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Chapter 5

‘Sorry to have kept you waiting so long, Mr. Macfarlane’: Further Education after the Coalition

Robin Simmons

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the further education (FE) sector, a part of the education system – if indeed system is the correct term – which has suffered more than most under the Coalition. Although FE has always been something of a ‘Cinderella service’, savage funding cuts and far-reaching systemic changes mean that its prospects now look particularly bleak. Drawing on recommendations made in the first draft of the often forgotten Macfarlane Report of 1980, I set out a radically different future for further education: a future in which the muddled and incoherent FE sector we see today is transformed into national system of tertiary colleges – organisation which would be at the centre of a greatly simplified system of comprehensive post-school education and training. Before planning the future it is, however, necessary to understand the present and so, initially, I provide an overview of the FE sector and explain how it has arrived at its current condition. The chapter therefore initially provides a brief overview of the history of further education and summarises some of the main characteristics of the Coalition’s approach to FE before turning to the future of further education.

Further education in England: a brief history

In England the FE sector is made up of a diverse range of providers including sixth-form colleges, school sixth forms and what remains of adult education services run by local authorities. Specialist colleges catering for subjects such as art and design, agriculture, and performing arts also exist. Other institutions serve particular groups of students such as adult returners or learners with special educational needs. Private and voluntary providers are an important part of the landscape: since the 1980s, successive governments have driven the commercialisation and marketization of post-compulsory education and training, and today the English further education sector is effectively a ‘mixed-economy’ of public sector providers competing with each other and literally thousands of voluntary and private sector organisations. FE is therefore complicated and difficult to understand, not only for those with little direct experience of the sector but also for many working or studying within it (Orr and Simmons 2010). Whilst there are some significant differences in the different nations of the UK – in Scotland, for example, sixth-form colleges do not exist and private providers play a less significant role than in England – in each nation general FE colleges are the largest and most ‘weighty’ providers of further education.

FE colleges offer a broad and diverse variety of learning opportunities, ranging from courses for people with learning difficulties through to degree-level programmes. In some ways FE also overlaps with the work of schools, both in terms of competition for young people over the age of 16 and with regard to collaborative provision for 14-16 year olds thought more suitable for vocational or work-related education rather than academic study. Introductory and intermediate vocational learning for those

above the minimum school-leaving age has, however, always been further education's 'core business' and most FE courses focus on teaching the skills and knowledge needed for everyday employment – whether this is on the construction site, in the engineering workshop, the care home, office or hotel. Basically, further education has always been about education and training for working-class people and consequently few policymakers have direct experience of FE: in class-conscious England, further education colleges have always been better suited to 'other people's children' (Richardson 2007, 411).

The origins of some of today's FE colleges can be traced back to the mechanics institutes of nineteenth century England but local education authorities (LEAs) played a key role in their development. However, municipal involvement was initially voluntary and so many parts of the country, including some of its major industrial towns and cities were left without meaningful provision (Bailey 1987 52-55). Later, there was a huge growth of further education after the 1944 Education Act placed a statutory duty on all LEAs to provide 'adequate facilities' for FE. The notion of adequacy is, of course, open to interpretation and the way in which each local authority carried out its responsibilities depended, to a great extent, on what Waitt (1980, 402) describes as a 'local ecology'. One important feature of this was the variable level of finance different LEAs awarded to different colleges across the country. The size, remit and ethos of each college were also shaped, at least in part, by the presence (or absence) of local schools, polytechnics and universities, as well as by other colleges. Moreover, some local authorities allowed colleges considerable autonomy in their affairs whilst others were, at their worst, stifling and restrictive (Waitt 1980, 397-402). One way of describing FE under local authority control is that it was 'variable' – and that this

variability existed at a number of different levels: between different authorities; within different authorities; and even between different departments within individual colleges (Simmons 2008, 361). More bluntly, Ainley and Bailey (1997, 103) describe the era of LEA control as ‘a mishmash of brilliance...and diabolical practice’.

