

WIDER PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE in **EDUCATION** and **TRAINING**

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CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING LEARNERS IN THE FURTHER EDUCATION SECTOR

The focus of this chapter is the diverse demography of learners in the Further Education and Training Sector, henceforth referred to as FE, including vocational learners, those on courses such as A level and Higher Education (HE) programmes, post-16 programmes for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, as well as those on 16–19 study programmes; their needs, aspirations and motivation. The chapter will explore issues which are often inherited from the schools sector, including disengagement, demotivation and problems regarding English and maths within the context of the raised participation age. The effects of the lack of parity of esteem, or equality in status, between vocational and academic education will also be discussed in light of these topics.

This chapter will cover the following:

- An overview of vocational education, past and present
- A profile of learners in further education
- A summary of adult education in further education

(Continued)

(Continued)

- Offender learning provision
- English and maths
- Issues around engagement in education and training
- Motivation of learners in further education

The History of Vocational Education and Training

The FE sector has gone through several name changes over the years, from the technical and vocational education sector to the post-compulsory sector to the learning and skills sector, to the lifelong learning sector, before reverting back to the further education sector more recently.

In the UK, social structure has historically been influenced by social class and there is a longstanding history of hierarchical ranking of educational provision according to social class. The campaign for mass education in the late 1800s sought an education system which provided for all. However, this was not a popular movement, and many were opposed to the idea of different classes being educated together, arguing that the education system should be divided according to social class. This opposition was founded on the traditional view that the purpose of education was to maintain social position, and that an education that could be more readily converted into money would lower social standing. The traditional view of education, often described as a liberal education, is associated with intellectual activity and personal development versus a vocational education, which in turn is associated with practical activity and employment. The Taunton Report, published in 1868, although linking technical education with general education for the first time, proposed that secondary education curricula should be based on social class, and should be provided in separate schools. This perpetuated the hierarchical view of education, and its purpose, along class lines. The higher status given to traditional academic education pathways often results in a derisory view of vocational education and skilled trades, and this perpetuates the notion that a vocational pathway is a second-tier option and ensures that FE remains 'ghettoised as working-class institutions with all the attendant sense of inferiority which that brings' (Morrison, 2010: 68).

The Edge Foundation (2014) released research that revealed that many young people are being actively discouraged from opting for vocational pathways, with 22 per cent being told that they are 'too clever' for vocational education by schools and just a quarter of parents considering vocational education to be worthwhile.

In his book, Richard Pring challenges the divisions between vocational and academic education, suggesting that education should encompass both, rather than having a two-tiered education system, and argues for the:

abandonment of those dualisms of education and training, between thinking and doing, between theory and practice, between the intrinsically worthwhile and the useful which bedevils our deliberations on education. Surely if we focus on what it means to fully become a person ... then there seems no reason why the liberal should not be conceived as something vocationally useful and why the vocationally useful should not be taught in an educational and liberating way. (1999: 183)

Unless the association between vocational education, lower socioeconomic status and lower ability are challenged, and messages about social mobility defined as university education and professional employment are challenged, then parity of esteem cannot be achieved.



Activity 1.1

- How is the status of further education, its learners and its qualifications viewed today?

Incorporation of further education

Historically, further education in the UK has been influenced by external factors, namely wider socioeconomic priorities. The Education Act 1944 introduced the tripartite system of state-funded secondary education and made all schooling, including secondary education, free. The tripartite system organised secondary education into a structure containing three types of school: grammar school, secondary technical school, sometimes described as technical grammar schools, and secondary modern school. Following this Act, the school-leaving age was raised to 15, although the stated intention of raising it to 16 was not achieved until 1972. The Act required local authorities to support and manage education for their population, which up until 1992 included provision for further education. This meant that compulsory schooling and post-16 education were brought under the public sector. Much of what we would associate with further education now was provided in secondary technical schools, which taught mechanical, scientific and engineering skills to serve industry and science. The diversification of FE as multipurpose providers has had a chequered history, but the 1960s saw the rapid growth of the sector, offering a wide range of vocational as well as non-vocational learning at different points, becoming a post-16

alternative to school for resits and A level study whilst maintaining its employment-related tradition. The economic downturn in the 1970s saw the expansion of adult learning in FE, and a focus on training, upskilling and retraining for unemployed young people and adults. In this way, FE superseded secondary technical schools and secured its position in post-compulsory education.

