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Globalisation, neo-liberalism and vocational learning: the case of English further education

Robin Simmons
School of Education and Professional Development
University of Huddersfield,
Huddersfield, UK
HD1 3DH
r.a.simmons@hud.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0)1484 478224

Notes on contributor

Robin Simmons is a senior lecturer in the School of Education and Professional Development and a member of the Centre for Research in Post-Compulsory Education at the University of Huddersfield, UK.

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Abstract

Further education (FE) has traditionally been a rather unspectacular activity. Lacking the visibility of schools or the prestige of universities, for the vast majority of its existence FE has had a relatively low profile on the margins of English education. Over recent years this situation has altered significantly and further education has undergone profound change. This paper argues that a combination of related factors – neo-liberalism, globalisation, and dominant discourses of the knowledge economy – has acted in synergy to transform FE into a highly performative and marketised sector. Against this backdrop, further education has been assigned a particular role based upon certain narrow and instrumental understandings of skill, employment and economic competitiveness. The paper argues that, although it has always been predominantly working class in nature, FE is now, more than ever, positioned firmly at the lower end of the institutional hierarchy in the highly class-stratified terrain of English education.

Keywords: further education; England; globalisation, neo-liberalism

Globalisation, neo-liberalism and vocational learning: the case of English further education

Introduction

The further education (FE) sector provides a vast and diverse range of learning opportunities for over four million learners across England. This includes provision for people with learning difficulties, intermediate and advanced vocational training, and courses of higher education. However, despite its diversity, further education has traditionally been associated mainly with 'trades' rather than the professions: most FE students are focused on learning for everyday employment – whether this is on the construction site, in the engineering workshop, the care home, hotel, or office. Although International comparisons are not straightforward, there are some similarities between FE colleges, community colleges in the USA, and the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes in Australia. Few policymakers have direct knowledge or experience of further education and, for most of its existence, FE suffered from significant underfunding and received little attention from central government. Richardson (2007, 411) argues that, in class-conscious England, FE colleges have often been regarded as something better suited to 'other people's children'. Despite this, over recent years, further education has become the focus of government attention and series of centrally directed policies, strategies and initiatives have radically altered the nature of FE. These reforms, it is claimed, will simultaneously 'up-skill' the workforce, increase economic competitiveness, and promote social inclusion.

This paper relates the changing position of FE to wider social, political and ideological change. It argues that there are two separate but related developments that have been largely responsible for the changing nature of further education – globalisation and neo-liberalism – and that an examination of these forces alongside dominant discourses of the 'knowledge economy' is central to understanding FE's current position. The first section of the paper provides an overview of English further education and highlights some of the key developments that have shaped the sector we see today. The next two sections

develop the two key themes of globalisation and neo-liberalism. They provide an overview of these phenomena, consider their relationship to each other, and discuss the consequences of this particular symbiosis – both for society in general and for FE in particular. The following section focuses on discourses of the 'knowledge economy', which, it is argued, are essentially a neo-liberal response to the perceived pressures of globalisation. The particular place reserved for further education within this context is highlighted. The paper finishes by arguing that, despite rhetoric about the demands of the knowledge economy, further education is a sector that is increasingly controlled and constrained and that, over recent years, has been driven 'downwards'. In the highly stratified landscape that characterises post-compulsory education in England, FE has been assigned a narrow and prescriptive role based upon particular interpretations of skill and employability that can only be understood within a class-based analysis.

Further Education in England

Further education's roots lie in the later stages of the industrial revolution and the origins of some of today's FE colleges can be traced back to the mechanics institutes of nineteenth century England. Such provision focused largely on technical education and training and was essentially run on a voluntary basis, by both municipal councils and philanthropic bodies. It was not until the 1944 Education Act that FE was given thorough consideration by central government and a statutory duty was placed upon local education authorities (LEAs) to provide 'adequate facilities' for further education. However, this remit was open to interpretation and, for three decades after the end of World War Two, FE colleges were essentially locally-run organisations on the margins of English education. Nevertheless, the post-war period saw a rapid growth in further education across the country. Many new colleges were created and student numbers expanded greatly (MoE 1946). Each local authority was responsible for the general educational character of institutions under its control but the way in which this responsibility was discharged depended, to a large extent, upon local circumstances and preferences. With over 100 LEAs running colleges it is difficult to describe FE as a 'national' sector during this period. The nature of each college was also shaped, at least in part, by the presence (or otherwise) of local schools, polytechnics and universities as

well as other FE institutions. Some had a large educational void to fill whilst much less was expected of others (Waitt, 1980, 412). Further education at this time could perhaps best be described as a rather 'variable' service – and this variability existed at a number of different levels: between different authorities; within different authorities; and even between different departments within individual colleges (Simmons, 2008a, 361).

