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'The reputation of English further education: understanding the evolution of the sector in the context of present debates'

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Background

At present, the public standing of further education (FE) in England, along with the professional development of its staff, is retarded by the lack of coherent and balanced narratives about the contribution of further education colleges to public life and their local communities over the post-war period. In particular:

a) 'opinion-formers' remain ignorant of many of the most important contributions made by FE since 1945 and the historic causes of contemporary concerns;

b) many staff working in FE have no comprehensive account of their professional and institutional heritage, which they can use: during initial training/CPD; for debate amongst themselves; or to share with the wider public.

Research Questions

In this context, many present day prescriptions for the future development of FE in England, including those generated by the 2005 Foster Review, have failed to address, in any detail, how FE came to be the shape and size it is today. However, if a strategy aimed at creating a highly regarded FE system is to address contemporary concerns successfully, it needs to reconcile the compromises and contradictions of the past with ideals and hopes for the future.

The project reported here set out to explore what 'lessons of history' are available to those concerned with enriching contemporary FE in England. More specifically, the following questions were addressed:

- How has English FE evolved and what have been the dominant dynamics of this process?
- What have been the similarities and contrasts of FE provision in five selected localities since 1945?
- To what extent have these local endeavours matched the national policy framework for FE over the period?
- In what ways does a project of this kind break methodological ground and how can its findings best be communicated to contemporary audiences?

Methods

The study has two key components.

i) Local fieldwork - oral history interviews, archival and documentary research for the period 1945-1995

Following a pilot study carried out in Exeter, we have undertaken oral history fieldwork and archival research in four further locations: Leicester, Manchester, Solihull and Reading. These sites were chosen to provide further education settings that: are urban as well as rural; have experienced significant diversification of ethnicity amongst FE learners; have experienced different kinds of employment restructuring; and have contrasting present-day FE structures (e.g. 'tertiary'; mix of sixth

form and 'general FE colleges'). The oral history interviews followed a semi-structured schedule and, when transcribed, were subjected to a common framework of content analysis. Interviewees were chosen according to their ability to represent significant relevant experience, for example being: an FE lecturer/manager or a community partner. Local record offices and public libraries in each locality/region were visited, as were the National Archives, to capture images of key documents.

These components of case-study fieldwork were combined to generate a comprehensive set of data that allowed for the reconstruction of narratives of FE in a variety of communities.

ii) Interviews with national figures

Following the 'community-based' interviews outlined above, six semi-structured interviews with national figures with experience over many years of FE policy and practice were conducted. The purpose of these interviews was: to elicit information on perspectives on FE over the period of respondents' professional / political engagement with the sector; to seek their commentary on the key findings of the 'community based' interviews; and to explore their views as to the significance of the findings for contemporary further education.

Frame

Integral to the design of the project was empirical research generating two bodies of knowledge; narrative generated via oral history interviews and documentary sources; and public policy analysis derived from the 'key informant' interviews and national archives suggestive of public policy lessons to be drawn from the subsequent reconstruction. It was anticipated that contemporary concerns could be analysed and reported from a public policy perspective, grounded and strengthened by outlooks embedded in narrative accounts of the triumphs, set-backs and unresolved problems that have occurred in recent decades in both individual colleges and the FE system as a whole.

Research findings

Anticipated findings (fieldwork concludes after the submission of this abstract) include the following:

- turning points in FE at the local level have been affected by varied patterns of: local government / governance; reorganisation of adjacent school provision; and demographic change (including occupational restructuring and the dynamics of immigration and migration in local communities);
- evident within the professional culture of FE over the half-century from 1945 is a pair of reciprocal themes: the desire for greater recognition of the work of the sector, alongside considerable freedom of operation in the classroom;
- in our period, diverse value systems among lecturers and senior staff have endured in English further education, including: a pragmatic strain, strongly focussed on imparting occupational skills; an idealistic strain in which the importance of open of access and equality of opportunity are pursued alongside celebration of the 'second chance' that FE is held to afford for many students; and a strongly perceived role for senior staff in leading the internal working of their college while also representing and promoting it among particular networks within the local community.

The contribution to knowledge of the project is the provision of an analytical framework, populated by five case studies. Into this accounts of the evolution of further education in other English localities can be placed in future, so as to deepen understanding of the diversity of FE in the post-war period.

The conference presentation will conclude with reflections on how findings framed by this kind of historical methodology of the research undertaken can be disseminated with influence to target audiences - college managers / governors and local authority staff freshly responsible from 2010 for the local governance of further education among the under-19s in their area.