Whatever arrangements local authorities made, for three decades after the end of World War Two FE colleges were basically locally-run organisations on the margins of the education system (Lucas 2004, 36-8). This situation began to change as increasing disquiet about the performance of the education system began to be voiced. Although predated by the ‘Black Papers’ and other, mainly Right-wing critiques, James Callaghan’s (1976) ‘Great Debate’ speech infamously linked the UK’s relative economic decline with the perceived inability of schools and colleges to produce enough ‘employable’ young people. Thereafter successive governments intensified such criticisms and championed the need for greater efficiency and responsiveness to consumer needs. Teachers, like other public servants, were viewed as protected from the rigours of competition through excessive trade union power, weak management and overly generous terms and conditions. Gravatt and Silver’s (2000, 116-117) critique of FE under local authority control encapsulates many of the criticisms made about the public services at the time – that parochialism, inefficiency and ‘vested interests’ dominated at the expense of consumer needs. One would not, however, need to be a zealous neo-liberal to object to some of the traditions and practices that characterised the ‘golden years’ of LEA control. Whilst, officially, local authorities were accountable through the democratic process, the reality was often rather different. Decision-making could be slow and some LEAs were not particularly open to change (Simmons 2008). Historically, most colleges were dominated by certain relatively privileged sections of

the working class and there was sometimes a reluctance to engage with the needs of ‘non-traditional’ users such as women, ethnic minorities or mature students (FEU 1979).

During the 1980s, public utilities and nationalised industries were incrementally privatised but more politically sensitive public services such as education could not so easily be sold off. A combination of quasi-market forces and strict limits on public expenditure was used in order to reproduce the conditions of the private sector instead. At the same time, there was increasing state intervention in the education system and a series of legislative changes which aimed to re-direct education in order to serve the perceived needs of the economy. The 1988 Education Reform Act focused mainly on schools but also resulted in important changes in the way FE was financed and governed. The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act was, however, pivotal for further education and, following this Act, all FE colleges were removed from LEA control – a process known as ‘incorporation’. Each institution became fully responsible for its own affairs; principals became ‘chief executives’; and colleges were required to compete against each other, schools, universities and other education and training providers in marketized conditions engineered and maintained by the state (Simmons 2008, 359). Arguably, the decline of the UK’s traditional industrial base and broader social change meant it was necessary to remove colleges from municipal control to allow them to operate more flexibly in a changing environment, but the particular form which incorporation took was closely associated with neo-liberalism (Simmons 2010, 366). Following incorporation, 20,000 staff left FE through redundancies, early retirement and ill-health (Burchill 1998). Cumulative reductions in funding meant that the amount colleges received per full-time equivalent student was reduced by over 20% in the first five years

of incorporation (FEFC 1998). Pay and conditions deteriorated and teachers' professional autonomy was significantly curtailed; macho-management, strike action and industrial unrest became commonplace. FE colleges became far more taxing places in which to work, particularly for teaching staff (Randle and Brady 1997).

Although there is no doubt that FE was in a state of disarray when New Labour came to power in 1997, it must also be noted that many colleges became more open and outward-looking after incorporation. FE embraced new areas of work, engaged with new constituencies of students, and, in some ways, colleges were forced to operate in a more transparent fashion than had been the case hitherto. But whilst there were certain continuities between New Labour and its Conservative predecessors (Hodgson and Spours 2006), the governments of Blair and Brown were less overtly aggressive towards FE. There was, however, much rhetoric about 'up-skilling' and further education's supposed role in creating a 'knowledge economy'. New Labour's vision was that FE was the key to both economic success and social justice (Cabinet Office 2008) and, from 2001 onwards, colleges were provided with substantially increased funding – much of which manifested itself in improved facilities and shiny new buildings. The *quid pro quo* was an avalanche of interventions and policy initiatives, the extent of which lead Frank Coffield (2006, 18-19) to describe FE under New Labour as a sector dominated by diktat and discipline, performativity and managerialism.

The Coalition and Further Education

There are significant similarities between the Coalition's approach to further education and that of New Labour – both, for example, valorise 'skills' and see market competition as the best way to improve the sector (Avis 2011). There are, however, also important

differences between their approaches, one of which is the peculiarly utilitarian and old-fashioned conception of vocational learning evident amongst key figures within the Coalition's Conservative leadership (Fisher and Simmons 2012, 41). Whilst the introduction of compulsory teacher training for FE teachers was an important part of New Labour's drive to 'professionalise' the sector, Coalition policymakers display a marked antipathy towards formal teacher training in general and for FE teachers in particular. The recent decision to rescind the statutory requirement for teaching staff in colleges to hold formal teaching qualifications is consistent with the essentially liberal values which underpin the Coalition's education policy.