Local authority control of FE offered the promise of a democratically accountable service. Teachers and managers were officially accountable to LEA officers who were - at least in theory - responsible to democratically elected local councillors. However, English further education has a peculiar history which has been predominantly working class yet, paradoxically, also somewhat elitist. Until relatively recently, the majority of FE students and teachers were drawn from a predominantly male working class elite of skilled manual and technical workers. Many colleges were rather closed and inward-looking institutions: the needs of underachieving young people were often overlooked and FE did not always actively engage with minority ethnic groups or mature students. Furthermore, the culture of many colleges was not conducive to the entry or career progression of women staff and students (Simmons, 2008a, 363). Gravatt and Silver (2000, 116-117) argue that this period was often dominated by parochialism and 'cosy' closed arrangements between college staff, trade unions and local authority officials. This view can be seen as part of a broader conception that overly powerful professionals and others with 'vested interests' had come to dominate education at the expense of its 'consumers' – students, parents and especially business (Ironside and Seifert 1995). FE teachers, for their part, enjoyed terms and conditions intended to be generous enough to draw skilled practitioners away from industry and into colleges (Taubman 2000, 83). Employer support for trade unions and remote collective bargaining combined with a tradition of professional autonomy to shield FE teachers from an excessive exploitation of their labour. Whilst administration of a sort took place, generally senior college staff were not perceived as managers: the LEA took the role of employer, budget-maker, estates manager and much else besides (Reeves 1995, 38-39).

From the 1980s onwards there has been an increasing incursion of the central state into education policy and practice in the UK and elsewhere. Much of this has been aimed at re-directing education to serve the perceived needs of the economy. In England, this is the case for all sectors of education, but arguably it has affected further education most of all (Hyland and Merrill 2003, 4). The 1988 Education Reform Act focused mainly on schools but it also weakened the municipal governance that had characterised FE since the end of World War Two. The 1992 Further and Higher Education (F and HE) Act and the subsequent removal of colleges from LEA control: a process known as 'incorporation', were pivotal in 'reforming' FE. This resulted in marked changes in the management, funding and organisation of the colleges. Rather than being provided with locally co-ordinated services, each institution became responsible for its own affairs and its own financial and management infrastructure. Principals became 'chief executives' and colleges were required to compete against each other, schools, universities and other education and training providers in quasi-market conditions engineered and maintained by the state.

In the first five years after incorporation, FE was placed under greater pressure than any other part of the UK public sector has recently experienced: twenty thousand staff left further education through redundancies and 'restructuring' (Burchill 1998). Funding was severely constrained and FE colleges became far more taxing places in which to work, particularly for teachers. Workloads increased greatly, pay and conditions deteriorated and levels of professional autonomy were significantly curtailed (see, for example, Avis and Bathmaker 2004; and Randle and Brady 1997). Encouraged by the state, there was a trend towards 'macho-management' in many colleges; strike action and industrial unrest became commonplace. Coffield (2006) describes FE as a sector that is now dominated by diktat and discipline, performativity and managerialism. It must also be recognised, however, that the consequences of reform have not all been negative. Colleges now tend to be more outward-looking and responsive to their communities. FE has embraced new areas of work, new constituencies of students, and now operates in a more 'customer focused' manner.