Prior to 1992, further education colleges were owned and controlled by Local Education Authorities (LEAs), which were locally responsible for educational provision. The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 released colleges from LEA control. This phase in 1993, which is referred to as 'Incorporation', created the further education sector with independent institutions that were funded directly by government. However, although freed from local authority involvement, this transition was subject to external control in three principal ways. First, detailed and prescriptive government regulation. Second, complex and frequently changing financial and funding mechanisms from ever-changing sector organisations – namely, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and its more recent successor the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) – which still directly links almost all college funding to the recruitment, retention, achievement and, more recently, destinations of learners. Third, an external inspection system which was established by the FEFC, followed by the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI), which in 2007 then became part of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). Some of the thematic issues introduced with this restructuring of the further education sector will be explored in more detail in Chapter 2.

Learners in Further Education

According to the Department for Education (DfE, 2013a) there are approximately 400 general further education colleges in the UK which are state-funded. These institutions provide a wide range of full-time and part-time courses, covering a range of levels, for over 4 million learners aged between 14 and 90 years, although a significant proportion of learners who attend are aged between 16 and 25 years. Further education colleges provide the majority of state-supported adult learning provision and, together with sixth form colleges, are the majority provider of young people's learning from ages 16 to 19.

Since the announcement of the raising of the participation age, which from 2015 requires young people to remain in some form of education or training until their eighteenth birthday, there has been a loss of teaching staff within the FE sector as competition between schools and colleges to retain learners has increased, with schools and sixth form colleges providing more

vocational options alongside the traditional academic subjects. Further education colleges are the main provider of vocational education and training in the UK, but also offer many academic courses such as A levels, and increasingly higher education courses. The diversity of contexts is also significant, as this includes general further education colleges, apprenticeships, work-based learning, adult and community learning and offender learning. It is a reasonable assertion that the majority of learners in further education are seizing a second chance with education and learning, and that they have left school feeling demotivated and disenfranchised. Further education is seen by many learners as an alternative route back into education and learning to support their social and economic aspirations:

It is further education which has invariably given second chances to those who were forced by necessity to make unfulfilling choices. It said 'try again' to those who were labelled as failures and who had decided education was not for the likes of them. (Kennedy, 1997: 2)

According to Buddery et al. (2010: 25), FE in the UK offers learning opportunities to some of the most disadvantaged members of our society:

- 56 per cent of 17-year-olds on full-time courses are from lower socio-economic backgrounds, compared to only 22 per cent in maintained school sixth forms
- 29 per cent of learners in general further education colleges are from disadvantaged postcodes, compared to 25 per cent of the population as a whole
- The achievement gap between the poorest learners at 19 and their better-off peers has narrowed at Level 2 and Level 3
- Ethnic minority learners are nearly twice as likely to be enrolled in further education institutions as their peers in the general population
- Further education is the main provider of post-16 provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

In general, minority groups and women both have higher than average rates of participation in further education provision in the UK. Over-representation of women and minority learners is particularly noticeable amongst adult learners, with approximately 57 per cent female adult learners, and nearly 20 per cent from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME) background (SFA, 2012). As women and minority adult learners are over-represented in further education, this means that they have been disproportionately affected by the overall cut of 25 per cent in adult provision over the past few years, and will continue to be affected due to the recent announcement of £460 million being cut from the adult skills budget (BIS, 2014). Changes to the funding system for adult provision resulted in the introduction of FE loans that have

had a detrimental impact on the number of adults participating in government-funded FE courses: figures show that there was a 10.7 per cent decrease in adult learners in the academic year 2013/14 (SFA, 2014a).

Data from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2011a) shows that 34 per cent of adult learners enrolled on further education courses were studying for their first full Level 2 qualification, and 54 per cent for their first full Level 3 qualification – GCSE and A level equivalents, respectively.