'...staff training, professional updating, competency and behaviour are essentially matters between employer and employee. There are sufficient statutory arrangements in place through, for example, employment legislation and the requirements for staff performance management and learner safeguarding set out in Ofsted's *Common Inspection Framework*, to ensure at least a threshold level of professional performance.' (DBIS 2012, 6)

The decision to end compulsory teacher training for FE teachers is, however, also rooted in a particular conception of teaching as essentially a skills-based 'craft' as opposed to a professional practice (see, for example, Gove 2010). Whilst this is evident in the way senior Coalition figures regard teaching in general, their conception of FE teaching draws on a combination of romance and condescension to promote old-fashioned images of technical instruction as opposed to broader forms of pedagogy rooted in a body of principled knowledge.

Another difference between the two governments' approach to FE

is, of course, the Coalition's regime of extreme cost-cutting which has, so far, included scrapping the Educational Maintenance Allowance for 16-18 year olds; removing all public funding for those studying level 3 courses over the age of 24; ending the entitlement for people over the age of 25 to take a first level 2 qualification free of charge; and pulling the plug on various college building projects. All this is set against overall reductions in funding of over 25%, on-going programmes of restructuring, redundancies, and a culture of 'more for less' across the FE sector. Deep funding cuts have, however, been accompanied by a discourse of freedom. Speaking at the Association of Colleges' Annual Conference shortly before the Coalition took power, the future Minister for Universities and Science, David Willetts, stated that:

'Our first principle is college autonomy. One of the things that always strikes me when I visit colleges is the long and proud history that so many of them have – for example, as local mechanics' institutes serving the needs of local employers. The Conservative in me is attracted by the idea of strong local institutions acting as glue in the local community... So I confirm that we will set you free.'
(Willetts 2009)

After years of New Labour's 'policy hysteria' (Avis 2009), such promises may have held a certain appeal. But, whilst various organisations responsible for regulatory and developmental functions across the FE sector have either been abolished or radically cut back since 2010, the Coalition's notion of freedom is deeply rooted within a neo-liberal discourse of market competition and consumer choice; and, whilst New Labour actively encouraged private and voluntary providers to enter the FE marketplace, the current Government has driven privatisation much further than its

predecessors. One example of this is the Employer Ownership of Skills pilot. Run by PriceWaterhouseCoopers, this initiative offers employers direct access, in the first instance, to £250 million of public money ‘to design and deliver their own training solutions’ (UKCES 2012). So far, companies including Siemens, BAE Systems and Aria Foods UK have been significant beneficiaries of the scheme, which effectively subsidises the activities of private companies with public money (Sloman 2013, 10-11).

Apprenticeships are strongly linked to the privatisation of post-compulsory education and training and, whilst they are promoted as a response to skill shortages, they are also being used as a way of providing employers with ownership and control of the FE system and, perhaps more importantly, the funding. The Government’s promotion of apprenticeships is also part of a discourse which seeks to valorise work-related learning as an alternative to academic study, at least for less privileged young people. The term ‘apprenticeship’ has long been associated with notions of craft, skill and job-security and there is no doubt it holds a certain appeal, especially to young working-class people and their parents. This, in turn, allows certain views about the value of ‘hands-on’ learning as a viable alternative to dry and abstract academic learning to be promoted, at least to certain sections of the population. Either way, there has been a great increase in the take-up of apprenticeships since the Coalition came to power, and it is important to note that some of these play a positive role in helping young people into employment. In other cases, however, employers have simply rebranded existing jobs as apprenticeships in order to access state funding. Moreover, in many instances, the training offered is very different from any traditional conception of an apprenticeship and certain programmes stretch the credulity of the term (Sloman 2013). Government nevertheless remains bullish:

‘Apprenticeships are at the heart of our mission to rebuild the economy, giving young people the chance to learn a trade, build their careers, and create a truly world-class, highly-skilled workforce that can compete and thrive in the fierce global race we are in. There are record numbers of people taking up an apprenticeship, with a million starting one in the last few years.’ (Cameron 2013)

Whatever the strengths or limitations of particular programmes, there is no doubt that apprenticeships and similar forms of vocational training have been shamelessly oversold by the Coalition as the solution to a range of problems. This is particularly the case with the enduring problem of youth unemployment, although this phenomenon is rooted at least as much in a chronic lack of demand for young people’s labour as in any deficits in their skills, abilities, attitudes and dispositions. It is important to remember that the success of any education or training initiative will always be limited without concomitant intervention in labour and product markets, and the stimulation of the demand for employment (Sloman 2013). Fortunately, however, Ed Miliband’s Real Jobs Guarantee for unemployed 18-24 year olds is one sign that key figures within the Labour Party are beginning to come to terms with this (Miliband 2012).