The F and HE Act was presented as 'freeing' colleges from the constraints of municipal bureaucracy but the decision to remove further education from LEA control can only be fully understood in the context of a belief that 'the market' is the most effective and efficient way to run public services. This is underpinned by a number of notions. One is that market forces are inherently superior to traditional forms of state bureaucracy in delivering public services. Another is a commitment to reduce public spending in order to enable a redistribution of wealth towards those responsible for free enterprise. Such notions are closely associated with the neo-liberal approach that has dominated British politics since the time of Margaret Thatcher's governments. Whilst it is recognised that New Labour has provided increased levels of funding for further education since it assumed power, there is still a significant degree of continuity between New Labour and their Conservative predecessors (Hodgson and Spours 2006). The governments of Blair and Brown have remained committed to neo-liberalism, albeit accompanied by a discourse of social inclusion. Nevertheless, despite the rhetoric of social democracy, issues of social justice are placed as subservient to neo-liberal understandings of the economy; any tensions in this relationship are overlooked; the interests of labour and capital are conflated in an unproblematic fashion (Avis 2007). Traditional forms of public sector organisation and delivery continue to be dismantled. Despite the increasing need for the state to subsidise private enterprise, public service organisations continue to be required to behave like commercial businesses. The language of the market continues to be pervasive. Many of the competitive forces that accompanied incorporation have been retained and, in some ways, they have been intensified. The present Government has promoted so-called 'demand-led' provision and actively encouraged private companies into the FE 'marketplace' (UCU 2007).

New Labour's FE policy is shaped by a central image of learning as the formal acquisition of economically useful knowledge and skills. Since 1997 there has been an almost never-ending succession of reports, initiatives and legislation aimed at directing the expansion and development of further education in line with this image. Finlay et. al. (2007, 141) highlight the multiple meanings that can be seen in the present Government's FE policy. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on the individual learner that may be

interpreted as 'a manifestation of a progressive movement in education with a focus on learning not normally associated with education (e.g. the workplace) and on student-centredness'. Simultaneously, however, the virtual disappearance of the term 'education' and its replacement by 'learning and skills' is representative of a continuation of 'the modernisation project [of] Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997, which deliberately sought to remove power and influence from education professionals and concentrate it in the hands of central government' (ibid.). Increasingly, 'skills' have become re-defined as competencies. Rather than emphasising a unity between knowledge and action, dominant contemporary discourses recast skill as performance-related tasks, remote from the principled underpinning knowledge which enables students to engage in critical enquiry (Ainley, 1999, 92-93).

Globalisation and social change

This section initially sketches some of the key components of globalisation; it then highlights how the pressures of globalisation have been interpreted by governments in different nation states; finally, it draws attention to neo-liberal responses to globalisation, particularly in the UK. It is followed by a section that focuses on neo-liberalism in more detail. This outlines some of its main assumptions and shows how UK governments have used a particular approach to the implementation of neo-liberal policies – an approach that has had far-reaching consequences for UK society, the public sector in general and further education in particular.

Although there is no agreed definition of globalisation, it is nevertheless possible to identify certain key principles which, most would agree, broadly constitute this phenomenon. Thus, whilst it should be recognised that globalisation is a contested concept, it can still be used as a heuristic tool to help understand and explain social change (Lauder et al. 2006, 30-31). One key component of most understandings of globalisation is the idea that the world is becoming increasingly 'inter-connected' and traditional divisions between nation states are breaking down. This, it is often said, encompasses a growing degree of economic, cultural and political 'connectivity' and is

accompanied by an increased flow and inter-change of goods, services, people and ideas across the world. Arguably, there is a concomitant decline in the importance of geographical and national boundaries and an increasing inter-dependence between countries and people. Knowledge, information and finance are able to flow across the world quickly and efficiently via global communication networks. Time and space are said to be 'compressed', especially by the use of information technology and fast, relatively inexpensive forms of travel (Lauder et al. 2006, 31).

As Kelly (2009) highlights, there are various ways of interpreting globalisation but some radical globalists advocate a future where national governments cease to maintain their primacy. Such an understanding of globalisation tends to view traditional bureaucratic state structures as incompatible with the demands of the new global order. In order to deal with the emergent needs of a globalised economy decision-making, it is argued, will increasingly need to be located in regional and global agencies; local cultures, it is claimed, will become more and more homogenised (Reich 1991; Waters 1995). From this perspective globalisation is leading to nothing short of political, economic and cultural transformation (Held and McGrew 2000). In the UK, various assumptions about the potency of globalisation have had a significant influence upon social and economic policy in general, and education policy in particular (see, for example, Cabinet Office 2008; Leitch 2006). However, caution needs to be exercised when assessing the impact of globalisation. Although it can be associated with certain quantitative and qualitative breaks from the past, it is doubtful whether globalisation can be regarded as an entirely new phenomenon. Furthermore, whilst it is possible to identify some objective changes associated with globalisation there are also subjective dimensions which are often promoted as objective processes. There are normative assumptions underpinning official conceptions of globalisation which emphasise its pervasiveness, and treat its forces as beyond political debate (Rizvi and Lingard 2006, 251). Globalisation cannot be divorced from the political and economic decisions that shape society and its institutions. Bourdieu (2003) writes about a conflation between the descriptive usage of globalisation and a performative interpretation of the term. For him, such a process constitutes a justification for the spread of neo-liberal economics across the world. Indeed, it can be argued that

dominant interpretations of globalisation often conflate the term with neo-liberalism. From this position it is possible to see globalisation as a doxa or as a discursive system pursued at policy level by powerful states and international capital.

