flexible, knowledge-based curriculum that offers more than the limits of a single qualification or track, and that in an age of uncertainty, learners need resources, knowledge and skills to enable them to contribute as citizens, workers and family members. Many college leaders stressed the need to broaden the offer we have today.

The ideas below are not in a particular order. These suggestions may form the basis of debate on the idea of developing the elements of a citizens’ curriculum.

Society, democracy and citizenship

- Learning about society, family and community: functions, roles, entitlements and responsibilities.
- Political education: democracies and other political systems.
- History, including the history of education, crafts and vocations.
- Legal and rights systems.
- Culture: ways of life, creative expression and belief systems in a diverse society.

It’s a small world: other cultures and languages

- Learning about other countries and cultures, developed and developing economies, and societies across the world.
- Faith studies.
- Modern languages.

Climate change, sustainability and associated industries, embedded as appropriate in vocational programmes

- Living with uncertainty, acting for change.
- Awareness raising and education for sustainability.
- The science of climate change, global warming and ‘peak oil’.
- Education and training for work in renewable energy industries,

- Wildlife conservation.
- Organic farming and forestry.
- Eco-tourism.
- Sustainable approaches to all curriculum areas, e.g. hairdressing, hospitality and catering, agriculture and horticulture, construction, engineering, science subjects.
- Local actions: the transition town movement.

Better health for all in an ageing society

- Nutrition and diet to address obesity and eating disorders.
- Counselling and, for example, cognitive behavioural therapy qualifications.
- Mental health education: preventive approaches and management of conditions.
- Training in art, drama and music therapy.
- Learning and qualifications for carers and learning providers of Alzheimer's and other dementia sufferers.
- Prolonging active healthy life.
- Family health programmes with partners.
- How to maximise individuals' continuing potential to learn.
- Use social spaces and events in colleges to support the well-being, happiness and quality of life in communities.
- Promote healthy eating in catering courses and use restaurants for Ministry of Food 'pass it on' schemes.
- Active life: sport, exercise programmes – preparing for the pre- and post-Olympic momentum.

Equality and diversity

- Put the 'bottom rungs' back in – pre-entry and entry levels (note that there is much evidence of the efficacy of Entry Level learning in terms of progression to higher levels).
- Address the issue of 'older NEETs' already emerging in communities, and likely to increase in recession.
- Develop the ESOL/literacy curriculum – a major growth area is the literacy needs of multi-lingual citizens and migrants.
- Full-time financially supported programmes for unemployed people: new 'pre-TOPS' with progression routes to vocational programmes.
- Writing for work programmes: the exponentially growing literacy need.

- Intergenerational impact: colleges working with schools in mainstreamed programmes of family learning and family literacy, language and numeracy, in particular with working class learners and minority ethnic groups.
- Colleges funded to work with families at risk of knife and gun and other violent crime (now expected and part of good practice, but unfunded).

Economic well-being and financial literacy

- Financial systems and how they work.
- Financial literacy, including family financial literacy.
- Retraining and up-skilling for unemployed learners.
- Education and training for mobility, virtual and real (including foreign languages, geographical and cultural training, and customer services).
- Informal and formal support at college level for debt management, in co-operation with non-educational partners, e.g. the Citizens Advice service.

Project management and organising for change: organising local, community and college projects or thematic groups

- Project management and organisational skills.
- What is organising for change about? How do 'movements' start?
- Getting started: the practicalities.
- Gaining knowledge of the topic and what else is being done: research, information-gathering skills.
- Managing meetings.
- How to network.
- Managing funds.
- Raising funds.
- Note taking and report writing.
- Advocacy and persuasion skills.
- Publicity, marketing and media skills.
- Values, ethics and principles in governing and managing organisations.

Public understanding of science and technology

- Understanding of key scientific issues affecting people and the planet, and their implications; for example medical and bio-technology developments, stem cell technologies, evolutionary theory, the science of climate change, physics.
- Developing technological understanding and capability, including ICT.

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