Alongside demands for a more ‘hands-on’ vocational curriculum, Coalition thinking stresses the need for different forms of learning to take place within different types of institution. This can be seen in the proposal to create up to 40 university technical colleges (UTCs) across England. Alongside qualifications in English, mathematics, science and IT these institutions will offer technical education to 14-19 year olds in areas such as engineering; construction; sport and health sciences; land and environmental

services; and hair and beauty. What is clear, however, is that vocational education clearly remains a second class option in comparison to academic education. This is evident in Prime Minister Cameron's views on UTCs which mix hyperbole with a discourse of deficit.

'The next great poverty-busting structural change we need – the expansion of University Technical Colleges – offering first-class technical skills to those turned off by purely academic study.' (Cameron, 2010).

Meanwhile, key Conservative thinkers within the Coalition seek to reassert 'traditional' academic values and to separate the academic from the vocational. Whilst New Labour rejected Tomlinson's (DfES 2004) proposal to formally break the academic-vocational divide through the creation of integrated diplomas, its period in power nevertheless resulted in some 'blurring' between vocational and academic learning. This occurred, for example, through the redefinition of General National Vocational Qualifications as 'applied' A-Levels and GCSEs, and through promoting the combination of academic and vocational study at 16+ following the reforms of 'Curriculum 2000', albeit with limited impact. In contrast, Coalition policy promotes more rigid divisions and increased exclusivity in academic education, for example, through allowing schools to 'filter out' pupils identified as less academic at an early stage and transfer these young people to FE colleges. This, alongside granting schools greater powers to suspend and expel students, is likely to increase the flow of less able students into FE and to reinforce vocational learning's subordinate status (Allen 2010).

Further education after the Coalition

Much will need to be done across all sectors of education after the

Coalition loses power. Not least of these tasks should be a de-cluttering of the institutional landscape. The current jungle of organisations delivering education and training is both socially divisive and incredibly difficult for ordinary people to understand. Unequal possession of economic, social and cultural capital gives unequal access to different forms of education, and political decisions since the 1980s have ensured that those holding more of the various forms of capital have experienced continued advantage in gaining access to privileged forms of education (Ball 2003). Institutional competition and consumer choice benefit those most able to manipulate market forces and, whilst there is a strong case for reducing both institutional and curricular complexity throughout the education system, for post-compulsory education and training the best and most straightforward solution was first suggested well over 30 years ago: the creation of a national system of tertiary colleges.

The term tertiary college is sometimes used to describe any institution which provides a combination of academic and vocational programmes but, in their purest form, tertiary colleges are the sole providers of publicly-funded post-16 education in any given area, except that which is located in establishments of higher education (RCU 2003, 1). Under a truly tertiary system there are no school sixth forms, sixth-form colleges or other providers of education and training; young people of all abilities progress from local schools to a single organisation providing a broad, inclusive curriculum. Tertiary colleges also serve the needs of adult students and provide a wide range of education and training opportunities to the community more generally. Full-time and part-time courses, vocational, pre-vocational and academic education all take place within one institution: the traditionally divergent streams of academic and vocational education are united. In other words,

tertiary colleges are effectively comprehensive institutions for post-school education and training.

England's first tertiary college was established in 1970 when Devon LEA abolished school sixth-forms in Exeter and created a single post-16 college in their place. Some other authorities followed suit and by the end of the decade 15 such institutions existed across England. Somewhat ironically given their hostility towards the principles of comprehensive education, Conservative-controlled LEAs, particularly those in rural areas with small, unviable sixth-forms and under-used FE colleges were amongst the first to establish tertiary colleges. In contrast, tertiary re-organisation made less progress in Labour-controlled urban authorities. Many Labour councillors believed that allowing comprehensive schools to have their own sixth-forms would provide an equitable system in place of grammar schools. Some schoolteachers argued there would be a drop in standards in schools without sixth-forms. Often parents worried about the 'freedoms' offered by the more mature environment found outside schools (Allen and Ainley 2007, 53).