Despite assertions about its inevitability and irresistibility, globalisation does not necessarily dictate any one form of political response. Capitalism can take various forms and there have been significant differences in the responses of different nation states: neo-liberalism is not an unavoidable response to globalisation. Whilst many Anglophone nations have chosen to embrace globalisation through the adoption of economic neo-liberalism, others have actively resisted aspects of the Anglo-Saxon model. The Nordic nations, for example, have chosen to mediate the effects of globalisation through encouraging greater continuity in employment and welfare than has been the case in either the UK or the USA (Lauder et al. 2006, 46-7). Arguably nation states are able to shape trans-national systems at least as much as they, in turn, are disciplined by global forces. Markets need to be created, maintained and policed. Rather than accepting globalisation as a 'natural' process it needs to be recognised that, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, globalisation is dominated by a neo-liberal orthodoxy of the free-market. Its impact has been felt unevenly – both between and within different nation states.

Whilst major changes are related to contemporary forms of globalisation, it needs to be recognised that global and national domains of power and culture are not necessarily mutually exclusive. State power has never existed independently of international context; trans-national trade and significant levels of migration have existed for centuries. Whilst over the past thirty years nation states have clearly been affected by globalisation to a far greater extent than beforehand we still have 'a world of states'. The role of the individual nation state may be changing but this does not necessarily mean it is diminishing or will disappear altogether at some point in the future (Hirst 2000, 178-183). The supposedly irresistible forces of globalisation have nevertheless provided a backdrop for the restructuring of workplace relations across both the private and public sectors in much of the 'developed' world. In the UK in particular, certain understandings of globalisation have led to profound changes in the way public services are managed, organised and

delivered. Traditional bureaucratic forms of governance based upon professional control and autonomy have been replaced by detailed centralised control, the discipline of market forces and an ethos of commercialisation. The unprecedented level of pressure placed upon the English further education system since the 1980s is one of the clearest examples of this. In England, policymakers imbued with an ideology of the market, have increasingly come to see FE as the answer to perceived skill shortages and as the solution to questions of economic competitiveness and social inclusion. Further education, due perhaps to a combination of its peculiar history and its ongoing institutional weakness has, more than any other sector of education, proved to be particularly vulnerable to such interventions.

One way of explaining this situation is through using Bourdieu's (1986) concept of 'field'. According to Bourdieu a society is made up of many 'fields' which are relatively autonomous but are structured by power relations. In the field of education it can be argued that it is largely the degree of 'academic capital' that determines who are the power-holders. If post-compulsory education in England is notable for anything, it is surely its institutional complexity. Many different types of providers offer a diverse range of education and training to people over the minimum school-leaving age of 16. Bourdieu (1988) argues that the weaker the academic capital the more vulnerable an institution or set of institutions are to state intervention, consumerism, marketisation and other forms of political pressure. These forces can be seen as leading to a shift in the underlying logic shaping academic practices: education becomes reconceptualised as a commercial activity; the pedagogic relationship becomes dependent on the market transaction of the commodity; the teacher becomes the 'producer' and the student the 'customer' (Naidoo and Jamieson 2006, 877-876). In England, where vocational education and training has traditionally been regarded as inferior to liberal, academic learning, educational forms and structures have always been closely related to status and social class; and although, admittedly, such views are not confined to this country, arguably they are more emphasized here than is the case elsewhere (Hyland and Winch 2007). Perhaps this goes some way towards explaining FE's description as the 'Cinderella' of English education.