Data shows that women outnumber men in pursuing degree-level qualifications in further education, as well as higher education institutions. Overall, one in twelve HE learners attends an FE college, thereby playing an important role in widening participation in HE for people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Adult Education and Basic Skills in FE

Further education has gone through several redefinitions in recent years, from post-compulsory, to lifelong learning, vocational and technical and further education and skills. These rebrands have been influenced by broader economic, political and cultural climates over time. Adult education in the UK is not new and has been long established, but the most significant growth has occurred since the 1970s in adult basic education provision, which was principally literacy, but also numeracy. Funding was allocated for prison education and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) for immigrants, as well as family learning. The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 made adult basic education part of the system of further education but with a distinctive shift from a political commitment to addressing social inequality towards policy based on economic efficiency. Government funding for adult education hereafter has been targeted in assisting adults to improve their qualifications, update their skills, and progress in their present career or into a new career.

In 1999, the Moser Report, *A Fresh Start: Improving Literacy and Numeracy*, concluded that 7 million adults, about 20 per cent of the adult population, lacked the basic literacy skills required to function at work and in society and estimated that 30–50 per cent of adults had problems with numeracy. The report attributed this situation to home circumstances but mostly to poor schooling in the past. It expressed concern about how low levels of basic skills disadvantage both the individual and the productivity of the UK as well as being linked to other social problems such as crime. Government policy in addressing poor basic skills in adults is founded on the underlying belief that these are essential if more people are to realise their full potential and the UK is to remain competitive in an increasingly global economy.

Following the publication of Moser Report, the Skills for Life national strategy for adult basic skills was launched in 2001, offering nationally recognised literacy and numeracy qualifications, provided largely by further education colleges. In 2010, Skills for Life and its component Key Skills, were replaced by the Functional Skills suite of qualifications and the terms 'literacy' and 'numeracy' were supplanted with English and maths. Despite the widespread distribution of the national Skills for Life strategy, in FE and elsewhere, issues with literacy and numeracy persist among the adult population in the UK, as well as among school leavers and young people. The term 'functionally' illiterate or 'functionally' innumerate is used to describe people who would not pass an English or maths GCSE and have literacy or numeracy levels at or below those expected of an 11-year-old. According to the National Literacy Trust (2014), 16 per cent of the adult population, or 5.2 million adults, in the UK are functionally illiterate, and around four in five adults have a low level of numeracy (National Numeracy, 2012).

English and Maths GCSE Provision in FE

In 2013/14, the percentage of 16-year-olds achieving 5 or more GCSEs, or equivalent, at grade A* to C (including English and maths), was 52.6 per cent (DfE, 2014a). In addition, 61 per cent of 16-year-olds gained at least a C in English and 62 per cent gained at least a C in maths (ibid.). This means that approximately 40 per cent of 16-year-olds do not get an English and maths GCSE grade C, or the gold standard of five GCSEs grade A* to C. Research carried out by Sheffield University (2010) revealed that 22 per cent of 16–19-year-olds are functionally innumerate, and 17 per cent are functionally illiterate.

Since the raising of the participation age was introduced (2015), the funding condition for learners aged 16–19 who have no prior attainment of a C in English and/or maths is that they must continue to study GCSE English and maths, rather than the lower-level functional skills, until they leave education or training at 18.

This government initiative stemmed from Alison Wolf, a professor at King's College London, who proposed the change in her 2011 review of vocational education. At the time, she said that it was 'scandalous' that half of 16-year-olds were leaving school without good GCSEs in English and maths (*The Guardian*, 2013). The Wolf Report heavily criticised the plethora of vocational qualifications which were not recognised by employers, asserting that most further education colleges offer a staple 'diet of low-level vocational qualifications, most of which have little to no labour market value' (Wolf, 2011: 7). This review recommended that GCSEs were the gold standard qualification and since then, GCSE A*–C English and maths has

become the benchmark and grade C is now the minimum entry requirement for many occupations, for example early years education, social work and nursing. Employees with no qualifications on average earn 20 per cent less than those who leave school with the gold standard of five GCSEs grades A*–C (ONS, 2011). This benchmark is also set for adults in further education:

Our ambition is that, by 2020, adults aged 19 and over and apprentices of all ages studying English and maths will be working towards achievement of the reformed GCSEs, taking stepping stone qualifications if necessary. Functional skills will continue to be part of apprenticeship completion requirements but we will work with apprenticeship providers to enable them to offer GCSEs to their apprentices. (DfE, 2014b)



Activity 1.2

- How has your institution responded to the provision of GCSE English and maths?
- What (potential) issues arise from this provision for you, your colleagues and/or learners?