From the early 1970s onwards, a combination of factors brought increasing pressure on the education system. The economic crisis which followed the OPEC oil boycott of 1973 and the ensuing collapse of much of the UK's traditional industrial base brought significant consequences (Ainley 2007, 369), as did the problem of falling school rolls. A particular problem for FE was the curtailment of the supply of day-release students which had traditionally provided the majority of its learners. Consequently many colleges diversified their offer and participation in further education, especially on a full-time basis, grew steadily throughout the 1970s as FE colleges began to embrace new types of students.

Gradually, colleges shifted away from their technical roots and became more inclusive organisations offering a broad range of vocational, pre-vocational and academic courses (Lucas 1999, 18). Another important development was the creation of the Manpower Services Commission and the introduction of various training and re-training schemes for the growing ranks of the unemployed, which also brought new constituencies of adults and young people into colleges (Ainley and Corney 1990).

As is the case today, during the 1970s successive governments were focused on reducing public expenditure. For local authorities the re-organisation of post-compulsory education was a frequent response to the pressure to cut costs, and some decided simply to concentrate sixth-form provision in certain schools, leaving others to concentrate on 11-16 year-olds. Elsewhere, LEAs encouraged neighbouring schools to share staff, students and facilities by forming sixth-form consortia. Most of these arrangements were, however, fraught with logistical problems and usually unsuccessful (Terry 1987, 10-11). Other authorities chose to close school sixth forms and create separate sixth-form colleges for students continuing with academic studies after reaching the minimum school leaving age. This model offered some advantages over some other forms of post-16 re-organisation – including greater clarity of structure and the ability of sixth-form colleges to offer a broader range of courses than school sixth forms (Terry 1987, 9). However, despite their name, sixth-form colleges were established under Schools Regulations and were usually set up on former grammar school premises. Sixth-form colleges remain distinctive in both their predominantly academic goals and the relative social advantage of their intake; in many ways, their culture remains similar to that of schools (Foster 2005, 21). The creation of sixth-form colleges may have appeased middle-class interests, but left a

number of problems unresolved. One issue was the often considerable overlap between sixth-form colleges and neighbouring FE colleges. Normally FE colleges would take the largest number of post-school students in a given area but, like sixth-form colleges, would sometimes also have significant numbers of A-level students. Nevertheless, most FE colleges continued to have a predominantly vocational curriculum and, therefore, continued to suffer from an image of being second-best. Faced with such a scenario, some LEAs adopted a radical option – ‘going tertiary’.

In 1979, the incoming Conservative Government set up a post-16 working party under the chairmanship of Under-Secretary of State for Education, Neil Macfarlane. The group’s remit included a survey of work carried out by local authorities in rationalising post-16 education; an assessment of future demand for various types of education and training; an examination of the relationship between schools and FE colleges; and a consideration of the cost-effectiveness of existing provision. The Macfarlane Committee found a range of evidence in favour of tertiary re-organisation, including cost savings through the rationalisation of existing provision; the ability of tertiary colleges to offer a wider programme of full-time and part-time courses than is possible through other arrangements; and the opportunity for young people to select the courses best suited to their needs (Macfarlane 1980, 31). Consequently, Macfarlane initially recommended that, for both educational and cost reasons, a national system of tertiary colleges should be created. This was a truly radical proposal with potentially far-reaching consequences and, if implemented, would have meant the dissolution of school-sixth forms and sixth-form colleges across England. The ‘Cinderella service’ would, for the first time, have been brought into the mainstream and the ethos of comprehensive education would have been extended to the post-compulsory level.