Neo-liberalism, the state and public sector reform

Neo-liberalism has a number of basic assumptions about both the nature of people and the role of state. It assumes, as a starting point, that there are innate differences between individuals: for example, in terms of intelligence, motivation and moral character. People are seen, at root, as self-interested. Individuals, it is claimed, function best and are able to contribute most effectively - both to their own welfare and to the economy in general - when they are allowed to follow their private interests. As it is believed that hierarchies based upon ability will naturally emerge, attempts to organise society in order to actively promote equality are assumed to be flawed. Under neo-liberalism the disadvantaged are encouraged to 'stand on their own two feet' and individual competition based upon opening up access to markets for education, training and work is promoted (Lauder et al., 2006, 25). Although full employment can no longer be guaranteed, the state offers the opportunity for individuals to become 'employable'. Education and training are prioritised as the best way of overcoming the uncertainties of the labour market (Brown et al. 2001). Such notions can be seen in New Labour's shift away from a distributive approach towards welfare to one that is based upon 'inclusion' and 'employability'.

The conceptualisation of neo-liberalism is often associated with the writing of Hayek (1976) and Friedman (Friedman and Friedman 1980) but its intellectual roots can be traced back much further: some of its central tenets stem from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the principles of classical liberal philosophy. Certain key neo-liberal ideas such as a belief in competitive individualism and the maximisation of the market can be seen as contemporary interpretations of the philosophies of Hume, Smith, Ricardo and other classical liberals. It can also be argued that some of neo-liberalism's basic assumptions can be linked to notions of evolution and natural selection and their application to socio-economic questions (Olssen et al. 2004, 136). However, despite there being notable continuity with the ideals of classical liberalism, there are also new emphases in neo-liberalism that represent a break from its predecessor. For example,

although a degree of state intervention was always necessary, it is often argued that the aim of classical liberalism was to minimise the role of government and to 'free' people from bureaucratic constraints; supposedly, the aim was for state intervention to be limited to ensuring that individuals did not infringe upon the rights of others. In contrast, under neo-liberalism, there is a positive conception of the state. Government, its institutions and the law are used proactively to create competition and to drive the market in all areas of social life. State intervention is seen as necessary to promote enterprising and competitive behaviour and to deal with restrictive, anti-competitive forces. Among other things, this shift involves a change in conception of the individual from *homo economicus*, who naturally behaves out of self-interest, to *manipulable man*, who is created by the state and who is encouraged to be perpetually 'responsive' (Olssen et al. 2004, 136-137).

Although neo-liberalism has come to dominate economic and social policy across much of the western world, the UK has adopted many of its precepts with particular vigour. From the late 1970s onwards, UK governments have adopted increasingly interventionist policies both to prevent anti-competitive practices and to promote competition – especially in areas such as education where market mechanisms are least prone to operate. There have been far-reaching policies of deregulation and liberalisation and the introduction of privatisation and marketisation to the public sector. The particular form of neo-liberalism adopted in the UK can be compared to the approach of the *Ordoliberalen* or 'Freiburg School' of neo-liberalism that developed in Germany in the late 1920s. This approach recognises that the market is not a natural or self-regulating entity but that it needs to be constituted, regulated and maintained by the state – especially through the use of legislation. The goal is to increase levels of competition throughout society so that social and work relations operate according to the principles of supply and demand. It is acknowledged that market forces are not natural or inevitable, and it is recognised that there is a need to actively construct the moral and cultural order of the market (Olssen et al. 2004, 167-168).

Some similarities can be seen between the approach of the *Ordoliberalen* and that of contemporary UK governments. For example, the 1988 Education Reform Act, the 1992

F and HE Act and the 2000 Learning and Skills Act have all been used to impose or re-impose the discipline of the market upon further education. However, the logic of the Freiburg School can perhaps be seen most clearly in New Labour's persistent interventions in and tinkering with the FE system. This has included an almost bewildering range of strategies, initiatives and targets which aim to make FE providers responsive to the market and the disciplines of competition – the unprecedented level of which has been described as a 'torrent' of policy (Coffield 2006, 5). The growing degree of direction and control which government now seeks to exercise over virtually every aspect of FE could perhaps be seen as an example of the Freiberg approach in action.

Further education and the knowledge economy

For the present UK Government, assumptions about a direct causal relationship between levels of education, training and economic success appear to have achieved an almost hegemonic status. It is argued that, as a result of globalisation, the nation now faces new and unique challenges and that radical social and economic changes are necessary if a future of stagnation and decline is to be avoided (Cabinet Office 2008, foreword). For New Labour, all social institutions - but particularly education systems - must conform to the demands of globalisation. Contemporary policy attempts to tie all forms of education, but especially further education, to a certain view of economic competitiveness shaped by dominant interpretations of globalisation, 'skill' and the 'knowledge economy'.

