

## The Impact of Widening Participation on Further Education Settings in England

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### Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### Abstract

Today's Sixth Form colleges and colleges of Further Education are a world away from the original Mechanics' Institutes set up by George Birkbeck; an initiative designed to bring education to workers who had been through only perfunctory formal education previously. Instead, present day colleges are run as quasi-businesses with the educational and the economic imperatives engaged in a battle for supremacy. The purpose of this paper is to explore the current landscape through the lens of those least likely to attend further education and to explore the dichotomy that exists between the pressures of metrics on an organisation and the requirement to respond to government priorities. Overlooking this battle is the desire to provide transformative opportunities for diverse communities. It looks at how these challenges can be approached and managed, alongside the performative measures used to explore success in the sector such as high success and retention rates.

### Full paper

Throughout history, scholars have found great difficulty in defining the Further Education (FE) sector due to both its byzantine structures and also the myriad of opportunities and pathways for learners. Duckworth (2014) suggests these difficulties are due to its fast-changing landscape. Anderson, Barton and Wahlberg (2003) characterise this by describing the sector as having IADHD -

Institutional Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder. A commonality in descriptions is the desire to support sections of the community that have not always been fully catered for by education and hence the educational imperative of 'education as a good in itself' is a strong feature in colleges. However, to simply define it in this way is both misleading and an oversimplification. The then Prime Minister, James Callaghan, articulated the importance of the link between education and economic benefits in his Ruskin College speech (Callaghan, 1976) and the Further Education sector has been at the forefront of the desire to link employability to qualifications. This has resulted tensions between an instrumental view of education which focuses on the economic imperative and the educational imperative that stresses support for all students.

The movement towards an economic based model for colleges in England was facilitated by the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) which sought to use the perceived best practice from the private sector to improve efficiency (DfE, 1992). Furthermore it encouraged the use of metrics that were claimed to judge the performance of organisations. Whilst the latter has created a degree of convergence of ideas about what makes an outstanding college, it has narrowed the focus of the organisation to those things which can be measured (Ball, 2003). A key point to make at the heart of this dichotomy between educational and economic imperatives, is the primacy of the data, hence, if a policy, such as supporting less advantaged students, was explored, then it is looked at with reference to the impact on the metrics for the organisation.

Accounts from learners within the sector indicate the power of FE courses in conquering marginalisation (whether it is economic, social, political or cultural) (Munday, 2020). Schuller et al (2002) as well as Duckworth and Smith (2019) have recognised the transformative nature of education for both communities and individuals. However, given the pressures on colleges to meet data targets, it is no surprise that there appears to be a dichotomy of issues at play here in regard to ensuring a diverse college cohort who are also able to perform to meet the college's attainment targets. Shaw et al (2007) identified that attitudes to widening participation at a departmental level often acted as a barrier and it was often not a priority amongst staff due to a fear of 'lowering

standards' (Shaw et al, 2007, p.112) for marginalised groups. However, at senior management level, widening participation was described much more positively and as necessary in order to benefit communities and individuals, one of Shaw et al's participants noted it as a 'social responsibility' (2007, p.114).

The tension between the two approaches is exacerbated by the constant policy churn and the reduction in funding that has occurred in the last decade for the sector. The publishing of the 2021 White Paper neatly outlines the divide that exists between the two approaches. On one hand the introduction of initiatives in it might well help support students from disadvantaged groups, but it is all predicated on an approach that means that in order to support, colleges must first ensure that books are balanced, and economic choices are made.

Despite the challenges, the sector appears determined to 'find a way' to fulfil the original goals of the sector of educating and providing opportunities for all students, regardless of their backgrounds or educational level. It manages this by adapting to new skills, working flexibly with employers in a modern world and introducing an even larger offer of courses such as foundation programmes, T. Levels and HE courses whilst retaining their core purpose: to provide transformative education which benefits local communities and offers all learners a sense of hope and purpose for their future lives and careers. If college provision is adapted and changed based on need, then its identity should not be negatively perceived as 'unclear' but as fluid and responsive to the needs of society but also the demands of the government. Whilst there is inevitably a degree of compromise, this fluidity of approach can be utilised in order to adjust to the needs of all students within the sector.

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