Offender Learning Provision

Since 2011, the Ministry of Justice planned to place greater emphasis on developing the vocational and employability skills that offenders need to find sustainable employment on release from prison which benefits them as individuals, but which also benefits wider society. This provision for offenders is seen as the first step towards economic, social and community re-engagement and critical to reducing reoffending. Reoffending is estimated to cost the UK economy somewhere between £9.5 billion and £13 billion a year (BIS, 2011b). The broad aim of educational provision is to provide opportunities for offenders to gain nationally recognised qualifications up to Level 2 (equivalent to a C grade GCSE). All prisons have to provide a core curriculum that covers social and life skills, information technology and preparation for work, in addition to English and maths. There should also be opportunities for prisoners to gain employability skills through a range of activities. However, the main focus is on English and maths for offenders, because '80 per cent have the writing skills, 65 per cent the numeracy skills and 50 per cent the reading skills at or below the level of an 11-year-old' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002: 6). Despite the critical importance of providing educational opportunities for offenders, the prison service is not immune to the financial pressures and profit-driven marketisation policies to which

education is subjected. The danger is that prison education is no longer a priority in a competitive retendering system where cost-cutting for profit overrides the rehabilitation of offenders.

Disengagement and Re-engagement

Young people who are not in education, employment or training are described as NEET, and growing youth unemployment figures since the global financial crisis in 2008 mean that the number of young people falling into this category has increased. Youth unemployment has long been above the overall rate of unemployment of people of working age in the UK, but this gap has grown sharply since 2008. Disengagement from learning and education in the UK has been a persistent problem.

In the first quarter of 2015, according to the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), 5.5 million unemployed young people aged 15–24 in the European Union (EU) were looking for work but were unable to find it (Thompson, 2013). Despite a fall in the youth unemployment rate between 2013 and 2014 in the UK, there are still close to 1 million unemployed young people aged between 16 and 24 (ibid). Of these young people, 60 per cent are still NEET, while the remaining 40 per cent are in education or training (ONS, 2014).

The IPPR suggests that there is a mismatch between what young people are training for and the types of jobs available and show that youth unemployment is lower in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, where the vocational route into employment through formal education and training is as clear as the academic route – which gives both routes a parity of esteem (Thompson, 2013: 3). This is not the case in the UK, and as a result, vocational education and training is seen as a lower-status pathway than the general academic route by employers. This compromises the labour-market value of vocational qualifications, many of which do not translate into employment. This was first highlighted in the Wolf Report (2011), and further described by the National Careers Council (2013), which reported that the supply and demand mismatch between the vocational education and training acquired by young people, and actual labour market vacancies, still persists, with skills shortages impeding recruitment by employers and ultimately resulting in high youth unemployment in the UK.

Young people described as NEET have a diverse range of characteristics, needs, attributes and ambitions. The reasons that learners become NEET are so varied that it is impossible to generalise, but it is fair to say that some young people face multiple and complex difficulties in their lives which often then become a barrier to engagement in education and training. NEETs can be categorised into three groups: sustained; open to learning; and undecided

(Spielhofer et al., 2009). The majority of NEETs fall into the 'open to learning' or 'undecided' categories, which means that with the appropriate intervention these young people can be re-engaged (Nfer, 2012).

The introduction of 16–19 study programmes and traineeships from 2013/14 is central to the reform of 16–19 education and the raising of compulsory participation in education or training to 18 in 2015. The key features of these programmes are based on many of the recommendations in the Wolf Report (2011). Participation can be any one of the following:

- Full-time education including A levels (known as a 'Study Programme')
- An apprenticeship
- Full-time work involving at least 280 hours of education
- A traineeship
- Home education (NCFE, 2013)

Study Programmes for 16–19 are aimed at supporting progression to further education and/or employment. These programmes include qualifications such as functional skills or GCSE in English and maths and non-accredited provision such as personal and social development and vocational skills in work placements. These programmes were introduced to allow more opportunity for a personalised curriculum according to learners' individual needs, and as colleges are funded per learner rather than per qualification, there is more freedom and flexibility to tailor programmes more individually. One key feature is the non-qualification activity that creates opportunities for learners to develop personal, employability and study skills.