Despite different responses to globalisation, one common theme - particularly for developed nations - has been a growing emphasis upon the importance of the knowledge economy. It is asserted that there is a rising international demand not only for traditional goods and services but also, increasingly, for high value, knowledge-based products and services. It is widely held that 'human capital' – the skills, knowledge and creativity of the workforce – will in future be the most important form of capital. Some, such as Becker (2006), go so far as to argue that nations such as the USA and the UK are becoming 'human capital' or 'knowledge capital' economies rather than simply capitalist economies.

Within this *zeitgeist* physical and financial capital is deemed to be subservient to the skills, abilities and aptitudes of labour. Whilst it is assumed that low-skill and raw material-intensive production will increasingly be located in poorer nations it is thought that, for the West, the future will prioritise brains over brawn. Technology is viewed as the vehicle through which to achieve prosperity but human capital is seen as the fuel which will enable it to run (Becker 2006, 292). However, it must be noted that, increasingly, trans-national companies are attempting to construct a high-value, low-cost model in their attempt to compete for market share. As advances in information technology and narrowing differences in productivity enable more professional and technical work to be carried out in low-wage economies, it is likely that cost pressures will intensify upon the workforce in Western Europe and North America (Brown et al. 2008).

Popular characterisations of the knowledge economy can be rejected for two main reasons. One is that such a discourse does not accurately reflect the nature of most forms of work and employment in the UK in general - and England in particular (Brown et al. 2001). The other is that such a label attempts to obscure the realities of capitalist relations. Nevertheless, it is recognised that such an understanding of the economy and society has certain implications for education. Following this logic, there is a need to reformulate and realign the purposes and governance of education systems in order to meet the demands of a labour market which will in future be based around high-skill labour processes. In the UK, it is commonly argued by politicians and policymakers that if education systems can produce the desired number and mix of skilled workers, individuals, businesses and the nation as a whole will be able to benefit from the new global division of labour. At the same time, however, it is also fashionable to criticise education as failing to deliver the skilled workforce deemed necessary for the knowledge economy. This situation, it is claimed - unless reversed - will lead to failure in the global marketplace which will, in turn, lead to social and economic doom. This discourse has become pervasive to the extent that it now shapes the education policy of New Labour governments almost entirely. Such assertions are commonplace in policy documents but are perhaps articulated most clearly in the Leitch Report of 2006. This report is aimed

specifically at the English FE sector but it can be argued that it has become emblematic of UK education policy in general (Simmons 2008b, 422).

Our nation's skills are not world class and we run the risk that this will undermine the UK's long - term prosperity....without increased skills we would condemn ourselves to a lingering decline in competitiveness, diminishing economic growth and a bleaker future for all (Leitch 2006, 1).

These and similar claims can be seen as a manifestation of dominant neo-liberal understandings of the knowledge economy and discourses of globalisation. Within this discourse, it is the responsibility of individuals to invest and re-invest in their own development on a repeated and on-going basis throughout their lives. However, de-industrialisation should not be confused or conflated with a claimed reduction in unskilled work. Whilst pockets of so-called knowledge industries do exist, this is not typical of the UK economy in general where the majority of jobs are located in labour-intensive and predominantly localised parts of the service sector. Indeed, the whole idea of a knowledge economy would seem to be little more than wishful thinking (Brown et al., 2003, 114).

There have been concerns about the competitiveness of the English economy and the perceived threat to national well-being represented by competition from overseas stretching back at least 150 years (Simmons, 2008b, 423-424). However, until the late twentieth century, such concerns were centred mainly upon the industrial muscle of Germany and other northern European nations. In contrast, there are new emphases contained within current policy discourses about economic competitiveness and globalisation. One of these is that, in addition to the UK's traditional rivals, such discourses now take place against the rise of China, India and other 'emerging economies'. Another new emphasis is the increasing stress placed upon such matters and assertions about the need for urgent responses to remedy this situation. Furthermore, within contemporary policy discourse, education is now expected almost

exclusively to provide the route to salvation. Other possible strategies are eschewed. Despite the lack of any convincing evidence about a direct relationship between education and economic success, claims about the demands of the knowledge economy have been used as one way of justifying the increasing commercialisation and marketisation of FE over the past two decades. Further education has been assigned the responsibility of developing the flexible, adaptable workers and consumers deemed necessary for social and economic progress. But, paradoxically, FE is increasingly positioned at the 'lower end' of a largely class-based division of post-compulsory education.