Unsurprisingly, senior figures in the Conservative Party were alarmed at Macfarlane's proposals and, following Lady Young's intervention on the behalf of Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, Macfarlane was forced to climb down (David 1981, 764). Consequently, the final draft of the Macfarlane Report recommended only that LEAs consider tertiary re-organisation in light of their own local circumstances. A national tertiary policy was thought impracticable because of 'the realities of existing investment', 'local preferences' and the claimed 'success of many "all through" schools' (Macfarlane 1980,36). Effectively Macfarlane fudged the issue of tertiary re-organisation. Nevertheless, some local authorities pressed on and by the early-1990s almost 70 tertiary colleges had been established, although often school sixth-forms and sixth-form colleges were allowed to exist alongside so-called tertiary colleges. The lack of a national policy also meant that, even in the few areas where a fully tertiary model was implemented, competition for students with institutions in neighbouring authorities undermined the tertiary principle. The 1988 Education Reform Act made tertiary re-organisation considerably more difficult by creating Grant Maintained (GM) status. This allowed some schools to opt out of LEA control and enabled GM schools to set-up sixth-forms outside the local authority framework. The threat of leaving LEA control was also used by some schools as a defence against the prospect of re-organisation. The possibility of creating more tertiary colleges was effectively extinguished when local authorities lost all responsibility for running further education following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act.

Had Macfarlane's initial recommendation, the creation of a national system of tertiary colleges, been implemented this would

have helped to create a more coherent institutional framework than had existed hitherto – and a far more transparent system of post-compulsory education than exists today. Rather than competition and duplication of provision, national tertiary reorganisation could have been used to encourage institutional co-operation and innovative practice. Across the country, students would have been given access to a wider range of courses and greater flexibility of study in both the number and type of subjects available to them. Whilst we need to remember that education cannot compensate for all society's ills (Bernstein 2000, 59), the way in which education is structured and delivered can exacerbate or ameliorate inequality. The creation of a national system of tertiary colleges would go at least some way towards reducing the deep inequalities that characterise the English education system today.

Research suggests that tertiary colleges offer significant educational advantages in comparison to other forms of post-compulsory education and training, and that these benefits are experienced by students from across a broad spectrum of ability and background. Drawing comparisons between tertiary, general FE and sixth-form colleges, a study conducted by the Responsive Colleges Unit (RCU 2003) found tertiary colleges to have higher achievement rates at almost all levels and much better success in encouraging learners to progress on to higher levels of study. It also found they have significantly better retention rates than general FE colleges, with levels almost as high as those found in sixth-form colleges, despite having a far more diverse curriculum and a much more inclusive ethos; and that a genuinely tertiary structure helps to increase overall participation rates, especially for students from relatively deprived backgrounds. Moreover, tertiary colleges enable students to access a wider range of courses and have greater flexibility of choice in the options available to them – and,

importantly, this includes access to a range of specialist and ‘minority’ subjects normally reserved for the privileged. With full-time and part-time students; arts, sciences and technology; general and vocational courses offered within one institution, the potential to begin to break down – or at least reduce – the barriers between academic education and applied training becomes possible (Cotterell and Heley 1981, 10-11).

Perhaps the Macfarlane Report represents a key moment that has been lost forever. The economic and political climate since the time of the Report has run contrary to the principles of the tertiary college movement, and there is no doubt that the Coalition is fiercely hostile to the ideals of comprehensive education. Yet, despite all this, tertiary reorganisation may still return to the agenda. A new government committed to increasing social justice would obviously be needed to revive the tertiary college movement but other, more expedient factors, also mean that, in many ways, tertiary colleges are the obvious answer to a number of immediate and pressing questions. For example, for the foreseeable future at least, it will be necessary for governments to operate within strict spending constraints – and, as we have seen, the tertiary college allows education and training to be delivered in a more cost-effective way than is possible through other arrangements. Other developments, such as raising the compulsory age of participation to 18, present both educational and logistical challenges to which only tertiary colleges can provide a satisfactory solution: a broad, flexible curriculum and an inclusive ethos is necessary to engage disadvantaged and marginalised young people who would not otherwise be participating in education and training.

Much will need to be done across all sectors of education once the Coalition is gone and, whilst the logistical and political challenges

involved in creating a national system of tertiary colleges should not be underestimated, it is in many ways the obvious answer for post-school education and training. Having said this, young people still need to be provided with meaningful labour market opportunities however robust or well-delivered their education. Labour market intervention to stimulate the demand for work and for particular forms of knowledge and skill is necessary to provide young people with meaningful employment opportunities and the motivation to study. This will mean a radically different approach not only to organising and providing education and training but to social and economic policy more broadly.

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