Differences in Motivation

As outlined in this chapter, FE provision caters for a broad range of learners who are diverse in age, personal circumstances and previous educational experience. Therefore, their reasons for enrolling onto courses are equally disparate. Historically, FE provision has had two main strands: the personal development of learners, and more focused work-related training. These two principal strands remain the key motivating factors for most learners in FE, with some provision being targeted more towards the development of the learner as an individual, while other courses have a more work-focused approach. In reality, both aspects need to be considered and provision that takes both motivations into account is likely to be the most effective. Intrinsic motivation such as personal development, a passion for a subject, and extrinsic motivation, such as getting a certificate or a job promotion, are often pitted against each other as polar opposites, but in reality they coexist in most of us. However, intrinsically motivated learners are more

likely to sustain interest and engagement, and be more committed than those who are more extrinsically motivated. Intrinsic motivation 'seems to be central to high-quality involvement in a task and be self-maintaining and self-terminating' (Curzon and Tummons, 2013: 256)

One of the many strengths of the further education sector is the commitment to learners that teachers bring to their teaching role. This creates an ethos of support, encouragement, choice and challenge in FE, where learners are involved in their own learning through a range of teaching and learning approaches that foster active engagement in the learning process, which in turn create the conditions to help learners become self-motivated. Teachers in FE mostly have a holistic view of the learners they work with, and the work they do, and as a result attach importance to forming and maintaining positive working relationships with their learners. Younger learners frequently feedback that they get treated with respect in FE colleges, and they respond positively to this.

By encouraging learners to reflect on how they learn, defined as 'metacognition', we can begin to engage them in discussions about their learning.



Activity 1.3

- Make a list of questions about learning that you could ask learners as part of an induction activity to start the dialogue about the learning process.

Frank Coffield, a leading educationalist, in his report *Just Suppose Teaching and Learning became the First Priority ...* (2008: 64), offers a set of questions which he has found useful in getting the discussion on learning going (see Appendix 1).

A key challenge in FE is motivating learners to continue studying English and maths. Although these subjects have been embedded in vocational subjects since the Skills for Life strategy was introduced in 2001, it was quite an informal practice. One area of concern amongst FE teachers has been around the wholesale introduction of English and maths teaching, alongside teaching their curriculum subject, which became a significant part of their role following the launch of the Functional Skills qualifications in 2010. Part of the concern relates to many teachers' own confidence in being able to teach English and maths, with anecdotes being made such as: 'I'm a plumber teaching plumbing, not an English teacher.' However, the main issue currently being experienced by FE teachers is the difficulty in motivating learners who have spent 11 school years learning English and maths, and

failed to achieve the all-important GCSE grade C, and being given only an academic year (36 weeks) to meet this considerable challenge. This sentiment has been repeated since the raising of the participation age and the requirement for learners without that all-important grade C, to continue to study GCSE English and maths alongside their chosen course, although English and maths teachers rather than vocational subject teachers now have this principal responsibility. The challenge to motivate learners who have struggled with these subjects throughout their schooling remains a substantial one.

Conclusion

While it is not possible to do justice to the diversity of the further education sector in so few words, this chapter has sought to highlight how wide-ranging the provision is, and how this is designed to meet a very diverse range of learners. FE has long suffered a low status within the education system in the UK, and some of the history behind the perceived inferiority of vocational education compared to academic education has been discussed, but unfortunately the evidence shows that this perception still persists today. This is reflected in successive government spending reviews which have hit core college budgets which are not ring-fenced like the schools budget for 5-16 year olds. This means that recent austerity measures to cut public spending have fallen mainly on the funding of education for 16-19 years olds and adults. Further evidence is demonstrated in the government policy to deregulate mandatory initial teacher education in further education which strikes at the heart of FE professionalism. The inextricable link between further education and economic imperatives has also been outlined, and this highlights some of the complex challenges which the sector has met, and continues to meet. It also demonstrates the undervalued expertise of its teachers who work with very diverse learners with a very diverse range of needs and aspirations – an expertise that comprises the knowledge, skills and commitment to engage, and re-engage, young people and adults in learning.

Suggested Further Reading

- Coffield, F. (2008) *Just Suppose Teaching and Learning became the First Priority ...* London: Learning and Skills Network.
- Wolf, A. (2011) *Review of Vocational Education: The Wolf Report*. London: DfE.