Young (1971, 14) argues that the selection and organisation of the curriculum needs to be located in the wider social structure and, although the FE curriculum is complex and varied, it is possible to identify two trends in its direction. Firstly, it has been driven downwards. Over the past two decades FE has played a major part in expanding participation in post-compulsory education. However, as school sixth-forms, sixth-form colleges and universities have absorbed the majority of the expansion from the higher social classes, the remit of FE has been adjusted downwards. Reversing the 'academic drift' of the 1970s and 1980s, colleges have been driven away from higher level and academic work (Hyland and Merrill 2003). In contrast to its previous intake, the 'aristocracy of the working class', FE now contains significant proportions of unskilled, unemployed and otherwise disadvantaged students. Much of the remaining higher education provision left in FE is now based upon prescriptive and low status foundation degrees. Secondly, the FE curriculum has become increasingly centrally controlled and codified. The tradition of teachers interpreting a broad syllabus with freedom to determine course content and methods has been significantly curtailed (Reeves 1995, 74-76). This is perhaps best illustrated by competence-based, occupationally-orientated courses such as NVQs – qualifications that Hyland (1994) criticises as narrow, instrumental and lacking in underpinning knowledge. But it is also evident in pre-vocational and academic courses as well as in specific areas such as FE teacher education (Simmons and Thompson 2007).

Despite the dominant skills mantra, UK employers generally make relatively few demands on workers in terms of skills. Poorly paid work, often transitory in nature, is increasingly the norm for large sections of the workforce (Simmons 2008b, 430). As further education is positioned primarily to serve the perceived needs of employers, it is perhaps unsurprising that the FE curriculum centres more and more upon a combination narrow competency-based training and courses focusing primarily upon low-status generic discourses of 'employability'. Official discourse asserts that, in future, labour markets will require high levels of flexibility, and that individuals will need to continually adapt and change to the constantly shifting demands of workplace. Within this discourse, further education has been identified as the chief mechanism to compensate for the exclusionary tendencies of neo-liberalism and globalisation. However, Wheelahan (2007) argues that low status vocational pathways, such as those now commonly found in FE and TAFE, actually contribute to the exclusion of working class students. This, she argues, is because such curricula deny learners access to 'powerful knowledge': the explanatory power and relational understanding offered by the systematic principles found in academic disciplines. Meanwhile, as colleges close courses deemed irrelevant to employability, FE is increasingly positioned as the residue left over after the extraction of other more dominant curricula. Whilst high status courses and the creation of knowledge are located in more prestigious institutions, the FE curriculum can be seen to reflect the production of obedience and conformity in the 'lower orders' that is also a significant tradition in English education (Lawton 1975).

Conclusion

The history of further education has not been smooth or unproblematic and the 'reforms' of the recent past have helped to ameliorate some of its previous flaws. Nevertheless, there is a continuing emphasis upon the perceived deficiencies of FE - particularly on its perceived 'failure' to develop the human and social capital deemed necessary for economic competitiveness and prosperity (Avis 2007). Such assertions have shifted further education away from the margins of the English education system and the FE

sector is increasingly placed at the nexus of various assertions about skill, globalisation and the demands of the knowledge economy. Consequently, as Coffield (2006) argues, in many ways, FE is now *running ever faster down the wrong road*. Further education is an environment which is complex and difficult to understand, both for those working and studying within it and for those outside the sector; it is subject to high levels of state regulation and intervention; and teaching and learning is increasingly impoverished and utilitarian. In the highly class-stratified terrain of English education, FE is, more than ever, positioned firmly at the lower end of the institutional hierarchy (Simmons and Thompson, 2008, 611-612).

Although FE has always been a predominantly working class endeavour, the powerful structural forces that have been placed upon it from the 1980s onwards make a class-based analysis of further education more relevant than ever. Whilst there is a need to be cautious of economic reductionism, it is important to recognise that we live under capitalist relations. Whilst, as Bernstein (1977) states, education cannot be expected to compensate for the inequalities of society; it is nevertheless implicated in producing and reproducing the social divisions that characterise contemporary society.

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